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Green is the New Black: Reading the Black Experience Ecocritically

A dissertation presented

by

Shannon Joyce Prince

to

The Department of African and African American Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

African and African American Studies

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Green is the New Black: Reading the Black Experience Ecocritically

Abstract

Green is the New Black argues that African American literature, as a genre, should not be understood simply as literary works written by blacks of the United States but as a collection of artistic products aggregated by the shared characteristics of their content – in substantial part, culturally distinct ways of relating to the environment. This dissertation contends that African American engagement with green is shaped both by blacks' experience of being rendered inhuman socially and legally as well as by the race's retention of the figure of Ananse – a spider-man from West African orature – and of the techniques of *Ananses*ɛ*m*. It also proffers a body of black-green tropes that have been revised across African American literature from the nineteenth century through the present day.

Green is the New Black engages in ecocentric analysis of both canonical and obscure black writing. I read Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom* as a work that employs Anansesɛm techniques to humanize blacks and animalize slaveholders. Next, I use Charles Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine" to reveal the depth of the disastrous consequences of the Flint water crisis, treating both African American literature and life ecocritically. The following chapter challenges Chesnutt's assertation that he drew on childhood memories of black folklore unconsciously and insignificantly when crafting his work. I argue instead that attention to the natural elements in Chesnutt's Conjure Woman stories and his novel *The*

Colonel's Dream reveal deliberate, intricate revisions of the tar baby Anansesɛm that, when exegeted, unveil hidden layers of meaning.

Next, I examine the many ways Toni Morrison makes use of nature in *Tar Baby*. She employs environment, flora, and fauna to engage with issues of race and property, to revise black-green tropes, and to create an ecocentric African diaspora retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." In a second chapter on Morrison's work, I explain how her novel *Home* suggests that black social death is followed by a sort of green afterlife in which dehumanized African Americans are forced to exist as animals or plants.

Green is the New Black concludes with a close reading of a lesser known work, C. S. Giscombe's book of poetry *Giscome Road* which is set in nineteenth century Canada. In this final chapter, I examine Giscombe's vision of what African American relationships with nature could look like outside of the context of racial dehumanization.

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Dean Garth McCavana, Dean Sheila Thomas, and Professor Marla Frederick, thank you so very much for your prodigious support. Dr. Benjamin Woodring, you have been an all-purpose mentor! Thank you for your unfailing generosity in advising me through law school, the bar exam, and my doctoral studies. Dr. Robin Mount and Stephanie Parsons, thank you for encouraging me to pursue my doctorate at Harvard. I so appreciate your warm welcome and gracious support.

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Dedication

In loving memory of Mildred Joyce Guillory, the kind of grandmother who would have taught Rosa Parks to sit and Maya Angelou to rise

Introduction

The Law Slips

being property once myself
i have a feeling for it,
that's why I can talk
about environment.

Lucille Clifton[1]

I am more than a spider, much more than just a man.

Ananse in *The River Where Blood is Born*, Sandra Jackson-Opoku[2]

Introduction

For over 300 years American law has wondered: Are black people green? Are these humans from Africa, in fact, human after all? Or are they trees that speak? Mules that walk on two feet? Faced with the contradictory incontrovertibility of African humanity and the socio-economic imperative of black fungibility, America's pre- and post-Revolutionary statutes have suffered from cognitive dissonance. Its jurisprudential slippages are color coded – "black" signifying undervalued race; "green," the extension of nature. That is to say, law, both explicitly and through disparate impact, tends to achieve African Americans' subordination, to segregate them – if not expel them – from the human family. These racial exiles are shooed across the

[1] Lucille Clifton, "[being property once myself]," in *good news about the earth* (New York: Random House, 1972), 2.

[2] Sandra Jackson-Opoku, *The River Where Blood Is Born* (New York: One World/Ballantine, 1997), 16.

species barrier into green, bound up in policy alongside livestock and land. But African American writing turns these slippages into advantage – for if blacks are nature, it means they know nature better than whites. The added value is especially poignant and urgent as we confront the environmental ravages of modernity's indifference to the environment. What law meant for evil, literature uses for good.

It is against the background of this burdened history that, after offering brief introductions to the field of ecocriticism and to the debates about how to collect works by members of the same ethnic groups into genres, I will suggest that one major quality that unites African American writings into a unified body is a racially-inflected focus on nature. I look at how this focus manifests itself across time and how it was shaped by antebellum law.

Next, I offer a more extensive history of ecocriticism, tracing its journey from its white-dominated first wave to its still growing multiracial second wave and explaining how I aim to contribute to the development of this second wave by locating the African roots of African American affinity for nature and by offering a black-green body of tropes.[3] Finally, I proffer a roadmap of my next chapters.

Ecocriticism and Race

Ecocriticism is the study of literary works with a focus on elements of texts relating to the environment. Its first wave, which lasted from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990's, directed its attention primarily towards obviously green works of white authorship such as *Walden* and

[3] Even as the second wave progresses, third and fourth waves attending to globalized perspectives and materialism, respectively, are developing.

Leaves of Grass. The second wave expanded its gaze to encompass the writing of people of color and pieces which, though not necessarily pastoral, nevertheless engaged nature -- though in subtler ways.[4]

Yet while ecocritical scholars were broadening their view, Kenneth W. Warren argued in 2011 for the contraction of the works considered part of the "collective enterprise" of African American literature.[5] Warren asserted that African American literature was made up only of pieces written between 1896 and 1968.[6] He rejected the premise it included *all* literary texts created by black persons in the United States, instead insisting it consisted of only those African American-authored writings drafted during legal segregation.[7] To Warren, it was the shared experience of apartheid faced by black authors that gave their creations a cultural distinctiveness.[8]

Warren is not alone in challenging received boundaries of ethnic literatures. (By ethnic literature, I mean literary bodies whose individual works are considered in relation to each other because of the shared racial or national heritage of their authors). Five years earlier, Anishinaabe scholar Dave Treuer had gone even further, declaring Native American literature

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[4] Steven Rosendale, introduction to *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002).

[5] Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 1.

[6] Ibid., 8-9.

[7] Ibid., 2.

[8] Ibid., 8.

not to exist at all. Treuer argued that texts written by Native Americans are "used" by readers as cultural artifacts rather than as literary works (as literal relics of American Indian life rather than as works of art that skillfully *evoke* American Indian life) and, thus, are more properly conceived of as ethnographic objects.[9]

I agree with Warren and Treuer that it takes more than the melanin and geographic location of poets, novelists, and memoirists to aggregate their texts into a "distinct entity."[10] However, there are identifiable stylistic and thematic elements in African American writing that come into focus if we notice significant patterns in what we can call ethnically-inflected *ecoliterature*. In other words, African American literature is not simply literature written by black people in the United States of America, but literature written by black people that is often daubed with specific shades of green. Reasons include explorations of how one fits into the natural as well as the socio-legal world and what is "unnatural" about certain social constructions.

Black-Green Literary History

The green of which I speak colors African American writers' earliest texts. The first known novel ever written by an African American, Hannah Crafts' mid-nineteenth century work *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, includes a scene in which a slave and the dog she cherishes -- because it had been the pet of a beloved daughter since sold away -- are both suspended from a tree until starved and dehydrated to death. The merciless killing of the slave and her dog

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[9] See Treuer, David. *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2006.

[10] Warren, *What Was African American Literature?*, 8.

causes the plantation to become cursed – prefiguring Paul Laurence Dunbar's afflicted "Haunted Oak." Thus, just as slavery is often conceptualized as America's original sin, the joint abuse of African Americans and nature is conceived of as America's original blight in America's originating black works of literature.

The black-green thread weaves its way through the African American canon all the way to the present day, appliqueing leaves onto the eponymous slave protagonist of "Po' Sandy," embroidering the chokecherry tree scar on the back of Sethe in *Beloved*, and, perhaps most boldly, sporting its colors in the lines I use in one of this Introduction's epigraphs. The verses come from an untitled poem by Lucille Clifton whose African American persona declares:

> being property once myself
> i have a feeling for it,
> that's why I can talk
> about environment.

Law and the Black Experience of Being Green

As Clifton's reference to property indicates, black-green writing necessarily concerns itself not just with landscape but with law. Indeed, it was law that initially cancelled African Americans from the human species into the realm of nature. As black relationships with the environment exist in the context of jurisprudential violence, this dissertation explores how ecocriticism can engage the law to read African American texts.

For example, Frederick Douglass laments, throughout his corpus, how antebellum law animalizes blacks. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he describes the valuation of his late owner's estate as follows:

> Men and women, young and old, married and single; moral and intellectual beings, in open contempt of their humanity, level at a blow with horses, sheep, horned cattle and swine! Horses and men--cattle and women--pigs and children--all holding the same rank

> in the scale of social existence; and all subjected to the same narrow inspection, to ascertain their value in gold and silver—the only standard of worth applied by slaveholders to slaves! How vividly, at that moment, did the brutalizing power of slavery flash before me! Personality swallowed up in the sordid idea of property! Manhood lost in chattelhood![11]

My Bondage, published in 1855, depicts slaves as having the legal status of livestock, a popular rhetorical – and common legal – framing. However, antebellum law was never quite sure what to make of slaves. It labored over whether they were beasts, land, people, hybrids, or intermediaries.

As A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. describes in his work *In the Matter of Color: The Colonial Period*, until 1705, colonial courts went back and forth over whether slaves should be considered livestock or land. Until 1671, Virginian estate law treated slaves left as inheritances to minor orphans as animals. Since orphans could not acquire title to their parents' estates until they reached their majority, livestock with two legs and four were to be sold immediately upon the decedent's demise, and the revenue was to go to the heir. Otherwise, the orphan would lose the value of animals or slaves who died, aged, or became disabled before he or she turned twenty-one.[12]

However, a 1705 Virginia law clarified that slaves were not livestock and were to be inherited as real estate – sort of. Slaves were land in the sense that they could be sold by real estate creditors to pay off a mortgage. But, because slaves could reproduce, while an estate

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[11] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. John David Smith (1855; repr., New York: Penguin, 2003), 128-29.

[12] A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: The Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 51.

remained in the domain of an executor, slave children born after their master died could, like farm animals, be seized to pay the deceased's non-real estate debts. The classification of slaves as land was then adopted by other colonies.[13]

Given these sorts of convolutions, it is not surprising that, as William W. Fisher III explains, some legal historians have thrown up their hands in frustration, insisting that scholars cannot speak of a singular "law of slavery" and concluding, rather, that antebellum American law imagined blacks, as convenience dictated, differently across time and space.[14] Thus, the Mississippi Supreme Court held in 1829 that "[i]n some respects slaves may be considered as chattels, but in others, they are regarded as men"[15] while, thirty years later, it would insist that African Americans existed in "an intermediate state between the irrational animal and the white man."[16] In the first instance, slaves were people and objects; in the second, not quite people nor creatures. Yet in a Tennessee case decided between these two, the court insisted, "A slave is not the condition of a horse or an ox" but, rather, had equal humanity to his owner despite his subordinate legal rights.[17] Courts in the same jurisdictions changed their minds about slaves – and free blacks'—status across time and sometimes even within short periods of

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[13] Ibid., 50, 52-53.

[14] William W. Fisher III, "Ideology and Imagery in the Law of Slavery," in *Slavery & the Law*, ed. Paul Finkelman (Madison: Madison House, 1997), 45.

[15] Ibid., 45, 72.

[16] Ibid., 57, 81.

[17] Ibid., 65, 84.

it, and courts in different jurisdictions reached wildly divergent conclusions about slave/black humanity/animality during the same eras. To the extent consistencies were extant, they existed to slaves' detriment -- slaves were conveniently considered volitional humans who deserved the consequences of their rational acts when they were on trial for committing crime.[18] Thus, the predominant sense many legal scholars get when examining slave law is one of indeterminacy and instability. Accordingly, much of African American literature depicts a slippage between black and green.

The History of Ecocriticism

I noted earlier that scholarly work on ecocriticism typically discusses two initial waves.[19] The first took up texts primarily from the genre of "nature writing," and nature, itself, was narrowly defined as relatively unpopulated spaces such as "the wild," the forest, farm country,

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[18] Jenny Bourne Wahl, "The Bondsman's Burden: An Economic Analysis of the Jurisprudence of Slaves and Common Carriers," *The Journal of Economic History* 53, no. 3 (1993): 498. JSTOR.

[19] For discussion of the first two waves of ecocriticism, see: Rosendale, "Introduction"; Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and The Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013.; Gambier, John Blair. *Positive Pollutions and Cultural Toxins: Waste and Contamination in Contemporary U.S. Ethnic Literatures*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012.; Mcnee, Malcolm K. *Environmental Imaginary in Brazilian Poetry and Art*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.; Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.; Heise, Ursula K. Afterword to *Postcolonial Green: Environmental Politics and World Narratives,* edited by Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010.

etc. (I use "genre" to mean a collection of works sharing "common textual characteristics").[20] Thus, ecocentrism's first wave glorified the biocentric over the androcentric.[21]

The second wave moved from focusing on nature writing to examining nature wherever it appeared in writing. It recognized not just Walden Pond but urban flora as making up the environment. Furthermore, second wave ecocriticism realized that explorations of literary nature could not be extricated from anthropocentric matters such as racism, sexism, and colonialism.

Early African American ecocritical texts such as Melvin Dixon's 1987 work *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, which looked at nature as a site of refuge and cultural revitalization in African American writing, did not inspire a rash of subsequent black ecocritical work. In fact, the term "African American ecocriticism" appears not to have been coined until Anissa Janine Wardi used it in her 2011 book *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective*[22] ten years after Kathleen Wallace and Karla Armbruster lamented the absence of both black authored texts as the subject of ecocriticism and black ecocritics.[23] Wardi's book criticized first wave ecocriticism for its Eurocentrism and

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[20] Amy J. Devitt, *Writing Genres* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 164, Project MUSE.

[21] Bennett, Michael, "Different Shades of Green," *College Literature* 31, no. 3 (2004): 208. Project MUSE.

[22] Tayana L. Hardin, review of *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective*, by Anissa Janine Wardi, *Callaloo* 37, no. 2 (2014): 457. Project MUSE.

[23] Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster, introduction to *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001).

called for African American ecocriticism to attend to the relationships between black humans, the natural world, and African spiritual cosmologies.[24]

Yet, it must be noted that during the decade before the term “African American ecocriticism” was coined (as a means of describing ecocriticism informed by the black experience), works such as *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature* by Jeffery Myers, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* by Paul Outka, and *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860* by Ian Frederick Finseth had begun to diversify the field.[25]

Myers examined the intersection of race and nature in nineteenth century writing. Outka looked comparatively at white and black experiences of environment as well as at the role nature plays in the social construction of race. And Finseth attended to links between racial discourse and natural thought.

And a mere year before “African American ecocriticism” was given a name, Kimberley N. Ruffin published *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* which put forth an “ecological burden-and-beauty paradox.” Per this paradox, literature records how African Americans shoulder the ecological burden of forced and/or exploited labor in the natural world.

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[24] Anissa Janine Wardi, *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 15.

[25] Scott Hicks, review of *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* by Kimberly N. Ruffin, *African American Review* 45, no. 3 (2012): 485-487. Project MUSE.

Yet, even though the landscape is an arena of racial oppression for African Americans, they are still able to recognize it as a site of beauty.[26]

Locating the African Roots of African American Ecoliterature

My own approach to ecocriticism is informed by my multiracial identity. The prominence of nature in the traditional (by which I mean precolonial and religion-inflected) stories of my Cherokee people made me query whether the green in my African American literary heritage might have analogous indigenous roots. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. had identified Esu-Elegbara as providing the matrix for the repetition and revision that are hallmarks of African American literature.[27] I wondered if the orisha had a counterpart to whom the green in black authored-works might be sourced.

He did: Ananse.

Ananse, a prominent figure in the folklore of several West African and diasporic cultures, is both man and spider. However, Ananse is not a shapeshifter. He no more literally morphs bodies than the protagonist of *Invisible Man* is actually imperceptible. As David Afriyie Donkor argues, “When we observe Ananse now as a human and then as a spider, we are not seeing changes in his form but rather shifts in the narrative point of view that emphasize one or

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[26] Kimberly N. Ruffin, *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Tradition* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 3.

[27] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 21.

another of his characteristics."[28] In other words, Ananse is like the reality show contestant who protests he was merely edited to look like a villain.

In demystifying how Ananse tales work, Donkor unwittingly evokes African American writing. Like Ananse stories, African American texts allow us to observe beings one moment black, the next green, individuals laboring to maintain a sense of self in the face of a larger society and legal system that only inconsistently recognizes their humanity.

Black-Green Tropes

To do this, African American literature makes use of a collection of verdant tropes. Consider, for example, the device of the tree-involved lynching that curses the environment. Earlier, I used *The Bondwoman's Narrative* and "The Haunted Oak" as examples of this device. However, it also appears in Charles Chesnutt's "Po' Sandy." In that story, the slave Sandy is magically transformed into a tree that is then chopped down. He ultimately becomes a ghost said to haunt his plantation after the demise of slavery. Then, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe recalls "boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world" on her former plantation.[29] This plantation is a place Sethe believes to be under the sort of (inexplicit) curse that would subject one who returned there to antebellum horrors. Relatedly, Celie, of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, imagines she is a tree to effect stoicism as a means of surviving abuse. Later, she curses Mister, her abuser.

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28 David Afriyie Donkor, *Spiders of the Market: Ghanaian Trickster Performance in a Web of Neoliberalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 70, Project MUSE.

29 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 5.

In the earliest incarnation of the trope in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the reader is presented with the doubled oppressions of African Americans and nature. But in other revisions, blacks *become* nature (as they did under antebellum law), rendering the subjugation of blacks and the environment one and the same. Like Ananse, Sandy and Celie are sometimes human, sometimes natural beings. And, as with Ananse, the form in which they appear is determined by the perspective from which they are perceived. It is the denigrating gaze that ultimately makes Sandy and Celie trees.

Another device is the notion of a bodily link between blacks and nature: Sethe developing tree-like scars across her back after a savage whipping or Henry, a slave in Charles Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine," taking on the physical characteristics of the titular plant. Even Janie, watching bees drink from the calyxes of a pear tree in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and experiencing arousal as if she herself were engaging in a sexual act is an example of this device.

The idea of a corporeal link between African Americans and nature hearkens to Ananse whose body is that of both a human and a natural creature. In Ananse stories, changes to the being's body that occur when he is functioning as a person alter his spider anatomy. For example, when anthropomorphized Ananse attempts to steal hot food by carrying it away in his hat, the damage to his scalp renders spiders "bald."[30]

Like Ananse, Sethe and Henry experience injury – the brutality of slavery. In the gazes of their owners – and from the perspective of antebellum law, both these African American

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[30] Donkor, *Spiders of the Market*, 69.

characters are subhuman property, and their human bodies are transformed by the violence they suffer in their dehumanized state. However, as the example of Janie reminds us, the corporeal connection between black and green is not always violent. The bodily link engenders pleasure in Janie.

Another trait exemplifying black-green writing is cross-species empathy forged in the context of racial oppression – a spiritual conjunction to the bodily dialectic. In “The Haunted Oak,” a tree loses all its foliage from the trauma of being used as a leaf-and-branch gallows during a lynching. And Pauline Breedlove, a character in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, rankles at a racist white doctor who, regarding her as a mare, claims that she will give birth painlessly like a horse -- she defends her own humanity, then promptly, empathetically, acknowledges that a horse must also feel delivery pains. As noted, Lucille Clifton’s black persona declares in her untitled poem:

> being property once myself
> i have a feeling for it,
> that’s why I can talk
> about environment.

while the Nikki Giovanni poem “Sanctuary: For Harry Potter the Movie” compares the eponymous hero’s survival of an attack by an evil wizard to real world suffering experienced by African Americans, Native Americans, and Jews – as well as elephants, manatees, and the savannah. And in Frank X Walker’s poem “The River Speaks,” a river visited by York, the slave of Lewis and Clark, laments how white invaders oppress both non-whites and nature.

Befitting a genre with a spider-man as one of its ancestors, a fourth marker typifying African American literature is the notion of nonhuman personhood. This biocentric ideology responds to the socio-legal contraction of the human species to the white race with a radical

expansion of personhood to other species. The African American notion of nonhuman personhood should not be confused with the Western literary technique of personification. Personification endows non-humans with human traits. Personhood endows non-humans with what are typically thought of as human rights.

Thus, the river in Frank X Walker's poem is not merely personified as empathetic but is granted personhood in the sense that it is presented as having a right to self-determination -- to not being dammed or having its route redirected. Self-determination is also affirmed as the birthright of nonhuman creatures in Clifton's aforementioned poem which continues on to say:

> what wants to be a tree,
> ought to be he can be it.
> same thing for other things.
> same thing for men.[31]

And the persona of "Sanctuary" invokes the right of an elephant calf not to be taken from its family, forcibly transported from its home, placed in captivity, and subjected to violence.

In defense of African American humanity, black writing employs yet another trope – the use of natural imagery to rehabilitate racial self-esteem. For example, "The Brown Legacy (To a Brown Boy)," by Effie Lee Newsome claims, "'Tis a noble gift to be brown" because brown is the color of "the strongest things that make up this earth" such as mountains and tree trunks.[32] "Portraiture," by Anita Scott Colemen, salutes black men as representing "the tall trees that

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[31] Clifton, "[being property once myself]," 2.

[32] Effie Lee Newsome, "The Brown Legacy (To a Brown Boy),"in *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* ed. Maureen Honey (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 117.

remain / Standing in a forest after a fire."[33] Pointedly, a third poem, Bessie Mayle's "[Night is like an avalanche]," not only argues for the power of blackness but contrasts it with the relative weakness of whiteness much as how in Langston Hughes' poem "Dream Variation" the persona anticipates the hour when "white day is done.… While night comes on gently, Dark like me)."[34] These verses, thus, bring us to a concomitant trope -- the use of nature to disparage whiteness and castigate white supremacy.

Consider "White Things" by Anne Spencer. The persona describes whites as aliens from Hell who invade earth only to wreak violence on the environment and blacks. Similarly, in Aqua Laluah's "Lullaby," an African American mother warns her baby daughter that if she does not go to sleep, the child will turn white and become sinister but, if she does slumber, she will remain a loving, pro-black infant who enjoys a healthy relationship with the natural world.

Finally, and most obviously in the mode of Ananse tales, there is the ubiquitous presence of protean African American characters whose mutability into natural objects and beings is a consequence of their oppression – from Sandy and Ben, of Charles Chesnutt's Conjure Woman stories, who become a tree and clay respectively to Celie, who insists she makes herself into a tree to survive abuse, to Jadine, the figurative ondine of Morrison's *Tar Baby*, who slips in and out of a literal sealskin coat as she toys with the fantasy of being able to divest herself of her blackness to Frederick Douglass who traces his metamorphoses back and

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[33] Anita Scott Coleman, "Portraiture," in Honey, *Shadowed Dreams*, 199.

[34] "Dream Variations," Poets.org, accessed May 15, 2018, https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/dream-variations.

forth from a "stupid" beast to an enlightened man in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.[35] These literary transformation into and out of human form mirror how the law ushered blacks back and forth across the species barrier. Yet, as powerful and poignant as these devices are, the experience of being black and green is manifested most potently not through trope but linguistically and through narratology as the close readings that make up the rest of my dissertation shall reveal.

Next Chapters

The following chapter is about the work of Frederick Douglass. I explore how the former slave argues for black personhood and white animality using techniques traditional to Ananse tales as part of his broader project of crafting a spectacular humanity for African Americans. I also examine the exceptional failures of Douglass' astute gaze as he goes about his intensely optical labor – breakdowns that are occasioned by his eco-indifference. Finally, I offer a typology of the visual modes in which Douglass writes and an assessment of how nature fits into his aesthetic.

Chapter Two connects Charles Chesnutt's works and the Flint water crisis, while Chapter Three reveals how the author continually revises the tar baby story in his writing. Chapter Four analyzes nature, race, property, and revision in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*. Then, in Chapter Five, I analyze how Toni Morrison's *Home* illustrates the phenomena of blacks' social and biological deaths and attendant resurrection as green beings. Finally, my sixth chapter analyzes

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[35] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 118.

how a lesser known African American poet, C. S. Giscombe, envisions what black relationships with green could look like outside of the context of racial dehumanization.

African Americans, having been denied their humanity by law, did not write works that responded simplistically to this existential quandary by either rejecting any fraternity with non-human lifeforms or by accepting subhuman status. Rather, they crafted a tradition that centers revision of both texts and identities, that conceives of the experience of having been seen as subhuman as having produced a superhuman capability to connect with the natural world, and that celebrates the acquisition of the ability to speak in voices both black and green even as it laments the historical atrocities through which this skill was received.

Chapter One

You Shall See: The Green in the Gaze

Introduction

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[36]

Like African Americans, Ananse could be said to harbor two souls within his dark body. And, like African Americans, Ananse has the ability to see himself through his own eyes and through the eyes of others. But, as a trickster, Ananse makes use of the knowledge of how he is perceived and misperceived to attain his ends and even to subvert the power structure.[37]

Among the Akan, the West African people from whom stories of Ananse originate, folktales – whether they involve the spider-man or not -- are called Anansesɛm: "news that is Ananse-like" i.e. tricky.[38] I read *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass' second autobiography, as an Anansesɛm -- a tricky, Ananse-like text. Douglass constructs the book as a

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[36] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., Champaign: Project Gutenberg, 1996), Chapter 1, Project Gutenberg.

[37] See Donkor, *Spiders of the Market*.

[38] Ibid., 73.

designer does a house of mirrors so that the act of reading becomes an exercise in having one's gaze manipulated and challenged.

Consider, for example, these lines from near the beginning of the autobiography when Douglass is describing his childhood: "The first year or two which I spent in [owner Hugh Auld's] house, he left me almost exclusively to the management of his wife. She was my law-giver."[39] At first glance, the second sentence seems redundant parataxis. But "Law-giver" is an epithet for the abolitionist prophet Moses. Thus, the very line that first appears to emphasize the control Sophia has over Douglass actually puns to reveal Sophia as playing a role in Douglass' liberation: she begins teaching Douglass to read, the act that he sees as galvanizing his journey to freedom.

Even more subtly, in an earlier passage, Douglass declares, "A person of some consequence here in the north, sometimes designated *father*, is literally abolished in slave law and slave practice."[40] Soon after, Douglass describes his first owner Captain Anthony as being "*really* a man of *some consequence*" [italics mine].[41] And Douglass' statement, "I say nothing of father for he is shrouded in a mystery I have never been able to penetrate"[42] as well as his lament that slavery "shrouded my father in mystery"[43] further use repetition to hint at

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[39] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 107.

[40] Ibid., 30.

[41] Ibid., 36.

[42] Ibid., 41.

[43] Ibid., 47.

Douglass' paternity – Anthony is thrice described as "mysterious."[44] And Douglass even notes that he got "a regular whipping from [Anthony], such as any heedless and mischievous boy might get *from his father*" [italics mine].[45] Douglass claims, "There was a whisper, that my master was my father; yet it was only a whisper, and I can't say that I ever gave it credence. Indeed, I have reason to think he was not…."[46] Nevertheless, Douglass allows the text to whisper the rumor, too.

"Hush and listen for the whispers," such passages coax. "Look deeper."

In *My Bondage*, Douglass first discovers the power of perspective on his liminal journey from his grandmother's cabin to Anthony's domicile, a trip which marks the transition from his happy life with his grandparents and cousins far from the presence of a master to his "first introduction to the realities of slavery." Of the walk Douglass and his grandmother take through the woods, Douglass recalls:

> Several old logs and stumps imposed upon me, and got themselves taken for wild beasts. I could see their legs, eyes, and ears, or I could see something like eyes, legs, and ears, till I got close enough to them to see that the eyes were knots, washed white with rain, and the legs were broken limbs, and the ears, only ears owing to the point from which they were seen. Thus early I learned that the point from which a thing is viewed is of some importance.[47]

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[44] Ibid., 33, 36, 151.

[45] Ibid., 97.

[46] Ibid., 46.

[47] Ibid., 38.

At the very moment Douglass is transitioning between life as a beloved grandson to a chattel slave, from a person to livestock, he recognizes just how mutable existence is. Perspective determines whether one sees a beast or a plant. And, more pertinently, perspective determines whether one sees a beast or a man.

In the Introduction of this dissertation, I described how Ananse storytellers create the effect of their protagonist morphing between forms by manipulating narrative perspective. Although Douglass uses a plethora of narratological, rhetorical, and linguistic devices to create the literary equivalent of optical illusions, similar to his African antecedents, his primary trick is controlling the lens so that, before our very eyes, white slaveholders are animalized and African Americans, humanized. It is this trick that makes Douglass' writing appropriate for ecocritical study. [48] For Douglass' work is green not because it describes people going out into nature but because it limns the nature, the beastliness, the wild *inside* humans.[49] It is green because it

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[48] Others have also studied Douglass ecocritically. For example, Michael Bennett, in "Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery," describes Douglass' writings as part of an anti-pastoral tradition in which rural spaces are sites of oppression and the urban north represents paradise. In contrast, Lance Newman's "Free Soil and the Abolitionist Forests of Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave'" posits the woods in Douglass' novel as a site of liberalization.

[49] Thomas J. Hillard says that in *Narrative* Douglass "consciously adopts the conventions of the Gothic as a means of resistance; he effectively inverts the common language used to demean and denigrate slaves and uses it not only to describe slave owners as vicious animals, but slavery itself as a Gothic wilderness that can transform otherwise good people into savage beasts." Thomas J. Hillard, "Dark Nature: The Gothic Tradition of American Nature Writing" (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2006), 195. While Hillard locates Douglass within the Gothic tradition, I shall demonstrate why I view Douglass as working in the vein of Ananse stories.

focuses on the natural community, but not as something for African Americans to seek to become part of but rather as something African Americans must distinguish themselves from.

Thus, I will first show Douglass to be a diasporic teller of Ananse tales whose work invites an examination of his strategies for animalizing and humanizing. I will look, in particular, at how Douglass humanizes himself and animalizes his owners.

This exploration of humanizing and animalizing is turn leads to a discussion of how Douglass' ideas about what assigned beings to one category or the other were bound up with the subject of photography. Douglass thought extensively about the medium, arguing, in one of his essays, that humanity was defined by the unique ability to make and appreciate pictures. Therefore, I examine the visual aspect of Douglass' humanizing efforts, focusing on how he "photoshops" the memory of a childhood visit from his mother to dignify himself and the black race. Then, I analyze how Douglass understands the act of picture-making to require the same skills as functioning as a legal actor, and how his use of photography to display his humanity parallels his literary performances of jurisprudential reasoning.

Douglass' employment of photography and writing to craft spectacular humanity must be considered in the light of nineteenth century responses to the performance of personhood. So, next, I limn how in the ruling of the *Belle Creole* case – which was about whether successfully revolting slaves were insurable by their former owners -- and the passage of the *quid pro quo* law that granted freedom to the "wives" of fugitive slaves who fought for the Union army, African Americans earned their liberty by performing humanity through insurrecting and marrying. And I show how, inspired, in particular, by the revolt on the *Belle*

Creole, Douglass framed his own uprising against Edward Covey as an exhibition of his personhood.

Unfortunately, Douglass had to battle for his humanity not just against slaveholders but also against abolitionists as his revision of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* into *My Bondage* reveals. The latter book, as I shall demonstrate, is far more artful than the former, and the difference between the texts reflects the tension between the dehumanizing instructions of William Lloyd Garrison and his peers to tell the story of slavery as simply as possible and then step aside so that whites could intellectualize on the subject and Douglass' urge to prove himself a full human being by exercising his cognitive powers through spinning his history into literary and oral masterpieces.

Given Douglass' project of distinguishing himself and his people from beasts, it is not surprising that his relationship with the natural world was fraught. I next explore how this tension manifests itself in three green moments in *My Bondage* when Douglass' otherwise sharp powers of vision fail him: his analysis of his experience with root working, his (mis)understanding of fellow slave Sandy's prophetic dream of birds, and his youthful misperception of other slaves as stupid beasts.

Finally, I consider how Douglass' attention to humanity, animality, and the eye invite the construction of a typology of the visual modes in which he writes and an assessment of how nature fits into his aesthetic. Douglass *perceives* moral intangibles, *reflects/develops* his experiences into derivative fiction, and uses *mise en abyme* in his novel *The Heroic Slave* to tuck his own story into that of his protagonist. Furthermore, he *sees* superficial realities in

Narrative, *looks* with the more critical eye of an artist in *My Bondage*, and *directs* when slyly manipulating the gaze, particularly when employing animalizing or humanizing techniques.

How a Slave Becomes a Man: The Art of Metamorphosis

When tellers of Ananse stories seek to anthropomorphize him, they do so by exhibiting his savvy in navigating civil society.[50] Douglass employs the same strategy. Starting with the part of his memoir in which he has mastered the trade of calking, Douglass flaunts his ability to function as a legal actor to negate the idea he should be a legal object.

He describes "contracting" for his services and making "transactions." And in the very next sentence, he refers to being able "to increase my little *stock* of education" [italics mine] by getting tutoring from other calkers.[51] He thrusts before the reader's gaze terms connoting law, property, contracts, transactions, and the marketplace.

While describing life as a calker, Douglass wonders, "'*Why should I be a slave?'* There was *no* reason why I should be the thrall of any man." He then reflects:

> Besides, I was now getting—as I have said—a dollar and fifty cents per day. I contracted for it, worked for it, earned it, collected it; it was paid to me, and it was *rightfully* my own; and yet, upon every returning Saturday night, this money—my own hard earnings, every cent of it—was demanded of me, and taken from me by Master Hugh…. He had given me no schooling, and I had received from him only my food and raiment; and for these, my services were supposed to pay, from the first. The right to take my earnings, was the right of the robber. He had the power to compel me to give him the fruits of my labor, and this power was his only right in the case. I became more and more dissatisfied with this state of things; and, in so becoming, I only gave proof of the same

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[50] Kwesi Yankah, "The Akan Trickster Cycle: Myth or Folktale" (graduate term paper, Indiana University, 1983), 7, IUScholarWorks.

[51] Douglas, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 232.

> human nature which every reader of this chapter in my life—slaveholder, or nonslaveholder—is conscious of possessing.[52]

Why should Douglass not be a slave? Not because, as Shylock pointed out, if you prick him, he bleeds and tickle him, he laughs. Not because he is made in the *imago dei*. No, Douglass should not be a slave because he functions in the marketplace, contracting, earning, collecting, and getting paid.

The evil of slavery presented to the reader here is not the physical violence or forced separation from loved ones described elsewhere. Douglass' complaint represents not a human rights claim but a contract dispute: He protests not being held captive but being "robbed" and laments not the theft of his being but the theft of his contracted for earnings.

Syntax reveals the depth of Douglass' outrage at the de jure unrecognizability of his rights. The use of anaphora -- the series of not one or two but four verbs followed by "it" – underscores Douglass' claim to his wages, as does the redundancy of "collected it; it was paid to me." And the sentence is a run on as though a line of grammatically correct length simply could not contain his indignation.

Earlier in the text, Douglass describes slave plantations as places where the "laws and institutions of the state" do not "touch," a place where "troubles… are not settled by the civil power of the state. The overseer is generally accuser, judge, jury, advocate, and executioner. The criminal is always dumb. The overseers attends to all sides of a case."[53] The slave

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[52] Ibid., 233.

[53] Ibid., 50.

narrative, then, is Douglass' court of appeals. Indeed, Douglass' preface to *My Bondage* puts the book in a legal light: "that this system [of slavery] is now at the bar of public opinion—not only of this country, but of the whole civilized world—for judgement. Its friends have made for it the usual pleas—'not guilty;' the case must, therefore proceed,"[54] and he explicitly frames his situation with Hugh as a "case."[55] An attorney's closing argument is thus spliced into the memoir as Douglass provides details irrelevant to the reader such as how much his wages were and upon which day he had to turn them over to his owner but which *would* be probed were he in a court of law.

The opening of the paragraph with the casual, conversational, almost sheepish "besides" suggests Douglass knows he is not putting forth what some would consider the most fundamental claim here. It is as though he is aware the reader expects him to follow his dramatic, italicized, poignant question, "*Why should I be a slave?*" with an existential answer and not one addressing transactional concerns. But lest the reader think Douglass' complaints are purely fiscal, the last sentence of the paragraph shows Douglass is searching for both damages *and* declaratory relief.

Yes, he wants to demonstrate Hugh's thieving ways, but what he ultimately seeks to "prove" is his own humanity. Hugh's deeds are offered as evidence of his perfidy, but Douglass' *awareness* of the wrongfulness of those deeds is marshalled as evidence of Douglass' humanity. Indeed, Douglass' preface to *My Bondage* explains, "Not only is slavery on trial, but

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[54] Ibid., 6.

[55] Ibid., 233.

unfortunately, the enslaved people are also on trial. It is alleged they are, naturally, inferior; that they are so low in the scale of humanity, and so utterly stupid, that they are unconscious of their wrongs, and do not apprehend their rights."[56]

With humanity on trial in *My Bondage*, Douglass further demonstrates what a civilized human being he is by showing himself to be not just a legal actor but a lay lawyer.[57] Consider how he revises the passage from its original appearance in *Narrative* to make it more persuasive as though aiming it at a jury. It is in *My Bondage* that "rightfully" gets italicized. The anaphora gets extended to have even greater weight: to "I contracted for it; I earned it; it was paid to me; it was rightfully my own" gets added "worked for it" and "collected it." Instead of simply saying, "upon each returning Saturday night, I was compelled to deliver every cent of that money to Master Hugh" as he does in *Narrative*,[58] in *My Bondage*, Douglass dramatically and pathetically underscores "upon each returning Saturday night, this money—my own hard earnings, every cent of it—was demanded of me, and taken from me by Master Hugh."

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[56] Frederick Douglass, preface to *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

[57] Though she does not treat this passage or the following two passages I invoke, Jeannine Marie DeLombard similarly "reads Douglass's personal narratives and oratory of the 1840s and 1850s to suggest that his revised self-fashioning—from witness to advocate—represents his growing appreciation that independent black advocacy was indispensable to the struggle for African American citizenship." Jeannine Marie DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial: Law, Abolitionism, and Print Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 27. Project MUSE.

[58] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*, ed. Benjamin Quarles (1845; repr., Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), 133.

Narrative follows that sentence by posing the rhetorical question, "And why?" which is answered *not* because Auld has helped Douglass earn the money nor because Douglass owes the money to Auld but rather because Auld has power over Douglass.[59] But in *My Bondage,* Douglass adds a new legal argument for why Auld has no right to the money; it is here an imagined contractual agreement in which "food and raiment" are exchanged for labor is invoked.

Framing the passage from *Narrative*, Douglass says, "[The slave] must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man."[60] But in *My Bondage*, Douglass says something slightly different. He states, "He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery. The man that takes his earnings, must be able to convince him that he has a perfect right to do so."[61] The slave who detects no inconsistencies in *Narrative feels* the wrong thing, but the slave who detects no inconsistencies in *My Bondage* is unaware of the legal claims he ought have. Douglass moves from the pathos experienced by all sentient beings to the legal reasoning exclusive to humans.

Douglass engages in similar legalistic revision of this passage from *Narrative*:

> "The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery…. I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 233.

> blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit…. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing [sic] no matter what, to get rid of thinking!"[62]

In *Narrative,* reading leads Douglass to hate his enslavers. In *My Bondage,* he is "led to abhor and detest slavery, and my enslavers" – to hate the legal system first and secondarily those who perpetrate it. In *Narrative*, literacy causes Douglass to regard himself as trapped in a pit. In *My Bondage*, he is confined not simply to a pit but within a "moral dungeon," a carceral space as it were. To follow a clause that appears in both texts about a silver trump that rouses the spirit,[63] *My Bondage* adds, "Liberty! The inestimable birthright of every man, had, for me, converted every object into an asserter of this great right," supplying rights language and the language of inheritance.[64]

These revisions reveal how Douglass' self-consciousness empowers him to play to his crowd and contrasts with Du Bois' rather curious depiction of the second-sighted black race as passive. For although, as Douglass demonstrates, the capacity to look at oneself through the eyes of others is concomitant with the ability to exert some control over how one is seen, in Du Bois, one finds no hint of Langston Hughes' mask or the masquerading of Dr. Bledsoe and the narrator's grandmother in *Invisible Man*. But just as a child's burgeoning ability to view reality through both her own eyes and through the eyes of others is what allows her to reach the

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[62] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 67.

[63] Ibid., 67-68.

[64] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 118

developmental milestone of lying, Douglass treats double consciousness as a resource to be employed to blacks' advantage, moving African Americans from objects of the gaze to subjects who orchestrate it.

A version of Du Bois' "twoness" figures into this passage. But the two souls at war in Douglass are not that of an American and a Negro but rather of an animal and a man. Douglas cannot "reconcile" his "strivings" to be either a free human or an animal insensate to the wrongfulness of slavery. These "warring ideals" indeed nearly "tear" him "asunder."

However, Douglass becomes more careful of his language in *My Bondage* like a lawyer not wanting anything to go in the record that an adversary could make use of on appeal. In *Narrative*, "I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity."[65] In, *My Bondage*, he only "almost" does so.[66] In *Narrative*, "I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing."[67] In *My Bondage*, Douglass admits no such thing. In the *My Bondage* passage, no matter how much pain enlightenment causes him, Douglass is unwilling to concede even the possibility that he would be better off without it.

The most explicit example of Douglass lawyering is his defense of himself and his co-conspirators when they are arrested for attempting to escape to freedom -- a moment entirely absent from *Narrative*. In that incident, Douglass' owner Thomas Auld tells the would-be

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[65] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 67.

[66] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 118.

[67] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 67.

fugitives "that the evidence he had of our intention to run away, was strong enough to hang us, in a case of murder."[68]

Douglass' sophisticated pro se reply is "But… the cases are not equal. If murder were committed, some one [sic] must have committed it—the thing is done! In our case, nothing has been done! We have not run away. Where is the evidence against us? We were quietly at our work."[69]

Douglass' lay defense is striking for the use of multiple tactics employed by lawyers. First, Douglass distinguishes his case from adverse precedent. Second, he invokes the idea of the prima facie case and points out that murder and escape have different elements. Third, he draws a distinction between inchoate and completed crimes. And fourth, he intuits – through logic, in the utter absence of legal education – what a prosecutor typically must prove in the case of an inchoate crime – intention to the commit the crime *and* the taking of an initial step in furtherance of it. Douglass' famous chiasmus from *Narrative* may declare, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man,"[70] but in these passages, we see how a man instrumentalized by law masters and performs legal reasoning to exhibit the breadth of his human faculties.

But let us return to the "*Why should I be a slave?*" passage. Just as Douglass' awareness of himself as a legal actor and his ability to function as a legal advocate prove his humanity,

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[68] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 217.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 97.

Hugh's exploitation of Douglass reveals him to be an animal. Douglass' chiasmus is, as I have noted, absent from *My Bondage.* Nevertheless, in this paragraph, we see how Douglass the slave is made, by his participation in the legal realm and his consciousness of himself as a right-bearer, a man. As for the other half the chiasmus – we also see how Hugh, whose humanity as a white person is initially taken for granted, is made, by narrative craft, an animal.

For while Douglass demonstrates his civilized nature through his mastery of capitalism and his championing of socio-legal norms, Hugh shows himself to be an uncivilized "robber" who transgresses those norms. Douglass deals in rights; Hugh, in brute "power." Ananse's immorality – particularly his exploitative native – is an aspect of his spider side.[71] And, working in the mode of an Ananse storyteller, Douglass links vice and animality to dehumanize Hugh and other slaveowners.

In folktales, when Ananse's schemes fail, he often flees not to the farm where his anthropomorphized self dwells but to spider lairs such as building rafters, shady corners, and his web.[72] Similarly, Hugh, exposed as a predator and a parasite, can only take refuge de jure law that is actually nothing more than the crude dynamics of Adam Smith's state of nature cynically formalized.

Another example of Douglass dehumanizing his owners may be found in the section of memoir in which Douglass steals away from the monstrously abusive Edward Covey, the

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[71] Donkor, *Spiders of the Market*, 68.

[72] Alphonse Kwawisi Tekpetey, "Kweku Ananse: A Psychoanalytical Approach," *Research in African Literatures* 37, no. 2 (2006): 75. Project MUSE and Donkor, *Spiders of the Market*, 69.

“Negro-breaker” Thomas has assigned to subdue him, to ask Thomas to spare him from further brutalization at Covey’s hand. Strategically deploying his second sight, Douglass sees himself through both his own and Thomas’ eyes – as both a battered young man and as chattel in danger of losing its value due to Covey’s damage. But he also spies a two-ness in Thomas analogous to the two-ness Du Bois sees in blacks. In Thomas’ case, the duality consists of the warring impulses both to humanity and to inhuman savagery. Thus, Douglass reflects:

> If not animated by motives of humanity, he might be induced to interfere on my behalf from selfish considerations. “He cannot,” thought I, “allow his property to be thus bruised and battered, marred and defaced; and I will go to him, and tell him the simple truth about the matter.”[73]

Douglass counts on either the human in Thomas recognizing Douglass as a human worthy of humane treatment or the monster in Thomas viewing Douglass as property Thomas must not let Covey destroy. (Douglass portrays others of his owners engaged in similar existential battles, describing Anthony as being “at war with his own soul”[74] and Sophia, torn between her tendency to treat Douglass as a son and her urge to abide by her husband’s wish to regard him as chattel, as engaged in “a mighty struggle with all the noble powers of her own soul”).[75]

Douglass illustrates Thomas with language that anticipates the cyborg. The young slave enters Thomas’ presence with “an appearance of wretchedness and woe, fitted to move

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[73] Douglass, *My Bondage and My* Freedom, 166.

[74] Ibid., 62.

[75] Ibid., 113.

any but a *heart of stone*" [italics mine].[76] And as Douglass describes the abuse he has suffered at Covey's hands, Thomas is initially mildly sympathetic but then "repressed his feelings and became cold as *iron*" [italics mine].[77]

As Craig M. Klugman explains in his article "From Cyborg Fiction to Medical Reality," Manfred E. Clynes and Nathan S. Kline invented the term "cyborg" – short for "cybernetic organism" – in 1960. "[A] cyborg," Klugman explains, "is composed of human, mechanical, and electrical systems organized to function as a living person."[78] Clynes and Kline imagined the cyborg as being able to function in outer space.

But in 1985, Donna Haraway's seminal essay "Manifesto for Cyborgs" invested the term with a metaphorical connotation. Harraway envisioned the cyborg as a dichotomy-busting hybrid blurring boundaries "such as male/female, human/animal, human/machine, self/other, and mind/body."[79] Douglass endlessly describes slaveholding as unnatural, and he depicts Thomas as having had to become a cyborg – a being of stone and iron as well as flesh – to navigate a world as alien to the normal human condition as outer space. Thomas' "human nature" is incompatible with the social construction of slavery, thus he must become inhuman and unnatural – must construct himself like a machine, transplanting his heart for a heart of

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[76] Ibid., 167.

[77] Ibid., 168.

[78] Craig M. Klugman, "From Cyborg Fiction to Medical Reality," *Literature and Medicine* 20, no. 1 (2001): 40, Project MUSE.

[79] Ibid., 41.

stone and repressing his feelings to refashion parts of himself from iron. Through their blurring of the boundaries between human and inhuman, both Thomas and Ananse are proto-cyborgs.

Douglass treats – and invites the reader to view -- Thomas like Ananse. That is to say, Douglass regards him as a creature with both bestial and human natures, either of which might come to the fore at any given moment. He had hoped "that Capt. Auld would now show himself in a nobler light than I had ever before seen him," but, alas, "I had fled from the tiger to something worse." "At first, master Thomas seemed somewhat affected by the story of my wrongs, but he soon repressed his feelings and became cold as iron." "I distinctly saw his human nature asserting its conviction against the slave system which made cases [of abuse] like mine possible; but, as I have said, humanity fell before the systematic tyranny of slavery."[80]

One may think here of genetics in which one finds genotypes and phenotypes. An organism's genotypes contain all the genetic information it carries while its phenotypes visually manifest only some of that information. A human, for example, may have a parent with blue eyes and a parent with brown eyes. That individual thus has the genotypes for both blue eyes and brown and the potential to bear a child with either blue eyes or brown eyes. However, the individual will only bear the phenotype of either blue eyes or brown.

Similarly, Ananse is capable of presenting as either spider or human, but at different times, he manifests one side of himself or the other more strongly before the narrative gaze. Thomas is the same. Douglass awaits to see how Thomas will "show himself" and laments when he ultimately chooses not to be a man but a beast worse than a tiger. Thomas "seemed"

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[80] Douglas, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 168.

affected by Douglass' story -- but only temporarily. Douglass "saw" Thomas' "human nature" attempt to assert itself in vain.

(In contrast, when Hugh is faced with the ghastly sight of Douglass after he is the subject of a racist attack by his white coworkers in a shipyard, Hugh shows himself to be in "every way more humane than… his brother, Thomas" when Douglass asked Thomas to spare him from Covey. Unlike Thomas with his heart of stone, Hugh proves himself to be a "manly-hearted fellow," and while the mechanized Thomas' humanity retreats from Douglass' despairing gaze, Hugh's "best nature showed itself").[81]

Douglass watches as Thomas feels "his twoness" "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one" *light* body "whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." He can see each soul as it rises to the surface and sinks, becoming visible in and then disappearing from Thomas' countenance. Thomas is indeed nearly torn asunder by the war inside him: "He first walked the floor, apparently much agitated by my story,"[82] but the fight ultimately concludes with Thomas resolutely choosing to give in to his inhumanity.

Kwesi Yankah states that Ananse's humanity "tapers off occasionally and *betrays* [his] animal tendencies."[83] Like a teller of Ananse tales, this is exactly how Douglass crafts the scene. Thomas is initially "agitated" by Douglass' harrowing experience, "but, presently, it was

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[81] Ibid., 230.

[82] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 168.

[83] Yankah, "The Akan Trickster Cycle," 7.

[Thomas'] turn to talk." And thereafter, Thomas' humanity "tapers off" as his inhumanity crescendos: "He began moderately… ending with a full justification of [Covey], and a passionate condemnation of me." Finally, pure animal, Thomas "*fiercely* demanded what I wished him to do in the case" [italics mine].[84] This scene is a nonfiction antecedent to Dr. Jekyll becoming Mr. Hyde. Indeed, in his lecture "The Nature of Slavery," Douglass observes that for the slave system to be maintained, "Nature must cease to be nature; men must become monsters; humanity must be transformed…."[85]

In addition to presaging the cyborg – a being that may be human and animal and/or human and machine, Douglass also depicts slaveowners as Frankenstein's monsters – that is to say, as creatures both living and dead, a more grotesque version of the duality Ananse exemplifies. After Anthony refuses to protect a horrifically whipped slave woman from the overseer in his employ, Douglass wonders, "Was he dead to all sense of humanity?"[86] Elsewhere, Douglass says of Sophia, "Her affectionate heart was not yet dead, though much hardened by time and by circumstances."[87]

Less subtly, yet also in the tradition of Anansesɛm, Douglass sometimes simply calls out slaveowners' bestial superficial attributes: thus, Covey is described as a "creature" with a "wolfish visage" who "[w]hen he spoke, it was from the corner of his mouth, and in a sort of

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[84] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 168.

[85] Douglass, "The Nature of Slavery," in Smith, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 332.

[86] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 64.

[87] Ibid., 230.

light growl, like a dog, when an attempt is made to take a bone from him."[88] Later, Covey's "wolfish face" turns "ferocious," and he ultimately attacks Douglass "with something of the savage fierceness of a wolf."[89] But even Douglass' disparaging of Covey's appearance is not as shallow as it first seems. What the description is actually doing is carefully inverting the tropes of negrophobic dehumanization.

