CULTIVATION AND CATASTROPHE:
Forms of Nature in Twentieth-Century Poetry of the Black Diaspora

Sonya Posmentier

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Abstract

Hurricane Katrina has made explicit the connection between racial and environmental experience, a connection taken up, for instance, in Spike Lee’s documentary *When the Levees Broke*, the HBO series *Treme*, and Kara Walker’s art volume *After the Deluge*. This connection did not begin to emerge in the twenty-first century but rather has a long tradition in black diasporic writing, a tradition that has remained surprisingly robust in the United States and the Caribbean for the last century in spite of urban migration, immigration, and the legacy of enforced agricultural labor. Whereas scholars of diaspora largely situate black modernity within an urban framework, *Cultivation and Catastrophe* remaps the geography of diasporic culture, inviting readers of African American and postcolonial literature to imagine environmental experience as a crucial force in shaping black modernism and poetic form.

The turbulence of the hurricane is a driving theoretical model in *Cultivation and Catastrophe*. I trace the metaphorical and metonymical relationship between the legacy of slavery’s forced migrations and the violent displacements produced by destructive tropical storms. The works I address take their shape not only from destruction but from the oscillations between catastrophe and cultivation. These terms are metaphors for human experiences of growth and displacement, and descriptions of agricultural and natural processes that have had material implications for black communities and their environments. I focus on lyric poetry—as a discrete genre and as it intersects with other forms, from novels to the blues—because its structures allow writers to address varieties of natural time, whether cyclical, unpredictable, fragmentary, or subject to the forces of anthropocentrism. My project makes the case for poetry as the quintessential genre of diaspora, revealing a black poetics capacious enough to encompass the disjunctive transnational ecologies of diverse post-slavery landscapes.

*Cultivation and Catastrophe* detours through the landscapes of slave labor, Jim Crow, colonial violence, hurricanes, and floods, to explore how writers of the African diaspora transform these wounded environments into spaces for artistic innovation. Demonstrating the inextricability of these landscapes from the human experiences they contain, I argue that black poetry transforms the very category of environmental writing. To that end, Claude McKay’s provision ground, Derek Walcott’s pastoral, Zora Neale Hurston’s "jumping dances," Sterling Brown's blues poems, and Kamau Brathwaite’s “scatta archives” become the grounds upon which we not only encounter history and comprehend new aesthetic geographies, but also reimagine the relationship between nature and culture.
# CONTENTS

Abstract iii

Acknowledgments v

Introduction 1

Cultivating the New Negro 32

Cultivating the Caribbean 73

Collecting Catastrophe 113

Catastrophic Culture 182

Coda: Unnatural Catastrophe 228

Works Cited 242
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INTRODUCTION

I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live.

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*¹

They looked like something to eat and something to wear at the same time; they looked beautiful, they looked simple, as if made to erase a complicated and unnecessary idea. I did not know what these flowers were, and so it was a mystery to me why I wanted to kill them. Just like that. I wanted to kill them. I wished that I had an enormous scythe; I would just walk down the path, dragging it alongside me, and I would cut these flowers down at the place where they emerged from the ground.

Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy*²

Oh, I who so wanted to own some earth,
Am consumed by the earth instead:
Blood into river
Bone into land
The grave restores what finds its bed.

Oh, I who did drink of Spring’s fragrant clay,
Give back its wine for other men:
Breath into air
Heart into grass
My heart bereft—I might rest then.

Anne Spencer, “Requiem”³

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¹ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (Plume, 2000). Future references will be parenthetical and refer to TBE.
² Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy: A Novel* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002). Future references will be parenthetical and refer to Lucy.
At the end of *The Bluest Eye*, the adult narrator Claudia experiences a revelation in regard to the “botanical aberration” which produced no marigolds in the fall of 1941. Where the young, melancholic Claudia saw only her own guilt in relation to this botanical failure, the adult narrator recognizes that “the earth itself might have been unyielding” (6) and articulates a particular grievance against the cultural barrenness and violence of the nation-state. The shift in Claudia’s perception involves not only a transformed vision of the inward self but a newly politicized and historicized outward vision achieved through a reconfiguration of the narrator’s relationship to environmental experience. Why must Claudia hold “the land of the entire country” responsible for the demise of Pecola Breedlove, the unfortunate child whose story *The Bluest Eye* tells? Land and property have special significance in this novel because of the history of slavery—enforced agricultural labor—to which the novel repeatedly (if obliquely) refers. That we can identify Claudia’s preoccupation with “the land” and what grows from it as characteristic of twentieth-century black literature, in spite of many writers’ desire to move away from that vexed history, is one of the central puzzles of this dissertation.

In a very different time and place (New York City in the late sixties) the eponymous protagonist of Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy* describes her inexplicably violent urge toward a raft of flowers she has never seen before and cannot name. These flowers—daffodils, it turns out—are involved in the cultivation of more than “the entire country.” Indeed, as Alison Donnell has argued, by virtue of their association with a Wordsworth poem many colonial school children were made to memorize and recite, the daffodils are “a powerful catalyst for Lucy’s memories of cultural imperialism” and, for many colonial and postcolonial writers, “a metonym for the colonial apparatus, promotion of an aesthetic which is ideologically motivated in its very essence
of seeming to be devoid of ideology.”⁴ In spite of the violent historical associations between cultivation and colonialism, plants and flowers seem to grow everywhere in this urban novel, indeed in twentieth-century black literature more broadly.

These two moments in black literary fiction indicate both the turn away from and the pull toward the natural world that I will argue has defined twentieth-century black literature. Lucy and Claudia describe what seems at first to be a kind of essence associated with the land, a transcendent violence that has the capacity to overwhelm individuals. We come to understand this transcendence as historically constructed, to read the flowers as part of a network of social relations rather than an essentially “natural” process. But the overwhelming presence of growing things in these two late-twentieth-century novels itself is surprising. Morrison’s debut novel chronicles the life of interconnected families in urban Ohio, a community of people who have escaped agricultural labor in the South for industry in the Midwest, at the height of the World War II manufacturing boom. Lucy unfolds the coming of age of a young West Indian woman working as a nanny in New York City in the 1960s. And yet, in these urban settings, images of cultivation persist as if within sidewalk cracks.

Both novels alert us to the ways in which cultivation—as agricultural practice, as language, and as a metaphor for human growth and experience—has shaped notions of belonging, identity, and history for the last century, in spite of an apparent turn toward the city as the center of black life and culture. Their parallel flower figures represent a shared trope of diasporic consciousness, but they also help to particularize the locations from which that consciousness emerges. Finally, insofar as “the garden for me is so bound up with words”⁵ (to

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⁵ Jamaica Kincaid, My Garden (Book) (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 7.
quote from Kincaid’s nonfiction writings), these novels inform my sense of narrative’s limit. Although Claudia has the last word in *The Bluest Eye*, the penultimate section is the only one to break from Claudia’s view and take us into Pecola Breedlove’s mind. What results is a stream-of-consciousness dialogue, taking place within Pecola’s bifurcated self. *Lucy* concludes with a blank page, on which Lucy inscribes her name and a single sentence, “And then as I looked at this sentence a great wave of shame came over me and I wept and wept so much that the tears fell on the page and caused all the words to become one great big blur” (*Lucy* 164). These revelations of broken or blurred selves and stories begin to suggest the inevitable ruptures and pauses attendant to the task of representing environmental experience. Cultivating diaspora means attending not only to the continuous within black culture but to the fissures, the breaks, the missed connections and disconnections born of history.

To this end, the turbulence of environmental catastrophe serves as a driving theoretical model in *Cultivation and Catastrophe*. Throughout the study, I trace the metaphorical and metonymical relationship between the legacy of slavery’s forced migrations and the violent displacements produced by destructive tropical storms. However, the modern and contemporary works I address take their shape not from mere destruction but from the oscillations between catastrophe and cultivation. I read these terms as metaphors for human experiences of growth and displacement, and as descriptions of agricultural and natural processes that have had material implications for black communities and their environments. Indeed, my central claim is that cultivation and catastrophe, the key terms of my study, define and give shape to the poles of black historical experience. Although I have begun with a discussion of two novels, throughout the dissertation I focus on lyric poetry—as a discrete genre and as it emerges within and intersects with other forms, from novels to the blues—because its structures allow writers to address
varieties of natural time, whether cyclical, unpredictable, fragmentary, or subject to the forces of anthropocentrism. This project thus makes the case for poetry as the quintessential genre of diaspora, revealing a black poetics capacious enough to encompass the disjunctive transnational ecologies of diverse post-slavery landscapes. I begin, however, with a narrative of a young girl coming to understand blackness within the nation-state.

**Cultivating the Nation, After Slavery**

In Morrison’s botanical metaphor of marigolds inheres a special significance related to the history of slavery and racial violence in the United States. The narrator figuratively depicts Pecola as her father’s “own plot of black dirt” (*TBE 6*) evoking the circumstances in which black bodies and black earth were similarly white property. That the economy of slavery in the United States in particular depended upon reproduction, and thus on the rape of black female bodies by their white “owners” underscores the power of Morrison’s representation of a post-slavery landscape that is simultaneously haunted by this legacy and “unyielding.” The novel associates “outdoors” with “the real terror of life” (17), and connects this terror with “a hunger for property, for ownership” (18). Insofar as it can be fulfilled only by mimicking the white confusion between humanity and property, as manifested when Pecola’s father Cholly rapes her, the hunger for property proves devastating to the community in this novel.

In this context, the natural world is understandably sinister. At the beginning of the section entitled “Spring,” Morrison evokes the sense of beauty and possibility many would associate with spring’s first flowerings: “The first twigs are thin, green, and supple. They bend into a complete circle, but will not break.” But in the next sentence she transforms that association: “Their delicate, showy hopefulness shooting from forsythia and lilac bushes only
meant a change in whipping style. They beat us differently in the spring…. Even now spring for me is shot through with the remembered ache of switchings, and forsythia holds no cheer” (97).

We can think of many of Morrison’s physical descriptions as “shot through with memory.” The landscape “shot through with the remembered ache” of violence evokes the memory of Cholly’s rape by white men in the wild vineyard of a Georgia field. So the problem is not merely that “This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers,” that the land not only fails to nurture but kills, but also that even those flowers and fruits it does bear are “shot through” with violence.

What do we make of Morrison’s evocation of the rural southern landscape of slavery in a novel that takes place in emancipated Ohio? In the closing passage of The Bluest Eye, I can’t help but hear an echo of “Strange Fruit,” a song condemning southern lynching written by Lewis Allen and famously performed by Billie Holiday beginning in 1939. In condemning “the land of the entire country,” Morrison draws a connection between the strange fruit of lynching in the segregated south and the internalized violence of the post-integration North. Morrison’s depiction of the barren soil is haunted not merely by the violence of slavery but by the particularly American context of post-emancipation racial violence.⁶

In this sense, we can understand Morrison’s writing in a tradition of black literary works concerned with the relationship between the rural South and the industrial North, concerned, to paraphrase Leo Marx, with the place of the machine in the black garden.⁷ Critics have long identified the rural as a major preoccupation of African American literary thought from the New Negro period to the present. Bernard Bell, for instance, coins the term “Afro-American pastoral” to describe the “implicit contrast between country and city life” that he and other critics in the

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⁶ In an afterword, Morrison also draws our attention to the background of the impending U.S. involvement in World War II (217).
late 1960s identified as a signal feature of African American literary race consciousness. The tension between urban and rural experience, of course, dates back to pastoral’s classical origins. Leo Marx has argued that the presence of what he calls the “counterforce” of the external world shapes the pastoral design; according to Marx, the dialectic between idyll and industry resonates especially powerfully in the American or “New World” context because of America’s special status as an idealized landscape in the European imagination. Extending Marx’s theme, Robert Bone usefully contends that the pastoral is the ideal mode for the expression of African American double-consciousness. Paradoxically, by drawing attention to Afro-American pastoralism as a nationalist counterpoint to cosmopolitanism, this strain of criticism would set the stage for later accounts of black modernism that would (reactively) ignore or minimize the presence of the natural world in black literature altogether.

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10 Ibid., 26–33. Raymond Williams acknowledges this sort of contrast alongside other tensions (“summer with winter; pleasure with loss; harvest with labour; singing with a journey; past or future with the present” [18]) as integral to classical pastoral, but demonstrates, significantly, that Renaissance English pastoral attempts to erase or minimize these tensions, naturalizing the aristocratic social order through depictions of the country that omit country life (i.e. “an actual rural economy” or the people whose work produces that economy [26]). *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
Given the historical circumstances of migration from the rural, agricultural South to the urban, industrial North, it is not surprising that most accounts of twentieth-century African American literature emphasize the city as the site of black modernity. The very name of the movement most closely associated with black modernism, the Harlem Renaissance, privileges the urban imagination. George Hutchinson, given his emphasis on print culture and institutions, identifies New York as particularly significant because of its status as the center of book and magazine publishing, its cultural diversity, the relative weakness (compared to other Northeastern cities) of its white elite, and the “freer atmosphere” it provided writers and artists.\footnote{George Hutchinson, \textit{The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White} (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 6.}

Placing the migration narrative at the center of her account of twentieth-century African American literature, Farah Jasmine Griffin describes the encounters with the urban landscape, and urban power as “pivotal moments” in these narratives.\footnote{Farah Jasmine Griffin, \textit{“Who Set You Flowin’?”: The African-American Migration Narrative}, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 3, 48–141.}

This is not to say that the rural South does not feature in accounts of this period. Griffin acknowledges the significance of the natural world in the form of anti-pastoral critique of the South, from Jean Toomer’s \textit{Cane} to Richard Wright. She also identifies the ways in which a “return to the South” (which may or may not constitute a return to nature) might be a component of the confrontation with modern urban power.\footnote{Ibid., 142–183.} Although Griffin questions the status of urban migration as “progress,” the city remains the central destination in her work. In \textit{Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance}\footnote{Houston A Baker, \textit{Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).} and \textit{Turning South Again},\footnote{Ibid.} his revision of the earlier text, Houston Centuries of African American Nature Poetry (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009). See also Britt M. Rusert, “Black Nature: The Question of Race in the Age of Ecology,” \textit{Polygraph: An International Journal of Culture & Politics} 22 (September 2010): 149–166.
Baker in markedly different ways identifies the United States South as a kind of breeding ground for black modernism. This position is particularly pronounced in the later work, in which “the special smell of jasmine and early-evening humidity powers up southern memory,”17 haunting Baker into turning from Harlem, the acknowledged metropolis of Black culture, toward the South. “The framing of black being toward anything suitably called ‘modernity,’” Baker writes, “has its primary locus south of Mason-Dixon.”18 Although Baker does not explicitly equate “the South” with agriculture, he is ultimately concerned with the plantation as a space of what David Scott would call “conscripted modernity.” Although he identifies the civil rights movement as an assertion of black modernity rising from the South, Baker nonetheless depicts agriculture as an exclusively enslaving, imprisoning force.

Studies that do attend to organic tropes in African American literature of this period typically interpret the language of cultivation as nationalist, nostalgic, and anti-modern. Even Bone, although he acknowledges the dualism at the heart of Renaissance pastoral, ultimately consigns the mode to the realm of pure nationalism and defines its trajectory as “recoil” from white cosmopolitan values.19 In other words, he associates African American pastoral with a kind of essentialist, rooted thinking. Barbara Foley contends that Alain Locke’s important New Negro anthology draws upon nineteenth century romantic origins of organic tropes in service of a nationalist ideology that collapses race and nation.20 Locke and other writers of the New Negro

17 Ibid., 17.
18 Ibid., 24.. Baker’s italics.
19 Ibid., 17. It is through this lens that Bone reads Claude McKay’s oeuvre as a largely un-integrated vacillation between the “picaresque” and the “provincial.” Robert Bone, Down Home: A History of Afro-American Short Fiction From Its Beginnings to the End of the Harlem Renaissance (New York: Putnam, 1975), 159–170.
20 Barbara Foley, Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 198–250. While Foley acknowledges the positive move away from
movement, Foley argues, successfully uncoupled race from a relationship with nature that would “naturalize” theories of black inferiority, and drew instead upon “soilness” and “rootedness” as essential signs of black citizenship. According to Foley, the “metonymic nationalism” mobilized through these organic tropes ultimately compromised the radical or resistant potential of the New Negro movement. By contrast, I argue that the organic tropes of cultivation and catastrophe, especially insofar as they function not only metaphorically but metonymically, have allowed black writers for the last century to theorize belonging beyond citizenship.

**In the Garden of the Inward Eye: Cultivating Diaspora**

Viewed together, Claudia Macteer’s failed marigolds and Wordsworth’s uprooted daffodils manifest the diasporic ubiquity of the language of cultivation. While Morrison’s novel roots itself in the toxic “land of the entire country”\(^\text{21}\) to shift the perception beyond the myopic I/eye into the realm of political, Kincaid’s *Lucy* makes explicit the transnational routes through which growing things travel—from the Lake District, to Antigua, to New York City. The novel’s eponymous heroine experiences herself from the novel’s outset as alienated from the climate of her new environment. “It was all wrong,” she realizes, after having chosen a summer dress to wear on a January day in New York, “The sun was shining but the air was cold…. But I did not know that the sun could shine and the air remain cold; no one had ever told me” (5). Lucy, like the familiar plants she later comes upon in a lover’s apartment, “was no longer in a tropical zone, and this realization now entered my life like a flow of water dividing formerly dry and solid ground, creating two banks, one of which was my past... the other my future, a gray blank, an

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\(^{21}\) My emphasis.
overcast seascape on which rain was falling and no boats were in sight” (5-6). The disjunctive weather signals the disjunctive history of diaspora, the spatiotemporal displacement that comes to define Lucy’s identity. The presence of so many flowers and plants in the novel—daffodils and freshly plowed fields, peonies cut and arranged in crystal vases (all of them, notably, cut, mown, disconnected, either literally or in Lucy’s imagination)—places the Northeastern American landscape of the novel in a broader context. The plants represent not only Lucy’s history but also the colonial history withheld and elided, a history, in fact, that connects the United States with is what is often called “the global South.”

The writers I consider in this study invite us to theorize belonging beyond the nation. McKay’s poem “The Tropics in New York,” often read simply as nostalgic for a pastoral Jamaica, signals the international exchange of commodities (in this case, fruit), as an analogue both to the “trade” in humans that traveled comparable routes and to the circum-Atlantic migration of literary form that puts an English sonnet in the hands of a Jamaican-born poet in New York. The Florida community uprooted by a hurricane in Their Eyes Were Watching God, is already a community of displaced people—migrant workers from other parts of the United States as well as native Indians, and Bahamians—perhaps most powerfully suggested by the image of the ironically-named character Motor Boat, falling asleep in the top floor of a house and floating out the storm. Derek Walcott’s poetry traces the Caribbean archipelago, and not only assembles “shards of an ancient pastoral” but peers through the Claude Glass of the American tourist. These writers demonstrate that the language of cultivation goes beyond a rooted sensibility.
Like much literary history of African American literature, recent theories of diaspora and the postcolonial privilege the city (almost always the metropolitan city) as the site of hybridity, cosmopolitanism, and black consciousness. Paul Gilroy’s pathbreaking *The Black Atlantic* celebrates dislocation and travel but returns us, repeatedly, to London. Brent Edwards has crucially expanded the geography of black modernism beyond Harlem through his emphasis on translation and transnationalism, and in doing so links New York to Paris. Homi Bhabha locates the possibilities of hybridity specifically in the metropolis. If the tyranny of “the English weather” forecloses possibilities for the postcolonial, “It is to the city that the migrants, the minorities, the diasporic come to change the history of the nation… it is the city which provides the space in which emergent identifications and new social movements of the people are played out.” But the very terms of Bhabha’s discourse—hybridity and diaspora—are etymologically related to organic life, signaling the need to consider these cultural concepts not as dead language describing metropolitan conditions, but as living metaphors that describe analogous processes in the human and natural worlds. Considering the multivalent meanings of these terms challenges our sense of postcolonial hybridity as a metropolitan phenomenon. The very name and nature of diaspora must be understood in relationship to the “seed” it proposes to scatter.

Critquing Gilroy’s Black Atlantic model, Alison Donnell calls for a renewed focus on local and regional expressions of Caribbean culture, against what she sees as the unbalanced emphasis on diaspora and migration in Caribbean studies. Donnell argues that the focus on diaspora privileges metropolitan culture, marginalizing less-known writers whose work inhabits particular Caribbean locations. A diasporic framework is essential for this project because I seek to draw connections between African American and Caribbean writers. One premise of this work is that a common history of enforced labor informs African American and Caribbean writers’ conception of the land. However, I take seriously Donnell’s contention that local articulations of Caribbeanness are not necessarily regressive or nostalgic, as some of the more celebratory accounts of migration and diaspora can imply. Following Donnell’s lead, I read Caribbean (and African American) “works [that] are clearly located and concerned with dwelling” in particular geographic, historical, and political contexts.

In attending to the particularities of these works, I draw upon Edwards’s use of “diaspora” not as a term obsessed with “origin” but as one that “forces us to consider discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference.” The interconnected tropes of cultivation and catastrophe uniquely allow us to mediate between “discourses of linkage” across the black diaspora, and the culture and politics of the local.


28 Donnell, 79. Donnell specifically emphasizes the role of Caribbean women in performing “a reterritorialisation of the Black Atlantic model.” The examples who are the focus of this introduction, along with other women writers such as Olive Senior and Lorna Goodison, would bear future analysis as writers who perform gendered “reterritorialisations.”

Cultivation and Catastrophe: Beyond Metaphor

In the example of Morrison’s failed marigolds, we have seen how nature and property can function as representation, specifically as a metaphor in which the land represents the social fabric of the country and the marigolds represent individuals, or, more specifically, little black girls. But for both Morrison and Kincaid, the language of cultivation has a closer relationship to history than metaphor can convey: a metonymic relationship in which there is a deep association between the labor of cultivation and the “ancestral history” of slavery.

Kincaid establishes the metonymic function of cultivated flowers not so much through a series of associations, but as a series of dissociations. When Lucy’s well-meaning employer, Mariah, waxes nostalgic about the spring, and observes that Lucy has never seen daffodils, Lucy has a strong negative reaction to Mariah’s comments, and shares her story of having been forced to memorize and recite a poem about “those same daffodils” (Lucy 18). Mariah responds, “What a history you have” (19). A few pages later, spring has sprung, and Mariah, insensitively, takes Lucy to see the flowers without naming them:

They looked like something to eat and something to wear at the same time; they looked beautiful, they looked simple, as if made to erase a complicated and unnecessary idea. I did not know what these flowers were, and so it was a mystery to me why I wanted to kill them. Just like that. I wanted to kill them. I wished that I had an enormous scythe; I would just walk down the path, dragging it alongside me, and I would cut these flowers down at the place where they emerged from the ground (29).

The passage is notable not for the history it unravels but for the history and context it withholds. Lucy has explained to Mariah (and Kincaid to the reader) her associations with the flower in a previous scene, but the novel never reveals to the reader the name of the poem, its author, or its significance, nor does it situate Lucy’s anger within any broader historical context. The novel’s withholding extends to its syntax. Kincaid uses semi-colons and commas where one would usually find conjunctions like “and” or “but”: “they looked beautiful, they looked simple” or, “I
wanted to kill them. I wished that I had an enormous scythe; I would just walk down the path.” The urge toward disconnection is not only manifest in Kincaid’s rhetorical structures but in Lucy’s desire to cut down the flowers, to separate herself from the history with which she metonymically associates them.

Gayatri Spivak has argued that syntactical parataxis shapes the emotional and political content of the Lucy.\textsuperscript{30} Spivak’s reading of Lucy models two key methodological assumptions of \textit{Cultivation and Castrophe}: first, by demonstrating the political possibilities of reading rhetorically, and second, by suggesting that we can understand diasporic identity in terms of the break in narratives of migrant subjectivity. Attention to \textit{language}, she says, “erases the migrant-as-victim into the unmarked ethical agent.”\textsuperscript{31} By severing Lucy’s connection to her colonial past, paratactic syntax makes it difficult for us to reduce this novel to its apparent subject matter, “a story about a migrant governess, and therefore an instantiation of received ideas about hybridity and diaspora.”\textsuperscript{32} It is through disconnection and disassociation that Lucy arrives at the condition of possibility for diasporic subjectivity: the blank page that occasions the novel’s conclusion.\textsuperscript{33} At the end of her essay on \textit{Lucy}, an homage to Stuart Hall, Spivak cites Hall to suggest that we might rethink the geography of diaspora not only in terms of the metropolis but in terms of “the so-called ‘colonial’” city.\textsuperscript{34} However, it is not through the city (colonial, metropolitan, or otherwise) that Kincaid marks Lucy’s alienation or the reconstruction of her identity. Rather, the


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 335.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{33} It is not hard to see how Spivak’s critique of received notions of diaspora forms one basis for Brent Edwards’s revised notion of diaspora (see note 29, above), although Edwards necessarily takes issue with Spivak’s conflation of “migration” and “diaspora.” Brent Hayes Edwards, “Selvedge Salvage,” \textit{Cultural Studies} 17, no. 1 (January 2003): 27–41.

\textsuperscript{34} Stuart Hall, qtd. in Spivak, “Thinking Cultural Questions on ‘Pure’ Literary Terms,” 354.
rhetoric of parataxis in *Lucy* emerges most acutely in response to the violent and violated spaces of the natural world.

In holding back the full story of *Lucy*’s anger, Kincaid submerges a literary history of cultivation, of being in (and apart from) nature. The poem with which Lucy associates the offending flowers, and which has incited so much rage, is William Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” a poem which schoolchildren everywhere in the British Empire were, like Lucy, forced to memorize and recite as evidence of their mastery (or perhaps deformation)\(^{35}\) of the Queen’s English and their loyalty to the crown. George Lamming, Kamau Brathwaite, V.S. Naipaul, and more recently Lorna Goodison, Michelle Cliff, and Edwidge Danticat have all asked versions of the same question Lucy raises: what can it mean to study a poem, memorize a poem, about a flower you have never seen? To encounter this northern flower in a southern landscape? This experience of having to name and extol a flower one had never seen was so pervasive, so traumatic, and so emblematic of the colonial experience that postcolonial critics have coined a term from the flower to describe the broader experience it represents: “the daffodil gap.”\(^{36}\) This act of critical naming, of coining from nature the political and social experience of colonialism, in a sense reinforces the notion of the colonial subject as an “object of benevolence at best.”\(^{37}\) To give Wordsworth his proper name would be to connect Lucy’s personal history with a broader history of conquest and suffering, a history the novel does not yield.

Kincaid’s garden writings explicitly historicize nature in a way that the novel refuses to do. In *My Garden (Book)*, a collection of non-fiction pieces Kincaid published in the *New Yorker*, she describes her entry into gardening in Vermont, where she was living with her

\(^{35}\) I am referring to Houston Baker’s claim that “mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery” are the central postures of black modernity. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*.

\(^{36}\) Helen Tiffin, “Cold Hearts and (Foreign) Tongues: Recitation and the Reclamation of the Female Body in the Works of Erna Brodber and Jamaica Kincaid,” *Callaloo* 16, no. 4 (October 1, 1993): 920n.

husband and children. While reading a book about the history of the conquest of Mexico, Kincaid began, somewhat inexplicably, to dig up flowerbeds in what she describes as “the most peculiar ungardenlike shapes.” She writes:

I wanted a garden that looked like something I had in my mind’s eye, but exactly what that might be I did not know and even now do not know. And this must be why: the garden for me is so bound up with words about the garden, with words themselves, that any set idea of the garden, any set picture, is a provocation for me.\(^\text{38}\)

Finally, after years of trying to explain the unusual shapes to other gardeners, she came to some understanding with herself:

When it dawned on me that the garden I was making (and am still making and will always be making) resembled a map of the Caribbean and the sea that surrounds it, I did not tell this to the gardeners who had asked me to explain the thing I was doing, or to explain what I was trying to do; I only marveled at the way the garden is for me an exercise in memory, a way of remembering my own immediate past, a way of getting to a past that is my own (the Caribbean Sea) and the past as it is indirectly related to me (the conquest of Mexico and its surroundings).\(^\text{39}\)

These passages highlight the dual notion of the garden as a site of imaginative possibility on the one hand, and, on the other, as bound and constricted by histories of conquest and enslavement. Kincaid’s garden from the very beginning rejected convention, and was the project of her “mind’s eye.” The garden was “an exercise in memory,” giving her access to both personal and global history. In this sense, Kincaid’s sense of the garden, and of cultivation more broadly, is expansive, hopeful, and associated with literary imagination. At the same time, the memory of that past is far from liberatory. Several times in *My Garden (Book)* Kincaid takes up the association between gardening—the body caked in soil, the hard work—and enforced labor.

The relationship between cultivation and the social catastrophe of slavery at once does and does not define the experience of nature in the diaspora. In a scene that parallels and reverses


Lucy’s encounter with the daffodils, Kincaid describes her encounter with a beautiful flower in London:

One day I was walking through the glasshouse area of Kew gardens when I came upon the most beautiful hollyhock I had ever seen…. It had that large flared petal of the hollyhock and it was a most beautiful yellow, a clear yellow, as if it, the color yellow, were just born, delicate, at the very beginning of its history as “yellow,” but when I looked at the label on which its identification was written my whole being was sent a-whir. It was not a hollyhock at all but Gossypium, and its common name is cotton. Cotton all by itself exists in perfection, with malice toward none; in the sharp, swift, even brutal dismissive words of the botanist Oakes Ames, it is reduced to an economic annual, but the tormented, malevolent role it has played in my ancestral history is not forgotten by me. Even so, long after its role in the bondage of some of my ancestors has been eliminated, it continued to play a role in my life.40

This episode evokes the same strange sensation as the opening of the “Spring” section of The Bluest Eye. Just as Morrison delights us with the description of a spring blossom, the cotton flower delights Kincaid. And just as Claudia’s negative associations with forsythia and lilacs surprise us, the historical weight of the cotton flower overtakes Kincaid in Kew Gardens. The scene challenges our notion of nature as a stable signifier; that which exists “in perfection, with malice toward none” takes on a “tormented, malevolent role.” Unlike the daffodils Lucy encounters in spring, “cotton all by itself” does not reveal its relationship to human history; nor do the “sharp, swift, even brutal dismissive words of the botanist”; but Kincaid historicizes the flower in relationship to ancestral history and thus her own status as a diasporic subject, a colonial migrant in the garden of the metropole.

In her garden writings Kincaid thus anticipates Rob Nixon’s recent work on the environmentalism of the poor41 and George Handley and Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s important

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40 Ibid., 149–150.
anthology, *Postcolonial Ecologies*, new criticism which forces us to rethink the fields of ecocriticism and postcolonial literary studies. As Nixon has suggested, Kincaid’s work awakens environmental criticism to the interconnectedness of environmental degradation and colonial oppression, what he calls the environmental double-consciousness of postcolonial pastoral. Nixon calls for American ecocritics to acknowledge American imperialism as part and parcel of destructive global environmental practices. He critiques literary environmentalism for its tendency to stay within narrowly defined national borders. One of the aims of my own project is to think beyond American regional perspectives in defining the environmental experience. A black diasporic framework invites this rethinking, occasioning both comparative and historical approaches to environmental experience.

If I have suggested that environmental experience and history—of colonialism, of slavery—are inextricably bound, I hope to have suggested as well that we cannot think this connection outside of literature and literary forms. Departing from Nixon, who juxtaposes the realm of the “purely” literary or aesthetic against the activist or worldly, I want to foreground Kincaid’s observation that “the garden for me is so bound up with words about the garden, with words themselves,” and Spivak’s contention that “rhetorically sensitive approaches to literature enhance rather than detract from the political.” The making of Kincaid’s botanical mind is something like what literature can do—make not only a place and a time but also a sense of identity physical, public, legible to others. At the same time, our map is marked by gaps and absences; these absences can be alienating and difficult as Kincaid’s garden is to her neighbors in Vermont.

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Toward a Poetics of Catastrophe

It is perhaps surprising to have begun a study of lyric poetry with partial readings of two novels. These novels bring to the fore the ubiquity of organic tropes in twentieth-century black literature, demonstrate the way those tropes become conduits for national, regional, and transnational identities, and signal the powerful relationship between self-cultivation and social catastrophe that animates this study. They also foreground the limits of narrative in accounting for the historical experience of diaspora. Just as Spivak juxtaposes the paratactic rhetorical structure of Kincaid’s novel against its “plot summary,” Toni Morrison describes the need to break from narrative in her 1993 afterward to The Bluest Eye:

One problem was centering: the weight of the novel’s inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. My solution—break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader—seemed to me a good idea, the execution of which does not satisfy me now. Besides, it didn’t work: many readers remain touched but not moved (TBE 211).

Morrison’s impulse toward narrative and structural disruption “didn’t work.” That is, at least in her estimation, her protective gesture to “break the narrative” as a substitute for “smashing” Pecola only left the reader whole, unmoved. While I don’t necessarily agree with Morrison’s assessment of her novel, it indicates the overbearing presence of narrative for writers (and readers) trying to imagine a new relationship to history for black diasporic subjects.

Critics of postcolonial and diasporic literature express similar frustrations with narrative modes of engagement with history. In his rereading of C.L.R. James’s classic text The Black Jacobins, David Scott argues that the postcolonial present demands “another way of thinking

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45 Spivak’s insistence on reading rhetorically acknowledges—in fact is presupposed upon—the possibility of reading otherwise, as evidenced by her observation that “if Lucy is read without sensitivity,” which, as Spivak’s corrective stance implies, it inevitably is, “it is a story about a situation, not a subject.” Ibid.
about history and historical change.” Scott suggests that we give up constructing (critically) what Hayden White calls “romantic emplotments” that narrate the resistance of the oppressed, and attend instead to “the story-form of tragedy” which, he contends, can account for the transformed conditions of modernity.\footnote{David Scott, \textit{Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 131.} For Scott the conscripting structure of the plantation shapes modernity and thus demands this new “story-form.” In imagining a form that can account for the conflicting experiences of constraint and generation that emerge within the plantation zone, however, must we be limited to the “story-form?” On the contrary, we can comprehend the spatiotemporal displacements that have originated and perpetuated this time and place of modernity by going outside “emplotment” altogether. To do so requires that we rethink the place of poetry within black literary discourse.

Anne Spencer’s poem “Requiem” (1931), reframes the history of the vexed relationship between humans and their environment within the compressed temporality of the lyric. As a New Negro poet, Spencer had strong connections with writers of the Harlem Renaissance, but she lived, wrote and gardened in Lynchburg, Virginia. Like Claude McKay, who is the focus of chapter one, Spencer is one example of a “nature poet” often read as romantic, nostalgic, even retrograde in relationship to black politics, in spite of her considerable personal commitment to political activism in the South. As Evie Shockley has recently argued, however, the work of this largely-neglected American poet, “challenges us to further reconsider constructions of the New Negro Renaissance, recalling that Afro-modernity in the South was not predicated on a wholesale removal from natural world to an urban-industrial one, but was signaled instead, perhaps, by the precious acquisition of a garden of one’s own.”\footnote{Evie Shockley, \textit{Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry} (University of Iowa Press, 2011), 144.}
In “Requiem” the speaker’s relationship to earth-as-property is ambivalent: does she lament being consumed “instead” of owning the earth, or celebrate the potential peace in meeting her end? Spencer establishes this indeterminacy by compressing and suspending time in a way that is characteristic of lyric poetry. Natural time in Spencer’s poem is without end: it existed before, when the speaker “wanted to own the earth” and “did drink of Spring’s fragrant clay,” it exists now as the earth consumes her, and it will exist in the future “then,” when she “might rest.” The poem seems allotemporal insofar as it apparently unfolds outside of the chronology of human life. The aphoristic claim that “the grave restores what has found its bed,” asserts a truth that exceeds any particular time or place. In this sense, the poem epitomizes Sharon Cameron’s description of lyric as having compressed or stacked temporality.\textsuperscript{48} Spencer’s poem does not bridge the speaker’s past and nature’s eternal present, but layers them upon one another. If the suspension of time seems to render the poem ahistorical, romantic, and universal, however, the speaker’s past tense desire (“I who so wanted to own some earth”) gives her a particular history: the desire for property in a country where property was all but unavailable to black citizens. In this context the apparently timeless “requiem” of a body for her soul grows out of a particular historical experience, even as the poem eschews a conventional narrative of inclusion or exclusion in relationship to property rights. Lyric’s characteristic suspension and disruption of historical narrative makes it possible to rethink this history, and reimagine the landscape in which it takes place.

Although African American literary critics and postcolonial scholars express the need for new ways of thinking not only about space but about time, the Ur-texts in both literary traditions

\textsuperscript{48} Sharon Cameron, \textit{Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 240–241. As we shall see, however, the diasporic lyric shatters the “unity” that Cameron also identifies as a generic characteristic.
tend to be narratives of cultural or national identity. In spite of Phyllis Wheatley’s status as a foremother of African American literature, early slave narratives form the backbone of a tradition deeply concerned with genealogy, identity-formation, and progress. Major critics and theorists seek out and recuperate such narratives as constitutive of African American identity. Some obvious examples are Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s recuperative literary projects, such as the single-volume collection of *The Classic Slave Narratives*, which have made texts in the African American narrative tradition widely available, as well his recent efforts to bring together genealogical research and story-telling in *African American Lives* (2004), and the PBS documentaries based on that collection. Gates reminds us that “In the long history of human bondage, it was only the black slaves in the United States who… created a genre of literature that at once testified against their captors and bore witness to the urge of every black slave to be free and literate.” Similarly, as Ramazani and Edwards have pointed out, narrative fictions are at the center of postcolonial studies, often to the exclusion of a serious theoretical engagement with poetics. Why should such we undertake such an engagement? In addition to the obvious threat

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51 Jahan Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2001), 1–6. Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Specer of Interdisciplinarity,” *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 123, no. 1 (January 2008): 190. Ramazani has already outlined several ways in which deeper study of poetry ought to be central to postcolonial literary studies (as well as some of the reasons it has not been, to date). Ramazani challenges T.S. Eliot’s description of poetry as “stubbornly national” as well as representations of contemporary poetry on the one hand as especially personal, and on the other as empty of subjectivity. He contends that poetry’s formal characteristics, while rendering it “a less transparent medium by which to recuperate the history, politics, and sociology of postcolonial societies” also contribute positively to the representation of cultural hybridity. Ramazani emphasizes metaphor, irony, and linguistic hybridity as the constitutive features of poetry’s contribution to the discourse of “split cultural experience.” As a caveat, Edwards notes that there is increasing critical attention to individual authors, particular issues, and particular regional contexts (including the Caribbean), as well as to poetic manifestations of the relationship between postcoloniality and
of biological determinism that haunts Gates’s DNA-based genealogical research, the emphasis on narrative as the genre of postcolonial and African American identity privileges the representation of progress, continuity, growth, “testimony” and the acquisition of literacy. Poetry, and lyric poetry in particular, offers a way of thinking at the same time about catastrophic rupture, a temporal alternative to what Homi Bhabha calls the “continuous progressivist myth of Man.”

Bhabha seeks to displace the predominance of ideas of “progress” that in his view dominate Western modernism by emphasizing an alternative “temporal dimension.” Having defined the metaphor of the nation in terms of titles of novels, Bhabha calls for “another time of writing that will be able to inscribe the ambivalent and chiasmatic intersections of time and place that constitute the problematic ‘modern’ experience of the Western nation. How does one write the nation’s modernity as the event of the everyday and the advent of the epochal?”

The call for “another time of writing” is—perhaps inadvertently, on Bhabha’s part—a call for lyric. While Bhabha frames his theories as a rethinking of postcolonial narrative, it is worth noting that a work he begins with Nadine Gordimer and Toni Morrison (returning often to Beloved, a text which in which narrative reveals its own limits) resolves its final chapter with a reading of a poem by Derek Walcott, and concludes with a poem by Sonia Sanchez, the lyrics of Ella Fitzgerald, and finally the time-lag as heard in “the rhythm of the Sorrow Songs” in Du Bois. Thus, when Bhabha concludes that, “we must not merely change the narratives of our

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Euromodernism, but minimal theorizing of “the relation between postcoloniality and poetics in the broader sense.”

52 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 340.
53 Ibid., 201.
54 Ibid., 202–203.
55 Ibid., 255–256.
histories, but transform our sense of what it means to live”

it is hard not to imagine that sense residing in song. To describe how narration can interrupt the “the continuous, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical” Bhabha must borrow a term from prosody. Referring to Fanon, he writes,

Elsewhere he has written: “The Black man is not. [caesura] Any more than the white man” (my interpolation). Fanon’s discourse of the “human” emerges from that temporal break or caesura effected in the continuist progressivist myth of man…. Fanon writes from that temporal caesura, the time-lag of cultural difference, in a space between the symbolization of the social and the “sign” of its representation of subjects and agencies. Bhabha’s “time-lag” brings to mind Adorno’s formulation of lyric as bearing “the quality of a break or rupture.” For Adorno, the “pure subjectivity” with which the lyric recreates an image of nature “actually witnesses to the opposite, to a suffering caused by existence foreign to the subject.” It is through this break, rather than in spite of it, that the lyric poem engages society, and it is this alienated engagement that for Adorno defines the lyric as a modern form. Lyric speaks from the caesura, the temporal break, and is opposed to “the continuous progressivist myth of man.” If we think of Bhabha’s “temporal caesura” as part of “what we mean by lyric” (Adorno)—that is, as a form characterized by a break or rupture—then we must understand lyric not as a genre apart from history but as a genre that disrupts temporal progression even as it, in Bhabha’s words, “keeps alive the making of the past.”

In placing poetry at the center of black diasporic literary studies, I want to go one step further: what happens if we read formulations of community, culture, and history as imagined in

56 Emphasis mine.
57 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 209.
58 Ibid., 340.
the African diaspora as constitutive of modern and contemporary lyric? In the January 2008 issue of *PMLA*, Rei Terada takes issue with assertions of “lyricism’s specialness,” proposing that we ought to “let ‘lyric’ dissolve into literature and ‘literature’ into culture.” Alongside the other objections to this position, I offer the possibility that, following Bhabha’s assertion that “we need another time of writing,” we need lyric to account for “the ambivalent and chiasmatic intersections of time and place” of diaspora. This possibility is implicit in Derek Walcott’s renunciation of the history of his “fathers” and his related observation that “the method by which we are taught the past, the progress from motive to event, is the same by which we read narrative fiction,” as well as James Snead’s subversive appropriation of Hegel’s negation of black history and culture, in which Snead embraces “cyclical, non-progressive” forms of culture associated with nature.

These writers raise questions about temporality, poetic form, and organic form that are at the heart of this study. As Snead notes, extra-literary forms such as the farmer’s almanac suggest the intrinsic, unavoidable relationship between agricultural work and time. Classical and

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60 Bhabha proposes the time-lag as a postmodern concept in opposition to the tyranny of progress that for him defines Western modernism. But, placing black “modern” poets alongside contemporary postcolonial ones, I posit the time-lag as a feature of black modernity.


63 I am wary of what Virginia Jackson, in the same issue and elsewhere, describes as “the lyricization of poetry.” Virginia Jackson, “Who Reads Poetry,” *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 123, no. 1 (January 2008): 123. I recognize that some of the works considered in this study affiliate themselves either with more specific genres, or with what are apparently distinct genres: epic, for instance, or novel. However I believe, with Culler, that “the category lyric has the virtue of directing our attention to nonnarrative poetry in general” (202). I’m interested not only in self-contained lyric poems but in the lyric moments that pervade a variety of texts. This is why I will bring questions of lyric and genre to bear on Claude McKay’s sonnet, Walcott’s medium-length apparently narrative poems, and even Hurston’s novel.


European poetic forms called upon by Virgil’s *Georgics* and Spenser’s *Shepheard’s Calendar* establish intimate relationships among human labor, “natural” time, and poetic form.

Another distinct feature of lyric is the proximity between visual and sonic experience within its forms. Given the speaker’s apparently liminal position—already having been consumed by the earth, but not yet at rest—the title of Anne Spencer’s “Requiem” refers most obviously to the obsolete usage of the word, in which a speaker invites her own soul to take rest. But “reliquem” more commonly refers to the musical setting for such a prayer.66 The poem thus exemplifies a general quality of lyric: the proximity not to speech but to song. This quality calls for attention to lyric’s particular place in the black diasporic tradition: a literary tradition in which the relationship between orality and textuality is a central theme.

*Cultivation and Catastrophe* explores lyric’s relation to musicality, temporality, sociality and modernity as framed by such critics as Adorno and Sharon Cameron, but also the lyric theories of Walcott, Glissant, Brathwaite, M. NourbeSe Philip, and Nathaniel Mackey. These theorists help us to address Mackey’s point that we need to read black writers not only at “the noun level” of representationality but as “experimentally and innovatively engaged with the medium” in a way that “move[s] the medium.”67 While some critics defend the status of Claude McKay and Sterling Brown as modern lyricists, few turn to McKay’s sonnets or *Southern Road* to know what a modern lyric is, as much because of the complicated generic and formal status of these works as because of their authors’ position apart from mainstream, white “high modernist” circles. This dissertation explores the possibilities of making that turn.

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If the disjunctive temporality of black modernity is in part my subject, the essays that follow here also constitute a disjunctive history, rooted in and routed through two moments: the New Negro movement in the United States, which, in my analysis, begins with the influx of black migrants and immigrants to Northeastern American cities, but extends beyond the start of the great depression (its typically-cited end) well into the thirties; and the Caribbean postcolonial, which I take up with the middle-career of Derek Walcott and trace to the present day. But even in attempting to describe the boundaries of these episodes of black modernity, I find myself needing to break them down: Claude McKay, this study’s inaugural figure, properly belongs in and to both places and times. The commerce (literal and cultural) between various locations and histories is my subject and to some degree, necessarily, my method. For this reason I do not proceed chronologically but rather through an analysis of two problems that define the manuscript’s two halves: 1) How do the processes and shapes of cultivation shape poetic form? and 2) What kind of literary and cultural work is possible in response to the extreme experience of environmental catastrophe?

My project begins by unsettling the stark line between “provincial” country and “modern” city that is the starting point of so many versions of black literary modernism. In chapter one, “Cultivating the New Negro,” I examine the apparently bifurcated career of Claude McKay, whose early dialect poems of the Jamaican landscape and later, militant anti-racist works seem to form separate oeuvres. Tracing McKay’s journey on a United Fruit Company ship from Kingston to South Carolina, I establish cultivation as foundational for what he refers to as the “fuller expression” of a modern poetic sensibility. The New Negro Movement, I argue, transforms Booker T. Washington’s apparently provincial agricultural rhetoric into a central
tropes of diasporic black modernity. In his poems of the Jamaican landscape McKay deploys the local space of the provision ground, or slave garden, as a model for black poetic labor, and finds in the sonnet a black expressive form that exceeds the colonial economy. Whereas much McKay scholarship has maintained the sharp divide between his poems of the Jamaican landscape and his formulation of a radical black identity in America, I argue that the Jamaican provision ground provides a language and structure through which McKay defines a distinctly modern, postcolonial temporality.

My study of the New Negro period reaches both backward, for the agricultural rhetoric of Washington’s social uplift theory, and forward, anticipating the continued preoccupation with cultivation in contemporary Caribbean poetics. Chapter two, “Cultivating the Caribbean,” explores the resonance of cultivation in post-independence Caribbean culture. I argue that Derek Walcott creates an alternative model for inhabiting Caribbean modernity in his return to the sites of plantation slavery, challenging versions of pastoral that avoid or erase the human presence in the landscape. Walcott enacts the possibility of return by picturing the slave within the plantation “Great House” in his little-studied “The Star-Apple Kingdom,” revisiting the landscapes of colonial power to unsettle narratives of history that revolve around property, offering instead a poetics of dwelling that depends upon the sensory experience of a particular Caribbean landscape.

