Shackled in the Garden:
Ecology and Race in American Plantation Cultures

by
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Maurice Wallace

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Even in our contemporary moment, the word plantation evokes a distinctly Southern and rural image in which slavery is well hidden within an idyllic botanical scene. And yet, from the very beginning of industrialization in the United States, plantation agriculture and enslavement were thoroughly embedded in the circuits of Northern capital and urbanization. “Shackled in the Garden” begins from the premise that the plantation is not an archaic institution that withered away in the nineteenth century, but rather is an enduring site of production and reproduction in the U.S. and throughout the Global South. Historically, the plantation has played a central role in organizing racialized bodies, technologies and environments in the South. In the wake of widespread ecological and social disaster across global Southern geographies, I insist that it behooves us to take another view of the plantation.

“Shackled in the Garden” rethinks the plantation as an ecological space: a space of dynamic relations in which racialized bodies and technologies are aggregated and disaggregated by a powerfully tropical environment. In the midst of ongoing crises over the sustainability of the plantation complex in the mid-eighteenth century, the plantation metamorphosized from an idyllic geography of botanical bounty and pure soil to a “toxic paradise”: a tainted space that enclosed usable bodies and usable lands to be put in the service of increasingly experimental purposes. This peculiar conjoining of racialized subjects and the environment transformed the plantation into a privileged site for
investigations into natural history, which sought to catalog and organize the natural world. Understandings of natural history as an innocent and feminine pursuit based on non-intervention and simple observation of the environment hid rampant experimentation on all kinds of “specimen” on the plantation including botanical species, agricultural crops, livestock, and enslaved persons.

While emergent biological models in the mid-nineteenth century began to understand race and identity as being rooted in the body, climatic or environmental determinations of identity continued to hold rhetorical power. Biology may have achieved a hegemonic position with the increasingly legitimated theories of Darwinian evolution, but natural history did not wither into oblivion. While individuation, mechanization, and biology flourished in the North, the plantation South continued to be figured as a natural ecology, a geography where identity refused its disentanglement from a dangerously miasmic and tropical environment. This project emerges out of both literary studies and science studies. Moving from James Graunger and Thomas Jefferson through Thomas Wentworth Higginson to Booker T. Washington, I explore how a literary imaginary of the plantation pastoral, which continued to represent the plantation as an unenclosed, pre-industrial and green geography in the face of extensive industrialization and environmental degradation, contributed to an understanding of the plantation as a “natural” space of scientific experimentation. The second half of the project considers a perhaps surprising genealogy of plantation fiction from authors such as Martin Delany and Jean Toomer who defamiliarized pastoral naturalizations of
plantation space at the same time as they played on the heterotopic spatiality of the plantation to imagine a different, more global plantation South.
For my parents
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Plantation Ecology: An Introduction

“Agriculture and culture have the same origin or the same foundation, a white<br>spot that realizes a rupture of equilibrium, a clean spot constituted through expulsion. A<br>spot of propriety or cleanliness, a spot of belonging”


“But under the regimen of those days the whites could not stand the climate. So<br>the slavers brought more and more Negroes, in numbers that leapt by thousands every<br>year, until the drain from Africa ran into the millions”

—CLR James, *The Black Jacobins* (1930)

“Let us begin by discussing the weather, for that has been the chief agency in<br>making the South distinctive”


In 1750, the Antiguan planter Samuel Martin published *An Essay Upon<br>Plantership*, a didactic handbook written to compensate for a severe dearth of<br>information about proper plantation management and agricultural improvement in the<br>British West Indies.¹ Throughout the essay, Martin insists that every component of the<br>plantation should be carefully managed and watched since the ultimate success of the<br>estate depended on the delicate balance of its internal system: “By plantership I

¹ The volume was published six more times over the course of the next half-century and<br>included publication runs in Antigua, Jamaica, and London. See Martin, *An Essay Upon<br>Plantership in Three Tracts on West-Indian Agriculture* (Jamaica: Alexander Aikman,<br>1802).
understand the art of managing a sugar-plantation to the best advantage, so as to make it produce the most, both in quantity and quality. To effect a design so comprehensive, it is necessary to understand every branch of the art precisely; to plan every scheme with mature premeditation; and to exercise all the arts of economy in the execution: For, as a sugar-plantation is the most expensive kind of estate, so the clear profit of it will be more or less in proportion to the manager’s frugality. It is therefore the duty of a good planter to inspect every part of his plantation with his own eyes” (4). The author goes on to compare the controlled, enclosed environment of the sugar plantation to a machine: “But as the negroes, cattle, mules, and horses, are the NERVES of a sugar plantation, it is expedient to treat that subject with some accuracy; for the success of the whole consists chiefly in this, as in a well constructed machine, upon the energy and right disposition of the main springs, or primary parts” (4).^2 Martin’s analogy between the internal system of the plantation and a “well constructed machine” reveals the complex networking of bodies and technologies within the cultivated spaces of the New World plantation. Enslaved persons and livestock are intertwined as the “nerves” of the sugar plantation, the “main springs, or primary parts” that compose and network plantation space. Martin’s machinic plantation body illuminates how the plantation, by the middle of the eighteenth century, was beginning to be understood as a complex ecosystem.