As Thomas J. Hillard says of *Narrative*, "Certainly it is well known that Anglo slaveowners used this animal rhetoric as a tool of oppression; but many literate slaves such as Douglass were also able to co-opt that language and use it as a means of rhetorical resistance."[90] Thus, the emphasis on Covey's lupin features in *My Bondage* is a foil to the common depiction of African Americans as "pronagthous" or as having, as Dr. Samuel Cartwright of "drapetomania" fame put it, a "mouth and face projecting further forward in the profile than the brain" "more like the lower order of animals than any other species of the genus man."[91] Douglass, arguing for blacks' status as human as opposed to animal in his speech "The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered" derides how in stereotypical descriptions of blacks, the African Americans' "high cheek bones and retreating forehead, are especially

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[88] Ibid., 153-4.

[89] Ibid., 156.

[90] Hillard, "Dark Nature," 195.

[91] Saml. A. Cartwright, "Slavery in the Light of Ethnology," in *Cotton is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments: Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe, and Cartwright, on this Important Subject.*, ed. E. N. Elliott (August: Pritchard, Abbott & Loomis, 1860), 707, GALE CENGAGE Learning.

dwelt upon."[92] He therefore makes sure to offer a description of Covey's "forehead without dignity, and constantly in motion, and floating his passions, rather than his thoughts."[93]

But Covey's behavior, not just his appearance, gets the animal edit. Douglas describes how Covey spies on his slaves rather than "approach the spot where his hands were at work, in an open, *manly* and direct manner" [italics mine]. Just as Ananse's spider side is emphasized with details that reference mobility and environment when he runs across the surface of water or dwells in the rafters of a house, Douglass paints a vivid picture of how Covey "would creep and crawl, in ditches and gullies; hide behind stumps and bushes, and practice so much of the cunning of the serpent, that Bill Smith and I--between ourselves--never called him by any other name than 'the snake.'"[94]

Douglass notes, "We fancied that in his eyes and his gait we could see a snakish resemblance. One half of his proficiency in the art of Negro breaking, consisted, I should think, in this species of cunning."[95] Since he has previously observed that Covey's eyes are "greenish-gray,"[96] Douglass is once again flipping the practice of associating African phenotypes with animal features. And "species" flags Covey's reassignment to the animal kingdom in Douglass'

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[92] Frederick Douglass, *The Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered* (Rochester: Lee, Mann & Co., 1854), 29.

[93] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 154.

[94] Ibid., 157.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid., 153.

taxonomy. However, the description of Covey's *gait* as snake-like is at first befuddling. One wonders how someone's *walk* could resemble the movement of a creature that slithers upon the ground without legs.

Ananse is an arachnid trickster, but Douglass compares Covey to the animal considered wily in his own culture: the snake. But just as Ananse is not just *a* spider but *the* supernatural spider of the Akan cosmology, Douglass renders Covey as not just any snake but *the* serpent of Semitic cosmologies who fooled Eve into eating from the Tree of Knowledge. For, per Genesis, prior to being punished for its role in the fall of man, the serpent did not crawl on the ground. Rather, it moved upright – like Covey.[97]

The Biblical story of the serpent, like that of the other of the Bible's two talking animals, Balaam's donkey, is very much like an Ananse tale. (Douglass alludes to the donkey in the passage I shall treat next). In the Bible, as is common in Ananse stories, first the creature is anthropomorphized. Thus, in addition to speaking, the serpent is presented as having a human intelligence, a human motive for its actions, and a human investment in the affairs of people and God. And, as in an Ananse story, at the end of the tale, when the trickster is facing the consequences of his deceit, his animal nature comes to the fore.

In the Bible, the snake goes through a transformation that provides an etiological explanation for the reason it slithers upon the ground. In fact, there is even an Anansesɛm that parallels this Biblical narrative. For just as God punishes the serpent for challenging Him by

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[97] Other scholars have also called attention to Douglass' framing of Covey as the serpent, though for different reasons than I. Hillard, "Dark Nature," 191–92.

tricking the stewards of His garden by forcing him to crawl, in an Akan tale, God punishes Ananse for challenging Him by distracting the stewards of God's farm by slapping him to the ground, which flattens Ananse and leaves him, thereafter, only able to crawl.[98]

Covey's story, too, is etiological. As a Negro-breaker, Covey's aim is the same as the serpent's: to cause men to fall. And these fallen men are doomed, like Adam, to painful lifelong toil. But as Douglass repeatedly reminds the reader, slavery damages slaveholders, too. Thus, like the serpent, Covey is cursed to crawl on his belly through the dust.

When I read *My Bondage,* I also think of the Anansesɛm that depicts Ananse's acquisition of stories. In the tale, Nyame the sky god sets the price for stories as "a live python, a hornet's nest, a leopard, and an *Aboatia* (a magical dwarflike creature)."[99] The narrative details how Ananse procures each of these entities in succession, and the section of plot exploring his entrapment of the Aboatia is what has come to be known in the west as the tar baby story.[100]

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[98] Kwesi Yankah, "The Question of Ananse in Akan Mythology," in *Perspectives on Mythology: Proceedings of a Conference Organized by the Goethe-Institut and the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana between 21 and 24 October 1997*, ed. Esi Sutherland-Addy (Accra: Woeli Publishing Services, 1999), 136–37.

[99] Donkor, *Spiders of the Market*, 74.

[100] Douglass' acquisition of literacy through both buying lessons from peers and also tricking white children into teaching him to read is also reminiscent of this Anansesɛm. Ananse *purchases* his stories from Nyame the sky god, and he does so buy *tricking* into captivity the various creatures Nyame demands as compensation for the tales. Ibid., 75.

In the Ananseseɛm, Ananse lures the Aboatia to a gum-covered doll which the Aboatia assumes to be a real person. Provoked when the doll does not respond to the Aboatia's greeting, the Aboatia hits it and gets stuck in the gum.[101] The moral of the Ananseɛm is the same as that of this autobiography: the failure to see clearly, to look closely, entraps. To complacently accept illusion is to get tricked out of one's freedom or even one's humanity. And to the latter, the slaveholder is as vulnerable as the slave. One sees this in my next example of metamorphosis wherein Douglass describes how his increasing despair at being enslaved affects his relationship with Sophia.

Just as the unresponsive doll provokes the Aboatia, Douglass' "leaden, downcast, and discontented look, was very offensive to [Sophia]." And as with the doll, Douglass muteness' exacerbates Sophia's anger: "She did not know my trouble, and I dared not tell her. Could I have freely made her acquainted with the real state of my mind, and given her the reasons therefor, it might have been well for both of us." Alas, Douglass is chattel – he is the victim of what Aimé Césaire called "thingification" and can no more speak than a doll can: "such is the relation of master and slave I could not tell her." And, as in the Ananseɛm, Douglass' impertinent silence arouses "abuse of me… like the blows of the false prophet upon his ass." Ultimately, Sophia is trapped like the Aboatia -- Douglass laments, "We were both victims…."[102] Balaam (the false prophet) cannot see the angel in his path (or, as I shall demonstrate, the personhood of his steed), the Aboatia cannot see that the doll is not a real human being, and

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[101] Ibid.

[102] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 119.

Sophia can no longer see that Douglass is. Sophia's inability to perceive the full scope of Douglass' humanity ultimately causes her to lose her own.

One must not glide over Douglass' comparison of himself to Balaam's donkey for it is placed in chiastic relationship to the allusion to the Biblical serpent. The story of the serpent shows how an intelligent being becomes a lowly animal, while the story of Balaam's donkey shows how a humble animal is granted personhood. The paired tales of devolution and transcendence are a more subtle and artful replacement of the Douglass' missing "You have seen how a slave was made a man; you shall see how a slave was made a man" chiasmus from *Narrative*.

In the Bible, Balaam beats his donkey for diverting from the path upon which Balaam is directing it. The prophet thinks the donkey is merely being irrationally obstinate, but it turns out the creature has a good reason for its recalcitrance. More perceptive than his owner, the donkey has seen an angel in its path and, by avoiding colliding with the heavenly being, the animal has spared Balaam from being killed in retribution.

The angel grants Balaam's donkey the ability to speak, and when the creature does, it reveals itself to be a creature of intelligence and logic, asking Balaam rhetorical questions to help Balaam see that if the donkey is behaving out of character, it must have a legitimate reason for doing so.

Returning briefly from the Bible to the autobiography, I note Sophia is both the "false prophet" abusing Douglass, and the "angel"[103] (as he refers to her before she is corrupted) in

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[103] Ibid., 106.

his path just as she was once both his "law-giver" in the sense of managing his behavior and the Moses that would liberate him from others' control: Her gift of literacy arouses in the him the very intolerance of slavery she cannot abide.

Thus, the donkey asking rhetorically "Why are you beating me?" when the angel opens its mouth is paralleled by Douglass the author, using the powers of literacy the angel Sophia blessed him with asks, "*Why should I be a slave?*" The donkey goes on to exhibit its reasoning powers just as Douglass shows off his own capability for legal reasoning. Thus, the donkey is personified and even manifests the attributes of personhood just as Douglass gives "proof of the same human nature which every reader of this chapter in my life—slaveholder, or nonslaveholder—is conscious of possessing."

The passage ends, "I will not censure her harshly; she cannot censure me, for she knows I speak but the truth…."[104] The present tense is at first curious here. Sophia, at the writing of Douglass' autobiography, is no longer around to "censure" him. When the two were together, she was mystified by his discontent, and Douglass was unable to "speak." If Sophia "knows" in the present tense that Douglass "speak[s]" the truth, it can only be because she is reading his memoir.

Thus, we see Douglass does not leave off his allusion to the story of Balaam's donkey with the donkey being beaten. Literacy having opened his mouth, as a memoirist he is finally able to explain himself to Sophia as a fellow human being. (And it is not unlikely that Sophia *did*

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[104] Ibid., 119.

read *My Bondage* – after all, her brother-in-law Thomas was aware of the existence of *Narrative*, so the family knew of Douglass' literary production – and Douglass knew that they knew of it).[105]

My Bondage begins with an epigraph from Coleridge: "By a principle essential to Christianity, a PERSON is eternally differenced from a THING; so that the idea of a HUMAN BEING necessarily excludes the idea of PROPERTY IN THAT BEING."[106] Yet the text of *My Bondage* belies half of this sentiment. This memoir does indeed stand for the principle that "the idea of a human being necessarily excludes the idea of property in that being," but it does not agree with Christianity that "a person is eternally differenced from a thing." Being enslaved cannot make a person a thing, but enslaving makes one appropriate to objectify.

Indeed, Douglass concludes a letter he writes to Thomas in freedom with a vow to instrumentalize him: "I intend to *make use of you* as a weapon with which to assail the system of slavery…. I shall *make use of you* as a means of exposing the character of the American church and clergy...." [italics mine]. In the missive, Douglass, having asked Thomas to imagine how Thomas would feel if Douglass were to enslave Thomas' daughter Amanda allows, "Damning as would be such a deed on my part, it would be no more so than that which you have committed against me and my sisters."[107] Thus, Douglass damns not just Auld but his

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[105] Ibid., 325.

[106] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), ii, Alexander Street.

[107] Douglass, "Letter to His Old Master" in Smith, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 325.

owners as a group to contrapasso, objectifying and animalizing the men and woman who held him as livestock.

The Picture-Making Animal

Given Douglass' affinity for optics, it is not surprising he was the most photographed American of the nineteenth century. Photography provided Douglass with a second medium through which to display his humanity. He took advantage of the form to art direct how he – and by extension other African Americans -- were perceived by "the other world." Douglass also wrote, more than any other American of his age, about photography,[108] and his writings on the subject are intertextual with *My Bondage.*

For example, in his "Lecture on Pictures," Douglass posits that the very thing that defines humanity is man's existence as a "picture-making and a picture-appreciating animal."[109] The connection between appreciating pictures and being human is manifested when Douglass offers a cherished childhood memory of a nighttime visit from his mother Harriet, a woman who has been hired out to another plantation and is all but a stranger to him.

During the visit, Harriet heroically defends Douglass against Aunt Katy, the slave woman who supervises Douglass and other slave children, for punishing Douglass by starving him. This act humanizes Douglass, making him realize "the fact, that I was, not only a child, but

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[108] John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015), x-xi.

[109] Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," in Stauffer, Trodd, and Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, 132.

somebody's child" as opposed to anonymous livestock. And it is at this point in the text that Douglass first depicts himself appreciating pictures, commenting that he often looks at an image from *Prichard's Natural History of Man* that reminds him of his mother's face. And after the death of his mother, Douglass says, he is left with "the side view of her face… imaged on my memory… but the image is mute."[110] The fact that the face is in profile and mute evokes a photograph – and, if we look closely, we see that this photograph is carefully staged.

For if we peer closely at Douglass' seemingly guileless childhood memory, we catch him orchestrating his mother and his race's image. The figure Douglass mentions from *Natural History* is of Ramses the Great.[111] Douglass thereby dignifies the slave woman as a pharaoh. Additionally, by claiming a phenotypical resemblance between his "deep black"[112] mother and the Egyptian king, Douglass argues against the tendency to de-Africanize Egypt (as Du Bois does). Thus, in concert with explaining to the reader, during this section, that he owes his brilliance to his African American mother rather than to his white father, Douglass mobilizes the image of Ramses to seize hold of an intellectual lineage for the black race by associating it with a culture vaunted as erudite. The move rebuts James M'Cune Smith's description of the Negro in the preface to *My Bondage* as being "for the first time in the world's history, brought in full contact with high civilization."[113]

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[110] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 45.

[111] James M'Cune Smith, introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom.*

[112] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 42.

[113] Smith, introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom.*

Furthermore, Douglass uses this memory to slyly argue for race as a social construction. For the image of the African king his “deep black” mother so resembles is described in *Natural History* as being "like Napoleon's… superbly European!"[114] Similar to his invocations of phenotypically white and near white slaves and in conjunction with his insistence that it is the “color” of one’s character rather than one’s flesh that matters,[115] Douglass underscores here that neither features nor virtue determine race, but rather, race is socially determined.

Finally, by claiming his memory of his mother is of “the side view of her face,” Douglass offers her up to the nineteenth century reader familiar with the visual lexicon of the era – during which distinguished individuals were posed in profile[116] -- as a rarefied being. In this way, Douglass humanizes and dignifies the memory of the parent whom he describes as being forced, like her peers, “to die as a beast; often with fewer attentions than are paid to a favorite horse.”[117] (The side view memory, fictitious or not, is visually repeated in Douglass’ own signature profile pose).[118]

So skillfully does Douglass present this carefully photoshopped image of his mother as unretouched that the casual reader is unlikely to catch on. Even Smith, in his Introduction to

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[114] Ibid.

[115] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 61.

[116] Stauffer, Trodd, and Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, xxv.

[117] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 45.

[118] Stauffer, Trodd, and Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass*, xxv.

the book, accepts that "[t]he nearness of [the image of Ramses'] resemblance to Mr. Douglass' mother rests upon the evidence of his memory, and judging from his almost marvelous feats of recollection of forms and outlines recorded in this book, this testimony may be admitted."[119]

But then, Smith is impervious to more than one of the points of this excerpt. Rather than agreeing with Douglass that Douglass got his brains from his black mother, he insists Douglass' mental prowess is "the result of the grafting of the Anglo-Saxon on good, original, Negro stock." And despite Douglass' use of the claim that a "deep black" woman looks like an Egyptian pharaoh to make a phenotypical argument for Egypt's blackness, Smith will only admit that "Egyptians… were a mixed race, with some Negro blood…."[120] (There is some evidence Smith, the first African American to hold a medical degree, himself was the product of a white father. One wonders if this animates his investment in hybrid vigor).[121]

Perhaps Douglass really did remember his mother in profile and as resembling *Natural History's* image of Ramses. But I doubt this for the same reason I disagree with Robert Hemenway's interpretation of Charles Chesnutt's story "The Goophered Grapevine." In "The Goophered Grapevine," former slave Julius warns John and his wife Annie, a white couple from the north, not to buy the plantation on which he lives because its vineyards are "goophered" or

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[119] Smith, introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom.*

[120] Ibid.

[121] Haroon Kharem, "Medical Doctor, Integrationist, and Black Nationalist: Dr. James McCune Smith and the Dilemma of an Antebellum Intellectual Black Activist," in *Education as Freedom: African American Educational Thought and Activism*, ed. Noel S. Anderson and Haroon Kharem (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 12.

cursed. Hemenway interprets the narrative as representing the "tension between… John's scientific rationalism, which depends on abstraction and object classification for validation, and Julius's secular faith in magic, which depends solely on subjective experience and the warrant of tradition."[122] This means Hemenway takes it that Julius has actual faith in magic. But this understanding leaves out that Julius has a motive for discouraging John and Annie from buying the plantation – one John makes explicit: Julius has been profiting off the vineyard and hopes to continue to do so.

Though Hemenway seeks to honor the worldview he ascribes to Julius, there is nevertheless something of Thomas Jefferson, who declared in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that he "never yet could… find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never seen even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture"[123] in his interpretation: the idea that Julius is merely "narrating" what Julius understands himself to have experienced rather than strategically deploying his creative powers. Throughout much of the text, Douglass foregrounds his writerly brilliance, but here, the magic is happening behind the scenes. For his description of his mother's appearance to have its desired effect, there must be no hint of artfulness. Rather, Douglass must appear to be merely narrating his recollection.

Thus, despite the wary observation in his preface that Douglass' autobiography "carries us so far back into early childhood, as to throw light upon the question, when positive and

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[122] Robert Hemenway, "Black Magic, Audience, and Belief," in *The Conjure Stories: Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Robert B. Stepto and Jennifer Rae Greeson (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 254.

[123] Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Boston: David Carlisle, 1801), 207, Google Books.

persistent memory begins in the human being,"[124] it nevertheless seems more plausible to Smith that Douglass is remembering his mother than artfully crafting her image, that he is recollecting her rather than constructing her – picture-making, as it were.

In "Lecture on Pictures," another of Douglass' writings on photography, he explains, "The process by which man is able to invent his own subjective consciousness into the objective form, considered in all its range, is in truth the highest attribute of man's nature."[125] This beautiful sentiment applies to law, too, for law is subjective consciousness converted into objective form. This explains why Douglass is so careful to pose himself as a legal actor and legal advocate as a means of performing his humanity.

For example, let us return to the "*Why should I be a slave?*" passage from *My Bondage*. Douglass says, "I had received from him only my food and raiment; and for these, my services were supposed to pay, from the first." "Supposed to" is a curious phrase. After all, Douglass does not actually have a contract with Hugh Auld. The two men did not bargain for Douglass' services as complete consideration for his room and board. The contract Douglass implicitly references exists nowhere but in his own affronted mind. But just as Douglass' ability to envision the rights he ought to have and to be dissatisfied by their unrecognition "gave proof" of his "human nature," the ability to visualize a contract shows him to be a "picture-making animal" – i.e. a man.

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[124] Smith, introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom.*

[125] Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," 133.

Many, if not most, creatures in the animal kingdom can work, but only humans, upon sensing the subjective value of their labor, contract to realize an artifact of that value in objective form and to receive consideration to make such value tangible. *That* is what Douglass means when he says it is his distress at the abuse of his property rights that makes him human. This is also why Douglass does not appeal to sentiment at the very point in the text at which readers familiar with the tropes of slave narratives – or even of current human rights discourse – expect him to. For ultimately, the experiences of suffering violence or separations from one's loved ones – while they may be inhumane – are not uniquely human. It is not that we laugh when tickled, bleed when pricked, or even cry out when whipped that makes us human -- it is that we peer at daguerreotypes and negotiate contracts.

Looking Human

Oddly, one entity who shared Douglass' notion that functioning as a legal actor and entering the marketplace should make you free was a court located in the major slave market city of New Orleans. When slaves revolted on the ship *Belle Creole,* their former owners sued The New Orleans Insurance Company for recompense in *Thomas McCargo v. The New Orleans Insurance Company*, known as the *Belle Creole* case. But the court held that the slaves, in successfully revolting, had freed themselves by appropriating the risks on their own lives. Thus,

they were no longer insurable by their former owners.[126] It was by owning risk that the slaves came to own themselves.[127]

Relatedly, in her law review article "Instead of Waiting for the Thirteenth Amendment: The War Power, Slave Marriage, and Inviolate Human Rights," Amy Dru Stanley discusses a little-known *quid pro quo* law that granted freedom to the "wives" and children of enslaved men who escaped to fight for the Union during the Civil War. As Stanley points out, the law posed a legal conundrum: what was an "enslaved wife" when slaves had no legal marriages?[128] Congress concluded "slaves' everyday practice and mutual understandings must prevail; it was through her own will and her husband's—not her master's or the rule of law—that a slave wife could be known."[129] In other words, while de jure law heretofore had not recognized slave marriages, Congress' understanding was that such marriages did, in fact, exist.

The decision in *Belle Creole* and the passage of the quid pro quo law evince a legal reasoning that freedom was not merely conferred upon African Americans but was intelligible in the witnessed performance of humanity in blacks prior to formal recognition of their status.

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[126] Jonathan Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 28.

[127] Douglass' only fictional work *The Heroic Slave* – which I shall later discuss -- tells the story of Madison Washington, who led the rebellion. As Robert S. Levine demonstrates in the "Heroic Slaves: Madison Washington and *My Bondage and My Freedom*" chapter of *The Lives of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass took pains to write the story of Washington in a way that would elide the two of them.

[128] Amy Dru Stanley, "Instead of Waiting for the Thirteenth Amendment: The War Power, Slave Marriage, and Inviolate Human Rights," *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 3 (2010): 749.

[129] Ibid., 751.

This strain of thought essentially granted that if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it must be a duck. By making the true scope of one's soul recognizable to those who, as Du Bois commented, usually "measure[ed]" it "by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" or, as Ralph Ellison would later assess in *Invisible Man*, were all but unable to perceive it accurately, one was re-humanized. By forming marriage bonds, serving in the military, and/or owning risk, one exhibited the civic and/or economic markers of a member of human society, and society was pressured to legally recognize that appearance of humanity. Thus, Douglass illustrates himself functioning in the legal landscape and navigating the marketplace for the same reason he gets his picture taken at every opportunity -- he hopes the image of an African American acting as a legal subject, functioning in civil society, and looking like a dignified human being will help whites to recognize (visually, then legally) the humanity of blacks.

The closest thing in modern American law to the legal reasoning to which Douglass appeals and to which the *Belle Creole* decision and the quid pro quo law employed is adverse possession. By openly and notoriously acting as though one owns a piece of land for a specified period, one can come to be recognized as that parcel's legal owner. Through military service, marriage, and the taking on of risk, slaves openly and notoriously behaved like civilized humans and were essentially granted squatters' rights to their humanity and human rights. Therefore, Douglass flaunts his legal and economic capabilities and even cheekily refers to himself voting

(against remaining a slave).[130] He chronicles these attributes and acts for the public to render his performance of humanity open and notorious.

Douglass does not marry while a slave. Nor does he flee slavery to join the military. However, he does engage in something akin to an insurrection. While in the custody of Covey, Douglass fights back when the slave-breaker tries to whip him and successfully thwarts the attempt. Douglass notes, "During the whole six months that I lived with Covey, after this transaction, he never laid on me the weight of his finger in anger."[131]

Douglass does not call his rebellion an "altercation" nor an "uprising." He describes it is as a transaction, using the language of contract law as though he were back to discussing his calking trade. While Douglass uses "transaction" as a synonym for "event" throughout the text, here, he employs the term in the context of describing a happening he interprets as having quasi-legal dimensions. Douglass frames his decision to fight back as effecting his "partial disenthrallment."[132] He notes that, when he challenged Covey, he was "*not afraid to die*"[133] – in other words, he took on the *risk* of death. In fighting Covey, Douglass "transacts" for his "partial disenthrallment," just as in insurrecting, the slaves aboard the *Belle Creole* took on their own risk and gained their complete freedom. A comparative look at the descriptions of Douglass' fight with Covey in *Narrative* and *My Bondage* provides another example of how the

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[130] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 109.

[131] Ibid., 180.

[132] Ibid., 170.

[133] Ibid., 181.

first work was revised through a legal lens – in *Narrative*, Douglass does not refer to the fight as a "transaction." An animal can fight – Douglass presents his rebellion as something akin to a legal maneuver.

***My Bondage and My Freedom* and My Humanity**

As we have heretofore seen, *My Bondage and My Freedom* is an Anansesɛm – news that is tricky. *Narrative* is not for reasons the reader learns toward the end of *My Bondage.* Recalling his early career as a public abolitionist, Douglass says, "I was generally introduced as a 'chattel,' a 'thing,' –a piece of southern 'property' – the chairman assuring the audience that it could speak." The reader might think at first think that these introductions are meant to mock proslavery attitudes. However, Douglass recalls, "My speeches were almost exclusively made up of narrations of my personal experience as a slave. 'Let us have the facts,' said the people. So also said Friend George Foster, who always wished to pin me down to my simple narrative. 'Give us the facts,' said Collins, 'we will take care of the philosophy.'"[134] White abolitionists, while mortified by the idea that Douglass should be commodified, nevertheless objectify him.

"'Tell your story, Frederick,' would whisper my then revered friend, William Lloyd Garrison…. I could not always obey, for I was now reading and thinking."[135] Like a slaveholder, Garrison expects Frederick's obedience. Yet, as it did before, literacy unfits Douglass for

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[134] Ibid., 265-66.

[135] Ibid., 266.

submission. And as the modifier “then” in “then revered friend” hints, this literacy-inspired independence will threaten Frederick’s relationship with Garrison as it did with Sophia.

Douglass finds the task of “repeat[ing] the same old story month after month” “altogether too mechanical for my nature.”[136] He senses himself being dehumanized, presented as a clockwork Negro for his audience to gawk upon as though he were an organist’s monkey. His human “nature” rebels against the menace of mechanization, for as Douglass’ lecture “The Nature of Slavery” makes clear, he understands the dangers of this unmaliciously made demand: “The first work of slavery is to mar and deface those characteristics of its victims which distinguish men from things, and persons from property.... It reduces man to a mere machine.”[137]

Yet, as we see here, marring and defacing those characteristics of its victims which distinguish men from things and persons from property is also the first work of some forms of abolitionism. And Douglass’ first work *Narrative*, produced, as Robert S. Levine observes, under the influence of Garrisonian abolition,[138] is, as its name indicates, just what those abolitionists insisted upon in Douglass’ early speeches: “narrations of my own personal experience.” But in revising *Narrative* into *My Bondage*, Douglass shows just how far above the level of narration

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[136] Ibid.

[137] Douglass, “The Nature of Slavery,” in Smith, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 328.

[138] Robert S. Levine, *The Lives of Frederick Douglass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 28.

he can fly. He shows that he is an artist, a picture-making human, and even more than that -- a masterpiece-creating genius.

Rankling against the mechanical narrations his allies want him to recite, Douglas says, “Besides, I was growing, and needed room.”[139] Not coincidentally, the third chapter of *My Bondage* begins with lines that appear nowhere in *Narrative*: “If the reader will now be kind enough to allow me time to grow bigger, and afford me an opportunity for my experience to become greater, I will tell him something, by-and-by, of slave life as I saw, felt, and heard it, on Col. Edward Lloyd’s plantation.”[140] “Will,” *My Bondage* asks, “the reader of *this* work allow Douglass to be not a routinized machine but a human who grows?” Shall Douglass be allowed more than just the facts – what he “saw” and “heard” – but also the philosophy – what he “felt?”

Douglass could by no means take the reader’s “kindness” for granted. Even the editor of *My Bondage* is hostile to Douglass’ ends. He writes:

> If the volume now presented to the public were a mere work of ART, the history of its misfortune might be written in two very simple words—TOO LATE. The nature and character of slavery have been subjects of an almost endless variety of artistic representation; and after the brilliant achievements in that field, and while those achievements are yet fresh in the memory of the million, he who would add another to the legion, must possess the charm of transcendent excellence, or apologize for something worse than rashness. The reader is, therefore, assured, with all due promptitude, that his attention is not invited to a work of ART, but to a work of FACTS--Facts, terrible and almost incredible, it may be yet FACTS, nevertheless.[141]

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[139] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 266.

[140] Ibid., 41.

[141] Editor, preface to *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

It is clear from this note that the editor, reading for facts, misses the art through which those facts are presented and reflected upon. Despite the immense literary skill with which this autobiography is written, the editor nevertheless deems Douglass not to be in possession of "the charm of transcendent excellence." That the editor misses Douglass' artistry is especially befuddling given the fact Smith's introduction continually reproaches the "Garrisonians" for their racism and classism towards Douglass, particularly their "fail[ure] to fathom, and bring out to the light of day, the highest qualities of his mind" demonstrated by the fact that "irresistible mimicry, and a pathetic narrative of his own experiences of slavery, were the intellectual manifestation which they encouraged him to exhibit on the platform or in the lecture desk."[142] By insisting *My Bondage* is not art, the editor refuses to allow Douglass the human dignity of being an artist, of being a picture-maker.

Douglass' commitment to making *My Bondage* a work of art means he loads it with all manner of aesthetic flourishes absent from *Narrative.* In *Narrative*, repetition does not clue the reader to Douglass' paternity, and there is no revision of the tar baby Anansesɛm. Douglass' mother is neither remembered in profile nor compared to Ramses. Her intelligence is never glorified – and especially not marshalled in service of the argument that Douglass' own genius comes through his black maternal side. Though, of course, Douglass' genius is not on – nor meant to be on -- full display in *Narrative*, anyway.

Notably missing from *Narrative* are the hallmark moments of an Ananse tale when perspective shifts, and we see Ananse seem to morph before our eyes. The mentions of

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[142] Smith, introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom.*

Covey's canine qualities I quoted from Douglass' second autobiography are absent from *Narrative.* Covey is referred to as a snake, but the comparison of his gait to a serpent that reveals Covey to be Satan and his story to be that of the fall is absent as is the comparison of his phenotypically European eyes to a reptile's. The audience is deprived of the sly rendering of Sophia as Moses as well as the intricate allusive framing of Sophia as both Balaam and the angel in Balaam's path and Douglass as Balaam's donkey. These aporia necessarily mean the reader loses the chiastic relationship between the serpent and donkey allusions. And in the much-truncated account of Thomas' response to Douglass' entreaty to be spared further atrocity at Covey's hand, Douglass does not present Thomas as a man in whom human impulses, animal savagery, and machine unfeeling war nor give us a view of the human impulses gradually losing out, Ananse-style.

In *My Bondage*, Douglass, in trickster fashion, teases those who have the Garrisonian attitude, pretending he has not endowed his work with artistic depth: "But, let others philosophize; it is my province here to relate and describe; only allowing myself a word or two, occasionally, to assist the reader in the proper understanding of the facts narrated."[143] Similarly, after making a quasi-legal argument about why "the morality of free society can have no application to slave society" in terms of holding slaves morally culpable for committing acts such as theft, Douglass demurs, "But my kind readers are, probably, less concerned about my

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[143] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 80.

opinions, than about that which more nearly touches my personal experience; albeit, my opinions have, in some sort, been formed by that experience."[144]

One can casually read *Narrative of the Life*, but it is necessary to perform a close reading of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, for the power of *Narrative* is in its content while the power of *My Bondage* is found at the level of language and in the architecture of the text. You must look carefully at the latter work the way you study a painting in a museum. In *My Bondage*, Douglass proves himself to be a picture-making animal. And the reader must rise to the challenge and show herself to be a picture-appreciator.

Green Myopia

Despite Douglass' mastery of the gaze, his own vision is by no means divinely perfect. He uncritically accepts white supremacist conceptions of both Africans (as opposed to African Americans) and Native Americans. And, more pertinently for an ecocritic, in *My Bondage*, he reveals three specific blind spots that are all green inflected – one involving an herb root, one involving birds, and one concerning the putative animality of his fellow slaves. I shall take up each in turn.

Douglass' poor vision can first be seen in his representation of his experience with root working. Sandy Jenkins, a fellow slave and root worker, gives Douglass an herb root to wear on his right side that will cause it to be "impossible for Covey to strike [Douglass] a blow" and make it such that "no man could whip [Douglass]." When Douglass balks, Sandy points out that

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[144] Ibid., 140.

"book learning… had not kept Covey off…."[145] Ultimately, Douglass returns to Covey anticipating merciless punishment for having run into the woods to escape one of Covey's beatings. Instead, Covey and his wife greet him with smiles on their way to church, prompting Douglass "to think that Sandy's herb had more virtue in it than I, in my pride, had been willing to allow…."[146]

The next morning, however, Douglass wonders "whether the root had lost its virtue" as "the pious and benignant smile which graced Covey's face on Sunday, wholly disappeared on Monday." When Covey pulls Douglass to the ground to initiate a beating, Douglass, having "now forgot my roots, and remembered my pledge to stand up in my own defense," fights back. "Whence came the daring spirit necessary to grapple with a man who, eight-and-forty hours before, could, with his slightest word have made me tremble like a leaf in a storm, I do not know…." he claims.[147]

Douglass recounts how "[e]very blow of [Covey's] was parried"[148] and how Covey is "seemingly unable to command words or blows." Covey calls for the assistance of various parties – first, his cousin Hughes whom Douglass handily dispatches, then Bill, a rented slave, who insists, "My master hired me here, to work, and not to help you whip Frederick," and finally, Covey's own slave Caroline whom Douglass remembers as "[s]trangely… in no humor to

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[145] Ibid., 175.

[146] Ibid., 176.

[147] Ibid., 176-77.

[148] Ibid., 177.

take a hand in any such sport. We were all in open rebellion, that morning." Caroline refuses to participate even when Covey deals her "several sharp blows." After two hours, the fight ends, and "[t]he fact was, he had not whipped me at all. He had not, in all the scuffle, drawn a single drop of blood from me."[149]

Despite this successful outcome, Douglass nevertheless presents the root as superstitious nonsense, seemingly insensate to how every fact seems to testify to its power. When Douglass sees Covey is no longer all smiles on Monday, he is quick to offer the reader two possibilities, both of which deny the root's efficacy – that the root does not work after all and Covey was pleasant and peaceable the day before because he was honoring the Sabbath and that the root *does* work but that Covey is involved with the occult and has Douglass outgunned. But Sandy does not promise the root will make Covey smile at or be congenial to Douglass – only that it will keep Covey and other men from striking him. At the point at which Douglass gives up on the root, it has not failed him.

Douglass himself comments on the mysterious nature of the events that follow -- his inability to account for how he changed from terrified of Covey to being brave enough to fight him in the space of two days, Covey's befuddling incapacity either to speak or hit, the "strangeness" of Caroline's refusal to obey Covey's demand to help subdue Douglass even in the face of violent punishment, and the singularity of Douglass, Bill, and Caroline all rebelling in concert. Yet Douglass does not countenance the idea that these uncanny events may have been caused by the power of nature.

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[149] Ibid., 178-80.

When Covey neglects to beat Douglass on the Sabbath, Douglass wonders whether the root is, in fact, powerful and whether his pride is what animated his doubt. Pride, indeed, seems to be a factor in both Douglass' interactions with Sandy and his framing of his encounter with Covey. When Sandy initially finds Douglass in the woods, Douglass treats Sandy and his wife's willingness to shelter Douglass in their home and feed him despite the fact that Sandy risks grievous punishment if caught doing so as a fan offering tribute to a celebrity: "both seemed to esteem it a privilege to succor me; for, although I was hated by Covey and by my master, I was loved by the colored people, because they thought I was hated for my knowledge, and persecuted because I was feared."[150]

But if Douglass portrays Sandy as a fan, he also situates him as something of a rival. For just as Douglass is renowned for his literacy, Sandy is "as famous among the slaves of the neighborhood for his good nature, as for his good sense."[151] Douglass is master of one kind of knowledge; Sandy, a root worker, as an expert in the environmental sphere, is master of another. Douglass poses these systems of knowledge in contest with each other, holding that belief in roots is illogical and immoral. Sandy, in contrast, is ecumenical. Though he honors Douglass for his literacy, Sandy rejects the idea that "book learning" is an exclusively valuable means of knowing. For him, knowledge of the natural world is important, too.

When Covey pulls Douglass to the ground to beat him, at the very moment the root ought to become relevant, Douglass conveniently forgets its existence and remembers a pledge

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[150] Ibid., 174.

[151] Ibid., 173.

he made to defend himself. The memory of the pledge allows Douglass to attribute his rebellion to something other than the power of nature – namely his own "daring spirit."

In this self-celebratory vein, Douglass depicts himself pulling off a number of stunning maneuvers. Rather like a kung fu star, Douglass "gave [Hughes] the kick which sent him staggering away in pain, at the same time that I held Covey with a firm hand."[152] This is certainly a more epic description of the move than the one supplied in *Narrative* in which Douglass kicks Hughes while *Covey* was holding Douglass. I do not mean to cast doubt on the idea that Douglass, young and strengthened by years of physical work, wins the fight against Covey and Hughes. But it does seem extraordinary that a man can engage in a fight in which two adversaries are involved, during the first part of which he restricts himself only to parrying blows, without being hit even once *over the course of two hours* in the absence of some sort of external aid.

Given the way Douglass frames this narrative – he gets a root promised to keep him from being struck and then, against all odds, while armed with the root, he heroically wins a fight against his tormentor without ever being struck, one might almost think that while sixteen-year-old protagonist Douglass is blind to the root's efficacy, authorial Douglass recognizes its power. But a glance at the footnotes disabuses the reader of this notion. In an annotation, Douglass recalls that he and Sandy "used frequently to talk about the fight with

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[152] Ibid., 178.

Covey, and as often as we did so, he would claim my success as the result of the roots which he gave me. This superstition is very common among the more ignorant slaves."[153]

Is the root's power merely superstition? Does the root have actual supernatural abilities? Or is there a third possibility Douglass fails to perceive? When Sandy sends Douglass back to Covey, root in tow, Sandy advises Douglass "to walk up bravely to the house, as though nothing had happened." Douglass heeds this advice because he finds "in Sandy too deep an insight into human nature, with all his superstition, not to have some respect for his advice."[154]

Sandy's instruction to Douglass to walk "bravely" and his gift of a root meant to instill the confidence in the possessor that the possessor is unbeatable combined with Sandy's "deep… insight into human nature" suggests that perhaps the root was meant to work not through supernatural means but through the placebo effect. After all, it is only after Sandy's ministrations that the "daring spirit" whose arrival Douglass cannot account for emerges. Perhaps the root renders the possessor unbeatable because it endows him with the will not to *let* himself be beaten. It is striking that what Sandy is "famous" for is not his root working abilities but his "good sense." Is Sandy a lay psychologist who prescribes flora as a confidence booster? Douglass cannot see this possibility. To Douglass, Sandy is merely "a genuine African" with "so-called magical powers"[155] – one of "the more ignorant slaves." As noted before, Michael Bennett calls Douglass an anti-pastoralist. And, indeed, the former slave stands in

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[153] Ibid., 193.

[154] Ibid., 175-76.

[155] Ibid., 174.

almost comic contrast to all the African American writers who frame nature as a sympathetic or analgesic. Accordingly, not only does Douglass not see this natural object as having supernatural influence – he is unwilling even to admit to its power as a psychic aid.

Of course, Douglass' harshness towards Sandy and Sandy's involvement with the natural world ought not be de-linked from Douglass' suspicion that Sandy betrayed Douglass and their co-conspirators in the attempt to flee slavery I discussed earlier. However, this conviction may have been informed by Douglass' complex feelings towards Sandy – his admiration of Sandy's kindness, insightfulness, and good sense, his bigotry towards Africans, his possible sense of competitiveness with Sandy over the esteemed status both men share within the slave community, and his derision towards and suspicion of Sandy's green mystical practices. That Douglass may have been biased in suspecting Sandy is suggested by the fact that Sandy is the object of the single instance of poor legal reasoning Douglass displays:

First, in blaming Sandy for the fugitives getting caught, Douglass renders inadmissible his own earlier admission that "I am the more inclined to think that [Douglass' owner Freeland] suspected us, because… we did many silly things, very well calculated to awaken suspicion" including victoriously singing such not so subtly metaphorical verses as "O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan" and "I don't expect to Stay / Much longer here."[156] Second, the evidence against Sandy is circumstantial – as Douglass' own diction admits: "Several circumstances seemed to point SANDY out, as our betrayer."[157]

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[156] Ibid., 203-204.

[157] Ibid., 217.

Douglass points to Sandy's knowledge of the group's plans – knowledge that every member of the group shares. He also names as evidence Sandy's inauspicious prophetic dream of birds which Douglass is inclined to discount as fraudulent due to his dismissal of Sandy's naturophilic beliefs. Douglass sees the dream as furnishing Sandy with a handy excuse for withdrawing from the group's plans, discounting the possibility that Sandy may have withdrawn because he did, in fact, receive a revelation. Sandy's premonition – while awake -- that the group has been betrayed also accuses him in Douglass' eyes – even though Douglass shares this premonition. That Sandy alone is not taken to jail when the plot is uncovered is the most damning fact against him. The rest seems more a manifestation of Douglass' conflicted feelings towards him.

The more antipathic of those feelings seem to have inspired Douglass' bizarre statement that early in the planning stages of the escape attempt, "We were all, except Sandy, quite free from slaveholding priestcraft." This slaveholding priestcraft espouses "the duty of obedience to our masters," encourages slaves "to deem our enslavement a merciful and beneficial arrangement," and holds "that the relation of master and slave was one of reciprocal benefits."[158] How could Sandy, who risked, as Douglass puts it, "thirty-nine lashes on his bare back, if not something worse" to shelter and feed Douglass and who gave Douglass a root to protect Douglass from the beatings of Covey and other whites possibly be said to adhere to such a theology?

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[158] Ibid., 201.

But let us return to Sandy's dream of birds. It may have indeed been prophetic – only, like the root, not in the way Douglass expects it to be. It at first seems the dream, on the eve of the group's escape, is relevant to their plans to run away. Indeed, Douglass first understands the dream to have resulted from "the general excitement and perturbation consequent upon our contemplated plan of escape."[159] And Sandy may have interpreted the dream as applying to the escape attempt as well, which might have motivated his withdrawal from the plan.

But Sandy dreams of Douglass in particular, curious for a vision meant to warn of the group's failure. Another hint that the dream does not apply to the group's arrest: Sandy makes a point of the birds flying in a "south-westerly direction."[160] But Douglass says of the capture that the dream – fraudulent or not – seems to foretell, "I was in the hands of moral vultures, and firmly held in their sharp talons, and was hurried away toward Easton, in a south-*easterly* direction amid the jeers of new birds of the same feather, through every neighborhood we passed" [italics mine].[161]

What Sandy's dream actually seems to predict is Douglass' shipyard attacks. "I dreamed, last night, that I was roused from sleep, by strange noises, like the voices of a swarm of angry birds," Sandy's recollection begins.[162] At the shipyard, white laborers, resentful of

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[159] Ibid., 208.

[160] Ibid.

[161] Ibid., 215.

[162] Ibid., 208.

having to work with an African American, “began… to talk contemptuously and maliciously of ‘the Niggers;’ saying, that ‘they would take the country,’ that ‘they ought to be killed.’” These men, “seldom called me to do any thing, without coupling the call with a curse….”[163]

“I saw you, Frederick, in the claws of a huge bird, surrounded by a large number of birds,”[164] Sandy continues, and Douglass describes how one day “Edward North, the biggest in everything thing, rascality included, ventured to strike me.”[165] In Sandy’s dream, the swarm picks at Douglass while, in the shipyard, a mob of four sets upon Douglass and rains blows upon him. The birds in Sandy’s dream fly over the tops of trees to get to Douglass; the mob sets upon him where he has fallen, haven been struck by a hand-spike, among “timbers.”[166] Sandy dreams of Douglass trying to protect his eyes. In the shipyard, “one of their number… planted a blow with his boot in my left eye, which, for a time, seemed to have burst my eyeball.”[167] Having completed their attack, the birds in the dream fly away, and Douglass’ attackers “[w]hen they saw my eye completely closed, my face covered with blood, and I staggering under the stunning blows they had given me, they left me.”[168]

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[163] Ibid., 228.

[164] Ibid., 208.

[165] Ibid., 228.

[166] Ibid.

[167] Ibid., 229.

[168] Ibid.

“Watch de Friday night dream,” Sandy urges Douglass,[169] but Douglass does not. In his description of Douglass as an anti-pastoralist, Bennett points to Douglass’ utterly unromantic and unimaginative attitude towards nature. Rural space, for Douglass, is simply the very real and very terrible site of his enslavement. It is thus unsurprising that Douglass’ is unable to decode the vehicle of nature in a dream correctly.

Along with authorial Douglass’ misperception of Sandy’s green magical or psychological practice and equally verdant prophetic abilities stands protagonist Douglass’ distorted view of other enslaved blacks. After he becomes a reader, Douglass sees nonliterate slaves as being in possession of a “stupid contentment” of which he is jealous -- or almost jealous, and he expresses his “wish” to be “a beast, or a bird—anything, rather than a slave.”[170] These parallel palliative desires render the slaves and the beasts interchangeable. Literacy endows Douglass with a curious form of second sight. He is able to perceive his own humanity, yet he looks upon his peers (rather like Hannah in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*) “through the revelation of the other world” and “measures” their “soul[s] by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”

Yet in his preface, Douglass states the goal of his memoir is disproving the idea that African Americans are “so low in the scale of humanity, and so utterly stupid, that they are unconscious of their wrongs, and do not apprehend their rights” which shows that the author does not retain the perspective of the protagonist. For, indeed, in opposition to the sentiment

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[169] Ibid., 208.

[170] Ibid., 118.

of the preface, the envy described is aroused by the viewpoint that, like beasts, Douglass' fellow slaves are "so low in the scale of humanity" as to be, as Douglass explicitly calls them, *stupidly* unaware of both their wrongs and their rights.

To expose the falsity of the protagonist's view of himself as a human among animals, the author allows the reader to witness a plethora of scenes that thoroughly rebut the idea of slaves' stupid contentment: Douglass' grandmother distraught at being forced to turn over the grandchildren she rears from birth to Anthony, Esther determinedly pursuing emotional autonomy and repelling Thomas' sexual predations – and suffering the consequences, Nelly and her children bravely combating Nelly's verbal and physical abuse, and, poignantly, songs, "loud, long and deep, breathing the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish" of which "[e]very tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains."[171]

Authorial Douglass also offers examples of slaves' critical praxis: "Slaves know enough of the rudiments of theology to believe that those go to hell who die slaveholders," he assures the reader.[172] And he transcribes these lyrics:

> We raise de wheat,
> Dey gib us de corn;
> We bake de bread,
> Dey gib us de cruss;
> We sif de meal,
> Dey gib us de huss;
> We peal de meat,
> Dey gib us de skin,

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[171] Ibid., 75.

[172] Ibid., 53.

> And dat's de way
> Dey takes us in.
> We skim de pot,
> Dey gib us the liquor,
> And say dat's good enough for nigger.
> Walk over! walk over!
> Tom butter and de fat;
> Poor nigger you can't get over dat;
> Walk over![173]

Douglass even demystifies the behaviors that might be taken for the less savvy as stupidity, explaining that slaves dance and sing not because they are happy but because they are miserable and seeking to comfort themselves and that a major reason more slaves do not try to escape is because they cannot bear to leave their loved ones. "You have seen a how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man," Douglass says in *Narrative*. Here, one finds a parallel chiasmus – you shall see how protagonist Douglass makes his fellow slaves beasts; you shall see how authorial Douglass makes those stupidly content beasts men.

Behind the Camera: A Typology of Douglass' Visual Labor

At this chapter's beginning, I framed *My Bondage* as a visual work and described the creation of the effect of the persons in the memoir being humanized and animalized as visual labor. Thus, the techniques that attract the gaze of an ecocritic must be considered in the context of Douglass' larger scopic repertoire. In the autobiography and throughout Douglass' writing, one finds six visual modes: perceiving, reflecting/developing, *mise en abyme*, seeing, looking, and directing.

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[173] Ibid., 185.

I use the term "perceiving" to describe the first mode which relates solely to intangibles, to the non-literal ability to "see" the wrongfulness of slavery. In this mode, I locate Douglass' several metaphorical references to the light that illuminates the evils of slavery and the darkness that renders slavery's immorality imperceptible.

Reflecting/developing is the visual mode in which Douglass works in the crafting of *The Heroic Slave.* If *My Bondage* is a carefully posed literary photograph of Douglass, *The Heroic Slave* is its negative. The negative is a double of the photograph (as a reflection is a double of the object), an artifact of the photographic process, but not a standalone object. Similarly, I read *The Heroic Slave* as part and parcel of Douglass' slave narratives, the remixed version of a song that, though a separate work, cannot be appreciated properly unless the original is also consumed.

My Bondage begins with a description of Douglass' birthplace, Talbot County, Maryland as an utterly pathetic place filled with equally pathetic people. Like a negative, the opening of *The Heroic Slave* does exactly the opposite, depicting Virginia, the birthplace of Madison Washington, as the natural homeland of heroes.

Douglass' description of Madison both elides and contrasts the two men. Unlike the biracial Douglass who, as a young child, Thomas refers to as his "little Indian boy,"[174] Madison is, like Douglass' mother, "glossy" "black."[175] Madison is incontrovertibly and phenotypically

[174] Ibid., 62.

[175] Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, ed. Robert S. Levine, John Stauffer, and John R. McKivigan (n.p.: Yale University Press, 2015), 7.

what Douglass seeks to frame himself as in spirit: a dynamo whose glory is of exclusively African provenance. Thus, like an actual photographic negative, the black Madison is the double of the lighter Douglass.

But, as with a negative, despite differences in shade, the two men are really the same: Madison's appearance "betokened Herculean strength"[176] just as Douglass was referred to in a British newspaper as a "Negro Hercules."[177] Their names and how they got them even parallel: "My name is Madison,--Madison Washington my mother used to call me."[178] "The name given me by my beloved mother was no less pretentious than 'Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey.'"[179] The two even sound alike, for like Douglass, whom the Garrisonians advise, "Better have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not; 'tis not best that you seem too learned,"[180] Madison's "words were well chosen, and his pronunciation equal to that of any schoolmaster."[181]

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[176] Ibid.

[177] See Murray, Hannah-Rose. "A 'Negro Hercules': Frederick Douglass' celebrity in Britain." *Celebrity Studies* 7, no. 2 (October 2015): 264–279. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2015.1098551 .

[178] Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 12.

[179] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 252.

[180] Ibid., 266.

[181] Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 47.

In Mr. Listwell's listening to Madison's soliloquy, Douglass' wish that "spiritual-minded men and women" could hear the heartrending songs of slaves is granted.[182] Madison's soliloquy, like the songs, are performed in the woods. The singers are "peculiarly excited and noisy"[183] just as Madison is an almost manic state. The songs blend rapture and melancholy;[184] just as Madison's speech is "now bitter, and now sweet."[185] Both the songs and the soliloquy are rendered as prayer, and though Madison is speaking, his voice is nevertheless "melodious."[186] And ultimately, in an echo of Douglass' response to the slave singers, Mr. Listwell is utterly moved.

Madison and Douglass experience and react to slavery in much the same way. Like Douglass, Madison is particularly aggrieved by the unjust charge of impudence slaveholders levy at their captives. Like Douglass, Madison explains that, though ostensibly immoral, it is in fact *not* unethical for a slave to steal. Like Douglass, Madison is distraught at witnessing the beating of an elderly, bald, male slave. And, as Levine notes in *The Lives*, at the opening of *The Heroic Slave*, Madison gives a soliloquy that is strikingly similar to Douglass' famous apostrophe

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[182] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 75.

[183] Ibid., 74.

[184] Ibid.

[185] Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 7.

[186] Ibid.

to the ships.[187] (Its beginning, "What, then, is life to me?"[188] also echoes his famous "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July)?"