If spaces of cultivation shape poetic form, catastrophe troubles the mimetic relationship between nature and culture. Chapters three and four cross and re-cross both geographic and temporal boundaries in an attempt to approximate the disjunctive form of environmental disasters. Chapter three, “Collecting Catastrophe,” takes as its starting point Kamau Brathwaite’s
assertion that “the hurricane does not roar in pentameters,” extending beyond the Caribbean context of Brathwaite’s formulation to ask how two modern American writers respond to natural disaster. I uncover a transnational archive of Zora Neale Hurston’s musical recordings and productions, which crucially informs my reading of the hurricane sequence in Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. These collective soundings, like the hurricane itself, lyrically interrupt the narrative structure and fracture our reading of the novel as a story of individual development. In their flood blues and flood poems, respectively, Bessie Smith and Sterling Brown expand our sense of lyric subjectivity beyond the individual consciousness, emphasizing a collective experience of history. At the same time, Brown’s lyrics eschew historical narrative and figure catastrophe as a moment of stopped or slowed time. Taken together, these works invite us to rethink diaspora not only in relationship to space but also in terms of time.

In chapter four, “Catastrophic Culture,” I chart how the problem of cultural preservation tests the boundaries of literary genre in the later twentieth century. I focus on Brathwaite’s 1991 poem *Shar*, composed after Hurricane Gilbert destroyed his home and archive of diasporic culture in Irish Town, Jamaica. Brathwaite’s poem laments this loss in a context where black culture has developed over and against suppositions that it already lacks history, rootedness, or an authentic relationship to its own cultivation. His representation of the continuity of culture in the face of disaster critically revises the relationships among history, nature and culture in modern and contemporary poetics. Finally, in a coda, I ask what it means to think of ecological writing as taken up with the environment not as its subject but through its formal practices. Through a reading of *Zong!*, Marlene NourbeSe Philip’s sequence of poems about an eighteenth-
century slave ship massacre, I argue that the expanded category of social disaster gives rise to what I call the collective catastrophic imagination of twenty-first century lyric.
CULTIVATING THE NEW NEGRO

Transplanting Booker T. Washington

In 1912 Claude McKay traveled on a United Fruit Company boat from Kingston, Jamaica to Charleston, South Carolina. From there, he went to Tuskegee, Alabama, and then, six months later, as if following in the footsteps of American freedmen, to Kansas and later New York. The poet’s brief education in agronomy in the halls of Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute remains something of a mystery, even to McKay scholars and biographers. What can it mean that McKay, a self-described vagabond and radical darling of the Harlem Renaissance credited by some as breaking “the mold of the Dialect School and the Booker T. Washington compromise,” came to the United States to learn from the Tuskegee wizard himself—that figurehead of conciliation, Southern black pride, and rootedness?

In his published autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, McKay omits the experience at Tuskegee entirely. He wrote his only known comment on the Institute five years after his departure, where he notes his unhappiness with the “semi-military, machinelike existence there.” McKay’s biographers have imagined that the reasons for his disappointment in Tuskegee include the strict regimen, the lack of intellectual stimulation and emphasis on vocational training, and the racism he encountered in the Deep South. Tyrone Tillery also speculates that, “Tuskegee’s practical curriculum did not appeal to McKay, whose real reason for

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attending the school had been to further his creative writing career.”

If we are to accept Tyllery’s theory for the departure, we must assume a dichotomy between a “practical curriculum” focused on agriculture, and McKay’s poetic ambitions. Washington himself might have clung to such a dichotomy, touting practical over cultural growth. Where McKay’s motivations are concerned, however, it is not quite so easy to separate the two. After exploring the cultural legacy of Booker T. Washington’s agricultural imagination for black modernity, in particular as manifested in Alain Locke’s *New Negro* anthology, this chapter will turn to Claude McKay as a quintessential figure of diaspora for whom agronomy and poetry were twin enterprises, both driving forces in his transatlantic journey.

McKay was one of the iconic figures of the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic and literary movement whose very name constructs an urban image of black modernity. Reading cultivation as a central trope of his poetry redirects our attention from McKay’s role in that movement to the relationship between his rural origins and his cosmopolitan literary success. To unearth cultivation as the motivation and method for McKay’s modernity requires that we revisit the rural Jamaica of his youth, and that we detour through the “Black Belt,” broadly construed as the transnational landscape of Atlantic slavery. I begin, then, at a point in McKay’s itinerary through that place which, according to Booker T. Washington, “was distinguished by the colour of the soil. The part of the country possessing this thick, dark, and naturally rich soil [and] where the slaves were most profitable, and … taken there in the largest numbers.”

How would McKay bring this soil into relation with that of his native Clarendon, Jamaica? And how would the shared history of plantation slavery to which Washington refers inform McKay’s ability to define the Black Belt as a region of poetic possibility and autonomy?

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72 Tyllery, *Claude McKay*, 23.
We know more about McKay’s motivations for attending Tuskegee than we do about his brief tenure there, or his abrupt decision to leave. After expressing a desire to travel to America, a desire met with dismay by all who knew him, including his mentor Walter Jekyll, McKay heeded the suggestion of visiting American dramatic performer Miss Henrietta Vinton Davis that he seek admission at Tuskegee. Washington’s international fame attracted McKay, and Jekyll conceded that an agricultural education in America might prepare McKay to return to Jamaica as an instructor in methods of cultivation. Paradoxically, his mentor eventually supported McKay’s journey only insofar as he believed it would keep McKay “rooted.” As McKay later reflected, Jekyll believed that studying at Tuskegee

would also keep me close to the peasantry and their aspirations and ways of thinking. Mr. Jekyll was a great lover of the peasantry. He felt that it was the backbone of any country and that modernism and industrialism were ruining the world…. Now he was resigned to my going to America to be further educated, because he felt that I needed fuller expression.74

In his poetry, as in his representation of Jekyll’s perspective, McKay signals the importance of cultivation to the “fuller expression” of a modern poetic sensibility. Cultivation is important for this essay as it was for McKay: as a literal agricultural process, a metaphor for self-improvement, and a trope through which writers of the African diaspora negotiate their places in region, nation, and globe.

As Jekyll encouraged his protégé’s association with “the peasantry,” he also embraced his dialect poetry as an antidote to what he viewed as a ruinous modernism. Many critics argue that McKay’s journey to America marked a break from Jekyll’s values, and that McKay’s poetic voice found its best expression in his well-known protest poems, such as “If We Must Die,”75 or

74 Claude McKay, My Green Hills of Jamaica and Five Jamaican Short Stories (Kingston: Heinemann Educational Book (Caribbean), 1979), 83.
75 William J. Maxwell, New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 63-68. William J. Maxwell, New Negro, Old Left:
in his novels.76 Indeed, McKay himself explicitly turned his back on agronomy when he left Kansas “to achieve something new, something in the spirit and accent of America.”77 While he may have rejected the study and practice of agriculture, McKay continued to develop what we might call an agricultural imagination. His poetry takes up “the peasantry” and “systems of cultivation” as part of a modern aesthetic, staging the encounter between colonialism and modernity not only in the better-known protest sonnets, but also in poems that evoke scenes of Jamaican agriculture.

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It is no small irony that McKay’s “vagabondage” began at the institute founded by Booker T. Washington, the preeminent African American figure of stasis and rootedness. And yet, to read McKay in relation to Washington is to uncover the former’s role as a quintessential figure of diaspora, precisely because of his literary representations of the “soil” Washington so vociferously elevated. Critics of Washington emphasize, among other things, his resistance to black migration from the South to urban centers at the very moment when blacks were claiming their newfound freedom and mobility.78 Indeed, early in Up From Slavery, Washington clarifies

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76 Giles, Claude McKay, 67–58; Michael North, The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature, Race and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 100–123; Maxwell, New Negro, Old Left, 63–68. For Giles the failure of McKay’s poetry lies in McKay’s failure to “approach[ed] an innovative, intrinsically black style in his verse,” a problem Giles associates specifically with McKay’s use of traditional verse forms. I address North’s critique in greater detail below.

77 McKay, A Long Way from Home, 10.

78 Houston Baker, for instance, in his reconsideration of the figure of Washington in Turning South Again radically contrasts Washington’s advocacy of what Baker calls “domesticated immobility” (60) against Benjamin’s cosmopolitan flaneur, whom Baker sees as the ultimate figure of Afro-modernity. Here, Baker departs from his earlier position in Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, in which he argued that Washington is modern “because he earnestly projected the flourishing of a southern, black Eden at Tuskegee—a New World garden to nurture the hands, heads, and hearts of a younger generation of agrarian black folk in the country districts” (37). In the earlier work Baker read this southern flourishing as a kind of synecdoche for “the growth and survival of a nation,” a precursor for the later flourishing of
his wish that upwardly mobile black Americans in the Reconstruction era should “get a foundation in education, industry, and property” rather than seek “political preferment,” controversially locating progress upon “Mother Nature.” While Washington heralds the toothbrush and modern laundry techniques alike as crucial tools for the development of his people, “the soil” has pride of place in his theory of education and political progress, and “the country districts” of the South are the capital of Washington’s imagined community.

How many times I wished then, and have often wished since, that by some power of magic I might remove the great bulk of these people into the country districts and plant them upon the soil, upon the solid and never deceptive foundations of Mother Nature, where all nations and races that have ever succeeded have gotten their start,—a start that at first may be slow and toilsome, but one that nevertheless is real.\footnote{Washington, \textit{Up From Slavery}, 54.}

The agricultural terms of Washington’s wish operate simultaneously as a literal plan for his school and as a metaphor for national and racial progress “up from slavery.” Having established agricultural industry as a cornerstone of Tuskegee Institute, Washington uses the language of farming figuratively, casting himself as the farmer and “the great bulk of these people” as the seed he would “plant… upon the soil.” If agricultural labor offers an opportunity for turn-of-the-century African Americans to uproot, as it were, the remnants of the plantation economy by replacing cotton crops with sustainable family and community farms, by owning land rather than sharecropping, the very vocabulary of this assertion suggests a parallel literary transformation for Washington and subsequent generations of African American writers. At stake here is not only Washington’s ability as a farmer to plant new crops of utilitarian value, or his ability as an educator-activist to draw hundreds of teachers and students (as well as thousands of dollars) from the urban centers of the North to the “country districts” of the South—a kind of transplanting in

\footnote{“national culture” that would define the New Negro Movement. Baker, \textit{Turning South Again}; Baker, \textit{Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance}.}

\footnote{Washington, \textit{Up From Slavery}, 54.}

\footnote{Ibid., 53.}
and of itself—but his ability as a writer to “plant” by “by some power of magic”\(^81\) the roots of his people. For all of Washington’s pragmatic ambitions, he wished for something beyond the use value of the land. Washington was interested not only in the cultivation of the land, but also in writing as an alternative labor, a process of cultivating himself “up from slavery.” He called for the “power of magic,” a language that would allow black Americans access to the land and its cultural—as well as agricultural—products.

Washington was well aware of objections to manual labor. Upon telling some of the first teachers at Tuskegee that they would be clearing some land to plant a crop, “I noticed that they did not seem to take to it very kindly. It was hard for them to see the connection between clearing land and an education. Besides, many of them had been school teachers, and they questioned whether or not clearing land would be in keeping with their dignity.”\(^82\) If it was hard for the teachers to see “the connection between clearing land and an education” it was hard for Washington, in spite of his personal history, to acknowledge “the connection between clearing land” and slavery. Among some writers in subsequent generations, this connection engendered a strong resistance not only to what W.E.B. Du Bois calls Washington’s “gospel of work and money,” but to “Mother Nature” as the subject of literature. Yet, in the aftermath of slavery, migration, and industrialization, features of the natural world have persisted in the poetry and poetics of the African diaspora during the modern period and beyond.

In stirring the specter of Washington here, my point is not to insist upon his literary influence in any conventional sense. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the way that, in spite of Washington’s resistance to “travel,” the spirit of his agricultural discourse does migrate. While I agree with Houston Baker that Washington allowed himself a “mobility in public” which he

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\(^{81}\) Emphasis mine.

\(^{82}\) Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 72
seemed to withhold as a possibility for the “black-South Mass,”\(^{83}\) to suggest that this rendered both Washington and the mass culturally “inert” is to deny the palpable presence of Washington’s “magic” of cultivation in the literature of writers who are part of Baker’s canon of cosmopolitan Afro-modernity. Just as Washington, the figurehead of Southern black pride, conciliation to whites, and identity tied to “mother nature,” himself traveled—to the White House, to Northern cities to raise funds for his Southern school—indeed, just as, in McKay’s words, his “fame has spread all over the world,”\(^{84}\) so, the language of agriculture, the very sign of rootedness, self-reliance, national and even regional identity, has been mobilized by subsequent generations of black writers. Booker T. Washington’s language of cultivation, rooted in the plantation, calls for a literature of place that circulates, and in so doing exceeds the economic boundaries of the plantation. What forms would this literature take? By what “power of magic,” what poetics, could the landscapes of enslavement be transformed into sites of empowerment and possibility? Paradoxically, Booker T. Washington’s language of rootedness and apparent immobility yields the trope through which New Negro writers were able to stage a transnational literary identity.

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If the writers of the New Negro movement are often understood as the inheritors of W.E.B. Du Bois’s literary and cultural tradition, not least of all because of the role of *The Crisis* (the magazine of the NAACP) in launching many of their careers, and because of their identification with the urban North, they are nonetheless indebted to the language of his nemesis. Washington’s “soil” is not opposed to the cosmopolitan literary aesthetic that defines the period known as the Harlem Renaissance, as we have often supposed, but constituent of it. The presence

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\(^{83}\) Baker, *Turning South Again*, 63.

of the “soil” in the city does not merely hearken back, geographically and temporally, to the South and the time of slavery but becomes part of the New Negro’s newness, and his transnational literary identity.

A defining document of this period, Alain Locke’s *New Negro* anthology (1925)—a collection of poems, stories, dramatic works, essays, and art that sought to represent the cultural achievements of blacks and especially black Americans between the two world wars—collects a diverse, complex, and mobile public within its pages. And yet, as many critics have observed, Locke strives to create a coherent, indeed organic, representation of what he calls “the movement.” If Locke seems to impose a “pattern” that would keep the contents of the anthology “integral with its time” and *place*, what happens when we view the anthology itself as that pattern, that form: heterogenous, hybrid, always undermining its own organic claims?

Critical and laudatory scholars alike have positioned Locke’s anthology as definitive not only of a particular racial culture, but of American culture. “*The New Negro,*” Houston Baker writes, “is perhaps our first *national* book.” If for Baker this coalition of national culture, [which he names *radical marronage,*] is rooted in racial identity, for George Hutchinson a reading of Locke’s investment in the nation requires attention to the anthology’s interracial pluralism. Nathan Huggins and Walter Benn Michaels, who critique the failure of Locke’s pluralism, nonetheless share the assumption that the function of the anthology is to articulate an *American* Negro identity.

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87 Ibid., 76–77. Baker defines this term as the project of forming a communal national identity in the context of flight, marginality, or “frontier” culture. It’s notable that the term Baker chooses to define “our first national book” is in fact a term borrowed from the Caribbean context.
89 Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*; Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and*
There is undoubtedly a tension between Locke’s evocation of Harlem as a “race capital” and his formulation of American nationalism. I argue that this conflict, while inherent in what Barbara Foley calls the anthology’s “metonymic nationalism,” ultimately undermines Locke’s claims for *The New Negro* as a founding document of a precisely American identity. In doing so, I aim to contribute to the more recent body of scholarship that situates the literature of “Harlem” within an international framework. Whereas these scholars emphasize the metropolis as the site of black international identity, I am interested in how we might define diaspora differently by detouring through rural cites of cultivation.

Foley argues that a crucial link in Locke’s metonymic chain is the conflation of race and place—that is, the naturalization of Negro cultural identity as rooted in the American soil. According to Foley, tropes of “soilness” and “rootedness” are the conduit for the shift in New Negro discourse from radicalism to “culture-based” nationalism. These tropes are pervasive not only in Locke’s rhetoric but also throughout the anthology. However, Foley’s account of organic tropes in *The New Negro* and other critics’ praise and critique of the anthology’s nationalist ideology often fail to account for the diverse international presences in the volume. While images of the American rural South in the anthology are crucial to Locke’s formulation of American Negro identity, this is just one of many sites in which “the New Negro” is cultivated.

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90 While eschewing “100-percent Americanism,” Foley argues, Negro nationalism of this period derives from a cultural pluralism that would “at once maintain separate national identities and enhance loyalty to the newly gained capitalist nation.” Foley, *Spectres of 1919*, 169.


The language of cultivation in *The New Negro* signals the anthology’s participation in a diasporic cultural project.

In the title essay of the anthology, Locke defines the transformation of Negro cultural expression in terms of northward movement, emphasizing the city as the center of the Negro’s “newness.” He downplays the material conditions of black lives in the South (“labor demand, the boll-weevil” and “the Klu Klux Klan”), insisting that “The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize…” (6). The movement of bodies, it seems, is a mere figure for the movement of “a spirit,” emphasizing Locke’s concern with “consciousness” rather than “condition” (7). Describing the “wave[s]” of migration and change as “a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern,” Locke all but equates modern culture with the city.

At the same time, Locke’s formulation of Negro urbanization and modernization as “natural” processes frequently undoes the linearity of the metropolitan progress he wishes to trace. While celebrating a modern transformation he defines as urban, he makes recourse to the language of agriculture. For, it is “in the very process of being transplanted,” that “the Negro is becoming transformed” (6). In spite of Locke’s explicit framing of this transformation as a movement from the body to the spirit, and thus as an abstraction of the “material” contributions of African bodies, his choice of metaphors also evokes the actual tide which carried Africans to the “beach lines” of the country, and the labor—the literal planting and transplanting—those Africans and their descendants were forced to perform. As Locke elides the material and the cultural, his references to artistic production as “crop” produced in “fields” appear to be purely metaphorical. Agricultural production is a vehicle representing the tenor of artistic production in
the urban North cultivation is a metaphor for culture. And yet, Locke’s emphasis on the overwhelming significance of migration draws our attention to agricultural production as an historical fact, something that the poems in the anthology bring into further relief. We are forced to acknowledge the landscapes that produce both kinds of “crops” as part of a history of enforced labor and enforced migration, far from the universal, romanticized “racy peasant undersoil” Locke celebrates elsewhere in the anthology (51).

Locke concerns himself explicitly with Negro “crop” as a contribution to “American Civilization.” In the title essay of the anthology, Locke describes two “constructive channels” through which the “social feelings” of the “American Negro” flow: “One is the consciousness of acting as the advance-guard of the African peoples in their contact with Twentieth-century civilization; the other, the sense of a mission of rehabilitating the race in world esteem” (13-14). “The pulse of the Negro world,” according to Locke, “beats in Harlem” (13). Locke ultimately sees “more immediate hope” in the “artistic endowments” of the American Negro than in this “new internationalism” (15). Here and elsewhere in his introduction to The New Negro Locke explicitly emphasizes the formation of modern America.

Yet, Locke repeatedly draws analogies between the New Negro movement and cultural renaissances emerging in the context of anti-colonial resistance in Ireland and elsewhere. His racialism depends on transnational connections. Indeed, recent critics have complicated the picture of Locke’s cultural nationalism: John C. Charles excavates the prominence of Africa and Africanism within Locke’s formulation of national culture, while Brent Edwards foregrounds translation and collaboration as the means through which Locke embodies diasporic consciousness. I, too, stress the anthology’s transnationalism, as opposed to what Barbara Foley refers to as Locke’s “metonymic nationalism,” not least because of McKay’s prominent place
within its pages.\textsuperscript{93} I locate the anthology’s diasporic consciousness not only in the urban cosmopolitanism previous critics have emphasized, but in the ubiquity of rural tropes throughout the volume.

To the extent that Locke tries to position the anthology as a national book, the anthology’s form complicates this reading of \textit{The New Negro}. Whereas many critics tend to read the individual works within the anthology as consonant with Locke’s aims, the generically hybrid form of the anthology demands that we read the poetics of cultivation in relation to various national and outernational locations, including southern and northern cities and towns, Panama (the setting for Eric Walrond’s story “the Palm Porch”), the West Indies broadly, and Jamaica in particular. Claude McKay presents the most important example of how the poets within the anthology resist their framing. Locke’s assertion of editorial control over McKay’s poems deemphasizes, among other things, his status as an international figure.\textsuperscript{94} In his essay arguing McKay’s centrality to a “Caribbean continuum,” Carl Pederson does not explicitly mention \textit{The New Negro}, but he might have it in mind when he observes that McKay “has traditionally been co-opted into an American Negro Movement or Harlem Renaissance rather than seen as part of a postcolonial Caribbean tradition.”\textsuperscript{95} From 1922-1933, McKay, a British


\textsuperscript{94} Locke is also known for having deemphasized McKay’s political radicalism, omitting many of McKay’s more radical poems, and changing the title of one poem from “The White House” to “White Houses.” Claude McKay to Alain Locke, August 1, 1926 in Claude McKay, \textit{The Passion of Claude McKay; Selected Poetry and Prose, 1912-1948}, ed. Wayne F Cooper (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 143.

\textsuperscript{95} Carl Pederson, “The Tropics in New York: Claude McKay and the New Negro Movement,” in \textit{Temples for Tomorrow: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance}, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 259. Pederson is part of a growing number of scholars seeking “to restitute McKay as part of a Caribbean as well as a global African diasporic tradition” (260), in part by situating his better-known sonnets of the 1920s within the context of other, more explicitly
The Provision Ground in New York

McKay uses lyric form to yoke together the apparently “rooted” local landscape of the provision ground and the transnational literary routes of the modern sonnet. Whereas Robert Bone classifies the poems from “Songs of Jamaica” as part of McKay’s “provincial phase” and the poems from *Harlem Shadows* as part of his “picaresque” phase, I suggest that McKay’s agricultural imagination unsettles the boundary between stillness and motion that has characterized so much analysis of the African American pastoral.

In the context of McKay’s upbringing in Jamaica and his earlier poems, for example, we can understand McKay’s American sonnet, “The Tropics in New York,” as a modern provision ground. Provision grounds were plots of land on plantation outskirts, which some Jamaican planters allotted to slaves for subsistence farming. Here we can see how formal lyric poetry can share the burdens and possibilities of such agricultural spaces: taking shape in relationship to a colonial tradition, while defining a black expressive form that resists its own utility within the post-plantation aesthetic economy. The economic purpose of the provision system was that slaves should cultivate their own food staples, freeing the masters from the need to feed the

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Jamaican or more explicitly diasporic writings. Pederson’s gesture is crucial to understanding McKay’s work. It is equally crucial, however, to examine how this context comes to bear on “an American Negro Movement.” See also Cooper, *Claude McKay; Winston James, A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay’s Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion* (London: Verso, 2000); Kotti Sree Ramesh, *Claude McKay: The Literary Identity from Jamaica to Harlem and Beyond* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 2006).

96 Bone, *Down Home*, 162. Bone sees both of these periods as precursors to the what he describes as the “pastoral” and “retrospective” phases of McKay’s later prose writings.

laboring population. Slaves in Jamaica, however, produced not only ground provisions for their own consumption, but also tree fruits and excess staples for trade within an informal, internal marketing system. Historians have debated the meaning, for planters and slaves, of the provision system. Whereas some have argued that provision grounds sustained the populations that maintained them, B. W. Higman insists that, at least by 1807, there was no significant correlation between provision grounds and a decrease in slave mortality. To the extent that the provision grounds maintained a healthy and productive slave population, scholars have emphasized the self-interest inherent in planters’ support (or reluctant acceptance) of such spaces. There is even a question as to how much control slaves actually had over the time and space in which this kind of farming took place. Finally, it has been argued that planters used representations of the provision grounds as “evidence” of the slaves’ happy state, so as to defend slavery and perpetuate the plantation economy.

Simon Gikandi suggests that the value of these spaces for slaves transcended these economic or even mortal questions. Gikandi draws our attention to the beauty (as opposed to the utility) of these gardens, establishing the provision grounds as sites of resistance to the masters’ economic purpose, and as spaces where an autonomous slave culture could grow. Accounts by Jamaican planters, as Gikandi points out, lament the amount of time and effort the slaves applied “to plantain-groves, corn and other vegetables, that are liable to be destroyed by storms” as opposed to root vegetables “which are out of the reach of hurricanes,” in other words, to visible rather than invisible cultivation. Gikandi turns to the eighteenth-century provision ground

98 B. W Higman, Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica, 1807-1834 (Kingston, Jamaica: The Press, University of the West Indies, 1995), 129.
not only as a site of cultural and economic production, but also as evidence of slaves’ ability to control time in ways that subverted the imperatives of the plantation. Against assertions that slaves’ historical disconnection from the traditions and culture of their ancestors rendered them socially dead,¹⁰² he argues that freedom from the thickness of history afforded slaves a creative “space for maneuver.”¹⁰³

Uncovering the presence of the provision ground in McKay’s poetry reveals the cultural continuity between this earlier agricultural practice and McKay’s poetic practice. I seek more than analogy here, for McKay’s lyric agency is inseparable from his environment: in preparation for his trip, McKay tells us, “I did a lot of planting. With the help of the peasants I planted yams and conga peas, black-eyed peas and red peas as well as sweet potatoes, yams and like things.”¹⁰⁴ As the financial foundation for McKay’s journey to become a poet, cultivation is literally at the root of McKay’s poetic production, and is a key poetic process through which McKay transformed his Jamaican identity into a diasporic one. Provision grounds were not universal to the British slave-holding colonies; as a feature of Jamaican plantation economy in particular, they formed the basis of an internal market system among laborers that has outlived slavery, and constitutes a source of local pride and identification. No such system took hold in the American colonies. But by transplanting the poetics of the provision ground across the sea, McKay

¹⁰² Gikandi is referring to Orlando Patterson, who in turn draws on Michael Craton’s study of Worthy Park. Gikandi, Slavery and the Culture of Taste, 245.

¹⁰³ “What would appear to have been the shallow memory of slaves and their descendants was also what enabled the dialectic of remembering and forgetting. The shallowness of memory and the thinness of genealogy would give slaves a space for maneuver; to have a shallow memory was to be liberated from the burden of genealogy; without concrete claims to historical antecedence, slaves could be free to imagine an alternative world of space and play. In turn, loose ties to the past would enable the symbolic inversion of the meaning of work and time in the plantation.” Ibid., 246. Within this debate over “memory as history,” Patterson, Craton and Gikandi are all speaking in part of continuity in relation to Africanist survivals. Building on Gikandi’s argument that a black aesthetic emerges precisely where the connection to African tradition is most tenuous, I wish to demonstrate that, even in the absence of an explicit engagement with Africa, an aesthetic of fragmentation similarly animates McKay’s memory.

¹⁰⁴ McKay, My Green Hills of Jamaica and Five Jamaican Short Stories, 83.
transformed the sign of the local tropics into a global poetics. Thus I understand both the
provision ground itself and its lyric counterpart the sonnet against the grain of criticism that
misreads “nature poetry” (and McKay’s nature poetry in particular) as nostalgic, provincial, or
anti-modern. Cultivation in the provision ground is more than, as Booker T. Washington would
have it, the linear process of moving “up from slavery”—an upward progression through time,
away from, but continuous with the violent history of the environment within which it takes
place. Within the enclosure of the sonnet, McKay cultivates the breaks from that history.

The Caribbean New Negro: “Subway Wind” and “The Tropics in New York”

Scholars have begun to attend to McKay’s status as a transnational figure, turning to his
cosmopolitan vagabondage,105 his Marxist internationalism,106 and his Jamaican upbringing107 to
challenge McKay’s status as an “African American” writer, and exploring the literary
implications of McKay’s experience as what Michelle Stephens calls a “traveling black male
subject.”108 But narratives of McKay’s career as a transnational vagabond tend to emphasize his
participation in an urban, cosmopolitan modernity (at least after his departure from Jamaica),
while readings of the rural in his poetry consign McKay’s natural imagery to a romantic and
often provincial mode. Winston James both elucidates the agricultural economy of McKay’s
childhood home of Clarendon Hills,109 and, in readings of McKay’s early Jamaican poems,
demonstrates McKay’s fidelity to representing the sometimes-harsh economic realities of peasant

105 Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora; Michelle Ann Stephens, Black Empire: The Masculine Global
Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962 (Durham: Duke University Press,
2005).
106 Maxwell, New Negro, Old Left; Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora.
107 James, A Fierce Hatred of Injustice; Pederson, “The Tropics in New York: Claude McKay and the
New Negro Movement”; Ramesh, Claude McKay.
108 Stephens, Black Empire, 169.
109 James, A Fierce Hatred of Injustice, 3–11.
life.\textsuperscript{110} He also cautions against overly-simplistic readings of the rural-urban dichotomy in McKay’s first two books.\textsuperscript{111} Nonetheless, he describes some of McKay’s early depictions of the Jamaican countryside as “idealized.” Critical accounts of natural or agricultural themes in McKay’s American poetry (written after McKay emigrated in 1912) read these works as sentimental, nostalgic, and romantic, in contrast to the more radical or militant poems he published during the same period in \textit{Harlem Shadows} and in American periodicals.\textsuperscript{112} I read agricultural spaces in McKay’s poetry instead as part of his modern, transnational identity. As a counterexample to Alain Locke’s description of the Great Migration and the accompanying New Negro movement as “a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern,”\textsuperscript{113} McKay’s poetry uncouples the modern from the urban, distinguishes temporal progress from spatial migration, and wrests black modernity from the nation-state.

Ironically, Locke establishes his vision of an urban American black modernity in the anthology in which he reprinted one of McKay’s most famously tropical poems: “The Tropics in New York.” McKay’s poems defy the explicit categories of the anthology, evoking agricultural processes to insist upon the rural transnational dimension of Harlem. Locke’s anthology was originally conceived as an issue of \textit{Survey Graphic} magazine, “Harlem, Mecca of the New

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 59–67.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 133.
\textsuperscript{112} In the Jamaican press, immediately following the publication of \textit{Spring in New Hampshire}, a correspondent opines that “the impassioned revolutionary poems find no place,” rather “the remainder of the poems are concerned with the beauties of nature, with yearning for his Jamaica home.” Recent critics maintain the dichotomy between radicalism and nature. George Hutchinson, for instance, emphasizes McKay’s nostalgia in “The Tropics in New York,” arguing that “Whereas his poems set in Jamaica often concerned black urban life there and protested the conditions of the lower classes, after McKay’s move to the United States, Jamaica became the rural, even pastoral, ‘motherland.’” “More Poems by Claude McKay,” \textit{The Gleaner} (Kingston, Jamaica, October 26, 1920); Hutchinson, \textit{The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White}, 414. See also Heather Hathaway, in \textit{Race and the Modern Artist}, ed. Josef Jařab, Jeffrey Melnick, and Hathaway, Heather (Oxford University Press US, 2003), 54–68.
\textsuperscript{113} Locke, \textit{The New Negro}, 6.
Negro.” 114 “The Tropics in New York,” appears in the magazine on the same page as W.A. Domingo’s prose essay of the same title, as if an illustration, symmetrically opposite another McKay poem, “Subway Wind.” 115 As modified English sonnets (abbreviated and elongated, respectively) the two poems are products of McKay’s cultivation as a British subject. 116 They demonstrate both his acculturation to and transformation of the form.

“Subway Wind,” in which an urban experience evokes memories of tropical breezes, at first seems to underscore the prevalent critical contention that McKay’s “Harlem” sonnets represent Jamaica as an idealized, pastoral landscape. 117 But the representation of natural phenomena in the poem ironizes that nostalgia.

Far down, down through the city’s great, gaunt gut
The gray train rushing bears the weary wind;
In the packed cars the fans the crowd’s breath cut,
Leaving the sick and heavy air behind.
And pale-cheeked children seek the upper door
To give their summer jackets to the breeze;
Their laugh is swallowed in the deafening roar
Of captive wind that moans for fields and seas;
Seas cooling warm where native schooners drift
Through sleepy waters, while gulls wheel and sweep,
Waiting for windy waves the keels to lift
Lightly among the islands of the deep;
Islands of lofty palm trees blooming white
That lend their perfume to the tropic sea,
Where fields lie idle in the dew drenched night

114 Alain Locke, Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro, Survey Graphic v.6, no.6 (New York: Survey Associates, 1925).
116 Although he would eventually write poems in Jamaican dialect, McKay’s initial education in the hands of his brother U. Theo immersed him in English poetry: “The direction of our schooling,” he reflected many years later, “was of course English, and it was so successful that we really believed we were little black Britons.” Claude McKay, “Boyhood in Jamaica,” Phylon XIII, no. Second Quarter (1953): 137.
117 There are poems in Harlem Shadows, such as “North and South,” that fit this description. The coexistence of nostalgia and critique in McKay’s œuvre suggests on a larger scale the complexity with which he represents the Jamaican landscape in individual poems.
And the Trades float above them fresh and free.\textsuperscript{118}

The opening lines describe the bleak, stifling air of the urban wind. The heavy alliteration in the first two lines emphasizes the “gray” and “gaunt” quality of the city, in contrast with the “dew drenched night” of the tropics. Rhyming quatrains progress from the “sick and heavy” captivity of the subway, to the possibility of nostalgia, creating the expectation that the “weary wind” of the subways will give way to “the Trades” of the tropics, to “idle.”

However, the movement from quatrain to quatrain undermines the concrete distinction between locales. The two winds blow into each other’s worlds, as the poem attributes the “deafening roar” of the subway to “captive wind that moans for fields and seas.” We must attribute the captivity of the wind not only to the subway cars, but to the sonnet itself and the colonial history it embodies. The end of the poem offers a vision of freedom, “Where fields lie idle in the dew drenched night.” However, freedom in the poem is unfinished: the sonnet is elongated, sixteen lines without a resolving couplet. Only the literary “moan” of the poem exceeds the boundaries of the subway’s boxed cars and the sonnet’s boxy quatrains. The appellation of the winds as “Trades” compromises the sense of winds as “freedom” or inspiration, evoking the possibility of commerce (economic and poetic) between New York and the “Islands of lofty palm trees,” as well as the slave trade.\textsuperscript{119} The last line of the poem thus reads as a kind of ironic haunting, reminding us that the “tropic sea”—site of the middle passage—


\textsuperscript{119} The expression “trade winds” has not always been associated with commerce. The phrase originally developed from “to blow trade,” meaning to blow in a regular or predictable way (monsoon winds), but 18th century etymologists likely began to associate “trade winds” with the commercial routes of the Atlantic, at which point the expression developed its current association with commerce generally and (for African diasporic writers in particular) with the Atlantic slave trade which depended on these winds. “Trade-wind, N.,” \textit{OED Online} (Oxford University Press, March 2012), http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204294. This double sense of “Trade” is resonant in a poem that juxtaposes the regularity of its meter and form against both the suffering of captivity and the possibility of errant imagination.
enabled captivity, and that the fields did not “lie idle” but were the site of enslaved labor. The cultural memory of captivity thus captivates the experience of technological freedom.

“The Tropics in New York,” which appears in the poetry section of the anthology as well as in W.A. Domingo’s essay in the magazine, features objects of trade as the central figure for the speaker’s nostalgia. More concretely than the breeze of “Subway Wind,” these objects evoke the Jamaican landscape of slavery—specifically the provision ground. The tropics are in New York in the form of “Bananas ripe and green, and ginger root/ Cocoa in pods” and other tropical fruits “Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs” (“Tropics” 154). But the fruits are far from the parish,

Set in the window, bringing memories
Of fruit-trees laden by slow-singing rills,
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
In benediction over nun-like hills.

That the fruit is in a shop window in New York, suggests its commoditization, and its traverse of the trade routes evoked in “Subway Wind.” The transition from the richness and particularity of the opening stanza’s imagery to the abstract “mystical” language of the second stanza’s recollection underscores the speaker’s sense of loss and detachment from the “fruit” of his homeland. Thus it has been argued that the detachment between fruit and tree in the poem signifies McKay’s dispossession from the Jamaican landscape and language and his transformation into a purely American poet.\textsuperscript{120}

Yet “The Tropics in New York” troubles what others see as McKay’s self-commoditization, in part through the way it inhabits and transforms the sonnet form. Reading “Subway Wind” and “The Tropics in New York” together, we might infer a relation among the trade winds that blow between the United States and Jamaica, the trade in fruit, the trade in

\textsuperscript{120} Pederson, “The Tropics in New York: Claude McKay and the New Negro Movement,” 259.
human bodies, and the trade in cultural practices. The “mystical” vision of the poem’s second stanza leaves the speaker, and reader, still “hungry” for the sustenance and “ways” of home. McKay withholds the final couplet that would relieve the speaker’s longing, or firmly unify the movements—and locations—of the poem. The fruit, the memory, and the tropics remain inassimilable by American commerce, and the question of how to resolve the past and the present remains open.

“Aldough de vine is little, it can bear”: “Quashie to Buccra” and the Language of Landscape

“The Tropics in New York” draws our attention to the labor involved in the production of this “display,” re-imagining the relationship between sustenance, economy, and the aesthetic for the twentieth century. Before taking up the agricultural imagination that emerges in “Tropics,” it is helpful to return to McKay’s much earlier critique of the post-emancipation Jamaican agricultural economy. The first poem in his 1912 collection of Jamaican dialect poems, Songs of Jamaica, published with an introduction and heavy annotation (explanatory notes and a glossary) by Walter Jekyll, McKay’s “Quashie to Buccra” can be read as an anti-pastoral critique of the production of subsistence crops and the “pretty” landscape that accompanies them. The poem, in which a black laborer complains that his white boss does not properly value the fruits of his labor, demonstrates how post-plantation labor practices sustain the agricultural economy, and produces an aesthetic counter-economy. Like many of the poems in Songs of Jamaica, “Quashie to Buccra,” is in Jamaican patois, and critics have argued that it demonstrates

121 Claude McKay, “Quashie to Buccra,” in Complete Poems, ed. William J. Maxwell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 19. Future references are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as “Quashie.”
of the problems of dialect for McKay’s poetry. While it is not my purpose here to defend McKay’s use of dialect, I wish to draw attention to the relationship between cultivation of the landscape and cultivation of poetic language in the poem.

“Quashie to Buccra” raises the possibility of beauty within the agricultural landscape of the early twentieth-century Jamaica, only to acknowledge the limitations imposed upon that beauty by harsh economic reality. The crop, however, is not cane produced on plantations for export, but rather, “sweet petater”—a ground provision for local consumption and market trade, which, in part by virtue of its easy confusion with the African-derived yam, has long been a quintessential symbol of black sustenance and survival. Evoking the spectral presence of slavery, the poem places itself not so much within the plantation fields, as within the provision grounds.

McKay’s early poem suggests the inextricability of ground provisions from the economic confines of the colonial plantation, and at the same time uncovers the cultural power of black labor. The poem, spoken in the voice of “Quashie,” a laborer, to “Buccra,” his boss, opposes the hard work of field labor against the “tas” of the crops their labor produces:

You tas’ e petater an’ you say it sweet,  
But you no know how hard we wuk fe it;  
You want a basketful fe quattiewut  
‘Cause you no know how ‘tiff de bush fe cut.

(“Quashie” 19)

The speaker accuses his imagined auditor of undervaluing the product, offering only a “quattiewut” for something worth more. The opposition between the first and second lines (“you say it sweet,/ But you no know”) renders “tas” contingent upon labor, and full knowledge and

122 North, The Dialect of Modernism, 105–110.  
123 Ralph Ellison would most famously evoke the yam as a madeleine of the American South. Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Random House, 1995), 263–267.
valuation of that labor. The pun “no know” doubly negates the “sweet” flavor of the potato, and the poem sets out to correct the knowledge gap. But the poem never settles as to the real implications of this correction: will knowledge of the hard labor of cultivation make the potato sweeter? Or drain it of its sweetness?

At stake in this indeterminacy is not only the cultivation of the sweet petater which Buccra “tas’ . . . an’ you say it sweet” but also the cultivation of poetic taste. The poem attests to the role of agricultural labor in the formation of colonial poetic taste, even as it questions the nature of that taste. After establishing the intensity of Quashie’s physical labor, Mckay connects the potential futility of that labor to the potential futility of language:

De Bush cut done, de bank dem we deh dig,
But dem caan’ ‘tan’ sake o’ we naybor pig;
For we so moul’ it up he root it do’n,
An we caan’ ‘peak sake o’ we naybor tongue (20)

The “naybor pig” and the “naybor tongue” equally frustrate the endeavors of the laborers: to build banks for burying the tubers, and to speak. We can take “naybor” here to refer to competing laborers, who, like the poem’s speaker, seek to make a living from the land, and whose gossip or chattiness prevents Quashie from speaking. But we might also read “we naybor tongue” as a figure for colonial language in relation to the speech of the poem. This interpretation is particularly evocative when we think of McKay’s complicated choice to write and publish “dialect poems” early in his career, a decision Walter Jekyll encouraged and subsequent generations of West Indian writers alternately derided and celebrated.124 Buccra’s “‘tas,” it would seem, erases not only black labor but black language (“An ‘we caan ‘peak”).

Hence, Michael North and others conclude that McKay is trapped within the double bind of

124 Winston James records Kamau Brathwaite’s condemnation of McKay’s European meter and, on the other hand, Jamaican icon Louise Bennett’s literary sense of empowerment in response to McKay’s poems. James, A Fierce Hatred of Injustice, 140–151. See also Cooper, Claude McKay, 35–38; North, The Dialect of Modernism, 100–123.
modernism—between the rock of an oppressive standard written English, and the hard place of dialect that white writers have appropriated into a minstrel tradition.\(^{125}\)

I argue instead that “Quashie to Buccra,” through the doubleness of language, engages the double bind of history that the provision ground evokes. The poem dramatizes the question faced by laborers: whether or not to participate in an alternative economy with ties to the plantation economy, given the possibilities of temporal and spatial control that might inhere in such participation. In this context of the provision ground as semi-autonomous space of cultural production, the double bind becomes a form of double consciousness, imbued with both a sense of historical burden and a sense of creative possibility. While the poem thematizes the loss of linguistic power in the face of colonial language, it demonstrates the power of literary expression and literary form.

In his writings on the topic McKay asserted his right to move between “pure English” and dialect as appropriate, and insisted on the relationship between dialect and the authentic lived experience of Jamaicans.\(^{126}\) At the same time, “Quashie to Buccra,” describes the breakdown between signifier and signified in the post-slavery agricultural landscape. We hear this breakdown in the slant rhyme in the couplet ending “do’n/tongue,” suggesting that language and taste (in both the literal and figurative senses of the word) are inadequate to the task of accounting for labor. Specifically, what Buccra sees and tastes ignores the reality of black labor.

\begin{quote}
Aldough de vine is little, it can bear;  
It wantin’ not’in but a little care:  
You see petater tear up groun’, you run,  
You laughin’, sir, you must be t’ink a fun.
\end{quote}

(19)

\(^{125}\) Giles, Claude McKay; North, The Dialect of Modernism, 100–123.
\(^{126}\) Claude McKay, “Claude McKay Defends Our Dialect Poetry,” The Gleaner (Kingston, June 7, 1913).
The speaker points to the distinction between the appearance of agricultural products and their reproductive potential (“it can bear”), paralleling this distinction against that between Buccra’s response (“you laughin’”) and the visual reality of the scene (“petater tear up groun.”)

Replicating a grammar characteristic of Jamaican patois, the poem’s penultimate stanza syntactically renders this break between appearance and reality by omitting the copula that would connect the production of crops for eating with the production of beauty:

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De fiel’ pretty? It couldn’t less ‘an dat,
We wuk de bes’, and’ den de lan’ is fat;
We dig de row dem eben in a line,
An’ keep it clean—den so it mus look fine.
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The omission of the verb “to be” from the first line suggests that the field might be less than pretty, in that the “fat lan’” depends upon the invisibility of those who “wuk de bes.” However even in putting the question to “De fiel’ pretty?” the speaker cannot deny the beauty of the scene; rather, he insists on the significance of labor and skill in making it so, emphasizing, in the parallel structure of the middle two lines, the agency of the laborers: (“We wuk de bes’…/We dig de row dem eben in a line”).

In response to the erasure of black labor that is the precondition of Buccra’s “tas’,” the poem makes visible the beauty of that labor, and at the same time critiques the ugliness of a system in which one man’s hard labor makes another man’s taste. The speaker ultimately celebrates the virtues of labor only in relation to its economic value, for “Yet still de hardship always melt away/ Wheneber it come roun’ to reapin’ day” (“Quashie” 20). This conclusion deflates both the significance of “hardship” and the extra-economic possibilities for contextualizing the “value” of agricultural work. That is, in making recourse to economy in the poem’s final lines, the speaker stops short of fully acknowledging the aesthetic or cultural value of work (even though the poem itself performs a kind of cultural value). Especially when we
remember that McKay raised money for his trip toward “fuller expression” by growing subsistence crops for trade, “Quashie to Buccra” reads as a cynical acceptance of the economic value of cultivation, as well as a critique of the economy of poetic taste. But the poem also crucially emphasizes the process and duration of the peasants’ labor, which takes place in the habitual present, ensuring its own continuity beyond the “day” when it “melt away.” As the peasants “dig de row dem eben in a line,” the poem enacts a literary version of that process by “dig[ing] de row dem eben in a line” of verse, equating the cultivation of the land and the poetic process, allowing agricultural time to unfold in “eben” measure. The poem delineates an alternative history of taste that foregrounds agricultural labor, even as it bemoans the lack of value attributed to that history.

The Fruits of Poetic Labor

If Quashie remains bound by his economic relationship to Buccra, he nonetheless controls and creates the beauty of his provision ground. In “Quashie to Buccra,” McKay deals in tubers, making visible the labor of that underground production. In “The Tropics in New York” he takes us above ground, more fully imagining what Gikandi calls a “counter-aesthetic” that transgresses the economy of the residual landscape of slavery.127 With one exception, all of the produce listed in the first stanza of “The Tropics in New York” grows on trees, and falls into the category of crops subject to the vicissitudes of extreme weather:

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs.

(“Tropics,” 154)

127 Gikandi, Slavery and the Culture of Taste, 239.
Through the imagery of ripe fruit, the lengthy catalog, and the precise, exotic visual of “alligator pearls,” a fruit (avocado) whose name suggests not only the rough skin of an animal but also the luxury fashion products made from the alligator’s skin, McKay’s poem emphasizes the excess of these crops “fit for highest prize” rather than for consumption. The commodity here is beauty (and perhaps exoticism) rather than sustenance. The provision grounds, however, create a space for beauty that exceeds its use value, resisting the legacy of a plantation economy.

Indeed it is the profound impracticality of the fruit that makes it beautiful. In Banana Bottom, McKay’s novel depicting his childhood home, a dramatic hurricane lays waste to the community of the protagonist, the appropriately-named “Bita Plant.” While McKay describes the hurricane’s destruction in lyrical prose, he also attends to the economic devastation left in its wake; the loss of the banana crop is particularly “sweeping and paralyzing,” for, “since the decade of the boom in the banana many peasants had taken to cultivating that plant only, to the exclusion of other crops.” Only the farm of Jordan Plant (Bita’s father) survives the hurricane, because Jordan “had been a shrewed cultivator” and avoided the dangers of monoculture. The hurricane in Banana Bottom, then, knocks the banana to the ground and elevates the sweet potato; it demonstrates the foolishness of the peasants and the wisdom of men like Jordan Plant who think not only of export but of sustaining their families and communities. More joyfully than does “Quashie to Buccra,” the novel celebrates the economic and social potential of the

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128 In her critique of “the imperial georgic,” Beth Fawkes Tobin describes a similar catalog, in Thompson’s eighteenth-century poem The Seasons, as “an abstract, universalizing register” that “erases geographical and cultural specificity, and... transforms agricultural production into commodities for circulation in the world economy.” Michael North makes a similar argument about “The Tropics in New York.” Tobin, Colonizing Nature, 55; North, The Dialect of Modernism, 112.
130 Ibid., 281.
131 “Sweet potatoes were sparingly used for human consumption…. But now the food of hogs was fit for gods.” Ibid., 292–293.
post-slavery provision ground, primarily in relation to the utility of its below-ground crops. Banana and other fruit trees subject to the winds, by contrast, turn out to be impractical and foolish investments. Nonetheless, celebrating the taste of foolishness, the novel concludes with a scene of lush indulgence in Banana Bottom’s tree-fruit abundance: Bita’s son “little Jordan” “overstuffing” himself with ripe mangos form the tree in his yard.