Where Martin emphasizes the necessity of controlling production within the plantation’s borders, this enclosed space of cultivation was constantly threatened by a surrounding tropical environment that reproduced profusely beyond the planter’s masterful gaze. In his treatment of “tropicalization” as a way of thinking about how

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^2 My capitalization of nerves replicates the type of the 1802 edition.
“ideas, habits, and attitudes that, in the eighteenth century, were traded back and forth as much as populations and produce,” Srinivas Aravamudan notes that this term has also been used “in a more literal sense, to describe the acclimation of flora, fauna, and even machinery to warmer habitats” (6).³ This project is interested in how tropicalizations of flora, fauna (including human bodies), and machinery have been negotiated within “temperate” plantation spaces in the U.S. and Caribbean. Martin’s An Essay on Plantership reveals how promotions of the plantation as an ordering cultivation machine were riddled with anxieties of how a powerful tropical environment disaggregated and disorganized bodies and technologies in Southerly spaces. Where concerns over racial miscegenation have preoccupied historians and other commentators of the South, negotiations of miscegenation in Southerly geographies have long extended beyond the horizon of the human to include all kinds of mixtures among plants, animals, machines, and racialized subjects.

Historically, the U.S. South has been disassociated from the “mixed-up,” creole environments of the Caribbean. This project emerged in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which made brutally visible the connection between the “provincial” Deep South and the “tropical” Caribbean. The tropicalization of the Deep South during and in the aftermath of Katrina illuminated structures of racism and socioeconomic inequality that linked regions of the U.S. South with rampant poverty in the Global South. Claims that the lack of post-disaster response was to be expected from a government that has rarely taken care of poor African American populations were right on target. But the government’s non-

response to Katrina was also part of a long history of environmental racism in the South, where communities of color have been both disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards and routinely placed in intimate proximity with the environment in order to justify their subjugation to a “natural” racist order. Through such naturalizations, the residents of New Orleans and surrounding areas could easily be disappeared into the toxic stew of Katrina’s environmental and social catastrophe. Katrina’s tropical miscegenations revealed the U.S. South as a highly toxic landscape that had been thoroughly disordered by both the hurricane and the unnatural disaster of the government’s post-storm abandonment.

Throughout this project, I argue that the plantation has operated historically as a central organizing site of racialized bodies, technologies and environments in the South against the disordering effects of an unruly tropical nature. “Shackled in the Garden” begins from the premise that an enduring understanding of the plantation as an ecologically unique space of exception, existing outside of time, space, and modernity, stands at the heart of contemporary ecological and racial disasters in the U.S. and more Global South. In his 1990 book, Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality, sociologist Robert Bullard notes that at that point in time, almost one-third of the nation’s toxic waste was stored in the Southern states.⁴ He goes on to link an ecologically devastated South with its former entrenchments in a plantation economy:

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The South has always been thought of as a backward land, based on its social, economic, political, and environmental policies. By default, the region became a “sacrifice zone,” a sump for the rest of the nation’s toxic waste. A colonial mentality exists in the South, where local government and big business take advantage of people who are politically and economically powerless. Many of these attitudes emerged from the region’s marriage to slavery and the plantation system, which exploited both humans and the land. (97)

Taking this relationship between environmental destruction and the legacy of a plantation system where both “humans and the land” are offered up in the “sacrifice zone” of the South as an important point of departure, this dissertation considers how rethinking the plantation as an ecological space might help us develop more ethical responses to environmental and social crises throughout the U.S. and Global South.