> (Consider these lines of the soliloquy from *The Heroic Slave:*
>
> Those birds, perched on yon swinging boughs, in friendly conclave, sounding forth their merry notes in seeming worship of the rising sun, though liable to the sportsman's fowling-piece, are still my superiors…. That accursed and crawling snake, that miserable reptile, that has just glided into its slimy home, is freer and better off than I…. [H]e is my superior, and scorns to own me as his master, or to stop to take my blows. When he saw my uplifted arm, he darted beyond my reach, and turned to give me battle. I dare not do as much as that. I neither run nor fight, but do meanly stand, answering each heavy blow of a cruel master with doleful wails and piteous cries.[189]

They are later further revised in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: "Mister [the rooster], he looked so… free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. Son a bitch couldn't even get out the shell by hisself but he was still king and I was….)"[190]

More subtly, like protagonist Douglass and author Douglass, Madison is a celebrity. As noted before, when protagonist Douglass needs shelter and food after having run off to escape a beating from Covey, Sandy and his wife, two of his fans, take him in and feed him despite the risk of punishment. When Madison is in similar straits, Mr. Listwell and his wife offer their hospitality despite also facing risk, and the relationship between Mr. Listwell and Madison is framed in a way that could apply to that between Douglass the orator and his admirers.

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[187] Levine, *The Lives of Frederick Douglass*, 148.

[188] Ibid., 5.

[189] Ibid., 5-6.

[190] Morrison, *Beloved*, 84.

In the model of the asymmetrical dialectic between star and aficionado, when Listwell and Madison properly meet, Listwell recognizes Madison and is familiar with his story, having heard him speak. In contrast, Madison, the (unwitting) orator, has no clue who Listwell is.

Mr. Listwell's remark to Madison that "your face seemed to be daguerreotyped on my memory" is particularly instructive.[191] It echoes Douglass' line from *My Bondage* that "[t]he side view of [his mother's] face is imaged on my memory." The *reason* Douglass posits for his mother's face being imprinted in his mind is that "[t]he counsels of her *love* must have been beneficial to me" [italics mine].[192] Love, according to Douglass, develops mental photographs, and it is indeed a love relationship that exists between Mr. Listwell and Madison. We are explicitly told Mr. Listwell "loved as well as admired" Madison.[193] But what Mr. Listwell feels for Madison is, of course, not filial piety but a fan's devotion for a heartthrob.

Mr. Listwell's first encounter with Madison is depicted as the beginning of a homosocial fairy tale romance. In a forest, a man hears a captivating voice. The voice belongs to a haunting beauty. As white Desdemona falls in love with black Othello after hearing his story of enslavement, white Mr. Listwell grows besotted with black Madison by the same means. Obsessed, he later confesses, "Ever since that morning… you have seldom been absent from my mind, and though now I did not dare to hope that I should ever see you again, I have often

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[191] Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 13.

[192] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 45.

[193] Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 39.

wished that such might be my fortune…"[194] The mental daguerreotype, then, is an artifact of Mr. Listwell's fandom, the nineteenth century equivalent of an autographed headshot.

The situating of Madison as celebrity continues as the narrative progresses. Captured during an escape attempt and chained in a coffle, "It seems that Madison, by that mesmeric power which is the invariable accompaniment of genius, had already won the confidence of the gang, and was a sort of general-in-chief among them."[195] (This, even though Madison has, at this point, neither done nor said anything brilliant in front of the coffle). By the time Madison is aboard the *Creole*, "the negroes fairly worshipped him."[196]

Everywhere in the story, we find reflections of Douglass' previous work. Mrs. Listwell is a rehabilitated Sophia. Of Sophia, before her corruption, Douglass says in *My Bondage*, "There was no sorrow nor suffering for which she had not a tear, and there was no innocent joy for which she had not a smile. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach.[197] Similarly, Mrs. Listwell "felt for the sorrows of the oppressed and hunted ones of earth, and was always glad of an opportunity to do them a service."[198]

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[194] Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 13.

[195] Ibid., 36.

[196] Ibid., 47.

[197] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 113-14.

[198] Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 12.

Elsewhere, Mr. Listwell sees a slave gang: "Humanity converted into merchandise, and linked in iron bands, with no regard to decency or humanity! All sizes, ages, and sexes, mothers, fathers, daughters, brothers, sisters,--all huddled together, on their way to market to be sold and separated from home, and from each other *forever.*"[199] In *My Bondage*, Douglass, returning to Anthony's home upon Anthony's death so that the estate can be valued and divided, witnesses, "Men and women, young and old, married and single; moral and intellectual beings, in open contempt of their humanity, level at a blow with horses, sheep, horned cattle and swine!"[200] And in *The Heroic Slave,* "that girl of thirteen, weeping, yes, weeping, as she thinks of the mother from whom she has been torn"[201] from Douglass' speech "The Internal Slave Trade" becomes "a girl, apparently not more than twelve years old, who had been weeping bitterly. She had, probably, left behind her a loving mother…."[202]

It, at first, seems odd that the uprising, which ought to be the climax of *The Heroic Slave*, is missing from the text. Indeed, we seem to spend more time watching Madison rehearse Douglass' experiences than leading the uprising that launched him into history. The reader does not get to experience the insurrection in real time as he does the interactions between Madison and Mr. Listwell. Rather, *Creole* overseer Tom Grant describes the events after the fact. But even Grant's telling is secondhand for, just as the action begins, Grant is knocked

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[199] Ibid., 34.

[200] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 128.

[201] Douglass, "The Internal Slave Trade," in Smith, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 346.

[202] Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 36.

unconscious, and when he comes to, the uprising has successfully concluded. The reader wonders why she is not allowed to see the insurrection… but, indeed, she is – in the pages of *Narrative* and *My Bondage*. "You have seen how a slave was made a man" in *Narrative* and *My Bondage* in Douglass' fight with Covey – no need to witness it again in *The Heroic Slave*. For the two works are not merely intertextual with each other -- a reading of either *Narrative* or, better, *My Bondage* is *necessary* to complete the story of *The Heroic Slave*. A photographic negative is not a finished object. Only when coupled with one of Douglass' autobiographies in which the insurrection is *developed* does the work become a complete picture.

If insurrecting Madison is the reflection of rebelling Douglass, then Mr. Listwell is the analogue to readers of Douglass' nonfiction. In moments like the revised apostrophe to the ships, Mr. Listwell hears Madison speak a very close version of what the reader "hears" Douglass think. Thus, in Douglass' rendering of Mr. Listwell's reactions to Madison, the reader gets to see how Douglass imagines (or fantasizes of) his own reception with the reader – and, given the odes to Madison's beauty which verge on ekfrasis – he is also conjuring up the response of those who view photographs of him. We get to see how Douglass sees us.

Mr. Listwell fawns over the richness of Madison's voice, gazes rapt at the loveliness of his form. In Mr. Listwell's reaction to Madison's soliloquy, we see how Douglass intends to reader respond to his apostrophe: "'Here is indeed a man,' thought Mr. Listwell, 'of rare endowments….'"[203] The quote shows Mr. Listwell's recognition of Madison's humanity, but the

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[203] Ibid., 9.

phrase “of rare endowments” shows it is important to Douglass that the reader recognizes not just the personhood of blacks but his personal brilliance.

In addition to reflecting Douglass’ other works, *The Heroic Slave* also mirrors a text from outside his corpus: Dante’s *Inferno*. Mr. Listwell and Madison are framed as Dante and Virgil. Mr. Listwell first finds Madison in a dark forest such as that in which Dante discovers Virgil. Dante is thirty-five during his fateful meeting, and Mr. Listwell first encounters Madison in 1835. Virgil laments to Dante that he was doomed by being born before Christ and thus cannot receive the gift of salvation while Madison cries (unwittingly) to Mr. Listwell that “even before I was made part of this breathing world, the scourge was platted for my back; the fetters were forged for my limbs.”[204] Virgil laments that he no longer possesses life, while Madison grieves that his life is divested of meaning by slavery.

Just as the reader follows Douglass in his autobiographies through the vicissitudes of slavery and Dante follows Virgil into the bowels of Hell, Mr. Listwell who “had long desired to sound the mysterious depths of the thoughts and feelings of a slave” “was not, therefore, disposed to allow so providential an opportunity to pass unimproved… resolved to hear more” -- that is to follow Madison into his and his people’s Inferno.[205] And in *The Heroic Slave*, the *Inferno*, and the historical American South, stars (the North Star in *The Heroic Slave* and the South; the drinking gourd constellation, also in the South; Madison, framed as a guiding star in

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[204] Ibid., 5.

[205] Ibid., 7.

The Heroic Slave; and the starry night into which Dante and Virgil emerge from Hell) represent freedom.

The next visual mode in which Douglass works is *mise en abyme*, and this, too, is the visual mode of *The Heroic Slave*. We see mise en abyme at both the micro- and macro-levels of the work. At the micro-level, Madison, who plans to follow the North Star, is himself described by the narrator as a "guiding star."[206] Also at the micro-level is the "full fountain" of Madison's soliloquy from which "gush[es]" Douglass' corpus including "[s]cathing denunciations" and "heart-touching narrations" i.e. *My Bondage* and *Narrative*, respectively.[207] (Douglass states in one of the lines that helps explain why he needed to revise *Narrative* into *My Bondage*, "It did not entirely satisfy me to narrate wrongs; I felt like denouncing them)."[208] This gush in which elements of Douglass' previous writing are jumbled is a synecdoche for how the story itself is a pastiche of the former slave's body of work. But, at the macro-level, the whole novel is a picture of a picture. Just as Velasquez paints the process of creating the painting *Las Meninas* in *Las Meninas* (by painting figures posing for the painting in a mirror), *The Heroic Slave* is a "picture" of Madison guiding Listwell through the horrors of slavery in which we see the reflection of how Douglass has guided us in his autobiographies.

Mise en abyme is the only visual form too unwieldy for Douglass. In Part III of the story, Madison ceases to be Mr. Listwell's guide to understanding slavery, and Mr. Listwell becomes

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[206] Ibid., 4.

[207] Ibid., 7.

[208] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 266.

the reader's guide. But in Part IV, the point of view shifts to Grant – this time less successfully. Douglass forgets Grant, unlike Madison – or Mr. Listwell in Part III, is not his proxy. For example, when Grant describes his fellow crewmembers as being like "so many frightened monkeys,"[209] Douglass is repeating his earlier move of applying an animalizing negrophobic stereotype to whites, but Grant would not see the sailors as simian.

The latter three visual modes all involve dialectics between the reader and Douglass. "Seeing" is the mode of *Narrative* and some of Douglass' speeches, and it requires the least of both parties. In this mode Douglass need only, as the editor so aptly put it, recite "[f]acts, terrible and almost incredible, it may be yet FACTS, nevertheless." Functioning in this mode, Douglass offers up "scenes,"[210] "picture[s],"[211] and sometimes catalogues marked by an anaphoric percussion of "I see"[212] or a series of directives to "[b]ehold," "mark," "hear," "see," "cast one glance," "follow" (with the gaze), and "attend."[213] The reader need process nothing as Douglass tells her what she has seen, is seeing, or will see. And Douglass has to do nothing but point, or even, like a slave on an auction block or an orator on the Garrisonian stage, stand so that the audience can gawk at him.

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[209] Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 49.

[210] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 86.

[211] Ibid., 11.

[212] Ibid., 347.

[213] Ibid., 346.

The looking mode, which distinguishes *My Bondage* from *Narrative*, demands more of both Douglass and the reader. In the looking mode, Douglass shows himself to be not just a picture exhibitor but a "picture-maker" or artist which in turn calls on the reader to be a "picture-appreciator." Animals can see and be seen, but *My Bondage* demands that the reader not just passively see but actively look which means that Douglass cannot just stand inert before his audience's gaze but must supply the reader with something that requires being attentively looked at rather than just passively seen. In the looking mode, both Douglass and the reader prove their humanity according to Douglass' standard in "Lecture on Pictures." It is in this mode that, rather than simply narrating his story, Douglass engages in all the artfulness close reading reveals for, as the term close reading implies, the reader is not simply going to see these details – she has to be actively looking for them.

Finally, the directing mode, like the seeing mode, requires little from the reader but, unlike the seeing mode, much from Douglass. The reader notices Douglass' direction of her visual experience as little as a filmgoer detects changes in camera shots. Douglass is in director mode in *My Bondage* when "remembering" his mother's image or "shooting" the beating of Esther through a crevice between panes of wood or keeping "old master" off stage, at the work's beginning, while the tension builds for a bit as the reader hears his grandmother speaking of him – by his forbidding title rather than his personal name – in dread. And Douglass is in director mode when he manipulates narrative perspective to emphasize the animality of slaveholders or the humanity of blacks. He is in director mode when his ink flows green.

I begin my dissertation with *My Bondage* because, in its incorporation of Akan storytelling practices (consciously or not), it offers a glimpse of both the black roots of green

and a unique black take on green. Green, for Douglass, is not an environment but a special effect. He can adjust the picture to heighten its verdant pigments or drain them from the film. This green, found not in the forest, but produced from behind the camera, fits the aesthetic sensibilities of a visual writer like Douglass as well as the sociological experience of a people who have too often learned that humanity, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

Chapter Two

The Goophered Water

As a student of literature, I watched the Flint water crisis unfold with feelings of both horror and déjà vu. I had witnessed the story play out before – only in fiction. Life mimicked art in the most appalling of ways as the public health disaster developed in a manner that evoked Charles Chesnutt's Conjure Woman stories. This chapter considers this incident of environmental racism[214] through the lens of ecocritical readings of turn of the nineteent century author.

First, I provide a history of the Flint water crisis. Then, I offer a close reading of Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine" to show how the fantastic tale reveals the full import of the public health consequences of the tragedy in Michigan: the transformation of oppression from social to biological. Next, I engage in a close reading of another Chesnutt story "A Victim of Heredity; or, Why the Darkey Loves Chicken" to explore how the physiological changes caused by lead poisoning have the potential to create a biotic underclass. Inspired by my ecocritical reading of Chesnutt, I construct a radical negligence legal claim on behalf of the

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[214] Benjamin Chavis defines environmental racism "as racial discrimination in environmental policy-making and enforcement of regulations and laws, the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste facilities, the official sanctioning of the presence of life threatening poisons and pollutants for communities of color, and the history of excluding people of color from leadership of the environmental movement." Ryan Holifield, "Defining Environmental Justice and Environmental Racism," *Urban Geography* 22, no. 1 (2001): 83, https://doi.org/10.2747/0272-3638.22.1.78.

water crisis' victims. Finally, I contextualize the disaster within a larger history of the thinking on and attempts to bring about racial subordination.

This chapter is not a traditional work of literary criticism. I spend as much – if not more -- time discussing environmental justice issues in the "real" world as I do fiction. But this section of my dissertation is meant to awaken my audience to the power of ecocritical readings of African American literature to demystify urgent racial realities.

Flint, Michigan is a city whose population is 57 % black and 41.5% poor.[215] In 2011, when the town was in the throes of financial emergency, the state seized control of its budget. As part of the takeover, from 2011 to 2015, Michigan reigned over Flint's finances through four unelected emergency managers.[216, 217] In April 2014, to lower expenses, the state switched the city's water supply to the Flint River instead of paying Detroit for Lake Huron water.[218]

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[215] Michael Martinez, "Flint, Michigan: Did race and poverty factor into water crisis?" *CNN*, January 27, 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/26/us/flint-michigan-water-crisis-race-poverty/index.html?eref=rss_health.

[216] Julie Bosman, Monica Davey, and Mitch Smith, "As Water Problems Grew, Officials Belittled Complaints From Flint," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/21/us/flint-michigan-lead-water-crisis.html?login=email&mtrref=undefined.

[217] Julie Bosman, "Flint Water Crisis Inquiry Finds State Ignored Warning Signs," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/24/us/flint-water-crisis.html?login=email&mtrref=query.nytimes.com&_r=1&mtrref=www.nytimes.com&mtrref=www.nytimes.com&gwh=127A01ED4D878EA3F729D69ADD2D4C71&gwt=pay.

[218] Holly Yan, "Flint water crisis timeline: How years of problems led to lead poisoning," *CNN*, January 20, 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/20/health/flint-water-crisis-timeline/index.html.

Just one month after Michigan changed water sources, the town's residents observed that their water had become brown and had acquired a foul odor and smell. However, they were assured by the state that the water was safe.[219] Indeed, a May 23, 2014 *MLive* article describes an engineer with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, Michael Prysby, declaring Flint River water met state health standards.[220] But on August 23, 2015, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University researchers published a website "flintwaterstudy.org" that detailed their discovery of elevated levels of lead in the water being supplied to Flint households.[221, 222] They also reported their findings to the Department of Environmental Quality.[223]

The next month, though, the Department challenged Virginia Tech's holdings.[224] It claimed that in contrast to what the University had discovered, tests done by Flint's

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[219] Ibid.

[220] Ron Fonger, "State says Flint River water meets all standards but more than twice the hardness of lake water," *MLive*, May 23, 2014, http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2014/05/state_says_flint_river_water_m.html.

[221] Yan, "Timeline."

[222] "The Unintended Consequences of migrating to Flint River water," Flint Water Study Updates, last modified August 23, 2015, http://flintwaterstudy.org/2015/08/the-unintended-consequences-of-migrating-to-flint-river-water/.

[223] Robby Korth, "Virginia Tech researchers fought for Flint in water crisis," January 23, 2016, *The Roanoke Times*, http://www.roanoke.com/news/education/higher_education/virginia_tech/virginia-tech-researchers-fought-for-flint-in-water-crisis/article_56fb09da-9e6a-5e11-9085-b48893e2380d.html.

[224] Yan, "Timeline."

government showed lead amounts did not surpass legally permissible levels. City Administrator Natasha Henderson also released a statement defending the quality of Flint's tests in response to the Virginia Tech study.[225] But the University researchers were hardly alone in their conclusions – before September ended, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician, would find elevated levels of lead in Flint children.[226]

The physician's assertions, too, were initially rebutted. The spokesman of the Department of Environmental Quality went so far as to accuse Hanna-Attisha of causing "near-hysteria."[227] But when Michigan epidemiologists reviewed their data, the state was forced to backtrack and admit Hanna-Attisha had been right.[228] Michigan officials confirmed her findings at a late September press conference.[229]

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[225] Ron Fonger, "Virginia Tech professor says Flint's tests for lead in water can't be trusted," *MLive*, September 15, 2015, http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2015/09/virginia_tech_researcher_says.html.

[226] Yan, "Timeline."

[227] Associated Press, "Did this Michigan Town Poison Its Children?" *US News*, September 25, 2014, http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/09/25/flint-michigan-children-show-high-levels-of-lead-in-blood.

[228] Yan, "Timeline."

[229] Robin Erb and Kathleen Gray, "State to tackle unsafe water in Flint with tests, filters," *Detroit Free Press*, October 2, 2015, http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/2015/10/02/state-officials-outline-plan-flint-water/73200250/.

Finally, on October 1, 2015, Flint began using Lake Huron water once more.[230] But Virginia Tech continued finding lead in the city's water – Flint's pipes had been damaged. Though the initial problem was that the river water was corrosive, meaning it could not flow through Flint's lead water lines without becoming imbued with the metal, once the lines were corroded, *no* water could pass through them without becoming contaminated. In this manner, the people of Flint were poisoned in their very homes.[231] Men and women, adults and children, the unborn and even the unconceived were prey to the physical ailments and cognitive impairments caused by exposure to lead.

On January 6, 2016, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder declared a state of emergency.[232]

When I learned of the Flint water crisis, I immediately thought of a short story called "The Goophered Grapevine" that was first published in 1887 by African American author and lawyer Charles W. Chesnutt. In the work, John and Annie, a Yankee couple planning to buy a North Carolina plantation during the Reconstruction period, meet Julius, one of the farm's former slaves. The old man recounts a tale to the couple about the grapevines on the property being "goophered" or bewitched.

In his story, the former owner of the plantation hires a conjure woman to prevent his slaves from eating his grapes – a practice that is decreasing his wine profits. The conjure

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[230] "Events That Led to Flint's Water Crisis," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/21/us/flint-lead-water-timeline.html.

[231] Ibid.

[232] NBC News, "Michigan Governor Sends Bottled Water to Flint," *Time*, January 10, 2016, http://time.com/4174455/flint-michigan-bottled-water-emergency/.

woman complies by cursing the vines so that any slave who consumes their fruit will die within the year. But when Henry, a slave new to the plantation – and thus unaware of the spell – partakes in the grapes, the plantation overseer arranges for the conjure woman to prescribe him an antidote – a treatment that involves Henry applying sap from the vines to his head.

However, the combination of the goophering and the remedy has unexpected consequences: it connects Henry's physical state to that of the grapevines:

> "…ez soon ez de young leaves begun ter come out on de grapevimes de ha'r begun ter grow out on Henry's head…. [E]z de young grapes begun ter come Henry's ha'r begun ter quirl all up in little balls, des like dis yer reg'lar grapy ha'r…. When Henry come ter de plantation, he wuz gittin' a little ole an stiff in de j'ints. But dat summer he got des ez spry en libely ez any young nigger on de plantation…. But de mos' cur'ouses' thing happen' in de fall, when de sap begin ter go down in de grapevimes. Fus', when de grapes 'uz gethered, de knots begun ter straighten out'n Henry's h'ar; en w'en de leaves begin ter fall, Henry's ha'r begin ter drap out; en w'en de vimes 'uz b'ar, Henry's head wuz baller 'n it wuz in de spring, en he begin ter git ole en stiff in de j'ints ag'in, en paid no mo' tention ter de gals dyoin' er de whole winter."[233]

Thus, Henry ceases to be subject to the unidirectional decline of human senescence, instead aging and being revitalized according to the life cycle of grapes.

By the time one reaches this point in "The Goophered Grapevine," several haunting similarities are apparent between this fantastic story and the all too real crisis. First, a black or disproportionately black community lacks sovereignty over a natural resource that sustains it. Second, those in control of the resource make decisions that prioritize economics over the wellbeing of that community. Third, these choices render the resource poisonous. And fourth,

[233] Charles Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine," in *The Conjure Woman* (Boston: Houghton & Mifflin, 1899), 23, Alexander Street.

contact with the contaminated natural resource alters the physical, biological, and behavioral characteristics of the consumer. But an even more sinister similarity is yet to come.

When Henry's owner discovers his slave's biannual metamorphoses, he thinks up a scheme. Every spring he sells the "young" Henry at a high price. Then, when winter comes and Henry suddenly ages and becomes decrepit – to his new owner's dismay – Henry's former master "kindly" buys him back at a discount. Henry's consumption of the goophered grapes ultimately makes him *more* profitable for his master. It commodifies him further.

The scam comes to an end, however, when a consultant visits the plantation and suggests a new horticultural technique for managing the grapevines. The method kills the plants – and Henry, too, whose health and wellbeing are connected to them. The language of the passage that describes Henry's demise is striking:

> When de vimes sta'ted ter wither, Henry 'mence' ter complain er his rheumatiz; en when de leaves begin ter dry up, his ha'r 'mence' ter drap out. When de vimes fresh' up a bit, Henry 'd git peart ag'in, en when de vimes wither' ag'in, Henry 'd git ole ag'in, en des kep' gittin' mo' en mo' fitten fer nuffin; he des pined away, en pined away, en fine'ly tuk ter his cabin; en when de big vime whar he got de sap ter 'n'int his head withered en turned yaller en died, Henry died too, -- des went out sorter like a cannel.[234]

Chesnutt uses repetition and duplication to illustrate the parallels between Henry's state and that of the goophered grapevines – the vines wither "ag'in," and Henry ages "ag'in." The leaves start to "dry up," and Henry's hair starts to "drap out." (Here the repetition and duplication are located in the recurrence of the "dr" sound and the use of phrases consisting of

[234] Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine," 32.

two monosyllabic words). The several uses of “when” call attention to the drawn-out nature of Henry and the vines’ decline as does the run-on sentence that stretches to record every detail.

The description of the vines’ death alternates with the illustration of Henry’s; the back and forth movement between one being and the other underscoring their consanguinity, the clauses marked by a rhythmic symmetry. And instead of saying, “Henry began to complain about his rheumatism when the vines began to wither, and he began to bald when the leaves started to dry up,” the description of the vines *always* precedes that of Henry to symbolize how he deteriorates *in response* to changes in the grapes. Furthermore, the clauses of the sentence flow into each other just as the end of the grapevines merges with Henry’s own expiration.

Chesnutt does not just *describe* Henry’s death – he allows the nature of Henry’s passing to be *incarnated* in the diction and syntax of the language he uses. In doing so, he mirrors how Henry’s oppression morphs from an externally imposed socio-legal status to something biologically incarnated. For Chesnutt’s story is ultimately not about the transformation of a *slave* but the transformation of *injustice*.

And that is what the Flint water crisis is about, too. The most sinister harm of the crisis is the conversion of the *social* oppression Flint citizens already faced into *biological* subjugation. For while it may not be possible to enchant grapes in a way that makes blacks better, more profitable slaves, it is absolutely feasible to poison water in a manner that makes African Americans better – and more profitable -- plebeians. For lead, due to its effects on the brain, is highly effective at maintaining inequality.

Lead poisoning works in conjunction with and is even more efficient than the more traditional ways in which inequity is perpetuated. For example, damaging a disproportionately

black and poor population's IQ levels through lead exposure[235] is far more effective than relegating the racially and socioeconomically marginalized to underfunded schools or tracking them into low level classes.[236] The effect of depressed IQs on Flint's children will reverberate throughout their lives, affecting their decision-making skills, ability to pursue high school or post-secondary education, and career opportunities.

Before the Flint water crisis, African American children were already more likely than those of other races to be labeled learning disabled[237] even though racial differences – in the intelligence of uncontaminated populations – is a myth. But due to the goophered water, greater numbers of black children will go from being improperly labeled with disabilities to actually having them. For just as goophering made Henry into the natural product his owner always viewed him as being, lead poisoning brings the real abilities of African American children closer in line with prior racist assumptions about their capabilities.

(I note here how Henry was figuratively framed as a natural good even *before* his goophering. For example, Julius describes him as having been "ball [bald] ez a hossapple" and "ball ez a sweeten' 'tater." [238] Similarly, in another of the Conjure Woman stories "Lonesome

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[235] Paul Butler, *Let's Get Free: A Hip-Hop Theory of Justice* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 171.

[236] Rebecca L. Case, "Not Separate but Not Equal: How Should the United States Address Its International Obligations to Eradicate Racial Discrimination in the Public Education System," *Penn State International Law Review* 21, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 220.

[237] Julianne Hing, "Race, Disability and the School-to-Prison Pipeline," *Colorlines*, May 13, 2014, http://www.colorlines.com/articles/race-disability-and-school-prison-pipeline.

[238] Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine," 18, 22.

Ben," even before the eponymous slave is transformed into clay, he thinks of his large body as constituting "mo' groun' fer Mars Marrabo ter cover" with a whip,[239] demonstrating again how the dehumanizing transfigurations slaves endure merely literalize forms of degradation that were already extant).

It would have been difficult for Flint's children to take advantage of even the smoothest educational pathways to brighter futures with the compromised nervous systems, reduced attention spans, and hyperactivity that are symptoms of lead poisoning.[240] But Flint children do not march down a smooth educational pathway – they flow through the school-to-prison pipeline[241] which disproportionately refers black and/or disabled children to law enforcement to be punished for offenses that, when committed by the white and/or able, are handled by principals.[242, 243] These students, who were already targeted for punishment, will find their plight exacerbated due to exhibiting lead poisoning-induced behavioral problems.

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[239] Charles Chesnutt, "Lonesome Ben," in *Southern Workmen: Selected Short Stories, 1890-1925* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2005), 96, Alexander Street.

[240] Butler, *Let's Get Free*, 171.

[241] Carimah Townes, "How the Flint water crisis could send an entire generation to prison," *ThinkProgress*, January 22, 2016, https://thinkprogress.org/how-the-flint-water-crisis-could-send-an-entire-generation-to-prison-10f681ceab7d/.

[242] Wire services, "Government offers guidelines to end school-to-prison pipeline," *Al Jazeera America*, January 8, 2014, http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/1/8/government-offersdisciplineguidelinestoendschooltoprisonpipeline.html.

[243] Marilyn Elias, "School-to-prison Pipeline," *Teaching Tolerance*, Spring 2013, http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-43-spring-2013/school-to-prison.

But the physiological changes brought about by lead poisoning will have sociological consequences for Flint's adults, too. Weak, fatigued[244] adults have less energy to read to their children and help with homework or to pursue educational opportunities for themselves, work a job, take on a second job, or start a business. Irritable[245] lead poisoned adults are likely to encounter conflict in the workplace and at home and to find themselves impeded from partnering and parenting in a positive, productive manner. And the infertility and lowered sex drive[246] suffered by victims of lead poisoning adds additional suffering and psychic strain to relationships already burdened by race and class injustice. But as troubling as all this is, I have not yet discussed the most disturbing aspect of the biologizing – the literal naturalizing -- of oppression.

"A Victim of Heredity; or, Why the Darkey Loves Chicken" is another of Chesnutt's tales. In this piece, John and Annie who, at this point, own the plantation are exasperated by the continual theft of their hens by their African American neighbors. Having just trapped the latest culprit in a shed, John asks Julius why blacks "can't let chicken alone?" Julius asserts African Americans have a genetic predisposition towards liking the fowl, but he insists he is not

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[244] Butler, *Let's Get Free*, 171.

[245] Ibid.

[246] Ibid.

speaking out of self-loathing – rather, he says, blacks' affinity for the poultry is the fault of "a w'ite man."[247]

According to Julius, former plantation owner Mars Donal' visited the free black conjure woman Aun' Peggy in search of a magical method of feeding his slaves less, so he could save money. Aun' Peggy sold Mars Donal' a potion to apply to his slaves' food that would glamour half portions of rations to look like full servings and suppress appetite.

At first, Mars Donal' follows Aun' Peggy's instructions, and the slaves seem to manage just fine. But to save even more money, Mars Donal' decides to double the dosage of the concoction and feed his slaves only a quarter of their original rations. This results in the slaves becoming malnourished. Even after Mars Donal' returns to feeding his slaves their original portions, they continue to sicken. Desperate to save his ailing property, Mars Donal' tries providing them first with pork, then with beef, each at Aun' Peggy's suggestion, before Aun' Peggy finally prescribes the correct remedy: chicken.

Though Aun' Peggy eventually gives Mars Donal' another brew to break the spell -- to the extent it *can* be broken, she warns him "you… put dat goopher on so ha'd, dat I 'magine its got in day blood, en I's feared dey ain' nobody ner nuffin kin eber take it all off'n 'em." As a result, the slaves need to eat chicken once a week for the rest of their lives. As these slaves "got scattered roun' so befo' de wah en sense," they passed on their epigenetic need for fowl

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[247] Charles Chesnutt, "Victim of Heredity; or, Why the Darkey Loves Chicken," in *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*, ed. Richard H. Brodhead (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 173-74, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822377795.

to their descendants until all the African Americans in North Carolina shared their genetic deficiency, stealing if necessary to meet their therapeutic requirement.[248]

This story may not seem particularly ecocentric, and, thus, not fitting subject matter for ecocriticism. But the tale is one of *pollution* and *contamination*. It, like the environmental justice movement, is concerned with what happens when marginalized people lack control over their environment. Thus, though a close reading of "Victim of Hereditary" may not, itself, be ecocritical, it facilitates an ecocritical reading of black reality. As Kimberley N. Ruffin explains in *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions*, "Experienced with the triumphs and troubles of life among those at the bottom of human hierarchies, African Americans have a keen knowledge of the ecological implications of social systems…"[249] A work can hail an ecocritical reading then, not because it deals with trees or the sea or animals, but because, despite the absent of those entities, it treats disturbances in the natural balance.

Thus, Mars Donal' changes his slaves' diet to save money and ends up effecting irreversible hereditary criminogenic physiological change in their bodies. Michigan changed the disproportionately black population of Flint's water to save money and ended up effecting irreversible hereditary criminogenic physiological change in their bodies, too – for perhaps the most horrific consequence of lead poisoning is that it predisposes people who would have lived blameless lives – and their descendants – to commit crime.

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[248] Ibid., 181.

[249] Kimberly N. Ruffin, *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 20.

As legal scholar Paul Butler notes in his book *Let's Get Free: A Hip-Hop Theory of Justice*, "lead poisoning results in higher aggression and a reduction in impulse control" – a recipe for violent offense. Economist Richard Nevin even "thinks that lead poisoning is the biggest factor behind violent crime." This is because he found an almost complete correlation between leaded gas consumption and FBI crime statistics – the more consumption, the more crime. And the inverse was true, too.[250]

Nor is Nevin alone in his theory. Another economist, Jessica Reyes, did the most thorough study on lead poisoning and crime. After comparing crime rates and lead exposure in every state – as well as the District of Columbia – she concluded that not only does being exposed to lead during childhood increase the likelihood one will commit violent offenses but that the effects of lead exposure are so intense they impact "national crime trends significantly."[251] Sociologist Paul B. Stretesky and criminologist Michael Lynch even found that "U.S. counties with high lead levels had four times the murder rate of counties with low lead levels, after controlling for multiple environmental and socio-economic factors."[252] Still another study, this one by a psychiatrist, Herbert Needleman, "compared lead levels of 194 adolescents arrested in Pittsburgh with lead levels of 146 high school adolescents" and found the arrested

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[250] Paul Butler, *Let's Get Free*, 171.

[251] Ibid., 172.

[252] Shankar Vedantam, "Research Links Lead Exposure, Criminal Activity," *The Washington Post*, July 8, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/07/AR2007070701073.html.

teenagers' lead levels were four times higher than that of the control group.[253] Lead poisoning causes individuals who would have otherwise been peaceful to degenerate into violent offenders who, in turn, cause suffering for *their* victims at the domestic and community levels. That is one reason Dr. Hanna-Attisha remarks, "If you were going to put something in a population to keep them down for generations to come, it would be lead."[254]

The physician's phrase "generations to come" indexes not just the intergenerational effects of the criminal behavior to which lead poisoning contributes, but, as I earlier referenced, the fact that lead poisoning is hereditary. It crosses the placental barrier from mothers to children and on from those children to *their* sons and daughters so that the genetic markers of lead exposure are found in the blood of the *grandchildren* of those poisoned by it.[255] Flint may have switched back to its original water source just as Mars Donal' eventually returned to feeding his slaves their original amount of rations, but, as Aun' Peggy laments, Flint "put that

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[253] Shankar Vedantam, "Lead exposure causes crime, economist says," *The Seattle Times*, July 9, 2007, https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/lead-exposure-causes-crime-economist-says/.

[254] Abby Goodnough, "Flint Weighs Scope of Harm to Children Caused by Lead in Water," *The New York Times*, Jan 29, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/30/us/flint-weighs-scope-of-harm-to-children-caused-by-lead-in-water.html?login=email&ribbon-ad-idx=4&rref=us&module=Ribbon&version=context®ion=Header&action=click&contentCollection=U.S.&pgtype=article&mtrref=www.nytimes.com&_r=0&mtrref=undefined&gwh=094132786780D4D55A09677D40E38F2F&gwt=pay.

[255] Wayne State University - Office of the Vice President for Research. "Lead exposure in mothers can affect future generations." ScienceDaily. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/10/151002191739.htm (accessed October 22, 2017).

goopher on so hard, that I imagine it's gotten in their blood, and I fear nobody or nothing can ever take it all off of them."

In the story, Annie ultimately decides to show leniency to the chicken thief after hearing Julius' tale. Lead poisoning sufferers are unlikely to find similar compassion. These victims turned victimizers are poised to collide with a legal system that sees them only as predators, indifferent to how cognitive damage radically reduced their free will. For though Americans are somewhat sympathetic to physiological defenses to criminal charges,[256] there is, as legal scholar and psychiatrist Christopher Slobogin reminds us, "judicial nonchalance toward syndrome testimony" and wariness of the "subjectification of criminal law." [257]

Indeed, some hold that considering predisposition to crime undermines societal norms. Others argue that accounting for a syndrome's effect on the physiology of a criminal is to risk pathologizing all those who have her disorder.[258] Those sensitive to this perspective would avoid demonizing lead poisoning victims by pointing out that many sufferers *do* conform their behavior to social norms – which, of course, makes it harder to argue for why allowances should be made for individuals who transgress. For these reasons, Flint water crisis victims who commit acts they would never have performed in the absence of contamination are likely to

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[256] John Monterosso, Edward B. Royzman, and Barry Schwartz, "Explaining Away Responsibility: Effects of Scientific Explanation on Perceived Culpability," *Ethics & Behavior* 15, no. 2 (2005): 154.

[257] Christopher Slobogin, "Psychological Syndromes and Criminal Responsibility," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 6 (2010): 123-24.

[258] Ibid.

face prosecutors, juries, and judges who find the connection between lead poisoning and crime incomprehensible, incredible, or irrelevant.

A number of diverse lawsuits have been filed in response to the water crisis. They seek remedies for harms such as health problems, cognitive impairment, property damage, and emotional distress.[259, 260] But if I were representing Flint victims, I would put forth a prima facie case radically different from the extant ones.

I would bring a negligence cause of action that, at first, seemed rather standard: The Michigan and Flint governments had a *duty* to provide the citizens of Flint with water that would not place them at unreasonable risk of injury. (In fact, the refusal of state officials to heed the evidence that challenged the wisdom of using Flint River water may even transform negligence into “reckless disregard” or “callous indifference”). The governments *breached* that duty first, by not ensuring the city’s water lines would not be corroded by Flint River water and later, by ignoring evidence that the pipes had been corroded and were conveying toxic water.

The breach is both the *actual* and *proximate causes* of the plaintiffs’ injury: lead poisoning. It is the actual cause because officials’ choice to use Flint Water without ensuring it was not corrosive as well as their decision to ignore evidence that the water was toxic resulted in the plaintiffs’ lead poisoning. It is the proximate cause because, but for the defendants

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[259] CBS/AP, “Amid Flint water crisis, the lawsuits are piling up,” *CBS News*, February 8, 2016, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/flint-water-crisis-lawsuits-piling-up/.

[260] “NAACP Files Lawsuit Over Flint Water Crisis,” Press Release, NAACP, last modified May 18, 2016, http://www.naacp.org/latest/naacp-files-lawsuit-flint-water-crisis/.

failing to ensure the non-corrosiveness of Flint River water and ignoring signs of its toxicity, the plaintiffs would not have been hurt.

The last element of a prima facie negligence case is *harm*. It is within the context of this element that an ecocritical reading of literature comes to bear. For, as I have demonstrated, "The Goophered Grapevine" reveals the central harm of the Flint water crisis to be the transformation of racial oppression from social to biological. That *no one* is bringing a civil action upon this legal theory illustrates how utterly essential it is to read black literature ecocritically and to use our analyses to make sense of real world issues. The lack of such a lawsuit serves as an example of what is lost when we fail to do so.

But the intersection of inequality, lead poisoning, and the criminal justice system must be placed in a historical, not just a historical fiction, context. America's police forces, courts, and penal institutions have, since the nation's founding, served the purpose of maintaining a racial caste system in addition to preserving law and order. But since the 1868 passage of the Fourteenth Amendment, which included an Equal Protection Clause meant to establish legal parity among citizens regardless of color, statutes enacted to subjugate blacks have had to be superficially racially neutral. For example, during Reconstruction, African Americans found their *poverty* criminalized through vagrancy laws selectively applied to blacks. Penury functioned as a proxy for the blatant criminalization of melanin.[261] Economics were used to target African Americans only because biology could not be explicitly employed to this end. Melanin still

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[261] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 28.

cannot be criminalized per se – but a disproportionately minority population, such as that of Flint, *can* be poisoned in a way that pulls them into the prison system.

Henry's owner profited from him eating the contaminated grapes. Similarly – and sickeningly -- for some, goophering will represent a windfall just as it did in the story. Like Henry's owner, these relative elites may not have intended the poisoning of their less fortunate counterparts, but they will find it felicitous nonetheless. That's because all those who invest in for-profit prisons or who, as non-black citizens, benefit from the caste system that mass incarceration maintains by being ushered at least one rung above the very bottom of the social ladder gain from a swelling of the ranks of the imprisoned. They get the advantage of something even more powerful than the school-to-prison pipeline -- a womb-to-prison pipeline.

But lead poisoning's power to cross the placental barrier, imbuing successive generations with its criminogenic qualities, does not just revive slavery's ability to perpetuate profit via the biological reproduction of oppression. It also recuperates and lends credence to antebellum stereotypes. This is because the symptoms of lead poisoning are similar to the pseudo-scientific characteristics proslavery "scholars" attributed to blacks.

Consider: Lead poisoning symptoms include "excessive fatigue…. learning and behavioral disorders, lower IQs, [and] hyperactivity" as well as the aforementioned "higher aggression and a reduction in impulse control."[262] Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* describes blacks as having "a disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions, and unemployed in labour" (excessive fatigue), as being "in reason much inferior"

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[262] Butler, *Let's Get Free*, 171.

(learning disorders and lower IQs), and as individuals who "after hard labour through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of the morning" (hyperactivity).[263] Similarly, David Christy wrote in the 1860 work "Cotton is King or, Slavery in the Light of Political Economy" that "Occasionally some horrible crime startles the community, and is almost invariably attended by a savage ferocity peculiar to the vicious negro"[264] (hyper-aggressiveness and poor impulse control manifesting as violent crime).

In her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, legal scholar Michelle Alexander laments, "Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal."[265] Similarly, once you are lead poisoned, the old forms of discriminatory stereotyping are suddenly lent accuracy. And you're *genetically* prone to committing the sort of misdeeds that condemn you to pre-civil rights era strictures.

In Dante's *Inferno*, the damned are subject to *contrapasso* – the suffering of a punishment that echoes the crime. For example, the thieves confined to the seventh Bolgia of the eighth circle of Hell are vulnerable at any moment to losing their human forms and taking

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[263] Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 206-07.

[264] David Christy, "Cotton is King or, Slavery in the Light of Political Economy," in Elliott, *Cotton is King*, 707.

[265] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 2.

on the bodies of reptiles -- of having their anatomy reflect their loathsome, predatory souls. The Flint water crisis presents us with an even more disturbing version of this devolution. For while, in the *Inferno*, robbers' bodies are altered to reflect what they truly are, the bodies of the victims of the water crisis have been transformed to mirror what others have stereotyped them as being. In the *Inferno*, the guilty are punished for having committed crime. In Flint, innocents are punished in a way that predisposes them to doing so.

This predilection puts the African American would-be parents of Flint in double jeopardy. Women and men who reproduce furnish a demographic for those today who, like those who profited from slavery and de jure segregation in the past, benefit from the increase of populations of disenfranchised and criminal/criminalized people. Yet these prospective progenitors are also shamed for producing another generation of social or biological inferiority. As Dorothy Roberts asserts in *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, "Poor Black mothers are blamed for perpetuating social problems by transmitting defective genes… and a deviant lifestyle to their children."[266]

The prospect of a conjunction between heritable biology and social transgression is one of the oldest elements of literary horror. In "Misreading *The Scarlet Letter*: Race, Sentimental Pedagogy, and Antebellum Indian Literacy," Sophie Bell notes that in Nathaniel Hawthorne's book, "a Puritan elder suggests [Hester Prynne's daughter Pearl] is misnamed, exclaiming,

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[266] Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 3.

'Pearl? – Ruby, rather! – or Coral! – or Red Rose, at the very least, judging from thy hue!'"[267] Unlike the criminals in the *Inferno* whose loss of bodily integrity is the consequence of *their own* crimes, and unlike Hester's punishment which mobilizes *social* opprobrium and is inflicted as a consequence of her own act, Pearl is *physiologically* changed -- is colored -- as a result of her *mother's* wrongdoing. While Hester defiantly flaunts her scarlet letter, she is distressed by the prospect that her degradation, like lead poisoning, has crossed the placental barrier. Hester, like Henry, partook of forbidden "fruit," and, as a result, experiences – through her child – biological goophering.

Pearl not only appears red -- she is a disciplinary problem. Her inability to follow rules connects her both with real individuals suffering from lead poisoning and with stereotypes of non-whites. Furthermore, the concomitant racialization of Pearl alongside the presentation of her deviant behavior links her to individuals like O.J. Simpson whose photograph was famously darkened by *Time* magazine when he was on trial for murder.[268] A century and a half earlier, *The Scarlet Letter* deepens Pearl's complexion as it displays her misdeeds.

The Scarlet Letter takes place in the 1640s, an era that preceded the modern racial constructs with which Hawthorne, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, would have been intimately familiar. During the mid-seventeenth century, blacks and whites were both used as

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[267] Sophie Bell, "Misreading *The Scarlet Letter*: Race, Sentimental Pedagogy, and Antebellum Indian Literacy," *Studies in American Fiction* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 1, Project MUSE.

[268] Deirdre Carmody, "Time Responds to Criticism Over Simpson Cover," *The New York Times*, June 24, 1994, http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/25/us/time-responds-to-criticism-over-simpson-cover.html.

indentured servants and were freed at the end of specified tenures.[269] But white elites feared that the common socio-political interests of blacks and disenfranchised whites would lead to cross-racial allegiances. So colonial courts responded by drawing distinctions between the races. For example, they developed common law that punished transgressing white bonded servants with the extension of their indentures for a fixed period of years but black bondsmen with the extension of their indentures for life.[270] A 1662 policy that proscribed a child from inheriting its father's status, per English common law, if the child's mother was black was enacted. A 1667 statute did away with baptism as a means for blacks born into slavery to acquire their freedom.[271]

Such jurisprudence fostered the modern iteration of whiteness as a means of offering the psychic benefits of racial superiority to those of European descent who lacked class privilege in the hopes that white plebeians would identify along racial rather than socio-economic lines and cease forming coalitions with African Americans. Once the law drew divisions between black and white bonded laborers, race served as a biological marker of socially constructed legal status. Hester, living in an era of racial pre-modernity, is confronted by the distressing notion of melanin as a legal marker and a form of hereditary disenfranchisement.

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[269] Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color*, 21-22.

[270] Ibid., 28.

[271] Alden T. Vaughan, "The Origins Debate: Slavery and Racism in Seventeenth-Century Virginia," in *The Worlds of Unfree Labour*, ed. Colin A. Palmer (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 46.

The legal separation of blacks from others required the invention of theories of racial difference to justify the oppression of Africans. One such creation was the idea of polygeny – the notion that different races originated separately from each other.[272] Those who subscribed to monogeny were not necessarily anti-racist though – white supremacist monogenists simply adhered to the idea that all human beings descended from Adam and Eve, but blacks were darkened -- and corrupted -- by the curse of Ham.[273]

The discourse of twentieth-century thinkers breathlessly anticipated contemporary analogues to those ideas. For example, in 1989, columnist Charles Krauthammer warned of "the newest horror: a bio-underclass, a generation of physically damaged cocaine babies whose biological inferiority is stamped at birth."[274] These children, implicitly raced as black, had a separate origin than children of the mainstream: crack addicted mothers. They were supposedly cursed with lowliness by the sins of their parents. Yet, as Deborah A. Frank, an authority on drug exposure, explains, the crack baby scare was a "fantasy" panic. Children exposed to cocaine in utero may suffer from mild cognitive impairments as a result, but they are not the severely physically, emotionally, and mentally damaged population they were

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[272] Audrey Smedley and Brian D. Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2012), 238, Alexander Street.

[273] Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 86, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195052824.003.0004.

[274] W. Joseph Campbell, *Getting It Wrong: Ten of the Greatest Misreported Stories in American Journalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 130.

hailed to be.[275] (It should be noted that while the fictional crack baby narrative was used to implement real increased penalties for drug abuse, there has been no similarly intense rally for criminal penalties for those who expose black children to the *actual* harms of lead poisoning. This suggests the trafficking of the myth may have been motivated more by the desire to punish blacks than to protect them).[276]

In other words, despite America's democratic ethos, there is an underbelly of this nation that has always theorized, fantasized about, and sought to produce a conjunction between melanin and inferiority. In the Flint water crisis, that goal was finally realized. I do not think officials purposefully poisoned the people of Flint. However, I do feel that if the city had not been so poor and, more importantly, so black, leaders would have acted with care. And, as I have argued, even though the crisis was unintended, its effects are not necessarily undesired.

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[275] Ibid., 131-32.

[276] Ibid., 138.

Most tragically of all, they are not isolated. Cleveland, Ohio, a city that is 53% black,[277] has *twice* the rate of lead poisoning as Flint.[278] In Baltimore, a 63% African American city,[279] thousands of children have been contaminated over the past decade[280] and still more remain at risk.[281] Black children are almost three times more likely than their peers to be poisoned by lead. In some black and Hispanic neighborhoods, over 90% of the youths have been poisoned.[282]

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[277] "Census 2010 Ohio village, city, county populations and demographics," last modified March 9, 2011, http://www.cleveland.com/datacentral/index.ssf/2011/03/census_2010_ohio_village_city.html?appSession=1773792JA530JSI02ZX3OWCAI527J3G78WFV4QV3C6H89OI16DJ17I70E95NA38VUUMJI303J35CH22458WD1ZLHN8358C7I3VANUW9S9CY0P431EYP35XG4S605SF1S.

[278] Michael Wines, "Flint is in the News, but Lead Poisoning is Even Worse in Cleveland," *The New York Times*, March 3, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/04/us/lead-paint-contamination-persists-in-many-cities-as-cleanup-falters.html.

[279] "RACE PROFILE 1: DETAILED RACE BY HISPANIC/LATINO ETHNICITY, WITH TOTAL TALLIES," last modified August 12, 2011, http://planning.maryland.gov/msdc/census/cen2010/SF1/RaceProf/Race_baci.pdf.

[280] Baynard Woods, "Baltimore warns that children are at risk of lead poisoning from paint," *The Guardian*, January 30, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jan/30/baltimore-children-lead-poisoning-paint.

[281] "Lead Poisoning," accessed October 13, 2017, https://health.baltimorecity.gov/lead/lead-poisoning.

[282] "Contaminated Childhood: The Chronic Lead Poisoning of Low-Income Children and Communities of Color in the United States," Health Affairs Blog, last modified August 8, 2017, http://healthaffairs.org/blog/2017/08/08/contaminated-childhood-the-chronic-lead-poisoning-of-low-income-children-and-communities-of-color-in-the-united-states/.

An apocryphal quote attributed to Malcolm X states, “Racism is like a Cadillac, they bring out a new model every year.” The stories of Chesnutt, along with the *Inferno* and *The Scarlett Letter*, help us to recognize that the Flint water crisis and other lead pollution disasters are not colorblind public health catastrophes but the latest versions of prejudice on the showroom floor. For though no one is deliberately poisoning disproportionately black communities, government leaders *are* affirmatively choosing to act with an indifference and neglect that has a disparate impact on African Americans – an impact that reinforces institutionalized racism and financially benefits elites.

Law and pseudo-science, theology and inequitable systems of public education have all sought and still seek to make and maintain the underclass status of blacks. Each of these fields innovated goophers to oppress African Americans, from selectively enforced vagrancy laws to proslavery ethnology to the curse of Ham to academic tracking practices that sort children by skin color. In lead poisoning tragedies, we must recognize the latest threat to racial equality: the no longer fantastic ability to make a population physiologically deficient.

"Why, Uncle Julius!" Annie replies upon hearing yet another of the former slave’s tales about how white supremacy led to the transformation and degeneration of African Americans, "what ridiculous nonsense!"[283]

But it isn’t.

[283] Chesnutt, “The Conjurer’s Revenge,” in *The Conjure Woman*, 107.

Chapter Three

The Terrible Tar-Baby Story

Introduction

In Chapter Two, I discussed how victims of the Flint water crisis were ignored by the officials who should have protected them from lead poisoning. The spectacle of black voicelessness reminded me of the mute tar baby and inspired an exploration of how Chesnutt revises the Ananseseɛm again and again in his tales. I will begin this chapter by discussing how the experience of slavery profoundly altered the original African forms of this Ananse story. Then, I will engage in close readings of Chesnutt's works.