The speaker of “The Tropics in New York” evokes such a scene through the list of tropical fruits, only to avert his glance from a childhood among mango trees. The ending of the poem is marked by its openness, and this openness invites reading and rereading, as we experience the speaker’s unfulfilled craving. North contends that the poem rehearses the minstrel cliché of a displaced African longing for his home, demonstrating McKay’s “commoditization. “This line of thinking depends on a reading of contemporary English and Anglo-American responses to the poems, which indeed confirm that the poem “fed this market” for the minstrel cliché.132 But a close look at the broader publication context of McKay’s work, at home in Jamaica and in the black diaspora, challenges this view, unshackling the poems from the confining embrace of white linguistic appropriation.

Indeed, inquiry into McKay’s literary relationships with various white American audiences (principally readers of radical leftist publications like the Liberator and the Masses), black American writers, the founders of négritude, and a diverse Jamaican audience reveals that, from his earliest publications in Jamaica in 1912, his poems nourished not only a certain type of white liberalism, but also international black language and literature, and Jamaican vernacular culture. McKay was hostile to the members of Harlem’s black intelligentsia; he felt oppressed by the bourgeois expectations of what he (following Wallace Thurman) called the “Niggerati.” In a

132 North, The Dialect of Modernism, 113.
1928 letter to Langston Hughes, he complains that “Their opinion will be conditioned by that of the whites .... Whether you give them revolutionary thought or revolutionary depiction of life there is no difference in their attitude. If they accepted ‘If We Must Die’ it was because a radical white organ printed it first.” In fact, although he rejected a certain type of white opinion (in the same letter he is openly derisive about a *New York Times* review of *Home to Harlem*) McKay went so far as to say he cared more about the response of the leftist “Masses crowd” than that of the Negro elite literary establishment.

This is not to say that McKay felt he had no audience among black Americans. As readers of each other’s work, McKay, Hughes, Jean Toomer, Wallace Thurman and others of their generation constituted a kind of mobile, bohemian counterpublic. They sent each other books, wrote poems in the margins of their letters, and griped about their elders and patrons and publishing venues. “Honestly,” McKay wrote to Hughes, “I value your opinion above any of the Negro intellectuals.” In turn, McKay sought to influence Hughes, encouraging him to travel abroad, and to “be more colloquial” in his poetry. Additionally, as many critics have argued, McKay’s writing and his presence in France during the 1920s exerted a major influence (the major influence, in Aimé Césaire’s estimation) on *négritude*.

I wish to emphasize the mobility of McKay’s work and the diversity of the circles through which it travelled—a diversity that extended not only along the path of McKay’s vagabondage, but back to Jamaica. Although McKay himself never returned to Jamaica, his work remained a force in the literary scene there and in the life of his family. As Raphael Dalleo

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133 Claude McKay to Langston Hughes, March 30, 1928, Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection, 109:2043, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
134 Ibid.
136 Indeed, McKay’s political radicalism significantly curtailed his mobility after he left New York.
has argued in his fine reading of *Banana Bottom*, McKay was invested in the notion of a literary public sphere in Jamaica.\(^{137}\) The publication history of his poems in Jamaica, before and after expatriation, bears out McKay’s long-distance participation in such a sphere. Six poems from *Harlem Shadows* appeared in J.E. Clare McFarlane’s groundbreaking anthology of Jamaican poetry, *Voices from Summerland*,\(^ {138}\) and the political journal *Public Opinion* (associated with the rise of the PNP) reprinted “If We Must Die” in 1939.\(^ {139}\) In the same year that Winston Churchill supposedly appropriated McKay’s militant critique of American racist violence as a rallying cry against the Nazis,\(^ {140}\) the editors of *Public Opinion* brought the poem back to Jamaica as part of their effort to define an emerging radical national literature.

Long after his expatriation, McKay also continued to participate in Jamaican literary discourse through the newspapers. Kingston’s *Daily Gleaner* and *Jamaica Times* (whose literary editor Tom Redcam was McKay’s friend) introduced McKay’s early poems to Jamaican readers. After leaving in 1912, McKay continued to publish his dialect poems in the *Gleaner*, and in 1913 he carried on a lively debate in the pages of that paper regarding the status of Jamaican (and American) dialect poetry.\(^ {141}\) The *Gleaner* also reprinted McKay’s American poems, reviews of his work, and tales of his adventures abroad. Although the *Gleaner* was the mouthpiece of the

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\(^ {140}\) Whether or not Churchill actually quoted from McKay’s poem is a subject of debate, but many critics claim that Churchill recited the poem in 1939 before the House of Commons to encourage the armed forces. Lee Jenkins has documented the difficulty of confirming this oft-repeated story. As Jenkins’s analysis attests, the persistence of the story within the criticism, and the struggles over the content of this radical-yet-universal poem, indicate most of all the faulty logic of conscripting McKay into a single literary, national, or political milieu. Lee M. Jenkins, “‘If We Must Die’: Winston Churchill and Claude McKay,” *Notes and Queries* 50 (248), no. 3 (2003): 333–337.

\(^ {141}\) McKay, “Claude McKay Defends Our Dialect Poetry.” The *Gleaner* (Kingston, Jamaica: June 7, 1913)
Jamaican plantocracy, McKay made use of the paper to broadcast a nationalist message to a diverse audience. As J.E. McFarlane has pointed out, McKay’s books were too expensive for circulation among “the masses.”\(^\text{142}\) Indeed, his brother T.E. McKay complained in a 1929 to Claude that, “I have not read them for I am too poor to buy them. They are sold at profiteering rates in Jamaica. From you left Jamaica I have not seen anything of your writings except what I got from the newspapers.”\(^\text{143}\) The letter underscores Winston James’s contention that the newspapers made McKay’s poems available to “ordinary Jamaicans,” many of whom first discovered McKay’s poems in the papers.\(^\text{144}\) Phrases from McKay’s poems also, in McFarlane’s words, “passed from lip to lip and have become household words.”\(^\text{145}\) Thus, after his emigration, McKay’s poems continued to “feed” not only a white American market hungry for a certain kind of post-slavery stereotype, but also McKay’s Jamaican family, insofar as he supported his daughter and niece on the earnings from his work and writing in America;\(^\text{146}\) an interracial Jamaican literary community; and a diasporic black reading public.

This broader publication context crucially reminds us of McKay’s continued entanglement with the family, community, and environment of his youth. The initial publication of “The Tropics in New York” in Max Eastman’s Liberator in 1920 would seem to make it available primarily to the white American Left. But at least one copy of an earlier edition of the magazine, “containing a page of sonnets and songs by Claude McKay” found its way to Jamaica.

\(^{142}\) McFarlane, J.E. Clare, A Literature in the Making (Kingston: Pioneer Pres, 1956), 84. in James, A Fierce Hatred of Injustice, 141.

\(^{143}\) T.E. McKay to Claude McKay, 1929, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Letters from McKay’s relatives underscore the poet’s continued financial and intellectual involvement with his family after his supposed detachment from Jamaica.

\(^{144}\) James, A Fierce Hatred of Injustice, 140.

\(^{145}\) McFarlane, J.E. Clare, A Literature in the Making, 84.

\(^{146}\) McKay’s brother Tommy and sister Rachel describe their gratitude for money to support the girls’ educations. McKay to Claude McKay, 1929; Rachel McKay Cooper to Claude McKay, June 23, 1929, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
and into the hands of the *Gleaner* editors, who in turn reprinted three of the poems, praised them as Wordsworthian, and insisted that one of them “proves that Claud [sic] McKay is really a poet.”¹⁴⁷ The *Gleaner* published McKay’s poems and reviews of his books alongside features on “Coolie Labour in the West Indies” (reporting on a visit from the Indian government to inquire into the status of immigrant laborers), “Growing Citrus Fruit In This Island for the Markets Abroad,” and a religious sermon on “Effects of Disaster.” If McKay’s poems can be read as fruits or commodities in their own right, they circulated within a Jamaican economy as well as a British and American one, deeply connected to the landscape and its cultivation in a real, not merely nostalgic, sense, long after McKay’s departure. The sonnet as provision ground becomes possible only in the context of McKay’s expatriation—he writes in an English form in the context of an emerging black American sonnet tradition, for English, American and Jamaican audiences.

As what Brent Edwards calls a “bad nationalist,” to the extent that his vagabondage constitutes a refusal to “perform nationalism” or citizenship,¹⁴⁸ McKay necessarily dislocates the provision ground’s status as a particular, local space, putting into motion what is already part of a global economy. Ground provisions (particularly the tuberous kind) can be evoked as sources of local pride, as in *Banana Bottom*, but they also always represent the cultivation of transnational products: yams, of course, came to the Caribbean from Africa along with the slaves, although sweet potatoes were indeed native to the Caribbean, and bananas came from Asia, Mexico, and South America in the hands of European travelers.¹⁴⁹ Likewise, the fruits listed in “The Tropics

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in New York” are not purely particular to the colony as some have suggested, but have long been part of a global economy, as a basic study of the history of the banana trade will bear out. Given that these fruits have always been suspended between local identity and global commodity, the poem is not a simple narrative of dispossession. The fruit situates the American vernacular of McKay’s agricultural imagination in relationship to the Jamaican landscape. At different points, McKay’s ground provisions—both tubers and tree fruits—symbolize on the one hand black submission to European and American economic constraints and, on the other hand, cultural autonomy. We might understand this dialectic between the confines of the agricultural economy and the freedom of agricultural production as the very structure of the provision ground.

The Sonnet as Provision Ground

In the form of the sonnet, McKay recreates the dialectic between freedom and constraint that defines the provision ground. McKay’s confinement within the form of “Tropics” mirrors the setting of the fruit, now plucked, within the shop window. The division of the poem into quatrains sequesters the image of the fruit “set in the window” in New York from the image of the homeland that produces it (“dewy dawns and mystical blue skies/ In benediction over nun-like hills”), and from the speaker’s emotional experience of these detached landscapes (“A wave of longing through my body swept,”) evoking the constraints of the imperfect trade relationships in which the fruit circulates (“Tropics” 154). At the same time, the poem insists upon the right to “memories/ Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills” within these constraints, and lays claim to

150 North claims that, in the shift from quatrain to quatrain of “The Tropics in New York,” “the particular language of the colony” represented by the list of fruits “loses out to the generalized language of empire.” North, The Dialect of Modernism, 112.
the displaced landscape of the speaker’s past. Withholding the final couplet, the twelve-line poem resists an aesthetics of remembering that would valorize continuity, or history in a progressive, continuous sense. Until the final stanza, when the speaker’s “eyes grew dim” on a New York sidewalk, the poem has no tense, and therefore consigns neither the fruit nor the memory of the Jamaican landscape to history, or to any time in particular. Occluded between these stanzas are the history of the actual cultivation of the fruit and the history of displacement (of the fruit from Jamaica, of the speaker from Jamaica, and perhaps of the speaker’s ancestors from Africa) that have led to this moment of diasporic subjectivity; in other words, the very history to which “Quashie to Buccra” gives ample space.

But lest we consign the vision of the fruit to universal history, the speaker claims the fragmented sensory experience as his own, and as the trigger for a process of remembering that “through my body swept.” Given the absence of a linking verb “are” or “were,” the first two quatrains constitute a sentence fragment. These are floating moments, suspended in the speaker’s consciousness, experienced sensorially. This is particularly significant when we consider slaves’ use of the space of the provision ground to assert cultural autonomy in the face of historical fragmentation. We can read the conclusion of McKay’s poem, the glance averted from the particular scene of childhood, the turn away from a painful history, as what Gikandi describes as a “space for maneuver”: a flourishing grove within and apart from the slavery and post-slavery landscape.

Undercutting the continuity between past and present, McKay uses the form of “The Tropics in New York” to exhibit control over memory. The original publication of the poem in the Liberator, however, featured a significantly different conclusion:

A wave of longing overwhelmed my soul,
My heart grew faint ceasing its furious throbbing;
And in the thronged street, losing self control,
Like a child lost and lone, I fell to sobbing.\textsuperscript{152}

In this ending, the past unhinges the speaker to the point of bodily and spiritual dysfunction: “my heart grew faint” and “a wave of longing over whelmed my soul.” After the caesura in line 10 (“My heart grew faint {pause} ceasing its furious throbbing”) the heart of the poem skips a beat, and the iambic meter is compromised, both within the lines, and in the feminine end-rhyme (“throbbing/sobbing”) that concludes the poem. The sense of being “overwhelmed” by longing and by personal history is palpable here.

The final version of the poem, which McKay selected for publication in \textit{Harlem Shadows} and \textit{Spring in New Hampshire}, and which was subsequently included in \textit{Survey Graphic} and \textit{The New Negro}, emphasizes instead the speaker’s agency in relationship to the past. Although, “I could no more gaze,” suggesting the speaker is beholden to some outside force, the longing is at least limited to the body: “A wave of longing through my body swept” (“Tropics” 154). Whereas in the earlier version the speaker “fell to sobbing,” here, the speaker acts upon his own body: “I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.” The iambic meter underscores the speaker’s control, the sense that the traumatic break from the homeland need not define the future. Thus, even if the sonnet is the very sign of that break and that trauma, its measure enables McKay’s measure in relationship to the experience of displacement. To paraphrase the Martinican poet Édouard Glissant, the “boundary” of the plantation, “its structural weakness,” which indeed also defines the structure of the sonnet, becomes the poet’s advantage: “The place was closed, but the word derived from it remains open.”\textsuperscript{153}

In this sense, the form of the English sonnet, transformed by its historical contact with


Jamaica and the United States, mediates the relationship between the poem’s two colonial environments. For Glissant, the imagination of literary form is inseparable from the environmental imagination:

Landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character. Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, and the land are inextricable in the process of creating history. Landscape is a character in this process. Its deepest meanings need to be understood.¹⁵⁴

Glissant’s contention that “landscape is a character” has garnered much critical attention. More central to Glissant’s thinking about literature is his suggestion that landscape—a category that subsumes, for him, geography, environment, agriculture, and nature—shapes (and perhaps is) literary form. Indeed, it is in this sense that, for Claude McKay, “describing the landscape is not enough.”

But if landscape is form, it is not so in an easily mimetic sense. That is, it does not mimic a single landscape, a national landscape. Glissant frames his discussion of organic forms in terms of “our quest for the dimension of time” and “our genres” (CD 106, 106n).¹⁵⁵ as opposed to “alien” traditions—in Caribbean Discourse because he is calling for the emergence of a “national literature.” Suggesting that the structure of the sonnet derives from the structure of European seasons, Glissant asserts equivalence between nature and nation:

The pattern of the seasons has perhaps shaped, in the works of Western literature, a balanced rhythm between neutral zones of narrative that are periodically crossed by explosive flashes that arouse the emotions and bring ‘revelation.’ A conclusive illustration of this technique is the European sonnet, with its final thrust that both summarizes and transcends the clear meaning of the poem. It appears that the forms of expression in black cultures do not follow this clever shifting from neutral to strong moments in the structure of a work. The unvarying season (the absence of a seasonal rhythm) leads to a monotony, a plainsong whose obsessive rhythm creates a new

¹⁵⁴ Édouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 104–105. Future references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically as CD.
¹⁵⁵ Emphasis mine.
economy of the expressive forms (CD 106).

Glissant’s reference to the European sonnet subsumes the differentiations within that political category as well as the climatic variations within that geographical region. The sonnet emerged first in the Mediterranean climate of Italy, and then was exported to England, France, and elsewhere in Europe. Thus, we cannot reduce the “European” sonnet to a single climatic or cultural environment; neither can we limit the landscape of the colonial counterform, or, for that matter, the colonial sonnet as counterform. As William J. Maxwell aptly puts it in his introduction to the Complete Poems, the sonnet offers McKay “an exceptionally transnational design.”156 Glissant’s distinction between “national” and “alien” would break down considerably by the time he wrote Poetics of Relation, in which he argues for new forms of identity that exceed the nation, forms that instead articulate the relation among cultures. One such form, for Glissant, is errantry, a kind of wandering through multiple particular landscapes rather than identification with a singular “root.” 157 My interest in Glissant’s understanding of the relationship between “the pattern of the seasons” and Western literary form lies not so much in his reduction of form to cultural or environmental essence, as in his search for “a new economy of expressive form” that might express and generate relational identities, and his positioning of the Caribbean landscape as a potential laboratory for that search (CD 106).

Glissant’s discussion of landscape in Caribbean Discourse emphasizes the way Caribbean environmental experience generates the need for new forms of discourse beyond rootedness. We have seen how in McKay’s hands, colonial form, through its encounter with

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156 Distinguishing himself from scholars who read McKay’s use of the sonnet as a kind of “mask,” Maxwell points out that the sonnet is “born in medieval Italy but dispersed throughout more of the modern world than any other type of Western lyric.” Maxwell, “Introduction,” xxxv–xxxvi.

157 Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 11–22. Glissant’s poetics of relation also involves a revision of the trope of the “root” into a discourse of the rhizome, which might grow in an errant way away from or without a singular source (21).
environmental form, gives rise to a postcolonial poetics of errantry. As McKay’s sonnet
juxtaposes disparate landscapes and literary forms, it also juxtaposes disparate temporal episodes
in order to assemble a collective memory. Returning to the final lines of “Tropics,” we perceive a
turn, in the final quatrain, from neutral description to reflection, as the lush list of the first stanza
gives way to the nostalgia of the second and finally the first person action of the last:

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;
A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

(“Tropics,” 154)
The final gesture is one of aversion, and the bland iambic meter of the last line (consisting almost
terribly of monosyllabic words) is far from “explosive.” By withholding a final couplet, McKay
withholds the revelation and harmony that Glissant defines as characteristic of European literary
tradition. Should we conclude, as Glissant’s analysis might suggest, that McKay is mistakenly
“aim[ing] for spectacular moments, or twists in the narrative, for ‘brainwaves’” and failing to
achieve that kind of closure because of his alienation from the landscape; that he “perpetrate[s] at
the technical level an unconscious and unjustified submissiveness to literary traditions alien to
[his] own” (CD 106)? On the contrary, McKay’s sonnet exposes the gap between the
progressive, compartmentalized structure of the form and a landscape that circulates within and
beyond its boundaries.

How do the individual, the community and the land collectively produce history? “The
Tropics in New York” is episodic in relationship to the past, layering discrete moments (the
memory of Jamaica, the scene in the shop window) without gradual or continuous development
between them. It yokes together the locally-identified space of the slave garden and the
dramatically other space of New York City, within the transnationally-imagined English sonnet.
Thus it can neither emerge precisely from “the pattern of the seasons” nor, on the other hand, take the shape of “a monotony, a plainsong.” If Glissant imagines a counterform to the European sonnet—a form that, in Kamau Brathwaite’s words, “approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience”—then he imagines it as yet to come: “Neither poem nor novel are for that matter our genres,” he writes. “Something else will perhaps emerge” (Glissant, *CD* 106n). In the mean time, the sonnet as provision ground affords McKay both the space for the Jamaican yard on the margins of the colonial plantation, and the “space for maneuver” beyond.

**The American Experiment**

In a 1922 letter to McKay, the American poet Jean Toomer responds to the news that McKay will soon be traveling to Russia (just a few months shy of becoming the USSR):

> Somehow I do not envy you your trip. The Experiment here in America has an almost complete hold upon my interests and imagination. Were it not that I am broadly curious and sympathetic I should be in danger of falling into provincialism. ¹⁵⁹

The letter outlines what appears to be a stark contrast between the two poets: McKay, the Jamaican-born “wandering troubadour” poised to leave New York for over a decade at the beginning of the movement that would be known as the “Harlem Renaissance,” and Toomer, the not-quite-provincial Washingtonian homebody, “held” by America. Three years later, when Toomer’s and McKay’s poems appeared together in *The New Negro*, these conflicting impulses—to move and to stay put, to “reach out” to the world and to participate in “The Experiment here in America,” to develop a national poetic imagination, or an international one—were at the heart of the movement that collection announced.

Toomer’s letter invites us to ask how movement and dislocation complicate our understanding of “the New Negro” as a term defining black Americanism, and to question the dichotomy between stasis and mobility that often prevents us from attending to the transnational circuits of black modernity. As Toomer suggests, “the Experiment here in America,” lacks a precise geographical center. Referring to his hometown of Washington, D.C., he writes, “I love this southland of my ancestors.” The “southland” then moves from the streets of the Mid-Atlantic city to the “hill and rivers” of Harper’s Ferry, VA, the site of Toomer’s recent love affair: “I’ll tell you, brother, the South means love. It has always happened so. Its lies and prejudices are dirty. Well, I’ll eat the dirt provided that the life be sufficiently sweet.” Toomer pictures himself as the subject of an all-too-plausible scene of race-based humiliation in the Jim Crow south—being forced to “eat dirt”—and at the same time uses the dirt as the basis of a metaphor in which the “sweet” life is a fruit growing out of the “dirty” South. Conflating the scene of subjection with the metaphor of cultivation, Toomer posits his own debased body as a hothouse, transforming the dirt from a feature of the “lies and prejudice” of the southern landscape to a seedbed for the “sufficiently sweet” love that is its product. Toomer’s creative process, then, is a process of creation that seems to depend on the dirty lies and prejudice of his dispersed and shifting ancestral homes.

Toomer is apparently immobile, grounded in the local, proscribed by national boundaries and engaged in a “national experiment.” But the many movements within his letter and indeed within his poetic oeuvre, together with McKay’s transplantation of the provision ground to the scene of Harlem, invite us to think of mobility as type of poetic imagination rather than in terms

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160 Toomer continues: “In New York I have been nostalgic for the streets and faces of Washington. In Paris or Moscow I think that I would be the same.” Positioning Washington as part of the “southland” indicates the shifting ground for Toomer’s “experiment.” Toomer to McKay, July 23, 1922.
of specific transatlantic circuitry. This is important lest we read either the “vagabondage” or the Americanism of this period as a form of unfettered privilege or access. This is also important given the ways in which the plantation—as both landscape and mindscape—has haunted and defined modernity not only within the United States but within the postcolonial Caribbean.
CULTIVATING THE CARIBBEAN

Roots

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa, Kikuyu, quick as flies,
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.

—Derek Walcott, from “A Far Cry from Africa”

Written in response to the Mau Mau rebellion and on the eve of Kenyan independence from the British, Derek Walcott’s early poem “A Far Cry from Africa” (1956) bemoans the brutality of the rebellion and the British response and seeks to understand the speaker’s relationship to Africa. It also posits a way of inhabiting the environment through sensation that will bear on this chapter’s central question: whether it is possible, poetically, to imagine a relationship to the landscape beyond property.

Although the title of the poem posits being “far” as the governing metaphor for the speaker’s relationship to Africa, the poem immediately transforms Africa from a location or environment to a body. The poem opens as if onto a landscape: we might expect “A wind is ruffling the tawny veldt” but the skin of an animal syntactically displaces the pastureland, even as the Kikuyu rebels are “quick as flies.” Landscape becomes animal and animal becomes landscape, and humans are one figure within the ecology of the veldt, feeding upon the body of the animal. From the start, the poem naturalizes the violent conflict, but it also brings the geographical relation into the body. The poem concludes:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?

162 In doing so, Walcott triangulates what might be an otherwise problematic equation between Africa and nature. In other words, Walcott does not naturalize the African body or continent, but rather incorporates both into his “divided” tongue.
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?
Betray them both, or give back what they give?
How can I face such slaughter and be cool?
How can I turn from Africa and live?163

Even the reference to language is an anatomical metaphor. The speaker literally cannot “live” without blood or tongue. The poem, then, apparently about distance and the possibility of return, ultimately circumscribes its speaker and the unenclosed African plains themselves within an immobile body. The trochaic substitutions at the beginning of the mostly-iambic closing lines underscore the sense that the speaker is circumscribed between stresses: between “how” and “live.” There is, the poem suggests, nowhere to go.

Walcott’s imaginative return to the African veldt suggests that environmental experience is fundamentally an experience of sensation. This chapter does not focus on Africa, but rather on how Walcott evokes sensory environmental experience to enact another form of return, imaginatively reinhabiting the sites of plantation slavery. In chapter one I suggested that imaginative (if not geographic) mobility produces a poetics that can resist literary, environmental, and economic containment or enclosure. Such a poetics has obvious value for a culture “attempting to produce itself against the sign of its own erasure.”164 In spite of the frequent association between lyric poetry and containment, and readings of the sonnet’s structure in particular as reproducing forms of political and agricultural containment,165 Claude McKay transforms lyric poetry into a route for a diasporic black consciousness that expresses black freedom in the early part of the twentieth century. Walcott invites us to ask what it might mean

164 I’m indebted to Elizabeth Maddock Dillon for applying this deconstructive formulation to Black Studies. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, “Axes of Primitive Accumulation” (presented at the Americanist Research Symposium, Princeton University, 2011).
instead to stay put—to dwell in the body and in the landscape.

In the waning days and aftermath of British colonialism, Caribbean poets faced the task not only of evoking discrete local environments in order to define transnational racial identities, but also of defining their poetics against the colonial order and within the context of emerging nation-states. As Brent Edwards, Nikhil Singh and others have argued, it is difficult if not impossible to disentangle black diaspora from the forces of nationality and nationalism. The language of cultivation has provided some of the most powerful, and problematic, metaphors for anti-colonial and nationalist rhetoric in the Caribbean and beyond. Roots, for instance, was the title of Kamau Brathwaite’s 1986 volume of essays. No figure more accurately encompasses how critics often distinguish Brathwaite from Walcott, his supposed ideological adversary. According to this school of thought, whereas Brathwaite seeks out African “roots” and acknowledges their foundational role for Caribbean culture, Walcott is skeptical of the black power movement among his contemporaries, arguing in many of his prose essays for a poetics that begins from a place of “amnesia” in relationship to the past. And yet tropes of cultivation pervade Walcott’s work as they do Brathwaite’s.

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167 The poets themselves, while full of mutual respect, have also noted the distinction between Brathwaite’s “mission-school melancholy” (Walcott on Brathwaite) and Walcott’s humanism (Brathwaite on Walcott, qtd. by Patricia Ismond). For a thorough discussion of the critical positions on this divide see Patricia Ismond, “Walcott Versus Brathwaite,” in Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott, ed. Robert D Hamner (Washington, D.C: Three Continents Press, 1993), 220–236. Ismond defends Walcott’s “Western Humanism” while upholding a common distinction between Brathwaite’s radical content and Walcott’s elegant forms, Brathwaite’s populism and Walcott’s privacy.

168 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Roots (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 30. Brathwaite’s explication of his volume’s title foregrounds the complexity of the metaphor “roots.” He opens the collection by outlining his concern with what he describes as the dichotomy between migratory and rooted sensibilities in relationship to the Caribbean: “The dichotomy, I think, is still there…. It comes, in a way, as an almost physical inheritance from Africa where in nature, drought and lushness, the flower and the desert, lie side by side. It is a spiritual inheritance from slavery…. Brathwaite essentializes the “physical inheritance from Africa.” However, perhaps surprisingly to critics (Walcott included) who would emphasize Brathwaite’s Africanism as a singular, constraining worldview, he highlights
In the title poem of his 1979 volume *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, Walcott envisions the plantation great house, the former seat of colonial power, as the seat of postcolonial power. Through a poetic meditation on the failed Agrarian reform policies of Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley, whose body Walcott situates within the great house, the poem inspires a rethinking of the relationship between humans and the land. The legacy of slavery twice-tainted the very notion of property in the context of enforced agricultural labor. Not only were human beings themselves held as property throughout the slaveholding colonies, but they also were radically dispossessed of their homelands, languages, families, and communities. In this sense the idea of twentieth-century black subjects reclaiming spaces of agricultural exploitation for alternative purposes maintains both a subversive power and a sense of the impossible. Even as the logic of private property haunts both the plantation space and the pastoral mode, Walcott draws upon the work of cultivation as a source of poetic power. The fragmentary sensory experience of lyric poetry allows him to acknowledge the destructive history of the colonial plantation while imagining a relationship to the environment that exceeds the logic of property inherent in that space.

In spite of his reputation as an international literary figure, a poet associated more closely with routes than roots, Walcott dwells in the local, and the spaces of the archipelago continually produce what I call the Caribbean detail. Here, I am borrowing James Clifford’s evocative and by-now familiar pun to name the relationship between travel and dwelling that we might argue is not divisive of Caribbean poets, but rather definitive of modern Caribbean poetics. Clifford, an anthropologist interested in modernism, posits “travel” as a corrective to “the field” as the key indeterminacy over certainty. Brathwaite finds “in nature” not the rooted fullness of African experience but the dialectic between “drought and lushness, the flower and the desert.”
mode for studying culture. In this chapter I take seriously Clifford’s corollary claim that, “once traveling is foregrounded as a cultural practice, then dwelling, too, needs to be reconceived.”

To draw attention to the space of the plantation and the language of planting in Walcott’s poetry is necessarily to question the ways in which we have understood metaphors of cultivation as fundamentally essentialist, provincial, and static.

Although the much-noted tension between Walcott and Brathwaite has hinged in part upon their differing politics and poetics in relationship to Africa as a potential homeland, equally important for both poets and for their generation more broadly is the idea of a return to the Caribbean itself. What can it mean, in life and in language, to dwell in a landscape now defined by colonialism and its postcolonial aftermath? In the Caribbean context, resistance to poetry of the land emerges as resistance to the pastoral tradition of English verse. Brathwaite, for instance, describes James Grainger’s 1764 georgic The Sugar-Cane, as an example of “Tropical English”:

“At once the ‘Caribbean’ disappears and we find ourselves in English autumn, anticipating Keats.” Even more problematically, as Brathwaite goes on to argue, Grainger imposes his “picturesque and sylvan” view of nature onto people—the plantation slaves—and

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169 Clifford turns to the term “routes” as a way of promoting “a view of human location as constituted by displacement as much as stasis.” James Clifford, Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

170 Ibid., 44.

171 This project does not attempt to categorize works as “pastoral,” “anti-pastoral,” or “georgic” in part because of self-conscious resistance to these traditions among some of the poets. These categories are nonetheless useful to my consideration of the role of labor in cultivation, as well as to my interest in genre. Leo Marx’s distinction between simple and complex pastoral and, later, Timothy Sweet’s emphasis on the georgic, as opposed to the pastoral, as the mode that engages the economic relationship between humans and the environment, are both ways of naming and reorganizing the relationship between nature and culture. The legacy of slave labor in particular transforms this relationship during the twentieth century. Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America; Timothy Sweet, American Georgics: Economy and Environment in Early American Literature (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). 2002).

172 Brathwaite, Roots, 130.

173 Ibid., 140.
ignores “the harsher realities of his society,” namely, the brutality of slavery. The problem with Grainger’s poem is not merely that it ignores the brutality of slavery, but that it enacts some of that violence through its use of the georgic. That is, Grainger categorizes humans (specifically, slaves) within the taxonomic mode of the georgic alongside soil, nectar, and cattle. He places the “Afric’s sable progeny” in the category of Virgil’s sheep, oxen and kine, establishing an unsettling sense of the slave as animal and product, something to count, categorize, and own. The idea of humans as property troubles the form of Grainger’s poem, even as it demonstrates the inextricability of poetry, property, and plantation within colonial logic.

In the generations preceding Brathwaite and Walcott’s, Caribbean poets struggled with the legacy of poems such as Grainger’s, and the pervasive tradition of imitative pastoral verse. The turn against pastoral, however, is not necessarily a turn from the “countryside” to the city (notwithstanding Walcott’s celebration of Port of Spain as the place where culture is made) but a return from English, European, or Europeanized landscapes to Caribbean ones. As an inheritor of Césaire’s legacy alongside the legacy of pastoral, Walcott claims specific geographies—imagined and real—as the cornerstone of his resistance to colonial impositions upon the land, and his dwelling in poetic form.

Following Walcott into the circumscribed territory of the plantation we might understand the ways in which that space has produced and continually produces the conditions of modernity. David Scott has argued we need new “story-forms” to account for modern conscription within

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174 Ibid., 142.
176 Ibid., bk. 1.4.
177 In spite of Grainger’s attempts at replicating the taxonomic order of the georgic, the brutal context of plantation slavery in fact fragments that order. For a fuller discussion of the disintegration of poetic form in The Sugar-Cane in the context of emerging empirical science see Britt M. Rusert, “Shackled in the Garden: Ecology and Race in American Plantation Cultures” (Duke University, 2009), 27–65.
178 “A culture, we all know, is made by its cities.” Walcott, “The Antilles,” 71.
the plantation. We might productively think about Walcott’s move into the space of the plantation, however, as something other than a transformation of “the problem of narrative.”

Given that narrative is the problem, how might poetic and specifically lyric forms allow us to reconceptualize the relationships among past, present and future in the postcolonial moment? Walcott’s representation of the encounter with the colonial logic of property occasions a specifically poetic response.

“The Sea Is History” and “The Schooner Flight”: Against Cultivation

If many Caribbean poets negatively associate cultivation and its poetic representation in pastoral with the brutal history of enforced agricultural labor, Walcott embraces the sea as the site of imaginative possibility unmoored from that history. The sea, as an environment that “does not have anything on it that is a memento of man,”180 seems an ideal geography for imagination. The poles of migratory and rooted Caribbean sensibilities thus emerge not only in the distinction between the city and the country, but in the distinction between agricultural and marine environments. To the extent that Walcott claims the sea as site of oblivion and amnesia, he turns away from the metonymic relationship between land and slavery. If the sea can exist in a metaphorical relationship to human experience, suffering, and culture, it can represent something other than the history of slavery over which Walcott’s contemporaries obsess:

Nothing can be put down in the sea. You can’t plant on it, you can’t live on it, you can’t walk on it. Therefore, the strength of the sea gives you an idea of time that makes history absurd. Because history is an intrusion on that immensity. History is a very, very minor statement; it is not even an intrusion, it is an insignificant speck on the rim of that horizon. And by history I mean a direction that is progressive and linear.181

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179 Scott, Conscripts of Modernity, 7. Scott’s Emphasis.
180 J.P. White, “An Interview with Derek Walcott,” in Conversations with Derek Walcott, by Derek Walcott, Literary Conversations Series (Jackson, Miss: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), 158.
181 Ibid.
In order to position the immensity of the sea against history “that is progressive and linear,” Walcott at the same time opposes the sea to cultivation: “you can’t plant on it.” Of course it is not the case that nothing grows on or in the sea; Walcott’s distinction emphasizes the role of human labor in land-based agriculture, and associates cultivation with an “intrusive,” “progressive and linear” history.

But the “idea of time” Walcott finds in the sea does not merely oppose growth; it also opposes ruin. Walcott acknowledges the self-canceling quality of a place where “nothing can be put down.”

You feel that first of all, that if you weren’t there you wouldn’t be missed. If you are on land looking at ruins, the ruins commemorate you…. And that’s what the ruins of any great cultures do. In a way they commemorate decay… The sea is not elegiac in any way. The sea does not have anything on it that is a memento of man.\(^{182}\)

To long for ruins is to long for a form that can express loss, as opposed to formlessness. Anita Patterson understands Walcott’s comments in this interview as evidence of his “yearning for monuments” and “his awareness of the historical absence of ruins in the Americas,” which, according to Patterson, drew Walcott to the modernist model of the craftsman as someone who builds “durable monuments.”\(^{183}\) But Patterson elides a crucial difference between monuments and ruins. What the sea does not have (and, by contrast, what the land produces) is ruin, decay, remnants. In the slip from “you” to “decay” there is a sense that “you” are “decay.” Thus, to the extent that Walcott embraces the sea’s self-annihilating quality, he embraces the annihilation of what he describes as an already-decayed self.

Walcott frames this annihilation as an opportunity; the absence of literal cultivation (“you can’t plant on it”) is, perhaps paradoxically, the occasion for creative possibility. That is, to the

\(^{182}\) Ibid., 158.

\(^{183}\) Anita Haya Patterson, *Race, American Literature and Transnational Modernisms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). 175
extent that they “reject this sense of history,” that is, history-as-shipwreck, New World poets have the privileged opportunity to create something new, to name the world as they see it in the mode of Adam.\textsuperscript{184} “It is this awe of the numinous,” writes Walcott, “this elemental privilege of naming the New World which annihilates history in our great poets.” Thus Walcott turns on its head Froude’s assertion that there is “no people” in the Caribbean, or Hegel’s that the slaves had no history or no culture. As Paul Breslin has argued, “even the sense of being without a history turns out to be historically produced” and poetically productive.\textsuperscript{185}

The title of Walcott’s “The Sea Is History,”\textsuperscript{186} a poem that appears in the same volume as “The Star-Apple Kingdom,” is an epigrammatic, quotable metaphor whose power rests in its uncanny yoking of history and oblivion. If the sea is the site of amnesia—of forgetting the past—it seems paradoxical to equate it with “a new idea of time.” How will this metaphor work? the title invites as to ask. How will these two radically unlike things become alike? If Walcott elsewhere equates the sea with the necessary amnesia that is the starting point of West Indian art, the native speaker of “The Sea Is History” performs a kind of submarine archeology, diving into the wreck of the past to describe the very history the sea apparently cannot contain. Structured in the form of a dialogue “The Sea Is History” juxtaposes Hegelian doubts about African (or in this case African diasporic) history against the response of a “native speaker.” Against the European critique of diasporic culture, the native speaker describes the middle passage, slavery, and emancipation as historical developments parallel to biblical narrative.

\textsuperscript{185} Breslin’s analysis of history in Walcott’s oeuvre draws upon Glissant’s notion of “a nonhistory” which describes historical consciousness as a series of overturnings rather than a continuous a gradual relationship to time. Paul Breslin, Nobody’s Nation: Reading Derek Walcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 5.
Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, 
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History.

(364)
The native speaker’s assured assertion, “The sea is History,” becomes the poem’s question. From the opening stanza, the poem refuses to distinguish clearly between the dismissive Hegelian voice and the defensive native voice. The enjambment after “sirs” in the second line, as opposed to a line break after “memory,” emphasizes the interpenetration of these voices rather than their discreteness. The separation further breaks down as the European speaker’s questions vanish; it becomes impossible to determine who asserts, “and that was just Lamentations—/ that was just Lamentations./ it was not history” (366).

The poem depends upon the uncomfortable intersection of unlike things—that is, upon the uncomfortable work of metaphor. To take one example, the poem’s brief description of the middle passage:

Then there were the packed cries,
the shit, the moaning:

Exodus.

(364)
The extended metaphor’s progress depends upon a narrative reversal: the poem compares the passage of Africans into slavery with the biblical passage out of slavery. The stanza break between the two terms of the comparison, and the harsh brevity of the single-word line “Exodus,” underscore the incommensurability of the two narratives. Rather than equating the history of African slavery with the unfolding of Biblical narrative so as to justify or memorialize Caribbean history against European claims of its nonexistence, the poem points up the difficulty
of such comparisons. The comparison of the title (the sea is history) and the comparison of the poem (African diasporic history is as important and meaningful as biblical history) taken together equate the West with history, and Africa with “the sea,” recapitulating Hegel’s assertion that Africa is “still involved in the conditions of mere nature.”

This is not to say that Walcott’s poem repeats Hegel’s dismissal of Caribbean history. On the contrary, once the voice of the poem seems to accept or at least repeat the notion that “it was not history” the poem posits an alternative starting point for culture, one which challenges not only the West Indian claim to the “wreck” as origin but also the insistent direction of European teleology. By the end we hear “the sound/ like a rumour without any echo/ of History, really beginning” (“Sea,” 367). The sea in Walcott’s poetry exemplifies nature’s status as at once freighted with history and independent of it, existing in both metaphoric and metonymic relationship to human experience. That is, the sea does not merely contain history on a metaphorical level, as “that grey vault,” but also literally contained “the packed cries,/ the shit, the moaning” (364) in the cargo holds of slave ships “all subtle and submarine” (365). Turning away from the sea as a metaphor toward the sea as a natural space through which humans have moved (and in which humans have died and drowned), Walcott’s poem produces “the sound” which indeed has a history.

Walcott’s wish to move beyond linear, time-based models of history that describe either progress or decay is a wish whose fulfillment rests specifically in the possibilities of poetry as a genre. For Walcott, the absence of history is the condition for the creation of poetic culture: “this elemental privilege of naming the New World.” Walcott longs for a form that can express not only the history of loss, but the loss of history. In the opening stanzas of Walcott’s mini-epic,

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“The Schooner Flight,” the protagonist Shabine represents his cultural hybridity as a contest between nationality and annihilation.

I’m just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have dutch, nigger, and English in me,
And either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation.188

The list of first-person declarations reads at first like a series of comma-spliced independent clauses, each upending the claims of the last as the speaker shifts among his various voices, the stodgily earnest “I had a sound colonial education” canceling out the mockingly self-deprecating “I’m just a red nigger who love the sea.” The final two lines of the stanza reconcile these conflicting claims and tones, but suggest yet another potential erasure. “A nation” can exist only if it can account for the diversity of its individuals. The line also suggests that, without nationhood, “I’m nobody”—that individuals cannot exist without the possibility of a hybrid nation. To be a “bad nationalist,” then, might cost existence. However, whether it is the nation, the individual, or both, whose ontology is threatened here remains ambiguous, suggesting at once the inextricability and the irreconcilability of these two forms of subjectivity.

Walcott also posits belonging to the poetic imagination as an alternative to national identification. Claude McKay’s tropes of cultivation demonstrate how the double bind of colonial language can become a form of double-consciousness, that is, in the Du Boisian sense, not only a burden but a possibility, a way of defining black vision. Like McKay, Walcott stages this possibility in part in terms of what language can accomplish. In “The Schooner Flight,” the idiomatic present tense opens the poem: although the narrative unfolds in the past, Shabine’s story begins by recollecting that, “In idle August…. I blow out the light” (“Schooner” 345).

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Thus, Caribbean linguistic idiom formally bridges past (“I stood like a stone and nothing else move”) with present (“either I’m nobody or I’m a nation.”) Shabine draws an apparently stark divide between nation and annihilation, a divide which raises important questions for our thinking of the relationship between nature and culture in black poetry: if hybridity both defines national belonging and threatens existence, then what lies between nation and annihilation? The answer may be poetic language itself, which mediates the relationship between the present and the past by the shifting verb forms in the passage. Later in the poem, the process of Shabine’s expatriation appears complete as he departs from “the Republic,” and stages an encounter with History in the form of his white grandfather: “I had no nation now but the imagination” (350). This formulation is equal parts foreboding and promising. Here the poem goes beyond annihilation (with “no nation,” “I’m nobody”). Walcott also suggests that it might be possible to imagine an ideal nation as an alternative to existing ones, and that imagination itself might be an alternative form of belonging.

The Slave in the Great House:

“The Star-Apple Kingdom,” Property, and the Plantation

“The Schooner Flight” offers the sea as an alternative space for rethinking the relationship between past and present as well as nation and imagination. But the landscape of slavery haunts the volume of *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, in which both “The Sea Is History” and “The Schooner Flight” appear. If the sea functions metaphorically to articulate how the loss of history and nationhood enables Caribbean artistic practice, what does Walcott make of the detritus of history on shore? What kind of relationship to nature and nation is possible within the confines of the plantation?
The possibility of imagination and poetic sensation as alternative forms of belonging takes on particular urgency in the volume’s title poem, an exploration of the challenges of post-federation national leadership in Jamaica. Like Claude McKay’s twentieth-century reimagining of the provision ground, “The Star-Apple Kingdom”\textsuperscript{189} returns to the landscape of slavery to reimagine black identity and belonging. The brooding poem descends into the meditations of a great political leader, Michael Manley, who was Walcott’s friend and Prime Minister of Jamaica from 1972 to 1980 (and again from 1989 to 1992). Opening with a description of “that ancient pastoral” of the plantation, the poem circumscribes its hero within the plantation, looking out “from the Great House windows.” The view from those windows reveals both the counterpastoral qualities of the landscape (the labor, for instance of the black gardeners who made it) and the failures of Manley’s political career. From that view the poem traces a broader geography of Jamaica and the Caribbean, shifting in and out of Manley’s consciousness. Unfolding Manley’s dream (and nightmare) of revolution, the poem is dense with both political allusions (“CIA, PNP, OPEC”) and environmental details. In 1979, the year of The Star-Apple Kingdom’s publication, Manley’s popularity was dwindling, in part because of his affiliations with Castro’s Cuba, and also because of the perceived failures of his agricultural reform. Most accounts of the poem describe it as a political allegory or cautionary tale about the dangers of socialism,\textsuperscript{190} but “The Star-Apple Kingdom” concerns itself with the agricultural landscape as more than a metaphor, accounting for the lived connection between social and environmental experience.


“The Star-Apple Kingdom” critiques the logic of private property within the colonial system, and of property as reconceived within the nationalist postcolonial state under Manley’s leadership. Like many Caribbean writers Walcott turns to the archipelago, rather than the nation, to describe the geography of Caribbean belonging. Against the postcolonial reconception of property, he posits the archipelago’s overarching and the fragmentary curve as the shape of poetry, and the primary structure for relating to the land.

“The Star-Apple Kindom,” has received relatively little critical attention, in part because of the way “The Schooner Flight,” a more well-attended poem in the same volume, predicts the epic ambitions of Omeros. However, it is precisely the lyric scope of the senses in “The Star-Apple Kingdom” that allows the poem to redefine dwelling in the Caribbean. Those critics who have attended to the poem do so largely because of its political message. Patricia Ismond, who declares that “The Star-Apple Kingdom” is “more significant” than “The Schooner Flight,” believes so primarily because the former is “Walcott’s most conclusive statement on history and politics in the region,” even as she acknowledges that the latter is better “structured.” Thus her lengthy reading of the poem, while a refreshing exception to the general rule of brief mention in relation to larger works, focuses on the intertwining of the political and personal narratives as the poem’s “essential meaning,” and largely ignores the poem’s status as a poem beyond establishing metaphor as a “point of entry” to narrative and characterization. To evaluate “The Star-Apple Kingdom” (or any Walcott poem for that matter) exclusively according to its political “statement” is problematic precisely because the poem makes multiple political readings available: while Paul Breslin calls the poem “a mordantly satirical account of the disintegration

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191 In part because of the large place Omeros has taken up in the criticism, much has been written about Walcott’s engagement with the European classical tradition of epic, which critics have identified as one of Walcott’s central preoccupations.
192 Patricia Ismond, Patricia Ismond, Abandoning Dead Metaphors: The Caribbean Phase of Derek Walcott’s Poetry (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2001), 249.
of the West Indies Federation,” for instance, Ismond sees Walcott’s Michael Manley (the central figure of the poem) as the object of great sympathy. This is not to say that the poem’s political explorations are irrelevant; the poem is remarkable within Walcott’s oeuvre for its direct confrontation with political reality. However, to treat the poem as a political footnote in the career of an artist is to suggest that Walcott’s politics and his poetics have little to say to one another. On the contrary, the poem engages a particular literary mode that in turn engages postcolonial politics. Walcott reappropriates the pastoral mode to critique a colonial system in which people and place alike were private property. In challenging the grounds of English originality, “The Star-Apple Kingdom” destabilizes the received relationship between nature and nation.

Walcott depicts the period of Jamaican nationalism as a transformation of the specifically literary and artistic modes of pastoralism. Thus, he explicitly unites anti-pastoralism with political resistance, but only to reclaim and reframe pastoral poetry for different purposes. The opening section of the poem conflates the idea of “ancient pastoral” as a form of painting, as a literary mode, and as the form of the land itself.

There were still shards of an ancient pastoral
in those shires of an island where the cattle drank
their pools of shadow from an older sky,
surviving from when the landscape copied such subjects as
“Herefords at Sunset in the Valley of the Wye.”

(“Star-Apple,” 383)

Ismond describes this moment as “a picture-perfect image of the ancient pastoral” which the poem will later unsettle, but the poem formally destabilizes “the picture-perfect” from the outset.

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194 Ismond, Abandoning Dead Metaphors, 253.
Through this ekphrastic description of broken porcelain shards, the poem asserts a measure of distance between the supposed subject (the landscape) and its multiple layers of representation (the pastoral painting on china in shards, the poem). Walcott also reverses the usual mimetic presupposition. That is, while we usually understand pastoral poetry or painting as artistic modes that copy the landscape, here, “the landscape” of the Star-Apple Kingdom copied such subjects as “Herefords at Sunset in the Valley of the Wye.” The very title of the poem already throws into question the nature of this reverse mimesis (and, in turn, the realist claims of conventional mimetic art): how can the land of the “star-apple kingdom” resemble this generic English subject of pastoral? The colonial landscape necessarily reveals a crisis at the heart of representation.

A triumphant reading of Walcott’s remaking of the pastoral mode on the postcolonial plantation might sound something like the romance narratives David Scott associates with the legacy of the anti-colonial struggle. Such a reading might go like this: The poem opens in the mode of poetic idyll, describing a Jamaican landscape that mirrors the idealized landscape of English pastoral conveyed with the apparent painting title “Herefords at Sunset in the Valley of the Wye.” The introduction of political discourse in the second stanza, however, disrupts the pastoral description by revealing the bitterness, violence and rage of colonialism itself and the response and overturning of colonial rule, marking a turn to the revolutionary content of the poem. The painting at the center of the first stanza represents pastoral, and the remainder of the poem the rejection of pastoral, its values, exclusions and omissions. The overturning of pastoral, in turn, functions as a political allegory: to expunge “shards of an ancient pastoral” from the image of Jamaica is to overthrow the yolk of colonialism. Further, a romantic reading might contend, by overturning pastoral the poem overturns the property relationship that pastoral both

\[195\] Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*. See the introduction of this dissertation for a more detailed discussion of Scott’s critique of romance as postcolonial mode of emplotment.
records and occludes: of master over both slave and scene.

We might also be tempted to read as allegorical the narrative that surrounds the poem’s central character, Michael Manley. Indeed, one thing that might lead us to this reading is Walcott’s reluctance to describe his apparent protagonist with any specificity. The poem is apparently about Manley and Jamaica, but neither the title nor the opening lines explicitly identifies the place, time, or the particular political context. While many poems in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* carry a dedication to a particular figure (Joseph Brodsky, for instance, and Kenneth Ramchand), the title poem does not identify Manley in this way, either. The poem does not in fact introduce its “hero” until the third stanza of the poem, placing the land and its history ahead of the man and his history, and when Manley does emerge, he is unnamed. In an interview with Carrol Fleming, Walcott unequivocally identifies Manley as the historical subject of the poem: “The Star-Apple Kingdom is a constant place—Jamaica. ‘He’ is Manley, my friend…. You know Michael Manley, a young person in charge of a country.”\(^\text{196}\) The poem has established itself as otherwise precise with names, evoking the name “Parish Trelawny” over and over again, and repeating the title of the pastoral painting, “Herefords at Sunset in the Valley of the Wye.” Why, then, in a poem so explicitly concerned with names, would Walcott omit the name of its hero?

Withholding the name of an historical protagonist creates an indeterminacy with regard to his identity while at the same time raising the possibility that the worldview of the poem is a collective one. The invisible name “Manley” is subordinated to place names—Trelawny, Wye, August Town, Warieka Hills, Kingston. Thus, the poem would at first seem to enact a version of “national allegory.” In this way of reading, reversing Ismond’s psychologizing interpretation of

the figure of Manley, we would understand the poem’s protagonist as representative (of all Caribbean nationals, or all Caribbean leaders, or of Jamaica), and his struggle as representative of the national struggle. But the poem refuses to be writ large on political terms, and Walcott thus renounces the romance plot and the trap of third-world allegory.\footnote{Frederic Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Social Text 15 (1986): 65–88. For different reasons, Jahan Ramazani has convincingly argued that Walcott’s later poem Omeros belies Jameson’s claim that third-world texts “are to be read as what I will call national allegories.” But Ramazani distinguishes Omeros, in which Walcott addresses the history of West Indian suffering, from Walcott’s earlier condemnations of what Walcott has often seen as a literature of “victimization.” Ramazani argues that the metaphor of the wound and the figure of Philoctete in Omeros allow Walcott to take up the mantle of Caribbean suffering without claiming a unique status. “The Star-Apple Kingdom” similarly evokes the history of Caribbean suffering in relationship to transcultural experience. However, the figure of the epic hero who embodies the wounded trope that is central to this process in Omeros remains unavailable to this shorter poem, in spite of its apparent focus on a single character.}

The central obstacle to an allegorical reading is Manley’s participation, as a leader and as a character, in conflicting discourses: visionary and populist, literary and political, historical and prophetic. We first meet Manley in the interior of the landscape, looking out across history and its present manifestations.

He looked out from the Great House windows on clouds that still held the fragrance of fire,
he saw the Botanical Gardens officially drowned
in a formal dusk, where governors had strolled
and black gardeners had smiled over glinting shears
and the lilies of parasols on the floating lawns

(“Star-Apple,” 385)

This portrayal immediately introduces Manley’s conflict: a battle with the “fire” “still held” by the land, the history of destruction and revolution that is his inheritance. Although the great house of Mona plantation was considered as the potential site for Prime Ministers’ residence after Independence, the actual residences during Manley’s first period of leadership were Jamaica House, built specifically for that purpose and which he continued to use as an office, and
other unofficial homes in Kingston. Walcott thus fictionalizes Manley’s physical surroundings in the poem. Positioned within the “Great House,” Walcott’s Manley occupies the seat of power, but he is able to see both the center and the margin, both “governors” and “black gardeners,” the smiles of those gardeners and the “glinting shears”—the good and the terrifying remains of history.

Manley’s position within the “Great House” circumscribes him within the plantation geography, which the poem relates to twentieth-century English and American power. Rather than standing in for a larger story, place names in the Kingdom draw us into the particular geography of colonialism. Walcott now makes visible (though not, notably, audible in the voice of the poem) those who have been “innocently excluded” from the scene of agricultural production: the “Black gardeners” who “had smiled over glinting shears.” The gardeners voice the “silent scream”—the critique—that the pastoral painting and family photo suppress in the poem’s opening stanzas, but that will later take over the poem:

> What was the Caribbean? A green pond mantling behind the Great House columns of Whitehall, behind the Greek facades of Washington

(“Star-Apple” 393)

In this analogy Walcott compares the Caribbean to the physical landscape of the plantation, and the plantation “Great House” to sources of colonial and contemporary power. The metaphor itself (the Caribbean was a green pond mantling....) is unstable insofar as it describes an impossible spatial relationship (is the pond behind the columns and facades, or behind Whitehall and Washington themselves? or is the pond behind Whitehall which is behind Washington?) The unstable comparison foregrounds the metonymic relationships between place names, architecture

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and power: Whitehall, a palace which exists only partially in the present day, gives its name and
monarchical power to all of English government; Walcott layers upon this the metonymic
association between the Great House and the brutality of planters’ power upon the plantation.
“Great House” and “White Hall” (emphasis added) also collectively produce the suggestion of
“The White House.”199 At stake is more than a process of writing back in the gardener. Rather,
in giving Manley power over the reclaimed landscape of slavery, the poem critiques even the
emancipated version of power, calling for a different ecological relationship all together. The
landscape, rather than Manley, becomes the “character” through which Walcott evokes the
Caribbean particular. The natural world yields the ideal set of tropes for Walcott’s critique of
Caribbean nationalism because of its double function as metonomy and metaphor—as site of
economic and physical oppression, as well as representative for imaginative labors.

Public Property

We might expect Walcott’s placement of Manley within the plantation geography to
mirror the powerful symbolism of the black (or in Manley’s case brown) Jamaican state taking
control of the sugar plantations. In this version of what Scott would call a “romantic
emplotment,” the Great House of colonialism and slavery, diminished by revolution, is now the
site of that revolutionary power. However, just as the sugar cooperatives failed to uplift the poor
or shore up the ailing Jamaican economy, Manley fails to create social change through
environmental power in Walcott’s fictionalized landscape. We might read the poem instead as

199 Elizabeth A. Wilson makes a similar point in her critique of Claire Malroux’s French translation of
“The Star-Apple Kingdom.” Wilson demonstrates how Malroux’s choice of “palatiales” for “Great
House” fails to convey the suffering associated with the landscape of slavery. Elizabeth A. Wilson,
“Translating Caribbean Landscape,” ed. Christine Raguet-Bouvard and Paul Bensimon, Palmipsestes:
Traduire La Littérature Des Caraïbes: La Plausibilité D’une Traduction : Le Cas De La Disparition De
unfolding a _tragic_ narrative, the kind that Scott sees as definitive of postcolonial modernity: Manley remains trapped within the plantation, and the ethos of the plantation marked by excessive agricultural and social control is essentially flawed, even in transformative postcolonial hands.\footnote{George Handley has usefully unearthed Walcott’s objections to tourist development in St. Lucia in the 1990s and his dismay at the “miamification” of the archipelago. My reading of “The Star-Apple Kingdom” suggests that even earlier in his career Walcott had linked excessive environmental control and ill-planned agricultural development with the failures of social, political, and economic transformation. “Derek Walcott’s Poetics of the Environment in The Bounty,” _Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters_ 28, no. 1 (2005): 202–204.} To some extent, then, Walcott represents Manley’s state control of plantations as a repetition of the logic of colonial power, however much the view from the Great House windows has changed. But tragic emplotment proves an equally problematic model for understanding the poem because of the way Walcott uncouples social power from environmental power.

Manley’s environmental mandates, rather than metaphorically representing his social power, evoke the tension between his agrarian reform schemes—designed to increase the nation’s agricultural production and give economic, political, and social power to small land owners and peasants—and the poverty and social inequities that persisted in spite of those efforts. Looking out from the Great House windows, Manley seems to regard both governors and gardeners from a temporal and emotional distance, “in a formal dusk, where governors had strolled/ and black gardeners had smiled.”\footnote{Emphasis mine.} Walcott portrays Manley as an agriculturalist—that is, someone who attempts to cultivate or control the land (and nature more broadly); he governs and gardens. For, where there had been governors in the center and black gardeners on the margins, now

| the flame trees obeyed his will and lowered their wicks, |
| the flowers tightened their fists in the name of thrift |
| the porcelain lamps of ripe cocoa, the magnolia’s jet |

\footnote{Emphasis mine.}
dimmed on the one circuit with the ginger lilies
and left a lonely bulb on the verandah,
and, had his mandate extended to that ceiling
of star-apple candelabra, he would have ordered
the sky to sleep, saying, I’m tired,
save the starlight for victories, we can’t afford it,
leave the moon on for one more hour, and that’s it.

(385)

Manley’s environmental power stands in contrast to his social power, for he cannot control persistent poverty.

But though his power, the given mandate, extended from tangerine daybreaks to star-apple dusks,
his hand could not dam that ceaseless torrent of dust
that carried the shacks of the poor, to their root-rock music,
down the gullies of Yallahs and August Town.…

His powers over nature are limited (his “mandate” does not extend to the sky, “that ceiling of star-apple candelabra”), but Manley’s power “from tangerine daybreaks to star-apple dusks” nonetheless exceeds his ability to control the poverty and destitution of his people. Walcott emphasizes the distinction between his “given mandate” over the earth and his inability to effect social change.

We can understand Manley’s agricultural development projects as attempts at cultivation in a double sense insofar as Manley intended the initiatives to create and preserve the culture and agriculture of the island. This dual cultivation was for Manley crucial to the nationalist project of defining an independent Jamaican economy and society. Manley, the son of former Prime Minister and leader of the People’s Nationalist Party Norman Manley, rose to power in the wake of his father’s resignation with a combined platform of democratic socialism and participation in an international economic order. His policies thus constituted “an attempt to defend and preserve localism and the preservation of local culture and historical memory while functioning
in a global economy.²⁰² The Sugar Cooperatives in particular were both Manley’s most ambitious reorganization and his most disappointing project. On the one hand, Manley’s transformation of the sugar plantations into worker-owned cooperatives—which the previous government purchased at low cost from the corporations which previously owned them—must have seemed a powerful historical transformation: the independent state taking control of an industry that for centuries had been integral to the oppression of the black majority and handing that control over, at least in part, to the cane workers themselves. On the other hand, as Michaline Chrichlow has argued, Manley’s projects enlisted workers in the service of state development projects without creating significant social or economic change. While the sugar cooperatives undoubtedly restructured the economy of the plantation, they failed to restructure the economic lives of the sugar workers. Arguably, the cooperatives functioned to consolidate state power over the land rather than empower small farmers.²⁰³

By depicting Manley’s agricultural power as the sign of Jamaica’s economic decline, the poem implicates state property in the same destructive pattern as private property. Further, the poem begins to suggest that the division and commodification of land and communities has relays with the organization of poetic language. Where Walcott elsewhere celebrates the “numinous” as the essence of poetic creation,²⁰⁴ here he represents Manley as a kind of apocalyptic Adam whose urge to name and control the environment is overly circumscribed by history. In one of the poem’s most interior moments, Manley reflects on the inadequacies of both his human and his environmental mandates:

²⁰⁴ Critics likewise celebrate the Adamic impulse of Walcott’s poetry as its most revelatory quality.
I should have foreseen those seraphs with barbed-wire hair, beards like burst mattresses, and wild eyes of garnet, who nestled the Coptic Bible to their ribs, would call me Joshua, expecting him to bring down Babylon by Wednesday, after the fall of Jericho; yes, yes, I should have seen the cunning bitterness of the rich who left me no money but these mandates:

His aerial mandate, which contained the crows whose circuit was this wedding band that married him to his island. His marine mandate, which was the fishing limits which the shark scissored like silk with its teeth between Key West and Havana; his terrestial: the bled hills rusted with bauxite; paradisal: the chimneys like angels sheathed in aluminum

(“Star-Apple” 389-390)

Again the poem contrasts different kinds of power, emphasizing Manley’s control over Jamaica’s commodities (not only the “bled hills” but the chimneys of paradise are sheathed in “aluminum”—which was, by 1978, the predominate, yet faltering, industry in Jamaica) but not, fundamentally, its economy. The transformation of bauxite from the earth into aluminum sheaths for angels suggests the exploitation of Jamaica’s natural resources. In this section of the poem the linear structure breaks down, enjambments overtaking the previously end-stopped lines. The stanza listing Manley’s mandates has the quality of a bulleted to-do list, whose items become increasingly brief and abstract: “His aerial mandate, which..../ His marine mandate, which..../ his terrestrial.... paradisal.” After the stanza break the poem also shifts abruptly from first person to third, suggesting the fundamentally exterior quality of Manley’s power. The rhythmic repetition of the environmental mandates reduces the air, sea, land, and even heavens to partial representations, like the parts of a woman’s body singled out for praise in blazon. This poetic
gesture enacts in advance the division and commoditization of the Caribbean itself, which

Walcott describes two stanzas later:

One morning the Caribbean was cut up
by seven prime ministers who bought the sea in bolts—
one thousand miles of aquamarine with lace trimmings,
one million yards of lime-colored silk,
one mile of violet, leagues of cerulean satin—
who sold it at a mark up to the conglomerates.
(390)

Manley’s leadership, and perhaps the poetic process itself, Walcott suggests, participates in the
same disintegration as the failure of the West Indian Federation and the rise of Caribbean
nationalism. As Manley’s power grows too great, human error and violent revolution corrupt the
possibilities of the landscape, for

Now a tree of grenades was his star-apple kingdom,
over fallow pastures his crows patrolled,
he felt his fist involuntarily tighten
into a talon that was strangling five doves,
the mountains loomed leaden under martial law,
the suburban gardens flowered with white paranoia
next to the bougainvillaeas [sic] of astonishing April.
(391)

In spite of Michael Manley’s democratic socialism and ideological commitment to the uplift of
the poor, Walcott’s Manley is ultimately subject to the notions of property inherent in the topos
of the Plantation. The excessive urge to environmental ownership, the poem suggests, turns hills
rich with aluminum “leaden under martial law.”

Naming as Claiming

For Walcott, the destructive claim to property emerges not only in the contemporary
political arena but in poetic language. From its opening lines, the poem represents the act of
naming the landscape as an act of violence rather than creation. After evoking the “shards of pastoral” the poem describes the process by which “the landscape copied” this fragmentary art:

The mountain water that fell white from the mill wheel sprinkling like petals from the star-apple trees, and all of the windmills and sugar mills moved by mules on the treadmill of Monday to Monday, would repeat in tongues of water and wind and fire, in tongues of Mission School pickaninnies, like rivers remebering their source, Parish Trelawny, Parish St. David, Parish St. Andrew, the names afflicting the pastures, the lime groves and fences of marl stone and the cattle with a docile longing, an epochal content.

(383)

Language, here a sign of human social control, “afflicts” land. If the title of a generic pastoral painting disjunctively names the Caribbean landscapes, then the lines that follow represent the nonidentity between “an ancient pastoral” and its colonial manifestation as a problem of linguistic repetition. The long, difficult-to-parse sentence raises the problem of colonial language on multiple levels. Place names “afflict” the pastures, suggesting that the colonizing language divides the land according to the English missionary system. These names contrast sharply with the name the poem gives the landscape, an expansive (albeit monarchial) name that emerges from the earth itself: star-apple kingdom.

The affliction is also nostalgia: “a docile longing, an epochal content.” The “affliction” of colonialism gives the landscape its subject (its content) as well as its stature of docile submission (its content), just as English pastoral (borrowed already from its more “ancient” predecessor) imposes its form upon colonial landscape. The poem enacts the ritualistic process of memory through the repetition of the word “parish” as “source” for the river—a word that refers to the
divisions of territory (according to ecclesiastical or other parameters). The singular “source” of the rivers is thus already divided, plural, and determined according to political, economic, or religious boundaries. This reminder of the formation (and naming) of parishes (particularly Trelawny, which was named for Edward Trelawny, who was governor of Jamaica 1738-1758) marks the English governance of Jamaica as an “affliction.” Naming thus becomes a kind of claiming-as-property that which cannot belong.

Lest we read the newly-empowered inhabitance of the plantation by the descendents of slaves as an allegory for political resistance, “The Star-Apple Kingdom” also suggests the dangers of poetic comparison. There is certainly a sense in which Walcott proceeds always in terms of equation and similarity. Comparison is, in a sense, the subject of the poem, its singular obsession. The comparative word “like” occurs three times in the first stanza, and more direct comparisons take place even more frequently. However, Walcott represents such comparisons as violent yoking of unlike things. At the end of the poem’s second stanza, Walcott describes the function of art as the simultaneous representation of two things. The poem describes the “silent scream’ excluded from the work of pastoral art,

\begin{quote}
a scorching wind of a scream 
that began to extinguish the fireflies,
that dried up the water mill creaking to a stop
as it was about to pronounce Parish Trelawny
all over, in the ancient pastoral voice,
a wind that blew all without bending anything,
neither the leaves of the album nor the lime groves;
blew Nanny floating back in white from a feather
to a chimerical, chemical pin speck that shrank
the drinking Herefords to brown porcelain cows
on a mantelpiece, Trelawny trembling with dusk,
the scorched pastures of the old benign Custos; blew
far the decent servants and the lifelong cook,
\end{quote}

and shriveled to a shard that ancient pastoral of dusk in a gilt-edged frame now catching the evening sun in Jamaica, making both epochs one.

(384-385)

Walcott identifies the utopian rage of the postcolonial moment that has just ended with the same urge to property that has defined the colonial past. Here the work of the “ancient pastoral of dusk” is “making both epochs one,” bringing together through artistic comparison the colonial era of English pastoral and the rage of postcolonial politics. Jahan Ramazani has suggested that *Omeros* in particular (perhaps singularly) uses metaphor as a way of yoking together dissimilar things across boundaries of class, race, gender and power, rendering the Caribbean legacy of suffering a condition of woundedness that can be understood globally. But “The Star-Apple Kingdom” associates the process of “making both epochs one” with a kind of artistic violence toward history and environment alike. The “scorching wind of a scream”—the voice of nationalist revolution—blows but does not bend, shrinking reality into readable forms, so that Nanny, the monumental foremother of Caribbean maroonage is a “chimerical, chemical pin speck” and live Herefords are transformed to souvenirs, consumable commodities.

This is, notably, the first moment where Walcott identifies the poem’s particular national geography: the pastoral and the scream alike (for it is unclear which of these has agency in “making both epochs one”) are “in Jamaica.” Although the penultimate line of the stanza suggests a scene that could take place nearly anywhere, the enjambment juxtaposes that apparently universal setting against the particular place, emphasizing the incommensurability of the “gilt-edged frame” and the setting in which it has been “shriveled to a shard.” Being “in Jamaica” thus foregrounds a crisis of representation with regard to the landscape, but it also

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produces the “specks” and “shards,” the Caribbean details that themselves make up the landscape of New World poetry.

**Dwelling in the Archipelago: Sensing the ‘Speck’ as History**

As particular details of the landscape, the “shard” and the “speck” are remnants of a sensory experience of the environment. I draw attention to Walcott’s interest in the detail, the speck, and the shrunken and fragmentary as a way of suggesting the shape of the lyric poem. These shrunken details evoke the violence of poetic representation, but they also suggest something that must be perceived without being possessed, and that makes meaning only in the process of assemblage. In this sense Walcott’s poetry plots neither a romantic story nor a tragic one. It does not plot at all. Rather, The poet’s engagement with the plantation’s modernity assembles a lyric form. Even in Walcott’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, “The Antilles,” whose subtitle is “fragments of epic memory,” (my emphasis) and even in the middle-length poems of *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, which many critics regard as some of Walcott’s “rehearsals” for *Omeros*, Walcott dwells in the possibilities of the particular for defining individual and collective Caribbean identities.

In her reading of Walcott’s *Omeros*, Susan Stewart has argued that lyric affords a sensory experience we need in the aftermath of the violent desensitization of war. Walcott, according to Stewart, embraces the first person subjectivity of lyric as an alternative to war, a “counter-epic” that works against the generalizing, allegorizing, nationalist aims of epic by way of the particularity of place and the consciousness of first-person lyric. Stewart’s discussion centers

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208 Ibid., 320.
not only on Walcott but on Gwendolyn Brooks—both are African Diasporic poets, writing not only after war but after slavery, colonialism, and Jim Crow violence. By invoking at the start Marx’s critique of the desensitization of the “trade in human bodies,” Stewart’s reading implicitly suggests it might be profitable to think about lyric as a necessary counter not only to the violence of war but to the desensitizing effects of racial violence. If Omeros functions as a “counter-epic” by engaging epic’s traditions, “The Star-Apple Kingdom” produces the possibilities of lyric poetry through its engagement of the pastoral. The poem’s transformation of pastoral is especially important because it reimagines particularly the details of the landscape of slavery. In spite of Walcott’s claims to historylessness, this lyric subjectivity constitutes a response to the particular legacy of slavery, insofar as it emerges from the plantation geography.

The loss of history, rather than the absence of history, motivates the rhythm of the poem.

Extending Stewart’s claims, I want to suggest further that “lyric’s role as the continuing form of [sensory] expression” emerges in Walcott from his preoccupation with environmental detail as sensory experience. If art “shrinks” both nature and history, lyric “compression” affords access to the particular, the distinct. Within the structure of the book The Star-Apple Kingdom, each individual poem constitutes a fragment of history. The geographic movement of the book from Trinidad to Jamaica, with stops in places as diverse as Tobago and a “gulag archipelago” in Joseph Brodsky’s Russia, mirrors the shape of the archipelago in such a way that emphasizes

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209 Ibid., 294.
210 Ibid., 325.
211 Walcott critiques Brathwaite for being unable to enact this kind of lyric compression. “The poet does not wish us to approach the poem as a compression of epic experience. His vision is oblique, his tone modulated, ‘Rights of Passage’ is a succession of lyrics, almost casually arranged in terms of epochs and historical changes, and like every lyric it is self-centered. The journeys and sojourns which the poet has made have entered his experience without his addressing them in prophetic terms. Everything has been honed down to a sliver-thin essential, to bare bone, to the sound of a single instrument.” Derek Walcott, “‘Tribal Flutes’ Review of Rights of Passage by Edward Brathwiate,” Sunday Guardian Magazine, March 19, 1967.
both the interconnection and the integrity of the “speck”—which is, in Walcott, perhaps another word for island viewed from above.

Walcott figures the relationship between the universal and the particular through the topography of the Caribbean archipelago. While the primary meaning of “archipelago” is the Aegean Sea, the word also refers to any sea that contains a group of islands, or the group of islands itself. Walcott evokes this dual archipelagic structure to describe “the Caribbean” and “The Antilles.” “The Star-Apple Kingdom” laments that “One morning the Caribbean was cut up/ by seven prime ministers who bought the sea in bolts,” transforming “the Caribbean” from what Walcott depicts as “natural” and originary (“the sea”) to an economic commodity, from “archipelago” to “this chain store of islands.” In that sense, even as Walcott celebrates the particular, he embraces the unity offered by the archipelago.212

Walcott has elsewhere, in his prose essay “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” questioned the construct of discrete Caribbean (and any American) nationhood:

We have broken up the archipelago into nations, and in each nation we attempt to assert characteristics of the national identity. Everyone knows that these are pretexts of power if such power is seen as political. This is what the politician would describe as reality, but the reality is absurd.213

In this essay Walcott’s notion of the archipelago is so expansive that it includes “America” (by which Walcott means alternately the United States of America and “the Americas”). The flexibility of the term testifies to Walcott’s suspicion toward the “pretexts of power” that accrue to individual nations within the Caribbean, and his interest in defining alternative social and

212 To be clear, I am not saying that Walcott champions West Indian unity “in the necessarily reductionist and romanticized terms of a collective epic” which Antonio Benítez-Rojo attributes to his dramatic work Drums and Colours. On the contrary, I’m interested precisely in the way that the poem’s dwelling in the environment has complicated the nationalist paradigms of that epic unity. Antonio Benítez-Rojo, The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective, trans. James E Maraniss (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1996), 300.

political formations.

On the political level, then, Walcott bemoans the collapse of the West Indian Federation—the division of the Caribbean into fragmentary entities with national interests. On the aesthetic level, however, he accepts the fragmentary and partial nature of his environmental experience. The archipelago relates both metaphorically and metonymically to human history. Its shape encompasses the detail, the “speck,” even as it draws a partial curve around Caribbeanness as belonging. Just as Walcott associates the archipelago with the totalizing whole of the Sea in “Culture or Mimicry,” in his nobel prize lecture “The Antilles” he celebrates the small-scale of the fragment: “our archipelago is becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent,” which, Walcott insists “is the exact process of the making of poetry.”214 And if the division of the archipelago is at times the figure for its commodification, Walcott also views wholeness as a threat. In “The Antilles” he critiques the representation of the Caribbean in tourist brochures as “a blue pool”: “This is how the islands from the shame of necessity sell themselves; this is the seasonal erosion of their identity, that high-pitched repetition of the same images of service that cannot distinguish one island from the other.”215

Walcott’s persistent interest in the process of reduction reflects his concern with “distinguish[ing] one island from the other.” The nature of the “speck” emphasizes the process of distinction, a process which for Walcott is grounded in the ecology and agriculture of the island. A speck is: “A small spot of a different colour or substance to that of the material or surface upon which it appears,” “Applied to things rendered extremely small by distance or by comparison with their surroundings,” or “A small piece, portion, etc., of ground or land.”216 If

215 Ibid., 81.
Nanny rendered into a “speck” becomes “chimerical,” Walcott nonetheless renders “small piece[s] of land” as part of the task of “distinguish[ing]” his own poem so that it is “certainly West Indian.” Against “the empires of tobacco, sugar, and bananas” that constitute the economic basis of the island, Walcott juxtaposes a “kingdom” of star-apples, Bay trees, ginger lilies and magnolias, plants whose origins and histories suggest both the indigenous and the transplanted quality of Jamaican culture. As Elaine Savory has written, “plant names that are sonorous, like frangipani or ginger lily, are often key to Walcott’s use of heightened patterns of sound.”

Whereas Savory goes on to argue that Walcott’s plant references are metapoetic representations of Caribbean literary history, I believe the Caribbean details of Walcott’s poetry resist representation and allow us to sense and dwell in the small scale of the fragment.

Although Walcott frequently describes the making of poetry as a process of assembling those fragments, the assembly is partial. In “The Antilles,” Walcott also complicates (even as he rehearses) his description of Caribbean writing as Adamic:

Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.
And this is the exact process of the making of poetry, or what should be called not its “making” but its remaking, the fragmented memory, the armature that frames the god, even the rite that surrenders it to a final pyre; the god assembled cane by cane, reed by weaving reed, line by plaited line….

In the shift from “making” to “remaking” Walcott acknowledges the inescapability of, if not history, then the material past. If “the muse of history” is tyrannical, “fragmented memory” generates art through the landscape: the “cane” and “reed,” agricultural materials are woven into the basis for cultural ritual and performance.

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The poem also offers us a *rhythm* beyond the plantation insofar as the rhythmic repetitions of the natural world name a poetic world. In an echo of modernist fragmentation, the poem attributes Manley’s political struggles to a loss of language,

he had to heal
this malarial island in its bath of bay leaves,
its forests tossing with fever, the dry cattle
groaning like winches, the grass that kept shaking
its head to remember its name. No vowels left
in the mill wheel, the river. Rock stone. Rock Stone.

(386)

The landscape itself suffers drought for lack of a name, and there are “no vowels left,” suggesting that the “creaking” of the mill wheel—the very engine of the sugar industry—has at last ceased. The lament clearly echoes the haunting question from the beginning of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water….  

(219)

It is as if Manley is the “son of man” responding to Eliot’s grim invitation to “come under the shadow of this red rock,” into the modern imperial landscape. The repeated phrase “Rock stone. Rock stone” has the effect of a bird mimicking a condensed version of this invitation. At the same time, that repetition enacts the very “creaking” whose dissipation it bemoans (or celebrates). Walcott’s verse offers a linguistic alternative to the dry landscape it claims to describe, for the repeated phrase revolves around the very vowels whose loss it laments. There is a roundness to this forgetfulness, a promise of sorts. While Eliot invites us “under the shadow” to

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view “fear in a handful of dust” where there is “no sound of water” (only later rendering the drowning of Phlebus the Phoenecian), Walcott invites us underwater, here in Manley’s dream, “down fathoms into sleep.” An earth scene is “inverted by water.” In this sense, the rhythm of poetry subverts the rhythm of the now defunct plantation. Walcott rewrites Eliot as he rewrites pastoral, generating a poetics of memory mediated by the third term of the sea.

Walcott’s inversion of Eliot’s drought leaves its protagonist suspended between the past and the future, between the “afflicted” English landscape and the Caribbean watery alternative, between the “afflicted” English poem and a the possibility of a new poem. Half underwater, half above it,

… he climbed from that submarine kingdom as the evening lights came on in the institute, the scholars lamplit in their own aquarium, he saw them mouthing like parrot fish, as he passed upward from that baptism, their history lessons, the bubbles like ideas which he could not break: Jamaica was captured by Penn and Venables, Port Royal perished in a cataclysmic earthquake.

(386-387)

Manley encounters the genre of “history lesson” as he emerges from the submarine. But the space is still intermediary, for the scholars are still contained within “their own aquarium.” They are “mouthing like parrot fish” (a name which, like “sea-horse” implies an already hybrid species) and their history lessons come forth in the form of an inverted simile, “the bubbles like ideas which he could not break.” The space of dreams, in which history at once takes place and is transmitted, is a hybrid space. Manley moves from earth (in which “the mountains rolled like

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220 The submarine journey not only evokes English affliction but also environmental truths “Which he could not break,” such as the “cataclysmic earthquake.”

221 This, in spite of a 1977 drought in Jamaica which, along with Manley’s political mis-management and the already-failing nature of the plantations, may have contributed to the decline of the sugar cooperatives.
whales”) into the sea, and then back out again. After he has left the sea, he still sees the water, has not fully emerged. Manley is outside of “the institute” but also cannot quite escape the hold of history. By taking Manley through and out of the temporal and spatial containment of the plantation, Walcott suggests the need for another kind of spatiotemporal configuration.

The archipelago, whose geography the entire book *The Star-Apple Kingdom* traces, is the site of a collective ritual of redemption. But Walcott has challenged our sense of “national,” “collective,” and “allegory.” History has “coruscating façades,” suggesting the glittering, reflective surface of the water and also history’s unreliability (the cathedrals are not described, so much as their “facades”). In a stanza tracing the history of the Caribbean, Walcott stages a double baptism. The first takes place in “a parenthetical moment/ that made the Caribbean a baptismal font” (387). The second, in a moment “before” this one, in which “the Caribbean was borne like an elliptical basin/ in the hands of acolytes, and a people were absolved/ of a history which they did not commit.” The repetition of the image displaces a static sense of time; the Caribbean is a “baptismal font” both in the “parenthetical moment” and in that which supposedly precedes it. The pun on borne/born suggests that the Caribbean is not only the “font” or “basin” in which “a people were absolved” but also an infant awaiting his or her own baptism “in the hands of acolytes.” Walcott proposes the Caribbean as a site of nationalist solidarity, but he also imagines another kind of entity altogether, a basin in which the “shards” of culture float and define themselves.

40 Acres: Two Fantasies of Return

Let’s turn from the Caribbean back to the edge of the Atlantic. In May 1929, the American writer and ethnographer Zora Neale Hurston wrote to Langston Hughes to ask his
opinion about an opportunity to buy a parcel of land in southeastern Florida, “slap on the Indian river, which as you probably know, passes for the most beautiful river in the world. It parallels the ocean all the way with the merest strip of land between so that one has the river and the ocean together.” She went on to detail her plans for the 15 plots: “A Negro art colony.”

What would it have meant for Hurston to have realized this dream, to have raised the money—perhaps, as she suggested to Hughes, by soliciting funds from the wealthy daughter of black cosmetics entrepreneur Madame C.J. Walker—for the $1500 down payment, and become the first Negro to buy land on the Dixie highway or the Indian River? For Hurston herself, the chance to build “a little town of our own” must have evoked memories of her childhood in Eatonville, the first all-black town to be incorporated after the end of slavery. Home ownership might also have meant financial security, and independence from her wealthy white patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, also known to Hurston and Hughes as “Godmother.”

The realization of Hurston’s fantasy would have had implications not only for her personal economic stability, but also for the legacy of black modernism. In positing the Indian River colony, Hurston imagined a geographic repositioning of the literary and artistic center of black culture. Her vision placed quintessential Harlemites (Bruce Nugent, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, and others) not only in the South but at the edge of the Atlantic, in close contact with the multiple locations whose folk culture Hurston studied: the Bahamas, Haiti, Jamaica, and of course Florida.

Hurston also envisioned a self-sufficient black community; it is no coincidence that she mentions A’Lelia Walker, not Godmother, as a potential patron for this particular venture. In proposing to shift the geography of black modern artistic cultivation, Hurston also reimagined

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the relationship between black culture, land, and property. Rather than turn to the northern city as the site of possibility, Hurston proposed black ownership of southern land. Further, she dreamed of an isthmus between “the most beautiful river in the world” and the Atlantic—that is, a space which would afford black writers a local identity and, at the same time, access to that very culture and geography from which they had been dispossessed.

Hurston’s dream was never realized, whether for lack funds, lack of interest among her counterparts, or because of the collapse of her friendship with Hughes. The fantasy of black land ownership in the landscape of the rural South continued to pervade Hurston’s consciousness, most notably in her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but so, too, did the failure of this fantasy. In fact, with no property to call her own, near the end of her life Hurston was evicted from her beloved rented home in Eau Gallie, a mere three miles from the projected site for her colony.

In his 2008 poem “Forty Acres,” written on the occasion of the inauguration of Barack Obama, Walcott similarly projects new possibility onto the southern scene of slavery. In this poem Walcott figures the American president as a ploughman—”a young negro at dawn in straw hat and overalls”—making his way through a landscape marred by the violence of history: “the moaning ground, the lynching tree, the tornado’s/ black vengeance.” Referring to the false promise of Reconstruction-era democracy, Walcott stops short of claiming Obama’s inauguration as a belated fulfillment of this promise. The plough “continues... beyond” these violent scenes, but leaves us waiting “for the sower.” It is not necessarily in the political realm, the poem suggests, but “on this lined page” that it might be possible to uncouple the metonymic

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association between the natural world and the human violence of slavery, segregation and social oppression.

Hurston’s letter and Walcott’s poem both affiliate power and possibility with property, whether the forty acres never given to black Americans during Reconstruction or the “merest strip of land” in Florida citrus country. But they also begin to suggest the danger of attempts to inhabit such spaces. Hurston, for instance, goes to great lengths to reassure Hughes that they would be “safe” and “isolated” even though “they have never allowed a Negro to buy on the Dixie or the Indian river before and they are not doing it now, except in this case.” Walcott’s poem, too, marks the violence of the landscape’s history, even as it imagines an open field of possibility. To inhabit or transform the pastoral landscape is to navigate between that danger and that future, and it is to live and write conscripted by a modernity that enslaves.

But if “Forty Acres” indulges in the fantasy of political transcendence through the fantasy of property, “The Star-Apple Kingdom” suggests the need for an alternative logic of modernity, one in which neither a “negro art colony” nor an ecological mandate would reside in property. Walcott challenges both colonial and nationalist models for civic and environmental belonging, bringing to mind Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s critique of “the republic of property.”

Dwelling within the plantation, “The Star-Apple Kingdom” does not call for a return to the commons, but invites as to ask: what would it mean to imagine the commons as archipelago, not open field, to sense the postcolonial future through the interrelation of specks?

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226 Indeed, we might read Manley’s failures in relationship to their description of property as the recurring obstacle to social democratic reform. It is also worth noting that a crucial part of Hardt and Negri’s critique resides in their observation of the intimacy between slavery and the republic of property. Commonwealth (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 71–77.
COLLECTING CATASTROPHE

The Hurricane Does Not Roar in Pentameters

In a Harvard lecture hall in 1979, Barbadian poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite defined the region of his poetic making like this: “The Caribbean is a set of islands stretching out from Florida in a mighty curve. You must know of the Caribbean at least from television, at least now with hurricane David coming right into it.” The Harvard lecture is an iteration of Brathwaite’s earlier presentation at the literary symposium of Carifesta, a pan-Caribbean festival of the arts held in Jamaica in 1976. In its published form, History of the Voice (1984) is a foundational theory of the relationship between language and culture. Speaking and writing in the first decade of West Indian independence from British colonization, Brathwaite coins the term “nation language” as a way of defining a regional vernacular literary voice, an alternative to the violent experience of reading and writing an inherited colonial language.

Brathwaite characterizes nation language as geographically and temporally dynamic, intercultural, and coming-into-being. In doing so he names a “notion” that helps us read the diasporic form not only of poetry we commonly understand as postcolonial, that which emerged in the later part of the twentieth century out of nations newly independent from European colonizers, but also of black modern poetry more broadly. A footnote simultaneously archives the history of the text and the history of environmental catastrophe: “This talk was presented at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, late in August 1979. Hurricanes ravish the Caribbean and the southern coasts of the United States every summer. David (1979) was

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227 Originally published as a monograph by New Beacon Books in London (1984), the essay was also included in Brathwaite’s Roots, a volume first published in Cuba by Casa de Las Américas (1986), and then in the United States by University of Michigan Press (1992). This publication triangle begins to suggest the outer-national significance of Brathwaite’s thinking. Future references are to the New Beacon edition unless otherwise noted, and will be noted parenthetically. Brathwaite, History of the Voice, 6.
followed by Allen (1980), one of the most powerful on record’ (History, 6n). Unifying anxieties over translation of environmental experience, translation of national or regional experience, and translation from stage to page, Brathwaite’s footnote is remarkable because it refers to the shared environmental experience of a region including both the southern United States and the Caribbean, suggesting an expanded definition of nation that encompasses the African diaspora. The footnote also translates from Caribbean catastrophe to American classroom, signaling difference as a constituent element of diasporic experience.

If Brathwaite’s remark identifies the hurricane as the signature of the nation, it also invites us to understand the experience and representation of environmental catastrophe in a transnational framework: specifically in relationship to the development of black modernism in the United States. In the first half of this dissertation I have asked what can be made from within the confines of the plantation geography and economy. While the trope of cultivation has drawn my attention to cultural production, catastrophe foregrounds collectivity and collection, inviting us to ask who and what must be brought together in the context of a culture and geography under threat. After exploring Brathwaite’s use of the hurricane as a figure for an imagined or hoped-for West Indian poetry, chapter three moves along the Atlantic to pursue the responses of two American writers and one American musician to natural disaster. Sterling Brown’s Southern Road (1932), hailed as the work of a modern “folk poet,” takes up catastrophe in a handful of poems responding to the 1927 Mississippi river flood, often known as “The Great Flood.”

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228 In spite of this “translation,” until Matthew Hart’s recent Nothing But Nations of Poetry, few accounts of “dialect” or “vernacular” in American literature—from Gates’s landmark Signifying Monkey to more recent works such as Michael North’s Dialect of Modernism—have seriously engaged Brathwaite’s theory of poetic language, although some accounts of contemporary poetry, such as Nathaniel Mackey’s Discrepent Engagement, do contextualize Brathwaite’s thinking transnationally. Nations of Nothing but Poetry: Modernism, Transnationalism, and Synthetic Vernacular Writing (Oxford University Press, 2010); The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); The Dialect of Modernism; Discrepant Engagement.
flood blues of Bessie Smith are the sounds through which Brown mediates his poetics, and constitute a powerful, resistant response to social and environmental catastrophe in and of themselves. Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a narrative of the female protagonist’s social and romantic development in rural Florida, culminates in an account of a devastating hurricane based on the historical experience of a 1928 Florida Hurricane, as well as Hurston’s personal experience of a 1929 Bahamian one. All of these works place environmental catastrophe in the context of historical and contemporary social and racial injustices. Indeed, natural disasters retain a powerful place in literature of the African diaspora because of their potential to metaphorize the historical experience of violence inherent in the slave trade, slavery, colonialism and Jim Crow. But how do twentieth-century literary responses to catastrophe transform our sense of that history?

Although Brathwaite seems to claim a natural or inherent relationship between cultural, regional, or national identity and certain forms of weather, the power of these tropes ultimately inheres in their geographic scope and dynamic form. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the transnational community of workers makes audible the geography and the beat of the hurricane, defining the poetic form of Hurston’s representation. Bessie Smith’s catastrophic blues redefine lyric voice in terms of collective memory, and Sterling Brown’s catastrophic blues poems fracture the linear narratives of individual identity that have been the Ur-texts of African American and postcolonial literatures. Given that natural disaster brings to the fore the paradoxical spatial crises of displacement and immobility, these modern lyric responses to catastrophe offer a new thinking of time.  

Finally, for Brown and Hurston, both collectors and

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229 Figurative and literal hurricanes are a particular focus because of the ubiquity of these catastrophes in the global South, their persistence in the literature, and the shared path of the hurricane and the Atlantic slave trade. But in time we will also need to consider continuous local flooding, ongoing ecological
transcribers of musical folk culture, the uneasy exchange between musical and textual expressive forms defines the possibilities of black culture amidst the devastations of disaster.

If the trope of the hurricane taken up by Brathwaite and Hurston emphasizes the break, the turn, the interruption of genealogical, agricultural, and social progress, the 1927 Mississippi river floods to which Smith and Brown respond have a different relationship to time. According to the *Monthly Weather Review Supplement on the 1927 Floods of the Mississippi River Basin*, rains stretching as far back as the previous year, long-term saturation of the soil, floods of local tributaries, and unusually high water levels of the Ohio and Mississippi (before the heavy rains of 1927 even began) contributed to the 1927 flood. The “great flood,” then, is really a collection of floods, a disaster whose making—cumulative, lengthy, and ongoing—belie its status as an “event” and underscores the continuity of the catastrophic. These two types of meteorological temporality, the continuous and the ruptured, figure the relationship between the pervasive ongoingness of economic disparity and violence in the rural South on the one hand, and the narrative of social, political, and familial displacement in the black diaspora on the other.

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Having evoked the hurricane as the signature environmental experience of the region, Brathwaite returns to it as a figure for the problem of literary mimesis that he and other Caribbean writers of his generation faced. “The hurricane does not roar in pentameters,” he famously contends, “And that’s the problem: how do you get a rhythm which approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience” (*History*, 10)? Natural disaster poses a spatial problem for Brathwaite: how to represent the regional experience of an environmental degradation, the destructive vibrations of the earthquake, and finally social disaster as ecological experience, in part because of the different ways in which each of these experiences engages history.

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231 Brathwaite’s emphasis.
phenomenon. In this sense, catastrophic experience repeats the representational challenges of a natural and agricultural environment steeped in history, which has been the main focus of my first two chapters. But the rhythm of the hurricane is also a resource, a way of marking time in opposition to the violence of colonial history.

The verb “approximates”—this action of bringing near that which is far, of bringing disparate entities close to, but not into, union—describes both the relationship between nature and culture in diasporic poetry, and the task of poetic form in articulating that relationship. “Approximate” would also be a good way of understanding the relationship between nation language—which approximates the hurricane, according to Brathwaite, because it “largely ignores the pentameter” of English Verse—and English. In charting out this relationship, Brathwaite describes, and then pulls back from or modifies, a series of likenesses:

Nation language is the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timber, its sound explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree […]

But it is an English which is not the standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility, which has always been there and which is now increasingly coming to the surface…. Nation language [as opposed to dialect] is the submerged area of that dialect which is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English: but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time (13).

“English it may be,” “the words, as you hear them, might be English,” “it may be in English,” but… “it is not English.” Brathwaite acknowledges the proximity but not an identity between nation language and English. The language also brings the English and the “African” into proximity, simultunaeity. Even in staking a claim to a potential authentic rhythm, Brathwaite’s definition of nation language assumes a distance between “the natural” and the rhythm that would give voice to or transcribe the experience of the natural. The identity of the rhythm
remains open to experience and change, defined by simile: “like a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave” and, perhaps most importantly for our purposes, “like the blues.” Brathwaite’s repetition and hesitation reflects the uneasy relationship between the colonial language and nation language as he imagines it, but it also suggests the approximate quality of nation (and nature) itself.

Why is the hurricane the signal feature of “our experience”? To take Brathwaite too literally risks falling prey to mimetic fallacy: naturalizing, romanticizing, or nationalizing the relationship between race and region. In the intimacy between “our experience” and the weather, we can hear the echo of a colonial tradition in which the slave’s body and mind are inseparable from his climate (given, of course, the irony that the very condition of the slave in the Americas is that of having been separated from his climate.)