In "The Goophered Grapevine," John reverses the Aboatia's error. Blinded by unconscious racism, he mistakes Julius, a (black) human being, for a tar baby. Then, in "Po' Sandy," a slave tragically devolves into a tar baby, becoming objectified even as he seeks freedom. In a narrative told (in slightly different ways) in both Chesnutt's novel *The Colonel's Dream* and his short story "The Dumb Witness," a former slave woman cannily assumes the tar baby pose for strategic reasons.

Chesnutt revises both the tar baby narrative and Joel Chandler Harris' piece "The Story of the War" in his work "Mars Jeems's Nightmare." In Chesnutt's tale, the conjure woman Aun' Peggy turns a slaveowner into a tar baby as a form of contrapasso. The common interpretation of the piece is that the transformation is only temporary. However, if the reader approaches the narrative with knowledge of the oral tar baby tale, a radically different ending is revealed. An exploration of the question of to what extent American authors, black and white, were

aware that they were using African retentions from the oral tradition follows. My last move is to read "Lonesome Ben" as a tale of how social death leads to degeneration into a tar baby.

Chesnutt's stories stand on their own as masterpieces. But reading them without knowledge of the tar baby story and its African roots is like gazing at Picasso's proto-cubist paintings unaware of *their* African referents – one misses half the glory. But when the reader takes the ecocritical approach I described in the Introduction, an approach that keeps one eye on African American texts and the other on African orature, she is richly rewarded with the ability excavate of layers of meaning that would otherwise be hidden beneath the surface like gold under strata of stone.

An Anansesɛm Becomes American

Consider the experience of being reborn as a slave after floating, as though in the womb, in the darkness and confined space of a ship's hold, of having one's body, as part of the thingification process, reconstructed by pitch. (Captains of slave ships disguised the wounds of their living merchandise by caulking them with tar).[284] Captives who came from cultures that told the tar baby story must have felt as though they were being transformed from human beings into asphalt-sculpted things. Slaves' inability to speak the language of their captors, the punishments they received for "impudence," and the literal bits they were forced to wear all served to silence them. This, combined with being restrained from defending themselves against beatings – which left them as powerless as the fictional doll to ward off the rabbit's

[284] "Slave Auction," Bitesize, BBC, last modified October 17, 2007, https://www.bbc.co.uk/education/clips/z366n39.

blows, must have made at least some Africans process their suffering in terms of the tar baby tale. And it likely inspired them to understand the story in a new way.

In a context in which blackness equaled voicelessness and African Americans were considered part of the natural world rather than the homo sapien species, the tar baby expanded from a small detail in the tale of how Ananse got his stories into an allegory for the devolution from black human to green humanoid, the demotion of Africans into creatures that resembled humans but were really -- like gum, wax, turpentine, and tar – natural objects. The other elements of the story, such as Ananse's capture of the python, hornets' nest, and leopard, fell away. What black people retained most strongly were the aspects of Anansesɛms most relevant to their New World plight: Ananse, the ambiguous figure sometimes identified as a man and other times as an animal, and the tar baby, the vulnerable green entity whose silence confuses those who look upon it as to whether it is actually human. Chesnutt was among the African American authors inspired by the latter cultural retention. In fact, he was obsessed with it -- he revises the tar baby story again and again in his tales.

"The Goophered Grapevine"

Consider, for example, "The Goophered Grapevine." Chesnutt links his story to the folktale from the very first paragraph: John and Annie decide to move to North Carolina on the advice of John's cousin, who is in the turpentine business -- turpentine and tar are the natural ingredients Brer Fox crafts the tar baby from in Joel Chandler Harris' version of the narrative.

The tar baby story hinges on the rabbit's misperception of the doll. John, similarly, fails to see Julius accurately. Like Sophia – after her corruption -- and the Garrisonians in Douglass' memoirs, the émigré inverts the hare's error, mistaking a living being for an item.

As Bryan Wagner notes in *The Tar Baby: A Global History*, whites understood the rabbit's inability to tell a doll from a human as representing how those they considered primitive and fetishistic were unable to distinguish between inanimate objects and sentient beings.[285] Even more grotesquely, in popular culture, whites reframed their pseudo-scientific ambivalence about black humanity as *African* intellectual inferiority. On the one hand, they insisted Africans and apes were effectively the same. Yet, on the other hand, they claimed that blacks were unable to tell their race and the simian species apart and that this incapability was evidence of their stupidity. Thus, the elision of Africans and non-human primates was evidence of academic brilliance when articulated by white scholars but mocked as farcical when blacks were supposedly too dumb to tell monkeys from men.

For example, white society matron Elizabeth Paschal O'Connor recounts in *My Beloved South*, a memoir of her life during the antebellum and Reconstruction eras, what reads as a particularly twisted revision of the tar baby story:

> There is a story told of a field hand going to a circus and saying to a very big, black ape, "Good mawnin', sah." The ape remained silent. "Why don't you talk to me, mistah?" the darkey said; "you looks jes' like my poor brer John, who is done dead." The ape blinked sympathetically, but made no reply. Then the darkey's face broke into a smile, and he said, "You sho'ly is wise, sah; 'cause ef you said anything de white folks would cut off yo' tail, put a hoe in yo' hand, and set you to work plantin' cotton."[286, 287]

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[285] Bryan Watson, *The Tar Baby: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 114, Project MUSE.

[286] Mrs. T.P. O'Connor, *My Beloved South* (New York: Putnam, 1913), 307, HATHI TRUST Digital Library.

[287] In the next chapter, I reference an antebellum creation story in which the devil turns an ape into a black man as punishment for the creature refusing to answer his questions. Like O'Connor's anecdote, this story frames African humanity as not just similar but *inferior* to

In this retelling, the black character does not waste time castigating or beating the tar baby analogue for its rudeness when those moments could be better spent commenting on the alleged resemblance between African Americans and monkeys and on the superiority of simian pragmatism. Ultimately, the purpose of both racist readings of the traditional American tar baby story and O'Connor's disgusting version is the same – to query why, if blacks cannot tell themselves from things or animals, whites should make such distinctions. But in the works of Douglass and Chesnutt, it is racial elites who are too backward to perceive the world accurately.

For example, John continually – and fallaciously -- presents Julius as merely the object of the gaze like a turpentine mannequin that can be looked at but cannot stare back. Thus, when the Yankee first sees Julius, the old man is eating fruit, "smacking his lips with great gusto" while "a pile of grapeskins near him indicated that the *performance* was no new thing" [italics mine]. John says, "We [he and Annie] approached him at an angle from the rear, and were close to him before he perceived us." But as John's diction reveals, Julius is indeed aware of the couple – he is secretly performing for them, playing the role of the simple-minded Sambo who derives outsized enjoyment from watermelon and other produce.[288]

Then, as Julius begins to tell the story of how the grapevines were goophered, John says of the old man:

> but as his embarrassment wore off, his language flowed more freely, and the story acquired perspective and coherence. As he became more and more absorbed in the

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simian status. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 106.

[288] Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine," 9.

> narrative, his eyes assumed a dreamy expression, and he seemed to lose sight of his auditors, and to be living over again in monologue his life on the old plantation."[289]

John refuses recognize Julius' creative agency. Instead, the old man's language and story are described as developing of their own accord rather than being crafted. And Julius once more devolves into a visionless entity, something looked upon yet unable to return the gaze. He becomes an oracle, a mere vessel for voice.

For the second time, John refuses to recognize Julius as a performer – rather than playing to his audience, Julius "seemed to lose sight of his auditors." Instead of authoring a tale, the elderly man is merely "living over again… his life on the old plantation," doing what the Garrisonians demanded of Douglass. His eyes, previously described by the northerner as evincing "shrewdness,"[290] go "dreamy."

But even though Chesnutt is writing "The Goophered Grapevine" from John's distorted perspective, he manages to reveal Julius' stagecraft. One way Chesnutt does so is through the use of eye dialect: "w'ile" for "while," for example, or "w'en" for "when."[291] Eye dialect is inherently performative – it allows phonetically correct words to masquerade as improper. And Chesnutt highlights the artificiality of the technique by refusing to settle on consistent spellings

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[289] Ibid., 12-13.

[290] Ibid., 10.

[291] Ibid., 13, 14

for these incorrectly rendered words. For example, again is spelled as both “ag’in” and “agin.”[292]

As Tom McArthur explains, eye dialect is used to transcribe dialogue of a character meant to be viewed as inferior.[293] Here, it is employed to signal how Julius is acting the part of a guileless plantation “Uncle” too simple to strategically deploy a narrative towards his own ends. Rather than sculpting a baby from turpentine and tar, Julius shapes *himself* in the image of negrophobic stereotypes.

In the tar baby story, the fox thinks the doll is a real child and is angered when the figurine does not speak. But in “The Goophered Grapevine,” John thinks Julius is a cross between a poppet he can stare at, a storytelling automaton, and a minstrel stereotype – and, thus, cannot accurately hear his speech.

John’s inability to perceive things correctly is lampooned in a scene from Chesnutt’s “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt” in which the white man laments his inability to interest Annie in philosophy “even when presented in the simplest and most lucid form.” This is allegedly demonstrated by her unwillingness to listen to him read a passage on transformation.[294] He fails to ascertain that the subject of the excerpt is the same as that of Julius’ stories or that Annie’s interest in the conjure tales proves an affinity for philosophy.

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[292] Ibid., 21.

[293] Tom McArthur, *Concise Oxford Companion to The English Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 228.

[294] Chesnutt, “The Gray Wolfs Ha’nt,” in *The Conjure Woman*, 164.

He also never grasps that the particular passage that bores Annie is most relevant to the very tale Julius tells him in “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt” and to John’s own reaction to it. The segment from John’s book reads:

> The difficulty of dealing with transformations so many-sided as those which all existences have undergone, or are undergoing, is such as to make a complete and deductive interpretation almost hopeless. So to grasp the total process of redistribution of matter and motion as to see simultaneously its several necessary results in their actual interdependence is scarcely possible. There is, however, a mode of rendering the process as a whole tolerably comprehensible. Though the genesis of the rearrangement of every evolving aggregate is in itself one, it presents to our intelligence—'"[295]

The “transformations so many-sided” are the multiple metamorphoses in this particular story within a story: a slave’s transfiguration into a wolf and his wife’s into a cat. “All existences” include Africans, who were converted by law into green chattel; the plantation, which is being changed by John; the South and the black and white races, which are being altered by Reconstruction; and Annie, who is being empowered by Julius’ stories. And allegory, Julius’ specialty, is the “mode of rendering the process” of transformation “comprehensible.” Furthermore, when John seeks to verify Julius’ tale by searching for the bones of the wolf and is unable to find them, he learns firsthand how “almost hopeless” it is “to make a complete and deductive interpretation” of events in which transmutation are involved.

But let us return to “The Goophered Grapevine.” In the African American version of the tar baby tale, the doll is used as a means of protecting natural resources. It is designed to trap the rabbit, who has been raiding a garden. Every time the hare strikes the tar baby, he gets increasingly stuck. Similarly, almost every time John and Annie listen to one of Julius’ tales,

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[295] Ibid., 163-4.

they get trapped into doing what Julius wants them to do: which is usually to let alone some part of the plantation property the old man has been appropriating -- or wants to.

Like Julius, Flint's citizens inhabited the tar baby role. Unfortunately, the water crisis victims were not empowered by this status. When the disaster began, they and their allies cried out that something was wrong with their water only to go unheard as though they had been as silent as natural objects. Thus, the people of Flint are less like Julius, who poses as a tar baby, than they are like Henry.

For when Mars Donal' sells Henry during his first seasonal scam, the slaveowner obviously does not disclose the fact that Henry is goophered to the buyer. When Henry ages, he explains to his new owner why he has suddenly become decrepit but is disbelieved. Scholars speak of slaves and other hyper-marginalized populations as being socially dead, but in the story, we see a related phenomenon – social inaudibility. Mars Donal' is aware that Henry understands why his life cycle is anomalous and does not bother to forbid him to share the reason. He knows Henry is, to all intents and purposes, as voiceless as a grapevine. He, like the officials on duty during the Flint water crisis, counts on the voices of the oppressed being dismissed.[296]

"Po' Sandy"

Chesnutt references the tar baby story even more subtly in "Po' Sandy." When enslaved conjure woman Tenie turns her husband Sandy into a pine tree, another slave chops into his

[296] Henry transforms not simply into a voiceless grapevine but also into a tar baby – he has the form of a black human but is a *thing* constituted from plant matter.

wooden flesh to tap for turpentine. And Tenie warns Sandy before she performs the metamorphosis that, in sylvan form, "he won't hab no mouf ner years."[297, 298] Unable to speak or hear and coated with turpentine, Sandy is a tar baby.

Furthermore, when Tenie briefly returns Sandy to human form, his leg is scarred from being hacked into. The species-transcending damage to his body connects him to the larger tradition of Ananse stories such as the one I mentioned in the Introduction in which the spider-man burns his scalp while in human form which causes arachnids to be bald.

***The Colonel's Dream*/"The Dumb Witness"**

Consider a version of the tar baby story from Sierra Leone. In this incarnation, a spider (not identified as Ananse) gets stuck to a doll made from arboreal wax. As in the Akan tale – and unlike in the African American version of the story – the poppet's captive does not escape. Rather, the prisoner is beaten by his family members (who are referred to as "people") whose food he has been stealing. They pound him until he is no longer "roun' lek pusson" but flat the way arachnids are today.[299]

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[297] Chesnutt, "Po' Sandy," in *The Conjure Woman*, 47.

[298] "Years" is both the phonetic rendering of how Tenie pronounces "ears" and foreshadowing. For, as a result of becoming a tree, Sandy doesn't get to live out any more years – he is soon slain.

[299] See Cronise, Florence M. and Henry W. Ward. "Spider Discovers the Wax Girl." In *Cunnie Rabbit, Mr. Spider, and The Other Beef: West African Folk Tales*, 101-11. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Lim., 1903. Google Books.

In the story, humanity and animality, the animate and inanimate are literally fused. The thin line between homo sapien and not represented by the uncanny authenticity of the Wax Girl is mirrored by the spider's degeneration from human-like form to flat insect when he comes in contact with her. Thus, in the tale, humanity is presented both as ambiguous and precarious.[300]

A similar such human, animal, thing hybrid is found in Chesnutt's novel *The Colonel's Dream*. In this work, former slave woman Viney poses as a tar baby, pretending to be mute to vex her former owner, Mr. Dudley, who is desperate to have her reveal the location of a hidden treasure. Mr. Dudley speaks to her as though she were a dog: "'Yes, Viney, good Viney,'" [Mr. Dudley] said, soothingly" – trying to calm the woman he has just threatened to beat. "'Try again, Viney [to speak],' he said, 'that's a good girl. Your old master thinks a great deal of you, Viney. He is your best friend!'"[301]

The simplistic language; the repetition of Viney's name; the use of short, declarative, imperative, and exclamatory sentences; Mr. Dudley's referring to himself in the third person and as Viney's master (particularly in a scene that takes place after the end of slavery); the lilting rhythm of the language; and Mr. Dudley's treatment of Viney as simple-minded and,

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[300] I note there is also an Aun' Peggy analogue in the text in the form of a "country fashion man" who, after scrying with stones and other objects, advises the victims of Ananse's theft to make the Wax Girl.

[301] Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1906), 139, HATHI TRUST Digital Library.

thus, easily manipulated are all hallmarks of the way an owner speaks to a puppy. He even pets her as he talks – though this is referred to as a "caress."[302]

In *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt revises the tar baby folktale by inverting the tale's morphemes: Unlike the tar baby who is beaten *for* its silence, Viney, the biracial slave "mistress" of Malcolm Dudley, feigns twenty-five years of physiological muteness *after* Mr. Dudley spurns her and has her whipped – and then needs her to tell him the location of the treasure. Partially paralyzed by a stroke brought on by her beating, Viney simulates the complete immobility of a doll upon realizing her opportunity for revenge. Like the rabbit, Mr. Dudley continually tries to elicit speech whereupon, also like the rabbit, he is met with only silence. In an additional similarity to the hare, he *adheres* to Viney, unwilling, even after slavery ends, to separate from the woman he believes will one day facilitate his enrichment. And, finally, as though he were an animal character in the folktale version of the story, Mr. Dudley is described as having a face with a "hawk-like contour."[303, 304]

Viney's name also gestures at her tar baby black/green identity. For "Viney," the reader is told, is how the African American community mispronounces the character's given name "Lavinia." But "Lavinia" would not be misspoken as "Viney" but as "Vinnie." Thus, the name "Viney" seems to be Chesnutt's way of rendering the character a flora-black: vine-y.

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[302] Ibid., 152.

[303] Ibid., 138-139.

[304] This is also an allusion to Tereus, for Viney's story, as I will discuss later, is a revision of the Greek myth of Philomela. Sarah Mccoy-Wagner, "Virgilian Chesnutt: Eclogues of Slavery and Georgics of Reconstruction in the Conjure Tales," *ELH* 80, no. 1 (2013): 212, Project MUSE.

Furthermore, the appellation could allude to the eponymous plants in “The Goophered Grapevine,” calling attention to how, like fruit, the bodies of slaves were available for consumption – including that of a sexual nature. Thus, “Viney” is a proper adjective that describes the woman’s utter vulnerability – her ripeness for the picking. Finally, one also wonders whether the character’s name inspired Zora Neale Hurston’s christening of Leafy, the mixed-race young woman who conceives Janie through rape in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Before he wrote *The Colonel’s Dream*, Chesnutt told a slightly different version of the tale of Viney in his short story “The Dumb Witness.” But in that piece, Mr. Dudley’s analogue cuts Viney’s tongue with a knife after she shares an undisclosed secret with his fiancée. But despite her injury, her inability to speak is still only a performance.

Neither narrative is explicitly one of transformation, but both allude to the Greek myth of Philomela and Tereus who are turned, at their story’s end, into a nightingale and hawk, respectively.[305] For Philomela’s tongue is cut out by her brother-in-law Tereus after he rapes her so that she cannot disclose his crime. (Morrison would later revise Philomela’s myth into the Pecola’s story in *The Bluest Eye*).[306]

The mythological references in Viney’s story connects it to Sally Hemmings’ as the historical figure was both Thomas Jefferson’s sex slave and his sister-in-law. The likeness is

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[305] Ibid., 210.

[306] Madonne M. Miner, "Lady No Longer Sings the Blues: Rape, Madness, and Silence in *The Bluest Eye*," in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 176.

further underscored by the fact that Tereus was a king and Jefferson was a president. Also, Viney and Sally are/were both mixed-race.

Thus, Viney, like the tar baby, is an ambiguous figure. She hovers somewhere between human, animal, and thing as well as between turn of the twentieth century fiction, turn of nineteenth century history, and ancient mythology.

"Mars Jeems's Nightmare"

Chesnutt revisits the tar baby story yet a fifth time in "Mars Jeems's Nightmare." In this piece, Chesnutt mixes Biblical allusions into the Akan tale, so Julius can offer John an allegory involving the eponymous slaveowner becoming chattel. The narrative offers a fantastic illustration of Douglass' line "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."

The story begins when Julius asks John to hire his grandson to work on the farm. John says, "I hired Tom—his name was Tom—to help about the stables, weed the garden, cut wood and bring water, and in general to make himself useful about the outdoor work of the household."[307] That Julius' grandson allegedly has the name Tom, like the protagonist of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, immediately catches the reader's attention. The way John refers to the grandson as "Tom" without having introduced him as such, only to have to backtrack to explain that "Tom" is the grandson John has been referring to suggests John at first took for granted that the reader will know who "Tom" is because the she will understand that "Tom" is just the sort of appellation a negro peon would have. But then, it seems he thinks better of his assumption

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[307] Chesnutt, "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," in *The Conjure Woman*, 66.

and seeks to clarify. It almost makes the reader wonder if the grandson's name is not, in fact, "Tom," and John merely jumped to the conclusion that it was.

Regardless, the latter of the two tasks John hires "Tom" to perform represent one of many of the story's Biblical allusions, for the scriptural formula "hewers of wood and drawers of water" was used by Joshua to curse the Canaanites to a laborious fate and was interpreted in proslavery exegeses to reference the destiny of blacks. But Tom does not hew wood and draw water for long -- John fires the young man for his poor work ethic and refuses to re-hire him upon Julius' request. Instead of being lenient, his heart, like that of the pharaoh of the Exodus', "hardened."[308] His determination, two sentences later, "to be firm as a rock in this instance"[309] gestures to Ezekiel 11:19: "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh."

Chesnutt's invocation of this verse continues a tradition begun in slave narratives of depicting the anatomy of slaveholders as anomalous and unnatural. For example, as I noted in Chapter One, Douglass castigates Thomas Auld for having a "heart of stone." The possessor of this rock-hard organ is contrasted with the "manly-hearted" Hugh Auld. And even earlier, Mary Prince observes that "slavery hardens white people's hearts towards the blacks."[310]

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[308] Ibid., 67.

[309] Ibid.

[310] Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*, ed. Sarah Salih (1831; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 2001), 11.

In an attempt to remove John's heart of stone and give him a heart of flesh, Julius tells the northerner a story while he and Annie wait at a spring for their turn to fill their jugs.[311] That detail is also a reference to the tar baby tale. For there is a version of the narrative in which members of the animal community make a tar baby to keep the rabbit from filling his jugs from a well he refused to help build.[312] John and Annie similarly assume the right to partake of the natural resources garnered through the labor of slaves – in "The Goophered Grapevine," they buy the plantation from its white owners with nary a thought that Julius or any of his fellow former slaves have a moral claim to it. In response to this presumptuousness, Julius poses as a tar baby in an attempt to defend the farm's assets on behalf of himself and the black community.

I quibble a bit, then, at Sarah Gilbreath Ford's assertion in *Tracing Southern Storytelling in Black and White* that "[w]here Julius's power truly lies is thus not in the accumulation of things; he in fact depicts gain and greed as the motivation for much suffering in slavery. The

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[311] God is the speaker in Ezekiel 11:19. Thus, by trying to soften John's heart, as Julius soon undertakes to do, he is taking on a divine role. And this is far from the only moment in the Conjure Woman stories that frames Julius as a deity.

First, as I will discuss, the old man, like Christ, seeks to alter social hierarchies. Second, Julius is what Jesus identifies as: a servant. Third, the narrator's language hints at Julius' divinity. Thus, when the couple first meets Julius in "The Goophered Grapevine," they pass through "*virgin* forest" [italics mine] where they are wrapped in "*cloistral* solitude" [italics mine]. Julius awaits them, just past "a *cross*-roads" [italics mine]. Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine," 7. And later, in "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," Annie declares that a story from Julius would be a "godsend." Chesnutt, "The Gray Wolf's Ha'nt," 167. Julius also engages in two of Jesus' signature practices: telling allegories and, as I will later demonstrate, healing.

[312] Linda Jean Cowan Williams, "The 'literary' folklore in the novels of Toni Morrison: *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Tar Baby*" (PhD diss., Tarleton State University, 1996), 48.

power is in his ability to tell the story of the people he knew and the atrocities of the slave system."[313] My slight objection to this claim arises for much the same reason that I took some issue, in Chapter One, with Robert Hemenway's statement that Julius actually believes in the magic that is the subject of his stories.

Certainly, Julius is trying to awaken John and Annie's consciences, but he is also strategically using his tales towards pragmatic, material ends – to be able to continue to retain control of the grapevines whose fruit he sells, to occupy an old schoolhouse building on the property, to acquire a ham or a watermelon, or to secure employment for his relatives. His condemnation of the avarice of slaveowners should not be confused with a wholesale attack on the idea of property. For while Julius denounces white supremacist cupidity, his stories are a way of realizing what might be thought of as a sort of reparations.

Ford says that "In an attempt to soften the blow of Julius's portrayal of slavery, John attributes the stories to Julius's desire for gain."[314] This is true, but John is not entirely wrong. (Does Ford think the fact Julius' stories so regularly and neatly dovetail with his material goals is coincidental)? John's mistake lies not in identifying Julius' pecuniary concerns but in missing the more profound lessons of the tales. That the old man is concerned with his listeners' moral amelioration does not make him a noble savage too pure to have fiscal interests or to seek his share of ecological benefits. But onwards to the story within a story.

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[313] Sarah Gilbreath Ford, *Tracing Southern Storytelling in Black and White* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014), 27, Project MUSE.

[314] Ibid.

In Julius' tale, slaves agonize under the brutal reign of their owner Mars Jeems and his overseer Ole Nick. ("Ole Nick" is a sobriquet for Satan). Mars Jeems is an analogue both to the pharaoh of the Exodus and to Rehoboam. The master, already ruthless during his father's lifetime, gives full vent to his inhumane nature when his parent dies. Similarly, when Rehoboam inherits the throne from his sire King Solomon, he is insensible to his people's plea for lowered taxes. As he colorfully declares in 2 Chronicles 10:14, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add thereto; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."

The tar baby represents the denial of humanity to black bodies, and Mars Jeems adds to the weight of his chattels' yokes by forbidding them any element of the human experience -- such as singing, dancing, playing music, and even courting and marrying -- that does not contribute to his financial goals. And he forces his slaves into silence by punishing them with forty lashes should they complain. (Like Jefferson, Mars Jeems is indignant that his human property might try to seize a moment of joy for themselves when this could result in them having less energy to labor for him the following day).

But while, in the Bible, Rehoboam ascends upon Solomon's demise, Chesnutt's tale is all about inversion -- so it is a slave of Mars Jeems named Solomon who seeks the curse from Aun' Peggy that brings the Rehoboam-analogue down. After the big house cook serves Mars Jeems Aun' Peggy's goopher in his okra, a mysterious, amnesiac slave unaccustomed to deferring to whites and inexperienced with both agricultural work and physical abuse arrives on the plantation. Later, after the utterly frustrated Ole Nick sells the bondsman, Mars Jeems is found bedraggled in the woods. But when the slaveowner diametrically changes his system of

governance upon being restored to the plantation, Solomon can only conclude that Aun' Peggy conjured up the most intimate form of integration possible – forcing Mars Jeems to experience slavery by putting his soul in a black body.

In a parallel to the frame story in which John assumes Julius' grandson is named Tom, when the new slave is first sold to the plantation, Ole Nick, inspired by the stereotype, addresses him as "Sambo." But the field hand, unable to remember real his name or where he is from, is unable to correct the overseer. Though the new bondsman is not literally incapable of speech, one of his most salient characteristics is his inability to communicate: Lack of memory prevents him from answering questions. He is muted by force when Ole Nick locks him up to starve "'tel he got 'im kin'er quiet'" and when the overseer whips him and deprives him of food again for "impidence."[315] And absence of a sense of fraternity means the slave does not "mix' wid ner talk much ter de res' er de niggers."[316]

In the Akan version of the tale, the tar baby is struck simply because it is rude for one individual to ignore another. However, in the antebellum American context, the beating of the dolls reads as punishment for failure to adhere to plantation etiquette. For as Douglass says in *My Bondage*:

> There is no better material in the world for making a gentleman, than is furnished in the African. He shows to others, and exacts for himself, all the tokens of respect which he is compelled to manifest toward his master. A young slave must approach the company of the older with hat in hand, and woe betide him, if he fails to acknowledge a favor, of any

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[315] Chesnutt, "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," in *The Conjure Woman*, 83.

[316] Ibid., 84.

> sort, with the accustomed "tank'ee," &c. So uniformly are good manners enforced among slaves, I can easily detect a 'bogus' fugitive by his manners.[317]

And indeed, it is lack of manners – which are what Ole Nick promises to teach the slave with a whip – that hints at the slave's "bogusness."

(It must be noted here that the brutality of Ole Nick's etiquette lessons links him to overseer Simon Legree from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In Stowe's book, Uncle Tom insists Legree, from whose beating he is dying, "an't done me no real harm…."[318] In an allusion to the novel, Solomon asks whether Aun' Peggy's goopher will poison Mars Jeems because Solomon does not "want ter do nobody no rale ha'm."[319] But the curse does indeed cause Mars Jeems to experience gruesome – although non-fatal – abuse. The downplaying of this torture as not constituting "real harm" highlights the ludicrousness of Tom's statement).[320]

Furthermore, that Ole Nick explicitly frames his abuse as a pedagogical technique recalls Prince's description of torture as a perverse educational experience. She describes in her memoir how her owner "caused me to know the exact difference between the smart of the

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[317] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 54.

[318] Harriet Beecher Stowe*, Uncle Tom's Cabin: or, Life among the Lowly* (1852; repr., Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1892), 497, Google Books.

[319] Chesnutt, "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," 77.

[320] That Ole Nick is a renown slave-breaker who is compared to the devil reminds the reader of another individual from black literature that shares both those qualities: Edward Covey. In fact, Douglass' story of his interactions with Covey -- from Douglass' use of root working to try to protect himself against the slave-breaker to the ultimately transformative nature of his experience with this abuser -- makes that section of Douglass' memoirs read rather like a conjure story.

rope, the cart-whip, and the cow-skin, when applied to my naked body by her own cruel hand)."[321]

Thus, with a goopher that darkens and silences, Aun' Peggy makes a tar baby out of a white slaveowner, subjecting him to contrapasso. Before being cursed, Mars Jeems was constantly whipping his slaves. But unlike the rabbit who gets stuck *to* the black figure he strikes, Mars Jeems gets stuck *inside* a black body of the sort which he has beaten. (This is consistent with yet another version of the tar baby tale in which the doll's analogue is actually a "magic trap" that "has the power to catch and hold").[322]

In a dark revision of the folktale, rather than the rabbit being returned to the briar patch where he comes from,[323] exasperated by the field hand's constant insubordination, Ole Nick sends him back to where human chattel come from – the slave market. It is the tale's development from this point that causes me to read it extremely differently than other scholars.

Ford, in a representative interpretation of the story, understands Mars Jeems' tenure as a slave to have been a temporary one[324] – and, indeed, the title of the story affirms this

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[321] Prince, *The History of Mary Prince*, 14.

[322] Aurelio M. Espinosa, "A New Classification of the Fundamental Elements of the Tar-Baby Story on the Basis of Two Hundred and Sixty-Seven Versions," *The Journal of American Folklore* 56, no. 219 (1943): 33, doi:10.2307/535912.

[323] In the American tar baby tale, the rabbit uses reverse psychology to convince the fox who has trapped him that the worst punishment that could befall him is being placed in a briar patch – the rabbit's habitat.

[324] Ford, *Tracing Southern Storytelling*, 33.

analysis. So, too, does a face value acceptance of Aun' Peggy's anxious instructions to Solomon to find the amnesiac slave and get him to eat a sweet potato by telling the befuddled man that he must do so if he does not want to be sold to New Orleans. Furthermore, the fact that the strange slave and Mars Jeems are never on the plantation at the same time suggests the goopher involves not two separate individuals who switch bodies permanently – which is my interpretation of the text -- but one person whose form is briefly transfigured.

But knowledge of the original Akan tale suggests an alternative reading – that, rather than the sweet potato breaking the spell, it makes the effects of the conjuration permanent. For in the Ananseseɛm, Ananse places a closely related dish, mashed yams, before the gum-covered doll. (The change in produce is perhaps explained by the fact that yams are indigenous to Africa; sweet potatoes, to the Americas). The Aboatia, lured to the doll by the yams, gets trapped by the gum, for sweet potatoes/yams are what tricksters use to ensnare – not to free. Accordingly, I think the mysterious slave, who is at once the analogue of the Aboatia *and* the mannequin, confines himself permanently in pitch black flesh upon eating the tuber.

This small but weighty green detail unlocks an entirely new interpretation of the story. In this interpretation, Aun' Peggy's anxiety could be read not as a desire to rescue Mars Jeems but an eagerness to ensure that her goopher endures forever. The instructions Solomon is meant to give the bewildered slave are perhaps not honest advice about how not to be sold to New Orleans but a lie meant to ensure that he is.

After all, Aun' Peggy's claim, when she first gives the magical herbs to Solomon, that the curse "gwine ter do [Mars Jeems] good, but he'll hab a monst'us bad dream fus'" should not be uncritically accepted, for Aun' Peggy minimizes – to the point of utterly misconstruing -- the

effect of her root working when she refers to literal transfiguration as a “bad dream.” And Julius observes that Solomon does not go so far as even to reveal his suspicion that the goopher involved not a nightmare but an actual transformation as “Aun' Peggy would 'a' 'nied it ef she had be'n ax', fer she 'd 'a' got in trouble sho', ef it 'uz knowed she 'd be'n cunj'in' de w'ite folks.”[325] So why should the reader believe Aun’ Peggy’s enchantment is ultimately going to benefit Mars Jeems? Or that she is not feigning her concern that “it doan 'complish no mo' d'n I 'lows fer it ter do?”[326] I think she is simply maintaining plausible deniability.

Ford interprets “Mars Jeems’” relatively more humane governance of the plantation and dismissal of Ole Nick[327] as being animated by the empathy aroused by his temporary experience of slavery.[328] But I think the story ends with an inversion of the social hierarchy: A white man becomes a slave, and a black one ends up running the plantation.

Here is my “theory of the case”: The “white man” Solomon encounters in the woods is actually the bondsman whose body Aun’ Peggy switched with Mars Jeems’. The nightmare of slavery this individual refers to having had is his own lifetime up to that point. The slave, disguised as Mars Jeems, attempts to govern the plantation as mercifully as he can short of performing a mass manumission that would arouse suspicion.

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[325] Chesnutt, “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare,” 100.

[326] Ibid., 77.

[327] The fact that Ole Nick vanishes after his employment is terminated suggests he may have been the actual devil.

[328] Ford, *Tracing Southern Storytelling*, 34.

In this story, I think Chesnutt is sending up of myths about white chivalry and black brutes by having Miss Libbie, a white woman who rejected the real Mars Jeems for fear his mercilessness towards his slaves foretold spousal abuse, agree to wed his new, less vicious incarnation in what she does not know is actually an interracial marriage. It is perhaps to conceal this – the cardinal pre-Civil Rights era taboo – that Julius crafts his story to allow for an interpretation that Mars Jeems was restored to his original body. Furthermore, since Julius is trying to convince John and Annie to re-hire his nephew, the old man needs the narrative to be understood as a tale of finite goophering if its moral is to be: "dat w'ite folks w'at is so ha'd en stric', en doan make no 'lowance fer po' ign'ant niggers w'at ain' had no chanst ter l'arn, is li'ble ter hab bad dreams, ter say de leas', en dat dem w'at is kin' en good ter po' people is sho' ter prosper en git 'long in de worl'."[329]

Ford, even though understanding Mars' Jeems' goophering to have been only temporary, nevertheless calls attention to how gingerly Chesnutt had to broach a story about an individual changing race.[330] The idea of such a change being permanent would have been even more controversial. In an April 10, 2014 article in *The Phoenix*, Toni Morrison is described as imbuing her writing with hidden layers of meaning -- a process she refers to as writing with "invisible ink" that only the "right" reader can perceive. I think Chesnutt used invisible ink to print the real ending of his tale. Perhaps he felt that anyone passionate enough to learn the

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[329] Chesnutt, "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," 100.

[330] Ford, *Tracing Southern Storytelling*, 36.

symbolism of plants in the original version of the Ananseɛm would not be so negrophobic as to be offended by the true conclusion of his story.

How one interprets the ending of Julius' story hinges, in part, on what one makes of "Mars Jeems'" interactions with Ole Nick after Mars Jeems is restored to the plantation. When Ole Nick tells the returned Mars Jeems what happened in his absence, Mars Jeems laughs hysterically, taking outsized interest in the story of the amnesiac slave. He relishes Ole Nick's account of how the overseer beat the rebel and praises Ole Nick to the skies for abusing and selling the field hand. Ford interprets this laughter as "[t]he sign… that Mars Jeems gets it, that is understands what it means to be a slave…."[331]

I find this analysis curious. Why would understanding what it is like to be a slave stimulate laughter rather than tears? Why would an experience styled as a nightmare arouse mirth instead of horror? After all, the larger Conjure Woman corpus furnishes readers with a model of what it looks like to empathize with slaves in Annie's serious and reflective reactions.

I think it more likely that "Mars Jeems" is a slave in disguise chortling in delight at and eagerly consuming a narrative of a slaveowner getting his just deserts. This response profoundly contrasts with the sadness with which he referred to his nightmare when talking to Solomon – his grief at the horrors he experienced in his original life as a black man. I see in Mars Jeems' glee the triumph of the black successful at passing who then uses his deception to benefit his people in the mode of Walter White. Perhaps, through the character, Chesnutt is also savoring his own trickster potential as a phenotypically white African American.

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[331] Ibid., 33.

As for the camouflaged slave's approval of Ole Nick selling the strange field hand – I think this is animated by a sense of relief that his double is safely exiled. And in his wistful yearning to have been able to see the mysterious slave before he was sold, I identify a kind of gloating – the desire of one no longer mute, black, and powerless to defend himself against blows, the wish of an individual who was the object of a dehumanizing gaze and who had to avert his eyes in the presence of whites to experience the transition from tar baby i.e. the looked upon and powerless to rabbit i.e. the one who wields the regard and has agency.

Julius describes "Mars Jeems" laughing "'tel it 'peared lack he wuz des gwine ter bu'st."[332] This is an interesting choice of words for two reasons. First, it is another hint that the tale is a revision of the tar baby story, since in Harris' narrative, Brer Rabbit threatens to "bus' you [the tar baby] wide open."[333] Second, "bursting" is what happens when the exterior is no longer able to contain the interior. Mars Jeems' black joy threatens to rupture his white guise.

This particular bout of hilarity is brought on by Ole Nick's comment that he took "de hide off'n [the strange slave].'"[334] While I doubt the actual Mars Jeems' would consider a loss of white privilege – that subjected him to torture – funny, Ole Nick's words would come across as particularly ironic and humorous to an African American character who had his melanin-rich

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[332] Chesnutt, "Mars Jeems Nightmare," 95.

[333] Joel Chandler Harris, "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story," in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880; repr., New York: Privately Published, 1957), 7, Alexander Street.

[334] Chesnutt, "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," 95.

skin – and its attendant oppression -- taken off of him… and knows a white slaveowner suffered the inverse fate.

According to Ford, "As Nick tells the story of how inept the slave was and how harsh Nick was in return, Mars Jeems 'lafft en lafft…. Mars Jeems has become an insider and now gets the joke. He understands that the overseer is cruel and untrustworthy."[335] Again, even if "Mars Jeems" were to get the joke, is it plausible he would find it funny given that it was on him? Furthermore, Mars Jeems already knew the overseer was cruel – that is why he retained him. And there is no basis for Ford's last assertion – Ole Nick is ruthless, but he has done nothing untrustworthy.

There is, however, one final clue, within Julius's tale, about how the goopher really worked: Solomon happens upon "Mars Jeems" when he is checking a rabbit trap – what the tar baby in the traditional story is designed to be. And what he finds is the living analogue to a rabbit trap – the man whose black, voiceless body ensnared the real Mars Jeems. Surely, if Aun' Peggy was able to erase Mars Jeems' memories to make him a slave, she could endow a field hand with the knowledge necessary to perform the role of master. That Mars Jeems is not truly restored to his old life is what I think Julius suggests with his comment that "Aun' Peggy's goopher had made a noo man un 'im enti'ely."[336]

At the end of the frame text, Annie re-hires Tom. This is significant for two reasons. First, Annie, depicted by John as a delicate invalid, seizes this bit of domestic authority for

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[335] Ford, *Tracing Southern Storytelling*, 34.

[336] Chesnutt, "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," 98.

herself. Indeed, the result of Julius' tales is repeatedly Annie taking hold of more agency. For, as is suggested by Miss Libbie's marital decisions and by the fact, at the frame narrative's beginning, Julius identifies a man flogging a horse as the grandson of Mars Jeems, racial, gender, and species empowerment and abuse are linked.

Second, Annie re-hiring Tom is important because, in doing so, Annie is carrying out Julius' wishes and ignoring John's. At the story's beginning John muses:

> Toward my tract of land and the things that were on it—the creeks, the swamps, the hills, the meadows, the stones, the trees—he maintained a peculiar personal attitude, that might be called predial rather than proprietary. He had been accustomed, until long after middle life, to look upon himself as the property of another. When this relation was no longer possible, owing to the war, and to his master's death and the dispersion of the family, he had been unable to break off entirely the mental habits of a lifetime, but had attached himself to the old plantation, of which he seemed to consider himself an appurtenance.[337]

As the adjective "peculiar" suggests, John understands the spirit of the "peculiar institution" to be alive within Julius' breast.[338] But, through the tactical use of his creative powers, Julius consistently ensures that his desires triumph over John's. Julius is not the plantation's slave – he is its master. His stories are a form of advocacy that allows him slowly to acquire a modicum of control over the "land and the things that were on it—the creeks, the swamps, the hills, the meadows, the stones, the trees," piece by piece. This is another reason I view the old man's story as not being a narrative of a white slaveowner who is transformed into

[337] Charles Chesnutt, "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," 64.

[338] Jeffrey Myers, "Other Nature: Resistance to Ecological Hegemony in Charles W. Chesnutt's 'The Conjure Woman,'" *African American Review* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 9, JSTOR.

a black slave and then turned back but as a tale of a master and bondsman who switch bodies. That reading, after all, would mirror the frame story. Indeed, repeatedly, when Julius and John's interests conflict, Julius' wants are met while John's are disregarded. The two men may not have switched bodies, but they figuratively exchange roles.

In Julius' rubric, the analogues of the violent and greedy rabbit are the abusive, unyielding, and parasitic slaveowner, the violent overseer, and John, who shows himself to be unbending and mean as well as, along with Annie, appropriative of natural resources. The beaten tar baby represents the lashed slaves, the ungenerously treated "Tom," and the freed blacks forced to watch whites like John and Annie inherit the natural riches – of which the spring water is a symbol – maintained by their labor.

But in this story, Chesnutt does more than revise the most famous of Harris' tales "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story." Chesnutt's narrative of a slaveowner's tumble down the social hierarchy is also an inversion of Harris' "The Story of the War." For while "Mars Jeems's Nightmare" is a text about the reversal of the power structure, in "The Story of the War," Uncle Remus acts to maintain the status quo, going so far as to shoot a Union soldier, John Huntingdon, who was about to fire upon literature's other Mars Jeems – Uncle Remus' owner.

In both stories, a white man comes to acquire a black body – though to diametrically opposite ends. For when Harris' John ultimately marries into the slaveowner's family and his sister Theodosia reminds Uncle Remus that the former slave is the cause of her brother having lost an arm, the old man replies, "'an I gin 'im deze'—holding up his own brawny arms. 'En ef

dem ain't nuff for enny man den I done los' de way."[339] By this means, John gains the body of a black man. As for Uncle Remus -- his false consciousness shows he has the mind of a white one.

Uncle Remus reflects upon his relationship with Mars Jeems musing, "Manys en manys de time dat I nuss dat boy, en hilt 'im in dese arms, en toted 'im on dis back....[340] The word "nursed" here refers to caring for someone who is ill but is also suggestive of the forced labor of enslaved wet nurses. Uncle Remus thus describes how male and female slaves had to give their bosoms, arms, and backs to their owners, to be dairy cow, mammy, and mule. For him, these experiences form dear memories. But Chesnutt turns these tender reminisces into horror, allowing the reader to glimpse what it would be like if white slaveowners really did attain the brawny black arms, backs, and other body parts to which they lay claim.

"Mars Jeems's Nightmare" sends up "The Story of the War" in other ways. First, Uncle Remus tells the story to Theodosia, a sickly Yankee woman visiting the south who is affiliated with a fellow northerner named "John." But, unlike how Julius attempts to help John and Annie see the world from a black perspective, Uncle Remus facilitates John and Theodosia's acquiescence to the white supremacist worldview.

(Annie's transformation must not be glossed over, for the relationship between the invalid and Julius is a revision of that shared by Scheherazade and Shahryar. As in *One Thousand and One Nights*, there is a frame story involving a person from a less powerful

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[339] Joel Chandler Harris, "The Story of the War," in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1880; repr., New York: Privately Published, 1957), 126, Alexander Street.

[340] Ibid.

demographic captivating a more powerful one of the opposite gender with compelling tales and using the narratives to develop the listener's empathy for the oppressed group).[341, 342]

Furthermore, in Chesnutt's story, Mars Jeems' trips to his second plantation necessitate him hiring Ole Nick to manage in his absence. But in Harris' story, after Mars Jeems enlists in the Confederate army and the plantation overseer is drafted, "ole Miss" asks Uncle Remus to run the farm and the slave gladly proves himself to be as diabolical as Ole Nick and Chesnutt's Jeems: "I had dem niggers up en in de fiel' long 'fo' day, en de way dey did wuk wuz a caution. Ef dey didn't earnt der vittles dat season den I ain't name Remus." Third, "The Story of the War" ends, like "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," with an expression of disbelief from the female

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[341] Their relationship is also that of doctor and patient. At the beginning of "The Goophered Grapevine," John describes moving himself and Annie to a southern climate, partly for the benefit of his wife's health, on the advice of the family doctor "in whose skill and honesty I had implicit confidence." Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine," 1. This otherwise irrelevant detail is offered merely to contrast the northerner's utter trust in this physician with the skepticism he directs at Julius, thereby placing the two men in dichotomy.

But despite the doctor's assessment of Annie as suffering from a physical ailment that can be cured by a change in weather, it later becomes apparent there is a psychological component to her illness as well. The reader sees this most clearly in "Sis Becky's Pickaninny" in which Annie has a severe bout of "melancholy" – the nineteenth century term for depression -- that is dramatically cured when Julius' tale awakens in her the full spectrum of emotion. Diogo Telles-Correia and João Gama Marques, "Melancholia before the twentieth century: fear and sorrow or partial insanity?" *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, no. 81 (2015): n.p., doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00081. However, the obtuse John cannot help but give the weather at least some of the credit for the efficacy of Julius' tales, repeatedly suggesting that some meteorological phenomenon or another has, through pathetic fallacy, provided the perfect storytelling conditions.

[342] One notes, also, that "The Dumb Witness"/*The Colonel's Dream* is another take on Arabian Nights. A disempowered woman holds a powerful predatory man in thrall – only, in this case, not with nightly stories but through ritualized silence.

listener coupled with the elderly former slave storyteller sharing the moral of his narrative. In Harris' story, Theodosia's evinces shock that Uncle Remus shot her brother after which Uncle Remus' supplies the message of the tale: that black bodies properly belong to whites.

Ford describes how "Chesnutt distances himself from folklore when he claims that his tales are different from Harris's because his are the 'fruit of my own imagination,'" and notes how "[h]e later undercuts his assertion in his essay 'Superstitions and Folk-lore of the South,' when he admits that a few elements of the stories he thought he had made up were actually stories he had heard as a child and were in his latent mind." She concludes, "How close the stories are to an actual oral tradition is then in question."[343] Perhaps, however, they are not in question as much as Ford thinks.

Ford asserts, "The obvious marker that demonstrates the writers [Harris and Chesnutt] playing with orality is their use of dialect."[344] I somewhat disagree. Dialect is *an* obvious marker of orality, but in Chesnutt's work, an equally if not more explicit flag of his antecedents both oral and literary is his use of morphological details, especially green ones.

Ford says that, in Chesnutt's story, getting the joke means becoming an insider – which is what she feels happens to Mars Jeems. She argues that getting the joke requires John and Annie, through empathy, or Mars Jeems, through goophering, becoming black. I only half agree.

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[343] Ford, *Tracing Southern Storytelling*, 18.

[344] Ibid.

Yes, getting the joke means becoming an insider. But what this means is having inside knowledge of the material Chesnutt revises and analyzing that material ecocritically. It means being familiar enough with the narrative functions of Anansesɛm, Harris' stories, and Greek mythology to recognize just how heavily Chesnutt draws on them and then using his source materials to decode his work. Getting the joke, then, is not about being racialized but being cultured.

Without this insider knowledge, not only is the reader unable to get the joke – he is unable to recognize all the jokes that have been told. Unless he knows the Anansesɛm of how Ananse acquired his stories, the reader will not understand that since orange starchy tubers are used to adhere individuals to blackness rather than to free them from it, Mars Jeems never gets restored to his original form. And unless he understands that Mars Jeems never gets restored to his original form, he will not grasp that not only has the original Mars Jeems been replaced by a slave, but that the original *story* of Mars Jeems – Harris'-- which is about the shoring up of the status quo has been replaced with a new tale that celebrates inversion. He will not see "Mars Jeems'" riotous laughter as not just the mirth aroused by Ole Nick's recounting of recent events but meta-hilarity at how Chesnutt goophered Harris' text into his own.

Getting the joke means seeing the winks – for example, Aun' Peggy smirking when she says the sweet potato will restore Mars Jeems to his original form. It means seeing that Chesnutt has his fingers crossed behind his back when he claims to have made up his stories out of whole cloth or to having only vaguely remembered some aspects of them from childhood when, in reality, the Conjure Woman collection revises extremely specific elements from the oral tradition. Just as the reader who "gets it" does not for a moment believe

Douglass' claims in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that he is not philosophizing, but only narrating, she takes Chesnutt's demurrals with a grain of salt, too.

"Mars Jeems's Nightmare" and the Use of African Retentions

Before I move on to Chesnutt's next revision of the tar baby tale, I must make some final observations about "Mars Jeems's Nightmare." At the end of the frame tale of "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story," Uncle Remus eats a yam. Perhaps this signals how he remains trapped in subordinate station even after slavery's end. Regardless, the location of the yam in the frame tale rather than in the tar baby story represents a breaking of the proscenium. And the fact Uncle Remus is named after a boy suckled by a wolf further blurs the lines between the frame of the storytelling act shared between humans and the folktale populated by anthropomorphic animals, muddling once more the question of whether blacks have bestial or human status.

However, despite Harris' use of the yam, it is unclear to what extent Americans – both black and white – recognized details in their retellings and revisions of African American folktales as being African retentions. For example, a 1904 anthology of stories compiled by Anne Virginia Culbertson is titled "At the Big House: Where Aunt Nancy and Aunt Phrony Held Forth on the Animal Folks." Aunt Phrony, of mixed African American and Native American descent, tells narratives of Native American origin, while Aunt Nancy, purely black, develops the oral texts of African American origin. The tar baby story is referred to in the book, but the author never mentions – if she in fact knew -- that "Aunt Nancy" is a corruption of Ananse[345] or

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[345] *Britannica Academic*, s.v. "Ananse," accessed July 16, 2018, https://academic-eb-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/levels/collegiate/article/Ananse/607338.

that the spider-man has anything to do with the tar baby folktale. Nor does she reference the fact that her Aunt Nancy, with her repertoire of stories, has a role analogous to Ananse's position as owner of stories.

In contrast, Joel Chandler Harris' character "Aunt Nancy" is an obvious allusion to Ananse. In fact, in another breaking of the proscenium, the frame story in "Brother Rabbit Doesn't Go to See Aunt Nancy" analogizes Uncle Remus to the spider-woman. In the story within a story, Aunt Nancy tries to conceal her partly human, partly arachnid body with a cloak – in the frame text, Uncle Remus is patching a waistcoat.

In "A(unt) Nancy's Web: Tracing Threads of Africa in Black Women's Literature," Shanna Greene Benjamin claims the name of the character "Aunt Nancy" in Chesnutt's Conjure Woman story "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" is also an allusion to Ananse. I, however, see no characteristics, beyond the moniker, that link the fictional slave woman to the mythical spider. Benjamin rather mystically argues:

> Just as Chesnutt's writing reflects conscious acts of resistance and allegiance to literary techniques inspired by and formulated from the experiences of black Americans during slavery, it also reflects an impulse that lies in the realm of rememory: Ananse's presence through the character Aunt Nancy in the story of "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny."[346]

But while it is one thing to acknowledge writers can incorporate into their works details of whose provenances they are ignorant, it is a bit farfetched and essentializing to suggest an African schema dwells in the subconscious of black writers.

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[346] Shanna Greene Benjamin, "A(unt) Nancy's Web: Tracing Threads of Africa in Black Women's Literature" (PhD diss., The University of Wisconsin, 2002), 98.