Colonial descriptions of the West Indies are replete with racialized formulations of the West Indian climate as claiming its inhabitants (both slave and master). Edward Ward’s 1698 critique of Jamaica, for instance, equates the climate with the community of white colonists there, describing the “character of Jamaica” as follows: “Subject to Turnadoes, Hurricans, and Earthquakes, as if the Island, like the People, were troubled with the Dry Belly-Ach [sic]” (an affliction of the inhabitants which Ward attributes to the excessively sour fruits of the island). 232 At the same time, John Singleton’s description of a hurricane and a Negro funeral in subsequent episodes naturalizes both processes—tying them to the oceanic. Singleton initially emphasizes the “calm deportment” of the mourning slaves and the “gentle waves” of their procession, but

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eventually the “frantic” energy of the funeral sequence echoes the description of the storm that immediately precedes it.\(^{233}\)

Unlike Ward and Singleton, physician-poet James Grainger demonstrates an acute awareness of the West Indies as non-native environment for the slave in *The Sugar-Cane*:

> “Woud’st thou secure thine Ethiop from those ails,/ Which change of climate, change of waters breed/ and food unusual?”\(^{234}\) Grainger’s concerns about “transplanting” African slaves from their native landscapes and Ward and Singleton’s equation of the West Indian climate and character equally trouble modern readers, as both rely on naturalized conceptions of racial identity.

Grainger cautions planters in St. Kitts that “In mind, and aptitude for useful toil,/ The negroes differ” according to the particular African geography, climate, and culture from which they have been removed.\(^{235}\) He goes on to detail the particular pros and cons of slaves from particular places, slipping between climate and culture as explanations of the various taxonomies he outlines. Men from Cormantee are “bred too generous for the servile field” because at home they hunt and fight while “their wives plant rice, or yams, or lofty maize.” The women, in turn, make good field workers. Slaves from Mundingo, he contests, are especially prone to worms in response to the unfamiliar food and climate of the West Indies. Grainger suggests an equivalence between experience (i.e. how the slaves are “bred”) and geography in accounting for labor fitness: “the sunny Libyan” apparently defines both the disposition and the climate of the slaves he deems most flexible in their use value.\(^{236}\)

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\(^{233}\) John Singleton, *From A General Description of the West-Indian Islands [1767]*, in *Caribbeana: An Anthology of English Literature of the West Indies 1657-1777*.

\(^{234}\) Grainger, “The Sugar Cane,” bk. IV, lines 119–120. Grainger’s particular concern could only be meaningful in a West Indian context, where it was more profitable to “replenish” slave labor with new shipments of slaves from Africa, as opposed to a North American context, in which reproduction was the key to the economic viability of the slave trade.

\(^{235}\) Ibid., bk. IV, lines 38–39.

\(^{236}\) Ibid., bk. IV, lines 40–121.
This kind of taxonomic thinking shares its logic with the strategies of cultural dominance that pervaded the colonial slave trade. Richard Ligon, in *A True and Exact History of Barbados* [1657], cites three reasons why the slaves, although they outnumber “the Christians” do not rise up in rebellion:

The one is, They are not suffered to touch or handle any weapons: The other, That they are held in such awe and slavery, as they are fearfull to appear in any daring at [...] Besides these, there is a third reason, which stops all designs of that kind, and that is, They are fetch’d from several parts of *Africa*, who speake several languages, and by that means, one of them understands not another: For, some of them are fetch’d from *Guinny* and *Binny*, some from *Cutchew*, some from *Angola*, and some from the River of *Gambra*.  

The colonial equation between climate and culture parallels colonial assumptions about language and community. If building a slave labor force out of disparate linguistic populations was a deliberate strategy to prevent the formation of community among the slaves, it also became the foundation for racist theories of slaves’ cultural inferiority: divorced from mother tongue and fatherland, this line of thinking goes, slaves and their descendents had *no* culture, *no* language, *no* weather. Twentieth-century writers and scholars have been faced with the challenge of acknowledging the historical reality of these displacements (albeit with significant qualifications to Ligon’s oversimplified theory), while insisting upon the viability of the black language and culture that indeed emerged from this history.

It might seem surprising, then, that Brathwaite would develop his theory of nation language in relationship to climate, echoing the powerful colonial language of cultural supremacy he wishes to refute and redefine. Indeed, if we read Brathwaite’s definition of “nation” in a geographically limited sense, we might understand his formulation as trapped

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238 This tension is perhaps embodied in the important anthropological debates at the beginning of the twentieth century between Melville Herskovitz and E. Franklin Frazier.
within the colonial logic of mimesis. However, the very structure of the weather complex makes it difficult for us to read Brathwaite’s “hurricane” as an insistently local or national figure for resistant poetic voice. I want to suggest instead that the hurricane is a particularly apt and powerful figure for poetic language because of its status as a phenomenon that travels, and yet takes different forms as it touches different shores. Brathwaite’s call for poetry worthy of hurricanes is a future-oriented call for a circulatory, collective poetics. At the same time, to the extent that such a poetry would follow the path of the hurricane—in the Atlantic region, forming off the coast of West Africa, and coming ashore in the West Indies and mainland United States—it retraces the motion of the slave trade and the violence and loss of the Middle Passage.

Even as Brathwaite claims that poetic language should “approximate” a particular “natural” or “environmental experience”—hurricanes, not snow—he acknowledges the reach of poetic forms regionally and transnationally. He identifies the need for environmental language in the Caribbean with other “New World” efforts to “bridge or break the pentameter”: including Walt Whitman’s “cosmic sound,” Marianne Moore’s syllabics (10), and even T.S. Eliot’s voice (30-31) What Brathwaite scarcely acknowledges in History is the relationship between what Simon Gikandi refers to as “a Caribbean modernism that contests colonial history”239 and African American modernism.240 I take for granted Gikandi’s now well-established contention

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240 Brathwaite does briefly acknowledge the “connection of Caribbean and Harlem/New Orleans” in terms of “the influence of Langston Hughes for instance, and Imamu Baraka for instance, and Sonia Sanchez for instance” (41). While most critics focus on Brathwaite’s relationship to Anglo-American modernism, Donette A. Francis has outlined Brathwaite’s material debt to Harlem through Jazz as well as through Nancy Cunard’s Negro anthology. As Francis argues, the Harlem Brathwaite inherits through Cunard’s anthology—featuring Claude McKay, among other West Indian, African, and African American writers—is already a diasporic one. Donette A Francis, “Travelling Miles: Jazz in the Making of a West Indian Intellectual,” in Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite, ed. Annie Paul (Mona, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2007), 20. In History Brathwaite also acknowledges McKay as
that Caribbean and European modernism are engaged in a mutually shaping relationship (for better and for worse), beyond a discourse of colonial belatedness in relationship to Euro-American “high modernism.” Building on this contention, many critics have argued for an extension of modernism’s temporal boundaries past the middle of the twentieth century so as allow contact, in our critical accounts, between western and non-western writers. Eliot’s influence on Brathwaite and other Caribbean poets is a case in point: Jahan Ramazani, for example has turned to this pairing to break down the view that describes the “folk/oral” and “modernist” as opposite poles in “the range of aesthetic registers” available to Caribbean writers. More recently Matthew Hart has identified Eliot’s “local universalism” as one modernist precedent through which Brathwaite defines his “elastic nationalism.” While drawing attention to the crucial points of contact between European modernism and the “irruption into modernity” that Glissant describes as the particular quality of American writing, the emphasis on Eliot in these disjunctive histories sometimes obscures other affinities, in particular the relation between Brathwaite’s theory of poetic language and black American vernacular poetries. If the “irruption into modernity” is a common experience of the


242 Jahan Ramazani, “Modernist Bricolage, Postcolonial Hybridity,” Modernism/Modernity 13, no. 3 (2006): 445–463. Ramazani contends that “Euromodernism… crucially enabled a range of non-Western poets after World-War II to explore their hybrid cultures and postcolonial experience.” While I think his intervention in this dichotomy is necessary, I take issue with his emphasis on Euromodernism in particular (and, by virtue of his examples in this particular essay, white modernism). While Brathwaite resists earlier European models for poetry, he turns to Euro-American modernism (in History defined exclusively as an American phenomenon) for the shape of that resistance when he emphasizes the need to “break the pentameter,” either intentionally or inadvertently echoing Ezra Pound. See also Pollard, New World Modernisms.


244 Glissant, Caribbean Discourse, 146.
Americas, so too is the hurricane one of the signal features of that experience. The range of black
diasporic responses to this experience demands that we read them in relation to one another.  

Getting a Rhythm: Hurston among the “Saws”

In 1929 Zora Neale Hurston travelled to the Bahamas to collect stories, song, and dance,
a body of artistic production she describes as especially varied and vital, and which may have
formed the basis for her production of Bahamian music in her New York city musical production
*The Great Day*. While in the Bahamas, Hurston lived through a hurricane, which hit Nassau in 1929 and killed a relatively small number of Bahamians, but devastated the industry and
agriculture of the island. In *Dust Tracks on the Road* Hurston describes the Nassau hurricane as
having lasted five days, and as “horrible in its intensity and duration.”  

The experiences of the hurricane and of Hurston’s musical work are inextricable in her accounts. A few weeks after returning to Florida from the Bahamas in the fall of 1929, she
described the Bahamian hurricane to Langston Hughes in a letter in the fall of 1929:

> The hurricane was awful. Thought once I’d never get back. That felt like h— — —to me too, for I had just collected 20 marvelous Bahamian songs and learned the two native folk dances, and gotten a Congo drum (called GimBAY, accent on the last syllable) for us. That would be terrible to miss bringing back now wouldn’t it. I got 3 reels of the dancing too.

Hurston perceives the storm as a potential threat to the circulation of cultural materials in a way
that anticipates, for instance, the tremendous anxiety about literary and cultural archives in Haiti
after the 2010 earthquake. Such a formulation solidly opposes nature and culture. But what is
perhaps more interesting is the way Hurston describes her experience of the storm and her

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musical collection as if in a single breath. As much as she values her own life and mobility, she values the materials of a black folk culture she alternately describes as vanishing or as robust and dynamic. And there is something about that culture that is part and parcel of the intensity and duration of a five-day hurricane.

Destructive environmental experiences may have threatened black culture, but they also occasioned its production in the form of musical responses to hurricanes in both Florida and the Bahamas. While the 1929 Bahamas hurricane is one historical precursor to the literary storm in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a more obvious connection can be drawn with the massive Florida Hurricane of 1928. In 1935, in the field with Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnacle, Hurston collected a song recounting the experience of the Florida hurricane. “God Rode on a Mighty Storm,” performed in 1935 by Lila Mae Atkinson in Georgia,\(^{248}\) structures catastrophe not so much as an event but as a recursive tradition, a poetics.

As is fairly standard among the folk ballads recorded by Hurston and others during this period, alternating verses unfold a narrative, while the chorus interrupts the narrative and repeats a lament. In this case, the song’s first gesture is to establish the date of the hurricane:

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Sixteenth (day) of September,  
Nineteen Twenty-Eight,  
God started to riding early,  
And He rode until very late.
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Fixing the date of the hurricane is a common feature among other folk musical responses to the storm recorded during the same period, also held in the archives at the Library of Congress American Folklife Center: “In That Storm,” attributed to George Washington and

Group of Negro Convicts (collected by John A. Lomax), and “The West Palm Beach storm,” sung by Viola Jenkins (whose lyrics are almost identical to those of “God Rode on a Mighty Storm”). The precision of the dating within all of the songs (and the precision and slow pace with which the singers unfold the dates within the rhythm) establishes the significance of the single moment, the static event within history.

And yet, the circulation of these extremely similar songs among different locales in Florida and Georgia, male and female voices, solo and ensemble performances, through oral repetition and recording as well as print transcription and notation, for almost a decade after the hurricane underscores their utility in and resonance through a variety of contexts and over time. In Washington’s version, the date of the hurricane “On the sixteenth day of September/ In Nineteen Twenty Eight” echoes the rhythm of an earlier date in a previous verse “In nineteen hundred and Fourteen/That World War Begun.” God’s motion on the water, thus, echoes “a awful battle” in which “no nations won.” Washington’s voice rises up in the penultimate stanza of the song, just as the quartet accompanying him seems to be drawing the melody to close, pushing toward the final verse as if to emphasize the relentlessness of the storm beyond its time and place, into the era of “this mighty depression,” which, of course, began a year after the storm, and continued to the moment of the song’s recording. The songs extend the time of the hurricane, creating a sense of what I call continuing catastrophe.

Given Hurston’s attention to Bahamian music-making within the Floridian context in *Their Eyes*, it should come as no surprise that the tradition of musical response to catastrophe, too, circulated among the locations affected by catastrophic weather. There is a marked formal

likeness, for instance, between “God Rode on a Mighty Storm” and “Pytoria,” a musical account of the 1929 storm that Hurston herself lived through in the Bahamas. Thought to have been composed by John Roberts, a singer from Andros, most likely in the aftermath of the 1929 Bahamian Hurricane, “Pytoria” was made popular as “Run, Come See Jerusalem,” in the Bahamas by Nassau tourist entertainer “Blind Blake” Higgs and in the United States by The Weavers, The Highwaymen, Larry Mohr & Odetta, and Arlo Guthrie. Like “God Rode on a Mighty Storm” and the other Florida hurricane songs recorded in the 1930s, “Pytoria” begins by spelling out the date of the event it recounts: “It was nineteen-hundred and twenty-nine/run come see.” Other versions underscore the significance of the year by adding the refrain: “It was nineteen hundred and twenty-nine/Run Come See, I remember that day pretty well.” Notably, however, the song was recorded and performed at least into the 1960s, transformed from a mournful folk tune, to a curiously jolly tourist calypso and, eventually (in Odetta’s hands and in John Roberts’s own) back again. The song’s concluding narrative of bodies drowning at sea powerfully evokes the earlier history of the middle passage, especially in the context of the prolonged, mournful recording of American civil rights icon Odetta. Thus, in this case as with the Florida storm songs, catastrophe demands to be historicized even as it resists temporal and geographic compartmentalization. “The horrible intensity and duration of that storm” stretches both forwards and backwards, and calls for a poetics that can contain and give shape to that long

251 There are no early recordings of Roberts’s version of the song to substantiate his status as the composer, but according to Sam Barclay Charters, who recorded Roberts in 1958 in Andros, Roberts worked aboard the ship until a week before it sank, and “John Roberts… composed PYTORIA…. And John remembered that the Pytoria sank on Wednesday and on Sunday morning ’... I had my song ready.’” Sam Barclay Charters, “Liner Notes,” in Music of the Bahamas, Vol. 2: Anthems, Work Songs and Ballads (Smithsonian Folkways, 1959). See also “Run Come See,” Traditional Ballad Index, n.d., http://www.csufresno.edu/folklore/ballads/FSWB058.html.
Continuing catastrophe is close to but not identical with what Rob Nixon, insisting upon the ongoing and progressive qualities of environmental violence, describes as “slow violence.” Nixon’s important work seeks to make visible previously invisible environmental violence, and its connections to colonialism, Empire, and neoliberalism. He distinguishes this kind of violence from the more static “structural violence,” emphasizing the “gradual” and slow nature of environmental violence over time, and at the same time posits “slow” ways of living as a kind of antidote. We can confront slow violence, he suggests, only by slowing down. Nixon notices that conversations about gradual environmental violence typically draw upon a narrative vocabulary. That is, they expose the absence of narratives to account for slow violence. Nixon concludes:

To confront slow violence requires, then, that we plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time. The representational challenges are acute, requiring creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects. To intervene representationally entails devising iconic symbols that embody amorphous calamities as well as narrative forms that infuse those symbols with dramatic urgency.  

I agree with Nixon that we can think of the problem of slow violence as a representational one—that is, that our vocabulary for representing the event exceeds our capacity to account for the ordinary. Nixon seeks “narrative forms” to convey “dramatic urgency,” and indeed it is possible that emplotment is the most direct method of “drawing public attention.” However, by suggesting that what we need is a story to “infuse [iconic] symbols with dramatic urgency,” Nixon draws upon the very narrative structure—linear, climactic, progressive—of the politics of slow violence. I wish to argue instead that “to intervene representationally” is to imagine non-

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255 Nixon perhaps too easily attributes the “representational bias against slow violence” to a generically “speedy” way of living, having to do with attention spans and computer screens. He admirably wishes to make invisible violence visible by increasing attention to a different kind of time, but in doing so he also waxes nostalgic for “slower” forms of experience and representation. Ibid., 12–13.
narrative forms of experience. The hurricane might seem an “iconic symbol” for “instant spectacle,” but in Hurston’s hands it also embodies the “amorphous” and continuing catastrophes of various kinds of social and economic violence.

Storms and sounds alike, informed by Hurston’s practice collecting and recording music, transform the narrative structure of her most well known novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The need to account for the extreme environmental experience of a hurricane causes a generic crisis within the novel. This crisis leads to the irruption of lyric within its narrative structure, and also points to the immense challenge of transcribing, recording, or responding to nature. The attempt to evoke or describe environmental experience, a literary process for which Timothy Morton has coined the term “ecomimesis,” parallels a similar problem that haunts Hurston’s literary oeuvre, which is the question of how to preserve, record, and transmit black folk cultures.

**Writing the Hurricane**

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* embodies the tension between the historical experience of violence and disruption, and expressive possibilities for containing and countering that experience. The novel establishes itself as a coming-of-age narrative, unfolding the sexual and social development of its protagonist, Janie, as “a great tree in leaf.” After following Janie through two miserable marriages, we find her finally more or less happy with her third husband, Tea Cake, with whom she has made a life as part of a community of workers picking beans in the Florida Everglades. But just as that community has begun to take shape, their lives are

257 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel*, 1st Perennial Library ed. (New York: Perennial Library, 1990), 8. Subsequent references will be parenthetical and refer to *Eyes*.
dramatically altered by a forceful hurricane. The hurricane marks a radical shift in the narrative structure, evoking both the physical horrors of the middle passage and the indignities of Jim Crow racism. After the storm, “Corpses were not just found in wrecked houses. They were under houses, tangled in shrubbery, floating in water, hanging in trees, drifting under wreckage…. Some bodies fully dressed, some naked and some in all degrees of dishevelment” (Eyes 162). In a novel famously condemned by Richard Wright as having “no theme, no message, no thought,” Hurston’s words perhaps surprisingly bring to mind the cargo holds of slavers, the waters of the middle passage, Jim Crow lynchings, and the range of physical and social deaths befalling slaves and their descendants. Indeed, these images are also deeply resonant with Wright’s own symbolic landscape of corpses in another flood story, his “Down By the Riverside.” But the storm is not merely an allegory for history; rather, Hurston reveals how the human practices around the storm emerge from and continue that history. The most obvious example of this continuity between environmental and human violence are the Jim Crow burials that famously took place after the 1928 Florida Hurricane and that Hurston refers to after the storm when Tea Cake, conscripted into labor, is instructed to bury the black dead in mass graves, the white dead in coffins.

It is this twentieth-century experience of destruction and displacement, rather than a mimetic claim to a particular meteorological phenomenon, that constitutes “environmental experience” in Their Eyes. Hurston’s depiction of the relationships between American and Bahamian workers, alongside the historical reference to the hurricane brings into relief the reality of workers’ lives. But the hurricane sequence is not only a twentieth-century rehearsal of

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slavery’s destructiveness to individual bodies, social organization, culture, and the environment.\textsuperscript{261} Hurston’s novel also attempts—in words I’m borrowing from Brathwaite—to “get a rhythm,” creating a re-imagined \textit{poetics} to account for “ourselves, the networks of us.”\textsuperscript{262} Hurston’s sound recordings and performances are the basis for the novel’s dramatic shift from narrative to lyric time.

The hurricane and music enter the novel not merely diegetically, but as interdependent formal presences that shape its structure. Hurston depicts the hurricane as an event to be interpreted aurally. When Janie sees the Seminoles “headed toward the Palm Beach Road,” she inquires as to their direction. They reply,

\begin{quote}
Going to high ground. Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming.
\end{quote}

\textit{(Eyes 150)}.

These lines have the compressed rhythmic economy of a poem, linking the present progressive movement of the people (“going”) and the storm (“coming”) with the natural sign of the impending catastrophe (“Saw-grass bloom”). The temporality of the Seminole “poem”, then, is suspended, lyric, and yet signals the grand historic proportions that juxtapose progressive natural

time and human history. In a sense we can understand *people going* and *storms coming* as a kind of recreation of diasporic experience, especially when we consider the path of an Atlantic hurricane, forming off the cost of West Africa and making land fall in the Caribbean and the United States.

The scene of transnational cultural production is the stage for the impending disaster and, more importantly, establishes its beat. On the night of Janie’s encounter with the Seminoles,

The fire dance kept up till nearly dawn. The next day, more Indians moved east, unhurried but steady[…] Another night of Stew Beef making dynamic subtleties with his drum and living, sculptural grotesques in the dance (147). The scene juxtaposes the “unhurried but steady” movements of both people and storm against a description of Stew Beef, one of the Bahamian workers, playing his drum for the community. Bahamian music and dance is the continuous, “unhurried but steady” rhythm of daily life on the muck, keeping “dynamic… living” time, against which, it seems, the hurricane’s “time of dying” will emerge.

The hurricane simultaneously disrupts this rhythm and the economy of human labor on the muck, and figures the already erratic lives of the workers. Its narration demands a rethinking of time that the co-presence of sound and lyric make possible. The structure of the novel intimately links cultivation, the growth of individual subjectivity, and ideas of linear progress insofar as the development of productive agricultural labor and of Janie’s romantic life are its twin narrative arcs. Janie’s cultivation from her sexual awakening “under a blossoming pear tree” where “the inaudible voice of it all came to her” (10) to her love-filled married life engaged in productive agricultural labor beside her husband, among “big beans, big cane, big weeds, big
everything” (123) parallels the novel’s traversing of generic boundaries, from romance to realism.  

The hurricane interrupts the temporal economy of cultivation and of narrative by suspending the main story of Janie’s romantic and subjective development, as well as the agricultural production of the laborers in the muck. In this sense the hurricane is like the drumming itself, which Janie first came upon during a break in the agricultural season. Dispersal and death displace the economy of the laborers. As Tea Cake puts it, “You couldn’t have a hurricane when you’re making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans” (155). But quickly, “the time of dying was over. It was time to bury the dead” (168). While the beginning of the chapter moves through three days in a page-and-a-half, the rest of the chapter simultaneously constitutes a single day and a lifetime: “It was the next day by the sun and the clock when they reached Palm Beach. It was years later by their bodies. Winters and winters of hardship and suffering” (158). Here, in what Homi Bhabha might call “a temporal break or caesura effected in the continuist, progressivist myth of Man,” 264 narrative time departs from natural time, disjoining the suffering of the storm from any possible claims to “natural” or essential experience. This caesura, this new thinking of history, is embodied in the lyric.

By emphasizing how the hurricane “stops time” I do not mean to suggest, as Hazel Carby and others have, that the novel creates an ahistorical community. 265 I agree with Martyn Bone

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264 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 340.

265 Hazel V. Carby, “The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston,” History and Memory in African-American Culture (1994): 28–44. Leigh Ann Duck makes a more complex argument about the novel’s temporality, allowing that Hurston’s novel is “centrally concerned with modernization” (132). Whereas Duck, however, insists that Hurston’s modernization of the folk...
that the Bahamian workers and the hurricane sequence alike signify the presence of “history” in an expanded sense within *Their Eyes.* I wish to move beyond rehistoricizing the novel, however, to identify its poetics within a diasporic tradition. The hurricane’s stopped time formally disrupts the romantic narrative that highlights the development of individual consciousness. This disruption underscores the imbrication of narrative, history and violence. In other words, the hurricane offers us a way of theorizing lyric form—that poetics that encompasses the caesura—in relation to history. To what extent might it be possible to read “stopped time” as engaged with the past even as it fractures and disrupts history?

**A Sound Proposal**

Hurston’s work as a collector and producer of sound offers one approach to this question. Listening to the music Hurston recorded, performed and transcribed invites us to extend theories of Hurston’s literary vernacular to encompass not only the preoccupation with oral narration that has dominated Hurston scholarship for two decades, “the emulation of the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical structures of mimetic speech” famously described by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as “the speakerly text,” but also to encompass those rhythms in Hurston that exceed speech. An increasingly significant body of research explores the relationship between Hurston’s...
ethnography and her literary imagination, but none explains in depth how Hurston’s work as a performer and collector of music in particular might inform our understanding of the rhythms, structure, and language of her most famous novel.

Hurston herself proposed listening to music as one particularly rich way of gaining access to the diverse cultures of Florida, Hurston’s home state, the “field” for much of her anthropological research, and the landscape in which Their Eyes Were Watching God unfolds. In the waning days of the Federal Writers’ Project, Hurston submitted a grant application for musical research in Florida to Carita Corse, the state director for Florida, who in turn submitted the proposal to Henry G. Alsberg (FWP director) and B.A. Botkin (director of the state guides project). A generically heterogenous document, “Proposed Recording Expedition into the Floridas” (1939) simultaneously undertakes and proposes the recording of sound and geography. The document is itself a kind of “recording” insofar as it collects that which has been produced, heard, witnessed, and recorded in other forms, and saves the lyrics of Florida songs for posterity, even as it “proposes” doing so in a more extensive form in the future. By the time Hurston wrote “Proposed Recording Expedition” she had been collecting music and dance for over a decade, so much of what is “proposed” here was already underway. Hurston grew up in

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269 Dance scholar Anthea Kraut’s rich history of Hurston’s work as a choreographer assembles an archive of the performances of African diasporic music Hurston staged in New York during this period, and has noted in that context some important biographical connections between this work and Their Eyes. More recently Daphne Brooks has analyzed Hurston’s vocal performances as socio-political phenomena that invert the relationship between informer and informed in anthropological practices, and Alexandra Vazquez situates Hurston as a foremother of a diasporic female performance tradition in Florida. These scholars have helped me to define the archive of Hurston’s musical performance that forms the basis of my interpretation of music’s irruption within Their Eyes Were Watching God. Anthea Kraut, Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2008); Daphne Brooks, “Sister, Can You Line It Out?: Zora Neale Hurston and the Sound of Angular Black Womanhood,” ed. Glenda R. Carpio and Werner Sollors, Amerikastudien/American Studies 54, no. 4 (2010): 617–627; Alexandra Vazquez, “Listening in the Cold War Years” (presented at the American Studies Association, Baltimore, Maryland, October 21, 2011).
Eatonville, Florida, and went to school in Jacksonville. The places of her childhood figure significantly in her literary and anthropological work, so we might think of her as having been on this expedition from the beginning. Hurston’s career recording performance, whether in her own body, voice, and mind or on government-issue reels continued: as a teenager she toured as a maid with Gilbert & Sullivan Troupe; as a Barnard undergraduate under the tutelage of mentor Franz Boas she conducted anthropological research in her native Eatonville, and later the Bahamas in 1929. In 1935 Hurston travelled throughout the US South with Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnicle recording for the Library of Congress, and by the late thirties worked for the Federal Writers’ Project State Guides project in Florida, and conducted extensive research in both Jamaica and Haiti through a Guggenheim Grant. “Proposed Recording Expedition” thus not only charts out a path for work to be done, but signals the literal and literary reels Hurston has already recorded, reminding us of the interplay between the forms of recording that make up Hurston’s oeuvre.

“Proposed Recording Expedition” borrows from the lexicons and rhetoric of a range of discourses and genres, mingling song lyrics and geographic descriptions with ethnographic analysis. The proposal also structurally reflects the hurricane sequence in Their Eyes; in both cases, musical and lyrical forms interrupt the prose form. Each section of the proposal begins with a song lyric as an epigraph, evoking but not repeating the doubleness of the musical and lyrical epigraphs of Du Bois’s Souls of Black Folk. Following the epigraph, the prose describes that region’s borders, and offers an overview of its agricultural products and industry. Additionally, Hurston outlines the cultural characteristics of each region, and the types of music and stories likely to be found there. Sometimes these lyrics also emerge not only as epigraphs but

in the middle of a section, as when Hurston offers a chant in “Area II.” To some extent, then, “Proposed Recording Expedition” is a kind of musical baedeker, suggesting the deep intimacy between place and recording for Hurston’s work. But it is a baedeker that is likely to get you lost, switchbacking as it does through a dense geographical and cultural landscape.

If the narrative prose of Their Eyes Were Watching God cannot contain the hurricane, the argumentative prose of Hurston’s grant proposal cannot contain the racial violence and terror that haunts it from the outset. We hear this violence in the opening epigraph, an excerpt from a rhythmically awkward ballad lyric spoken in the voice of a rifle-toting man-hunter in search of a black victim:

“Got my knap-sack on my back
My rifle on my shoulder
Kill me a nigger ‘fore Saturday Night
If I have to hunt Flordy over.”

Without overstating the link between environmental and human violence, I want to suggest that for Hurston these two types of terror engender similar methodological problems. In a proposal that apparently celebrates Florida’s cultural richness, what can we make of the violent image offered in the first lyric epigraph? We are aware, at the very least, that the expedition Hurston proposes here is far from sound—in the sense of “safe”—for her to undertake.

Nonetheless, through the epigraphs and other lyric insertions in the document Hurston transforms the depiction of southern racial violence into lyric prayer. In the last sentence of each of the first three area descriptions, Hurston offers the same piece of advice to Florida’s would-be ethnographers: she recommends “A serious study of blank verse in the form of traditional sermons and prayers” in Area I (“Proposed,” 2) and reiterates the suggestion twice as a command

Zora Neale Hurston, “Proposed Recording Expedition into the Floridas”, 1939, 1, Florida Folklife from the WPA Collections 1937-1942. Subsequent citations will be parenthetical and refer to “Proposed.”
to “Look for the roots of Traditional sermons and prayers” in Area II and, “Look for fine examples of those folk poems in blank verse known as sermons and prayers” in Area III (4).

Throughout the proposal, however, Hurston frustrates this order. She tells us to look for “folk poems in blank verse known as sermons and prayers,” evoking three generic categories whose boundaries are already difficult to draw, but produces instead railroad songs, chants and blues. For instance, following her second suggestion to “Look for the roots of traditional sermons and prayers” at the end of Area II, she opens Area III with two blues epigraphs (from two different songs attributed to the same singer). The first are lines from a highly sexualized blues lyric:

“I got a woman, she shake like jelly all over
I got a woman, she shake like jelly all over
Her hips so broad, Lawd Lawd her hips so broad.”

(269)

The second epigraph comes from a different song performed by the same singer. It describes an indeterminate scene of grief and loss that comes from the song “Po’ Lazaraus” about a levy worker who disrupts the camp, steals money and is chased by the sherrifs. Out of context this second epigraph reads as a scene of crucifixion, or lynching or both.

“And they found him, found him in between two mountains,
And they found him, found him in between two mountains,
With head hung down, lawd, lawd, with head hung down.”

The epigraphs share a parallel blues structure, down to the shared apostrophe “Lawd, lawd.” Together, they invite us to hear this range of emotional and physical experiences as something Hurston’s topographical prose, even as it describes the geography that produces this poetics, cannot contain or express.

The journey Hurston takes us on, then, is not only a geographic journey from area to area,
but a call for a reparative poetry that can encompass the diffuse experiences of violence, sexual longing, and prayer. The tangled path by which Hurston guides us underscores the great difficulty of this task. The summary section finally answers the call for prayer, for the proposal ends with a “Sanctified Anthem”:

O Lord, O Lord
Let the words of my mouth, O Lord
Let the words of my mouth, meditations of my heart
Be accepted in Thy sight, O Lord

Respectfully Submitted
Zora Neale Hurston

(7)

Here, those other lyrics—terrifying, lusty, hard-working, and heavy with grief—become “the words of my mouth.” That is, they emanate from the voice of the writing subject who is Zora Neale Hurston. The anthem is psalm 19, which Hurston curiously attributes to a particular singer, Mrs. Orrie Jones of Palm Beach Florida. The attribution marks the status of the lyrics as a mere synecdoche for the performance of the song. At the same time, the lyrics function independently. That is, the speaker within the song lyric prays to god for the acceptance of her words, while Hurston, signifying, prays that her federal benefactors accept her words, insofar as these are the closing words of the proposal she has “respectfully submitted.” Hurston has not only recorded a miscellaneous collection of sound, but transformed the sonic realm of “the Floridas” from the racial violence indicated by the epigraph to Area I to a meditative prayer in her own voice. In doing so, Hurston suggests a purpose to the work of “expedition” beyond scientific observation. “A serious study” of sound, for Hurston, involves an ethical transformation from racial terror to lyric prayer. What enables this transformation, not only in Hurston’s sound proposal, but in *Their Eyes Were Watching God?*
Listening to Diaspora

Hurston hears in black music—not only the “folk poems, sermons and prayers,” but the blues and jumping dances and ringshouts—an expression of and response to violence. Before the closing anthem, Hurston’s proposal offers a summary of the Floridas in the form of a genealogy of diaspora:

No where else is there such a variety of materials. Florida is still a frontier with its varying elements still unassimilated. [....] The drums throb; Africa by way of Cuba; Africa by way of the British West Indies; Africa by way of Haiti and Martinique; Africa by way of Central and South America. Old Spain speaks through many interpreters. Old England speaks through black, white and intermediate lips. Florida, the inner melting pot of the great melting pot—America (6).

In this panoply of mixed metaphors Florida is at once exceptional and representative, a laboratory for unassimilated diasporic culture, and a melting pot. What do we make of the juxtaposition between the sound of Africa manifest in the form of diasporic drumming and the “sanctified anthem” that are Zora’s last words of prayer? After announcing that “the drums throb” Hurston enacts their throbbing, repeating the phrase “Africa by way of” four times, so that Africa becomes the beat against which Hurston describes the diaspora. We can easily imagine these lines as a poem from the Black Arts movement thirty years hence, even, for that matter the late Langston Hughes poem “Drums” (1964):

I dream of the drums  
And remember  
Nights without stars in Africa.

Remember, remember, remember!

I dream of the drums  
And remember  
Slave ships, billowing sails  
The Western Ocean,  
And the landing at Jamestown.
Remember, remember, remember!

I dream of the drums
And recall, like a picture,
Congo Square in New Orleans—
Sunday—the slaves’ one day of “freedom”—
The juba-dance in Congo square.

“Drums” parallels the birth of jazz with the recollection of Africa at the dawn of the slave trade. The repetitive rhythm “remember, remember, remember!” emphasizes the work of memory rather than the ontology of geography, interrupting what otherwise appears to be a seamless narrative connecting the originating moment of enslavement with what some have called the only original “American” art form. The speaker recalls at a temporal remove from both moments, relegating the Middle Passage and the scene at Congo Square alike to history and to dreams. Whereas Hughes’s poem describes a national origin story rooted in Africa, Hurston’s proposal maps a more disjunctive geography insofar as Haiti, Martinique, South America, the West Indies, “Old Spain,” and “Old England” all mediate the relationship between Africa and the “Sanctified Anthem”. Paradoxically, then, through her rhythmic contributions to a state guide, Hurston has enacted the ethical transformation of American racial violence by slipping the bounds of the United States. In other words, the throbbing diasporic drum enables Hurston to venture the lyric petition that closes the document.

Likewise, Hurston draws upon her vast collection of diasporic music in order to transform both racial and environmental destruction via suspended lyric time in Their Eyes Were Watching God. In the Epigraph to Area IV of the “Proposed Recording Expedition,” Hurston cites the lyrics of a song she has recorded.

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“Evalina, Evalina, you know the baby don’t favor me, Eh, Eh, you know the baby don’t favor me.”

(Sung by Lias Strawn, Miami, Fla, drummed by Stew Beef)

(“Proposed,” 4)

Hurston notes not only the singer of the lyrics but the drummer, as if the quotation she has offered can in some way transcribe not only the words but the beats. In light of her claim elsewhere that “the words do not count” toward her ability to identify the coherence of a particular song, this moment draws our attention to the incongruity between the textual form of this document and the record of performance it both creates and calls for. Readers of Their Eyes Were Watching God will recall that Stew Beef is the Bahamian musician who keeps the rhythm at the camp. What does it mean to have established Stew Beef’s Bahamian drumming as the beat against which catastrophe breaks in Their Eyes Were Watching God? Listening to two recordings of “Evalina” helps us to hear that sound in the novel as well.

In 1935 Alan Lomax and Mary Elizabeth Barnacle, with whom Hurston had traveled on other expeditions that same year, recorded a version of “Evalina” in the Bahamas. The song, over two minutes long, features a chorus of voices accompanied by steady drumming. The voices harmonize and build as the drums intensify. Toward the end of the song, the voices and drums together peter out. Following a silence of a few seconds, two drumming sounds return: one hand beating while the other chafes against the side of the drum. The drum becomes the sound that counts at the end, a solo instrumental commentary on the collective vocal experience. Hurston strives to recreate this process not only in text, but in her own voice. One month after submitting her proposal, Hurston herself recorded “Evalina” on June 18 1939, attempting to replicate in solo

273* Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road, 706.
performance what we know from her descriptions and from the Lomax/Barnacle recording to be a collective mode of production.\textsuperscript{275} In Hurston’s mouth “Evalina” undergoes a process analogous to that of the song lyrics in “Proposed Recording Expedition,” in which multiple first person speakers become “the words of my mouth.” The song is followed by a brief interview between Hurston and Carita Corse, the Florida state director for the FWP state guides project:

Carita Corse: Are those songs sung in Florida as well as in the West Indies?

Hurston: Yes, Dr. Corse, they are song in Key West and Miami and Palm Beach and out in the Everglades where a great number of Nassaus are working in the bean fields and what not. There’re a great number of them in Florida. They hold jumping dances every week.

Corse: I think it’s very interesting that we have influences from the West Indies as well as from the rural south in our Florida Negro folklore.\textsuperscript{276}

The dialogue between Corse and Hurston draws our attention to the ways in which the “Proposed Recording Expedition” and indeed \textit{Their Eyes} demands to be read in a diasporic context. In spite of its collection under the heading of the state guides project of the Federal Writers’ Project, we cannot understand Florida’s cultural production in a rigidly regional or even national sense. Hurston’s Floridian body and voice are the media for assimilating the diaspora into this American collecting project, but even after her performance the scene requires further translation and explication, suggesting the inassimilable quality of the work. We become aware of Hurston’s double role as informant and ethnographer of course, but also as performer. We hear what Daphne Brooks has recently described as Zora’s “ability to, like Edison’s queer little

\textsuperscript{275}Zora Neale Hurston and Carita Doggett Corse, “Evalina,” Florida Folklife from the WPA Collections, 1937-1942 AFS 3144B:4, 1939. According to my research, the June recording session—of Hurston’s own voice, “collected” by Herbert Halpert and Stetson Kennedy, playing back songs she had herself collected in the field—is Hurston’s last for the Federal Writers’ Project, and her only recording after submitting the proposal.

\textsuperscript{276}Ibid.
late-Victorian instrument, both record and playback the sound around her.”277 We also hear in the
elongated, vibrating “eh” of Hurston’s voice and in the strange brevity of the performance a
sense of that which is lost: namely, the collective scene of production and collection. Given
Hurston’s production of collectively-made music in a singular voice, we need to understand her
innovative “speakerly text” not only in relationship to vernacular speech but also in relationship
to vernacular music.

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What happens when we return to Their Eyes with this music in our ear? I have suggested
already that the presence of lyric interrupts both the prose argument of the Proposed Recording
Expedition and the prose narrative of Their Eyes Were Watching God. The collective scene of
diasporic musical performance also enables Hurston’s lyric response to the disruptions and
displacements of environmental catastrophe. After a night of storytelling, guitar-playing,
chanting and dancing, the eve of the hurricane finds Tea Cake and his friends playing dice
(artfully) while the weather deteriorates.

Sometime that night the winds came back. Everything in the world had a strong rattle,
sharp and short like Stew Beef vibrating the drum head near the edge with his fingers. By
morning Gabriel was playing the deep tones in the center of the drum. So when Janie
looked out of her door she saw the drifting mists gathered in the west—that cloud field of
the sky—to arm themselves with thunders and march forth against the world. Louder and
higher and lower and wider the sound and motion spread, mounting, sinking, darkening
(Eyes 184-185).

Hurston represents the storm as a rhythmic interruption to the narrative structure of the novel.
The “motion” Hurston describes in this passage resembles the sonic motion of what we heard in
Lomax and Barnicle’s recording of Evalina. The simile comparing the sounds of the storm to
Stew Beef’s drum makes explicit the connection between human artistic creation and “natural

Womanhood,” 263.
expression.” The description draws a contrast between the singular, erratic, and dramatic beat of the storm, “sharp and short,” then “louder and higher and lower and wider… mounting, sinking, darkening,” and the literal drumming it interrupts: the monotonous “another night of Stew Beef.” At the same time the progressive verbs, including the neologism, “darkening” suggest the profound continuity of the condition of catastrophe. It is precisely the need to account for these two kinds of temporality—the continuous and the catastrophic—that occasions the narrative suspension in the novel. The gap between the “dynamic subtleties” of Stew Beef’s percussive music and its representation in words is lyric time.

What emerges “in the break”\(^{278}\) is what I’m hearing as lyric poetry. In the introduction I have written of the caesura as marking one characteristic temporality of lyric poetry. Here I cite Fred Moten’s work on black aesthetics to evoke yet another kind of break: the improvisational chronotope in which black resistance to violence emerges. The events that unfold after the hurricane—Tea Cake’s forced conscription into labor, Jim Crow funerals, and the subsequent violent end of Janie and Tea Cake’s love and marriage—demonstrate that the terror of environmental disaster and the racial terror of the Southern United States are intimately linked in this novel. But in its aural presence as diasporic sound the hurricane also occasions a rhythmic, transformative response to that terror.

If we look back at the summary paragraph of Hurston’s “Proposed Recording Expedition,” we recall that Hurston’s evocation of drums in that context is African diasporic:

The drums throb; Africa by way of Cuba; Africa by way of the British West Indies; Africa by way of Haiti and Martinique; Africa by way of Central and South America (“Proposed,” 6).

To evoke God’s message in the form of Gabriel drumming then is to suggests that God’s will is

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manifest beyond the framework of the nation state. Like “Proposed Recording Expedition,” *Their Eyes* transforms terror into the occasion for lyric prayer, through the recording and replaying, textually and aurally, of diasporic sound. If catastrophe causes a breakdown in narrative structure, it finds its form in a lyric poetry that mediates between “the words of my mouth” and the diffuse sounds of diaspora.

Hurston’s evocation of African drumming evokes multiple sources rather than a single thread of influence. This is not Pan-Africanism, but rather what Brent Edwards describes as a diasporic consciousness that is not obsessed with “origin” but that “forces us to consider discourses of cultural and political linkage only through and across difference.”\(^{279}\) Hurston’s diasporic genealogy Floridian music manifests on a broad geographic scale the challenge of accounting for collective experience and collective cultural production with a single artistic voice, a challenge which animates much of Hurston’s work. Hurston herself writes, in her 1934 essay on Negro spirituals, that “Negro songs to be heard truly must be sung by a group, and a group bent on expression of feelings and not on sound effects.”\(^{280}\) And yet, concluding the same essay she leaves open the possibility of “unaccompanied” prayer, which she describes as “an obligato over and above the harmony of the assembly.”\(^{281}\) An obligato here resonates as a sound that is at once “over and above” and absolutely essential insofar as it responds to or extends the “jagged harmony” of the group. Although Hurston was a writer of prose fiction, both of the documents I’ve read in this section enter lyric modes as one way of finding such a voice. Collective experiences of catastrophe continually require the reinvention of lyric subjectivity so as to contain or at least render this collectivity. Hurston’s novel invites us to imagine not only

\(^{280}\) Zora Neale Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America), 870.
\(^{281}\) Ibid., 874.
how sounds become the words of her mouth, but also how the words of her mouth are never hers alone.

Hurston’s engagement with transnational black musical folk culture lends its shape to her fictionalized representation of the Florida hurricane of 1928. Rather than a conventional historical narrative, we might read the storm sequence in *Their Eyes* as a collection—a reel, if you will—of diasporic aural and lyrical experiences, alternately mimetic and fractured in relation to the environmental experience of the hurricanes.

**Collective Catastrophe: Sterling Brown and Bessie Smith’s Blues**

If, as Ralph Ellison writes, “as a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically,” then we must understand the meaning of “personal” to be something more than individual; for, catastrophe in the context of the blues signals not only the experiences of unrequited love and individual loss that are the signatures of the genre, but also a history of man-made and natural disaster, experienced collectively. Ellison describes this history as,

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all those blasting pressures which in a scant eighty years have sent the Negro people hurtling, without clearly defined trajectory, from slavery to emancipation[ …] and which, between the two wars, have shattered the wholeness of its folk consciousness into a thousand writhing pieces.
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If the “personal catastrophe” is that which “sent the Negro people hurtling,” Ellison suggests the need for something beyond individual emergence, a collective response that would bring the “thousand writhing pieces” together.

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283 Ibid., 80.
Ellison’s formulation is as much about literary genre as it is about music, or, it names the interpenetrating relationship between the two. As Edwards has argued, Ellison’s use of the word “lyrically” to describe the way the blues work draws our attention to “the fuzzy area between the song lyric and the literary lyric,” and thus to transcription as a major preoccupation of modern poetry. Ellison’s description of the blues also suggests a powerful parallel between the challenge of transcribing “those blasting pressures” of social and environmental catastrophe and the challenges of transcribing one artistic form into another: chronicle into lyric, lyric into blues, blues into lyric.

In the flood poems of Sterling Brown disaster heightens at once the urgency of preserving vernacular forms and the unevenness, discontinuity, and, sense of loss that are the hallmarks of a poetics of “vernacular transcription.” Further, taken up in “the fuzzy area,” catastrophe disrupts our sense of the blues as a migration narrative and demands that we reconceptualize not only Ellison’s characterizing of the blues as “personal,” but as a “chronicle.” Brown’s flood poems expand the sense of lyric subjectivity beyond the individual or interior consciousness, and disorder attempts to chronicle black historical experience lineally.

Sterling Brown’s “Ma Rainey” defines the blues in part by their capacity to depict the very communal nature of violence, as well as their capacity to bring into being a collective rather than an individual response. But the basis of Brown’s portrayal lies in the approximate relationship between poetic practice and the blues themselves. Although unnamed in Brown’s

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284 Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Seemingly Eclipsed Window of Form: James Weldon Johnson’s Prefaces,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 580–601. Edwards argues that the blues lyric’s embodiment of black vernacular tradition, occupying the edge between transcription and performance, constitutes a formal development that can help us reconceptualize the modern lyric’s claim to subjectivity. To the extent that the blues lyric depends upon and makes possible what Edwards describes as a double agency that at once individuates consciousness and connects disparate bodies within a community, modern lyric after the blues is inherently steeped in history.
flood poems, Bessie Smith wrote and performed several of the songs at the heart of his poetic response the 1927 Mississippi river floods: “Homeless Blues,” which her pianist Porter Grainger wrote in direct response to the floods, and “Back Water Blues,” a song Smith famously wrote before the major flooding, but whose sales and distribution markedly increased in the context of the great deluge. The narrative of a third song, “Muddy Water,” a Tin Pan Alley hit written by Joe Trent, Peter DeRose and Harry Richman, does not directly refer to the flood in its lyrics. Rather, it evinces a nostalgic memory of a “sweet south.” But Smith’s recording of this song—released in 1927 a day before the largest levee break in Greenville, Mississippi—also gained popularity in the aftermath of the floods.

The catastrophic in Bessie Smith’s flood blues names at once the suffering of an individual and the suffering of a community. In this sense, the catastrophic blues challenge our sense that individual consciousness dominates lyric form, and that violence demands an individual response. The apostrophic mode of address in “Homeless Blues” unifies the personal suffering of a lyric speaker, the demographic suffering of the people in the face of environmental disaster, and the racial suffering of the people in the Jim Crow South. The speaker directly addresses the river as if a lover:

Mississippi River, what a fix you left me in.
Lord, Mississippi River, what a fix you left me in.
Mudholes of water clear up to my chin.

The speaker’s emotional and spiritual distance from the Mississippi are all the more palpable in this cry to which no one responds, even as she claims a deep link to her “home sweet home”

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287 Bessie Smith, “Muddy Water (A Mississippi Moan),” by Harry Richman and Jo Trent (Columbia 14197-D, 1927).
289 Smith, “Homeless Blues”
beside the river. The accusation—“what a fix you left me in”—could just as easily be addressed to a lover as to a body of water; thus, the lyrics construct the relationship with the natural world through the blues tradition of the abandoned woman’s lament.

As Farah Griffin has noted, the song also draws upon associations between the river and Southern violence during and after slavery.290 The song’s final verse extends the analogy between the destructive river and a destructive lover, engaging symbols of American idealism and American racism.

Wish I was an eagle but I’m a plain old black crow
Wish I was an eagle but I’m a plain old black crow
I’m gonna flap my wings and leave you
And never come back no more

Griffin’s brilliant suggestion that the “plain old black crow” is an allusion to Jim Crow, to a constrained black figure who seeks freedom in opposition to the “eagle” representing America’s values, underscores the coding of southern violence and oppression in the song.291 The final lines of the poem assert the speaker’s agency in the face of violence, even as they acknowledge the historical role of both natural catastrophe and Jim Crow as catalysts for change (migration). Catastrophe has both obliterated her “home sweet home” and revealed it to be no such thing. The continuous struggle with Jim Crow limits the speaker’s mobility—unlike an eagle, she cannot soar—but does not curtail it. In Griffin’s analysis, Smith’s coded references to the violent history of the South exemplify the artistic representation of causes for northward migration. Bringing together the personal experience of lost love and the communal experiences of environmental and social catastrophe, blues lyrics constitute “the migration narrative of the mass

291 Ibid., 20.
of migrants.” 292 Griffin emphasizes the interconnectedness between individual and collective experiences and demonstrates the agency of black migrants even under the considerable constraints imposed by their natural and social environments.

Whereas Griffin folds these lyrical performances into a narrative of black historical experience, 293 however, I wish to attend to Smith’s flood recordings as lyrics and within lyric poetry. One crucial component of the lyric strategy of “Homeless Blues” is the way we experience the song temporally. The lyrics not only indicate a metaphorical or symbolic relationship between the natural world and the social one (as in the figure of the eagle); they also evoke the social world through the intersection between disruptive and continuous catastrophic time. The second verse underscores that poor living conditions preexist the floods:

House without a steeple, didn’t even have a door (2x).
Plain old two-room shanty, but it was my home sweet home.

Describing the speaker’s lost home the stanza emphasizes her poverty (“Plain old two-room shanty”), profane existence (“without a steeple”) and exposure to the elements (“didn’t even have a door”). These conditions, the ongoing catastrophe of the speaker’s life, cause us to question the repeated accusation of the next verse:

Ma and Pa got drownded; Mississippi, you to blame.
My Ma and Pa got drownded; Mississippi, you to blame.
Mississippi River, I can’t stand to hear your name.

The speaker’s rebuke (“I can’t stand to hear your name”) ironizes notion of the blues as a “merely” personal form insofar as the river is more than a lover, the speaker’s relationship to it

292 Ibid., 19.
293 Griffin’s book discusses visual, musical, and literary texts, but she describes narrative as her “conceptual umbrella.” Ibid., 4.
more than a romance. As the repetition of “blame” suggests, Mississippi is at fault in a double sense. The lyrics synecdochically associate the flooded Mississippi river and the politically and socially restrictive Mississippi state: the latter “to blame” for her poverty, the former for her more immediate loss. The flood, then, represents both a catastrophic event and the ongoing disaster.

Although the song emphasizes the continuing catastrophe of poverty, it nonetheless represents the storm as disruptive. The speaker longs for the “home sweet home” the flood has taken from her, even as she emphasizes its lack of comforts. The third stanza renders the full meaning of that loss: “Ma and Pa got drowned.” In the shift from the statement of this fact to its repetition with a difference we hear perhaps the most significant measure of loss: “My Ma and Pa got drowned.” Perhaps paradoxically, the statement of loss becomes a statement of ownership and belonging, the speakers’ assertion of her agency in relationship to a family and community. The repetitive lyric structure of the blues allows this shift, and at the same time enables the increasingly defiant tone of Smith’s address to the river from the playful teasing of a spurned lover in the first verse, where Smith sings “Mississippi river” in an even, trochaic meter, to the angry rebuke of the third, where she alternately stresses, in long, loud calls, the first, third, and fourth syllables of Mississippi, indicating not only that the speaker “can’t stand your name,” but that she can’t or won’t commit to pronouncing it.

Like “Homeless Blues,” Smith’s “Backwater Blues” negotiates the relationship between personal catastrophe and collective suffering. Unlike “Homeless Blues,” however, which depends upon an implied analogy between the speaker and a spurned lover to “universalize” its

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294 It is notable that the implied lover/river analogy, in the voice of a female vocalist, inverts the stereotypical image of nature’s destructiveness as female. Here, the violence of the river and the state are coded masculine.
message, the lyrics of “Backwater Blues” are rooted solely in the event of a destructive flood. The song not only narrates, but formally recreates the experience of the flood: the repetition of the central melodic phrases without break for several verses evokes the relentlessness of the rain. Further, the same phrases are used to describe environmental and human action: “When it rain five days and the skies turn dark at night” is musically parallel to the start of the next verse, “I woke up this mornin’, can’t even get out of my door.” The voice intersperses a narrative of personal experience with the description of a catastrophe that affected entire communities.

Smith articulates the relationship between individual and collective experience through temporal shifts in the lyrics, a temporal structure that constitutes one basis for Brown’s modern poetics of catastrophe. As they alternate between general and particular experience, the verses also alternate between a vernacular present tense (“When it rain five days”) and a past tense narrative (“I woke up this morning’’”). In a particularly powerful gesture, the song shifts its focus from the homelessness of the speaker to that of the community. The narrative recounts the speaker’s rescue:

Then they rowed a little boat about five miles ‘cross the pond
Then they rowed a little boat about five miles ‘cross the pond
I packed all my clothes, throwed ‘em in and they rowed me along

When it thunders an lightenin’, and the wind begin to blow
When it thunders an lightenin’, and the wind begin to blow
There’s thousands of people ain’t got no place to go295

The speaker describes her experience of displacement in the past tense, but the homelessness of “thousands” in the ongoing present. To the extent that it represents both an individual story of suffering and displacement, and the experience of “thousands of people,” the song powerfully

295 Smith, “Backwater Blues.”
juxtaposes that loss which can be contained in the past against the continuity of collective suffering.

The actual description of the weather—in present tense—interrupts the contained personal narrative of migration. In this sense, Bessie Smith’s lyric blues cause us to question Ellison’s formulation of the blues not only as a narrative of “personal” experience but as a “chronicle”—to the extent that a chronicle is understood to be an orderly report of events in time.\(^{296}\) The floods disorder the past; they make impossible a triumphant (or even a tragic) narrative of individual experience; and they call for a form of expression that can provide a new thinking of history. Bessie Smith most likely wrote and recorded “Backwater Blues” in the aftermath of a 1926 Nashville flood she witnessed, but the song became popular in the wake of the 1927 Mississippi Flood.\(^ {297}\) Its recording history indicates the iterability of environmental disaster, social disaster, and cultural forms alike: The flood is not merely a singular event with specific individual and historic repercussions. Rather, it is part of a blues, an aesthetic tradition-in-the-making, a poetics that confronts history.

Smith’s representation of the bind of forced migration unmistakably brings to mind the forced displacements of slavery, evoking past and present in a single breath. Her telling renders the “home sweet home” of “Homeless Blues” as “no place.” Further, this image of itinerancy

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\(^{297}\) In a meticulously researched essay into the origins of the song, musicologist David Evans rebuts the longstanding myth that Smith actually wrote the song after the Greenville levee break, and locates the song instead as a response to an earlier flood of the Cumberland river in Nashville Tennessee. If his motivation is to pin the song in time and place, the effect of his article is in fact to demonstrate the difficulty of doing so. His research into the particularities of the state response to the Nashville flood demonstrates effectively that in that local context disaster relief was not a “racialized” matter, because existing housing inequalities in Nashville were part of ongoing problems—what I have called continuing catastrophe. Far from refuting “racial” readings of the song then, his exhaustive discussion of the multiple contexts in which it has been performed, produced, and heard, as well as his acknowledgment of the slippage between the different kinds of catastrophe effecting poor black communities—a thematic Smith’s song explicitly takes up—indicates the power of anachronism in the flood songs. Ibid.
undercuts the apparently romantic image of the speaker of “Muddy Water” who has “been a way a year today/ To wander and roam,” which I will discuss in greater detail below. In the world of “Homeless Blues” and “Backwater Blues,” the “Southern Road” of Brown’s poems is far from the open road. The final verses of the song fuse the experiences of “thousands” with those of the speaker, at last “a poor old girl” described in the third person:

Then I went an’ stood up on some high ol’ lonesome hill
Then I went an’ stood up on some high ol’ lonesome hill
Then looked down on the house where I used to live

Backwater Blues done cause me to pack my things and go
Backwater Blues done cause me to pack my things and go
‘cause my house fell down and I can’t live there no more

Mmmmmmmm I can’t move no more
Mmmmmmmm I can’t move no more
There ain’t no place for a poor old girl to go

The specific condition of the speaker’s mobility—“my house fell down and I can’t live there no more”—becomes the broad category of “Backwater Blues,” a conglomeration of personal, environmental, economic and social conditions endemic to the “backwater” Smith describes.

Many blues critics have written off “Muddy Water,” unlike “Backwater Blues” and “Homeless Blues,” as a nostalgic, idealized fantasy of southern life, but Smith’s performance mediates between the nostalgic lyrics and the catastrophic experience—the violence of the southern landscape—to which the song only obliquely refers. In “The Blues as Folk Poetry,” Sterling Brown himself describes “Muddy Water” as insufficiently authentic, “stereotyped,” and “sentimentalizing.” In contrast, he praises “the gain in vividness, in feeling” achieved in such songs as ‘Backwater Blues,’ or the ‘Mississippi Water Blues’,” which “substitute[ing] the thing
seen for the bookish dressing up.” But listening to these flood blues together (sung by a single artist) does more than point to a contrast between the swingy longing of “Muddy Water” and the deeply mournful “Backwater Blues,” or, for that matter, the bitter, resistant lyrics of “Homeless Blues.” Rather, it exemplifies the power of Bessie Smith’s performance in bringing the “thing seen” to life.

Smith recorded “Muddy Water (a Mississippi Moan)” as part of a 1927 session in New York including largely popular or “commercial” music. It was a Tin Pan Alley hit written by an interracial team of composers, and recorded around the same time by Jack Pettis, Bing Crosby, and others. It is true that the lyrics, as Angela Davis points out, “reflect the banality of Tin Pan Alley assembly-line musical products” and, as Chris Albertson concedes, that “there is barely a trace of blues in this ‘moan.’” At the same time, Albertson goes on to contend that Smith’s performance is marked by “conviction” in which “we have to believe.” Davis takes Albertson’s argument a step further by emphasizing the “contemplative and complicated” tone of Smith’s performance, “as if she is summoning her audience toward a critical reading of the lyrics.”

Against the backdrop of “Backwater Blues” and “Homeless Blues,” it becomes hard to hear Bessie Smith’s “Muddy Water” as anything other than ironic in its claim that “They live in ease and comfort down there, I do declare.” Whereas the same declaration comes across as earnest—indeed easy—in Bing Crosby’s contemporaneous version of the same song, as in

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300 Ibid., 150.
301 Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, 88.
302 Albertson, Bessie, 150.
303 Davis, Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, 89.
304 Smith, “Muddy Water.”
composer Harry Richman’s 1929 version, Smith’s performance renders the (perhaps unintentional) irony in the lyrics unmistakeable. Davis points to a particularly powerful example of this irony in the eerie line “I hear those trees a-whispering, ‘Come on back to me,’” a phrase which apparently underscores the sense of nostalgia represented by nature in the song, but would inevitably evoke a traumatic association with lynching for some black listeners. Indeed, the very contention that “Southland has got its grand garden spots/ although you believe or not” seems to elide the history of plantation slavery. Following these lines, however, Smith introduces the refrain with increasing intensity and volume, her voice taking on the quality of vibrato, as if holding steady beneath a wail. The “muddy water ‘round my feet/ muddy water in the street” does not merely evoke life upon the “river sweet” but threatens death by drowning.

If Smith’s voice has a singular capacity to transform the Tin Pan Alley lyrics into a critique of southern violence, she also brings to life the collective experience of catastrophe. The collective quality of the blues renders Ellison’s notions of the autobiographical and the personal so expansive, and forces us to re-examine the genres that constitute the “chronicle” of black experience. But how should poetry reflect or reproduce this kind of performance? If, in her analysis of violence as a trigger for migration, Farah Griffin moves seamlessly from Bessie Smith’s disaster blues to Jean Toomer’s Cane, Brown’s poems suggest that such a movement is necessarily rocky and discontinuous.

As in Hurston’s novel and Brathwaite’s essay, the problem of how to collect, record, and write sound—in this case the blues—is akin to the difficulty of translating environmental experience. Transcribing sound is a process of *approximation*, that “envious blues feeling” Leroi

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305 Davis, 88.
Jones describes in “Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note”\(^{306}\) as such, it shares the qualities of *ecomimesis*—writing which evokes nature, and draws attention to the process of that evocation in such a way that compromises the distinction between nature and its representation.\(^{307}\) The “blues feeling” assembles black historical experience not as a *traumatic event* but in terms of what Lauren Berlant has described as “crisis ordinariness.” As an alternative to trauma theory’s emphasis on “exceptional shock and data loss in the memory and experience of catastrophe,” Berlant proposes that we think about the ordinary as a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine. Catastrophic forces take shape in this zone and become events within history as it is lived.\(^{308}\)

This idea of catastrophe as an ongoing experience taking place “within history as it is lived” has special meaning in a musical genre that mediates the relationship between particular and universal experience, between discreet and ongoing time. It is this quality of the blues rather than its particular structures of repetition, rhyme, or meter that motivates Brown’s flood poems.

Sterling Brown’s homage to Bessie Smith’s blues seeks to express formally the sense of collective suffering to which Smith gives voice. In “Cabaret (1927, Black & Tan Chicago),”\(^{309}\) a poem which samples the lyrics of the Tin Pan Alley hit “Muddy Water,” Brown’s use of multivocality brings to the fore the ironic contrast between the nostalgic image of the “peace and happiness” in the Delta of “Muddy Water” fantasy and the poverty, oppression and death of Delta reality. As in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, disaster in Brown’s flood poems

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is a matter of historic record—a force that helps to materialize the conditions of black lives; a metaphor for racial violence and oppression; and a way of shaping and defining a poetics. Here, catastrophe is the very condition of art making because of its capacity to describe and structure the chaos of human suffering.

According to Brown’s biographer Joanne Gabbin, Brown juxtaposes the voices of the poem against one another in “powerful antithesis.” In Gabbin’s brief reading, “the destructive floods, the stench, and the death at no time intrude upon the papier-mache artificiality of the scene.” Such a reading, while attentive to the profound critique inherent in Brown’s depiction of city life, still privileges the perspective of the “rich, flashy, puffy-faced” patrons as the consciousness of the poem (into which the reality of black southern life cannot “intrude”). Instead, the poem’s splintered consciousness undercuts the empty longing of “Hebrew and Anglo-Saxon… overlords” (111) for an “authentic” representation of black south, and makes way for the “weird posturings” (113) of the (presumably black) performers. The voices of the poem are not antithetical to one another but are inharmonious constituent parts of the same system.

The power imbalance between sprawling “overlords” and the “deaf-mute waiters” (110) and performers who variously serve them corrupts the space of cultural production. The poem draws an odd parallel between the condition of the performers in the chorus (“Their shapely bodies naked save/ For tattered pink silk bodices, short velvet tights”) and blacks forced into relief work in Arkansas following the floods, “Poor half-naked fools, tagged with identification numbers/ Worn out upon the levees” (112) as well as slaves on the auction block: “A prime filly, seh/ What am I offered gentlemen, gentlemen.” These parallels—between urban black

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performers and rural black laborers, and between both groups and their slave ancestors—defy a progressive sense of temporality or of northward migration. This genealogy of suffering unmoors any visions of a liberatory northern metropolis, even as the object of its satire is southern nostalgia, and it unmoors at the same time the narrative of progress “up from slavery”

To some extent the poem bemoans the lack of power and agency in the music—or at least the lyrics—of the song “Muddy Water.” Shifting voices, Brown juxtaposes the fantasy of the lyrics—”There’s peace and happiness there/ I declare”—against the economic reality of those affected by the floods:

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\begin{align*}
\text{(In Arkansas,} \\
\text{Poor half-naked fools, tagged with identification numbers,} \\
\text{Worn out upon the levees,} \\
\text{Are carted back to serfdom} \\
\text{The had never left before} \\
\text{And may never leave again)}
\end{align*}
\]

Brown is referring here to the conscription of Negro sharecroppers to shore up the levees against the encroaching waters, while whites were rescued and evacuated from the flood plains. This historical atrocity, recounted by Richard Wright in the short story “Down By the River,” and similar to Tea Cake’s enforced labor after the hurricane in Their Eyes, undermines the song’s claim to the “peace and happiness” of the river. In this sense, the voice of “reality” and the voice of the song (which is also the voice of a lyric speaker) indeed seem to be antithetical.

But the voice that insists, “Still it’s my home, sweet home” also “cries out.” Reminding us of the human consequences of social and environmental catastrophe and creatively sounding out a response to that catastrophe, this cry is what Fred Moten would call blackness, that is, “testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.” \(^{311}\) At the end of the poem

My heart cries out for

\(^{311}\) Moten, *In The Break*, 1.
MUDDY WATER

(Down in the valleys
The stench of the drying mud
Is a bitter reminder of death.)

Dee da dee DAAAAAH

If this voice echoes the scat that concludes The Waste Land, as others have suggested, then it seems be a drowning voice, sounding out a gurgled version of “death.” The apparently antithetical voices say “death” together. The voices do not harmonize, surely, but the stench of death makes itself audible in what we might call a scribal scat—the printed representation of the song’s musical improvisation. We cannot read the scatting in the poem as the trifling nostalgia of this banal blues; rather, the scat—if only in its inability to communicate the sound it represents, or to find the soft final consonant “th” of death—sounds the “bitter reminder” of the floods’ human effects. Thus the “moans and deep cries for home” that issue from the “lovely throats” of the dancers are deep not only for the richness of their longing—whether for “Nashville” or for “Boston”—but because of the pain accompanying their itinerancy and experience of displacement.

Brown does not merely situate himself as the modern virtuoso resisting Tin Pan Alley’s dehumanization of black bodies. He also thematicizes the notion of a historically informed, resistant, virtuosic performance within the world of the poem. In other words, the Chicago

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312 John Callahan concludes that, in comparison with the “shantih shantih shantih” at the end of T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land, “Brown’s last notes cast doubt on whatever expectations linger of modernism’s ability to affirm convincing new beginnings either for self or for community without the low, painful fires of critical intelligence and historical consciousness.” But even Callahan reaches toward a transcendent reading of the poem, conceding that, while degraded performance displaces “authentic” blues within the space of the Cabaret, “Brown himself renders a virtuoso jazz performance in” in the poem. But it would be problematic to conclude that “critical intelligence and historical consciousness” permits Brown—but not the performers within the text—to achieve this modern virtuosity. John F. Callahan, “A Brown Study”: Sterling Brown’s Legacy of Compassionate Connections,” Callaloo 21, no. 4 (1998): 902.
performers, like Bessie Smith, perform beyond the constraints of the song’s lyrics. Brown does not perform jazz (or the blues) but approximates its sounds. Knowing Bessie Smith’s rendition of “Muddy Water,” as Brown likely did, makes it impossible to hear Brown as the only aesthetic agent in the poem. Even if Brown emphasizes the banality of the “Muddy Water” lyrics, as when “home” becomes “home sweet home,” apparently calling upon the tone of Bing Crosby’s version, he makes room for Bessie Smith’s voice in the “moans” from the “lovely throats” of the chorus dancers. The two lines of scat in the poem take place at the same indented level as the song lyrics, occupying the position of the first person speaker. Thus the scat simultaneously articulates the cry of the poem’s speaker—the poem itself, in a sense—and that of the chorus performing the song. If the poem demonstrates its virtuosity, its modernity, and its capacity to account for catastrophe, it does so through the bodies and mouths of the exploited Chicago club performers. Following the choreography of these performers—both Jazz band and chorus—through the poem underscores how performance links individual and collective agency in the poem.

“Cabaret” generates vernacular memory as a collective and cross-cultural phenomenon. Diverse bodies inhabit the space of the cabaret: white overlords and “their glittering darlings,” the musicians and chorus, and the “deaf-mute waiters.” The waiters above all are—in the most literal sense—without voice. Their appearance in the first stanza signals the poem’s reach for modes of communication and resistance beyond vocality. The waiters move “surreptitiously…

313 There’s no evidence in the poem that Brown had Smith’s version exclusively in mind when he wrote “Cabaret”—indeed, the poem seems explicitly to reference and parody a nostalgic, Tin Pan Alley rendition. But elsewhere he describes his “zeal for Bessie Smith.” Sterling Allen Brown, Sterling A. Brown’s A Negro Looks at the South, ed. John Edgar Tidwell and Mark A Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 38. Further, the date in the subtitle of the poem unmistakably places the poem in relation to the Mississippi flood and to Smith’s more well-known “Backwater Blues.” Brown’s poem indexes the power of Smith’s transformative performance of “Muddy Water,” even as it critiques the banal Tin Pan Alley versions.
going easily… wary”; they seem to submit to the degradation of the club, but at the same time engage in deliberately strategic behavior, “flattering the grandees.” Against this “easy” movement,

The jazzband unleashes its frenzy.

Now, now,
To it, Roger; that’s a nice doggie,
Show your tricks to the gentlemen.

The trombone belches, and the saxophone
Wails curdlingly, the cymbals clash,
The drummer twitches in an epileptic fit.

(111)
The stanza in italics ironizes even the alarming “frenzy” of the musicians; this, too, it seems, is a servile “trick” to please the master. In his near-scientific reading of the poem, Stephen Henderson argues that “the band is depicted in pathological images.”314 While this may be the case, I maintain that Brown assigns a kind of agency to the “fit.” In a pun that pits musicality against semiotics, he renders the musicians’ frenzy inassimilable to the club-goers’ fantasy: “the cymbals clash.” The “epileptic” twitching of the drummer is jarring against the steady clipped rhythm of the song lyrics

Muddy water
Round my feet
Muddy water

The performers resist the easy, “banal” nostalgia of the song and the sound “wails curdlingly” around the “feet” of the poem. The chorus of “creole beauties” initially “sways in”/[…]/To bring to mind[…]/Life upon the river” for the club-goers fantasizing about the “river sweet.” But the

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overlords are not the only ones with a “mind” about the river. In unfolding the narratives of the Arkansas levee-workers and the auction block, the poem evokes yet another flood blues—Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie’s “When the Levee Breaks”—representing black consciousness and memory alongside that of the white overlords.

The poem does not merely undermine the white fantasy of “life upon the river”; rather, it reveals that fantasy—as a projection of urban art—to be deeply intertwined with, indeed dependent upon, the reality of black “life upon the river.” It is, after all, the migrations of blacks (of which the floods in Mississippi and racial oppression were twin causes) that enable the scene in the Cabaret in the first place. The chorus, for instance arrives “from New Orleans’ (By way of Atlanta, Louisville, Washington, Yonkers/With stop-overs they’ve used nearly all their lives).”

Black memory of catastrophic trauma at the hand of nature and man alike enables the resistant performances the poem describes. Brown renders this memory visible in the bodies of the performers:

The band goes mad, the drummer throws his sticks  
At the moon, a papier-mache moon,  
The chorus leaps into weird posturings,  
The firm-fleshed arms plucking at grapes to stain  
Their corralled mouths; seductive bodies weaving  
Bending, writhing, turning

(113)

The “creamy skin” of the “quarterounes” or “creole” chorus (presumably a product of illegal and forced interracial unions) testifies to the objectification of black female bodies under slavery. The bodies that “twist and rock” in the cabaret bring to mind the speaker of the song “Muddy Water” who is “reeling and rocking to them low down blues” with “Muddy water in my shoes.” Drowned or drowning bodies performing this dance resonate with all the associations of black bodies sold downriver, black bodies drowned by rain and violence alike. But the bodies perform
in opposition to drowning: they are seductive, active; they hurl their music against the “papier-mache” fantasy of the scene. The “weird posturings” of the dancers, alongside the “mad” movements of the band, exceed the pathologizing gaze of the club-goers and achieve a dynamic, sculptural grace. If the “black folk” in Mississippi “huddle, mute, uncomprehending,” and wonder quietly about their condition, then the collective performance of bodies “weaving/Bending, writhing, turning,” activates their “huddle,” evoking both the devastating image of bodies drowned in the river, and the creative possibility of “weaving” something beautiful out of that catastrophe. Enacting what Ellison describes as the function of the blues, the bodies “keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experience alive.” Brown’s poem testifies to the collective power of this kind of performance.

In this context, catastrophe stretches the limits of genre, juxtaposing multiple cultural forms. The scribal scat that closes the poem draws our attention to the gap between music and voice, voice and page. Even in recorded or performed music, the scat simultaneously marks and attempts to bridge the difference between instrumentality and vocality, in that it is a vocalization of instrumental sound. Brown’s “Cabaret” maps this tension onto the problem of recording music with the written word, drawing attention to the difficulty of transcription with the capital letters of the poem’s extended wail:

Dee da dee D A A A A H

(113)

In “Cabaret” the juxtaposition of different voices (nostalgic song lyrics against the dehumanizing voices of history, a voice that mourns the destruction of the floods, and another describing the scene in the club) brings into relief the seams between different forms of discourse. Describing 315 Ellison, Ralph, “Richard Wright’s Blues,” 80.
the anthropological “allegory of salvage” that motivated Brown’s response to natural disaster, Daphne Lamothe argues that “the almost seamless continuity between the folk culture he observed and the poetry he wrote suggests that Brown’s poetry, like an ethnographic narrative, aspired to preserve and transmit the source material.” As Lamothe suggests, there is a sense in which the “natural forces” of catastrophe both literally call for “salvage,” and provide the perfect metaphor for the cultural process at work in this moment. Like Lamothe I believe that the floods represent not only a threat to buildings and lives but to culture and community.

However, whereas Lamothe turns to the open road as the governing metaphor of the “seamless” relationship between past and present she describes, I maintain that the “cataclysmic change” of catastrophe itself figures both the disruption and the continuity, the aberration and the adaptability, and most importantly the mobility of black culture. The continuity between folk culture and Brown’s poetry is far from “seamless” and far from linear (as the shape of the open road would suggest) but rather bears the marks of its own catastrophic creation. The song “Muddy Water” corrupts a “disappearing” black culture, at least if we are to take seriously Brown’s description of the song as “stereotyping” and “sentimentalizing.” The poem, then, would appear to lament the loss of this “source,” but it also suggests that there is no pure “source.” The printed scats which interrupt and conclude the poem mark the difficulty of “transmission” from one cultural form to another (from instrumentality to vocality, from stage to page), even as they articulate the out-crying of poem, singer, and refugee alike.

Brown does not so much “preserve and transmit” a source from the past, as he clears a space for the transmission of modern culture obsessed with its own preservation. The subtitle of

316 Lamothe, Inventing the New Negro, 92.
317 See also Mark Sanders’s interpretation of the road as “a road through modernism.” Mark A Sanders, Afro-Modernist Aesthetics & the Poetry of Sterling A. Brown (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 91.
318 Lamothe, Inventing the New Negro, 92.
“Cabaret (1927, Black & Tan Chicago)” fixes the moment in its time, as if to preserve not so much the “lost” southern spaces of either the overlords’ or the dancers’ memories, as the time of black cultural production within this intercultural, urban, northern space that threatens “vanishing” everywhere.

**Catastrophe’s Caesura: Ma Rainey’s Lyric Time**

Against this distorted scene of Northern performance, Brown’s “Ma Rainey”\(^{319}\) describes a scene of collective listening and performance in the South. The poem, recalling the legendary singer’s performance of her protégé Bessie Smith’s “Backwater Blues,” opens with a list of place names along the destructive river’s path. Thus it would seem to preoccupy itself with movement through space southern space. Mississippi floods displaced black communities in particular, contributing to the Great Migration north, while laying bare the economic and social *stasis* that characterized much of black life in America at the time.\(^{320}\) Brown’s evocation of musical performance invites us to rethink that stasis in relationship to black historicity. The poem not only reveals the flood’s spatial effects on what Houston Baker has called a “blues geography,”\(^{321}\) but depicts catastrophe as a *temporal* experience which reorganizes the relationships among history, memory and the present.

Insofar as it replicated the concurrent geographic displacement and immobility imposed by the slave trade, the flood precipitated a crisis in space that is characteristic of diaspora. The final lines of Bessie Smith’s “Backwater Blues,” whose lyrics Brown cites in the poem’s final


\(^{320}\) See especially Griffin, “Who Set You Flowin’?”. Through a reading of two other Bessie Smith songs, Griffin cites natural disasters as one of the primary reasons for leaving the South chronicled in blues migration narratives (19-21).

section, bring to the fore this paradox of homelessness and immobility:

‘cause my house fell down and I can’t live there no more
Mmmmmmmmm I can’t move no more
Mmmmmmmmm I can’t move no more
There ain’t no place for a poor old girl to go

The lyrical pause between “I can’t live there no more” and “I can’t move no more” brings to mind the human cargo-holds of the middle passage. At the same time the hum between these lines, extended in Bessie Smith’s recording, constitutes what Nathaniel Mackey calls an “alternate vocality,” sounding a “fugitive spirit.” A metrical placeholder, audible when words are not to extend the rhythm of the song, the sound voices the tension between enforced mobility and social immobility, but also a blues response: the potential for song to move and even to live where bodies cannot.

The sound of that hum emphasizes the fugitivity of sound in and across time: across the meter of the song’s line, as well as historical time. The song’s capacity to overrun the bounds of its immediate context manifests in its recording history; “Backwater Blues” unifies a continuous experience of social catastrophe even while being folded into the narrative of the singular event of environmental catastrophe. Brown’s general love for Bessie Smith suggests he would have been familiar with her recordings of the song; his 1932 poem, however, recounts a performance of “Backwater Blues” by Smith’s mentor, Ma Rainey. The only known record of Rainey’s performance, and thus an historical document in and of itself, Sterling Brown’s “Ma Rainey” celebrates its potential to transform the path of the storm into a musical geography. “Picknickin’

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323 Ibid., 190.
324 That Brown’s poem focuses on Rainey rather than Smith—displacing the song’s authorship—merits further discussion, but my focus here is on the performance and the “alternate vocality” that is the main subject of Brown’s poetic inquiry
fools” gathering to hear Ma sing reenact the migrations triggered by the floods themselves. But
Ma (not the flood) is the agent of motion, communal gathering, and transformation. Ma “hits”
like a storm occurring repeatedly along the track of the river. Brown figures her music not as a response to the stormy weather but as a re-enactment of its temporality.

If many of our salient metaphors for diaspora have to do with movement through space—the “ships in motion,” for example, that anchor Paul Gilroy’s reorientation to the Black Atlantic— the spatial crisis of environmental catastrophe allows us to rethink diapora in terms of time. That is, if a certain alienation from geography is a precondition of diaspora, then the imaginative response to that alienation must take place within a new thinking of the temporal. Narrative provides diasporic communities with one such answer to this problem: in the absence of a homeland, we inscribe cultural and national identity within genealogies, histories, and progressions in time. But poetic time in particular can account also for the discontinuity of those histories and genealogies. This idea originates for me in a question raised by Brathwaite’s characterization of nation language: “The hurricane does not roar in pentameters, and that’s the problem: how do you get a rhythm which approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience?” Brathwaite’s question arises from the spatial, the regional experience of an environmental phenomenon; but he seeks an answer in rhythm, a way of marking time in the context of catastrophe.

Drawing on the rhythm of the floods—their relentless flowing coupled with their disruptiveness—Sterling Brown’s gives voice simultaneously to the experience of rupture, and to the ongoing forces of history shaping that experience. In Brown’s hands, lyric poetry is not a

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326 Hence, for instance, the persistent concern with genealogy that pervades the genre of the slave narrative, and the popularity and significance of this form in the foundation of African American literary canons.
genre apart from history but the genre that disrupts temporal progression even as it “keeps alive the making of the past.”

Ma’s performances take place within an uncertain geography, but continuously. The first two sections of Brown’s poem occur in the habitual present; Ma is as unremitting as the floods themselves. The crowd gathers:

Dey stumble in de hall, jes a-laughin’ an’ a-cacklin’,
Cheerin’ lak roarin’ water, lak wind in river swamps.

An’ some jokers keeps deir laughs a-goin’ in de crowded aisles,
An’ some folks sits dere waitin’ wid deir aches an’ miseries,
Till Ma comes out before dem, a-smilin’ gold-toofed smiles
An’ Long Boy ripples minors on de black an’ yellow keys.

The crowd takes on the aural qualities of the storm, “a-cacklin’” and “roarin.’ “While ecological disaster incurs detachment from the land (the drama of the poem takes place “Anywhere’s aroun’), Ma Rainey’s performance inspires a different kind of itinerancy. The crowd moves “When Ma Rainey/ Comes to town….. When Ma hits” The time of Ma’s performance provides the occasion for coming together. The poem establishes Ma’s approach and arrival as a performative counterbalance to the “aches an’ miseries” of life, a “hit” that borrows the rhythm but transforms the content of the floods. The continuity of black performance in time answers the continuity of black suffering.

Alongside both forms of continuity, Brown’s lyric time must account for their disruption. Brown’s poem is the only “recording” we have of Ma’s performance—its transcription, necessarily partial, indicates the significance of discontinuity for a poetics of catastrophe. Kamau Brathwaite calls for a poetry that would break the pentameter; we must hear this “break” not only as a geographical departure—from England to the New World—but as a metrical pause, a caesura. In Brown’s poem, the lyric voice interrupts the narrative of habitual itinerancy, and

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328 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 340.
delays the satisfaction of Ma’s song.

O Ma Rainey
Sing yo’ song;
Now you’s back
Whah you belong,
Git way inside us,
Keep us strong. . . .

O Ma Rainey,
Li’l an’ low;
Sing us ‘bout de hard luck
Roun’ our do’;
Sing us ‘bout de lonesome road
We mus’ go. . . .

These brief lines interrupt the rippling abundance of the previous section, leaving behind the historical landscape of river settlements for the domain of generalized “hard luck.” The three-syllable lines with one or two beats in mostly falling meter indeed “break the pentameter,” and the rhymes (song/belong/strong and low/do’/go) decrease the poem’s velocity. In this pause, this moment of slowed time, the poem asserts the agency of a collective lyric speaker.

We might read the layering of temporalities and voices in “Ma Rainey” as an example of the move toward compression and unity that Sharon Cameron calls the driving impulse of lyric. “The lyric’s collective voice,” Cameron contends, “or more accurately the voice of its collective moments, bound together as if one, is not equal to a human voice.” But by making the speaking “I” a self-consciously plural “we,” Brown renders the human audible. The final section of the poem disperses the authority of lyric among the singer who voices the experience of the flood, the reporting “fellow,” and “de folks” who “bowed dey heads an’ cried” at the sound of Ma’s blues, creating what Mackey calls a “buzz” of multivocality. We feel the vibration of

330 Ibid., 62–63.
331 Sharon Cameron, Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 208.
332 Brown, “Ma Rainey,” 63.
lyric both in this splitting of voices and in the collection of multiple moments “as if” bound, but not entirely bound to one another.

Far from consolidating experience into a “unitary” moment, the narrative structure of the final section, in which we “hear” the lyrics of “Backwater Blues,” draws our attention to the stratifications of time. The poem shifts abruptly from the present tense imperative to a nearly ethnographic narrative in past tense. In this moment, a first person speaker enters for the first time, then cedes narrative authority to another “source”:

I talked to a fellow an’ the fellow say
‘She jes’ catch hold of us, somekindaway.
She sang Backwater Blues one day

The “fellow” then cites the lyrics of Bessie Smith’s “Backwater Blues,” evoking collective and personal histories of the floods. The fellow’s vernacular past tense (“She jes catch hold of us”) becomes the present tense of the poem (“She jes’ gits hold of us.”) The terse final couplet omits the blues repetition of the first line, creating a caesura between the fellow’s narrative and the “ethnographer’s” conclusion. Speaker and fellow, past and present, collide within this break from narrative and history. The temporality of “Ma Rainey” thus undermines a narrative of cultivation “up from” the past, that would seamlessly transform the suffering of slavery into modern literary sensibility. But it does not deny history. Instead, various pasts—the Great Flood, the violent history of the Mississippi river, the “one day” in which Ma Rainey “sang,” and the moment in which the speaker “talked to a fellow”—hum beneath the present tense of shared cultural experience.

Brown has often been understood as a poet particularly rooted in the idiom of the United
States south, hence the original publication of “Ma Rainey” in B.A. Botkin’s anthology “Folk-Say: A Regional Miscellany.” Unlike Zora Neale Hurston, he did not travel beyond the borders of the United States in his search of folk materials, and in that sense he can be understood as a “rooted” poet rather than a diasporic one. However, the fugitive temporality of “Ma Rainey” draws upon and contributes to the making of a diasporic poetic tradition, which is what invites us to read Brown’s poetics of catastrophe alongside Brathwaite’s. Although the poem begins with place names, it concludes pointing “dataway,” not toward a place but toward a memory. With this closing gesture, the event of Ma’s performance—and the long-ago catastrophic memory of slavery it evokes—displaces the particularity of the Greenville floods and invites us to dwell instead in crisis ordinariness. The poem’s answer to the problem of geography is to reside in the time of song, in the caesura of lyric time.

On Nation Language, Collection and Transcription

Kamau Brathwaite’s preoccupation with the transcription of aural poetic rhythm conveys his anxiety over the preservation and continuity of a culture. For Brathwaite, the “noise” or sound of a poem is always that which is lost.

333 The title of Southern Road is the most explicit indication of Brown’s self-conscious artistic identification with a particular geography, an identification he underscores in his commitment to representing the South—and particularly the black South—in the prose writings he undertook during his time at Atlanta University. (These writings have been collected in Sterling Allen Brown, Sterling A. Brown’s A Negro Looks at the South, ed. John Edgar Tidwell and Mark A Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).) Tidwell and Sanders have argued that Southern Road and the prose writings alike construct the figure of the witnessing artist who “traverses the Southern landscape in an effort to collect and recollect the diversity of Southern black life” (12). Joann Gabbin and David Anderson have drawn attention to Brown’s appreciation of rural, geographic isolation as a productive ground for folk art, even as they both acknowledge his commitment to adapting and transforming folk forms so as to preserve them in an increasingly urban society. See David Anderson, “Sterling Brown’s Southern Strategy: Poetry as Cultural Evolution in Southern Road,” Callaloo 21, no. 4 (1998): 1023; Joanne V Gabbin, Sterling A. Brown: Building the Black Aesthetic Tradition, Contributions in Afro-American and African studies no. 86 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1985), 87-89.
The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word. It is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would think of as noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning. When it is written, you lose the sound or the noise, and therefore you lose part of the meaning. Which is, again, why I have to have a tape recorder for this presentation. I want you to get the sound of it, rather than the sight of it (History, 17).

Brathwaite champions *mimesis* as a crucial early stage in the development of nation language poetry, critiquing a poem which “gets the effect of the hurricane” (12) without approaching the experience of one, and praising a later work which, moved by T.S. Eliot’s “riddims of St. Louis,” “imitates the sound and the motion, the movement” of a particular natural phenomenon (31). At the same time, Brathwaite’s analysis continually returns to the impossibility of representation: he had a tape player for the presentation at Harvard, but the text is haunted by his inability to transcribe what was played. It is in fact the tension between the imperative to represent “the sound and the motion” and the impossibility of doing so that defines nation language for Brathwaite, and that constitutes the only possible response to catastrophe for Sterling Brown.

“Ma Rainey” brings to light (and juxtaposes) both the imperative and the impossibility of “preservation.” What is perhaps most striking about Brown’s representation of music, his homage to the blues “as folk poetry,” is not so much his rendering of sound, but his rendering of the loss that Brathwaite describes. Whereas “Cabaret” attempts to record the non-discursive sound of scatting, to give voice to the cry of remembering the South, “Ma Rainey” encodes the sound in the sign of the caesura, the aporia between the song and the cry. When the poem closes, we have become privy to the only recorded experience of Ma Rainey singing her protégé’s

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334 Brown acknowledges the difference between the preservation of “folk forms” and the preservation of what Leroi Jones and others would later call the “classic blues,” insofar as he acknowledges the particular role of the blues “priestesses” in establishing the popularity of the music. But for Brown the blues remain “folk poetry,” and part of what “Ma Rainey” takes up in particular is the connection between the individual virtuosic performance and the folk experience or creation.
powerful song. At the same time, we are aware that we have not experienced that which the poem describes, we have not been taken hold of “dataway.” There is a missing line that would—but of course, cannot—convey the meaning and essence of the “Backwater Blues,” and Brown’s poem resists that satisfaction. If natural catastrophe has the capacity to destroy communities and cultures, to displace folks from their homes and histories, and to echo the violent displacements of history, then Brown’s response is not so much to advocate a process of “salvage,” in which a dying culture of the past is preserved and categorized; as to write into being a process of memory.

Joseph Roach compellingly depicts catastrophe (and here, he means not necessarily environmental disaster, but any form of destruction, calamity, or “downward turning” in dramatic performance) as a structure of memory holding the past and the future in relation. “The choreography of catastrophic closure,” he writes, “offers a way of imagining what must come next, as well as what has already happened. Under the seductive linearity of its influence, memory operates as an alternation between retrospection and anticipation that is itself, for better or worse, a work of art.” Roach offers a compelling model for understanding how memory in “Ma Rainey” negotiates the relationship between past and future. But must this relationship always be defined by its linearity and inevitablity? Can catastrophe offer a way of imagining not “what must come next” but what might come next?

Roach draws a strong contrast between what he calls “the linear narrative of catastrophe” characteristic of Western tragic drama on the one hand, and, on the other, spirit-world rituals which “tend to place catastrophe in the past, as a grief to be expiated, and not necessarily in the

336 Emphasis mine.
future, as a singular fate yet to be endured.” In the future, in the circum-Atlantic plays Roach describes, celebration and affirmation may replace violent closure, because of the sense of continuity with the ancestors, the sense of dynamic relation to the dead. “In such circumstances, memory circulates and migrates like gossip from location to location as well as from generation to generation, growing or attenuating as it passes through the hands of those who possess it and those whom it possesses.”

Roach describes a kind of memory exempt from the “seductive linearity” of fate (which to Roach, it seems, is the same as “the choreography of catastrophic closure”), a kind of memory in which the past is transformed or even transcended through processes of circulation, allowing for the agency not of catastrophe itself, but of the people who experience and survive it, and in whose hands it is transformed.

Memory operates in just this way in Sterling Brown’s “Ma Rainey,” but not because the grief of catastrophe has been safely compartmentalized in the past. On the contrary, the catastrophic floods are an experience defined in part by their continuity. At the same time, however, the catastrophic is not fate in Brown’s poems; the past does not determine or enclose the future in quite the linear way that Roach attributes to Western tragedy. Rather, the structure of environmental catastrophe—repetitive, migratory, circulatory, transformative, dispersing and collecting—itself provides the aesthetic alternative to teleological narrative.

Having positioned Brown’s poems in the context of this theory of circum-Atlantic cultural production, as well as alongside Hurston’s novel and Brathwaite’s theory of Caribbean poetics, I hope to have displaced these poems at least partially from their theory and practice of what Botkin describes as American folk culture. If “Ma Rainey” first appeared in “a regional miscellany” what does it mean to consider that poem now as part of a transnational literature of

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response to catastrophe? And, on the other hand, what does it mean to think of Brown as writing (in) what Brathwaite calls “nation language”? 

While many of Sterling Brown’s prose writings—most notably his work for the Federal Writers’ Project and his posthumously published *A Negro Looks at the South*—underscore his investment in regional representation, his writings about music also demonstrate his geographic and formal flexibility. Brown opens his mid-century essay on “Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads, and Work Songs” by citing Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s well-known botanical characterization of the spirituals:

Thomas Wentworth Higginson, one of the very first to pay respectful attention to the Negro spiritual, called it a startling flower growing in dark soil. Using his figure, we might think of this flower as a hybrid, as the American Negro is a hybrid. And though the flowers of its family grew in Africa, Europe, and other parts of America, this hybrid bloom is uniquely beautiful.

The evocation of Higginson—a white abolitionist and Civil War colonel of the first all-black regiment, whose correspondences bring into proximity Emily Dickinson and Frederick Douglass—itself calls for Brown’s revision of his trope. Higginson’s metaphor is one of a few in his essay, “Negro Spirituals,” in which he draws upon botanical language to describe his encounter with Negro song. Early on, he describes his “scientific method” for studying the music:

I could now gather on their own soil these strange plants, which I had before seen as in museums alone. True, the individual songs rarely coincided; there was a line here, a chorus there, just enough to fix the class, but this was unmistakable. It was not strange that they differed, for the range seemed almost endless, and South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida seemed to have nothing but the generic character in common, until all were mingled in the united stock of camp-melodies.

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338 Brown, *Sterling A. Brown’s A Negro Looks at the South.*
Higginson’s organic trope not only insists upon the living nature of the music, but also ascribes nativity to the place and the bodies from which the songs emerged, “their own soil.” It is the presence of this “soil” that that makes “these strange plants” come to life. Here, the organic corresponds with the authentic, the essential, and the native. Even as Higginson acknowledges that the songs “differed” with seeming “endless” range according to geography, there was “enough to fix the class.” Higginson seems to regard the process of “mingling” in a “united stock,” as a degradation of the pure form. Brown by no means undermines the biological fallacy of Higginson’s claim, but he nonetheless uses the very language of biological determinism to challenge Higginson’s logic of cultural purity. In Brown’s revision of the trope, the diversity of the “stock” or family—a family spread over multiple continents—is that which produces the “uniquely beautiful” hybrid form of the music. Brown names and demystifies the “dark soil” that produces Negro art—“Africa, Europe, and other parts of America”—at once making concrete the continental boundaries that separate the different aspects of this “hybrid,” and insisting upon their complex coexistence within the music.

There’s no doubt that part of what’s at stake in Brown’s insistence upon the uniqueness of Negro music (and the poetry it contains) is upholding the notion of black originality and historicity forwarded by Melville Herskovits’s anthropological theory of African survivals, or James Weldon Johnson’s much earlier claims about the spirituals in his prefaces to the Books of American Negro Spirituals (1925, 1926), which surely would have influenced Brown’s thinking—that is, he wants to insist upon the resilience of black culture in the face of slavery and forced separation from Africa. But, as his opening creolization trope suggests, Brown’s conceptualization of form is far from essentialist. Brown mobilizes the regional, the natural, in service of an intercultural and transnational model of poetic expression. Like Johnson, he goes
beyond the claim to African inheritance. Brown maintains that Negro music reflects not a “pure” essence but the distinct experience of oppression suffered by blacks in America. The negro spirituals are not “otherworldly” but of this life infused with the material reality of Negro experience: “with the drudgery, the hardships, the auction-block, the slave-mart, the shackles, and the lash so literally present in the Negro’s experience, it is hard to imagine why for the Negro [bondage and freedom] would remain figurative.”