This, however, is what Benjamin seems to do, since a footnote appended to "rememory" explains:

> Rememory is a term coined by Toni Morrison in *Beloved* that explains the ways in which African Americans process memories long gone. Rememory is based on the notion that, even when people or places no longer tangibly exist, they remain locked in time and become a rememory after seeping into our conscious thoughts.[347]

Setting aside whether Ananse was a person who "tangibly existed" whose rememory can seep into "our conscious thoughts," Benjamin martials no evidence I find credible for her claim that Aunt Nancy "acts as a mediator between the spiritual and material worlds."[348] For example, Benjamin rather generously bestows this "mediator" title on Aunt Nancy simply because she is the one who contacts Aun' Peggy – who performs the actual mediation in the story. All that can be said of Aunt Nancy is that she mediates the mediation. In fact, given the lack of conjunctions between Chesnutt's Aunt Nancy and Ananse and between "Sis' Becky's Pickaninny" and "Brother Rabbit Doesn't Go to See Aunt Nancy" – the story Benjamin claims Chesnutt is revising[349] -- I am inclined to think Chesnutt named his "Aunt Nancy" character at random. As we search for the African roots of diasporic literature, we must be careful not to see every detail of a work of literature as a cultural retention from the motherland. As Freud allegedly said, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

Lonesome Ben

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[347] Ibid., 99.

[348] Ibid., 94.

[349] Ibid., 101.

But let us return to the subject of Chesnutt's revisions of the tar baby story with a discussion of "Lonesome Ben." In the tar baby folktale, the eponymous object is of human form but constituted of natural ingredients. This is exactly the sort of being Ben becomes when, after eating clay to survive subsequent to running away from his plantation, he turns into a kind of living earthenware. Though Ben becomes a clay baby rather than a creature of pitch, he effects his escape by taking with him a gourd full of *tar* -- he places the substance on his feet when he reaches a creek, so the dogs hunting him will lose his scent.

The gourd Ben keeps the tar in is perhaps a reference to the one Ananse uses in the Akan tar baby tale to trap the hornets Nyame desires as part of the payment for the stories Ananse wishes to buy. And in still another allusion to the folktale, between finishing off the bread and meat he packed for his journey and resorting to eating clay, Ben survives on stolen corn and sweet potatoes – the latter reminiscent of the yams used to lure the Aboatia.

I note here that Ben's theft from a garden analogizes him to the rabbit. In fact, "Lonesome Ben" and "Po' Sandy," like "Mars Jeems's Nightmare," take the position that one can be hare and doll both. In the first two cases, the men, like the rabbit, long for freedom. But, like Mars Jeems, they get stuck to – and trapped by -- all the stereotypes and oppressions bound up with blackness. Because black bodies are subjugated, the men's own flesh ensnares them. Rather than being fixed to an object, they are confined within it. The tar baby, then, is the denigrated ebony form.

Ben's degeneration inverts the creation story found in the Bible and other world traditions of humans being sculpted from clay and then vivified. In still another take on

Douglass' chiasmus, the sacred stories of man's origin as dust show us how natural entities become human while "Lonesome Ben" shows us how a human becomes a natural thing.

Earlier, I described how melanin and the marginalization of voice, rather than turpentine and pitch, are the substances typically used to make slaves into tar babies (although sometimes literal tar was involved),[350] but, as "Lonesome Ben" reveals, there is still another ingredient. Like the tar baby, Ben is the victim of misperception. This is because eating the clay, which is yellow, turns his formerly black skin golden.

At the frame story's opening, the reader learns both poor whites and blacks eat the yellow clay on John and Annie's land, the shared practice of consumption suggesting a sort of dietary analogue to miscegenation. John also observes that the skin of his black and poor white neighbors is sallower than ought to be expected even given the less than optimal hygienic conditions in which they live. This suggests the populations are golden not due simply to health disorders but to racial mixing.

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[350] Douglass recalls:

> Colonel Lloyd kept a large and finely cultivated garden…. The colonel had to resort to all kinds of stratagems to keep his slaves out of the garden. The last and most successful one was that of tarring his fence all around; after which, if a slave was caught with any tar upon his person, it was deemed sufficient proof that he had either been into the garden, or had tried to get in. In either case, he was severely whipped by the chief gardener. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life*, 39.

A slave daubed with pitch is powerless to defend himself against the charge of theft. Rather, the "tar upon his person" is "deemed sufficient proof" of the count. He is thus rendered as silent as a doll. And he suffers lashings analogous to those the tar baby endured from the rabbit.

All this remiinds us that white “blood” was another ingredient involved in the production of slaves. Forced miscegenation and the resulting change in the phenotypes of African Americans were hallmarks of thralldom. Thus, it is fitting for Ben, as a tar baby, to be yellow.

Ben’s canary color adds a gloss to both his family relationships and to the other characters’ inability to recognize him. For example, Julius explains that Ben has a wife named Dasdy, a son named Pete, and a daughter whom Julius does not name. Ben adores Pete but not care about his little girl. But lest the reader think Ben a misogynist, it must be noted that Ben also cherishes Dasdy. Pete is described at some length with details that have no purpose but to contrast with the fact that no more is said about Ben’s daughter. In fact, after Ben runs away from his master alone but fails to make it to the North, he decides he will attempt to persuade Dasdy and Pete to flee with him – ostensibly abandoning his little girl. One wonders, at first, why Julius even inserted the daughter and Ben’s indifference to her into the story.

But Ben’s yellow skin provides a hint. It gestures to the complexity of paternity among slaves. As Douglass lamented in *My Bondage and My Freedom*:

> It is one of the damning characteristics of the slave system, that it robs its victims of every earthly incentive to a holy life. The fear of God, and the hope of heaven, are found sufficient to sustain many slave-women, amidst the snares and dangers of their strange lot; but, this side of God and heaven, a slave-woman is at the mercy of the power, caprice and passion of her owner. Slavery provides no means for the honorable continuance of the race. Marriage as imposing obligations on the parties to it--has no existence here, except in such hearts as are purer and higher than the standard morality around them.[351]

[351] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 66.

Thus, perhaps Ben's disregard for his daughter is caused by his suspicion – or even the reality – that he is not the child's biological father. Indeed, when Ben is lamenting how no one knows him with yellow skin and taking stock of all that he is lost, he grieves that he no longer has a child – not children.

Once he has turned golden, a series of people fail to recognize Ben. When he decides he must see Dasdy and Pete one last time before fleeing all the way to the North, he positions himself, just as the fox did the tar baby, along a road just near some greenery. Dasdy, upon being approached by Ben in the woods, insists she does not know him "f'om a skeercrow" (another green humanoid tool, like the tar baby, used to protect a garden).[352] Her inability to identify Ben and embrace him as family echoes that of those Africans who do not feel kinship with the descendants of slaves, of black failing to recognize yellow and brown. This bondwoman's rejection of a golden individual is also reminiscent of the estrangement some slave women may have felt for children they conceived through forced miscegenation.

Dasdy asks Ben, "Er is yer some low-down free nigger dat doan b'long ter nobody an' doan own nobody?'"[353] Her question is evocative of a Nigerian slur for African Americans: "*akata*." The word means "wild, impulsive, animalistic, unserious, and unreliable."[354] To the Nigerians who employ the term, it is African Americans' location outside of their home

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[352] Chesnutt, "Lonesome Ben," 96.

[353] Ibid.

[354] AfricanGal, "Africans? Yes. African-Americans? No," *CNN*, June 1, 2009, http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-265794.

continent – like a wild animal's position outside of domestic space -- that makes them akata. For Dasdy, it is Ben's existence beyond the property regime that is salient. Slavery, according to some Nigerians, made blacks akata. Per Dasdy, Ben has become akata through freedom.

In casual discourse there is a slippage between "wild" i.e. undomesticated and "free" i.e. unowned. However, the two words are not synonyms. For example, in Mongolia, reindeer herders own wild undomesticated animals. Conversely, a friend of my family who raised an orphaned deer ended up with a companion that was domesticated but, nevertheless, free.

But in Dasdy's question to Ben and the definition of akata, one can see the elision between "free" and "wild." Dasdy rejects Ben because he is an unwieldy liminal figure. His yellow skin underscores his status as neither black slave nor a white slaveowner, and Dasdy thinks Ben's being unfettered by the property regime must mean he is unbound by human connections. His lack of bonds – iron or familial as the case may be – renders him both "low-down" and "unreliable."

"Whar did yer com f'om anyhow? Whose nigger is yer?"[355] Dasdy asks Ben. The woman is trying to locate Ben socially, but given the fragility and instability of enthralled families, the most salient question she can pose to him is not the traditional "Who are your people?" but "Whose are you?"

Dasdy's first question, "Whar did yer com f'om anyhow?" can be read as another framing of "Whose nigger is yer?" and interpreted to mean "What plantation did you come from?" But it could also be the African taunting the African American for his ignorance: Where

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[355] Charles Chesnutt, "Lonesome Ben," 96.

did you come from anyhow? Are you Igbo, Yoruba, or Hausa? Oh? You don't know? Just as I thought: akata.

It is the inability to answer either query that is terrifying – to be neither member of an African ethnic group nor part of a plantation community. This incapability is an example of what Orlando Patterson referred to as the "natal alienation" of slavery:

> [T]he term "natal alienation"... goes directly to the heart of what is critical in the slave's forced alienation, the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations. It also has the important nuance of a loss of native status, of deracination. It was with this alienation of the slave from all formal, legally enforceable ties of 'blood,' and from any attachment groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master, that gave the relation of slavery its peculiar value to the master.[356]

In *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Africana Philosophy*, Fred Lee Hord (Mzee Lasana Okpara) and Jonathan Scott Lee explain that, "In place of Descartes's 'I think; therefore I am,' we find in this black tradition, 'I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.'"[357] "We" is of the utmost importance both in the tar baby story and in "Lonesome Ben": both the fugitive and the rabbit are both punished for failing to live up to the expectations for members of their respective communities be it, in Ben's case, having social bonds or, in the rabbit's case, adhering to social norms. When Ben is no longer part of a "we," he ceases to be. He can be human only in community.

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[356] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 7, ACLS Humanities E-Book.

[357] Fred Lee Hord (Mzee Lasana Okpara) and Jonathan Scott Lee, *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Africana Philosophy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 16, Project MUSE.

The idea that humanity exists only in social contexts could also be a moral of the Sierra Leonean Wax Girl story. In that tale, Spider is so desperate to sate his greed that he feigns death, abandoning his wife and children, so he can sneak out of his grave into his family home when no one is around and eat to his heart's delight even though this deprives his relatives of food. His willingness to completely forsake all interpersonal connections ultimately dehumanizes him, turning him, as I noted earlier, from "roun' lek pusson" to flat like a spider.[358]

But let us return to the scene with Dasdy. It is important to note that part of this story takes place in the woods. In the folktale, the rabbit seeks to be freed from entrapment in the garden – cultivated nature – into the briar patch, which is "unimproved" green space. The briar patch, the rabbit's natural habitat, is a place of liberty. Similarly, as Melvin Dixon observed, the lyrics of black antebellum spirituals show that "during slavery blacks depicted the wilderness as a place of refuge beyond the restricted world of the plantation."[359] But as Michael Bennett reminds us in "Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery," "[Dixon] also points out that one only travels through the wilderness to reach the other side—a sanctified

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[358] In the Wax Girl story, Spider feigns his death and abandons his family in order to eat more than his share of the household's food. In "Lonesome Ben," the eponymous slave abandons his family, stealing *all* their bread and meat to sustain himself during his escape, and enters a sort of living death.

[359] Melvin Dixon, *Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (New York: Random House, 1974), 36.

community waiting with open arms…. [I]t was also a space of terror and loneliness without the welcoming community waiting in the celestial city on the other side."[360]

Thus, it at first seems Ben has achieved a small triumph by making it to the woods. But without a community, the briar patch becomes just another site of torment. For humans, the forest should only be liminal space. For in this place of limbo, Ben is neither black nor white, but yellow; neither owned nor owner; neither mute nor audible. Ben should have travelled *through* the woods, becoming free. Instead, he gets lost *in* the forest and transitions from legal object to natural object. Dwelling too long in the wild turns him akata.

After Dasdy rejects him, the next person Ben encounters is Pete who is on his way to go fishing. As indicated by his name and pastime, Ben's son is an allusion to the Biblical Peter who was both a fisherman by trade and was ordained by Jesus to be a "fisher of men." But rather than drawing Ben near, Chesnutt's Pete does exactly the opposite. He fights to get away from the loving embrace of the father he does not recognize. Rather than being a fisherman, Pete "slipped out'n [Ben's] han's" like a fish.[361] Julius expresses the father's confusion by saying, "Po' Ben kep' gittin' wus an' wus mixed up."[362]

Indeed, African Americans, as slavery progressed, received more and more infusions of white blood, and thereby kept, like Ben, getting more and more mixed up. And, just as

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[360] Michael Bennett, "Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery," in *Beyond Nature Writing*, 196.

[361] Charles Chesnutt, "Lonesome Ben," 96.

[362] Ibid.

Patterson describes, this compromised the tie of birth in both ascending and – as illustrated by Pete's rejection -- descending generations. Ben, as a synecdoche for an entire people, experiences both familial estrangement and deracination.

(It must be noted that what Pete carries with him to use as a fishing line is a reed. This is a green callback to "The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story" in which, adding a touch of irony to a tale at whose crux is the failure of the gaze, what Brer Fox is trying to keep Brer Rabbit from stealing is calamus reed, used in ancient times to cure eye disease).[363]

By the time the next party comes along, Ben is in full tar baby mode -- he is as non-responsive as a doll when the slave Primus comes crosses his path. He is simply too distraught to notice and acknowledge the other man's presence. Primus castigates him, accusing him, as Brer Fox does in Harris' tale, of being stuck up, pauses too briefly for Ben to reply, and then takes his leave before Ben can stammer out a syllable. Thus, both Ben's distraction and Primus dominating their interaction render the yellow man mute.

Primus' presence in the text thickens the theme of black metamorphosis into green in two ways. A reoccurring slave character, Primus is the man who, in another story, "The Conjurer's Revenge," gets transformed into a mule. Second, as Primus scolds Ben, he tells him

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[363] M. Grieve, "Sedge, Sweet," in *A Modern Herbal*: *The Medicinal, Culinary, Cosmetic and Economic Properties, Cultivation and Folk-Lore of Herbs, Grasses, Fungi, Shrubs & Trees with their Modern Scientific Uses* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1931), http://botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/s/sedges39.html..

his tattered clothes “look lak dey be'n run th'oo a sawmill,”[364] a clear allusion to Sandy’s tragic conversion.

The last person Ben encounters is his owner Mars Marrabo who, like his predecessors, denies ever having laid eyes on him: "No, I doan know yer, yer yaller rascal! W'at de debbil yer mean by tellin' me sich a lie?" Marrabo’s words apply to more than just the situation at hand.

Given the way the text glosses being owned as both being claimed by family and being possessed by a master, in Marrabo’s words to the yellow slave, the reader can hear a slaveholder *disowning* his mixed-raced descendants. Indeed, after this encounter Ben “wep' lak a baby.”[365] Later, he reflects that, despite the fact he had run away from his owner, it seems “a sin fer his own marster ter 'ny 'im an' cas' 'im off dat-a-way.”[366] But if Ben was willing to free himself from his proprietor, perhaps what he is *actually* mourning is the repudiation of a father. After all, the word “deny” is commonly used to express rejection of paternity. The manumission of a slave is a blessing -- it is the abandonment of a father that is a sin.

Thus, unlike the adhesive tar baby, Ben repels all those he seeks connection with (much as the scarecrow, to which Dasdy likens him, drives away birds). His complete ostracism from society functions, like slavery, as a sort of social death (which, as I discuss in Chapter Five, is often figuratively rendered as being forced to lead a green life) that drives Ben, in despair, to lay down and succumb to literal death. Indeed, when pondering why Dasdy did not recognize

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[364] Charles Chesnutt, “Lonesome Ben,” 97.

[365] Ibid.

[366] Ibid., 98.

him, he wonders whether she might have assumed he died attempting to flee slavery and that what she encountered was his ghost. The Bible warns that humans will become dust after they die, but Ben starts decomposing into clay while he yet breathes. He is a sort of zombie – animate but decaying all the same.

Ben is the last to notice his unfortunate state. Confused at why Marrabo referred to him as yellow, the fugitive looks at his reflection in a stream and does not recognize what he sees. Unlike other versions of the tar baby story that hinge on the rabbit or his analogue improperly identifying the doll or its proxy, in this tale, the tar baby fails to recognize itself. In the traditional Akan, Sierra Leonean, and African American stories, the green thing is mis-identified as a black human being. But in this text, Ben looks into the river expecting to see a black human face, only to be astounded to view a tar baby, a green – or rather, yellow – thing staring back. He is both the rabbit that expects to look upon humanity, and the tar baby that disappoints the hare's gaze.

Thus, Ben's loss of identity and humanity is complete. He is the dog Douglass speaks of in one of his lectures on photography that "fails to recognize his own features in a glass."[367] And he is the analogue of Janie from *Their Eyes were Watching God*. For Janie, who is yellow, thinks she is white, and her resulting inability to recognize herself in a photograph as a child is a manifestation of her undeveloped ego. Similarly, Ben, who thinks he is black, is astonished to learn he is, in fact, yellow, at which point he loses his identity to the extent that "he didn' eben

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[367] Frederick Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," 131.

hab his own se'f ter *'so'ciate* wid" [italics mine].[368] Indeed, in psychological terms, he *disassociates* from himself.

In yet another revision of the traditional tar baby tale, a bull frog talks, crying out to Ben that Ben has turned to clay. Unlike the rabbit who wrongly assumes the doll can speak, Ben, at first, presumes the voice he heard could not possibly have come from a frog. In a cruel blow, the amphibian can talk and successfully communicate, though Ben, in contrast, is socially inaudible.

The bull frog is likely Tobe, the protagonist of "Tobe's Tribulation," who Aun' Peggy turns into an amphibian, so he can escape to the North without getting caught. But, still too afraid to journey to freedom, Tobe remains, in frog form, in a pond by Aun' Peggy's house.[369] Eventually, Aun' Peggy dies, dooming Tobe to remain an animal even after slavery ends. Though Tobe encounters Ben in antebellum times, he seems to relish the fact that he is not the only slave to fail to escape to the North or to lose his humanity in the liminal forest and degenerate from black to green.[370]

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[368] Chesnutt, "Lonesome Ben," 98.

[369] Tobe's liminality – the fact that he is between captivity on his plantation and freedom in the North – is symbolized by the frog's amphibiousness.

[370] One might expect the story to end as the European fairy tale "The Frog Prince" does – with restoration to human form, but Tobe, who, as a slave, is the opposite of a royal, has a story that concludes a contrasting manner: He never becomes human again. Taken together, the fairy tale and Chesnutt's story seem to underscore the stubbornness of caste.

Collectively considered, the Conjure stories, *The Colonel's Dream*, and Douglass' writing, too, invite us to revisit the most common interpretation of the tar baby tale in which the rabbit is understood to be *the* analogue to African Americans – a relatively powerless creature that nevertheless manages to triumph over a stronger adversary.[371] Of course, the rabbit is *an* analogue to American blacks -- after all, in the Akan story, the Aboatia does not escape the tar baby. So, the revision of the tale in America to allow the prisoner to get away seems inspired by the experience of captivity.[372] However, these works encourage us to see the profound conjunctions between the tar baby and the experience of a people whose existence aroused confusion over whether they were green things or black human beings.[373]

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[371] See, for example, Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 113.

[372] Ironically, in his foreword to *With Aesop Along the Black Border*, a 1924 collection of black Sea Islands folktales, Ambrose Elliott Gonzales sneers that:

> Apologists for the Negro have attempted to condone this apotheosizing of the mendacious heroes of his folk-lore by assuming that the Negro saw in the Rabbit and the weaker creatures the poor slave forced to resort to cunning and lying to protect himself from the harshness of his cruel master! But the slave brought these myths from Africa, whence, also he brought his race characteristics! Ambrose Elliott Gonzales, foreword to *With Aesop Along the Black Border* (Columbia: The State Company, 1924), HATHI TRUST Digital Library.

[373] It should be noted here that Daniel Worden sees elements of Chesnutt's novel *The House Behind the Cedars* as revising the tar baby tale with Rena as the analogue to the rabbit and the black community as the analogue to tar. Daniel Worden, "Birth in the Briar Patch: Charles W. Chesnutt and the Problem of Racial Identity," *The Southern Literary Journal* 41, no. 2 (2009): 11-12, Project MUSE. Chesnutt's description of the beautiful Rena with her feet trapped in tar is later revised in Morrison's *Tar Baby* in which the equally gorgeous Jadine both literally gets her limbs entrapped in pitch and regards the African American community as a snare.

In "Lonesome Ben," Julius claims that, until the eponymous protagonist dies, is baked hard as a brick, and then smashed to pieces by a falling tree and ground into dust, the water of the creek ran clear at the site of his demise. It became its current amber color only when polluted by Ben's remains. Indeed, throughout the Conjure Woman stories, Julius portrays element after element of the landscape as permanently contaminated by negrophobic atrocity. Thus, according to Julius, grapes continue to be goophered, lumber remains haunted, and contemporary mules might still be transfigured humans.

The Conjure tales, like some Ananse stories, are etiological. In the tradition of Akan oral texts of a being who switches between African and spider and explains how the world became how it is today, in Chesnutt's corpus we find a host of shapeshifters who change between African Americans to natural entities to demystify environmental and human degradation and to explain how the entire web of life is harmed when blacks are forced to take on the silence and status of green.

This very fall, researchers found that the deaths of Flint's unborn children had gone up 58% since the town made the fated decision to switch from Lake Huron water.[374]

When will we finally grasp the moral of Chesnutt's tales?

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[374] Ana Aceves, "Flint Water Tied to Fetal Death and Lower Fertility Rate," *Nova Next*, September 22, 2017, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/next/body/flint-water-tied-to-fetal-death-and-lower-fertility-rates/.

Chapter Four

Skin Me, Don't Fling Me in the Briar Patch[375]

Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* is a story about the relationships between black, white, and green. This complex work approaches its subject matter from several -- somewhat unrelated – angles. It invites critics to rotate the text this way and that like a prism and treat its different facets in turn.

During the novel's Christmas dinner scene, European American wealthy Valerian and African American impoverished Son debate their races' rights to natural resources. Their exchange puts black moral entitlement to the environment in contest with whites' property rights and pits a social justice perspective against Lockean reasoning.

Given the presence of a character named "Son," the reader ought not to be surprised that the book makes much use of the form of the cross. It employs a chiasmus to express the idea that the essence of the black experience is the movement of people of African descent and the lands they inhabit in and out of white-dominated property regimes. However, the text plays with spiritual cruxes in addition to rhetorical ones. Thus, Son's figurative death, which

[375] In Harris' version of the tar baby folktale, the rabbit makes such a plea to the fox who has trapped him with the doll. He uses reverse psychology to convince the fox that being returned to what the fox does not realize is the rabbit's natural habitat would be more tortuous than being skinned.

parallels the crucifixion, brings about a revolutionary inversion in interracial and interspecies relationships.

As Son's moniker, in conjunction with his allegorical demise, suggests, names are highly symbolic in this novel. Morrison uses the names of and the allusive situations in which she places her characters to reflect on blacks' relationships to green. In particular, the appellations of Ondine and another character with a name similar to hers "Jadine" reference the myth of creatures who can move between human and animal form by removing their blackness by transforming their ebony fur into a cloak that can be stripped off.

The idea of race as property follows. Multiple times Jadine seeks to consume or divest herself of race via goods derived from natural resources. I consider these acts in light of characters' attempts at purchasing deracination in Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* and also in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" which, I argue, *Tar Baby* retells.

Water is one of the most important elements of the novel. Morrison shares Wardi's conception of water as an element linked to both racial oppression and liberation. Furthermore, in crafting the lore of the blind horsemen that *Tar Baby's* fictional islanders recount, she subtly retells the story of the aqua-centric historical slave revolt known as "Igbo's Landing."

As the foregoing suggests, *Tar Baby* is hardly a discrete creative work. Rather, it exists within a dense network of other texts. In fact, one can trace the provenance of a set of ecocentric tropes from Frederick Douglass' memoirs through *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through *Tar Baby* on to the 2002 novel *No Give Up, Maan!* (By including Afro-Colombian work,

I hope to call attention to the United States-centered character of African American Studies). And the conclusion of *Tar Baby* is a black-green revision of *The Bluest Eye.*

African Americans often have two radically different sorts of relationships with nature. The first involves blacks devolving into not-quite-human green objects. But the second type of relationship, which appears in *Tar Baby* and across Morrison's corpus, develops when African Americans *transcend* their humanity to connect to the environment. For me, *Tar Baby* is about the challenge of achieving self-realization by engaging in the latter type of relationship – and whether characters choose to rise to it.

Whose Face is on the Coin? Dueling Perspectives on Nature

The characters in *Tar Baby* do not have a merry Christmas. Valerian and Margaret, the white owners of a luxurious residence on the fictional French Caribbean island Isle des Chevaliers, invite their African American married domestic staff Sydney and Ondine to join them for dinner. Jadine, the couple's adult niece, whom they reared, attends as well. And there is a sixth diner -- Son, an African American intruder to the home eccentrically invited to remain as a guest by Valerian.

The party has just begun to eat when Valerian remarks that he has dismissed Thérèse and Gideon, the islanders hired to assist Ondine, for stealing apples from him. (While tropical fruit abounds on the island, apples must be imported from France, rendering them prohibitively expensive). Son is outraged by Valerian's act, and the two men engage in a contentious exchange that serves as a synecdoche for the novel's meditations over blacks and whites' rights, proprietary and moral, to green.

At this point in the story, Son and Valerian have already been posed as opposites by the text. One is a white – and white privileged -- landowner grandly named after an emperor. The other is black and racially disenfranchised, a vagrant who is not merely property-less but also transgresses property rights and cannot be said to possess so much as a "real" name. Son sneers at Valerian's profile, which he observes is resembles the head of a coin, as the older man eats. The reference to currency reinforces the framing of Valerian as wealthy and as an emperor, as a colonial force privileged to enjoy an island territory. But more importantly, it alludes to the question asked by *the* Son: "Whose face is on the coin?"

In the Biblical context, it is Caesar's face that is on the denarius. After posing his rhetorical query, Jesus encourages his followers to "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." Theologians commonly interpret Jesus' statement to imply that coins, stamped with the image of Rome's leader, ought to be turned over to him as taxes, while humans, who bear the image of God, should submit their souls to the Father. Thus, Jesus complicates the idea of property by positing that there is more than one system of it. The text suggests Valerian's power is unjust in its extent because he is both God *and* Caesar. After all, he literally evicts a couple from his paradise for taking apples forbidden to them. There is only one viable property regime, and Valerian is its master. He, as a white elite, has an exclusive right to green goods.

Yet Son, like the Son of Man, reveals the existence of other, less visible, worldviews. As he and Valerian argue, each has a vision of the knights for whom Isle des Chevaliers is named. Valerian imagines "one hundred French chevaliers" wearing epaulets who are "restful in the

security of the Napoleonic Code."[376] In contrast, Son's vision is of "one hundred black men on one hundred unshod horses" who ride "blind and naked through the hills and had done so for hundreds of years." These men:

> knew the rain forest when it was still a rain forest, they knew where the river began, where the roots twisted above the ground; they knew all there was to know about the island and had not even seen it. They had floated in strange waters blind, but they were still there racing each other for sport in the hills behind this white man's house.[377]

The men's connection to the land is not based on property rights but upon intimate knowledge born of the length of their tenure upon the island, a quasi-aboriginal familiarity with nature.

The black riders contrast with the Napoleonic horse soldiers not simply because they represent property-less-ness in contrast to an imperial property claim, but because, in direct opposition to property owners, they themselves were once chattel: "They had floated in strange waters blind." Literally, this refers to the story told on Isle des Chevaliers of slaves who were struck blind when they first saw the island -- according to that narrative, their slave ship then sank, and the slaves were forced to bob sightlessly in the ocean until they happened upon land. But the sentence also describes the experience of travelling the foreign waves of the Middle Passage as cargo in the darkness of a vessel's hold. As I discussed in the Introduction, the persona of Clifton's untitled poem insists that the experience of having been property can change one's attitude to the environment, engendering an intimacy with green. This holds true for Son's imagined warriors.

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[376] Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1981), 206.

[377] Ibid.

As their visions conclude, the two men look at each other. Son "turned his savanna eyes on those calm head-of-a-coin evening ones."[378] Son has "savanna eyes" first, because a savanna is associated with Africa, and, second, because it is a "wild" natural space existing outside of Western property regimes. Thus, it stands in contrast to the Europe of Valerian's ancestors and to the economic system that generates and sustains Valerian's wealth.

Son contends that though Valerian views Thérèse and Gideon as thieves, "nobody knew thieves and thievery better than [Valerian] did and he probably thought he was a law-abiding man." To Son, Valerian is a robber because, as head of a lucrative confectionary business, Valerian "had taken the sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value, as though the cutting of cane and picking of beans was child's play and had no value," allowing him to – like an emperor – "grow old in regal comfort" in a "palace."[379]

Locke held that though one comes to own land by mixing one's toil with the state of nature, the turfs a servant cuts nevertheless belong to the master under labor theory. But, according to Son, if individuals like Valerian pay exploitative rates to the people who mix their labor with natural goods such as sugar and cocoa, then there can be no legitimate appeal to labor theory, and the master is simply a thief.

Thus, when Valerian explains, "Those apples came at great expense and inconvenience from the consulate," Son probes, "Inconvenience for who?" pointing out to Valerian, "You didn't go and get them. They did. You didn't row eighteen miles to bring them here. They

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[378] Ibid.

[379] Ibid., 203.

did."[380] Since, according to Son, labor theory does not apply here, Thérèse and Gideon, who have mixed their labor with the apples, have earned the right to claim green and cannot be considered crooks.

I think here of Charles Chesnutt's Conjure Woman stories, particularly, "The Goophered Grapevine." In that tale, John and Annie move to North Carolina to exploit the natural environment and the work of blacks. As John puts it, they want to purchase real estate where "labor was cheap, and land could be bought for a mere song."[381] Like Valerian with his sugar and cocoa, John intends to pay for green "as though it had no value" and to treat black toil as though it were a leisure activity such as singing or "child's play."

Despite the fact Julius, one of the plantation's former slaves, mixed his labor – under duress – with the state of nature, rights to the earth he tilled pass him over entirely from the antebellum era when both he and it were owned by Mars McAdoo, to the following period when Mars McAcDoo's heirs litigated over the estate, to the Reconstruction present when John and Annie buy the farm. This injustice occurs even though, per Locke, Julius' enslavement was illegitimate as he did not sink to that status by being captured in war.

Thus, in both Morrison and Chesnutt's works, the legal system legitimizes white characters' claims to the land, smoothly converting the slave-based agricultural system into the far too similar white supremacist capitalist regime Valerian, John, and Annie profit from. In response, Julius, similarly to Son, insists upon a black right to green. Depending on the

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[380] Ibid., 205.

[381] Charles Chesnutt, "The Goophered Grapevine," 2-3.

situation, the former slave either appropriates natural resources, such as fruit, outright à la Thérèse and Gideon or masterfully spins stories that prompt Annie to hand them over.[382]

But let us return to the dinner scene. While at the table, Son muses that "[white people] loved property so, because they had killed it soiled it defecated on it and they loved more than anything the places where they shit…."[383] Thus, to Son, people like Valerian have property not because they have mixed their labor with the state of nature or fairly paid their servants to do so but because they have despoiled the state of nature. Like animals, they mark their territory through scatological means. And nature, given a voice by the text, agrees with the young man.

The personified clouds, fish, parrots, trees, snakes, and river assert, "The end of the world, as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses on Isle des Chevaliers."[384] The development – or destruction -- of land for the construction of L'Arbe de la Croix, Valerian and Margaret's island mansion, and its neighboring houses has disastrous

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[382] In addition to evoking the Conjure Woman stories, Son's critique of racist capitalism recalls Douglass' meditation in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that:

> [T]his money—my own hard earnings, every cent of it—was demanded of me, and taken from me by Master Hugh…. The right to take my earnings, was the right of the robber. He had the power to compel me to give him the fruits of my labor, and this power was his only right in the case.

Son sees the current economic system as an updated version of the one to which Douglass was prey. According to Son, whites misuse law to deprive blacks of the benefits of their labor, and the legalization of racial exploitation whitewashes theft.

[383] Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 205.

[384] Ibid., 9.

effects on the environment including the decimation of the rainforest and loss of animal populations. Unlike Locke and Jeremy Bentham who viewed property, particularly in the "New World," as dramatically improving upon wilderness, the narrator and multi-species chorus see land ownership as destructive.

Son's critique of whites' passion for property makes me think of the opinion in *Johnson v. M'Intosh,* the Supreme Court case that reified the Doctrine of Discovery. The court held that "the tribes of Indians inhabiting this country were fierce savages whose occupation was war and whose subsistence was drawn chiefly from the forest. To leave them in possession of their country was to leave the country a wilderness."[385]

The court believed it was using Lockean reasoning when it argued that American Indians lacked land rights because they had not mixed their labor with the state of nature. Yet the opinion describes Native Americans drawing their subsistence from the forest; it *depicts* them mixing their labor with nature. However, because their use of the land was sustainable -- because it failed to despoil the environment -- it did not give rise to property rights.

Coincidentally, the character named for Christ shares his views with Pope Francis. In a June 23, 2015 *New York Times* article, David Brooks denigrates as "overdrawn" the Pope's statement that "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth." Similarly, Son, in two outsized sentences reflects that "the sole lesson of [whites'] world" was "how to make waste." He signals the ubiquity of the substance in Western culture

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[385] "Johnson v. M'Intosh, 21 U.S. 543 (1823)," Justia, accessed May 17, 2018, https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/21/543/case.html#571.

by repeating the word nearly a dozen times and concludes that garbage is what "they had made of the world."[386]

Similarly, in his October 8, 2015 *New York Review of Books* article, William D. Nordhaus gently chides the Pope for rejecting carbon credits. In contrast, Son resents whites for expending energy on "how to mobilize waste, legalize waste."[387, 388]

But allow me to return to the clause in which Son refers to Valerian as "playing." A more expansive quote from this approximately page long sentence is:

> although he had taken the sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value, as though the cutting of cane and picking of beans was child's play and had no value; but he turned it into candy, the invention of which really was child's play, and sold it to other children….[389]

These clauses are (imperfectly) chiastic and thus formally echo the phrase L'Arbe de la Croix, inviting us to view the cross referenced by the mansion's name as not merely the Biblical crux but the rhetorical figure.

Sign of the Cross: Chiasmi in *Tar Baby*

Son's chiasmus recalls, yet again, Frederick Douglass' line "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." Together, Son and Douglass speak powerfully of how the natural resources of the black world, both cultivated by black labor

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[386] Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 203-4.

[387] Ibid., 204-205.

[388] One notes that Valerian's namesake candies are made from the leftover ingredients – or waste – of more popular confections produced by his family's business.

[389] Ibid., 203.

and constituting blacks themselves, are forced through bizarre metamorphoses as they process into and out of the property regime.

Unsurprisingly, Son, who employs the text's only chiasmus, is a Christological figure. And his resurrection or rebirth as a blind horseman maroon is rendered in ecological – particularly aquatic -- terms. Thérèse, having rowed Son to Isle des Chevaliers to begin his new life warns him that she has to leave "before the water is too small" i.e. contracts into a body of liquid as small as womb fluid. [390, 391]

Water has many symbolic ties to birth and re-birth. Christians are "born again" through baptism. But also, Africans were reborn as slaves of the diaspora when they emerged from a sinister version of the womb -- the dark, confined, marine space of the slave ship hold. Son inverts his ancestors' experience by being re-birthed as a mythical maroon – an avatar of auto-emancipation -- in a boat floating on Caribbean water.

Jesus declared in His own chiasmus that, at the end of time, "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last." The conclusion of the novel does not quite offer such a total upturning

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[390] Ibid., 305.

[391] The Bible itself has a chiastic structure that Morrison incorporates into her Biblical allusions. Thus, Thérèse is analogized not just to the Old Testament's Eve but to her New Testament double Mary. In fact, Thérèse's full name is Mary Thérèse Foucault. (Her surname is an allusion to Michel Foucault who theorized -- as the book does -- about power).

Like the Biblical Mary, Thérèse has mystical maternal properties – rather than conceiving without sex, however, she has breasts that never cease giving milk. Thus, Thérèse and Gideon's exile from L'Arbe de La Croix figures not only as a retelling of Adam and Eve being cast out of the garden but of Joseph and Mary (Thérèse), who will become a mother figure to Son by facilitating his rebirth as a maroon, being turned away from the inn (which L'Arbe de La Croix is said to resemble more than it does a home).

of the social order, but it is suggested that after Jadine figuratively kills Son, Ondine and Margaret, who were friends as young women until Valerian discouraged Margaret from behaving as a peer towards Ondine, will renew their relationship. Furthermore, the book's denouement finds the elderly Valerian addled and just barely attuned to the shift in power that occurs between himself and Sydney.

"Don't agitate yourself," Sydney soothes as Valerian manages to perceive through his funk that "[s]omething's happening here." Listening to the music Sydney has played to calm him, Valerian's "fingers danced lightly in the air."[392] Throughout the book, emperor butterflies fly about Valerian's mansion, and Son twice scorns Valerian for dismissing Thérèse and Gideon with "a flutter of the fingers," recalling the insects' movements.[393] Now, however, Valerian's fingers do not flutter. At the novel's end, Valerian is no longer an emperor butterfly. He is no longer an emperor.

Valerian's denial of apples to Thérèse and Gideon represents white dominance over black manifested by control of green. Conversely, Valerian's loss of his butterfly identity symbolizes his failing grip on green which is concomitant with the ascendance of black over white exemplified by Sydney's control of him.

However, the reversals brought about by Son's Christ-like experiences extend beyond the human realm. Prior to his symbolic death, Son brings the moribund plants in Valerian's greenhouse back from the dead. And though nature regards the construction of L'Arbe de la

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[392] Ibid., 287.

[393] Ibid., 203.

Croix and the other summer houses as the end of the world, just after Jadine slays Son, the environment of Isle des Chevaliers is revitalized as though by Jesus' sacrificial death. The narrator uses the language of expiration to describe symbols of the white monarchal and capitalistic property regimes and the language of life when portraying nature.

Thus, the Old *Queen* Hotel (italics mine) on Dominique is "dying"; once luxurious, now "the cells of a motel were growing."[394] The hotel's degeneration into a lower status form of real estate is framed as a sort of cancer effected by the mutation of "cells." The narrator goes on to inform us "in the distance under pink immortelles is an occasional dead plantation," playing on the plants' name to contrast enduring natural life with the demise of a space that represents a racist property regime.[395] Son's sacrifice uplifts characters of African descent *and* revitalizes nature. This suggests the fortunes of black and green are fused.

In the Name of the Son: Allusive Names and Contexts in *Tar Baby*

Though Son is nominally and morphologically Christ,[396] his adventures in nature reveal that he is also representative of Adam and Jonah. The night Son first arrives at L'Arbe de la

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[394] Ibid., 274.

[395] Ibid.

[396] The text plays with the idea of Son as Christ in many ways irrelevant to the topic of this chapter. For example, Son dries himself with an "Easter white" towel (Ibid., 140) and initiates the dinner conflict with Valerian on Christmas day.

When Son visits Gideon and Thérèse on his way to search for Jade, Son's continued romantic interest in her so disgusts Gideon that Gideon twice snarls, "Christ" in frustration at him, inadvertently calling Son by his metaphorical title. Thérèse watches the exchange "as though she were at a wake," referencing her belief that Son has been figuratively crucified by Jade. Irritated by a grunting noise Thérèse is making, Gideon commands her, "Fix some food, for

Croix, he climbs a tree that represents the Tree of Knowledge. In the darkness, he cannot tell if its fruit is an avocado or ake, the latter of which is poisonous. Thus, as Adam and Eve did, he finds the tree ambiguous, wondering if its produce will kill him. And, like his Biblical predecessors, he ultimately decides to go ahead and eat – discovering, upon first bite, that the fruit is avocado after all. Like its Christian analogue, the fruit initially seems benign. But though the forbidden fruit did not instantly kill Adam, it *did* condemn him to death. And Son, too, is doomed to a (figurative) death.

As for Jonah, at the novel's beginning, Son abandons his responsibilities and jumps from aboard the ship where he has been working into the ocean where the water gulps, then regurgitates him. In the Biblical story, Jonah, who has been sent by God to inform the people of Nineveh of their wickedness, shirks duty and hops on a boat to Jaffa. When a storm comes, Jonah knows he is being punished for his disobedience and, like Son, jumps overboard – in Jonah's case, this is to spare the others on the craft. Like Son, Jonah is swallowed by a wet marine throat – the prophet is eaten whole by a sea creature. Son is turned three times in a vortex of water while Jonah spends three days in the aquatic animal's belly. Both men are subsequently released.

Jonah, who intended to go to Jaffa, ends up in Nineveh after all while Son, who had hoped to catch a boat from the part of Dominique where he abandoned ship to the island's main city, Queen of France, inadvertently boards on the wrong vessel and gets transported to

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Christ's sake." Of course, since the food is for Son (of Man), its preparation is, in a way, "for Christ's sake." Ibid., 297, 302.

Isle des Chevaliers. There, Son rehearses the revolutionary behavior of Jonah in Nineveh by informing Valerian of his wickedness – namely, his denial of green to black. This sets off a chain of events that ultimately leave the "emperor" humble and repentant – just like Nineveh's king.[397]

But Son -- and Valerian -- are hardly the only characters with allusive names.[398, 399] Every main character but Margaret has a symbolic moniker. Sydney, the African American butler, is named after two colonized stretches of land ripped from non-whites: Sydney, Australia and Sydney, Canada. Jadine, known also as "Jade," is, by virtue of her beauty and her success as a model, a sought after good. Thus, one character is named for the purloined earth, the other for stone. But Jadine's aunt has the most evocative nature name of all.

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[397] Ondine's revelation that Margaret abused Michael helps bring Valerian low, but Ondine being present at the dinner table to disclose the narrative is a product of Son's destabilizing effect on the "natural" order.

[398] I must speak here of Son's real name "William Green" which Valerian and Margaret take it upon themselves to amend to "Willie." Given that Margaret stereotypes Son as a black brute and a rapist, the nickname they give him eerily foreshadows the infamous "Willie Horton" campaign ad. The ad renamed black rapist William Horton "Willie" in a successful attempt to stereotype him as a modern Gus the Renegade in order to portray presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, under whose furlough program Horton committed assault, as soft on crime. Dan Rodricks, "Trying to Find the Real Willie Horton," *The Baltimore Sun*, August 12, 1993, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1993-08-12/news/1993224224_1_willie-horton-willie-horton-jeffrey-elliot.

[399] The character Alma Estée also has a symbolic name, though not one with environmental connotations. Alma is Spanish for "soul," and Estée is French for "Esther." "Soul," here, is meant in the black vernacular sense denoting the intangible essence of Africana culture. Esther was the Jewish woman in the Bible who won what was essentially an ancient pageant held by King Ahasuerus. Like Esther, Alma Estée is a superlative beauty from an oppressed people. However, Alma Estée, who holds fast to a white standard of attractiveness, is blind to her own charms.

An Ondine is a female mythological being who lives in and is an avatar of the water element. Morrison blends ondine lore with that of a similar creature – the selkie. Selkies are seals when in water and human women upon land. A man who falls in love with such a creature may prevent her from returning to the sea by stealing her sealskin, which, when selkies are in human form, becomes merely a cloak. However, a selkie who retrieves her property is able to go back to her aquatic home. Ondine – and Sydney – are trapped, in selkie fashion, on Isle des Chevaliers by lack of resources. For as Ondine reminds Jadine, the older woman and her husband lack the funds to leave the household when their jobs become untenable.

Ondines/selkies are hinted at as an actual presence in the text when, at the novel's beginning, Son first jumps ship. The tide seems to push him with the "hand of an insistent woman" later referred to as a "water-lady."[400] And the allusion to the creatures becomes still more explicit when Jadine – whose name is similar to "Ondine" -- shows her aunt the sealskin coat Jadine has been given by a paramour.

The sentient angel trumpets that grow at L'Arbe de la Croix describe "the hides of ninety baby seals stitched together so nicely you could not tell what part had sheltered their cute little hearts and which had cushioned their skulls."[401] In citing the iconic anti-environmental sin – the clubbing of baby seals, making use of precious language such as "cute little hearts," and

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[400] Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 4-5.

[401] Ibid., 87.

foregrounding the violence necessary to produce the coat, the flowers reframe a luxury good as a savage violation of innocent nature.

Jadine models the coat for Ondine naked ("the best way to feel it") like a selkie who washes ashore unclothed but for her sealskin.[402] In a further mythologizing move, Jadine is repeatedly referred to as having irises the color of mink and is described as having "sealskin in her eyes."[403]

After Christmas dinner, Jadine runs off with Son to the United States but returns to the island when their love affair ends. She had left Isle des Chevaliers dishonestly, having falsely promised to send for her aunt and uncle, and Ondine "wondered if her niece would even have come to say goodbye [before returning to Paris] had it not been that the sealskin coat [which Jadine had left at L'Arbe de la Croix] was still there."[404] Thus, Jadine leaves Son the way a selkie leaves her swain – by retrieving her outerwear and going home. Unlike Ondine, Jadine is a selkie with the resources – for which the coat is a sumptuous synecdoche – for mobility.

It must be noted, however, that not just Ondine and Jadine but all diasporic blacks are selkies. They are all beings who came from the sea and had their blackness stolen from them through forced deracination, so they could be kept as property by others. And blacks are also a particular species of ondines: mermaids, for *Tar Baby* retells not just its eponymous African American folktale but also Hans Christian Andersen's most celebrated story.

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[402] Ibid.

[403] Ibid., 272.

[404] Ibid., 280.

In "The Little Mermaid," to become human and get a chance at having an immortal soul, the heroine of the title acquires a draught -- at the cost of her tongue and preternatural singing voice -- that splits her tail into legs with a pain that makes her feel as though she is being cleft by a sword and renders her unconscious. (Ondines are born soulless and can enter the afterlife only by marrying a human). In Morrison's hands, the mermaid's metamorphosis becomes a metaphor for the African American experience: The mermaid emerges from the sea onto foreign land, mutilated and transformed by violence she only barely survives, and stripped of her voice, all of which is justified by the logic that this will humanize her and redeem her soul.

Skin Me: Race as Property

Jadine sees race as a type of possession rather than an intrinsic component of identity, confusing heritage with commodities made from natural ingredients. Early in the text, she frames race as property when she goes grocery shopping in a Parisian store for a host of exotic foodstuffs -- "Major Grey's chutney… tamarind rinds, coconut… Chinese mushrooms… Bertolli's Tuscany olive oil" -- and sees a stunning African woman whom she "was not sure… was not at all part of her list—an addition to the coconut and tamarind."[405]

The African woman further stuns Jadine by refusing to conform to the mundane rituals of the marketplace – she opens a carton of a dozen eggs and extracts three of them for

[405] Ibid., 44-45. Jadine reflects on the profit margins suggested by the woman's body parts in a manner not unlike that of a prospective buyer of slaves: "there was too much hip, too much bust," noting, "The [modeling] agency would laugh her out of the lobby." Ibid. She appraises the African woman according to the standards of the (fashion) market.

purchase. Her transgression symbolizes her disrespect of a capitalist system that is broad enough to contain not just green but black.

(I pause here to note that the names of the chutney and olive oil call attention to issues of property, nature, and justice. The chutney, a product of India, is not sold by a company with an Indian name but one christened for an English man with a military title, calling attention to India's status as the imperial property of England and the use of colonial violence to secure and profit from the Asian country's flora assets. In contrast, the Italian product is vended by a company with an Italian name – nothing has disrupted Europe's rights to its natural resources).

Then, at L'Arbe de la Croix, the young woman requests a cup of hot chocolate from Ondine despite the blistering weather of the Caribbean. Her desire represents a longing for blackness -- she is trying to access it by consuming green. However, as Son's chiasmus reminds the reader, there is a difference between chocolate and cocao. What Jadine longs for is not cocao but candy – cocao that has been transformed from its natural state by whites like confection magnate Valerian via exportation to industrialized countries.

Jadine and Son's relationship comes to its eventual end because what Jadine desires is not Son as he *naturally* is but Son as he could be once transformed by the adoption of Eurocentric and capitalistic values. Son himself acquires the epithet "chocolate eater" because, before being discovered, he survives in hiding at L'Arbe de la Croix by stealing and eating the candies. But he comes to decline continued pursuit of a relationship with Jadine and to reject what she represents just as he disparages candy as fit to be consumed only by children.

In yet another manifestation of her disordered craving for blackness, Jadine titillates herself with her sealskin fur, licking it and trembling. But, again, what arouses Jadine is not

blackness in its natural state – she is not going into ecstasy over seals themselves – but blackness that has undergone a violent metamorphosis and connotes high socio-economic class. In contrast, Son reflects that his hair is "more alive than the sealskin."[406] He is unaltered, living blackness – which Jadine ultimately rejects.

As Jadine plays with her coat, she muses "that sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside…."[407] She wishes her blackness to be an accessory, to be property one can slip out of like a selkie taking off her sealskin cloak. A core feature of property is the right to alienate, and Jadine is frustrated that her skin, unlike her fur, is not chattel that she can divest herself of.

Cheryl I. Harris notes in her article "Whiteness as Property" that in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the phenotypically white biracial plaintiff argued that being forced to sit in the colored railcar stripped him of "this reputation [of being white] which has an actual pecuniary value," adding that "the reputation of belonging to the dominant race is property."[408] Harris observes that though Plessy remained relegated to the colored railcar, the Court accepted the notion of property in whiteness.

Whiteness is property, but whites never have been. In contrast, blackness is *not* property, but blacks have been such. Indeed, for people of African descent to have been owners of their blackness would have given them the right to alienate it and thus unfit

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[406] Ibid., 132.

[407] Ibid., 48.

[408] Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1747.

themselves for inscription into the property regime. Perhaps sensing such a possibility would be too threatening to the unjust social hierarchy, Plessy refrained from arguing for blackness as property – so he could divest himself of it – and sought only to possess whiteness as property, so he could benefit from it.

Because Jadine wants her blackness to be a good separate from herself, she is threatened when Son suggests to her that it is innate and physiological. Jadine, having internalized the stereotype of people of African descent having a strong odor, claims that she smelled Son's stench during a physical altercation between the two of them. When Jadine threatens to tell Valerian about the scuffle and have Son removed from the house, Son dares her to do so. But he warns her that she should not add that he also smelled *her* odor "because then [Valerian] would understand that there was something in you *to* smell…. And no sealskin coat… can disguise it."[409] Son contrasts Jadine's scent with the coat to insist that no amount of class privilege can negate race, that no commodity can make one what one is not.[410]

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[409] Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 124.

[410] Jadine's wish to be deracinated is another of the book's links to "The Little Mermaid." For though selkie lore and "The Little Mermaid" can be read as metaphors for the brutality of slavery and cultural loss, they are also analogies for willful assimilation and the belief that one can shed race or purchase one's way out of it. The mermaid in the fairy tale is as human-identified as Jadine is white-identified – Jadine's preference for Picasso to Itumba masks is matched by the mermaid's assessment that the terrestrial world with its human technology is richer than her own. And Jadine's wish to slip out of melanin parallels the mermaid's desire to cleave her tail into legs. Finally, in the fairy tale, species – analogous to race -- gets bound up with property when the mermaid purchases some proto-George Schuyler Mermaid-No-More in an ultimately futile attempt to buy her way into the human species with a costly good.