The particular content of black music gives rise to a particular form, and it is here that hybridity becomes a key term. The spirituals are: an “anthology of Biblical heroes and tales” marked by “numerous gaps,” “many repetitions” and “double-talk.” In this description, Brown might well be describing the poems in *Southern Road*. Although Brown’s poems “break the pentameter,” they remain deeply engaged with traditional American and European folk form. Brown also describes the ballad, a musical form that informs much of his poetry, as a “hybrid” form: “Like southern white groups, the Negro has retained many of the old Scotch-English ballads…. Similarly the Negro folk singer lends to and borrows from American balladry…. ‘Frankie and Johnnie,’ the most widely known tragedy in America, is attributed to both white and Negro authorship. It could come from either; it probably comes from both; the tenderloin cuts across both sections.” Brown continues, noting that “one of the best folk ballads, however, is in the simpler, unrhymed African leader-chorus design.” Brown’s characterization of traditional negro music’s approximate authorship, provenance, and structure, undermines the notion of the music as a “pure” source for textual representation or a pure cultural form that can be rescued from decline.

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342 Ibid., 253.
343 Ibid., 256.
Zora Neale Hurston similarly eschews a linear or historical relationship between vernacular culture and modern literary form, between musicality, play, and textuality. In a 1928 letter to Langston Hughes written from Magazine, Alabama, where Hurston was collecting materials for her anthropological research, she describes reading aloud from Hughes’s *Fine Clothes to the Jew* as a way of starting off the story-telling contests she held among the community of men she was studying. She tells Hughes, “you are being quoted in R.R. camps, phosphate mines, and Turpentine stills, etc. […]” The workers, then, are not only “the people you are writing about,” not only the “source” for Hurston’s and Hughes’s modern material, nor are they a passive audience for Hughes’s work (although Hurston frequently encourages Hughes to go on “reading tours” through the South, which he eventually does), but are themselves modern artists. Hurston goes on to describe the process by which the workers respond to and adapt Hughes’s poems.

So you see they are making it so much a part of themselves they go to improvising on it […]  
For some reason they call it “De Party Book.” They come specially to be read to & I know you could sell them if you only had a supply. I think I’d like a dozen as an experiment. They adore “Saturday Night” and “Evil Woman,” “Bad Man” Gypsy Man  
They sing the poems right off, and July 1, two men came over with guitars and sang the whole book. Everybody joined in. It was the strangest and most thrilling thing. They played it well too. You’d be surprised. One man was giving the words out-lining them out as the preacher does a hymn and the others would take it up and sing. It was glorious!

More than a classic example of the status of the participant-observer, the scene Hurston creates and describes reminds us that the music and stories Hurston collects are always already products of modern literary culture. While many critics have studied Hughes’s poems (along with Sterling Brown’s) as influenced by folk musical forms, Hurston’s letter suggests not only that these

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345 Ibid.
poems are “more than mere transcriptions,” to cite James Weldon Johnson’s description of Brown’s poems, but also that the path of influence is far more circular than we often account for, so that the musical inspirations for *Fine Clothes*, the print publication and distribution of that book (and *The Weary Blues*, which Hurston also eventually distributed in her travels), the recitation aloud by Hurston of the poems, the “improvising on it” and chanting in games and singing, and the form of church hymns, all contribute to the making of black modern culture.

This kind of circulation further expands our sense of the geographical boundaries of cultural production during this period. For, if Alain Locke famously describes northward migration of blacks as a “deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern,” then Hurston’s letter to Hughes dislocates the temporal – spatial relationship Locke’s influential formulation inscribes, uncoupling modernity from the “northward flight” and identifying multiple sites of cultural production.

Hurston’s practice as a cultural collector, of course, also uncouples “modern” from “America.” Edwards’s observation that there is “a hint of a move afield” in James Weldon Johnson’s celebration of black vernacular music in the *Book of American Negro Poetry* suggests an inherent relationship between a poetics of vernacular transcription and black diasporic collecting practices. Recent work by Alexandra Vazquez extends these claims further by noting the presence of the “far beyond” in Johnson’s preface. Vazquez draws our attention to Johnson’s evocation of the tango and the Cuban poet Placido as foundational, and to his naming of Cuba as that which is “far beyond” the limits of his own project. “The Far Beyond” is not

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347 Locke, *The New Negro*, 6. I have discussed this formulation in greater detail in part one.
merely “out there” in the diaspora, but originary, even as it also names that which is excessive to the often-nationalizing projects of anthologies. 349

Brown and Hurston’s literary responses to natural disaster can be understood as anthological, both in the textual sense of Edwards’s study, and in the extra-textual sense at the heart of Vazquez’s intervention. That is, Southern Road and Their Eyes Were Watching God collect the lyric and the sonic. To approach the presence of the musical in these texts is to hear in it that which may travel “far beyond” the geographic and political constraints of anthological form. For both Brown and Hurston, environmental catastrophe finds its meaning in the context of cultural and social experience, rather than an organic expression of national or racial identity.

CATASTROPHIC CULTURE

While I live with this absence from the landscapes of Jamaica—physical, political, and social—I think my position as a writer outside Jamaica is quite different from that of the generation of writers who left the region in the 1950s and 1960s. And the difference is reggae, which gives me the sense of being part of some global, electronic Caribbean community, from whose sounds and lyrical concerns I can still get some sense of ‘home’ and its changing sensibilities.

Kwame Dawes *Natural Mysticism: Toward a New Reggae Aesthetic* 350

In other words, we haven’t got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience, whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall.... What is even more important, as we develop this business of emergent language in the Caribbean, is the actual rhythm and syllables, the very software, in a way, of the language.

Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice* 351

“That’s where we want to go, to get away from it all”

In the week that the Beach Boys’ “Kokomo” 352 reached the top of the US charts, a very different song, imagining a very different tropical space, entered the “shots to watch” slot in Jamaica’s “Gleaner Top Ten.” 353 While the Beach Boys invited listeners “to get away from it all” on a mysterious island “off the Florida Keys” imbued with all the “mystique” of an international array of destinations (“Aruba, Jamaica, oooh I want to take ya/ Montego, Bahama, come on pretty mama”), Lloyd Lovindeer’s massive hit “Wild Gilbert” 354 freshly reported the hurricane

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352 The Beach Boys, “Kokomo,” in *Still Cruisin’* (Capitol B-44445, 1989).
that had all too recently devastated the agriculture and infrastructure of Jamaica—not to mention the “tropical contact high” of its tourist industry.

The coincidental juxtaposition of these tropical hits on the United States and Jamaican music charts (both reported in the Gleaner every week) points to the contrast between touring and dwelling in the Jamaican environment. Tour companies were told to halt the iconic “Come Back to Jamaica” ads in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, but it was not long before the country had launched a promotional campaign geared at reviving the Jamaican tourist industry, reassuring prospective visitors that the island was still safe and beautiful, still one of the tropical paradises described in “Kokomo.”355 While the Jamaica Tourist Board quickly devoted its resources to restoring the image of Jamaica’s coastlines as hospitable to “bodies in the sand” falling in love “to the rhythm of steel drum band,”356 Jamaicans faced the continued challenges of dwelling in this landscape, in many cases without electricity, clean water, or telephone service. Gilbert also caused long-term damage to the island’s agriculture and ecology. As one travel writer for the New York Times reported in December, three months after the storm many aspects of the country were still “on the mend at the edges”: trees and power lines downed, coral reef broken up, tent communities and homelessness. However, she pointed out, “the things that most tourists go to the Caribbean for—warm weather, swimming, golf, tennis, fresh food, pampering hotels—[were] in place.”357


356 The Beach Boys, “Kokomo.”

Lloyd Lovindeer’s “Wild Gilbert” and Kamau Brathwaite’s long poem *Shar/Hurricane Poem*, both composed in the immediate aftermath of Gilbert, dwell in another Jamaica, “at the edges” of such description. In different ways they describe and respond to the “absence from the landscapes of Jamaica” that poet Kwame Dawes evokes as a symptom of migration, but that is also, as Glissant has contended, a more long term effect of “a brutal dislocation, the slave trade.”

According to Glissant, the catastrophic imagination in the Caribbean can be symptomatic of this dislocation and its attendant “nonhistory.” Referring to the lack of continuous resistance to colonial oppression in the French Caribbean, Glissant writes that nature and culture have not formed a dialectical whole that informs a people’s consciousness. So much so that obscured history was often reduced for us to a chronology of natural events, retaining only their “explosive” emotional meanings. We would say: “the year of the great earthquake,” or: “the year of the hurricane that flattened M. Celeste’s house,” or: “the year of the fire on Main street.”

Glissant calls upon Caribbean writers to reestablish “the creative link between nature and culture.” The “explosive” structure of catastrophe, according to his formulation, is the opposite of such a link. How can we reconcile Glissant’s critique of catastrophic historiography with Brathwaite’s embrace of the hurricane as a figure for Caribbeanness? And to what extent might it be possible for catastrophe itself to produce that link, to bring nature and culture into proximity, all the while marking the brutal history of their alienation? Dawes describes music—and reggae in particular—as uniquely capable of mediating “this absence from the landscapes of Jamaica.”

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358 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 61. In this particular essay, “The Quarrel with History,” Glissant is responding to Eddie Baugh’s essay “The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel With History,” which was presented as part of the same Carifesta symposium as the first iteration of Brathwaite’s *History of the Voice* (60n.) Edward Baugh, “The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel With History,” *Tapia* (Trinidad, February 20, 1977).

359 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 63.

360 Dawes, *Natural Mysticism*, 264. Dawes identifies reggae (by which he means primarily the roots reggae of the 1970s) as the consolidated form of his diasporic identity in the face of a series of geographic displacements—in his case from Ghana, to Jamaica, to the United States. Although Dawes uses the word “landscapes” in an expansive sense to include social and political experience, his claim for reggae’s
But Lovindeer’s is an urban music, performing absence from the natural and agricultural worlds. By contrast, Kamau Brathwaite’s *Shar/Hurricane Poem* suggests the profound interconnectedness of environmental and cultural experience. The two responses share a persistent concern with how art can respond to and survive the disruptive turns of catastrophe.

In turning from music to poetry do we necessarily suggest that the latter is a kind of supplement to or inadequate transcription of the former? On the contrary, Brathwaite’s range of responses to Hurricane Gilbert—in poetry, in published interviews, and in informally distributed letters—demonstrates the interconnectedness of oral and scribal forms within lyric poetry. The problem of environmental approximation draws our attention to lyric poetry’s special status as a textual embodiment of song, that is, a form that is always an approximation of another form. If the hurricane appears to cause a crisis in Brathwaite’s genres, insofar as formal lines blur between his poetry and his poetics, this crisis can define how we think of modern diasporic lyric. That is, diasporic lyric is inherently catastrophic insofar as it is always bound up in the disjunctive poetics of transcription, but also inherently generative insofar as the sonic, visual, textual and performative properties of the poem do more than merely preserve nature.

**Wild Gilbert’s Electronic Community**

“Wild Gilbert” hit the streets of Kingston in the fall of 1988, three weeks after the massive hurricane of the same name, providing Jamaicans with a bit of reprieve from the enormous physical, emotional, and social loss brought about by the flooding and winds. Hurricane Gilbert traversed the entire island of Jamaica as a Category Four hurricane, causing unique powers to bring about reconnection makes sense in a more literal way because of his interest in roots reggae, a music that, as he emphasizes, emerges from rural culture and society.
forty-five deaths, bringing massive damage to agriculture, livestock, schools, houses and the tourist trade, and transforming the political landscape of Jamaica. The abundant outpouring of topical music on the radio waves after Gilbert memorialized and recorded the experience of the hurricane and its relationship to social issues and national identity. From Banana Man’s mournful and devout “Gilbert Attack Us” to Yellowman’s hopeful “Starting All Over Again,” these songs were broadly performed, circulated, and compiled, constituting an archive of the nation’s response to disaster. The Gleaner was right to watch Lovindeer’s “Wild Gilbert,” by far the most popular of the post-Gilbert songs primarily because of its humor and its relevance across class lines. The song climbed its way up the charts and soon became (and remained) Jamaica’s best-selling single, selling over fifty-five thousand copies and launching Lovindeer’s success as a solo dancehall artist.

Lovindeer’s account of the hurricane unfolds in the urban space of the street and the neighborhood. The song aired in the context of curtailed and unequal mobility, a kind of involuntary urban rootedness, but “Wild Gilbert” itself had the capacity to spread, and to sell like wildfire, to borrow another catastrophic metaphor. People turned to music in part because without power and generators other forms of entertainment were not available, while music could be played and heard on car radios or on the street—all factors Lovindeer dramatizes in the music video for “Wild Gilbert.” One Jamaican survivor of Gilbert, DJ Culture Norm, recalls his adolescent awakening into music at this time:

After the 1988 hurricane Gilbert hit Jamaica head-on, leaving the island in total darkness. Discovery Bay, the north coast town I lived in at the time experienced damage to

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361 Most historians and political theorists attribute Edward Seaga’s loss of the Prime Ministry to Michael Manley in 1989 to Seaga’s handling of the post-hurricane conditions.
363 Lovindeer had been performing and deejaying since the seventies, but “Wild Gilbert” made him into a national figure.
plantations, homes, churches, schools and so on. The island was left without electricity in most places for over a year and that meant amplified car stereos were the only source of entertainment.

When the electricity was finally restored in December 1989, I walked by a record shop and heard the sweet melody of fully amplified reggae music and that moment has been stuck in my head ever since. I purchased a dozen new records went home and pulled out my dad’s old Pee Vee tube amp, a pair of 15” midrange speakers and a single turn table and spent the weekend mixing my new tunes with my dad’s old ones.364

DJ Culture Norm is not a major musical figure, but he describes a major narrative, in which the material deprivations of Hurricane Gilbert give rise to a musical culture. Indeed, in their popular history Reggae Routes, Kevin Chang and Wayne Chen go so far as to contend that “Hurricane Gilbert was indirectly responsible for blowing the dancehall scene uptown and upmarket.”365

Almost twenty-five years later and an ocean away in Minnesota, Culture Norm’s sound system is called “Wild Gilbert.”

Even as an urban music, dancehall emerges from black diasporic practices of performance tied to the agricultural spaces and economy of the plantation. In her work on dancehall, geographer Sonjah Stanley-Niaah seeks to describe the continuity of the genre not only with roots reggae of the sixties and seventies but, following Gilroy, within a transnational Black Atlantic tradition extending to the plantation and the slave ship. Stanley-Niaah productively excavates the connection between the need for surreptitious, resistant, and nomadic celebration in the constrained space of the plantation and “the needs of the disenfranchised to

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364 DJ Culture Norm, “Lake Shady Reggae”, 2011, http://www.lakeshady.com/reggae/. DJ Culture Norm’s description of the longevity of the power outage is likely particular to his location. According to some reports, eighty percent of the people had power restored within two months. Treaster, “In Storm’s Aftermath, Jamaica Seeks Visitors.”

ease the tension, to give praise, to survive and to entertain” in the city.\textsuperscript{366} The post-hurricane environmental conditions reproduce and magnify the nomadic social conditions that are the basis and shape of dancehall. Lovindeer takes up the hurricane’s dispersals and displacements “as a culmination of New World history and imagination, today centered in the urban space.”\textsuperscript{367}

Gilbert exacerbated conditions which some geographers have contended emerged as part of a plantation economy, conditions significant not only for human social survival but also for the long-term survival of the landscape. Yet Lovindeer’s song makes no reference, even mockingly, to agricultural and environmental damage, instead claiming the continuous sociality of the street as an alternative to the disruptive disaster. Depicting natural disaster as “social disaster,” to borrow a phrase from Neil Smith,\textsuperscript{368} Lovindeer chastises urban looters, walks through the streets with throngs of admirers, and represents American cultural imperialism and related class divisions through the figure of the satellite dish. While roots may be a metaphor for national identity, the human plight unfolds in an urban geography. The song personifies Gilbert from the start (“Wa wa wild Gilbert! Well Gilbert yuh gone ha ha/ Now wi can chat behind yuh back”), incorporating the natural phenomenon into the human world, confronting disaster on a social scale.\textsuperscript{369}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{367} Stanley-Niaah, “Negotiating A Common Transnational Space.”
\textsuperscript{369} Lovindeer’s emphasis on cultural survival divorced from the question of agricultural survival thereby anticipates some of the crucial questions about urban poverty, global inequalities, and nationalist ideology that would emerge in very different ways in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (2004) and the Haiti earthquake (2010).
\end{flushleft}
Lovindeer’s song constitutes “some global, electronic Caribbean community”\textsuperscript{370} not only because of its massive appeal but because Lovindeer’s parody gives voice to collective social experience. Rendering this collectivity, the song ironically mitigates the destructiveness of Gilbert, draws attention to its own survival, and depicts the storm as creatively generative. Parody in Lovindeer’s song at first seems to make light of disaster. “Wild Gilbert” in no way signifies upon the Beach Boys’ touristic tropics—in fact, another notable feature of this song is its lack of musical or textual repetition of North American music\textsuperscript{371}—but it does in a very different way insist upon making the Caribbean landscape “danceable.” The chorus, borrowing a common trope of Jamaican music, quotes a popular nursery rhyme: “De likkle dog laugh to see such fun/ And di dish run away with the spoon.” The song continues to mock the storm’s destructive powers in its first verse, which contains both the song’s most hilarious pun and its most somber voice. Here, the “dish” of the song’s opening domestic scene becomes a different type of dish:

\begin{verbatim}
Unno si mi dish unno si mi dish,
Anybody unna si mi satellite d-d-dish
Unno si mi dish unno si mi— fiahhh!
Rough! We would like to express our sympathies
To those affected by gilbert
Wa wa wild gilbert
\end{verbatim}

Lovindeer stages class and value difference in the pun, which unites the common domestic “dish” with its more aspirational counterpart, the satellite dish. Mid-verse the speaker shifts from the desperate, comic, materialist “mi” to the institutional, funereal, radio voice “we.” A dramatic shift in tone—from silliness to seriousness—accompanies the shift in speaker, foregrounding the irony of collective “sympathies.” After all, the mock-serious tone implies, how “rough” can it be

\textsuperscript{370} Dawes, \textit{Natural Mysticism}, 264.
\textsuperscript{371} References to music from the United States are characteristic of dancehall; one example from the Gilbert songs is Yellowman’s “Starting All Over Again,” which remakes the romantic 1972 soul hit by Mel & Tim as a hopeful, nationalist post-disaster call to action.
when you mourn not lives, housing, income, or agriculture, but satellite dishes, when you can
sweep the water away with a broom?

The song goes beyond mocking to reconfigure the relationship between Jamaican culture
and global technology. While maintaining the comic tone of “such fun,” Lovindeer transforms
the dish into a synecdoche for loss and destruction on a larger scale. In the second verse the
storm intensifies:

Come! dish tek off like flying saucer
Mi roof migrate without a visa
Bedroom full up a water
Mi in a di dark nuh light nuh on you
And true mi nuh have no generator mi seh

As the size of the dish increases through the comparison to a flying saucer, so, too does the scale
of the disaster’s consequences: water, previously swept away with a broom, now floods the
bedroom, and the electricity has gone out. The increase in the physical scale and intensity of the
storm corresponds to social concerns, for the speaker “mi nuh have no generator” nor a visa with
which to obtain one. Unlike the speaker, Gilbert’s destruction migrates. In the context of
Lovindeer’s upbeat dancehall, however, the storm’s movements create a sense of possibility—
what Alexandra Vazquez has called “instrumental migrations,” the capacity for music and
musical culture to transcend political boundaries.372 Now the dish, too, is “like a flying saucer.”
Rather than being swept away by the wind, it has agency; it “tek off,” presumably for more
exotic (or at least safer) parts of the galaxy. Brian Heap interprets the dish as “the means by
which information and North American culture bombard the region” and contends that
Lovindeer evokes this sense of “dish” as a way of mocking the middle classes.373 The dish also

373 Brian Heap, “Songs of a Surrogate Mother : The Nursery Rhyme in Caribbean Culture,” *Caribbean
Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (December 1, 1997): 26–36.
signifies the loss of connection to outside entertainments, which in turn enables a turn toward locally produced, more readily available culture that makes audible the particular shared experience of Jamaicans. Lovindeer at once critiques a society in which class corresponds to curtailed mobility, and enacts the mobility of his own music.

“Wild Gilbert” had the capacity to move even in the aftermath of disaster. Lovindeer produced the song a few weeks after the hurricane at Dynamic Sounds studio, which had reopened after being flooded, and then distributed the single on his own label The Sounds of Jamaica. Although it was slow to enter the charts, it remained in the top one hundred for two years, the first song in Jamaica to have done so. Perhaps more interestingly, the song’s popularity lasted for generations beyond the event it recorded. Especially when performing overseas, Lovindeer recalls, audiences continue to request the song. In other words, Lovindeer’s song evoked and continues to evoke for Jamaican expatriates their sense of belonging to a digital Caribbean community. If this is what all reggae does for Kwame Dawes, the experience of Hurricane Gilbert undoubtedly heightened the need for such belonging insofar as it exacerbated the sense of displacement from and destruction of the Jamaican landscapes.

As destructive as Hurricane Gilbert was, many noted its ability to equalize communities and bring people together. The song “Wild Gilbert” celebrates this aspect of the storm, and draws attention to music’s ability to do the same. Asked to account for the song’s popularity, Lovindeer recalls,

374 In her reading of “Wild Gilbert,” for instance, Carolyn Cooper describes the access that wealthier Jamaicans had to generators (unlike Lovindeer’s speaker “inna my room inna dark”) because of their ability to travel to Miami.
375 Lovindeer complains that “in Jamaica the charts are corrupt.” Mel Cooke, “‘Wild Gilbert’ - a Song for All Seasons,” Sunday Gleaner (Kingston, Jamaica, March 14, 2010), http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20100314/ent/ent5.html.
376 Ibid.
It was a feel-good song in the midst of disaster. After you go through that and survive, you want to celebrate. It’s not ‘woe, woe’... It was danceable and everybody could relate. It was fun for everybody. You find the man from uptown couldn’t get ice either. The man from ghetto couldn’t get no ice. Everybody was one at the time until the light come back and everybody go them separate ways.\(^{377}\)

While celebrating the moment when “everybody was one,” Lovindeer’s tune also humorously points out the ongoing reality in which “everybody go them separate ways.” The Rastafarian “Natty dreadlocks” might be the song’s quintessential symbol of the storm’s equalizing force. He celebrates the destruction of other spaces, as the “breeze lick dung mr chin restaurant”\(^ {378}\) and “two sheet a zinc blow off a joe house,” justifying the storm’s violence in relationship to his theology. For, in destroying their homes but keeping them alive, Jah will “show dem seh a we run tings.” The Rastafarian speaker identifies himself with the divine, for “It’s through I merciful why dem alive.” But Lovindeer, repeating a trope of Jamaican popular music, gives the pious Rastafarian a taste of his own medicine. No sooner does the caricatured Rastafarian take pleasure in the storm’s wrath, than

Likkle after that Gilbert turn back  
Lift off di roof of a natty dread shack  
Him seh, blouse and skirt, Jah must never know  
Seh I & I live right ya so

The hurricane, blowing off his roof, challenges the Rastafarian’s theology of retribution, but he quickly adjusts his theology to the change in circumstances: the roof has blown off because the “I” who is divine is unaware of the presence of the “I” who is human in that shack. In spite of the Rastafarian’s rationalization of the storm, the destruction of his own roof suggests both the randomness and equality of violence. Indeed, as David Barker and David Miller have noted, the leveling of the Rastafaraian’s house seems to reflect the prevalent notion that disasters function

\(^{377}\) Ibid.  
\(^{378}\) Lovindeer, “Wild Gilbert.”
as social levelers. As evidence of this broader claim, Barker and Miller cite public opinion represented the *Gleaner* in the days immediately following the storm:

“Gilbert, in his violence, wrote on the chalkboard of the Jamaican countryside the lesson that affluence and poverty have common cause when it comes to nature.”

“Gilbert, as destructive as he was, will be seen as a catalyst in energizing the national spirit of togetherness.”

Barker and Miller note the power of representing Gilbert “personifying nature, an omnipotent social leveller [sic], a humbler of the mighty in the context of a nation with such stark social and economic differences,” but they do not question the accuracy of the claim that Gilbert “brought together” the nation.

Lovindeer’s song draws our attention not only to the temporary leveling but, on the other hand, to the continuing catastrophe of rigid social class structures. The reference to migration alone signals, for instance, the unequal access to interstate travel. By the 1980s, Jamaican emigration to the United Kingdom and the United States had declined, most likely as a result of increasing immigrations restrictions in both locations: the 1988 Immigration Act in the UK, and the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act signed by President Reagan. While emigration continued to be a source of income and opportunities, these opportunities were radically limited by class and gender. The migrating roof ignores national boundaries in a potentially resistant way, but at the same time signals the limits and inequalities imposed by the need for a visa in the first place. These limits would have been particularly acute after a hurricane, when the ability to

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380 *Sunday Gleaner* 18 September 1988, qtd in Ibid.

381 Barker and Miller, “Hurricane Gilbert.”

382 Although beyond the scope of my argument here, one major challenge to this commonplace is in the major political upheaval that ensued after the hurricane, which ultimately resulted in the ousting of Edward Seaga as prime minister. In a broader context, Rebecca Solnit has argued that while governments often fail in the aftermath of disaster, communities come together in surprising ways. Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (Viking, 2009).
migrate gave access to generators that others had to do without. Lovindeer’s joke depends on the broader political and economic context in which Jamaicans often must seek global identities against the pull of national pride and the push of international restriction.

Lovindeer’s parodic of a range of social classes—from the aspirational middle class to the poor youths who engage in looting after the storm—allows him to give voice to the populace and bring them together under the umbrella of the storm. According to some accounts, the song itself had the leveling effects some would attribute to the storm. Chang and Chen attest to the song’s transformative influence across classes in Jamaica:

The direct social impact of ‘Wild Gilbert’ is often overlooked. There was a time when rich uptowners scorned deejay music as ‘dibbi dibbi’ rubbish, completely ignoring dancehall in favour of soca, Bob Marley and North American pop. Hurricane Gilbert, however, was an experience every Jamaican – rich or poor, white, black, yellow, or brown – went through, so ‘Wild Gilbert’ was a song with which everyone could identify. Indeed it was the first deejay song many of the upper-class had ever bothered to listen to. . . . Of course ‘Wild Gilbert’ was not solely responsible for changes like this, but it did more than any single song to establish dancehall as the universal sound of Jamaica today.\(^{383}\)

This account echoes the surprisingly nostalgic description of Hurricane Gilbert’s leveling effects expressed by many, including Lovindeer himself. What is more interesting is Chang and Chen’s attribution of these effects not only to the storm, but to the song, and their tendency to describe “Wild Gilbert” and Hurricane Gilbert in similar terms as agents of cultural change.

“Wild Gilbert’s” multi-voiced critique of Jamaican class structure unites people across the class boundaries it mocks and maligns. The terror of disaster—of loss, displacement, mortality—engenders this collecting of culture. Lovindeer’s impulse, like that of Zora Neale Hurston and Sterling Brown in the United States, is anthological. In an interview with the Sunday Gleaner nearly twenty years after the storm, he recalls his process when asked about

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\(^{383}\) Chang and Chen, Reggae Routes, 193.
inspiration: “I had to write something about it. It is not just my experience, but everybody’s. I would go into the different communities after it happened and talk to the people and some of the experiences were other people’s.” Lovindeer’s narrative of creating “Wild Gilbert” out of “other people’s” experiences recalls the ethnographic voice of Sterling Brown’s Ma Rainey: “I talked to a fellow an’ the fellow say.” Lovindeer does not equalize “other people”; rather, he listens to the diverse and disjunctive voices of an urban public.

Foregrounding reportage as a mode of witness, Lovindeer creates a song with which people from various strata of society can identify, not so much through a universal voice, but through “Wild Gilbert’s” playful, polyvocal acknowledgement of contrasts. Lovindeer shifts between plural and singular pronouns, and in and out of character. After describing the increasingly interior soak of the storm, the speaker “a look somewhere safe dry and warm.” In this moment the song enters yet another plural voice, and draws a contrast between pious church culture and youth culture:

We thank di lord we never get hurt
Dem seh thank yuh lord for mr gilbert
Cause! yuh si mi fridge! a gilbert gimme
Yuh si mi colour tv! a gilbert gimme
Yuh si mi new stereo! a gilbert gimme
Yuh si mi new video! a gilbert gimme come now

The song draws a contrast between “we”—those who “thank di lord” they are safe—and “dem”—those who take advantage of the storm for personal gain. At the same time, Lovindeer’s song ventriloquizes “di youth,” giving voice to their jubilation in the context of disaster.

Against the global mobility of the runaway dinner dish turned satellite dish, turned “flying saucer,” Lovindeer juxtaposes the local fugitivity of a rebellious youth culture he

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alternately mocks and celebrates. Disaster transforms the looters by giving them access to a new kind of property: luxury consumer items. The looters’ joyous chant replays the dish-deprived speaker’s request that we “si” what has abandoned him, transforming his question to a command. Thus, although Lovindeer mocks the youth by distancing “we” from “dem,” the looters’ gain signifies upon the middle-class loss. The repetition reinforcing the command to look at what “a Gilbert gimme” has the rhythmic effect of commanding the listener to transform sorrow over what Gilbert took into joy at what “a Gilbert gimme.” The last two items on the list: “mi new stereo” and “mi new video” in particular suggest that the gift is not only material but cultural: “a gilbert gimme” music.

Lovindeer depicts the looting as morally suspect, but also full of potential for fugitivity and resistance, insofar as the act of theft claims the means of production for music. “Mi new stereo” and “me new video” describe both the electronic devices used for consuming music and, in a more abstract sense, the sounds and performances themselves. Since dancehall during this period depended on “mi stereo” as part of a sound system, the work of deejays like Lovindeer also uniquely blurs the boundary between devices of consumption and devices of production. The video of “Wild Gilbert” emphasizes the double-voiced nature of Lovindeer’s relationship to looting. Lovindeer’s voice amplifies when he voices the gratitude of the looting youth “thank de lord for mister Gilbert,” while in the video we see a young man reaching into crawl spaces in the rain to claim stolen goods, then raising his arms and lip-syncing in praise. The video cuts quickly from the looting youth to scenes of women indoors showboating their new electronic acquisitions, presumably purchased from or gifted by the boys. The women are also mouthing, awkwardly, Lovindeer’s words. The sloppy ventriloquism, far from deepening the distance between the speaker and these figures, instead draws our attention to Lovindeer as the real
speaker of these words, and underscores our sense that he shares in the celebration of the boys and women. The song thus invites us to think of looting in connection with, though not quite as equal to, the collective cultural work of song in the aftermath of disaster. Even as it makes fun, democratically, of the middle class’s subordination to North American bourgeois values and the looters’ opportunism, “Wild Gilbert” unearths both the devastations and the opportunities of catastrophe. Most importantly it suggests to us that song itself, with its speedy and inexpensive circulation, its immediacy, and its wide appeal, is one such opportunity.

“A Diary of Water”: Kamau Brathwaite’s Poetry of Approximation

If the technologies of music enable its dispersal and distribution even at times when whole communities are literally without power, the harsh conditions of floods and winds might seem to threaten print culture in a more material sense. Thus, while under normal circumstances we might associate text with greater permanence, in the face of a hurricane, song might seem more durable, indeed more possible. When Hurricane Gilbert destroyed Brathwaite’s house in Irish Town, Jamaica in 1988, Brathwaite was especially devastated by the destruction of his library of poetry and music, which was, in his words, “one of the largest & most important archives of Caribbean literature & culture in the world.... It contains a record – since I keep almost everything – of many of our writers’ progress (drafts unpublished manuscripts letters diaries artifacts books books books thousands of miles of tapes LPs) – possibly one of the largest collections of Caribbean poetry in the world.”386 The winds and flood-waters gave meteorological shape to what was already a major question in Brathwaite’s engagement with Caribbean culture and history: how does one capture the form, the rhythm of the hurricane on the

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386 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Shar/Hurricane Poem (Mona, Jamaica: Savacou Publications, 1990). Shar is unpaginated. Future citations will be parenthetical.
page, when its very precondition is that of dispersal, displacement, and loss?

Although the elision between his personal library and Caribbean literary history may seem extreme, Brathwaite details, in his published interview *conVERsations with Nathaniel Mackey*, the immense resources lost and the broader context in which their loss resonates. In the context of newly conceived nations with minimal infrastructure for collecting and preserving regional literary heritage, private libraries are often essential repositories of public culture. In the aftermath of Gilbert, Brathwaite issued an extensive list of what was damaged in Irish Town, including not only “sodden books” but recordings from radio and TV broadcasts, the paper archives of the Caribbean Artists Movement, interviews and readings from poets all over the world, field recordings from Ghana, Haiti, and elsewhere, and videos of theatrical presentations. Brathwaite structures much of the list geographically, listing place names followed by the figures represented in his archive, for example: “Cuba (inc Carifesta 79, inc Retamar, Nancy Morejon, Guillén, Iliana Sanz).”³⁸⁷ In this way, Brathwaite’s list constitutes a kind of literary map of the diaspora. Even as he emphasizes the singularity of his own collection—referring to “a very rare recording” of a particular worship service in Ghana and “several recordings (that xist nowhere else) of Yard Theatre grounnation”³⁸⁸—he insists upon the archive’s representative status and its broader significance for Caribbean scholarship. As one example of the latter he cites his inability to compose a chapter on folk culture of the Caribbean for the UNESCO *History of the Caribbean* because of his lack of access to his library. Although he acknowledges that he would have been able to access some resources at university and national libraries, he also claims a special status for private collections:

³⁸⁷ Kamau Brathwaite and Nathaniel Mackey, *Conversations with Nathaniel Mackey* (We Press / Xcp: Cross-Cultural Poetics, 1999), 300.
³⁸⁸ Ibid., 300–301.
Not mine only, but all collections such as mine: private, like personal, even somewhat idiosyncratic collections, which, unlike official collections, have the value and virtue of this very personal element – the conscious/unselfconscious dedication of collecting, storing & tryin(g) to preserve, over a long period of years, a kind of timehri of one’s livin(g), one’s culture (299).

Brathwaite goes on to cite some of the major Caribbean writers whose collections were partially or entirely damaged during Hurricane Gilbert: including Lorna Goodison, Louise Bennett Coverley, John Hearne. He connects these losses to a larger uncertainty about where and how Caribbean literary culture is preserved, warning that “if we don’t create archives of our culture in a land of drought, roaches, rodents, fire, damp, termites, volcanoes, earthquakes and hurricanes – we might have very little ‘culture’ left by the year 2000, okay?”

In *History of the Voice* Brathwaite demonstrates his anxiety over transcription and preservation through references to the oral presentations from which the text is derived. For example, in the essay text, discussing Jamaican poet/performer Louise Bennet’s (Miss Lou’s) use of the “language of her people,” Brathwaite notes that “I couldn’t satisfactorily reproduce in print Miss Lou’s ‘Street cries’ played for the lecture from her LP *Miss Lou’s Views,*” and goes on to cite instead “her more ‘formal’ verse.” Referring to the sound of Don Drummond’s trombone within Walcott’s poem, “Blues,” Brathwaite laments that “the print/text can’t reveal these things”; a footnote refers to the audio recordings played for Brathwaite’s lecture. In both of these instances, Brathwaite identifies the aural/oral as the limit of textuality, as that which must be (but cannot be) preserved.

For Brathwaite, the gap between vernacular performance and text is not merely a problem of the technology of transcription, nor is it a statement of the inherent superiority of oral forms

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389 Brathwaite’s use of the word “timehri”—an indigenous word referring to rock paintings—indicates his concern not only with the preservation of sound but with the preservation of the visual markers of culture.

(although *History of the Voice* hovers always at the edge of such a claim). Rather, it is a question of the proper relation of poetry to history. In a recording of the question and answer period following the original presentation of “History of the Voice” at Carifesta in Kingston, Jamaica in 1976, Brathwaite responds archly to a question about his characterization of Miss Lou in relation to nation language. “I hope this is recorded on the tape,” he began, “but my point was…” It is not on the tape; the case labeled “History of the Voice” in the archives of the Library of the Spoken Word at UWI Mona, where the Carifesta literature symposium took place, contains only the question and answer session, not Brathwaite’s presentation itself. Further, Brathwaite lists a recording of “History of the Voice” as one of the literary and musical works threatened or damaged by the flooding after Gilbert. Brathwaite’s remark signals his persistent concern with the preservation not only of his own voice but of Caribbean literary history more broadly. The impossibility of hearing Brathwaite’s archive of diasporic sound—from Claude McKay’s reading voice to Derek Walcott’s to Brathwaite’s own—is a defining feature of the text. The “blips” Brathwaite acknowledges between his own text and the rich aural performances that gave rise to it constitute the very form of poetry for which Brathwaite is calling.

In *History of the Voice* the hurricane functions in part as a metaphor for a sought-after poetic break from the past. How can we reconcile this future-oriented call for national poetics with Brathwaite’s obsessive interest in preserving and restoring the history of Caribbean culture, an interest that also defines the themes and forms of his first two poetic trilogies? His fragmentary experimental poetic style might invite us to call into question what critics commonly take to be his investment in repairing a sense of wholeness and continuity,

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391 “History of the Voice” Q&A [Sound Recording]. Library of the Spoken Word. Kingston: University of West Indies, 1976. Although Brathwaite’s presentation itself is missing, this archive contains all of the other presentations from the Literature of the West Indies symposium at Carifesta ’76. This archive in the back of the campus radio station is an immensely important collection of Caribbean culture with minimal space, technology, and staff.
particularly in relationship to Africa. But Brathwaite’s poetic response to Hurricane Gilbert undermines any overly mimetic readings.

_Shar_ represents not only the destruction and displacement caused by Gilbert, but also its figuration of the earlier human catastrophe of slavery. _Shar_ begins with an echo of Brathwaite’s earliest work, _The Arrivants_. This early trilogy narrates both early Saharan migrations and the forced displacements of transatlantic slavery as points of origin for Caribbean culture. In the opening poem of _The Arrivants_, “Prelude,” the speaker under the whip of slavery dreams of African villages. The voice of the poem commands:

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Build now
the new
villages, you
must mix spittle
with dirt, dug
to saliva and sweat
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These villages in the imagination of a slave who has become disconnected from the past under the master’s “whip/lash” become the starting point for a narrative of loss that also seeks to reclaim a connection to Africa. In its opening stanzas, _Shar_ echoes the call to build, but in a way that frustrates connection from the start. In the wake of the hurricane, the poetic style is fragmented as the landscape:

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wood
has become so useless. stripped. wet
fragile. broken. totally uninhabitable
with what we must still build
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a half-a-million shaved off from the auction block
curled & cut off from their stock
without even that sweet scent of resin on a good day
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_(Shar)_

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The reference to the auction block relates the hurricane to the slave trade’s destructive effects on continuity within families, communities, and cultures. Natural disasters have the effect of deepening and revealing existing racial and social hierarchies, and Brathwaite returns to the scene of slavery several times throughout the poem. But Brathwaite does not actually liken the storm to the forced migrations of slavery. Instead, he depicts the former as an interruption of the latter. Hurricane Gilbert disrupts a culture that is already unbuilt. Referring to another Brathwaite poem, Nathaniel Mackey has described these kinds of connections as “historical rhymes,” by which events and people “separated in time and space” come together in poetry. Unlike analogy, allegory, or other forms of comparison, Mackey’s term emphasizes the poetics of Brathwaite’s historicism, and describes the sonic process by which we can experience disparate historical moments as interconnected but not continuous.

Lamenting history’s disjunctiveness, Shar nonetheless creates a history through sound and geography. As do many of Brathwaite’s earlier poems, Shar begins by taking us through time and space to West Africa, but the poem renegs on the hopeful possibility of remaking the African village in the poetic memory. The speaker laments that after being “bombed” by the storm, all is “wasted wasted wasted all all all wasted wasted wasted/ the five hundred years of Columbus dragging us here/ and the four thousand three hundred years before that/ across valley & dune . dry river bed . gully & waddi . slip” (Shar). The poem goes on to contrast the eroded history of the landscape with an abundant “grove” of West African environment and culture:

scream of sandstorm . salt . mineral . glint . quartz
cutting the soles of my feet . gold
in the harrowed face of the rock . gold
in what will become leaf . branch . gilt . eucalyptus . cocoa

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pod . odoum . tweneduru . chikichiki even the evening man.
grove
at Golokwati Krachi & Pong

&
the spider arachne Ananse
the sweet of your arms hollowed out at Anum

Interspersing the names of trees in English, French, and West African languages within the geography of Ghana, Brathwaite plants a hybrid linguistic environment, at the same time using the stanzaic structure of the poem to suggest the distinct “shores” from which those languages come.

The storm does not interrupt this environment, however, so much as it interrupts the forced removal of “us” from that environment. “All” is “wasted” since Columbus. The storm interrupts a wasting, a process Brathwaite describes in relationship to soil erosion. The substitution of “gully & waddi” for “valley & dune” poetically recreates an environmental process whereby the valley, or wet river bed, gives way to a gully, part of the process of soil erosion, and finally a wadi—the Arabic word used in English to describe valleys only intermittently inhabited by water, including flash floods. The storm wastes what is already an experience of erosion and reduction.

And all this. all this. reduced to all this
to so little. this
to so almost nothing like this in the shattered cess of the storm . to this
nothinglessness in the thistle & cease. less like cease. less

Brathwaite describes a culture of ruin reduced to ruin: that which the slave trade has “shaved off” the storm has now “reduced.” The repetition of the pronoun “this” within a tautological
equation suggests that there is no distinction between the two processes, that there was no “this” to reduce. The premise of the poem, then, is the end of genealogy, the end of rootedness, a people “curled & cut off from their stock.” The material work of the hurricane makes palpable the break from the history of colonialism that Brathwaite had long ago imagined, which in turn becomes the occasion for poetry. “This” becomes not only “cease” but “thistle,” something which grows.

Under these circumstances, the poem asks us, in what form can culture reside and survive? Shar’s proximity to generically other texts in which Brathwaite describes the same events, sometimes in the same words invites us to question the poem’s generic status. The prefatory material in Shar consists of prose remarks by Carolivia Heron, who introduced Brathwaite’s reading of the poem at Harvard’s ‘Epicenter.’ Herron’s introduction reminds us of the poem’s provenance as oral even as it also draws our attention to its interconnectedness with prose. Specifically, the bulk of the introduction is a quotation from “a small [prose] piece he [Brathwaite] wrote when he heard of the hurricane,” beginning “What can I say? What can I do?” a refrain that gets picked up in the repeated “What can I tell you?” of the poem. The line between Brathwaite’s prose and poetic responses to Gilbert is permeable. For example, Brathwaite reprints his prose descriptions of the destruction of his library not only in Shar but in his later interview with Mackey.

Just as in History of the Voice poetry is haunted by its supplemental status in relationship to music, in Shar poetry is both defined and threatened by its relationship to an informal and private form of writing: the diary. The speaker recalls his flooded mementos:

all those scares that I have hidden in my closet . . . in this diary of water for

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my daughter where I have placed a fern or fan or withered birthday rose.
poor croton leaf or yam shoot mark to mark some special page or love.
one of time’s arrogant adornments.

(Shar)

The “diary of water” evokes the material reality of books flooded with water during the
hurricane, especially in the context of Brathwaite’s personal reflections on his flooded archive of
Caribbean culture at Irish Town, reflections which frame Shar. The form of a diary defines the
text of Shar in its opening sections in two important ways: first, for the first several pages the
poem indeed proceeds as a narrative, a personal account of a public event in the immediate
aftermath of its unfolding. The poem describes the scene of destruction (“it was like this all over
the island”), then the storm’s escalation (“And that more wind. rip. gust.”), its effects (“this
one Third World world of flickering rubbish.”) and finally its resolution into song (“Un/til at
last....) Second, the lines of the poem in these sections visually approximate prose. One of
Brathwaite’s many accumulative descriptions of the winds, to take one example, extends close to
the right margin, approaching and receding from the prose line:

And what. what. what. what more. what more can I tell you
on this afternoon of electric bronze

But that the winds. winds. winds. winds came straight on
& that there was no step. no stop. there was no stopp.
ing them & they begin to reel. in circles. scream. ing like Ezekiel’s wheel

This is not to say that Brathwaite is actually writing prose here. These lines are undoubtedly
poetic, attentive as they are to the break of the line, the tension between the line and the sentence,
between syntactical structures and rhythmic ones. Brathwaite draws our attention to the
approximate relationship between poetry and prose through excessive punctuation, fragmentation
of prose syntax, and repetition. Like the winds it describes, the poem moves “in circles,”
returning again and again to the same phrases. In spite of the poem’s impulse to narrate an event, the process of environmental approximation creates what Brathwaite would call a “tidalectic” pattern of circular motion. Brathwaite uses this environmental metaphor to describe how the shape of his writing has evolved over time. Describing his earlier trilogies he told Nathaniel Mackey,

it’s not a linear movement, except in the sense of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. That is an overall idea. But since I started that it has been superseded with the idea of tidalectics, which is dialectics with my difference. In other words, instead of the notion of one-two-three, Hegelian, I am now more interested in the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic, I suppose, motion, rather than linear.395

The tidalectic motion between poetry and prose draws our attention to both the poem and the diary as physical objects. The poem is a “diary of water” that tells the story of flooding because it is itself flooded.

To imagine the poem Shar as a diary, indeed as one of Brathwaite’s “sodden books,” is to consider the status of poetry as both a print object and an extension of an oral tradition (song) with the capacity to circulate beyond the print archive. One of the poem’s challenges is to describe or evoke the sounds of environmental experience. Throughout the opening sections, which narrate the direct environmental experience of the storm, Brathwaite emphasizes environmental and poetic noise. He describes, for example

And that more wind . rip . gust . scissors-howl

copper kettle boiling . boiling . boiling

over into your years

would wait . wait . wait like a snap or a flat rat trap in the streets

to freeze freeze frizzle

(*Shar*)

The alliteration sonically reproduces the sound of the wind, and the odd punctuation, coupled with occasionally pixelated letters, visually renders the “noise” of the hurricane’s destruction. Even in the most narrative section of the poem, disaster’s noise lays the groundwork for a more fragmented poetic form. *Shar* emerges as a lyric poem in part because of the way it transmutes sound into song.\(^{396}\)

At the same time we are aware of the poem we are reading as a physical object, one of those things drying out or lost. The “diary of water” might describe one of the books in Brathwaite’s lost library, but also the poem itself, which contains “a fern or fan or withered birthday rose . / poor/ croton leaf or yam shoot.” The poem can contain “one of time’s arrogant adornments,” contain history even as it marks its loss. Brathwaite celebrates continuity here in the context of “my daughter,” suggesting the continuity of both cultivation and writing intergenerationally and beyond the life of the poem. But the double status of the “diary of water” as the poetic page that survives, on the one hand, and the flooded archive, on the other, suggests the profound difficulty of this kind of continuity. The poem at once evokes the lost archive of sound and text, and recreates that archive.