For Christmas, Jadine gives Ondine an evening outfit made up of several gaudy pieces.[411] The young woman had considered adding a tiara to her aunt's present but ultimately decided the accessory would verge on ridiculous. What Jadine overlooks, though, is that Ondine already has a crown – elsewhere in the text, Sydney admires Ondine's "braids sitting on her head like a royal diadem."[412] But, true to her disregard for anything in its natural state, it does not occur to Jadine that a crown is something that can be grown.[413]

The fantasy of buying deracination also appears in Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye*. In that book, subconsciously self-loathing African American parents purchase white dolls for their children. Claudia MacTeer recalls desiring to dismember the objects "to see what it was that all the world said was lovable."[414]

In contrast to Claudia's fantasy of destroying property to examine and literally dismantle a symbol of the racial hierarchy, at one point in *Tar Baby*, Jadine pictures herself reeling in and

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[411]The outfit consists of a dress with "zircons on the bodice and on the waist…. And (the best thing) black suede shoes with zircons studding the heels. Hooker shoes. Ondine wouldn't be able to walk long in them, but how she could reign from a sitting position." Ibid., 90.

The fact that Ondine will not be able to walk in the shoes is yet another allusion to "The Little Mermaid." The unnamed fish-woman, when in human form, feels she is trodding upon knives when she strides. This is the fairy tale version of the pain Ondine, the seal-woman, would experience wearing high heels – that is to say when trying, like the mermaid, to play a role (portraying someone with class privilege). Similarly, early in Jadine's ill-fated relationship with Son, she goes outside in slippers thin enough for gravel to hurt her feet, foreshadowing the agony she will feel trying to navigate his world.

[412] Ibid., 97.

[413] Ondine also refers to the hope that young Jadine represented for Ondine as Ondine's crown.

[414] Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 19.

dissecting a fish that she imagines holds within its belly the women of Son's hometown of Eloe (which makes them, like Son, Jonah analogues), so she can examine exactly what about them she finds so off-putting. But Jadine's figurative autopsy does not unravel negrophobia – it merely clarifies her disgust.

Reading the two novels together, we see a connection between attitudes to race and to nature. For, as Claudia tries to take apart white supremacy, she destroys a plastic object, but as Jadine solidifies her anti-blackness, it is a natural creature, a fish, that she imagines desecrating. Claudia wishes that, instead of white poppets, she were given green gifts such as lilacs and peaches. Jadine, rejecting the women of Eloe, longs only for her coat of murdered seals.

The counterpoint to the white baby doll in *The Bluest Eye* is the trope of the tar baby in the novel bearing its name. Unlike the white figurines blacks purchase in an expression of their idolization of a Eurocentric idea of beauty, the tar baby is not a commodity available for sale but a natural object and an intangible part of an oral tradition stretching back to West Africa. While the dolls are white and plastic, tar babies are both black (culturally and sometimes visually) and green (being made from organic ingredients such as pitch and gum).[415]

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[415] As their relationship is coming apart at the end of their travels, Son tells Jadine *his* version of the tar baby story. In this incarnation, a white farmer who has a "bullshit bullshit bullshit farm" – Valerian whom Son, as described earlier, views as soiling and defecating upon the lands of non-whites – creates a tar baby to trap the rabbit who ate his cabbages (Son who stole and ate chocolate and avocado belonging to Valerian). Son does not develop the tale beyond this point. He merely reiterates what, for him, is the point of the narrative, "He made it, you hear me? He made it!" Ibid., 270. Valerian made Jadine by paying for years of elite private education for her, inculcating her with his Eurocentric values in the process.

Thus, Son damns Jadine as not being a person but a product. While the rabbit in the original tale confuses a doll for a human, Son frames Jadine being as much of a doll created to valorize

Jadine is somewhat familiar with the tar baby story, but her ignorance of the natural world causes her to misapprehend the tale's moral: At the conclusion of the book, she reflects upon her former vain hope that in New York "the night women [black women she has fearsome visions of at night] could be beaten, reduced to shadows, and confined to the briar patch where they belonged."[416] But, of course, the briar patch is not a place of confinement but freedom – which would be apparent to her if she knew anything about animals and their habitats. Jadine does not grasp that the request of the rabbit not to be delivered to the briar patch is a *trick* that illustrates the agency the weak have to thwart the strong. She aligns herself with the powerful – with racial and socioeconomic elites. Thus, like the fox, she does not understand what is going on.

The Little Selkie: Morrison's revision of "The Little Mermaid"

Tar Baby is nothing less than a black ecocentric revision of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale. When Son leaps from the ship, a water-lady attempts to rescue him from the

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whiteness as the toys Claudia is given in *The Bluest Eye*. And as Son tells the story to Jadine, she interrupts him to warn him not to touch her – as though she is a tar baby who does not want Son stuck to her – and to hit him as though she is the rabbit, and he is the tar baby who has provoked her to blows. (During another of their fights, Jadine "turned over and crawled on all fours to *jump* him again" [italics mine] and then bites him – like a rabbit). Ibid., 263-64.

In fact, Jadine and Son both regard the other as a mere product of life circumstances, as having been constructed, like a tar baby, by black matriarchy and Western civilization respectively: "Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?" Ibid., 269.

[416] Ibid., 288.

disorienting, identity-shaking experience he is about to have on Isle des Chevaliers.[417] Anissa Janine Wardi identifies this creature as a “Mami Wata or Mother of Water spirit” in *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective*. She explains, “Although worshipped throughout Africa, Mami Wata, as her pidgin name implies, is a foreigner, often identified with Europeans and, some conjecture, originating in the Caribbean. Her realm is beneath the sea, and she is an amalgamation of a mermaid and an African water spirit.”[418]

After that, Son lets the waves carry him where they wish. This parallels exactly how, in Andersen’s tale, the mermaid rescues the prince when he falls overboard from his sinking, storm-tossed ship and then lets the waves carry them where they will as she holds his head above water. (The blind slaves also surrender to the current and float where it takes them after their boat sinks). Already, then, we see how Morrison puts a culturally-inflected gloss on her characters’ experiences with nature and nature-spirits as they rehearse the events of the fairy tale.

In Andersen’s story, the mermaid deposits the prince on the beach near a temple. Similarly, Son ends up, though not quite at a temple in a fairy tale kingdom, at the tree of the cross on an island whose place names and lore are monarchal and mythical. The prince only just glimpses his mermaid rescuer upon regaining consciousness and, thus, is unable to tell her from the nearly identical temple acolyte who attends to him immediately upon his waking.

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[417] The connection between the texts is hinted at as early as the novel’s second line which gives the name of the ship Son abandons as the H.M.S. *Stor Konigsgaarten*. The language of the ship’s name is the first wink at *Tar Baby’s* Danish referent.

[418] Wardi, *Water and African American Memory*, 98.

Misidentifying the attendant as his savior, he falls in love with her, which dooms the mermaid, as she is cursed to lose her chance at eternal life if she does not become the prince's bride.

Similarly, though a water-lady attempts to save Son from Isle des Chevaliers, he struggles against her and falls in love with Jadine, the human woman he finds at the tree of the cross. And, in a second revision of the prince's confusion, upon first arriving at L'Arbe de la Croix, Son eats an avocado as he muses on Jadine. But at the end of the text, Son views Alma Estée as a "teenaged avocado" and realizes that "soul" (the English translation of "Alma") and blackness, rather than the materialistic Jadine and her Eurocentricism, are what he ought to revere. The prince's confusion over which love to pursue – over where to locate his salvation -- nearly costs the mermaid eternal life. Similarly, Son's romance with Jade confounds him as to where redemption lies and almost loses him the chance to live forever among blind horsemen.

Fungibility is thus a horror in both "The Little Mermaid" and in *Tar Baby*. In the fairy tale, the mermaid and the temple girl are interchangeable because their *whiteness* – in particular, the pallor of their skin and the blueness of their eyes -- renders them almost identical. Morrison slyly inverts this detail to explore the notion of blackness as transposable.

Thus, Jadine, Ondine, and Sydney treat the islanders as substitutable with each other. And Sydney claims that he comes from blacks who were, according to his way of thinking, civilized at an era when the Africans from whom Son descends had to practice scarification to tell each other apart. (Notably, the African woman Jadine finds so stunning is scarified).

Yet Jadine is nervous about her own possible fungibility, worrying whether "the person [her white boyfriend] wants to marry is me or a black girl" and "if it isn't me he wants, but any

black girl who looks like me, talks and acts like me."[419, 420] And near the end of the novel, Son enrages Jadine by declaring that all black women who valorize whiteness are interchangeable with each other regardless of whatever class privileges some of them might have.

In addition to the dehumanizing possibility of black individuals being considered transposable, the text also explores Jadine, Ondine, and Sydney's horror at the idea that blackness itself is homogenous. While the three may not have access to whiteness as property, they want to be recognized as the possessors of a superior caliber of blackness to Son.

All this anxiety about black fungibility ultimately hearkens not just to the idea that people of African descent are interchangeable with each other but also that they are transposable with green beings, for the claim that blacks were so physically identical as to be exchangeable with each other was put forth as evidence of their subhumanity.[421] This, in turn, led to people of African descent being lumped in with apes and other beings from the natural realm. Racist nineteenth century retellings of tar baby stories played upon this idea. For example, in an antebellum creation story, the Devil turns an ape into a black man as

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[419] Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 48.

[420] This boyfriend, in a nod to the fairy tale, has the name "Ryk" which means "powerful leader" and is short for the Scandinavian moniker "Ryker." Jadine's anxieties at the desires of her Scandinavian powerful leader parallel the ones the mermaid harbors around her Scandinavian fairy tale prince – the frustration at being unable to discern whether he wants to marry her or another extremely *white* girl, and whether it is not her, in particular, he wants, but any white girl who looks like her.

[421] John H. Van Evrie, *Negroes and Negro "Slavery": The First an Inferior Race; The Latter Its Normal Condition* (New York: Van Evrie, Horton & Co., 1861), 106, HATHI TRUST Digital Library.

punishment for the creature refusing to answer his questions.[422] And G. Robert Kemp's 1886 illustration of the tale depicts the tar baby with blackface features.[423, 424]

The novel's dominant natural elements – water and tar – both connect the work to Andersen's narrative. To become human and journey into the prince's realm, the mermaid seeks the help of a witch who lives in a marsh under the sea to which Morrison takes great pains to analogize to *Sein de Vielles* or "Witch's Tit," the tar pit Jadine visits before she travels with Son to Florida. Both the lair and the tar pit are in an ugly forest clearing – a submarine forest in the mermaid's case. The lair is gray and barren while the tar pit has "hardly any color; just greens and browns."[425] Morrison, however, ties her version of this natural space to racial and environmental issues, explaining its existence is the unfortunate consequence of whites tampering with nature by re-routing a river.

Just as the rabbit misperceives the tar baby, so, too, does Janie see the tar pit inaccurately. She compares the landscape to the works of white artists rather than recognizing it as a site of Afro-Caribbean culture. When Son later tries to enlighten her to the black folklore

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[422] Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 106.

[423] Bryan Watson, *The Tar Baby: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 64-65, Project MUSE.

[424] Given the fallibility of the gaze, the blindness of the horsemen is an asset. There is a power in being unseeing and thus impervious to deceptive appearances. There is also value in being unseen and thereby spared from becoming the object of others' misperceptions. The latter is why the blind horsemen cannot bear to be looked at and why the African woman spits at Jadine for appraising her. It is also why, at the end of Andersen's fairy tale, the mermaid, too, becomes invisible.

[425] Ibid., 182.

that surrounds the pit, she demands that he "shut up."[426] The rabbit does not recognize the doll is made of tar, and Jadine does not realize the "lawn of the same dark green the Dutchmen love to use" is tar either.[427]

Whirlpools threaten to pull the mermaid down; Jadine sinks into the pitch. The trees in the sea witch's forest are half animal and half plant with branches that are slithery arms of the sort that appear in the negrophobic reverie Jadine has in Eloe. The forest at Sein de Vielles is both flora and fauna, too – women, rather than fruit, hang in the branches.

Jadine does not see the swamp women as the black culture heroines they are. Rather, she reacts to them as though she were in the European fairy tale. The mermaid recoils from the animal-trees of the sea witch's dwelling because they kill anything their arms catch. In contrast, the swamp women mean Jadine no ill – they want to welcome her and are hurt when she scrambles to get out of the pit and away from them. Just as the fox does not know that the briar patch is not a place of torment but liberty, Jadine does not understand that if she bonds with the tar, rather than considering herself trapped, she would actually be redeemed. Instead, Jadine ends up a tar baby -- when she escapes the pit, she is found, just as in the folktale, coated with pitch, posed among greenery, by the rabbit/Son as he comes up the road.[428]

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[426] Ibid., 184.

[427] Ibid.

[428] During the picnic that takes place the same day that Jadine wanders into the tar pit, she reenacts the mermaid's metamorphosis. She first hides her legs from Son in her skirt where, bound by the cloth, they appear to be a single unit. After a few pages of his fetishizing and begging, she very theatrically reveals her limbs, one then the other, thus emphasizing their separateness. Then, fusing the black folktale with the Danish fairy tale, Jadine warns Son – who

The title of *Tar Baby* explicitly indexes the traditional black story. But reinterpreted in invisible ink alongside it is the European fairy tale. The surprise of finding the two works paired and woven together is one of the benefits of reading in an Ananse-like fashion – that is to say, with an attention to duality, an alertness to tricks, and from a place of hybridity.

Strange Waters

In *Water and African American Memory*, Wardi describes the eponymous element as a paradoxical presence in black literature – a site of both horror and redemption. I agree with her. For example, in his apostrophe to the ships, Douglass associates the seagoing vessels with freedom – even though boats transported African Americans to slavery. Similarly, though water was the means of both transatlantic and domestic slave traffic, in *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass ascribes a curiously liberating power to this element.

As Tom Grant, a mate on the *Creole*, explains to an interlocutor who sees African Americans as innately fearful:

> "Mr. Williams, all that you've now said sounds very well *here* on shore, where, perhaps, you have studied negro character…. It is quite easy to talk of flogging niggers here on

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confessed his love while trying to finagle a glimpse at her lower half – neither to adore her (adhere to her as the rabbit does to the tar baby) nor kill her (as the fox intended to do with the rabbit). (In another allusion to the Ananseɛm, during the picnic, Jadine looks at Son as though he were a dwarf -- the creature Ananse made the tar baby to trap).

Eventually Son and Jadine leave Isle des Chevalier together, first visiting New York City, Jadine's briar patch, then Eloe, Florida, Son's. Both Jadine and the mermaid commence their journeys without bidding their loved ones goodbye, much to their relatives' distress. When the mermaid first rescues the prince from drowning, she considers bringing him to her ocean floor kingdom before realizing this will kill him. She eventually joins him on land but is ultimately no more able to secure a place for herself in the human realm than the prince could live under the sea. Like the mermaid, both Son and Jadine find it agonizing to walk in the other's world. It is unfeasible for either to immigrate.

> land, where you have the sympathy of the community, and the whole physical force of the government, State and national, at your command; and where, if a negro shall lift his hand against a white man, the whole community, with one accord, are ready to unite in shooting him down. I say, in such circumstances, it's easy to talk of flogging negroes and of negro cowardice; but, sir, I deny that the negro is, naturally, a coward, or that your theory of managing slaves will stand the test of *salt* water…. It is one thing to manage a company of slaves on a Virginia plantation, and quite another thing to quell an insurrection on the lonely billows of the Atlantic, where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty. For the negro to act cowardly on shore, may be to act wisely; and I've some doubts whether *you,* Mr. Williams, would find it very convenient were you a slave in Algiers, to raise your hand against the bayonets of a whole government."[429]

As Michael Bennett explains in his essay "Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery," Douglass divides the landscape into rural space, where slaveholders abuse their prey with abandon away from the censuring gaze of their peers, and urban space, where social opprobrium serves as – somewhat of -- a check on savagery. But Douglass also divides the environment into land, where the white majority, organized by institutional forces, can act in concert to put down slave rebellion, and sea, where contests between slaves and slaveholders are less unfair because white supremacists are isolated from their support systems. However, in addition to the logistical reasons that the ocean emboldens African slaves, Douglass offers a psychic one: He claims that the marine breeze empowers and inspires blacks.

Accordingly, though the phrase "strange waters" in *Tar Baby* signifies the Middle Passage, water, like the book's other liquid natural resource, tar, is nevertheless sympathetic to blacks. As I noted earlier, the water tries to save Son from almost losing himself on Isle des

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[429] Douglass, *The Heroic Slave*, 44.

Chevalier, even fastening a bracelet of itself about his ankles. Similarly, the tar pit attempts to rescue Jadine from her Eurocentricism and superficiality by clinging fast to her ankles.

Water is important to the text for an additional reason. Although not obvious, the story of the blind horsemen is Morrison's revision of an aqua-centric historical event known as Igbo Landing.

In 1803, Igbo slaves who had just finished their journey across the Middle Passage were being transported from Savannah, Georgia to St. Simon's Island by boat. The Igbos revolted and seized control of the ship, prompting the whites on board to jump into the waters – where they perished. To avoid recapture, the slaves then committed mass suicide, drowning themselves in the swamp[430] that would come to be known as Igbo Landing – or so says a contemporary account by white overseer Roswell King.[431]

However, when a Federal Writers Project scribe interviewed Wallace Quarterman, an elderly African American man, in the 1930s, Quarterman explained that his community understood that the slaves had not drowned but had transformed into buzzards and flown back to Africa. This mythological take on Igbo Landing has inspired many African American authors

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[430] Given that the swamp women are the consorts of the blind horsemen, Morrison's depiction of Sein de Vielle as a swamp is perhaps another attempt to *marry* her novel to the tale of Igbo Landing.

[431] "Ebos Landing," History & Archaeology, New Georgia Encyclopedia, last modified February 28, 2017, http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/ebos-landing.

to retell the story of the Africans who soared away from slavery – including Morrison in *The Song of Solomon*.[432]

But there is yet another version of the tale. In that incarnation, the Igbos waded into a creek where they sang, “The water spirit brought us. The water spirit will take us home.”[433] According to this iteration, the slaves were not trying to attempt suicide. Rather, they drowned inadvertently in an attempt to walk the creek’s floor back to Africa.[434] Whether the slaves died intentionally or not, over two centuries later, members of the local community say the spirits of the Igbos continue to haunt the site of their demise.[435] However, still another version of the story insists the slaves did not drown – rather, they successfully walked *over* the ocean back to their homeland.[436]

There are numerous links between Igbo Landing and *Tar Baby*. First, the water spirit referenced in the song could be Morrison’s “water-lady.” Second, the iteration of the story that describes the Africans walking atop the ocean evokes *the* Son who, in the Bible, strides over waves – and, thus, Morrison’s Son, as well. Third, the Igbos haunt the Landing just as the

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[432] Ibid.

[433] “Glynn County Historic Resources Survey Report,” Robert A. Ciucevich, M.H.P. Quatrefoil Historic Preservation Consulting, last modified July 2009, https://www.glynncounty.org/DocumentCenter/Home/View/9254.

[434] Terri L. Snyder, "Suicide, Slavery, and Memory in North America," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 1 (June 2010): 43*,* https://doi.org/10.2307/jahist/97.1.39*.*

[435] “Slave legend draws people for two-day remembrance in coastal Georgia,” The Associated Press, Articles about SSAAHC, last modified 2016, http://www.ssiheritagecoalition.org/articles-about-ssaahc.html.

[436] Linda S. Watts, *Encyclopedia of American Folklore* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2007), 211.

horsemen haunt the hills. Still another historical detail provides a sickening link between Igbo Landing and *Tar Baby*: All Son's talk of waste and "shit" is paralleled by the fact a sewage plant was built at Igbo's Landing in the 1940s.[437]

In *Tar Baby* and *Song of Solomon*, as in real life, the mythical story is kept alive by the descendants of the peers of the supernatural Africans.[438] And both these Morrison novels end with a young man known by a nickname, aided by a mature woman with an atypical body (eternally lactating breasts and lack of a navel for Thérèse and Pilate, respectively) becoming heir to the mythical Igbos – Milkman turns into a flying African and Son morphs into a blind horseman.

The paratactic verse sung by the Igbo "The water spirit brought us. The water spirit will take us home" encapsulates the paradox of water in African American literature. The waters surrounding Isle des Chevalier are strange not just in the sense of being unfamiliar but because they are the mechanism of both atrocity and salvation.

Ah'll Be Gone: Morrison's Trip through the African American Canon[439]

Son and Jadine's journey to Florida represents Morrison taking the text on a figurative excursion to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, set in the same state.

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[437] New Georgia Encyclopedia, "Ebos Landing."

[438] The Associated Press, "Slave legend draws people for two-day remembrance in coastal Georgia."

[439] Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; repr., New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 115. (Before traveling with Tea Cake to Jacksonville, Janie warns her friend Phoeby, "Some of dese mornin's and it won't be long, you gointuh wake up callin' me and Ah'll be gone."

Hurston uses protagonist Janie's voyage to Jacksonville with her lover Tea Cake to show how Janie rejects the trappings of privilege in favor of her original loves – passionate, authentic living and the environment. Describing her relationship with Tea Cake to a friend Janie says, "Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game."[440] In contrast, Morrison uses Jadine's trip to highlight the young woman's materialism and ecophobia. The author creates enough similarities between her own text and Hurston's to make the allusion clear and but endows her novel with sufficient contrasting counterpoints for it to serve as an inversion of Janie and Tea Cake's travels.

To begin with, like Son, Tea Cake is a handsome vagrant known by his nickname. Tea Cake's real name is the rather arboreal "Verigible" Woods. ("Verigible" is a made-up moniker that seems to come from the Latin *viridis* for green). Similarly, Son's real name is eventually revealed to be "William Green."[441]

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[440] Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 114.

[441] Jadine's positioning to Janie is signified by the similarity of their names, too – one letter and transliteration apart from each other – as well as by Jadine's physical appearance. Janie is a light-skinned woman with non-Afro textured hair and a phenotype that reflects her mixed-race heritage. Similarly, Gideon references Jadine's yellow – rather than brown or black – skin tone; her hair is naturally straight; and her phenotypically multiracial appearance is signaled by Margaret who compares her to Eurydice in the film *Black Orpheus*. That character is played by actress Marpessa Dawn who was of African and Filipino descent.

Furthermore, Son's friends suspect the beautiful Jadine may have been purchased by Son like a Cadillac. And, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, Janie is considered one of her husband's possessions: When Janie and her second husband Jody Starks arrive to a new town, a character thanks Jody for "all dat you have seen fit tu bring amonst us—yo' belov-ed wife, yo' store, yo' land--." Henry Louis

But the two men's lovers are strikingly different. For while Janie views her life in an impoverished rural agricultural community with Tea Cake as pleasantly social and fulfilling, anti-pastoralist Jadine concludes, "Eloe was rotten and more boring than ever. All that Southern small-town country romanticism was a lie, a joke, kept secret by people who could not function elsewhere."[442]

As Jadine's contempt for country life suggests, the two characters have wildly dissimilar attitudes to nature. Janie experiences an orgasm watching bees sup the nectar of a pear tree, aroused by the green world. She would have swooned at Son with his hair like "foliage and… the crown of a deciduous tree" and his "woodsy voice."[443] But Jadine experiences orgasm

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Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 189.

The two characters have similar backgrounds, too. Janie is an orphan reared by her grandmother, a domestic who lives in the backyard of her white employers. Jadine is an orphan reared by her aunt and uncle who reside on the property of their white employers. When Tea Cake meets Janie, widowhood has just freed her from the thrall of Jody, a mayor who views himself – and is alluded to by the text -- as godlike. And when Son encounters Jadine, she, too, is in the kingdom of a man who poses as a God -- not Mayor Starks but Emperor Valerian.

Furthermore, after the heroine of *Their Eyes* becomes disillusioned with her first marriage, the narrator notes, "Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman." Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 25. After Jadine's relationship with Son concludes, Jadine reflects, "No more dreams of safety. No more. Perhaps that was the thing—the thing Ondine was saying. A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams." Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 290. But before Jadine's love affair ends, she and Son, like Tea Cake and Janie, engage in a violent altercation that only increases their ardor for each other.

[442] Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 250.

[443] Ibid., 181.

“nestling” into a sealskin cloak, nature that has been subjected to violence and transformed into a good.[444] And she refuses to heed the narrator’s silent encouragement to couple with the one of the tar pit’s trees.

Yes, the narrator of *Tar Baby* interacts with Jadine. In *Their Eyes*, the narrator’s consciousness and Janie’s merge as the story unfolds, manifested by the chronicler transitioning from standard English to Janie’s African American vernacular.[445] In the tar pit scene, a similar merging almost occurs – Jadine, for a moment, takes on the biophilic perspective of the raconteur.

At first, Jadine calmly plans to get out of the tar pit in which she is trapped by counting to fifty repeatedly and, at the end of each count, using a tree to pull herself farther out of the muck. Then the narrator gets inside her head, invades her consciousness. It directs Jadine to avoid getting distracted from her counting by focusing on engaging in lovemaking with the tree. Then, the free indirect discourse that reveals Jadine’s strategy succumbs to the second person imperatives of the narrator.

“[Jadine] had only to hang on until Son returned and shout—fifteen minutes, no more. And she would spend it edging up the tree that wanted to dance. No point in looking down at the slime, it would make her think of worms or snakes or crocodiles. Count. Just count.”[446] At

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[444] Ibid., 112.

[445] Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explained this during a class discussion.

[446] Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 182.

this point, the reader is still in Jadine's head. The tree wants to dance, but she is not interested. She sees the plant only as an inanimate object that can keep her from sinking into the tar. But then the narrator's perspective takes over.

"Don't sweat or you'll lose your partner, the tree."[447] The reader is alerted to the transition because it is the ecophilic narrator that would refer to the tree as Jadine's partner – not Jadine. "Cleave together like lovers. Press together lihhke man and wife…."[448]

Janie frames the act of bees drinking from the pear tree as the consummation of a marriage, which, in turn, is how the narrator (mis)identifies Jadine's coupling with the tree. This is indicated not just by the "man and wife" language but also by the insistence that Jadine form a lifelong bond i.e. "*never* let [ithe tree] go" [italics mine].[449]

I discussed how Janie is aroused by the sight of the bees and the pear blossoms. Here, the narrator, almost as though it were Janie's avatar, goes into ecstasy beholding the vision of Jadine clinging to the swamp tree. The percussive repetition of sentence after imperative sentence begun with words that begin with hard "c's" -- "Count," "Cleave," "Cling," "Creep," "Caress" -- mimics the rhythmic panting of a fevered lover. The chronicler cannot stop herself from piling on command after command as though caught in the throes of passion. The language climaxes:

> Cling to your partner, hang on to him and never let him go. Creep up on him a millimeter at a time, slower than the slime and cover him like the moss. Caress his bark

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[447] Ibid.

[448] Ibid., 183.

[449] Ibid.

> and finger his ridges. Sway when he sways and shiver with him too. Whisper your numbers from one to fifty into the parts that have been lifted away and left tender skin behind.[450]

Then the spell breaks. The paragraph's last sentence is "Love him and trust him with your life because you are up to your kneecaps in rot." The perspective shifts within the line. The command is the narrator's; the denigration of the tar that the narrator tells us in the very next paragraph, "hold[s] together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses's crib" is entirely Jadine.[451]

Once the narrator loses control of Jadine's consciousness, the swamp women realize what is going on – that Jadine is not, in fact, coupling with the tree but merely "fighting to get away from them."[452] Janie seeks communion with nature and the black community, but Jadine holds herself separate from the environment and other African Americans alike. This disunity is symbolized by her ecophobia's disruption of the merging of her consciousness with the narrator's. After, as before, sometimes the narrator editorializes, sometimes third person omniscient is used, and sometimes free indirect discourse is employed, but never again do we encounter the dramatic syncretism exhibited in this passage.

Janie and Jadine's divergent attitudes are informed by their first discoveries of intercourse. Unlike the pleasant sight of bees drinking from calyxes that Janie witnesses, Jadine sees a female dog unceremoniously mounted by a male one and then beaten for it. But

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[450] Ibid.

[451] Ibid.

[452] Ibid.

halcyon sights such as the one Janie gazes upon are possible in an environment that hosts lusty bees. In contrast, the narrator of *Tar Baby* makes a point of telling the reader, numerous times, how unnatural and lazy the bees of Isle des Chevalier are. But the differences do not stop there.

The most iconic moments of *Their Eyes* are upended in *Tar Baby*. Tea Cake's wooing of Janie with a moonlight fishing date is one of the most famous amorous scenes in African American literature, and, at the novel's end, Janie imagines the act of appreciating her richly experiential life as drawing in a full fishnet. But Janie derides the people of Eloe as "romanticiz[ing]" a locale she sees as pathetic so as to provide themselves with "[a]n excuse to fish."[453] And, as discussed earlier, she conceptualizes her act of examining what repulses her about the kind of community Janie loves as reeling in, then cutting open, a fish.[454]

Similarly, Janie uses the horizon to symbolize the expansive life she finally experiences once she takes up with Tea Cake. But when Jadine accompanies Son to Eloe, she is unnerved by the blackness of the country night, a darkness so pure it prevents her from being able to

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[453] Ibid., 259.

[454] In another similarity between the two books, Jody Starks, Janie's materialistic second husband, frequently uses the exclamation "I god." Jadine, equally materialistic, derisively interjects "God" when she is frustrated with Eloe.

perceive “a line between earth and sky.”[455] (Jadine’s horror of this darkness is, of course, a metaphor for her negrophobia).[456]

Thus, instead of the pairing of an unmaterialistic woman bound to materialistic men that readers encounter in *Their Eyes*, in *Tar Baby*, an unmaterialistic man takes up with a materialistic woman. Other characters attempt to make Janie, a vital, biophilic, young woman,

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[455] Ibid., 251.

[456] In a further contrast, Janie was satisfied only with Tea Cake, not with her first husband, a property owner, nor with Jody, a mayor and successful entrepreneur. But Jadine urges Son to continue his formal education and begin a professional career.

The two characters do share a macabre similarity, though. Janie kills Tea Cake in self-defense when Tea Cake, driven mad by rabies, is about to shoot her in the deluded belief that Janie has been unfaithful to him. Jadine kills Son, too, but only figuratively.

When Son tells her his version of the tar baby story, Jadine repeatedly interrupts to insist she is going to murder Son. Just moments later, Son finds photographs Jadine has taken of Eloe and its people – photographs which, despite her disdain for the town, were not meant to be degrading. Son comes to see his community through her eyes and, heartbroken, thinks himself to be recognizing, finally, the worthlessness of all that he had cherished. He dies a figurative death when he loses his values.

Photography provides further links between *Tar Baby* and *Their Eyes*. At the beginning of *Eyes*, Janie’s lack of a developed self-identity is signaled by her inability, as a little girl, to recognize herself in a photograph. Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, 185. Similarly, Son’s loss of identity is symbolized by the passage in which he looks at the pictures Jadine took of Eloe and its people and finds them unrecognizable as the place and individuals he once cherished. (The text posits the camera as being as susceptible to Eurocentricity as any human. It can capture the beauty of Jadine, but not of the African woman or the people of Eloe).

The mentally ill Tea Cake ultimately expires from being unable to see things as they are (the same flaw that traps the rabbit). Similarly, when Son looks at the photographs, his gaze is sacrificed for Jadine’s and he, too, views the world in a distorted fashion. Son is converted to Jadine’s perspective after he literally looks at existence through her eyes. Thus, Eurocentrism functions as rabies or mental illness in *Tar Baby*.

into a tar baby: Nanny wants Janie to spend her life displaying herself on a porch like a porcelain doll on a shelf, and Jody silences her when the townspeople invite her to make a speech. Her *natural* self is constantly stifled by society's mores. She becomes as seemingly inanimate and insensate as a figurine: "Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels."[457] "She got so she received all things with the stolidness of the earth which soaks up urine and perfume with the same indifference."[458] The novel recounts her quest to regain the fullness of her humanity by journeying, as Gates puts it, "from object to subject" by engaging in the "project of finding a voice."[459]

In contrast, Jadine is a negrophobic, biophobic doll that other characters attempt to make into a woman. But Jadine, true to her preferences for chocolate, sealskin, and rhinestone tiaras over cocao, seals, and braided crowns would rather be a product than a natural being. Indeed, she is decidedly unnatural: she rejects filial piety, declining the role of devoted daughter (to her aunt and uncle who parented her), which, Ondine asserts, prevents her from maturing into a woman. This refusal to grow up traps her in a doll-like stasis. Unlike Janie who tests and ultimately rejects Nannie's values, determining that everyone must figure out life for

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[457] Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 76.

[458] Ibid., 77.

[459] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., afterword to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), 196.

herself, Jadine complacently accepts the Eurocentric mores Valerian fostered in her, content to remain his creation rather than to strive to attain psychic autonomy.[460]

In still another textual conjunction, Son's journey ends ambiguously as Janie's does. The reader can no more say whether Son literally becomes a blind horseman than he or she can conclude whether when Janie "pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net" and "called in her soul to come and see" she is meditating or dying from the rabies she may have contracted when Tea Cake, in his madness, bit her.[461] But both endings return the reader to where their respective

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[460] Son, not Jadine, is the true analogue to Janie. Both characters – along with Andersen's mermaid – suffer from not being able to tell their visions of their lovers from the real thing just as the rabbit cannot tell the tar baby from a real child. Thus, Janie's "image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams." Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 72.

Similarly, the mermaid falls in love first with a marble statue of a young man that came from a shipwreck and then with the prince who resembles it. Just as the rabbit treats the tar baby like an actual child, the mermaid embraces the statue as though he were a human. Later, upon meeting the unconscious prince, the mermaid kisses and caresses him, comparing his inert form to the sculpture. Alas, when he awakens and becomes an autonomous being rather than just the object of her gaze, he disappoints her.

And Son falls in love with the image of Jadine in her modeling pictures. Once he has sighted them, Jadine is only able to get him to look at her again by promising to be as still as the photographs -- by making herself into a doll. Son compares Jadine to her image, evaluating the pictures and the still Jadine against the Jadine he spied on as she slept. And just as the mermaid projects her fantasies onto the unconscious body of the prince, Son, remembers how, as he watched Jadine slumber, he tried to "insert his own dreams into her." Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 119. Jadine is literally "something [Son] had grabbed up to drape [his] dreams over." Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 72.

[461] Ibid., 193.

stories began: at sea, represented by the fishnet in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Son's learning to walk, newly blind, on the beach in *Tar Baby*.

The structure of *Tar Baby* showcases yet another inversion: Gates notes in *The Signifying Monkey* that the opening of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* alludes to Douglass' apostrophe to the ships. The still enslaved Douglass, watching boats on Chesapeake Bay, laments to them that they are unmoored and free while he is a slave. Hurston revises the apostrophe, beginning her novel by musing that distant ships contain men's dreams, which sometimes come true by settling into the harbor of reality and sometimes do not, while women simply behave as though their dreams *are* true.[462]

Tar Baby opens with a scene of ships as well. But if ships and water are the site of dreams and freedom, then Son's abandoning his shipboard job to swim ashore to Dominique represents a journey *away* from liberty. Not only do the hands of a water-lady push Son away from the land, but "a bracelet of water" – the opposite of the metal shackles that bound slaves – twice wraps around Son's ankles in an attempt prevent him from swimming to the beach, to captivity.[463] Son is not the enslaved Douglass who looks at the ships and wishes to be free. Rather, he is analogous to the slaves brought to the island, carried by ship from freedom to captivity. And just as the text describes the blind horsemen's time in the Middle Passage as floating blindly in strange waters, when Son stows away on a boat in his attempt to reach

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[462] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 170.

[463] Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 4.

Queen of France, during the journey to Isle des Chevalier, he finds himself hiding in a closet so dark that he is unable to see.

No Give Up, Maan! a novel published by black Columbian Hazel Robinson Abrahams opens in this tradition as well:

> Blacks and whites—in those times, slaves and slave-masters—accustomed to scan the horizon every time they glanced up, noticed the presence of some renegade clouds which seemed to flirt with the sudden stillness that accompanied a somewhat offensive silence. This phenomenon, hitherto unknown on the island, ever disturbed the oily smooth surface of the ocean….[464]

Thus, these marine beginnings always pose dichotomies – between free ships and slaves in Douglass' memoirs, between men and women in *Their Eyes*, and between "blacks and whites… slaves and slave-masters" in *No Give Up, Maan!*

In Abrahams' novel, the anomalous horizon signals that a great storm is coming. Like the denizens of the everglades whose eyes "watch God" during the hurricane, the slaves "witness Mother Nature's skillfulness."[465] Then, in a possible allusion to Son being shoved by the hand of a water-lady, the slaves are "hurled inside [a hut] forcefully, as if by an unseen hand that was trying to protect them." Next, like both Son who, after being pushed by a mysterious limb, proceeds on in the blackness of a ship's closet and the slaves who "had floated in strange water blind," "in complete darkness [in the hut], [the slaves] gave vent to their emotions."[466]

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[464] Hazel Robinson Abrahams, *No Give Up, Maan!* (2002; repr., Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 2010), 243, http://babel.banrepcultural.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p17054coll7/id/3.

[465] Ibid., 246.

[466] Ibid.

Just as Son's journey recalls the Middle Passage, so, too, does the shadowy building remind the slaves of "the hold of the ship in which they had once embarked on their perilous journey to slavery."[467]

The slaves regard the storm with the ambivalence towards water Wardi describes as typical of African American literature. For example, "the first drops of rain fell like tears of frustration, as if sympathizing with the slaves." But, "The wind grew stronger by the second, and the nostalgia that possessed the slaves now became panic." The slaves as well as "dogs, pigs, and other domestic animals" "instinctively made for the main house," taking shelter beneath it.[468] Abrahams' description of "[s]laves and animals alike… grouped together in fright" recalls Douglass' invocation of slaves "leveled at a blow with horses, sheep, horned cattle, and swine!"[469] It also invokes Douglass' assertion that "the grand aim of slavery… is to reduce man to a level with the brute."[470] The slaves in *No Give Up, Maan!* are literally a level below their master, on the same physical plain with livestock.

Then the novel seems to invoke *Tar Baby* once more by referencing "the end of the world." But while that occasion is heralded in Morrison's novel by the ecologically-destructive construction of winter houses, that is to say, by the triumph of the whites over nature, in

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[467] Ibid., 246-47.

[468] Ibid., 247.

[469] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 128.

[470] Ibid., 32.

Abrahams' book, the event that makes slaveholder Richard Bennet wonder whether "the end of the world had come" is the storm flooding his home-- the triumph of nature over a white.[471]

Though *Tar Baby* is inspired by and seems to have inspired the works of other authors, it ends with a gesture towards another Morrison novel: *The Bluest Eye*. For what jolts Son to reclaim his original values is the sight of Alma Estée, a young island woman who used to assist Ondine at L'Arbe de la Croix:

> in a wig the color of dried blood. Her sweet face, her midnight skin mocked and destroyed by the pile of synthetic dried blood on her head. It was all mixed up. But he could have sorted it out if she had just stood there like a bougainvillea in a girdle, like a baby jaguar with lipstick on, like an avocado with earrings, and let him remove it.[472]

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[471] *Tar Baby* also invokes another African American novel: Consider the stream of insults Sydney directs at Son early in the young man's tenure at L'Arbe de la Croix: "You had a job, you chucked it. You got in some trouble, you say, so you just ran off. You hide, you live in secret, underground…." The sentence ends with "surface when you caught," but until that point, Sydney could either be speaking of Son or the unnamed protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 163. And, as the protagonist of *Invisible Man* informs the reader at the beginning of the book, he does not plan to stay underground (as though buried in the grave) but to rise again like (like both Son and the Son) and take future action.

The conflation of Son with the hero of *Invisible Man* continues when the narrator notes that Son tries to appease Sydney by "calling him Mr. Childs and sir and allowing in gesture as how he was a reprobate" and otherwise being obsequious. Ibid., 164. This recalls the famous advice the grandfather gives the protagonist of *Invisible Man* about how to handle whites: "I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open...." Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1947; repr., New York: Random House, 1995), 16. Sydney, during the same series of insults that I just quoted, uses a Eurocentric standard to compare African Americans like himself to blacks like Son. It is perhaps for that reason that Son feels he should employ a strategy designed to handle whites when interacting with Sydney.

[472] Morrison, *Tar Baby,* 299.

Alma Estée is compared favorably to nature – to the midnight sky, a bougainvillea, a baby jaguar, and an avocado while the wig is associated with violence, artifice, and commodities: dried blood, the synthetic, a girdle, lipstick, and earrings (such as those modeled by Jadine in an advertisement that intrigues Son). Like the baby seals, clubbed in the head, that are the source of Jadine's coat, Alma Estée is a young black creature who seems to be bleeding from the scalp.

Alma Estée's desire for red hair immediately makes the reader think Pecola Breedlove's longing for blue eyes. The text links the two girls even more subtly, though. When Son is in the avocado tree, his hand brushes what he bizarrely mistakes for the "tight-to-breaking breast of a pubescent girl three months pregnant" only to belatedly realize what his fingers grazed was fruit – a "teenaged avocado."[473] Alma Estée is *Tar Baby's* teenaged avocado – being both an adolescent and an "avocado with earrings," but Pecola is the pregnant pubescent girl. Son reaches from the pages of the book he is in into another to touch Pecola, eliding the two characters.

But the two novels conclude in strikingly divergent ways. *The Bluest Eye* ends with Claudia lamenting that Pecola can never heal from all she has suffered. "It's too late….," she insists. "It's much, much, much too late." But in the final pages of *Tar Baby*, when Margaret talks to Ondine about the possibility of the two of them repairing their friendship, Margaret insists, "It's not too late." When she seeks affirmation, asking, "Is it too late, Ondine?" Ondine replies, "Almost…. Almost" which, of course, though negatively phrased, is not the same as

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[473] Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 135.

"yes" as in "Yes, it is indeed too late."[474] The answer is ambiguous, its vagueness allowing for the possibility of hope.

And given the miraculous impacts of Son's journey on the power dynamics between Valerian, Margaret, Sydney, Ondine, and even between whites and nature, the reader can hold on to hope for Alma Estée. Perhaps it is not too late for her to be saved. Perhaps one day she will fling off her wig and bloom as a bougainvillea again.

In the Introduction, I spoke of how it is the green qualities of the works of black authors that helps aggregates their writings into a genre. In this section, we see how ecocentric tropes get passed down through generations of African American literature from the nineteenth century to the present day.

Green Like Me: Nature and the Black Identity

In Charles Chesnutt's story "The Goophered Grapevine," Henry, like Adam, is condemned to death for eating forbidden fruit. And, as though he had received the curse of Ham, Henry's phenotype changes to reflect his servitude. As I explained in Chapter Two, his oppression turns from sociological as biological as he literally becomes a natural good.

The imagery of the tale is reminiscent of the famous painting of the eighteenth century biracial beauty Dido Elizabeth Belle. In the portrait, Belle is portrayed with her white cousin Elizabeth Murray. Murray is seated with a book in her hand, the object symbolizing civilization, her repose indicating hers is the life of the mind rather than of bodily toil. In contrast, Belle flits across the canvas. There is no text in her hand. She runs, rather than sits to read, portrayed, in

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[474] Ibid., 241.

accordance with negrophobic racial stereotypes, not as a thinker but as the sort of purely physical being meant to be a drawer of water and hewer of wood. And she carries fruit – shiny pears, ripe mangoes, and grapes.[475]

For if Murray is culture, then Belle is nature. Pearls hang in her ears and about her throat, but these objects are as ineffective at changing her status as Jadine's sealskin coat is. As Belle jogs past, Murray puts a hand to her cousin's waist, pushing her along, urging her black relative to carry on with her frolicking and stop distracting Murray from her reading.[476] That ivory hand is a symbol for all the forces that have sought to shove people of African descent out of the family of reasoning humans and into the realm of nature.

The tar baby is an incarnation of the not quite people into which Henry morphs and Belle is avatar – humanlike yet a natural object. It is a symbol for the trope of African Americans' mutability into green things. The tar baby represents the sinister side of blacks' connection to the environment – Schoolteacher directing his nephews to list Sethe's animal and human characteristics in *Beloved* or the chokecherry tree scar beaten onto her back.

But there is another aspect to African Americans' relationship to the environment. In Morrison's corpus, sometimes blacks have trees brutally whipped onto their flesh, but, sometimes, they wondrously discover trees and other elements of nature inside themselves. Consider Sula's musing on Ajax in the eponymous novel:

> Oh yes, skin black. Very black. So black that only a steady careful rubbing with steel wool would remove it, and as it was removed there was the glint of gold leaf and under

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[475] I owe some of my interpretation of this painting to a discussion with Manushag Powell.

[476] Ibid.

> the gold leaf the cold alabaster and deep, deep down under the cold alabaster more black only this time the black of warm loam.[477]

Beneath Ajax's skin is precious metal, fine stone, and rich lifegiving earth. His associations with nature render him not subhuman but superhuman.

Or think of Pauline Breedlove's intimacy with her husband Cholly. In her loving gaze, his muscles are "peach pit stones"; his veins, "swollen rivers"; his palms, "granite." Passion sends her brain "curl[ing] up like wilted leaves." She experiences lovemaking as having a rainbow inside of her made of berry purple, lemon yellow, and june bugs' iridescent green. Even the sound of the bed springs reminds her of crickets.[478]

It is this sort of connection to environment – one not of debasement but transcendence – that the narrator hopes for Jadine during the tar pit scene. For if *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* find the nature in humans, *Tar Baby* shows us the humans in nature – water-ladies, swamp women, and the amorous, sentient tree the narrator encourages Jadine to couple with in the tar pit.[479]

"Whisper your numbers from one to fifty into the parts that have been lifted away and left tender skin behind," the narrator urges. For, according to the chronicler, just beneath the tree's bark is human flesh. In Morrison's works, there is humanity in the natural and nature in humans – black and green are one. They are united, but not because Murray's fair hand is

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[477] Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Penguin Group, 1982), 135.

[478] Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 127-29.

[479] When engaging in green-inflected romance with Cholly, Pauline Breedlove imagines "without touching him" the sensation of the "ridges" of Cholly's veins on the "tips of my fingers." Ibid., 129. In an echo of this, the narrator encourages Jadine to "finger [the tree's] ridges." Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 183.

shoving folk of African descent into the sphere of flora and fauna. For though the violence of subjection can force an ecological equality between blacks and nature, love and reverence can reveal an edifying cross-species unity.

Consider the third person pronouns the narrator of *Tar Baby* uses for the tree: "him," "his," and "he."[480] They recall the pronouns of Clifton's [being property once myself]:

> being property once myself
> I have a feeling for it,
> that's why I can talk
> about environment.
> what wants to be a tree,
> ought to be he can be it.
> same thing for other things.
> same thing for men.[481]

The referent for the first "it" is "property." "What," "he," and the second "it" all refer to trees, acknowledging a distinction between natural "things" and "men" yet also manifesting a slippage that that grants personhood to green beings. A deranged version of a worldview that considers blacks and nature as one renders blacks "it." The inversion of this perspective, represented by the trope of non-human personhood, dignifies a tree as "he."

These transcendent moments are among the treasures Morrison's corpus and other black works have to offer ecoliterature. At once ecocentric and Afrocentric, they invite readers to envision radical and righteous connections between racially marginalized people and the environment. If there is a moral to *Tar Baby*, then, it is perhaps:

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[480] Ibid.

[481] Clifton, "[being property once myself]," 2.

what wants to be a tree woman or blind horseman
ought to be (s)he can be it.
same thing for other things.
same thing for men.

Chapter Five

Black Death and Green Afterlife

I remained with Mr. Covey one year, (I cannot say I lived with him,)….[482]

Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me…. My natural elasticity was crushed; my intellect languished; the disposition to read departed; the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute![483]

Frederick Douglass

Introduction

Frederick Douglass declares "the grand aim of slavery… is to reduce man to a level with the brute." Toni Morrison's corpus, which contains novels whose settings range from colonial America to the country's present day, not only illustrates Douglass' claim but goes even further to depict an enduring national project aimed at turning blacks green. In *Home*, Morrison limns the anatomy of this ambitious plan, positing that African Americans are first condemned to social death and then resurrected to lead verdant lives. The initial step of this procedure is brought about through the cooperation of the legal and medical systems.

Home uses African American Vernacular English to frame society as condemning blacks to a living death. I contextualize Morrison's depiction of America as predatory by offering first a legal, then a medical history of the country, linking the latter to both gothic and Native

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[482] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 157.

[483] Ibid., 160.

American traditions. I then demonstrate how Morrison's corpus serves as a third, fictional history.

Having demystified black death, I next move on to my discussion of green afterlife. In *Home*, as well as other works by both Morrison and other African American authors, black people are divested of their humanity and transformed into figurative or literal animals or plants. But, in a hopeful turn, Morrison revises *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to allow *Home's* protagonist Frank Money to recoup his manhood. This hails a discussion of how personhood is – or is not – viewed and performed in this novel and other works of black literature. From this flows a discussion of how an uncritical gaze can cost characters humanity.

I then take up the subject of intersectionality, looking at how, based on their relative privilege, characters are able to socially kill and verdantly resurrect each other in *Home* and other African American works. I also examine how characters who understand intersectionality are empowered to reclaim their humanity.

Interlock(e)ing Law and Medicine

Black Korean War veteran Frank Money, confined to a hospital following one of his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder-induced rages, muses in *Home's* first pages that before beginning his journey to rescue his sister Cee – whom he has learned is in some sort of unspecified trouble – he must acquire a pair of shoes:

> Walking anywhere in winter without shoes would guarantee his being arrested and back in the ward until he could be sentenced for vagrancy. Interesting law, vagrancy, meaning standing outside or walking without clear purpose anywhere….[484] Better than

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[484] Uncannily and tragically, Morrison, publishing in 2012, speaks prophetically to the persistent irrationality the sight of black men walking while "improperly" attired can arouse in legal

> most, he knew that being out-side wasn't necessary for legal or illegal disruption. You could be inside, living in your own house for years, and still, men with or without badges but always with guns could force you, your family, your neighbors to pack up and move—with or without shoes.[485]

As Douglas Blackmon notes in *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black People in America from the Civil War to World War II*:

> Vagrancy, the offense of a person not being able to prove at a given moment that he or she is employed, was a new and flimsy concoction dredged up from legal obscurity at the end of the nineteenth century by the state legislatures of Alabama and other southern states. It was capriciously enforced by local sheriffs and constables, adjudicated by mayors and notaries public, recorded haphazardly or not at all in court records, and, most tellingly in a time of massive unemployment among all southern men, was reserved almost exclusively for black men.[486]

The phrase "with or without," repeated twice in Frank's cogitations, is important. Those three words set up a dichotomy, and the two groups of people to whom the phrase applies are, in turn, dichotomized by race. Each "with or without" calls attention to a particular breed of the law's indifference.

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officials and their proxies. Trayvon Martin, an African American teenager walking through his neighborhood in a hooded sweater, would die in February 2012 at the hands of gun-toting white Hispanic neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman. Lizette Alvarez, "A Florida Law Gets Scrutiny After a Teenager's Killing," *New York Times*, March 20, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/21/us/justice-department-opens-inquiry-in-killing-of-trayvon-martin.html. Martin's choice of clothing was cited as suspect in public discourse. Erik Wempel, "Fox News's Bill O'Reilly blames Trayvon Martin's death on hoodie," *The Washington Post*, September 16, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2013/09/16/fox-newss-bill-oreilly-blames-trayvon-martins-death-on-hoodie/.

[485] Toni Morrison, *Home* (New York: Vintage International, 2012), 9.

[486] Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: the Re-Enslavement of Black People in America from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 1.

With respect to whites, the state does not care whether Americans of European descent possess an emblem conferring legal authority as it considers pale skin itself to be a "badge" of such power. Conversely, when it comes to blacks, the law is unconcerned with whether government-sanctioned thievery forces African Americans into "crime" – if, indeed, vagrancy can be considered such – since it seeks to elide blackness with deviance anyway. Blacks compelled outside without shoes do not face punishment for their mens rea (guilty mind) or actus rea (voluntary physical act) – the two components of transgression -- but simply for their melanin. It is therefore unnecessary for Frank to use the terms "Negro" or "white" in his contemplations; he refers only to "men" and "you, your family, your neighbors" because merely describing the parties' agency or lack of it is enough to inform the reader of their colors.

In *Home*, it is a crime for blacks to be vagrants, yet they can be forced into that state not only through de facto legal ethnic cleansing, but also, as we are later shown, through the unethical denial of access to housing: A black character, Lily, is deprived of the right to rent an apartment in a particular neighborhood by an error-ridden rule that reads, "No part of said property hereby conveyed shall ever be used or occupied by an Hebrew or by any person of the Ethiopian, Malay or Asiactic race excepting only employ-ees in domestic service."[487] This stricture is an example of the restrictive covenants barring non-whites from purchasing or

[487] Morrison, *Home*, 73.

occupying real estate that were not struck down until 1948 when the Supreme Court ruled them illegal in *Shelley v. Kraemer*.[488]

Home, then, depicts a society in which policymakers have abandoned the idea of law as a means of upholding justice and hijacked the legal system so that it instead serves the goal of sustaining caste. To create the contradictory black condition of living death, the state must construct oxymoronically unjust law. Indeed, the fact that guns and whiteness, rather than badges, are the tools necessary to facilitate "disruption" exposes such displacement, whether under the guise of law or not, as illegitimate – as the acts of uncivilized humans who, despite the accoutrements of a legal system, have, in fact, not yet transcended the state of nature.

Just a few pages after Money mentally plans his journey to Cee, the reader discovers that, like the legal system, the medical system is corrupt. When African American Reverend John Locke learns Frank has escaped from a local hospital, he informs the veteran that the institution sells bodies to a medical school, explaining "doctors need to work on the dead poor so they can help the live rich."[489] Black death is, therefore, a sociological imperative – and not just in fiction. Harriet Washington, author of *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, notes a historical and

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[488] "Shelley House," We Shall Overcome: Historic Places of the Civil Rights Movement, National Park Service, accessed December 7, 2017, https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/civilrights/mo1.htm.

[489] Morrison, *Home*, 12.

"long-standing preference for African American bodies" for anatomical dissection and display.[490]

Locke asks Money "how'd you end up in the hospital 'stead of jail? That's where most barefoot, half-dressed folks go."[491] The criminal justice system and the medical system, having been excoriated within a few pages of each other at the novel's beginning, are, in these two sentences, linked. The hospital is not where one goes to be treated but to be punished. Nor is it where one goes of one's own accord but, like jail, where one is forced to go. In fact, when Money posits he was perhaps sent to the hospital because he was bleeding, Locke suggests, "They must have thought you was dangerous. If you was just sick they'd never let you in."[492] Not only are the criminal and medical systems oppressive – they are sinister inversions of each other. From this point on, the twinned abusiveness of the legal system and the medical system run like blood red threads throughout the book.

This twinning is prefigured in African American literature as early as 1900 in Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "The Haunted Oak" in which an innocent African American man is lynched by a minister, doctor, and judge. Such pairings have occurred in real life as well. For example, Washington reminds us that "[b]etween 1988 and April 1991, the New York City

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[490] Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006), 118.

[491] Morrison, *Home*, 12-13.

[492] Ibid., 13.

health commissioner ordered thirty-three tuberculosis patients to be held in hospitals against their will until they were no longer infectious. Seventy-nine percent were black."[493]

Locke's name is an allusion to philosopher-physician John Locke. The historical Locke's work traversed the terrain of both law and medicine, and the early presence of a character named for him alerts the reader that the work will take up and unite these themes. As George Sabine notes, Locke articulated the progressive idea that government only has legitimacy through the consent of the governed, and, as Sabine summarizes, felt that "civil power can have no right except as this is derived from the individual right of each man to protect himself and his property."[494] Pointedly, those are the very rights that, as Money observes just prior to meeting the character Locke, African Americans are denied.

Yet despite the philosopher-physician's championing of these ideals, he also insisted "slaves… are by right of nature subjected to the absolute dominion and arbitrary power of their masters," adding that human chattel "cannot… be considered as any part of civil society."[495] Thus, the physician whose job it was to sustain life renders slaves ontologically dead.

Ghoulish Grammar: Language and the African American Experience

"With or without," "dead poor" versus "live rich" – as Morrison's diction indicates, doubles and opposites are a theme of *Home*. These ideas are also manifested in her grammar. The impetus for Frank's journey to his sister is a letter he has received that reads, "Come fast.

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[493] Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 326.

[494] George Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (n.p.: Henry Holt and Company, 1937), 532.

[495] Martin Cohen, *Philosophical Tales* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 105.

She be dead if you tarry."[496] Given that in African American Vernacular English "She be dead" could either mean "She *is* dead" or "She *will be* dead," the narrator clarifies that the letter intends to state "she's alive but sick, very sick."[497] However, by giving the reader Money's context-based interpretation of the tense of the clause, Morrison highlights the verb's other possible rendering. Cee is in danger of biological death, but she is already socially dead.

The grammar of mainstream English could not create a sentence that articulated, with one verb, someone's present ontological death and conditional future biological death. African American grammar is needed to articulate the contradictions of blacks' status in a world of inversions, a world that requires African Americans' death both social and thanatological: Vagrancy laws subordinate blacks as an underclass to whites. Displacement serves Euro-Americans' material ends. "Incarceration" in hospitals protects white public safety. And medical experimentation on the living black ontologically dead as well as on biologically dead black cadavers develops science used in the service of white longevity.

Thus, while Frankenstein is alluded to later in the text, the society *Home* depicts is far more akin to Dracula -- or, perhaps a more appropriate vehicle would be humans possessed by wendigos. The wendigo is a ravenous cannibal monster who appears in the stories of northern

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[496] Morrison, *Home*, 8.

[497] Ibid., 34.

Native American tribes. These tribes came to view colonizers as "wendigo possessed," voraciously devouring both the nature and indigenous peoples.[498]

The white supremacist culture in *Home* both literally preys on black flesh and metaphorically feeds off black humanity to sustain itself. One thinks here of African Canadian poet Claire Harris' persona, in her poem *Drawing Down a Daughter*, wondering of the Caribbean whether "green is riotous/ threatens numberless armies of thin/ spears forever poking from fecund earth/ as if three centuries of pain/ grief and early dying/ ensures an eternal rage in fertility."[499]

One is also reminded of Morrison's lecture "Being or Becoming the Stranger" in which the author, ruminating on violent slaveholders, writes:

> The necessity of rendering the slave a foreign species appears to be a desperate attempt to confirm one's own self as normal…. Even assuming exaggeration by the slaves, the sensibility of slave owners is gothic. It's as though they are shouting, 'I am not a beast! I'm not a beast! I torture the helpless to prove I am not weak.' The danger of sympathizing with the stranger is the possibility of becoming a stranger. To lose one's own valued and enshrined difference.[500]

Morrison's use of the words "normal" and "confirm" make me think of a quote from Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *Middlesex*:

> I was beginning to understand something about normality. Normality wasn't normal. It couldn't be. If normality were normal, everybody could leave it alone. They could sit back and let normality manifest itself. But people-and especially doctors-had doubts

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[498] Michelle Lietz, "Cannibalism in Contact Narratives and the Evolution of the Wendigo" (PhD diss., Eastern Michigan University, 2016), 2, 4.

[499] Claire Harris, *Drawing Down a Daughter* (New Brunswick: Goose Lane Editions, 1992), 20.

[500] Toni Morrison, "Being or Becoming the Stranger," in *The Origin of Others* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 29-30.

> about normality. They weren't sure normality was up to the job. And so they felt inclined to give it a boost.[501]

In her essay, Morrison uses "normal" to mean "human," contrasting it with "foreign species." Though *Middlesex* is about intersexuality, the concerns of the white characters in *Home* are a fusion of those possessed by the slaveholders in "Being or Becoming the Stranger" and Eugenides' "people-and especially doctors": that *humanity* wasn't normal. It couldn't be. If humanity were normal, everybody could leave it alone…. But white people… had doubts about humanity. They weren't sure humanity was up to the job. And so they felt inclined to give it a boost.

Intersex individuals commonly undergo gender confirmation surgery that makes less anomalous their originally ambiguous anatomy. Similarly, slaveholders and the whites in *Home* seem to fear their humanity requires a similarly "confirming" intervention – a boost, as it were. Morrison's talk of "[t]he necessity of rendering the slave a foreign species" suggests that while slaveowners worried they were not – or were insufficiently -- human, they also knew – and tried to repress their knowledge – that slaves *were*. For the slaveholders do not merely misidentify slaves as being of a different species – they "render" them such.

Thus, "Being or Becoming the Stranger," like *Home*, details a racist worldview that considers humanity to be a finite essence that whites can only garner by denying it to – or vampirically sucking it from -- blacks. Masters torture slaves as though the brutal disciplining of African American bodies confers humanity upon white ones – as though humanity can be

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[501] Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (New York: Picador, 2002), 446.

beaten out of blacks leaving behind biped beasts. And, in the case of intersex individuals, surgery is performed upon the body to normalize it. In turn, *Home* fuses white supremacist torture and medicine in depicting a eugenicist physician, Dr. Beau, attempting to reify white supremacy by performing excruciating experimental – and, as I will later demonstrate – dehumanizing medical procedures on Cee.

"[D]ifference" is what slaveholders, intersexual individuals (or their parents) who pursue gender confirming surgery, and the whites in *Home* seek, and this difference needs be enshrined in law and in medical practice. If this distinction – between white humanity and black animality -- were a matter of natural law, people of European descent would not need vagrancy law and restrictive covenants to bolster their status. Thus, another rendering of the quote from *Middlesex* would be: I was beginning to understand something about white superiority. Whites weren't superior. They couldn't be. If whites were superior, everybody could leave it alone. They could sit back and let superiority manifest itself. But whites had doubts about superiority. They weren't sure whiteness was up to the job. And so they felt inclined to give it a boost.

In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a portrait of the protagonist ages so that its subject might remain young. Similarly, in "Being or Becoming the Stranger" and *Home*, African Americans die and become green so that whites can live and feel human.

The Strange Legal Career of Jim Crow[502]

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[502] The title of this section is an allusion to C. Vann Woodward's *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*.

One might expect to find entwined racist legal and medical histories in a nation whose founding was based on unjust laws rooted in biology and pseudo-biology -- biology in the sense that the interchangeability of phenotypical blackness with slave status depended on melanin and pseudo-biology because race is a social construct often mistaken for a scientific reality. Following this inauspicious beginning to America's history, slavery was replaced by "black codes" designed to perpetuate the racial caste system by criminalizing acts as benign as "changing employers without permission" and talking loudly with white women. The penalizing of African American behavior – really of African American being – reflected the fact that, as Blackmon puts it, "[b]y 1900, the South's judicial system had been wholly reconfigured to make one of its primary purposes the coercion of African Americans to comply with the social customs and labor demands of whites."[503]

Jim Crow laws made African Americans a de jure second class, but the legal system continued to be used to enforce racial inequality in the post-Civil Rights era. For example, as Marc Mauer noted in *Race to Incarcerate*, a study on "changes in state prison populations between 1971 and 1991… concluded that by 1990… the size of a state's black population was an even stronger predictor of the prison population than the rate of violent crime."[504]

And Michelle Alexander explains how the current legal system comes nearly full circle to render African Americans ontologically dead:

> Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color 'criminals' and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is

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[503] Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name*, 7.

[504] Marc Mauer, *Race to Incarcerate* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 52.

> perfectly legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal.[505]

Today, the United States exists in a state of mass incarceration. As Alexander notes, no other country in the world imprisons such a high proportion of its population. Unsurprisingly, mass incarceration has a huge racial component: "The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid."[506] As Fareed Zakaria observed in a *Time* article on April 12, 2012, the War on Drugs is the engine of American mass incarceration. But despite the fact African Americans do not commit drug crimes at higher rates than whites,[507] blacks constitute nearly one third of people arrested for breaking drug laws and almost 40% of those imprisoned for drug crimes[508] while only making up 12.2% of the population.[509] As Human Rights Watch noted in one of its reports, "Because of their extraordinary rate of incarceration, one in every 20 black men over the age of 18 is in a state or federal prison, compared to one in every 180 whites." Furthermore, 9% of black adults

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[505] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 2.

[506] Ibid., 6.

[507] Ibid., 7.

[508] "The Drug War, Mass Incarceration and Race," Drug Policy Alliance, last modified June 2015, http://www.unodc.org/documents/ungass2016//Contributions/Civil/DrugPolicyAlliance/DPA_Fact_Sheet_Drug_War_Mass_Incarceration_and_Race_June2015.pdf.

[509] "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010," U.S. Census Bureau, last modified March 2011, http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf.

of both sexes are either confined, on probation, or on parole – only 2% percent of white adults are.[510]

Recent events in Ferguson, Missouri reveal the legal system to be in a state of racial crisis. Volatile protests occurred in the city after a white police officer killed a black unarmed teenager on August 9, 2014.[511] As scholars noted in the *Harvard Law Review*, many of the townspeople viewed the killing as the last indignity they could endure at the hands of the justice system. The town had excessively fined its residents for transgressions such as small traffic violations and offenses as trivial as signing up for the wrong trash collection service. Those who could not afford to pay – not a small number in a town with a median income of $20,472 -- found themselves fined for that failure, too, and then arrested, jailed, and billed for each night of their confinement. In this manner, the resources of the poor were vampirically appropriated to supply the town's second largest source of municipal funding.[512]

But all Ferguson's citizens were not preyed upon equally – as Matt Apuzzo reported in a March 1, 2015 *New York Times* article, the Justice Department found African Americans were disproportionately targeted for fines and arrests. In the twenty-first century, during the tenure of a black president, African Americans in Ferguson were punished for their penury just as their

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[510] "Incarceration and Race," Human Rights Watch, accessed May 17, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/usa/Rcedrg00-01.htm.

[511] Larry Buchanan, Ford Fessenden, K.K. Rebecca Lai, Haeyoun Park, Alicia Parlapiano, Archie Tse, Tim Wallace, Derek Watkins, and Karen Yourish, "What Happened in Ferguson?" *New York Times*, August 10, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/ferguson-missouri-town-under-siege-after-police-shooting.html.

[512] "Policing and Profit," *Harvard Law Review* 128 no. 6 (April 2015): 1723-24.

forefathers had been criminalized during the nineteenth century for vagrancy. Whether a contemporary Ferguson citizen is being jailed for picking the wrong trash collector or his 1800s analog was being held captive for speaking loudly with a white woman, melanin is ever penalized. It is with this legal history in mind that readers and scholars ought to approach Morrison's body of work.

Hypocritical Hippocrates

In history, as in *Home*, the medical system worked in concert with the legal system to mistreat blacks. As Harriet A. Washington states in *Medical Apartheid*, "Dangerous, involuntary, and nontherapeutic experimentation upon African Americans has been practiced widely and documented extensively at least since the eighteenth century."[513] She constructs for the reader a horrific timeline of "experimental abuse and exploitation of African Americans in early American medicine… up until the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which began in 1932" to "the period from the early twentieth century to the present day" in which "children, soldiers, and hospital patients [were] used in research conducted by institutions ranging from the federal government to private corporations."[514]

In terms of the "recent history of medical research with African Americans," Washington directs our attention to abuses being investigated "at more than sixty research centers" and "experimentation-related deaths at premier universities" to the plight of subjects who:

> were given experimental vaccines known to have unacceptably high lethality, were enrolled in experiments without their consent or knowledge, were subjected to

[513] Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 7.

[514] Ibid., 19.

> surreptitious surgical and medical procedures while unconscious, injected with toxic substances, deliberately monitored rather than treated for deadly ailments, excluded from lifesaving treatments, or secretly farmed for tissues that were used to perfect technologies such as infectious-disease tests.[515]

In *Home*, Mrs. Scott, the wife of the doctor to whom Cee becomes both employee and victim, seeks to ward off the idea that her husband, Beauregard, known as "Dr. Beau," practices such sinister medicine. She states of her spouse, "He's no Dr. Frankenstein."[516] The character is mostly telling the truth. Victor Frankenstein creates life from death. Mrs. Scott's husband Dr. Beau nearly kills Cee, almost deriving biological death from sociological death.

Mrs. Scott is attempting to comfort Cee, but her words are an inadvertent warning -- Dr. Beau is not going to endow Cee with ontological life. He will not socially resurrect her. And far from animating her flesh, he will almost annihilate it. (As though to illustrate Mrs. Scott's point nominally, Morrison names Dr. Beau not after Frankenstein but Frankenstein's mother and maternal grandmother whose family's surname is "Beaufort"). Frankenstein's goal is to create a human, but Dr. Beau's practice is dehumanizing. The differences between the two men are highlighted by the presence of a "Frank" in the story. Frank *is* a Dr. Frankenstein in the sense that he rescues Cee from death and facilitates the revitalization of her life force.

However, there *are* some parallels between Frankenstein and Dr. Beau: the main being that neither sees the subject of his experiments as human. Frankenstein believes he failed to

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[515] Ibid., 5-6.

[516] Another reading of *Home* as a gothic exploration of racism in the medical system may be found in López Ramírez, Manuela. "Gothic Tropes in Toni Morrison's *Home*: The Scientist-villain Figure and the Maiden in Distress*." Revista de Filología de la Universidad de La Laguna* 33 (2015): 119-32. Dialnet.

create a man -- despite his lofty goals -- and grafted together a monster instead, and Dr. Beau similarly conceives of Cee not as a human but as what Frankenstein's creature literally is – a collection of parts. And he treats her as though she were one of the cadavers – one of the "dead poor" -- sold by the hospital. In foreshadowing lines, Cee's longing for Frank after he leaves her behind in their hometown Lotus makes her feel "broken. Not broken up but broken down, down into her separate parts."[517]

Frankenstein, however, exhibits *more* empathy towards his experimental subjects than Dr. Beau does: Upon destroying a female creature he had been in the process of creating, Frankenstein laments, "I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being."[518] Pointedly, this is exactly what Dr. Beau does – completely remorselessly.

Frankenstein is obsessed with the "secret of life." Similarly, Dr. Beau is "so interested in wombs" – the source of life, hidden away in the flesh.[519] Through exploring the site of reproduction, he literally seeks to do what Frankenstein hopes: "unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation."[520]

Furthermore, Frankenstein's interests lie midway along the spectrum between pseudoscience and actual knowledge – growing up, he is intrigued by alchemy, but while

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[517] Morrison, *Home*, 54.

[518] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1888), 239, Google Books.

[519] Morrison, *Home*, 113.

[520] Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 65.

attending university, he learns legitimate science. Similarly, Dr. Beau practices and attempts to advance modern medicine, but his abuse of Cee is motivated by pseudoscientific beliefs about black inferiority. In a further conjunction, Dr. Beau practices abortion, and so, too, does Frankenstein -- the latter aborts his female monster, and even his infamous male one says of himself: "I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on."[521]

And both Frankenstein and Dr. Beau share a eugenic impulse: Dr. Beau sterilizes Cee because he believes that, for the good of whites, the racially inferior must not reproduce. Similarly, Frankenstein destroys the female monster for fear she and his original creation will breed "a race of devils… who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror."[522]

I must remark upon yet another link -- not between Frankenstein and Beau -- but between *Frankenstein* and the Gothic nature of the black experience. In Mary Shelley's Author Introduction to the 1831 edition of her novel, she says, "I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion."[523] This line recalls Douglass' recollection in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that:

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[521] Ibid., 315.

[522] Ibid., 232.

[523] Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, introduction to *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1999), ProQuest.

> The possibility of ever becoming anything but an abject slave, a mere machine in the hands of an owner, had now fled, and it seemed to me it had fled forever. A life of living death, beset with the innumerable horrors of the cotton field, and the sugar plantation, seemed to be my doom.[524]

Both Shelly and Douglass have visions of men – the former picturing her literary creation, the latter conceiving of his future self. And both Shelley, creating a work of gothic fiction, and Douglass, contemplating his all too real future, describe their reveries as frightful: Shelley uses the word "hideous"; Douglass, "horrifying." Both these contemplated men are mechanical: Shelley's "show[s] signs of life" "on the working of some powerful engine" while Douglass' is condemned to be a "mere machine."

Though Frankenstein is not present in Shelley's mental picture, the reader knows the creature to be in his dominion just as the automated Douglass is "in the hands of an owner." And Douglass' phrase "a life of living death" describes both his social reality and the creature's existence as the vivified collection of corpses' parts.

Furthermore, Shelley's description of "half-vital motion" parallels Douglass' depiction of his degeneration quoted in the epigraph: "my natural elasticity was crushed; my intellect languished; the disposition to read departed; the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died." Douglass is only half alive, his faculties dimmed and diminished. And the creature's lament: "I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on" is Douglass', for when Douglass speaks of the seemingly thwarted "possibility of

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[524] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 220.

ever becoming anything but an abject slave," he is using the language of abortion, of destroyed potential.

In *The Lives of Frederick Douglass*, Robert S. Levine views Douglass' description of William Lloyd Garrison's speechmaking process, which involves Garrison "taking [Douglass] as his text" to inspire Garrison's philosophizing about the evils of slavery as Garrison "feed[ing] on him (almost in the way of a vampire) to recharge his flagging [creative] energies."[525] Garrison does this while directing Douglass to "repeat the same old [strictly factual] story month after month."[526] This leaves Douglass feeling, as he did during his enslaved years and as Shelley envisions Frankenstein's monster, "mechanical." Given how Douglass defines man as a "picture-making and a picture-appreciating animal,"[527] Garrison's concomitant use of Douglass as artistic inspiration and forbidding Douglass to utilize Douglass' creative power humanizes Garrison at the expense of mechanizing and animalizing the former slave.

I have made much of Mrs. Scott's comment that her husband is "no Dr. Frankenstein," but she says something else of import in her first interaction with Cee: "His inventions help people." Obviously, Dr. Beau's attempts to improve the speculum by experimenting on Cee do not help *her*. But, in Dr. Beau's mind, not only is Cee not ontologically alive – not philosophically different from the black cadavers the hospital sends to the medical school – she

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[525] Levine, *The Lives of Frederick Douglass*, 37.

[526] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 266.

[527] Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," 132.

is also not human. "People" – the ones Dr. Beau helps – are those Locke refers to as the "live rich."

Earlier, I referenced the wendigo. Though Morrison openly gestures to the gothic, her work shares many green conjunctions with this figure from Native American tradition. First, the wendigo is a creature of the winter, which is when *Home* begins. Furthermore, Dr. Beau, the character who most fits the profile for wendigo possession, consumes Cee as though she were – as the text later portrays her – a cantaloupe, and cannot restrain his desire to look ever deeper into her womb. Similarly, wendigos eat people, but the more they gorge, the hungrier they get. Basil Johnston, in his book *The Manitous: The Supernatural World of the Ojibway* says, "The pain of others means nothing to the Wendigo; all that mattered was its survival."[528] This is true of Dr. Beau as an experimenter and a eugenicist.

In the Introduction, I described the trope of using nature to castigate whiteness and disparage white supremacy. If one understands Dr. Beau to be wendigo possessed, then Morrison is employing this very trope. For the wendigo is a green being, a sinister winter spirit. Indeed, wendigos are reminiscent of the alien creatures in Anne Spencer's poem "White Things" who come to earth only to destroy blacks and the environment.

In "Cannibalism in Contact Narratives and the Evolution of the Wendigo," Michelle Lietz describes how Native American writers such as Winona LaDuke and Louise Erdrich have used wendigos and the wendigo possessed in their stories to allegorize colonialism.[529] Anti-black

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[528] Lietz, "Cannibalism in Contact Narratives," 21.

[529] Ibid., 2

wendigos are necessarily different than anti-Native ones given that white supremacist oppression of the two races differed. Of the traditional winter monster, Lietz says:

> The wendigo is ultimately associated with the possessive, unrepentant taking of land and the forced removal of indigenous people…. It is the icy cold heart of the colonizer who cannot see the Native people as worthy of anything besides eradication, decimation, and subjugation. Finally, it is the monster living inside men, whose souls were consumed long ago, giving them unnatural power to wreak destruction on the earth and within the lives of the people around them.[530]

While the classic wendigo is obsessed with acquiring land and ethnically cleansing indigenous people from it, the anti-black wendigo is focused on bodies. Anti-black wendigos, paradoxically, both hunger to acquire African flesh *and* seek its extinction.

Critical Race (Literary) Theory

The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education defines Critical Race Theory as:

> a framework that offers… a race-conscious approach to understanding… structural racism to find solutions that lead to greater justice. Placing race at the center of the analysis, Critical Race Theory scholars interrogate policies and practices that are taken for granted to uncover the overt and covert ways that racist ideologies, structures, and institutions create and maintain racial inequality.[531]

"Racial realism" is a component of Critical Race Theory that insists "racial progress is sporadic and that people of color are doomed to experience only infrequent peaks followed by regressions."[532] Yale Law School professor Reva Siegel describes this as "preservation through

[530] Ibid., 39-40.

[531] "Critical Race Theory," Paula Groves Price, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education, last modified 2017, https://doi.org/ 10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1.

[532] "Glossary," in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction (2nd Edition)*, ed. Richard Delgago et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 171.

transformation."[533] Morrison's body of work illustrates this concept, framing racism as morphing rather than fading away. And instances of bioethical racism appear in almost every Morrison book.

In a scene from *Beloved* taking place during slavery, African Americans are used as exhibits in racist Darwinist lessons. Elsewhere in the book, during the Reconstruction Era, a black person is exhibited as a savage in the circus. (Although not obviously a bioethical issue, Washington explains how the medical system's reprehensible treatment of African Americans had one of its origins in the "popular public display and imaging of black bodies," a practice that had a "permeable membrane" with "medical display").[534]

Later, during the post-Depression Era, an African American woman is compared to a horse as she is about to give birth in *The Bluest Eye*. And in *Song of Solomon*, a black community refers to a street officially named "Doctor Street" as "Not Doctor Street" and:

> call[ed] the charity hospital at its northern end No Mercy Hospital since it was 1931… before the first colored expectant mother was allowed to give birth inside its wards and not on its steps. The reason for the hospital's generosity to that particular woman was not the fact that she was the only child of this Negro doctor, for during his entire professional life he had never been granted hospital privileges and only two of his patients were ever admitted to Mercy, both white."[535]

This brings us to the post-Korean War era of *Home* in which African Americans are incarcerated in hospitals and experimented upon without their informed consent.

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[533] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 21.

[534] Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 76.

[535] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 4-5.

Similarly, the Emancipation Proclamation, the 13th Amendment, the Freedmen's Bureau, and Reconstruction Era legislation ended the regimes of slavery and indentured servitude illustrated in *Margaret Garner*, *A Mercy*, and *Beloved* only to be replaced by the Black Codes Money is mindful of in *Home*. The Equal Protection Clause is undermined by the housing discrimination Lily faces. And Junior, sexually abused by a juvenile hall employee in the present day, is as much a victim of the criminal justice system in *Love* as former slave Paul D is, sexually assaulted while imprisoned on a chain gang, in *Beloved.*

As Aldalberto Aguirre, Jr. explains, "The most distinguishing feature of CRT writings is the use of stories or first-person accounts…. Critical race theories use storytelling as a methodological tool for giving *voice* to marginalized persons and their communities."[536] It is clear Morrison employs narratives in this manner.

Green Like Me

At this chapter's beginning, I asserted the existence of a national project aimed at turning blacks green. I described this as a two-step process: First, it is necessary to achieve African Americans' social death. It is this stage that my chapter has focused on up to this point. However, the second element is to resurrect people of African descent into green incarnations. This section treats that second measure.

The very beginning of *Home* provides additional context for Mrs. Scott's statement that her husband's inventions "help people." At the book's opening, Frank shares a childhood

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[536] Adalberto Aguirre, Jr., "Academic Storytelling: A Critical Race Theory Story of Affirmative Action," *Sociological Perspectives* 43, no. 2 (2000): 321.

memory of himself and his sister watching horses fight each other. Again and again, Frank repeats that the horses rose and stood like men, i.e. on their back hooves alone. In African American Frank's capacious view, horses are akin to men. In contrast, the white Dr. Beau pushes Cee beyond the borders of the human species by treating her as a laboratory rat.

Similarly, in "Roast Possum" from *Thomas and Beulah*, Rita Dove's collection of poems that tell the story of an African American couple from the turn of the century through the 1960s, Thomas reads to his grandchildren about the titular creature from the 1909 *Werner Encyclopedia*, concealing from them that the tome, in addition to supplying scientific facts about animals, denigrates the Negro: "Werner admitted Negro children to be intelligent, though briskness/ clouded over at puberty, bringing/ indirection and laziness."[537] Yet Thomas also delights Malcolm with talk of Strolling Jim, a horse "who could balance/ a glass of water on his back/ and trot the village square without spilling a drop. Who put/ Wartrace on the map and was buried/ under a stone, like a man."[538] In both Morrison and Dove, we see white supremacists liken African Americans and animals to the detriment of blacks. But we also see blacks, in a manifestation of the trope of recognizing non-human personhood that I describe in the Introduction, compare humans and non-humans (in particular horses), in a way that honors both types of beings.

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[537] Rita Dove, "Roast Possum," in *Thomas and Beulah* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1986), 38.

[538] Ibid., 37.

Upon their return from viewing the horses, Cee and Frank come upon another remarkable sight. They watch some men "pull a body from a wheelbarrow and throw it into a hole already waiting." To their horror, "[o]ne foot stuck up over the edge and quivered, as though it could get out." Frank and Cee watch the men "drive the jerking foot down to join the rest of itself." Frank notes, "When she saw that black foot… being whacked into the grave, her whole body began to shake."[539, 540]

It is here, after encountering the paradox of personified horses, that the reader first encounters living death in the novel – in the form of a black person being buried alive. The man is an inverted Frankenstein's monster – a living human treated as a corpse rather than a corpse a doctor seeks to endow with life. Indeed, even as Frank realizes the individual is still alive, he speaks of the man as if he were dead. Frank describes not a person but a "body," then reminisces about a foot that is made to join "itself." "Itself" is a word for a cadaver – or an animal. Tellingly, once Frank and Cee can no longer see the foot shaking, Cee immediately begins to, foreshadowing how she will take up the victim's role as a living corpse just as she took up his trembling.

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[539] Morrison, Home, 4.

[540] Until Frank and Cee remedy the situation at the book's end, this brutally interred black man, unlike Wartrace, has no grave marker.

Frank concludes the passage by remarking, "Since you're set on telling my story, whatever you think and whatever your write down, know this. I really forgot about the burial. I only remembered the horses. They were so beautiful. So brutal. And they stood like men."[541]

Why is this so urgently necessary to remember? The detail is essential because Frank remembers the benign lesson while forgetting the horrific one – that while black and rust-colored animals may be embraced as something akin to human, black and rust-colored humans may be denied their humanity and their ontological and biological lives. It is this lesson he re-learns once Cee becomes Dr. Beau's victim.

This idea that animals can usurp the tenuous humanity – particularly the manhood -- of African Americans earlier appears in Madison Washington's lament in *The Heroic Slave* that:

> Those birds… though liable to the sportsman's fowling-piece, are still my superiors…. That accursed and crawling snake, that miserable reptile, that has just glided into its slimy home, is freer and better off than I…. he is my superior, and scorns to own me as his master, or to stop to take my blows. When he saw my uplifted arm, he darted beyond my reach, and turned to give me battle. I dare not do as much as that. I neither run nor fight, but do meanly stand, answering each heavy blow of a cruel master with doleful wails and piteous cries.

At the end of *Home*, the reader learns that the former stud farm that was the site of horses that stand and fight like men was also the arena of "men-treated-like-dog fights."[542] It turns out the man Frank and Cee saw buried was the victim of one of these sick contests – he and his son were kidnapped and forced to fight to the death. (The reader also remembers that,

[541] Ibid., 5.

[542] Ibid., 138.

to access the farm, Frank and Cee were obliged to imitate canines themselves, squeezing through "a crawl space that some animals had dug—a coyote maybe, or a coon dog….)"[543]

Told that both men would be killed if one of the two did not slay the other, the father and son – the latter named Jerome – each sought to lay down his life for the other. (In yet another linking of black death and green life, when Jerome tells his father, "I can't take your life," the father, a man-turned-dog, replies, "This ain't life").[544] As an old man explains to Frank years after the event, the macabre negotiations were an example of "a devil's decision-making. Any way you decide is a sure trip to his hell."[545]

Indeed, this place where horses are anthropomorphized and blacks animalized is reminiscent of Bolgia Seven of Malebolge in Dante's *Inferno*. There, thieves are cast into reptilian form and can only regain human shape by biting others of the damned who, in turn, transform into serpents and other lowly creatures. Thus, the farm is hell because animals and black humans exchange places there to horrific consequence.

Outside of literature, contemporary discourse observes how animals seem to take the place of blacks as beings worthy of personhood and its attendant rights in the white imagination. For example, some lamented how the killing of a protected lion in Zimbabwe, anthropomorphically named Cecil, seemed to arouse greater public condemnation from whites than had a near constant spate extra-judicial slayings of unarmed black men and boys since

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[543] Ibid., 3.

[544] Ibid.

[545] Ibid., 139.

2012.[546, 547] Similarly, many African Americans felt outraged that Michael Vick, an African American football player heavily involved in dog fighting, was punished for his cruelty to animals when George Zimmerman was not convicted for killing an innocent black teenager.[548] (As Locke quips to Frank, foreshadowing the revelation about the "men-treated-like-dog-fights," "You [African American soldiers] go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better").[549]

Morrison's conflation of humanity and non-human nature in *Home* continues throughout the text: The horse fight/burial scene takes place under a "cantaloupe" moon.[550] The next time melons appear in the text, Sarah, Dr. Beau's housekeeper, is considering their gender. She and Cee remark that female melons are the sweetest, and the chapter closes with a disturbing sentence: "Sarah slid a long, sharp knife from a drawer and, with intense anticipation of the pleasure to come, cut the girl in two."[551] Like the horses, the melon is the

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[546] "Is it Me or Are People More Outraged by the Killing of Cecil the Lion Than the Killing of Black People?," Issues, XO Jane, last modified July 30, 2015, https://www.xojane.com/issues/cecil-the-lion-outrage.

[547] Adding another layer of racial context, Cecil's name evokes Cecil Rhodes, the imperialist from whose surname comes Zimbabwe's colonial name: Rhodesia.

[548] Terry Shropshire, "Angry celebrities compare Michael Vick's and George Zimmerman's murder cases," *Rolling Out*, last modified July 14, 2013, https://rollingout.com/2013/07/14/angry-celebrities-compare-michael-vicks-and-george-zimmermans-murder-cases/.

[549] Morrison, *Home*, 18.

[550] Ibid., 4.

[551] Ibid., 66.

recipient of human language. It is referred to as a "girl." But just as the horses seem to usurp the humanity of the murder victim in the book's opening scene, the reader soon learns that while a melon can be a girl, a girl can be dehumanized into a melon sliced open for another's pleasure.

There is a long tradition in African American literature of depicting black as fungible with green. Consider "Po' Sandy," one of Charles Chesnutt's Conjure Woman stories. "Ef you'll des say de word, I kin turn yer ter w'ateber yer wanter be," an enslaved conjure woman tells her husband Sandy, operating on the theory, shared by Madison and Paul D, that her spouse would be better off an animal than an African American.[552] She offers to make him into a rabbit, wolf, or mockingbird before ultimately changing him into a pine tree. In this story, as in *Home*, the reader is privy to the two-step process of dehumanization – social death followed by green afterlife.

These fantastic possible metamorphoses are a metaphor for the taxonomic power of transformation owners had over socially dead slaves – the institution bewitched African Americans from human into livestock by making them commodities. For as Lawrence Buell remarks in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, "Personhood is defined for better or worse by environmental entanglement. Whether individual or social, being doesn't stop at the border of the skin."[553] Thus, while the DNA encoded in the flesh of slaves may have been that of homo

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[552] Chesnutt, "Po' Sandy," in *The Conjure Woman*, 46.

[553] Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 23.

sapiens, that empirical fact was not enough for the bigoted social environment in which they were entangled to recognize them as men and women.

Chesnutt takes up this theme in "Lonesome Ben" as well. At one point in the story, Julius says:

> In a day er so mo' he 'mence ter wonder whuther he wuz libbin' er not. He had hearn 'bout folks turnin' ter clay w'en dey wuz dead, an' he 'lowed maybe he wuz dead an' didn' knowed it, an' dat wuz de reason w'y eve'body run erway f'm 'im an' wouldn' hab nuffin' ter do wid 'im. An' ennyhow, he 'lowed ef he wa'n't dead, he mought's well be. He wande'ed roun' a day er so mo', an' fin'lly de lonesomeness, an' de sleepin' out in de woods, 'mongs' de snakes an' sco'pions, an' not habbin' nuffin' fit ter eat, 'mence ter tell on him, mo' an' mo', an' he kep' gittin' weakah an' weakah 'til one day, w'en he went down by de crick fer ter git a drink er water, he foun' his limbs gittin' so stiff hit 'uz all he could do ter crawl up on de bank an' lay down in de sun. He laid dere 'til he died, an' de sun beat down on 'im, an' beat down on 'im, an' beat down on 'im, fer th'ee er fo' days, 'til it baked 'im as ha'd as a brick.[554]

In Chesnutt's story, Ben's experience of social death engenders confusion in him as to whether he is biologically dead, too. Indeed, his physiology transforms to literalize his social status as he begins decomposing to clay while still alive. The markers of the black man's social death are green – he sleeps "out in de woods," dwells "'mongs' de snakes an' sco'pions," and must eat dirt like a worm or snail, lacking food "fit ter eat." It is almost as though, as a fugitive slave, Ben's grasp on humanity is so tenuous that, once located in natural space, surrounded by reptiles and arachnids, he morphs from man to creature. Ultimately, as the passage details, this social death proves fatal. Ben dies figuratively, then literally, as a black man and is incarnated as a natural object.

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[554] Chesnutt, "Lonesome Ben," 98-99.

But let us return to Morrison's work. The memory of the horses haunts Frank the way horse and human comparisons plague others of Morrison's characters. For example, as I have discussed, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline Breedlove discloses the painful memory of a white doctor commenting that she will give birth as painlessly as a horse. She remembers not only mentally arguing for her humanity but acknowledging that horses also feel pain. The scene takes place in the years following the Great Depression, but in 2012, the *Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice* published the results of a data analysis that indicated African American patients receive worse pain management than white patients.[555] This suggests the doctor's dehumanizing attitude is still manifest in the medical field.

Other socially dead Morrison characters are also treated like livestock. In *Beloved*, Schoolteacher allows his nephews to "milk" Sethe.[556] And, as I discussed in the previous chapter, it is the memory of Schoolteacher directing his nephews to list her animal and human qualities that drives Sethe to infanticide. For Sethe, only biological death can spare her baby from social death and green afterlife. As she explains it, "If I hadn't killed her she would have died…."[557] Just as only awareness of blacks' vulnerability to both biological and ontological death allows for a full interpretation of the word "be" in "She be dead," only the recognition

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[555] Miriam O. Ezenwa and Michael F. Fleming, "Racial Disparities in Pain Management in Primary Care," *Journal of Health Disparities Research and Practice* 5, no. 3 (2012): 21, accessed April 29, 2016, http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1079&context=jhdrp.

[556] Morrison, *Beloved*, 70.

[557] Ibid., 200.

that social and biological life are uncoupled for African Americans allows readers to make sense of Sethe's explanation.[558] Thus, only biological death can save Sethe's infant from the sociological death that would see her reincarnated as the beastly subject of one of Schoolteacher's lessons.

Her Eyes Were Watching Hurston: Morrison's Revision of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

But let us return once more to Frank's quote: "Since you're set on telling my story, whatever you think and whatever your write down, know this. I really forgot about the burial. I only remembered the horses. They were so beautiful. So brutal. And they stood like men." These lines, along with Frank's repression of a war crime he committed and his post-PTSD-episode amnesia, show that Frank's mind works the way the narrator of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* claims women's do: "Now women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly."[559]

"So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead," continues *Their Eyes*. And the beginning of *Home* is two children who have come back from

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[558] In addition to mining the possibilities of African American Vernacular English, Morrison also allows the ambiguities of standard English to convey the queer situation of being both living and dead. Thus, in *Beloved,* Sethe recalls "boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world" on her former plantation. The narrator leaves it ambiguous whether the boys Sethe remembers were being lynched or were merely playing upon the trees, but the choice of the verb "hanging" as well as Sethe's observation that slavery is a kind of living death is meant to evoke lynching either way.

[559] Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: P.S., 2006), 1.

watching a burial. In neither book is the deceased "the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet" as Hurston puts it, but of far more grotesque demises.[560]

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the first sentences of *Their Eyes*, which are about ships, revise Douglass' famous apostrophe to the white-sailed boats. *Home's* initial pages rework both Hurston's novel *and* Douglass' memoirs. Frank and Cee happen upon the burial while crawling through grass on their bellies as Covey does when he is spying on the slaves he is breaking – when he is surveilling the humans he transforms (as described in the epigraph) into brutes. In similar fashion, Frank and Cee slither to a place where men are turned to dogs. And Frank's reference to the anthropomorphized horses alludes to the fourth paragraph of *Their Eyes* which describes the community members who watch protagonist Janie's return as equine-like men: "These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human."[561]

Though Frank's memory functions the way *Their Eyes* says that a woman's does, he recovers his manhood at the book's end when he stops forgetting what he does not want to remember: how he murdered a Korean girl. Just as a cantaloupe symbolizes Cee's dehumanization, an orange – which Frank's victim was holding -- is the emblem of the unnamed child. And the two female characters are further linked by produce: Cee, sterilized by Dr. Beau, has mournful visions of "that toothless smile babies have," seeing the grin in a green

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[560] Ibid.

[561] Ibid.

pepper (as well as in a cloud). She thinks she is having apparitions of the child she would have born, but Frank suspects "the baby girl smile" belongs to the Korean child.[562]

In one of their early interactions, the girl says "Yum-yum" to Frank which, at first, seems to frame Frank as a fruit to be consumed in keeping with his black-green status.[563] And, indeed, the remark, is understood by Frank -- euphemistically in culinary terms -- as an invitation to "let her taste" him.[564] He murders the child because he is tempted by the offer. But though Frank is nearly tasted like the orange, it is the girl who is preyed upon, for, in this context, Frank is the one who holds and abuses power.

When Frank comes to terms with this memory at the book's end, the novel begins revising *Their Eyes'* conclusion just as it did its beginning. For at the end of *Their Eyes*, Janie draws in the memories of her life in an imagined fishnet, and *Home's* denouement, too, is rife with fish imagery: "Day and night [Frank] had held on to that suffering [his grief for his fellow soldiers] because it let him off the hook, kept the Korean child hidden. Now the hook was deep inside his chest and nothing would dislodge it. The best he could hope for was time to work it loose.[565]

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[562] Morrison, *Home*, 132-33.

[563] Ibid., 133.

[564] Ibid., 134.

[565] Ibid., 135.

While he waits, Frank visits the porch of an elderly man named *Fish* Eye to learn from him and other old men about the horse farm Frank and his sister visited as children.[566] Against the porch railing rest fishing poles. But the language here is not simply piscine.

Fish Eye's name connects it to the homonym of Cee's: "see." Indeed, not until the burial scene is interpreted for him by Fish Eye and the older man's compatriots is Frank able to *see* accurately what he and his sister witnessed so long ago. This linking of fish and vision is also a call back to *Their Eyes*: After Janie draws in her net, "[s]he called in her soul to come and see."[567]

Cee-ing Humanity

The first paragraph of *Home* consists of a mere three lines: "They rose up like men. We saw them. Like men they stood."[568] The crux of the two chiastic sentences, the first and last in the triptych, is "We saw them." Humanity, then, is something to be – that perhaps must be – witnessed.

I spoke, in Chapter One, of how Douglass performed humanity through the media of literature and photography as well as how slaves exhibited spectacular personhood by marrying, joining the army, and participating in rebellion. It is in the context of a society that,

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[566] This visit, like Frank's ceasing to remember and forget like a woman, increases Frank's masculinization, for the porch is homosocial space. Cee, similarly, is spiritually and physically healed by an all-female group of elders.

[567] Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 193.

[568] Ibid., 3.

rather than taking for granted black humanity, only recognizes it when it is satisfactorily demonstrated, that one observes the homonym of Cee's name.[569] And one notes also how the chiasmus that begins the book calls attention to Douglass' famous one: "You have *seen* how a man was made a slave; you shall *see* how a slave was made a man" [italics mine].

Douglass, as I discussed in Chapter One, is obsessed with the gaze. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he repeatedly paints "scenes" of Euro-American inhumanity as part of his animalizing project, commanding readers to "[b]ehold, "mark," "see," "cast one glance" upon, and "follow" (with the gaze) racists' bestial natures.

Vision is an enduring theme of Morrison's work, too. For example, *The Bluest Eye* begins with a fictitious excerpt from a Dick and Jane primer rife with ocular imperatives: "see jane," "see the cat," "look look here comes a friend."[570]

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[569] Morrison has a penchant for giving her characters names that are verbs – often imperative ones. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman Dead's grandmother is named "Singing Bird." The second of her names, however, gets recorded as "Byrd" -- like Cee's, its true meaning is disguised orthographically and revealed only phonetically. Her first name, shortened to "Sing," is initially misinterpreted as an instruction by her daughter Pilate (who did not know her mother's name) when she hears her father call it out on his deathbed. Later, having learned her father was crying out his wife's name, she nevertheless appropriates the moniker as a verb, requesting Milkman sing to her.

The reader of *Love* learns only in the book's final pages that the narrator, known as "L," is shares her name with the book's title. Once more, Morrison is cagey about the character's verb (and common noun) moniker.

And, most like Cee, *Love* contains another optically-named character: "Heed." Midway through the novel, it is revealed that her appellation is a specific instruction: "Heed the Night."

[570] Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, n.p.

Just as God created the various elements of reality and saw that they were good, the reader is compelled to take notice of white humanity and – unlike in *My Bondage* -- learn of its positive value, of how "very pretty," "very happy," "very nice," and "good" people of European descent and anything associated with them is.[571] Pecola obeys all these commands to her detriment, and, filled with self-loathing, loses her humanity, devolving into a flightless bird.

Pecola's primer trains her to gaze upon the world with complacent, uncritical superficiality. Cee is the same sort of observer. Upon beginning her work as the Scotts' domestic, she falls in love with, "the beautiful house, the kind doctor," the trite simplicity of the phrases both underscoring the shallowness of her perceptions and evoking Pecola's schoolbook.[572] Her limited education equips her to read the titles of Dr. Beau's books on eugenics, but not to understand – to *see* as it were – what the subject means.

Evoking Pecola's mother Pauline Breedlove – who adores her role as maid to a white family and, at one point, is an avid filmgoer, Cee thinks the Scotts' living room is "more beautiful than a movie theater" and that Mrs. Scott "looked every bit the queen of something who belonged in the movies."[573] Her appraisals are a red flag.

For it is at the movies that Pauline Breedlove is "introduced to" the "idea of… physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas [romantic love being the other] in the history of

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[571] Ibid.

[572] Ibid., 65.

[573] Ibid., 60.

human thought."[574] This phrasing of "*most* destructive ideas" reminds the reader of another negative superlative in Morrison's work: Paul D's musing that "[n]othing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher."[575]

In *Home*, the threats represented by beauty and dehumanizing pseudo-scholars like Schoolteacher are fused: "Beau" is French for "beautiful," but Dr. Beau only appears lovely. His allure nearly destroys Cee.

I commented earlier that Dr. Beau is named for the Beauforts of *Frankenstein* but that his full name is not "Beaufort" but "Beauregard." The moniker means "beautiful gaze" in French. The phrase can be exegeted in two – hardly exclusive -- ways. First, the name can be seen as a double of Cee's own: Cee and Dr. Beau, "see" and "beautiful gaze." Second, it can be interpreted ironically – Dr. Beau's gaze is not beautiful but ugly and dehumanizing. The name Beauregard, then, is reminiscent of the colloquialism that "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," suggesting perhaps humanity is, too.

Ultimately, readers witness both Douglass and Cee made and unmade. As portrayed in the lines from *My Bondage* used in this chapter's epigraph, Douglass transforms from a man into a slave and back into a man, a metamorphosis he experiences as being undergoing psychic death and devolving into an animal and then resurrecting and rehumanizing. And Cee is literally unmade by Dr. Beau. She is cut apart like a cantaloupe. But she is rehumanized – has her body and psyche reconstructed -- by elderly female healers in her community. "Men know

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[574] Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970; repr., New York: Penguin Press, 2016), 315–16.

[575] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; repr., New York: Vintage, 2004), 312.

a slop jar when they *see* one" [italics mine], the senior women chastise Cee. They scold her for her ultimate failure of vision: her inability to recognize herself as – to *see* herself as and thereby make herself visible to others as a human, for needing to be told she is not or a "mule."[576]

Double Jeopardy: Race plus Gender, Class, or More

While "African American" may be elided with "vulnerable," innocence does not automatically attach to melanin in black literature. Nor do African American characters refrain from "greening" others. Frank, himself, dehumanizes the Korean girl – though in a way that seems benign at first. He watches her "paw" the soldiers' garbage, searching for food among the American army's trash, and compares the sight of her to "a bird feeding her young or a hen scratching, scratching dirt for the worm she knew for sure was buried underneath.[577] He affectionately describes the child's hand as a "tiny starfish." But given that the text presents the elision of humanity and animality as sinister, the reader is perhaps less surprised when, at the book's end, Frank's confesses his crime.

It is important that Frank's experiences with the Korean girl take place during war. In her essay "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing" Andrea Smith says of non-whites:

> Our survival strategies and resistance to white supremacy are set by the system of white supremacy itself. What keeps us trapped within our particular pillars of white supremacy is that we are seduced with the prospect of being able to participate in the other pillars. For example, all non-Native peoples are promised the ability to join the colonial project of settling indigenous lands. All non-Black peoples are promised that if they comply, they will not be at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. And Black, Native,

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[576] Morrison, *Home*, 122.

[577] Ibid., 94-95.

> Latino, and Asian peoples are promised that they will economically and politically advance if they join U.S. wars to spread 'democracy.'"[578]

Thus, a militarized Frank renders another non-white character first animalistic, then biologically dead. Frank's atrocity against the Korean girl, him abusing her in the way his own people have been abused, shows that blacks are not invulnerable to wendigo possession. Lietz says:

> As the wendigo figure evolved within indigenous cultures to represent the white man and the unrelenting greed of colonization, it became most often represented as spiritual disease or sickness of the mind. Instead of becoming wendigo in the physical sense, people can be invaded by the spirit of the wendigo and turn into a wendigo through the corruption of their spirit.[579]

The perversion that allows Frank to murder a child and the resulting PTSD can be viewed as such a "spiritual disease or sickness of the mind." Smith describes how minorities, victimized by white supremacy, in turn victimize each other. Thus, Frank, as an African American invaded by the spirit of the wendigo turns into a wendigo through the corruption of his spirit and preys on someone more vulnerable than he.

And Frank's entrée into the army was for the very reasons Smith advanced – to escape Lotus, Georgia, a place of "mindless work in fields you didn't own, couldn't own, and wouldn't own if you had any other choice…. Thank the Lord for the army."[580]

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[578] Andrea Smith, "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing," in *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology*, ed. Jill Petry (Cambridge: South End Press, 2006), 69.

[579] Lietz, "Cannibalism in Contact Narratives," 41.

[580] Morrison, *Home*, 84.