Brathwaite’s reference to the poem as a “diary of water” that preserves disjunctive history raises the crucial question of how the private, individual poem can account for a public or collective experience. Describing the poem as “all those scares” and “this diary,” the speaker describes poetry’s albatross (to account for “time’s arrogant adornments”) and its instability as a

\(^{396}\) In this sense my definition of lyric necessarily extends beyond its association with brevity and compression. *Shar* sprawls visually, and some have treated it as epic (see below), but the poem also eschews narrative structure, its song interrupting from within an historical break.
genre. *Shar* also traverses the literary terrain between the diary of the private “I” who lived the hurricane and speaks the poem, and the history of the public “us” Columbus dragged to the new world at the beginning of the poem. Brathwaite does not introduce a first person speaker until the third section of the poem, and this speaker has a self-conscious authorial voice, as if burdened with the narrative of the storm: “And what. what. what more can I tell you,” he asks, and then asks again two pages later, reminding us of the difficulty of narrating disaster. But if this speaker is removed from the experience, the “I” who speaks of the diary has a particular history: “all those scares that I have hidden in my closet.”

The publication context of *Shar* underscores the difficult relationship between Brathwaite’s lyric “I” and his community. Like many of Brathwaite’s books published in the eighties and early nineties *Shar* is “self-published” by Brathwaite’s press, Savacou. Likely one of the reasons Brathwaite published his own work during this period was the difficulty of typesetting his poems, and Brathwaite’s desire for control over the visual form of the text.397 Connected in name with Brathwaite’s influential *Savacou* journal, the press is at once culturally foundational and personal, idiosyncratic, Brathwaite’s own. Many of its publications (including *Shar*) are limited editions, circulating mostly through academic libraries and private collections. In other words, the poem is a kind of public diary, embodying all of the contradictions of that

397 Graeme Rigby, for instance, has written that “The significance of Brathwaite’s adventures with the Apple Mac become apparent when you try to publish them. The introduction to ‘I Cristobal Colon’ [a poem Rigby published in the British journal *The Page*] was centered and in a standard, Times-lish face: we could enter it into our system and get a strong *approximation* [emphasis mine]. The main body of the text was in a face to which we had no access, and even if we had, our host paper would have had copyright permission on the software. It was a typeface we couldn’t *mimic* [emphasis mine], yet it was integral to the feel and to the conceit of the poem.” Rigby describes a typesetting process curiously akin to the oral-textual and environmental-literary transcription processes Brathwaite has described in *History of the Voice* and elsewhere. Graeme Rigby, “Publishing Brathwaite: Adventures in the Video Style,” *World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma* 68, no. 4 (1994): 711.
oxymoronic phrase. Put differently: the poem becomes the private library of public culture whose loss Brathwaite laments.

When the poem moves beyond narrating the events of the storm, song emerges as a collective art form. After its meditation on the loss of the “diary of water” the poem interrupts its own formal continuity. Up until this point, the poem has proceeded more or less with a narrative of the storm. Brathwaite marks each section with a space, as well as the word “And,” with the initial “A” enlarged and elaborate in the manner of an illustrated manuscript. After describing the diary of water, however, the poem moves from “A” to “X” from the beginning of a sentence to its transgressive, criss-crossed middle.

one of time’s arrogant adornments

X.

posed now & like a kicked up coin in the sun.

Unlike the “A” which begins a word, X stands alone on a line as if a Roman numeral. A compressed form of the prefix “ex,” (from “exposed”), “X” comes in the middle of the sentence, enlarged and pixelated, exemplifying the exposure it describes. We can think of “X” as the visual form of the approximation Brathwaite calls for in History: both a connective and a marker of difference in relationship to the extreme environmental experience of the hurricane as well as the sonic experience “Xpressed” within the poem.

This moment marks the narrative break in the account of the hurricane. In her introduction, Herron calls on the poem to do the work of epic, which she describes as “a long narrative describing the origin & nature & destiny of a race, group, tribe, nation or gender, depicting a hero or heroic ideal and incorporating the cultural world-view of that hero and his/her
people.” Herron describes her desire to “save” such songs against their potential erasure. But having begun *Shar* with a kind of origin story, Brathwaite has portrayed that origin as an historical rupture. What *Shar* must preserve is a song that accounts not only for “the long narrative” of culture but for its cycles and breaks, not for “the cultural world-view” of a “hero and his people,” but a collective culture. After evoking the material losses suffered by those in the community in the form of hunger and thirst (“widows’/ faces that must eat . . . that must eat . . . that must drink . . . that must sleep/ beside these water . . .”), *Shar* turns to lyric as both its subject and its method. The widows “will open their doves again & again to a wet/ leaf tomorrow . . . despite any sodden / or sorrow”

Un/til

at last

Stone

lone/ly

at first

& Slow/ly

out of the valleys. smoke. trail. trial. song

(*Shar*)

Approaching song, the poem shifts abruptly from phrases and sentences strung together in long lines with periods, to a narrow column of text in enlarged (and varying) fonts, beginning with the pixelated “illustrated” letter U. Even as the poem revels in sonic play, as in the internal rhymes

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398 Herron, “Saving the Word.” Herron’s investment in the epic form of *Shar* is underscored by the poem’s role as the inaugural text/performance of Harvard’s “Epicenter,” a center for epic poetry.
taking us from “Stone” to “lone/ly” to “Slow/ly,” it increasingly relies upon visual play on the page, and self-consciously reminds us of the computer’s creation of that play.

Whereas History of the Voice describes the challenge of accounting for environmental experience as a struggle to recreate sonic experience, “the actual rhythm and the syllables,” Shar and much of Brathwaite’s later work re-imagines its poetics of salvage in relationship to visuality, textuality, and print media. In the nineties Brathwaite began to experiment with computer fonts, in particular the font he would eventually name “Sycorax Video Style” after Sycorax, the witch who was Caliban’s mother in The Tempest; we see the beginnings of this turn in Shar. Insofar as insofar as Video Style (given its excessive pixellatioon) is “dated” almost as soon as it is produced, it marks its own status as an archive. What are the implications of this deep engagement with the textual archive for a poetic language that seeks to transcend English print culture?

A textual or scribal poetry obsessed with its own material form might seem to contravene the aims of nation language, Brathwaite’s theory of poetic vernacular as established in History of the Voice, insofar as that essay emphasizes the primacy of oral cultural forms. While celebrating Brathwaite’s turn to video Sycorax style as an extension of nation language, Elaine Savory nonetheless describes written English language text in terms of its “strictures” against which the “freedoms” of orality are juxtaposed, or within which the “freedoms” of orality are transposed.

399 Brathwaite, History of the Voice, 8.
400 Most famously, in 2001 Brathwaite republished his trilogy Mother Poem, Sun Poem, and X/Self as Ancestors, noting that the poems “have been enlarged, recast, and greatly revised by the Author for the 2001 single volume New Directions edition. The text has been photo-offset to incorporate ‘Sycorax video style’ type as developed by the author.” Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Ancestors: A Reinvention of Mother Poem, Sun Poem, and X/Self (New York: New Directions, 2001). copyright page.
401 Elaine Savory, “Returning To Sycorax/Prospero’s Response: Kamau Brathwaite’s Word Journey,” in The Art of Kamau Brathwaite (Brigend: Seren, 1995), 217–218. Savory also seems to ignore the fundamental difference between orality and writing, even as she portrays textuality as pure obstacle to the political and cultural goals of nation language. On the one hand she argues that the computer “bridges the
But Brathwaite makes use of the visual properties of the text in a way that breaks down these binaries. Like Savory, Brathwaite identifies textual experimentation as continuous with the project of orally based nation language. However, whereas Savory portrays video style as the bridge between an authentic or folk orality aligned with Caliban and a commercial print culture aligned with Prospero, maintaining the definitional divide between the two, Brathwaite imagines print culture in more expansive terms. In *conVERsations*, Mackey asks him, “Are you no longer an oral poet?” (*conVERsations* 211). Brathwaite reassures him, “Have no fear! .... Is more than oral – if we can put it this way – rather more than *conventionally* oral – because I think ‘oral’ in the conventional sense can only be part of what the ‘Oral Tradition’ is about. I mean, is never only ‘voice’ or ‘sound’ or ‘narrative’ or ‘rap’ or what have you. I mean what’s *song* for goodness slake?” [sic] (211). For Brathwaite, a sense of “oral tradition” that includes the visual (“*timehri/mural/graffiti*”) is especially crucial “in a world of *electronic* (s)” (215-216). It is not merely the task of written poetry to transcribe or even approximate performance; rather, performance embodies the visual and the oral together.

Brathwaite evokes the experience of witnessing performance to translate nation language into video style. Not surprisingly, this transformation takes place both discursively and performatively. Brathwaite responds to Mackey in a lengthy column of text:

What we have to remem ber – get to know – about the ‘Oral Tradition,’ is that it’s never only *heard*, it’s *seen* – is
gap between the world of orality and the world of reading” but on the other she maintains that “we are still reading, and it is still a book. Therefore, the condition of a book’s creation is still dependent on the publisher and the market place.”

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402 Here, Savory is using the terms of the debate Brathwaite stages with Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in his *X/Self*. In this poem Brathwaite joins a lineage of Caribbean writers, notably Aimé Césaire and George Lamming, who embrace Caliban as a resistant colonial subject/ex-slave challenging the authority of the colonizer, cast in this reimagined drama as Prospero.
part of a total kinesis, right? is not simply that we hear it but we watch an (d) we witness the gr iots as they go thru the sweat of their memory to their memory (224)

By referring to “the sweat of the memory” which the audience witnesses, Brathwaite draws attention to the body of a poet, the force mediating between the visual witnessing and the oral recitation of the poem. He goes on to describe the crucial role of the audience, addressing his audience at the Poet’s House event at which he and Mackey spoke “as watchful breathing witness and participants” (225). “Orality” in this rendition is more than sound or noise; it is performance that relies on all of the senses. It relies, too, on reading, and on perceiving the page visually. In History of the Voice Brathwaite constantly draws our attention to the lost sound, the inadequacy of the text in relationship to what is “on the tape.” In the “transcription” of conVERSations he instead foregrounds a kind of textual excess, augmenting and building around the original conversations with large sections of poems in Sycorax video style, scribbles and shapes, boxes and asides, font alterations. The published work, part of Brathwaite’s library of responses to Gilbert, visually insists upon the textuality of sound, and the sound of text. Here Brathwaite’s theory and practice of poetry anticipate Harryette Mullen’s important essay, “African Signs and Spirit Writing,” in which the black American poet reverses the privileging of orality that has been common in African American literary criticism. Unearthing a spiritual and folk tradition of writing (apart from the imposed European tradition that equated literacy with freedom and humanity), Mullen reminds us “that African American literacy might be continuous rather than discontinuous with African ways of knowing, and with traditional systems of oral and
visual communication that represent natural and supernatural forces as participants in an
eextralinguistic dialogue with human beings. With Mullen in mind, Brathwaite’s investments
in the scribal are not a necessary evil in an age of print, but a visionary practice.

We might infer that Brathwaite’s avant-garde motion from roots (the title of his 1986
collection of essays) to software, constitutes a move away from the ecological to the
 technological, and in turn a transformation of the particular into the universal. We should
remember, however, that even in History of the Voice Brathwaite evokes “software” as a
metaphor for the language that would allow us to evoke the hurricane (8). In the second half of
Shar, song takes the form of image and artifact, self-consciously enlarged, punctuated, at times
pixelated. Part two opens with a command: “So/ sing/ sing/ clatter of ashes/ collapses of coal.” If
the poem begins with a capture narrative evoking the flora of West Africa—”leaf . branch .
gilt . eucalyptus . cocoa / pod . odoum / tweneduru”—its concluding song brings us into
a more generalized landscape: “what’s left of the/ stone of the/ mourn./ ing/ the mount. ain/
black.” But by emphasizing the materiality of language through pixelation and enlargement,
Brathwaite reminds us that pages contain the particular materials of place and of culture: “poor
croton leaf or yam shoot.” Throughout part two the words “sing” and “song” punctuate the song
itself. “Sing” is often a command that interrupts storytelling in the poem. To take one example, a
first person speaker begins to tell the story of his interaction with the weather:

    but
    looka me borrow a
    cloud from de rain
    wid it rain. bow
    still wet when a
    shine. when a

These lines take up an entire page, and are the wordiest passage in part two. Most of the lines have at least two stresses, distinguishing the meter of this passage as fluid and fast. These qualities, along with the visual approximation of colloquial speech (the conventional “de” for “the”) create the sense of a storytelling “I.” In its particularity, this moment contrasts sharply with the abstract “Stone of the/ mourning” to follow. The very next page interrupts the story of the cloud-borrower:

but
Sing.
ing
&
Sing.
ing

The syllabic arrangement of the page undermines the narrative cohesion of the previous one. This moment disrupts one kind of particularity while generating another: the song “from the throats of the five hundred thousand” is its own cultural artifact, made palpable in its visual presentation on the page (see figure 1). Enlargements, pixelations, and repetition of the letter “S” and the word “song” emphasize the song’s visual materiality above and beyond its sonic qualities. Paradoxically, then, the storm gives literal shape to the presence of that cultivation or culture which it has destroyed.
Figure 1 Selected pages from *Shar* by Edward Kamau Brathwaite
Kingston: Savacou, 1990
Raphael Dalleo has argued that Brathwaite’s work in this period crucially challenges the framework of genealogical continuity as the basis for Caribbean culture. In particular, Dalleo cites Brathwaite’s experimentations with the visual forms made possible by computer typography as a discourse of identity that constitutes an alternative to “rootedness.”

But if his turn to technology is a turn away from rootedness in a metaphorical sense—insofar as the disjunctive visual forms apparently disrupt continuity with either Europe or Africa—Brathwaite nonetheless remains interested in the language and forms of cultivation as a marker of culture.

If Brathwaite remains obsessed with the material world (necessarily) as a place for housing the material archives of culture, the emphasis on song in “Shar” nonetheless suggests a function and duration for poetry beyond the printed page, beyond, that is, that which can be stored—and lost—in the archive. The catastrophe forces us to imagine this duration, this archive that would not be subject to the destructive forces of hurricane winds. I am reminded here of the songs that traveled in the aftermath of Gilbert: in the streets and on the radio. The aural experience of those songs has lasted in the Jamaican imagination for more than twenty years, outliving the sonic technology of the LP and resurfacing online. While celebrating such “instrumental migrations,” Brathwaite is not quite content to turn the page on the duration of the written word; for him, then, “software” is one potential form of that duration, not the end of cultivation but its future.

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Throughout his reflections on Gilbert, Brathwaite makes visible the intimacy between cultural and environmental experience. In conVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey, Brathwaite

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describes in detail the conditions of what Herron calls his “Library of Alexandria” in Jamaica. In a detailed account of his conflict with officials at the University of West Indies who, according to Brathwaite, failed to help him rescue and maintain the library after the flooding, Brathwaite acknowledges the less than ideal preconditions of the library. In response to the UWI official’s accusation that Brathwaite had not cared for his own library, the poet confesses

that the house at IT
is built on an older structure or ‘Dump’
which we find & buy there – a structure, as I say, like build into the
mountain, the main back wall being right up against the breathing
bulk of the massif itself, which, since the library occupied the whole
space of this wall, means that we find damp coming in thru the
wall & into that whole line of books on the shelves along there
(conVERSations 148)

In spite of Brathwaite’s efforts to stave off the moisture, Hurricane Gilbert brought, “water coming onto the floor of the library,” “sodden books,” and “the road & most of the roofless house itself buried under this landslide mountain.” In his account of this disaster in conVERsations, Brathwaite makes the landslide visible in the right-justified text, eventually overwrought by its own long lines. In describing the mountain, as if human, as a “breathing bulk,” this passage unifies environmental and literary space, suggesting their shared condition and their interconnected histories. Even the word “massif” used as a synonym for the mountain evokes the “massive”—which in reggae terminology is a noun describing a collective (often a
listening collective at a party or musical event). In that sense, the boundary between the landscape and the culture it apparently threatens is permeable. At the same time, Brathwaite opposes continuous “damp” against continuous culture (the books he wishes to preserve), and in

406 Herron, “Saving the Word.”
so doing highlights a tension central to all of his works: between breaking from the past and preserving it.

The conditions Brathwaite describes were not unique to his house or his archive, as he points out in *conVERSations*. Photos of Hurricane Gilbert’s damage in the archives of the National Library of Jamaica (see figures 2-5) draw attention to the bloated, roofless remains of culture and education elsewhere in and around Kingston. These images of the University of West Indies campus besieged by water, “sodden books” left out to dry, of a parish library’s migrated roof, draw our attention not only to the personal and economic consequences of the hurricane, but also to the institutional and cultural ones.\(^{408}\) Likewise, Brathwaite’s description of his damp library invites us to consider the special challenges of preserving cultural materials in light of the climatic alternation between drought and flood. The image also evokes the particular intimacy (albeit a threatening and destructive intimacy) between the library and its environment.

Brathwaite’s books cannot exclude the water of the world. Although Gilbert exacerbates these conditions, Brathwaite’s account of the library’s fate in *conVERSations* underscores the universality and the continuity of the “damp” that threatened his collection of Caribbean culture. That is, Gilbert extended and exacerbated a preexisting dampness not only for Brathwaite’s archive but also for the problem of preserving Caribbean archives more broadly.

The environmental condition of Brathwaite’s library mirrors the environmental condition of Jamaica’s agriculture and ecology after Gilbert: devastated by the event, but also by continuing catastrophe, that is, a gradual overturning whose results have the effect of disaster. As Barker and Miller have noted, Gilbert intensified the preexisting problem of soil erosion “as a

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\(^{408}\) For a detailed discussion of the effects of Gilbert on Jamaican libraries, particularly the Norman Manley Law Library, see John A. Aarons, “Hurricanes and Disaster Response: Lessons Learned in Jamaica from ‘Gilbert’”, n.d.
Figure 2  Books being placed outside to dry at Norman Manley Law School
Photo: National Library of Jamaica, Kingston, Jamaica

Figure 3  University of West Indies Grounds after Hurricane Gilbert
Photo: National Library of Jamaica, Kingston, Jamaica
**Figure 4** St. Ann’s Parish Library  
Photo: National Library of Jamaica, Kingston, Jamaica

This Image Has Been Removed for Copyright Reasons

**Figure 5** St. Thomas Parish Library  
Photo: National Library of Jamaica, Kingston, Jamaica

This Image Has Been Removed for Copyright Reasons
consequence of both historical and agricultural malpractice.” While there is some debate as to the extent and cause of deforestation in Jamaica’s Blue Mountains, at the time of Gilbert it was believed that Jamaica had a high rate of deforestation, and attendant problems with water supply, agricultural productivity, biological diversity, soil erosion and landslides. This environmental degradation emerged not only from logging, but from small-scale farming practices, particularly the production of coffee for international export which extended the destructive agricultural economy of the plantation. If it is true, as Jamaican economist Michael Witter has claimed, that “no problem, and particularly the environmental one, can be seen clearly except through the lens of our colonial history,” then Brathwaite’s lost library, in its intimacy with the mountain, also indexes that environmental history. Thus, while Brathwaite’s account to some extent represents the natural world as a menace from without threatening cultural progress, it also references the shared fate of Caribbean culture and Jamaican ecology.

Like Lovindeer’s “Wild Gilbert,” Brathwaite’s poem sets itself up within the urban geography of Kingston (although Irish Town itself is outside of the city limits). The cover of the volume depicts a street sign reading “Stanton Terr,” indicating a street in the northern part of the city, and the opening lines establish Kingston as a kind of synecdoche for Jamaica:

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411 Barker and McGregor have described the process by which modern land degradation in Jamaica has emerged from the techniques of coffee monoculture plantations from the period of slavery. According to Timothy Weis, the problem is not merely individual peasants’ resistance to ecologically sustainable practices, but rather the continuation of colonial land use policies within the logic of the international neoliberal framework which shapes Jamaica’s economy (and therefore ecology). David Barker and Duncan F. M. McGregor, “Land Degradation in the Yallahs Basin, Jamaica: Historical Notes and Contemporary Observations,” Geography 73, no. 2 (April 1, 1988): 118–119; Tony Weis, “Beyond Peasant Deforestation: Environment and Development in Rural Jamaica,” Global Environmental Change 10, no. 4 (December 2000): 302–303.
412 Quoted in Weis, “Beyond Peasant Deforestation.”
For the stone of this island to be bombed
by this wind & all this. all this. water
O longshore late light duppy Kingston nights

(Shar)

However, whereas “Wild Gilbert” emphasizes the hurricane’s costs only within that urban environment, and specifically in the realm of material culture, Brathwaite’s poem draws our attention to the interconnectedness of nature and culture. Alongside the detritus of human habitats—“zinc sheets crippled to the earth,” “wrecked homes” and of course sodden books—he describes

all over this island of the dead Arawaks

craters of outflung cherry & guinep & guava like they never knew what hit them

the sacred lignum vitae stunned into a sudden sullenness of olive grey
banana windmills broken

Here the “duppies” of “Kingston nights” get named: “dead Arawaks” haunt the landscape; their death is in fact the precondition for the cultivated landscape. And yet the indeterminacy of the pronoun “they” in the second line seems to equate the flinging of “cherry & guinep & guava” with the near-extermination of the indigenous population, elevating those fruit trees and even the “banana windmills” to the status of the island’s lost ancestors, equating the violent erasures of history with the violence of the storm, and imbuing trees with the capacity to know and be “stunned.” Evoking the intimacy between his diary and the island’s agricultural products, between his familial and creative genealogy and the cultivation of land, between ancestry and ecology, Brathwaite writes against the alienation between land and community that Glissant has described in Caribbean Discourse.
Scatta Archives

Having evoked the hurricane as the sign of Caribbean poetics in *History of the Voice* Brathwaite transforms the meteorological formulation of the hurricane into more than a metaphor for poetry in his writings on Gilbert. More than two decades after Gilbert, Brathwaite still struggles to find home for his archive, as development projects in Barbados threaten his homestead “Cow Pastor,” where, he has written, he dreams of establishing a cultural center, with “enough peace & space & beauty.” Much of the discourse around this continued displacement—including Brathwaite’s poems as well as letters to and from editors and friends—has taken place not only in Sycorax video style, but on websites and online discussion boards. In this context Brathwaite not only makes the case for the preservation of his archive, but for the environment of Cow Pastor itself. In these electronically-circulated pleas, he laments the loss of cattle, of a water catchment that would prevent future flooding, of a bearded fig tree metonymically associated with his own body, which he describes as “cruelly unethically soon to gone.” And at the same time he laments the loss of the home where he had hoped “to in-gather the scatta archives” of Caribbean culture. We may or may not want to grieve over the loss of what Brathwaite refers to as “my nation here—my maroon town” if we understand nation in a genealogically and geographically bound sense. But given that “nation” itself has always been approximate for Brathwaite, we might nonetheless wish for a place where it is possible “to keep alive the making of the past.”

Brathwaite’s essential claim that the hurricane does not roar in pentameters has resonated throughout this dissertation not because it is true in any absolute sense, but because it provokes a

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414 Ibid.
415 Ibid.
416 Ibid.
crucial question about the relationship between organic and literary forms. If indeed it is the case, as *History of the Voice* all but admits by way of examples, that the hurricane *does* roar in pentameters, even as it also *does not* do so, then what is the value of such a claim? How does it help us to understand pentameters and free verse, as well as hurricanes and their meaning in diasporic and Caribbean life? Neither accepting nor rejecting the possibility of mimesis between environmental or social experience and form, we can nonetheless identify in Brathwaite’s poetry what Jahan Ramazani has called “formal interculturation,”*417* that is, according to Ramazani, poetic qualities that reflect contact between Western and non-Western cultures and expressive forms. We can observe the relationship between his “voice” and T.S. Eliot’s, note that he names his computer font after a character from a Shakespeare play, and point out the juxtaposition between “tweneduru” and “leaf” in a single passage. At the same time *Shar* undermines the distinction between “Western literary models and non-Western oral traditions” that defines Ramazani’s notion of interculturation, insofar as the poem draws upon the textual properties of words as part of its author’s vernacular poetic strategy. Matthew Hart’s model, “synthetic vernacular”—that is, a vernacular poetry which attempts to unite different forms but inevitably leaves a remnant—is perhaps a more useful way of understanding how Brathwaite’s poetic language mediates between the local environment of post-hurricane Jamaica and a more universal experience of displacement and destruction.*418*

Brathwaite’s poetic account of Irish Town suggests that the local and global exigencies of environmental disaster require a way of understanding both rupture and continuity as formal qualities in literature. As Ursula Heise has argued, the study of environmental literature in particular requires “formal countermodels to ecolocalism” as an antidote to the way

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environmental discourse and American nationalism have developed in tandem.\textsuperscript{419} My starting point has not been an historical moment in American environmentalism, so much as a series of moments in the development of black modern consciousness. But like Heise I believe that the intersections of environmental and social history in these moments have produced a body of literature whose shapes must be understood in relationship to diaspora. Brathwaite is a key figure because the hurricane sweeps through his writings in both theory and practice, uniting our concerns with literary form and our understanding of Caribbean environmental experience.

Rob Nixon has cautioned against “historically indifferent formalism that treats the study of aesthetics as the literary scholar’s definitive calling,” particularly in the context of literary environmentalism.\textsuperscript{420} Nixon is concerned about what Anne McClintock has called a “fetishism of form,” the process through which certain kinds of formal practices become invested with too much political or social meaning.\textsuperscript{421} Nixon and McClintock rightly worry that we run the risk of attributing too much agency to discourse or form, rather than people. In the realm of environmental change, Nixon contends, writers must engage and affiliate with “nonliterary forces for social change” or risk irrelevance.\textsuperscript{422} By condemning both “indifferent” criticism and politically engaged formalism, however, he leaves little room for aesthetic attention in literary criticism, or at least literary criticism concerned with environmentalism. Nixon’s project crucially aims to generate more complex, intersectional identities, but writing off the power of literary forms eliminates a foundational element of anti-colonial and postcolonial literary

\textsuperscript{419} Ursula K Heise, Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7. Heise importantly acknowledges that “hybridity, diaspora, and marginality sometimes turned into quasi-essentialist categories themselves,” but contends that certain “particular and historical contexts” require such categories in the interests of ending the stalemate between global and local approaches to culture.
\textsuperscript{420} Nixon, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor, 31.
\textsuperscript{422} Nixon, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor, 32.
development. We need to ask instead what an historically attentive formalism would look like. That is, how can we attend to poetic form without turning our backs on the real world or, on the other hand, falling prey to anthropomorphism and abstraction? By looking at Brathwaite’s poetry, interviews, and missives in response to Hurricane Gilbert, particularly in the context of his theories about language, we can see that it is not possible to think of history without thinking about the forms of poetic language. While a poetics of rupture may not be inherently progressive or revolutionary (and here is where Nixon’s caution is well-taken) it is the case that for many poets in the African diaspora, poetic forms (such as the sonnet), meters (such as iambic pentameter), images (the daffodil, snow) and languages (nation language) have been intimately linked with the histories of colonialism, slavery, and resistance. For Brathwaite, lyric poetry, as a visual and aural medium, encompasses both continuous and disjunctive cultural and environmental histories, creating a place in the poetic imagination of the future capacious enough for the “scatta archives” of land and language alike.

423 Too much emphasis on activist affiliation can have its own problems. Within the field of ecocriticism, for instance, it is not uncommon to critique (or forgive, to the same effect) writers of color for being unable to “affiliate” with environmentalism because of their predominant affiliation with racial justice. 424 Perhaps ironically, after years of living in New York, Brathwaite has recently gone back to Barbados, describing his reverse migration as being “returned to the Plantation poorer, more bereft, than when i left.” In this letter to his friend and Internet chronicler Tom Raworth, Brathwaite recounts his anxiety over preserving his archives in his New York City apartment and his attendant traumatic breakdown in the context of the historically problematic role of the postcolonial writer. Returning to Barbados, Brathwaite somewhat surprisingly longs for an idealized “pasture” in which to write. Kamau Brathwaite, “Cultural Lynching or how to dis. man. tle the artist,” from Letter to Tom Raworth, Friday 23 Sep 2011. For the text of this letter and an online archive of Brathwaite’s struggle to relocate and rebuild his archive in Barbados, see Raworth’s website: http://tomraworth.com/wordpress/.
Coda: Unnatural Catastrophe

“catastrophe must be sounded”
Fred Moten, “Black-Op”

Edwidge Danticat’s book of essays, Create Dangerously, opens with the image of a political execution during the 1960s and concludes in the rubble of the 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince. In between, the collection meditates on the collective losses of our times—from AIDS to 9/11. Although Danticat started writing the collection in 2008, the published volume eulogizes the “two hundred thousand and more” lost in the earthquake, to whom Danticat dedicates the book. “And more” refers not only to the difficulty of counting those lost in the earthquake, but of counting losses that extend beyond this singular event. The earthquake animates Danticat’s poetics of grief, giving physical form to a catastrophe-in-the-making that was already the subject of the book. In another essay, “A Year and a Day” published in The New Yorker just past the one-year anniversary of the earthquake, Danticat draws our attention to the earthquake as continuing catastrophe in a difference sense. Describing the vodou belief according to which the souls of the dead slip underwater and remain there for a year and a day, she contrasts this kind of “transcendental continuity” between generations with the catastrophic continuity of the cholera epidemic that has transpired in the aftermath of the earthquake. The shifting signifier of the water figures this contrast: on the one hand “this fragile veil between life and death,” home to those souls whose continued presence nourishes Haitian resilience and

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culture, and on the other, “a feared poison.”

In my discussions of environmental disaster, I have restricted my study to catastrophes that nature causes (or at least seems to cause): floods and hurricanes as opposed to acts of terrorism, holocaust, other forms of extreme human violence, or oil spills. But if we can say, as Danticat’s book suggests and as Junot Diaz makes explicit in his recent essay in the *Boston Review*, that the Haiti Earthquake and Hurricane Katrina were “social disasters” insofar as they revealed and intensified racial, economic, and global inequities, blurring the boundary between human and natural agency, if such disasters force us to think of ecology in a broader sense as the temporality of the *event* gives way to continuing catastrophes of everyday life, then is it possible that this blurring works in the other direction?

That is, what happens when we think of a political execution, a massacre, or a bombing as environmental experience? A catastrophic imagination pervades Danticat’s accounts of culture, literacy, family, nation, and diaspora. For example “the other side of the water” in Danticat’s book refers both literally to the other side of the Atlantic (Miami) and to Danticat’s cousin’s death of AIDS. What does it mean to think of diasporic crossing and the crossing into death as parallel processes? To address the question *Create Dangerously* raises I turn to another text that has been haunting me. Although this book is not about a hurricane, an earthquake, a flood, or a drought, I have been unable to shake the sense that it belongs in a project that considers the intersection of race studies and environmental experience.

*Zong!* a booklength sequence of poems by Tobagan poet Marlene Nourbese Philip recounts the story of the 1781 massacre aboard the Zong slave ship. Bound for Jamaica with a

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429 Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 87.
fully-insured cargo of approximately 470 slaves from the West Coast of Africa, the ship was
delayed by a series of navigational errors; provisions ran low, slaves died of thirst, others threw
themselves overboard. Finally, the Captain ordered 131-150 slaves thrown overboard in order to
keep the rest of the slaves alive before making land and collect insurance for the economic loss
of the drowned “cargo.” The insurance company denied the claim, and a series of legal court
cases ensued. Of the legal archive, what remains is a single transcription of the Gregson v.
Gilbert trial in which insurers appealed an earlier verdict awarding damages to the ship’s owners.
The justices ruled for a new trial, but it is unclear whether such a trial took place. In spite of
abolitionist Granville Sharpe’s attempts to shift the terms of the conversation from economic to
human loss, the case remained an insurance case—not a murder case.430

Philip’s Zong! is a book-length poem divided into five sections, a glossary, a ship’s
manifest, “Notanda” (Philip’s essay on the writing process), and the legal transcript. This multi-
faceted account of human catastrophe invites us to consider the relationship between human
agency and environmental experience beyond representation, that is, to think of ecological
writing as taken up with “the environment” not so much in terms of content but also in its form.
In Ecology Without Nature, Timothy Morton, critiquing what he calls ecomimesis, draws a
connection between works ordinarily read under the sign “nature poetry,” and self-consciously
experimental or “ambient poetry” which, he argues, depends on the idea of a “surrounding
atmosphere.”431 This expansive way of reading ecologically invites us to consider social

430 For Sharpe, Oloudah Equiano, and other abolitionists, the case became fodder for abolitionist
arguments. It was the inspiration for J.W. Turner’s famous painting Slavers Overthrowing the Dead and
Dying (1840), and in the 20th century a novel by Fred D’Aguiar. In Spectres of the Atlantic, a critical
book that focuses on the Zong ship and the archive he assembles around it, Ian Baucom argues that the
event and its representations constitute the basis for modern ideas of capital, ethical spectatorship, and
temporality. Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History (Durham:
catastrophe in relationship to the problems of ecomimesis.

Philip’s poem and essays draw our attention to the suspension of the terms “natural” and “human” in the face of the massacre (and the violence of the legal language that is our only written record of the story). The legal decisions hinged upon whether the slaves had died “by the perils of the seas,” in which case the insurers were liable, or whether their deaths were a mere matter of “mortality,” in which case the insurers were not liable. According to a digest of insurance law published in the same year as the Zong! massacre took place, in maritime law,

The insurer takes upon him the risk of the loss, capture, and death of slaves, or any other unavoidable accident to them: but natural death is always understood to be excepted: —by natural death is meant, not only when it happens by disease or sickness, but also when the captive destroys himself through despair, which often happens: but when slaves are killed or thrown into the sea in order to quell an insurrection on their part, then the insurers must answer.\(^\text{432}\)

This distinction between “natural” and unnatural death motivated Luke Collingwood, the captain of the Zong! But how, as Philip asks in her “notanda,” can death be “natural” inside the cargo hold? How are “the perils of the sea” unnatural? If suicide is “natural,” what about murder? The legal language inverts our usual assumptions and naturalizes the conditions of slavery—if a storm ravages a ship and slaves fall overboard and drown, that is “unnatural.” But if slaves die of hunger, thirst, or illness because of the inhumane conditions of the human trade in human bodies, that is “natural.” This inversion represents what Ian Baucom, following Agamben, describes as “the rule of living in a permanent state of exception,”\(^\text{433}\) a state which, “classically entangles justice and violence.”\(^\text{434}\)

In the case of the Zong that entanglement takes place through the category of the natural. That is, even as Collingwood and the ship’s owners attempt to profit from murder by arguing

\(^{433}\)Baucom, Specters of the Atlantic, 188.  
\(^{434}\)Ibid., 186.
that their violent act is *unnatural*, the law surrounding the case *naturalizes* the everyday human violence and logic of the trade. To borrow Timothy Morton’s words, “nature always slips out of reach in the very act of grasping it.”

Blurring the boundary between natural and human dangers, the system of slavery simultaneously depends upon a false and violent differentiation between the human and the nonhuman.

Situating herself within this language Philip to some extent enacts the kind of *ecomimesis* Morton describes. She limits herself, in the cycle of poems that makes up the first section of *Zong!*, to what she calls the “word store” of the legal decision *Gregson v. Gilbert*. In her “Notanda” she writes, “I would lock myself in this text in the same way men, women, and children were locked in the holds of the slave ship *Zong*. By drawing a parallel between the text and the ship’s cargo hold, Philip describes the legal decision as an environment in the broad sense of that term: a physical space in which the poetic speaker dwells. The outer “word store” simultaneously enables and imprisons the in-dwelling voice of the poem. Parts of the poem visually evoke the tight space of the cargo hold, the geometry of arranged bodies, the shape of the ship, the exterior that *contains* individuals—bodies, words, “silences.”

The poem writes against this containment: as *Zong!* progresses, Philip breaks up the legal language of her word store and reorganizes the letters to create new lexicons, including words from French, Spanish, Dutch, Yoruba, Shona, and various kind of patois.

I mutilate the text as the fabric of African life and the lives of these men, women and children were mutilated.... I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object—create semantic mayhem, until my hands bloodied, from so much killing and cutting, reach into the stinking, eviscerated innards...

(193-194).

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436 M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Wesleyan, 2008), 192. Future citations will be parenthetical.
Analyzing her process of “unlocking” the hidden word store of the legal text, Philip describes a revenge poetics in which the legal text seems like a group of bodies and then a single body. But in light of her earlier representation of the ship and the legal text as an environment in which to dwell, her mutilation of the words also expands, explodes, dismantles, sinks and disperses this “tight space.” By the end of the poem the words spread out; they are pale, overlapping, they fill the page. They become what Morton might call ambient, a “surrounding atmosphere”—not the tight space of the legal text or cargo hold, but another kind of linguistic ecology in which we immerse ourselves. So in Zong #1 Philip evokes water as a pharmakon. The speaker of the poem is either a drowning body or a person dying of thirst. The poem stutters and stops; it floods (“www”) and withholds (3). The spaces between letters on the page suggest the fluid environment in which bodies disperse.

Even as the poem disrupts meaning and breaks down artifice so as to create an apparently authentic immersion in violence, the framing devices of the book—Philip’s essays, her wordstore, the glossary, and the legal text—reinscribe the dichotomy between inside and outside. These materials suggest a “reality” out there, in the “actual” record of the case, even a “real nature” in which Philip composes the poem and keeps a journal about her composition: “It is June—June 15, 2002 to be exact, a green and wet June in Vermont.” Morton identifies such “medial statements,” which draw our attention to the environment in which the artist creates, marking the boundary between the natural world and its representation, as key devices of ecomimesis from Thoreau to Denise Levertov.437 According to Morton the problem with ambient poetics is not so much the existence of that boundary as the attempt to deny its existence—to naturalize the aesthetic. At the same time, Morton holds out the possibility of what he calls a

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radical ecomimesis, which would acknowledge, in his words, “irreducible otherness, whether in poetics, ethics, or politics.” 438

To think of Zong! as a radically ecomimetic text is to redefine what we think of as ecological. Philip authorizes the legal word store as an “environment” outside the world of the poem, generating an automatic writing exercise that would at first appear to minimize the subjectivity of the author or even speaker. In the first cycle of poems, which is the part of the book derived exclusively from the legal text, there appears to be no lyric speaker. Syntax, Philip suggests in Zong #9, subordinates the “me in/ become”(17). But Zong! adds a third term to the binary of inside and outside by insisting up upon yet another source of “the real”: on its cover and title page, the book purports to be written “as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng.” If the legal environment and ship deny the humanity of the slaves, the claim to spiritual inspiration by an ancestor works against this denial, even as it further effaces the authority of the speaker. In printing the text of the legal decision and naming the spiritual ancestor who speaks through the poet, Philip gestures toward competing, indeed incongruous, notions of “the real,” thus undermining the discourse of environmental immersion.

The tension between the ancestral spirits and legal language as controlling environments repeats itself on the level of the structure of the individual poems in “Os,” the first section. Distressed that logs of slave ships did not contain the names of the Africans on board, Philip prints a list of names derived from Yoruba, Shona, Ibo, and other African languages at the bottom of each page, visually manifesting the drowning of the slaves. The named slaves are submerged, but they also become the environment in which Philip surrounds the legal text, reversing the outside/inside structure that frames the entire book. These simultaneous, opposite

438 Ibid., 151.
structures of containment create an expansive notion of “environment.” The poem spatially reorganizes the relationships among different categories of people, insisting upon the human dimension otherwise excised from the legal text.

If the alternating structures of immersion cause us to question the division between inside and outside in the early pages of *Zong!,* subsequent sections appear to break the boundary down entirely. In “Dicta,” the final subsection of “Os,” the names have vanished but the line that separated them from the main part of the page remains. In the second and third sections, the line between the legal language and the dead Africans disappears altogether; words from African languages as well as names of women and men become part of the discourse of the poem. At the same time, the poem becomes increasingly fragmented, especially visually. When I taught this poem recently, students remarked that this section in particular—because of the radical juxtaposition of multiple languages and the breaking up of words into what at first seems like non-sense—evokes experiences of the slaves on the ship who would have been disoriented and confused. My students were alienated by words they could not pronounce or translate. Few of them did the work of flipping to the glossary as they read at home, they confessed. More were willing to experience the poem as a form of disorientation, to allow the poem to work on them, or not. Philip describes something similar in her writing process. Early on, she writes in the *Notanda,* “the poems resist my attempts at meaning or coherence” (195).

But the poem stops short of resting in the “false illusion of intimacy” between experience and representation that Morton defines as characteristic of ambient poetry. Reading the poem aloud together, my students heard something that undermined the all-too-easy thesis that their experience of disorientation immersed them in the experience of the slaves aboard the ship: they heard the voice of a lyric speaker which punctures the illusion of “ambience.” Morton writes, “If
we are ever able to achieve ecology without nature, it will be difficult, if not impossible, and
even undesirable, to achieve ecology without a subject.” In the third section, *Zong!* evokes the
experience of “living deliberately” through a surprising subject: a white European man, perhaps
the captain or a member of the crew who participated in the murder, whose addressee is Ruth, a
“she negro,” in his words, whom he either murders, loves, or rapes. This speaker voices the
closest thing to a narrative of the violence of the transatlantic slave trade:

pan of pain that

is s

pain a round

the globe mi orbe
de oro bring the slop pail pin

her hold her

legs wide wet

her throw water the shelves a mess i

had an eye a very good

eye for negroes i grade

But this speaker—here a slave trader and rapist—is more than a despicable narrator from whom
the poem distances us ironically. He is consumed by his own sin. But more importantly, he is
“many-voiced” (205).

439 Ibid., 182–183.
If the poem filters the experience of social disaster through a narrator who is himself the murderer, it does not stop there in “making sense” of things. Rather, it implicates us collectively in the making of catastrophe. Recounting the scene of the poem’s central crime, the speaker begs,

\[
\text{ease my mind, she was too thin, hang him over board. throw her}
\]

Even as the speaker attempts to absolve himself through Ruth, commanding her to “ease my mind,” he also tries to imagine “the ne/gro in me” and the “song in negro.” In spite of the expansive Whitmanian tone, the line break in the middle of the first instance of the word “ne/gro” suggests the sharp spilt between the speaker and the other. At the same time the poem’s driving desire is to hear the “song in/ negro.” This desire splits the speaker’s dominant imperative voice into others. Other narratives overtake this primary speaker’s telling, most notably a slave’s narrative of capture, which repeats itself at various points in the poem:

\[
\text{it was it real master sir}
\]
\[
\text{me i beg you you write fo mi you}
\]
\[
\text{say ayo dem cam fo me in}
\]
\[
\text{de field me run}
\]

Thus, even if Philip often suggests in her Notanda that the text is “automatic,” the poem reads instead as a collection of collectively produced competing narratives. If at first Philip resists
meaning-making, later, “in the discomfort and disturbance created by the poetic text, I am forced to make meaning from apparently disparate elements [...] And since we have to work to complete the events, we all become implicated in, if not contaminated by, this activity.” At the end of *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton calls for such self-implication as one precondition interconnectedness. I’ve said that my students began to hear, in the later sections of the book, the voice of a lyric subject. But they also began to hear, in each other’s voices, the multiple voices in the poem. Describing his own experience teaching this poem, Fred Moten has suggested that “one person can’t read this poem; it has to be read symphonically.” So perhaps it is this symphonic subjectivity that properly historicizes the ecology of the slave ship. Whether or not a poem that embodies this subjectivity can enact a radical ecological ethics, as Morton seems to suggest, remains a question. But I’m interested in his suggestion that we can think of ecology in terms of form rather than content, and reading *Zong!* as ecological in this broader sense brings me back to my original supposition that the catastrophic imagination does not so much represent the tornado or the earthquake, as it concatenates and collects the voices of others.

I’ll conclude by returning to Danticat’s collection, which draws our attention both to the interconnectedness of human suffering in the context of catastrophe, and to its national contours. In “Another Country,” a reflection on American press coverage of Hurricane Katrina, Danticat critiques Americans’ shock at the resemblance of American poverty to that of developing nations, and our easy willingness to name Haiti as the sign of all that “we” are not. Danticat calls for an American catastrophic imaginary, and, simultaneously, insists upon its diasporic shape:

> Among the realities brought to light by Hurricane Katrina was that never again could we justifiably deny the existence of this country within a country, that other America, which America’s immigrants and the rest of the world may know much more intimately than

many Americans do, the America that is always on the brink of humanitarian and ecological disaster. No, it is not Haiti or Mozambique or Bangladesh, but it might as well be.\textsuperscript{441}

Danticat’s assertion that America “might as well be” a developing nation seems to be a lament or critique; in spite of being a “first world” nation, she argues, the existence of “that other America” testifies to the failure of the United States to utilize its first world resources in such a way that mitigates humanitarian and ecological disaster. But this critique contains within it a sense of possibility in the suggestion that acknowledging “Haiti or Mozambique or Bangladesh,” indeed looking beyond the boundaries of nation, might entirely transform our response to disaster. The threat that America might not be America contains within it a promise.

The tension between curse and promise that characterizes Danticat’s critique of American society parallels a tension that has informed this study and that is the source of a central debate within Black Studies scholarship: between what Jared Sexton and others have called Afro-pessimism, the theory that black diasporic subjects are conscripted within a modernity that enslaves, and what Fred Moten names black optimism, the idea of blackness as a persistent, resistant overturning of Western civilization, whose aim is also the recognition and reconstruction of its own possibilities.\textsuperscript{442} The key terms of cultivation and catastrophe allow us to mediate between two poles of black historical experience—continuity and change—but also to find common ground between these two ideological stances. Before and since their forced migrations, people of the African diaspora have been engaged in the production of vital cultures and societies. In black literature, even into and beyond the twentieth century, tropes of cultivation describe and give shape to the resilience, persistence, and progress of black cultures.

\textsuperscript{441} Danticat, \textit{Create Dangerously}, 113.
\textsuperscript{442} For an encapsulation of this debate see Moten, “Black Op”; Jared Sexton, “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” \textit{InTensions}, no. 5 (Fall/Winter 2011).
But writers also describe the experience of the break and the ensuing constraint and dehumanization of slavery as catastrophic—if not an irremediable wound (trauma) then a dramatic turning. As we have seen, cultivation and catastrophe interpenetrate as well: the history of cultivation in the new world, a history of enforced agricultural labor, has been a social catastrophe in and of itself, and environmental catastrophes have yielded rich traditions of art, music, and poetry.

We can understand the figure of the ship itself as an embodiment of cultivation and catastrophe if we juxtapose the slave ship Zong against what many see as a modern-day ark, artist Mark Bradford’s post-Katrina installation, Mithra. As a physical structure that gets dismantled in Zong’s visual economy, the environment that enslaves African bodies but also the wordstore that unlocks their voices, the slave ship adrift in the middle passage is the sign of social death and also of passage itself, of rupture and of continuity. Bradford’s Mithra, aground in the lower-ninth ward of New Orleans, posits itself as a kind of life-raft, the sort of help that New Orleans residents cried out for from cellphones and rooftops. Built from plywood shipping containers and weathered posters, the ship became a centerpiece of prospect.1, the contemporary art biennial launched in New Orleans in 2009. Of the title of the piece, Bradford has cited Mithra’s association in zoastrian tradition with agricultural fecundity. Hence his decision to situate the work in what he describes as the “scorched earth” of the lower ninth ward: “I was really sort of looking forward and making a proposition that humanity would spring from the earth and that life continues.” Bradford thus explicitly frames the project as a work of cultivation. The torn and faded posters pasted on the wood panels testify to disasters’

443 Bradford has also documented this phenomenon in “Help Us,” a rooftop installation visible from Google Earth.
consequences for art, archives, and the people who make them, but Bradford’s reuse of the
posters also asserts the generative possibilities of catastrophe. As the very form of black
optimism in the face of catastrophe, Mithra brought viewers to look upon the scorched earth it
proposed—for one-hundred days—to transform. The ship reminds us of the critical need to listen
to catastrophe’s sound, indeed to make the sound, even as we imagine something growing from
that ground.


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