In Frank's reflection upon why he joined the army, Lotus is described not only as a place of "mindless work" but also a place where "any kid who had a mind would lose it."[581] It is a town where "there was no future, just long stretches of killing time. There was no goal other than breathing, nothing to win…." Furthermore, "[n]obody in Lotus knew anything or wanted to learn anything."[582] Thus, the name of the town is a mythological pharmacological allusion to the lotus-eaters of the *Odyssey* who were addicted to the flower and lived in narcotized indifference.

Frank's gentle allusions to birds and starfish are merely a softer – but no more benign – echo of the gothic assertion, "I am not a beast!" *You are the creature, not I*, his figurative language seems to suggest. Just as Smith's essay portrays non-Native, non-black, and all other ethnicities of minority Americans contesting over a limited supply of rights and dignity, Frank vampirically secures his humanity and future at the cost of the Korean girl's.

When Frank probes why he might have been confined to the hospital at the book's beginning, he posits, among other options, "Perhaps he started a fight with a stranger or started weeping before trees—apologizing to them for acts he had never committed."[583] It is the latter suggestion that merits attention. When bad acts and trees appear together in black literature, it is often in the context of lynching.

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[581] Ibid., 84.

[582] Ibid., 83.

[583] Ibid., 15.

We are told Frank never committed the acts he expresses contrition for, but a few lines later we receive the hint that "[b]ack was the free-floating rage, the self-loathing disguised as somebody else's fault."[584] This suggests perhaps Frank, despite his blackness, is the analogue of someone who committed a lynching. We are suspect, then, when Frank claims to have merely "witnessed…. The scavenging child clutching an orange, smiling, then saying, 'Yum-yum,' before the guard blew her head off."[585]

The reburial Frank and Cee perform, though ostensibly for Jerome's father, also includes the Korean girl -- the smile that haunts Cee and Frank in the bell pepper is finally found in the dead man's skull. After respectfully interring the remains, Frank nails a grave marker that reads "Here Stands a Man" to a tree and "could have sworn the sweet bay was pleased to agree."[586] Thus, Frank's spiritual journey – from his denial of guilt to his redemption – is worked out upon green terrain. He sinned against the trees when he essentially lynched the Korean girl for the same reason many black men were murdered – anxiety about sex. But he is reconciled to them when he pleases the bay tree with his effort at doing good for another victim.

African American literature has long observed the ways individuals subjugated along one axis but privileged along another may act as oppressors in certain contexts. For example, in *The Color Purple*, Celie is essentially marketed to her future husband Albert as though she were

[584] Ibid.

[585] Ibid., 99-100.

[586] Ibid., 145.

a piece of livestock. Pa states he "can let [Celie's prospective husband] have Celie," using a salesman's language. He details her gynecological and reproductive qualities as though she were an animal: "She ain't fresh tho, but I spect you know that. She spoiled. Twice… And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it." Even the verb Albert uses to describe Celie's infertility "fixed" is the word used for describing a spayed or neutered animal. He also frames her as a beast of burden: "But she ain't no stranger to hard work." Finally, he forces Celie to display herself to Albert's appraising gaze as though she were an animal or a slave (a biologically human, legal animal) being auctioned.[587]

Just as the corrupt legal and medical systems converge in the experiences of abuse suffered by African American characters, so, too, do law and medicine come together in the section of the book in which Cee is healed by a group of black female folk practitioners: "The women handled sickness as though it were an affront, an illegal.…" These healers also make clear their feelings about the white-dominated medical system: "Once they knew she had been working for a doctor, the eye rolling and tooth sucking was enough to make clear their scorn. And nothing… made them change their minds about the medical industry."[588, 589]

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[587] Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Mariner Press, 1982), 7-8.

[588] Morrison, *Home*, 121.

[589] Like *Home*, Morrison's works *A Mercy*, *Beloved,* and *The Bluest Eye* suggest the only medical practitioners African Americans can trust are those who are themselves marginalized by the legal and medical systems. For example, in *A Mercy*, there is an unnamed African character known only as "the blacksmith" who heals a mixed-race girl in seventeenth century New York. In *Beloved*, there is Amy Denver, a white fugitive indentured servant, who cares for Sethe.

The elderly women's comments to Cee hold her accountable for her role in her victimization: "Men know a slop jar when they see one." "You ain't a mule to be pulling some evil doctor's wagon." "You a privy or a woman?" "Who told you you was trash?"[590] "Slop jar," "mule," "privy," and "trash," signify the forms blacks take on when taxonomically excluded from the human species.

In addition, "mule" is an allusion to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In the novel, Nanny warns her granddaughter Janie:

> Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see.[591]

While Amy prefigures Pauline's obstetrician by asking Sethe, "What you gonna do, just lay there and foal?" she also massages Sethe's legs and feet when Sethe is unable to walk, an act the narrator refers to as "magic." (Morrison, *Beloved*, 33). And Amy correctly identifies her labors as revitalizing, warning Sethe, "It's gonna hurt, now…. Anything dead coming back to life hurts." Ibid., 35. And, finally, in *The Bluest Eye*, there is M'Dear, an African American woman deemed by the narrator a "competent midwife and decisive diagnostician" and considered "infallible" by her community. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 135.

M'Dear is, in many ways, the ultimate Morrison healer, and she is a prototype of those who heal Cee -- female, black, old, skilled despite lacking formal education in medicine, and, perhaps most importantly, embedded in and vetted by an African American community. Her very "name," "M'Dear," is not a name at all but an African American term of endearment for grandmothers and other elderly women – a contraction of "My Dear." Furthermore, the two capital letters in her name "M" and "D" are a wink at the medical title she deserves but lacks "MD." M'Dear stands in stark contrast to Dr. Beau – a white man with a medical degree living in a segregated white community.

[590] Ibid., 122.

[591] Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 14.

Nanny's sociological conclusions prefigure what legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw refers to as "intersectionality" which is a rubric for understanding the experiences of those at the nexus of more than one form of oppression – in this case, race and gender.[592] Cee, as a black woman, is more vulnerable to a certain type of abuse; like the melon, the novel suggests females are the most delectable to cut open – especially for doctors who are "so interested in wombs."[593] And the surname "Money," as the talk of "dead poor" and "live rich" suggests, limns the way class, in addition to race, oppresses. Age is an additional challenge: as Miss Ethel, Cee's primary healer, declares, "You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let… no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery."[594]

Miss Ethel's definition of slavery hearkens back to Sethe's traumatizing experience of having Schoolteacher's nephews decide who – or what -- she is: animal or human. Additionally, Miss Ethel echoes a personal belief of Morrison's: "What I think the political correctness debate is really about is the power to be able to define. The definers want the power to name. And the defined are now taking that power away from them."[595] Miss Ethel and the other elderly

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[592] See Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–67. https://philpapers.org/archive/CREDTI.pdf.

[593] Morrison, *Home*, 113.

[594] Ibid., 126.

[595] Claudia Dreifus, "Chloe Wofford Talks about Toni Morrison," in *Toni Morrison: Conversations*, ed. Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 101.

women insist that marginalized people must be proactive about defining themselves as humans and rejecting claims that they are beasts.

The Quest to be Human in the Land of the Living

When Cee and Frank properly bury the man they saw murdered when they were children, they transfer the manhood Frank originally conferred on the biped horses onto the victim by crafting a marker that reads "Here *Stands* a Man" [italics mine].[596] I discussed earlier how Sethe's reason for killing her infant daughter suggests ontological life is only available to the biologically dead -- "If I hadn't killed her she would have died…." Similarly, only in the afterlife when he ought *lie* like a corpse does the decedent finally stand like a man. In Morrison books, characters do not necessarily "live happily ever after." At times, the most they can hope for is to live happily in the ever after.

Morrison's novels often conclude with a twinge of hope, yet the protagonists of one work struggle against the depredations of unjust legal and medical systems only for the protagonists of another opus, taking place in a later era, to fall victim to the new incarnations of oppression. Thus, Morrison's works do not function as an illustration of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s arc of the moral universe bending towards justice. Rather, they depict the spiral of American history continuously looping back to injustice.

Morrison's works, particularly *Home*, unmask that which masquerades as justice and medicine at the level of both narrative and grammar. *Home* testifies to how the medical

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[596] Morrison, *Home*, 144-45.

system relies on the bio-logic of the legal system to render black bodies vulnerable while the legal system needs a medical system lacking in bioethics to lend pseudo-scientific credence to its discriminatory laws. Ultimately, both systems collaborate and contrive to blur black into green.

Chapter Six

The Great Black-Green North

Introduction

C. S. Giscombe's *Giscome Road* is a book of poetry about the places in British Columbia named after his ancestor[597] nineteenth century black Jamaican explorer John Robert Giscome. The poems move back and forth between collapsing and bifurcating black and green, unifying African descended humanity with land and water only to tease out the differences between them, often employing words that apply, in one sense, to racially marginalized people and, in another, to the environment.

First, I discuss how two poems show what black relationships with nature can look like in Canada – the nation that nineteenth-century African Americans romanticized as the Promised Land. "Sound Carries" and "Giscome Portage" void the dehumanizing oppression of the United States. Unlike US Africans, Giscombe shows the productivity of the chiasmus between humans and nature. He takes advantage of this rhetorical figure whereas other black American writers get caught in it. Giscombe also uses a series of Biblical allusions – to Eden, the Exodus, and Christ -- to frame Canada as a holy eco-topia and treat old Giscome as a nature god.

[597] "Emancipation of the Dissonance: The Poetry of C.S. Giscombe," In Review, The Volta, last modified June 1, 2013, http://www.thevolta.org/inreview-prairiestyle.html.

A paradox follows because the poems are written from the African American perspective that hypes Canada and its land as idealized. However, African *Canadians* – who have actual experience with their national environment as opposed to fantasies of it – write warily of green. Comparative readings of "Sound Carries" and black Canadian poems make this discrepancy plain. (I also include these poems for the same reason that I analyzed *No Give Up, Maan!* in Chapter Four – to bring a transnational perspective to African American Studies).

In another poem "Giscome Portage," Giscombe invents a biocentric mythology for his ancestor. The sources of this lore can only be discerned from reading bi-culturally, between African and Anglo systems of reference, for one discovers in the legend of old Giscome bits of both Norse mythology and Ifa religion.

But other poems go a different direction. "The Northernmost Road" and "Giscome, B.C." focus not on aggrandizing old Giscome but on framing the "memory" of water as a repository of black history. In the latter poem, Giscombe employs multiple uses of the same words to dissolve the distinctions between non-human nature and African Americans. And, in the book's final piece, "Over the Edge," Giscombe takes the notion of black unity with nature to its apotheosis, going so far as to posit not just African diasporic multiraciality but black-green hybridity.

"Sound Carries" and Black-Green Chiasmi

Consider the clause "Sound Carries," the title of the first poem in *Giscome Road*. The words can mean sound -- the aural phenomenon -- endures across distance or that the phonetics of words hold meaning. Alternatively, the clause could be interpreted as explaining

that the body of water that separates an island from the mainland transports entities such as boats.

Here are the enjambed initial lines of "Sound Carries" transcribed (with the original line spacing) to facilitate a close reading:

> The song's a commotion rising in the current, almost an apparition: or the shape
>
> rises—obvious, river-like—in the blood (in the house that the blood made)
>
> & goes on, is the fact of the "oldest ancestor," in whose
>
> name etc [sic] description itself persists on out, not like some story, into the up-
> lands, on into the stony breakdown, no line
>
> between the old river god & the old man's name coming up along the river & on the road:
>
> an endless invisible present going on, [sic] a noise
>
> (with nothing at the other side of it)[598]

The two opening lines of the poem are chiastic: The word "song" tells us "Sound" should initially be understood in the auditory, rather than the aquatic, sense. In the first line then, human music is in the water. Yet in the very next line, the "river-like" – water – is located in human "blood." Humanity and nature are, therefore, not separate. Rather, they flow into each other. They are reflections of each other – like someone peering into a still body [of water].

This chiasmus may remind the reader of some of African American literature's other linguistic cruxes. First, there is, of course, Frederick Douglass' "You have seen how a man was

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[598] C. S. Giscombe, "Sound Carries," in *Giscome Road* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive press, 1998), 13.

made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." Then, there is Son, in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, musing that Valerian "had taken the sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value, as though the cutting of cane and picking of beans was child's play and had no value; but he turned it into candy, the invention of which really was child's play, and sold it to other children…." And, in Morrison's *Home*, Frank Money remembers that "[the horses] rose up like men. We saw them. Like men they stood."[599]

But there is a significant difference between Giscombe's cross and these others. Douglass and Son's point to the disparagement of black humanity: The former slave illustrates how easily people of African descent rock back and forth between the categories of "man" and "brute."[600] And Son scorns how black people and their green resources are lumped together and exploited as though worthless and only ascribed "value" when it profits whites to do so. Finally, Frank Money insists on focusing on the wondrously anthropomorphized horses as a way of repressing more sinister memories. Those recollections, when finally attended to, eventually lead him to learn that the farm where the creatures "rose up" was also the place where African Americans devolved -- the site of "men-treated-like-dog fights."

In contrast, old Giscome is in no taxonomic danger -- he is not at risk of being treated as livestock. No one threatens to prey upon his labor or the bounty of the landscape in which he dwells. He *does* slip between black and green – or blue, as it were – but not in a denigrating way; Giscombe has a *positive* biocentric identity.

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[599] Morrison, *Home*, 3.

[600] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 160.

“Sound Carries” and Religion

The explorer’s relationship to land is informed by *which* land he is in. Douglass, Son, and Money’s lives, both fictional and not, are lived primarily in the United States. But old Giscome is in *Canada* – a nation framed in the nineteenth-century African American imagination as the Promised Land, the Canaan to the New World Egypt of America.[601] As the chiasmi of Douglass and Morrison reveal, blacks understand and articulate their oppression in ecological terms. Thus, it is not surprising that visions of justice would be framed in ecocentric ways, too. For that reason, Canada, as an idealized haven, represents not just freedom from slavery and a homeland but something else besides -- a place where it is possible to form relationships with nature uncompromised by dehumanization.

C. S. Giscombe is less well known than the other writers this dissertation focuses on. One of my reasons for wanting to raise his profile is that his work diverges from better known black authors such as Douglass, Morrison, and -- as I will later show -- Chesnutt in a key way. For the former three writers, relationships with nature, however ecophilic they might be, are always compromised by the psychic violence of blacks’ experience of being considered non-human in America’s socio-legal schema. But, much like a fugitive slave, Giscombe manages to escape this fraught reality by sending his poetic imagination north across the border into Canada.

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[601] Renford Reese, “Canada: The Promised Land for U.S. Slaves,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 3 (2011): 210, EBESCO*host*.

A parenthesis in close reading is in order here -- note that it is crucial to remember that both ancient Canaan and contemporary Canada harbor indigenous populations. The Bible says God directed the Israelites to commit genocide against the indigenous Canaanites – and that the Israelites did so successfully. Similarly, just two years prior to the Cariboo gold rush of 1862, of which the historical Giscome was a part,[602] the British seized the lucrative land from Native peoples.[603] Thus, old Giscome's ability, as a black man, to have redemptive experiences in Canadian rivers happens in the context of injustice towards the First Nations.

But let us return to close reading. Ancient Giscome "is the fact of the 'oldest ancestor.'" In one sense, as an "explorer" – I put the term in quotes since his presence succeeds British Columbia's First Nations populations -- he is the ascendant of all the "pioneers" who come after him. But the phrase "oldest ancestor" is also evocative of Adam. Thus, Canada is not simply the Promised Land of Canaan but the Garden of Eden.

The Bible's first human was made of breath and dust. Old Giscome's conception is similar: He is breath – song, that is – and water. In Eden, Adam – like old Giscome after him – was a "namer"; God assigned the first man the job of christening animals while Giscome lent his surname to sites all over Canada.[604] As Adam's task suggests, the prelapsarian world was one

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[602] "John Robert Giscome," Huble Homestead: Historic Site, Huble Homestead/Giscome Portage Heritage Society, accessed May 21, 2018, https://www.hublehomestead.ca/johngiscome.

[603] M. J. Whittles, review of *The Burden of History: Colonialism and the Frontier Myth in a Rural Canadian Community*, by Elizabeth Furniss, *Anthropologica* 44, no. 2 (2002): 329-30, doi:10.2307/25606101.

[604] One wonders if any of the places named for old Giscome had indigenous names.

of harmony between nature and man. For example, humans did not yet eat meat, and snakes did not yet attack humans.

Other African American texts reference Eden and the fall.   These works reinterpret the story as being primarily about a crisis that perverts (the black) man's relationship with green rather than a shift in the connection between God and man: Douglass describes Captain Lloyd's garden as an Eden where slaves are punished by their omnipotent owner for stealing fruit. The chastisement makes the chattel degenerate from black humans into tar babies – green humanoids who cannot speak to defend themselves because the pitch on their bodies is considered sufficient proof of their guilt. Douglass also portrays slave-breaker Edward Covey as the Biblical snake who causes his African American prey to devolve from humans to brutes. And in *Tar Baby*, Morrison describes Valerian creating an Eden in the greenhouse of his palatial Caribbean home. While on the property, Son eats an avocado symbolic of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. The consumption of the produce precipitates his relationship with Jade – a bond that nearly costs him his birthright as an immortal ecophilic horseman.

Giscombe's Canada, however, is both a place where such black-green falls have not yet occurred *and* a post-slavery -- that is to say, a post-men-treated-like-dogs -- refuge. It is an Eden from which humans have not yet been exiled *and* a place where people of African descent can recoup their humanity. As the phrase "an endless invisible present going on" suggests, it is a haven that exists outside of time.

There is a major difference between the two myths, however: Adam was created in Eden, but, as I have noted, the historical Giscome was "made" in Jamaica. Canada, then, is a place of re-creation, a site where old Giscome as an individual as well as other immigrants from

the African diaspora could craft themselves anew -- a place where they could be born again, so to speak.

Unsurprisingly, then, in addition to being the father of humanity, old Giscome is linked to Christ (who Himself is often conceived of as a second Adam). The repetition of "rising" and "rises" suggests resurrection – although the "rising in the current" also hints at someone emerging from the water after baptism. The notion of the rite is further reinforced by old Giscome's first name – John – as in John the Baptist. And one remembers that Jesus was baptized i.e. born again in the Jordan River, the body of water the Israelites crossed to reach Canaan, the Promised Land.

These notions of rebirth are consistent with the role of rivers in African American literature. Wardi refers to these waterways as "Rivers of Redemption." She notes, "Unlike the transatlantic voyage where a reverse maritime journey was nearly impossible, rivers were frequently employed as escape routes."[605] Thus, rivers are the liberating counterpart to oceans just as Canada/metaphorical Canaan is the redeeming counterpart to the United States/metaphorical Egypt.

Although Wardi speaks of American rivers, one would expect a Canadian river – a waterway located in the Promised Land -- to be an exponentially emancipatory natural force. And if one thinks of water as symbolic of the womb, then the ocean represents the uterus from which one is born into New World slavery while Canadian rivers are places from Africans can be reborn into freedom. Furthermore, if blacks were delivered from the ocean onto American

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[605] Wardi, *Water and African American Memory*, 64.

shores as biped brutes, “Sound Carries” suggests they are reborn from Canadian rivers as nature-inflected divinities.

Further Christian allusions in the poem continue to deify old Giscome. “Blood” reminds the reader of the sacrificial and sacramental blood of Jesus, and “the house that the blood [of old Giscome] made,” suggests the mansions the Son, having shed His blood, went to Heaven to prepare for His followers. This implies Canada is not only the Promised Land and Eden but also Heaven – a Heaven on earth. It also suggests that just as Christ prepared Heaven for Christians, Giscome’s explorations paved the way for other blacks to immigrate. And the next phrase, “in whose/ name,”[606] references old Giscome *and* God – one thinks of “in Jesus’ name we pray.” Even the form of the chiasmus with which the poem begins echoes the cross upon which Jesus was crucified.

There is “no line/ between the old river god & the old man’s name coming up along the river & on the road” the narrator tells us. In one sense, old Giscome, like the triune God, has multiple undivided identities: divine, as in the “old river god,” and human, as in the “old man.”[607] (The “old river god” could either be the deified historical Giscome or an indigenous water spirit that old Giscome is an avatar of). Thus, there is “no line/ between the old river god & the old man’s name” just as Jesus stated, “Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father.”

“[N]o line” can also be comprehended at the meta-level. It is as though the narrator is referring to the poem’s constant use of enjambment. The lines flow together like water until,

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[606] Giscombe, “Sound Carries,” 13.

[607] Ibid.

to all intents and purposes, they can hardly be separated into lines at all. And, as in African Canadian M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, a book of poetry about the court case that followed the massacre of one hundred fifty Africans on the slave ship for whom the book is named, the words are arranged on the poem's second page so that they appear to be floating in water instead of being organized in standard lines. Then, on the next page, Giscombe abandons lines altogether, laying out various place names in geographic relationship to each other.

In Chapter Two, I discussed how, in Charles Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine," Henry's bodily changes are reflected in the diction and syntax of the language Julius uses to tell of the phenomenon. Similarly, Giscombe uses visual techniques to transform the poem first, into fluid, then, into a map to mirror representations he makes of old Giscome as water and as an atlas.

"Sound Carries," as the opening to *Giscome Road*, is analogous to Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Like this collection of poetry, the Bible begins with noise and water. The "Sound" is akin to the Word that God speaks to narrate creation into being. In the Bible, God hovers over an aqueous void before the commencement of speech and time just as old Giscome remains, in a way that transcends chronology, "an endless invisible present going on, [sic] a noise/ (with nothing at the other side of it)."[608]

Old Giscome, like God at the beginning of everything, is simply sound, a voice, a word speaking into the nothingness. And the resemblance between old Giscome and the Creator is

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[608] Ibid.

further underscored when the former's name becomes "a name-day, one of the day names" – here the reader is reminded of God initiating the concept of time by creating days.[609, 610]

Once more, I interrupt the close reading to point out that, as aesthetically lovely as all this is, it is also ethically troubling. After all, if "nothing [is] at the other side" of the noise old Giscome makes, it is because either the presence of First Nations peoples is being ignored or they are absent, having succumbed to whooping cough, measles, or smallpox, the latter of which killed almost half of the indigenous people of the region in 1802 and then over half of the survivors in 1855.[611] Thus, the framing as old Giscome as one of British Columbia's creator gods disregards the fact that the land existed and was inhabited prior to his presence.

At the end of the poem's second page, Giscombe recounts, "[T]he map/ of sound got fleshed out so."[612] If Jesus is the Word made flesh, then old Giscome is the map incarnate, for the "sound" of his name becomes toponyms in atlases. But in another sense, he is also sound – or water – turned to bone, muscle, and skin, the channel in human form. This notion is expressed in a reference to "a river's head and its mouth."[613] These are, of course, natural features, but, in a sense, old Giscome's head is the river's head. Old Giscome's mouth is the

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[609] Ibid., 14.

[610] The presences of other gods are hinted at, too. After all, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday are named after Tiw, Odin, Thor, Frigg, and Saturn, respectively.

[611] Whittles, "Burden," 329.

[612] Giscombe, "Sound Carries," 14.

[613] Ibid., 16.

river's mouth. And old Giscome's name is the voice that comes from that mouth. Old Giscome is thus, at once water and man, and, at once, man and god.

In making use of religion in this way, Giscombe engages in what we might think of as "radical deification." He dares to claim divinity for a dehumanized race. And he does so by "writing back." He uses white supremacists' trick of comparing blacks to non-human nature against them – employing the very technique utilized to denigrate people of African descent to elevate them. If racists wanted – or want – to assert, "You blacks are too much like nature to be human like us," Giscombe's response is: "You are right. We aren't humans like you -- we are divine."

"Sound Carries" and Differing African American and African Canadian Attitudes to Nature

I note here that though Giscombe is writing about Canada, his ecophilic point of view is decidedly American. Contrast "Sound Carries" with "Breath" from African Canadian poet Troy Burle Bailey's *The Pierre Bonga Loops* about the eponymous black Canadian fur trader born in the 1780s. At first, the two poems seem rather similar. In fact, Bailey's poem, written from the first-person perspective of Bonga, begins with the statement "[It feels like we must be]/ Made up only of damp sound from the wave pounding our hull" [brackets in the original].[614]

Bailey employs the same play on the word "sound" as Giscombe does. However, the placement of the first poem's line in brackets serves to undercut the declaration's power. It is almost as though Bonga is retracting this part of his statement or as though the clause is meant

[614] Troy Burle Bailey, "Breath," in *The Pierre Bonga Loops* (Burnaby: Commodore Books, 2010), 33.

to be understood as a mere intimation that does not carry as much weight as the rest of the text.

Though Giscombe constantly portrays old Giscome as an avatar of water, Bonga does not claim with equal forcefulness that he is made of the current. Thus, enjambment makes the lines of "Sound Carries" flow and merge while the brackets in "Breath" break up the momentum so that instead of the lines describing how Bonga and his companions are made up of water, and, in turn, "the canoe" is "made of endless scrolls of birch paper," the construction of the canoe seems matter of fact and the constitutions of the men putative.[615]

Old Giscome is one with the water but there is a break between Bonga and the green world. For, about midway in "Breath," the certainty of "[It feels like we *must* be]" [italics mine] cedes to the indeterminacy of "Or": "Or do we find code in the skin of the tree, which lives now as our boat, trying to sort some sorcery at us for stripping her bare," Bonga wonders.[616] Perhaps he and nature are not unified. Perhaps, in fact, they are enemies.

In further contrast, while old Giscome *is* cartography – a surname that labels the land, a "name [that] cycled along sourceless in the trees/ like it was a presupposition of lyrical content to the remote,"[617] Bonga *consults* a map inscribed with a caption that seems to reinforce how intimidating Lake Superior, which he is navigating, is: it is "[t]he largest known body/ Of Fresh

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[615] Ibid.

[616] Ibid.

[617] Ibid., 16.

Water in the/ World and as subject to/ Storms as the/ Atlantic Ocean."[618] In the face of such vastness and peril, Bonga cannot presuppose he is fated to reach his unnamed destination. Given such challenges, it seems likely he may never arrive at all.

Consider also African Canadian poet Wayde Compton's "Crucial Blues" from his book *49th Parallel Psalm*. The poem is about a member of a nineteenth-century prosperous, literate, black community preparing to immigrate from California lest it become a proslavery state. He is, in fact, like the historical Giscome, one of the six hundred blacks who left California for Victoria at the invitation of Governor James Douglass[619] – who, himself, was partly of African descent.[620] (The historical Giscome quit Jamaica for Panama, then traveled to California, finally ending up in Canada).[621] In still another similarity, Compton, like Giscombe, draws on the Exodus myth --"Psalm" is a Biblical word, and a psalm for the 49th parallel invites the reader to view the border between the United States and Canada (which runs latitudinous along the 49th parallel) as the Jordan which skirted Canaan. But here the likenesses cease.

Compton's persona "can't seem/ to discern if the scent of the sea is pure/ or rank," observing that "it's red tide." ("Red tide" denotes the mass death of marine species due to the

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[618] Ibid.

[619] Huble Homestead: Historic Site, Huble Homestead/Giscome Portage Heritage Society, "John Robert Giscome."

[620] John Adams, *Old Square Toes and His Lady: The Life of James and America Douglas* (Victoria: Touchwood Editions, 2011), 1, 51.

[621] Huble Homestead: Historic Site, Huble Homestead/Giscome Portage Heritage Society, "John Robert Giscome."

presence of toxins or bacteria in the water). The persona waits for the Pioneer Committee to "un/ earth us some new some/ where: settlement, sediment, coast" remarking, "no one uses the word home."[622] In contrast, the phrase "the house that the blood made" suggests that old Giscome's blood, when combined with Canadian water, spontaneously generates a home.

The yet undecided place the persona of Compton's poem contemplates is bittersweet – it boasts a "topography of our hope" but is located "in the inlet of our tears." None of the three debated emigration sites -- "Panama,/ Sonora,/ Vancouver's Island" -- offers unambiguous haven.[623]

When I read the poem, I am particularly struck by the verb "un/ earth." While old Giscome is constantly depicted as a sort of genus loci – someone *of earth* -- whose very presence changes unnamed, vacant land into, as Compton puts it, "some/ where," Compton's persona wants a place to be *unearthed*. He does not want to join *with* the earth. As "un," thrown into relief by being placed on a separate line from "earth," suggests, the persona wants the Pioneer Committee to carve out a destination *from* the earth.

Thus, while African American Giscombe romanticizes Canada's land, African Canadians Bailey and Compton express a profound ambivalence towards it. In previous chapters, I have shown how the green in African American literature is *African*. But reading "Sound Carries"

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[622] Wayde Compton, "Crucial Blues" in *49th Parallel Psalm* (Vancouver: Advance Editions, 1999), 41.

[623] Ibid.

comparatively with “Breath” and “Crucial Blues” reveal how the ecophilia of African American literature is also *American*.

Looking ecocritically at black American writing in his book *Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, African American Melvin Dixon observes, “Afro-American writers, often considered homeless, alienated from mainstream culture, and segregated in negative environments have used language to create alternative landscapes where black culture and identity can flourish apart from any marginal, prescribed ‘place.’” He describes how in songs composed “during slavery blacks depicted the wilderness as a place of refuge beyond the restricted world of the plantation."

In contrast, in *Black Like Who?*, African Canadian Rinaldo Walcott quotes his compatriot Dionne Brand’s phrase “a tough geography” to describe how black Canadian writers relate to *their* national landscape.[624] Walcott notes, “The first phase of Black demands on the Canadian nation-state must be considered in light of Africadian demands that land promised to them be honored. When some of those grants were indeed honored, the quality of the land was suitable for little more than housing plots.”[625] Thus, unlike the initial black American understanding of green space as sites that nourished the soul, one of the formative African Canadian encounters with land was with places that grudgingly refused to sustain the body.

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[624] Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who?* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 1997), 46.

[625] Ibid., 43.

Beyond this culturally specific history, nature is a relatively hostile place for Canadians of *all* races. As Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley note in *Greening the Maple: Canadian Ecocriticism in Context*:

> In his "Conclusion" to the Literary History of Canada (1965), a landmark essay, Frye several times suggests that an agonistic relation to the landscape defines Canadian culture; he notes that a characteristic of Canadian poetry is a predominant "tone of deep terror in regard to nature."[626]

They say, "An enduring stereotype [which Soper and Bradley admit may bear 'some truth,'] holds that Canadian literature revolves around descriptions of nature: in novel after novel, and poem after poem, rugged mountains, whirling snowstorms, and desolate prairies torment hapless characters."[627]

The United States of America is a less environmentally formidable place than Canada – and this simple fact creates a substantial difference between the literatures of the two countries' black populations. Above the border, the inhospitableness of Canadian nature blurs in the African Canadian mind with the inhospitable nature of white-dominated Canadian society -- or at least fails to offer a respite from it. In contrast, to African Americans, the relative sanctuary provided by the United States' climate and terrain serves as a palliative for racism.

Given these divergent eco-historical contexts, it is not surprising that, unlike Bonga and Compton's persona, American-authored old Giscome is portrayed as able to move through his new environment as though indigenous to it and destined for it. In a sense, he is a literary

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[626] Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley, introduction to *Greening the Maple: Canadian Ecocriticism in Context* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2013).

[627] Ibid.

Annexationist, connecting his black heritage -- or literally lending his name -- to notions of American Manifest Destiny.

Giscombe, like Bailey and Compton, is writing about the Canadian landscape. But imagined from below the border from a distance of one hundred years, the poet views green through rose colored glasses. The poet is not so much writing about the real British Columbia but, in African American fashion, conjuring up one of Dixon's "alternative landscapes," placing the historical Giscome in the Canada of nineteenth-century black American fantasy, a dream no more related to reality than the immigrant vision of a land with streets paved in gold is to the actual United States.

"Giscome Portage": Reading in Black and White

Earlier, I noted how Giscombe depicts old Giscome as a nature deity. In a section of his poem "Giscome Portage" called "(Northern Road, 2)," Giscombe develops this portrayal into a saga. The persona Giscombe has a dream in which, upon walking "into a line of trees,"[628] he encounters a one-legged black man carrying a cane. This individual is perhaps the one-legged Ifa forest orisha Osanyin. And his "cane" could an Opa Osanyin, the staff carried by the divinity's worshippers.[629]

This view is strengthened by the fact that descriptions of old Giscome – whom we will promptly learn is the descendant of this one-legged man -- are reminiscent of how Osanyin is

[628] Giscome, "Giscome Portage," in *Giscome Road*, 38.

[629] Francis Olawole Famule, "Art and Spirituality: The Ijumu Northeastern-Yoruba Egúngún" (PhD diss., The University of Arizona, 2005), 70, ProQuest Ebrary.

viewed in the New World. Consider, for example, this description of how the orisha is conceived of in Cuba where he is known as Osain: "Osain is the orisha who is the owner of the woods… wilderness, medicinal plants and everything that is nature. Osain is a person, a deity, a water infused with ashé [i.e. power], and an action." [630, 631]

Recalling his dream, the persona explains, "He'd lost an eye too, [the one-legged man] sd [sic], in a fight." When doctors remove the eye, which was dangling from its socket, "they gave him something to drink that tasted like wild/ strawberry, bitter & sweet at once."[632] Here, one thinks of Odin who sacrificed one of his eyes as an offering to a well and earned the Mead of Poetry. Robert Farris Thompson says of the orisha, "Osanyin is the crippled king who, crushed to half his size, gained insight into the human condition."[633] The African and European holy figures are alike in that they both glean knowledge from being maimed.

Thus, the dream man's form and experiences allude to both a black spirit and a white one, and his dualism is echoed by the fact that "he'd been pleasuring 2 women,/ one black & one white." The dream man describes his intimacies with these women while "making the

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[630] Amanda D. Concha-Holmes, "*Who* is nature?: Yorùbá religion and ecology in Cuba," (PhD diss., University of Florida, 2010), 37, ProQuest Ebrary.

[631] Concha-Holmes, "*Who* is nature," 211.

[632] Giscombe, "Giscome Portage," 38.

[633] James Lindroth, "Images of Subversion: Ishmael Reed and the Hoodoo Trickster," *African American Review* 30, no. 2 (1996): 190, doi:10.2307/3042353.

motions of diving as though/ they'd been water he was jumping down into."[634] Thus, the man is, in a way, the consort of both human women and the river.

From his relationship with the latter, there is a sort of conception: "it surfaced, he sd—meaning the *blood* did, meaning the blood *did*--, in the current"[635, 636] which is a callback to "The song's a commotion rising in the current, almost an apparition: or the shape/ rises—obvious, river-like—in the blood" from "Sound Carries." This blood that surfaces from the current is old Giscome. Thus, the Jamaican pioneer, like Jesus, had both divine and mortal fathers.[637] (This rather involved narrative of paternity suggests the reader should interpret "line of trees" as having a second, less superficial meaning: "line" as in "genetic line" and "tree" as in "family tree"). Endowed by Giscombe with a supernatural provenance, old Giscome's ascent into the pantheon is complete.

By setting his book in Canada, Giscombe envisions the sort of bonds African descended people could make with non-human nature in the Promised Land. To do this, however, he draws on inspirations from black history's prelapsarian period – the era before the crossing of

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[634] Giscombe, "Giscome Portage," 38.

[635] Ibid.

[636] One is reminded here of the Hindu story of Rishyashringa who was conceived when the sage Vibhandaka, upon seeing a beautiful celestial woman, released his seed into a river. A deer drank the water and bore a human child with antlers.

[637] That the one-legged man is symbolically both African and European is reminiscent of Governor Douglass who was himself mythologized as the Father of British Columbia and, because of his invitation to black Californians, could be considered the figurative progenitor of old Giscome and the rest of the region's African descended population.

the Middle Passage – by fusing together spirits from the Old World such as Osanyin and Odin to create a new diasporic black-green mythology. Like old Giscome's name, then, people of African descent's connection with the environment "cycles" -- from the worship of nature spirits like Osanyin, through the epistemological violence of socio-legal parity with animals, to dignifying ecophilic relationships in the New World Canaan.

"The Northernmost Road" and "Giscome, B.C.": The Memory of Water and Language's Waves of Meaning

In "Sound Carries," we are told that old Giscome's name "cycled along sourceless" as though part of the water cycle. It is "sourceless," perhaps, because no point in a water cycle can be considered the process' definitive beginning. The surname "Giscome" could be "presupposed," then, because it would have supplied "lyrical content to the remote" before, as many times as river has met sea and seawater has evaporated to vapor. I think here of the quote from Morrison that "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was."[638]

Repetition is used to give the text the "perfect memory" of water, to allow later poems to "get back to" the original language of "Sound Carries." Thus, "The Northernmost Road" begins with the persona Giscombe explaining his desire, in section "1" of the poem, to "drive out to the edge… the emptiest soundstage."[639]

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[638] Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 199.

[639] Giscombe, "The Northernmost Road," in *Giscome Road*, 21.

On the one hand, the edge represents an untouched frontier. But the soundstage, even if empty, is a man-made structure, evidence that the locale once harbored a human presence. The persona's arrival there will therefore represent not pioneering but civilization's return. The very word "soundstage" is, of course, a callback to "Sound Carries." Similarly, "the voice" that "was always centerless talking" in "Sound Carries" appears again in section "5" of "The Northernmost Road" as a "centerless inflection." And the next line references "the link looming… over the divide, but then along the helix of visible little ridges."[640] The line describes the real Giscome Road, but it also invokes genetic links, the helix suggesting the shape of DNA. After all, Giscombe is old Giscome's descendant, the living memory of his ancestor.

Thus, in "Sound Carries," old Giscome is "a commotion rising in the current," and in subsection "1" of the "(Notes incorporating 2 lines by Barry McKinnon)" section of "Giscome, B.C.," the persona Giscombe "drifted… down through some commotion I made."[641] This "drifting" takes place on a bicycle, but the verb is meant to evoke movement through fluid. (Bicycle, of course, suggests "cycle," and "bi" indexes the book's theme of dualism).

Subsection "6" of the poem describes "the same old story/ endlessly leaping from river to river" just as the essence of old Giscome leaps across the generations.[642] Indeed, the repeated use of the word "apparition" throughout the poems in *Giscome Road* suggests old

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[640] Ibid., 26.

[641] C. S. Giscombe, "Giscome, B.C.," in *Giscome Road*, 48.

[642] Ibid., 49.

Giscome is not merely a historical figure but a specter who transcends time, able to reappear in any era to re-inscribe his presence into the landscape.

One sees this in subsection "8" of the section of "Giscome, B.C." which, on the superficial level, depicts a mundane, quotidian scene: In the modern day, a group of trucks arrive at "Fraser Rd" – a locale traveled by old Giscome. The vehicles contain workers who are to paint lines on the street. As persona Giscombe moves in the opposite direction than the workers, the two parties wave.

But as soon as the poet describes "an *apparition* of trucks," [italics mine] the reader is put on alert that old Giscome is about to rematerialize. In this context, the painting of lines along the road is not just municipal drudgery but a contemporary way of marking the land the way old Giscome labelled the environment with his name. It is also a means of continuing old Giscome's legacy by performing the modern version of blazing a trail. And, in still another interpretation, the development of lines through paint parallels the continuation of old Giscome's genealogical line.

When persona Giscombe meets these workers "as I was going back, that direction, they pressed/ on in past me the opposite way:/ I was re-tracing,/ I was an outline too, from places, we were all out there/ (so we waved [sic]."[643] "As I was going back, that direction" describes movement through physical space. But it also refers to "going back" through time by "re-tracing" old Giscome's steps. The encounter that takes place, then, is not just between parties

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[643] Ibid., 50.

moving in opposite geographic directions but between persona Giscombe's backward motion into history and the workers' forward-looking preparative labor.

"[T]hey pressed/ on" suggests the contemporary men have an enduring "pioneer" spirit. But the clause could also be interpreted as "they pressed/ on in[to the] past" as though time exists in a loop – the way water moves in a cycle – so that by engaging in this progressive toil the men are journeying full circle into the history of black exploration.

But another reading of the phrase could be "they/ pressed on in past[-]me." The men, by painting the road, are in a sense pressing on into the historical Giscome who is the persona Giscombe's "past me." This reading is particularly salient given the fact that persona Giscombe is both "re-tracing" and is, like his antecedent, "an outline" that can be traced.

In this context, "We were all out there" seems to suggest that all the incarnations of old Giscome – his historical self, the men painting the road who are heirs to his legacy, and his descendant Giscombe are, at that moment, all extant. And they recognize each other as fellow avatars of the "river god" and wave.

Giscombe mines this word, too, for its plural possibilities. One meaning of "wave" is that the men hail each other but, if they are manifestations of old Giscome, then they are water. Thus, they "wave" in the sense of moving like a current. They are the flow of the remembered past.

African American history is pocked by lacunae. Contemporary blacks struggle to construct family genealogies. It is not uncommon for elderly African Americans to lack birth certificates. Their slave grandparents rest in unmarked graves. Sometimes, blacks are lucky enough to discover a memorialized snippet of the past – an ancestor's name and age recorded

in a plantation ledger or a moniker and brief physical description mentioned in an advertisement for runaway chattel. But mostly, there is oblivion. The titles of most ascendants, their clans, and their ethnic groups are gone forever.

Giscombe offers "Northernmost Road" and "Giscome, B.C." as balms for this wound. He suggests to a people scarred by forced forgetting the proposition that blacks are water, and, therefore, their history can never be lost. No matter how far time, obscurity, and distance carry African Americans away from their history, they will, inevitably, cycle back to their past.

But let us move on from this scene. Later lines in the "(Notes incorporating 2 lines by Barry McKinnon)" section of "Giscome, B.C." read "here the name of the furthest African arrival heralded in the north, this name/ for such a place as this/ in wch to detrain/ in wch to entrain."[644] The adjective "farthest" is used when describing distance unlike "furthest" which is employed in non-geographical contexts. Thus, though "north" denotes place, the reader is meant to understand old Giscome's exploration to have been far more than a physical journey.

The words "[f]or such a place as this" highlights the spiritual dimensions of old Giscome's travels. The phrase is reminiscent of Mordecai's question to Esther: "And who knows if you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" Thus, just as Esther ascends to queen at just the right moment to prevent her new husband, the king, from committing genocide against her Jewish people, old Giscome explores just the right place, preparing the way for his own marginalized people. (Given how, as I mentioned earlier, the

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[644] Ibid., 51.

framing of Canada as Canaan comes the Exodus story, this African-Jewish linking is particularly apt).

The first, most superficial, meaning of “a place as this/ in wch to detrain” suggests simply getting off the train, referred to in nearby stanzas, that passes through Giscome, B.C. More esoterically, given the profoundly Jewish influence on the book, one might also think of twentieth-century Jews being transported to concentration camps in cattle cars, and the persona proclaiming Giscome B.C. as a place where this horrific history may be symbolically thwarted.

“[E]ntrain,” then, at first seems like the opposite of “detrain” -- and that is, indeed, one of its meanings. But when a current carries something away, it “entrains” it. In chemistry, when tiny drops of a substance are moved along by a fluid, such as a vapor, they are “entrained.”

Less literally, to be “entrained” is to be caught up in something’s momentum. To stimulate a consequence is to “entrain.” Someone is “entrained” when he or she finds the rhythm of an entity contagious and falls in sync with it. “Entrain” can mean to incorporate. It can also mean to lead someone.

Thus, the idea of a place “in wch to entrain” cries out for exegesis. Giscome, B.C. is a place from which to be carried away by water. It is a locale from which to get swept up in the flow of history, to be moved forward into old Giscome’s continued legacy. It is a site where one experiences the Sufi concept of *fana* -- transcendent evaporation into something greater.

Old Giscome entrained non-Native presence in his namesake locales. And now, his descendant seems to say, if one visits Giscome, B.C., one may catch the rhythm of the “song’s…

commotion rising in the current." Thus, the verb "entrain" allows Giscombe to speak with just one word of transportation via technology, conveyance by water, the movement of fluid, and the flow of black history.

Like a magician revealing the secret to his trick, in the next section of the poem, "(Northern Road)," Giscombe gives away the key to demystifying *Giscome Road*, as a whole, and "Giscomb, B.C.," in particular. He says, "A long song edges in & in it I'd shout so my voice too/ would be surfacing,/ so sound would be all plural like description is,/ or all parallel."[645] In boasting that his poetic voice invests sounds with double meanings – or reveals their covert connotations – and declaring that "description" is "plural" or "parallel," he puts the reader on notice that his words have multiple significances. ("Parallel" itself is a hidden allusion – it evokes the "forty-ninth parallel").

Though it should be obvious that poetry has plural layers of meaning, one wonders whether Giscombe was concerned about the reality with which Douglass was all too familiar – the fact that some readers will ever be tempted to approach black writing, however fine it might be, as superficial narration. Douglass plays with this tendency by disavowing, with a wink, that he is doing anything more than recounting the bare facts of his experience. But Giscombe takes the opposite tact. He uses one section of one poem to instruct the reader on how to consume the rest of the work. For only if the audience reads with an attention to plurality (particularly duality) and to parallels -- between black and green, between African

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[645] Ibid., 52.

Americans and African Canadians, between Norse mythology and Ifa religion – can she grasp the richness of the poet's work.

"Over the Edge"

In "Over the Edge," Giscombe begins to use his cherished metaphor of flowing water to describe how racial groups merge. This begins with a reference to "good hair," the term some Africans of the diaspora use to describe hair (grown by black people) that is less kinky in texture and therefore more proximate to stereotypical phenotypically white locks.[646]

Giscombe warns, "you never know how the blood's going to appear, where/ it's going to come up in the current… no telling how it appears." The poet seems to describe how genotypes inherited from long ago can unexpectedly become racial phenotypes. He then gets more explicit, referencing "the tell-tale wave etched in so-&-so's hair… there was blood passing on in that house and in those fields too past that."[647]

Again, Giscombe plumbs the plural uses of "wave." The "wave" in the hair is, in one sense, aquatic movement manifesting itself in homo sapien physiology. This is a Creolization that hybridizes not just race but humanity itself. This wave in the hair, then, is the phenotype of the "river-like" in the blood. But, in another sense, the "wave" in the hair is evidence of racial mixing – white hair texturized by black blood or black hair made "good" by being loosened by white blood from kinks into waves.

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[646] C. S. Giscombe, "Over the Edge," in *Giscome Road*, 64.

[647] Ibid., 65.

The “house” and “fields” represent the poles of plantation life. “[T]he blood passing on in that house” refers to the fact mixed-race or white-approximating slaves tended to be employed as house servants while monoracial or phenotypically black slaves were more likely to be used as field labor. House slaves, due to their proximity with their owners, were particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, thus the house was a place for blood to pass between races. And when assault resulted in the conception of phenotypically white slaves, those individuals were able to racially “pass” for the dominant race. Yet, as the verse reminds us, sexual abuse occurred in the fields, too.

Phenotype reveals these clandestine forced couplings – Giscombe describes “the blood telling, unexaggerated” despite the fact of “there being/ no ritual trill or decoration to the passing along so there’s no way to recall.”[648] In other words, these brutal unions were neither consecrated by “ritual” i.e. wedding ceremony nor memorialized – so that there would be a “way to recall” them -- by legal artifacts such as marriage licenses. Thus, “—the source of the blood’s a little ambiguous.” In fact, he adds, “Human nature’s ambiguous.”[649] Humans’ race may be ambiguous, but, so, too, can their nature i.e. how much they are homo sapien or marine. In Giscombe’s world, one can be an octoroon or an aqua-roon.

The portrayal of miscegenation – and of merging with nature -- in “Over the Edge,” in particular, and in *Giscome Road*, in general, is profoundly different than depictions of these processes in Charles Chesnutt’s story “Lonesome Ben.” Both old Giscome and Ben strike out

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[648] Ibid.

[649] Ibid., 67.

into the wilderness with similar goals – the former wants to preserve his freedom; the latter wants to acquire it. But while old Giscome's experience is one of renaissance, Ben's is of decadence.

However, the men are associated with different natural elements. Old Giscome, of course, is connected to water, a life force -- people often say that "water is life" or note that most of both the planet and the human body are made up of the substance. In contrast, Ben is linked to clay, which is associated with death – one thinks of God's warning to humans that "Dust you are, and to dust you shall return." Thus, the reader witnesses old Giscome being *conceived* from water – as a result of the one-legged man coupling with the river -- and Ben *dying* as earthenware. Old Giscome, "the oldest ancestor," leads a life that parallels the story of Adam, while Ben, who turns from animate man to clay figure, inverts it.

The consequences of racial hybridity are also opposite for old Giscome and Ben. The former is the spiritual son of a mythical figure who invokes both Osanyin and Odin and the symbolic son of the biracial Father of British Columbia. His heirs are identified interracial as is revealed by the waves in their hair.

Ben, too, is marked with phenotypical multiraciality. However, rather than having wavy hair, he turns the yellow color of clay. But while Ben's transformation makes him unrecognizable, old Giscome is hyper-identifiable. The explorer's name is inscribed across the British Columbian landscape. Ben ends his tale with no one able to call him by his moniker. Giscome's story never ends because his toponyms are ubiquitous and enduring.

The contrasts continue. Ben's journey concludes with him mute and static whereas old Giscome is a voice and a movement in the current. At the end of Chesnutt's work, Ben looks in

a river and sees a man he does not recognize – an individual utterly disconnected from all human ties including those with his himself. His shock is so great, he lies down and dies.

There is an analogous – but opposite -- scene in “Over the Edge”: “The water’s level along the road, there’s nothing that’s not an image;/ all the cyclists have a face & a peculiar detailed history.”[650] If the people in “Over the Edge” were to look into the water, they would get a vision not of unrecognizable specters but their own familiar reflections. Unlike Ben, who is in America where having one’s blackness grouped together with green can trigger psychic disassociation, old Giscome is in Canada where elision with the environment ultimately affirms one’s identity.

One reaches the end of *Giscome Road* feeling a bit surprised by the creative choices Giscombe makes. From Sethe, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, being so traumatized by Schoolteacher directing his nephews to list her allegedly animal characteristics that she commits infanticide to spare her daughter from ever experiencing such a horror to Pauline Breedlove (note the surname) in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* bristling at the idea, articulated by a white doctor, that she will give birth painlessly as mares supposedly do, much of African American literature records the struggles of blacks to render themselves distinct from non-human nature. Thus, one is shocked that Giscombe repudiates so much of African American literature by saying, “Actually, black people really *are* green.” (As I discussed in Chapter Four, Morrison shows how green identities can be both dehumanizing and esteeming, but in *Giscome Road*, there is no hint that a biocentric identity is anything but an unalloyed good). Instead of

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[650] Ibid., 68.

protesting the idea that African Americans give birth like horses, he promotes the notion that blacks can have babies with rivers. Such a move seems reckless at first – even dangerous.

But consider -- if one is going to lay claim to a space as a homeland, it helps to strike an indigenous pose. And a compelling way of doing that is to compose a myth that solidifies your right to the land by telling a story of how you come from the land – of how you and the land are one. Thus, a myth about being descended from an explorer conceived during a one-legged man's coupling with a river legitimizes one's "presupposition" that one's ancestor's name belongs to the terrain that that river crosses.

A homeland can be either a place from which one comes or, in colonial rhetoric, a place one immigrates to but is destined for, a site that belonged to you before you were ever there. As Robert Frost expresses it in his poem "The Gift Outright," "the land was ours before we were the land's."[651, 652] In a sense, then, a journey to a homeland is always a return.

Giscombe setting his poems in the Promised Land allows him to reimagine black relationships with green. But to claim the Promised Land so that these relationships can develop, he first must compose a verdant mythology that legitimizes African presence there. "Dust you are," God says, "and to dust you shall return." "Green you are," Giscombe's work insists, "thus to green you may return."

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[651] "The Gift Outright," Poetry Foundation, accessed May 17, 2018, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53013/the-gift-outright.

[652] Of course, colonists do not make this assertion unchallenged. See, for example, the response of Anishinaabe poet Heid E. Erdrich: "The Theft Outright."