 Parsing the Plantation

The eighteenth century marks an important transition in the U.S., when lingering understandings of the New England plantation as a space that privileged the primacy of individual experience gave way to a more Southerly-oriented plantation that privileged systems of experimentation, scientific and otherwise. Over the course of four chapters, I chronicle the rise, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, of what I call the “experimental plantation,” which enclosed usable bodies and usable lands within the exceptional environment of the plantation. I explore how a literary imaginary of the plantation pastoral contributed to an understanding of the plantation as a “natural” space
of experimentation. An enduring plantation pastoral has not only shaped a vibrant
cultural imaginary surrounding the plantation, but has affected the organization and
exploitation of plantation geographies even into the twentieth century.

Throughout the dissertation, I defamiliarize—or denaturalize—various plantation
spaces in order to unsettle a monolithic and static historiography of the plantation South.
To do so, I work from some basic conceptualizations of “the plantation” to help account
for crucial transformations in the organization and function of plantation spaces from the
mid-eighteenth through the early twentieth century. In the simplest of terms, the
antebellum plantation existed for the commercial production of agricultural products that
entered a national, or more likely transnational, market either in a raw (cotton sold to
British manufacturers for the production of clothing, for example) or already
commodified form.\(^5\) The antebellum plantation was characterized, above all, by its
commitment to agricultural monoculture. Slaves were sometimes allowed to maintain
their own garden plots near the housing quarters, but were often barred from such
activities since planters worried the cultivation of botanical species would be put in the
service of dangerous medical or rebellious conjuring practices that disrupted the
plantation order and challenged its singular commitment to the intensified production of
one crop.\(^6\) While enslaved persons in the Caribbean were often encouraged to cultivate

\(^5\) Marx’s Civil War correspondence for the *New York Tribune* and Vienna *Presse*
provides an introduction to the cotton trade between England and the U.S. South during
the mid-nineteenth century and offers insight into the crises in Britain’s economy that
resulted from the Union’s barricading of Southern seaports during the Civil War. Marx’s
essays and correspondence on the Civil War are compiled in Karl Marx, *The Civil War in

\(^6\) On conjuring communities and botanical slave resistance, see Theophus H. Smith’s
*Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University
provision grounds, U.S. planters were more hostile toward slave “plotting” on plantation
grounds. By the start of the nineteenth century, the (mono)culture of King Cotton
reigned supreme across the U.S. plantation South.

Scholars have extensively detailed the transformation of many plantations during
the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century from spaces of raw production to more
factory-like systems, where crops were transformed into commodities on-site. An
interesting etymological overlap between the plantation and the factory highlights this
important historical transition. The term we use even today to describe a factory, the
plant, was in use as early as 1789 to describe the “planting” of a building for an industrial
process. I attend to the industrialization of agricultural spaces both before and after the
Civil War in order to explore how a pastoral literary imaginary worked to cover over both
the industrial networks of plantation space and the technologies of enslavement. The
presence of the agricultural plant in Northern industrial spaces also makes visible routes
of trade, commerce, and communication that reveal Northern dependencies on the
antebellum plantation complex and complicities with regimes of enslavement.

The plant of plantation additionally recalls attempts after the Civil War to
swiftly incorporate ex-slaves into the Southern factory system. Efforts to industrialize
and even automatize the enslaved body began long before the postbellum period. Many

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Press, 1994) and Sharla M. Fett’s Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on
7 See, for example, Maria M. Portuondo, “Plantation Factories: Science and Technology
in Late-Eighteenth-Century Cuba” in Technology and Culture 44.2 (April 2003): 231-57.
The industrialization of the plantation probably occurred faster in the Caribbean than in
the eighteenth-century U.S., where prominent figures, especially Thomas Jefferson,
argued that the United States should develop as an agrarian democracy and leave the
manufacturing processes for the British.
enslaved men and women were, for example, set to work in various kinds of industrial settings outside of the plantation proper. In addition, pre-Taylorist models of Northern industrial labor—where workers were encouraged to mimic the movements of efficient machines—were also applied to the biomechanics of enslaved labor on antebellum plantations. 8 After the war, Southern industrialists even erected factories that resembled antebellum plantations. 9 Plantation-inspired factories may have been constructed as gestures of nostalgia for the Old South, but Southern industrialists also sought to exploit architectures of surveillance and discipline that had been highly effective in antebellum plantation spaces.

An emphasis on the plantation as a central site of production in the antebellum South has often occluded practices of consumption in such spaces, thereby obscuring other important economic interdependencies between the South and the North (including Great Britain and other regions of the Global North). Advocates for Southern economic independence figured the region as an internal economic colony of the North, viewing the South as a region of rich resources that was continually tapped and run dry by the consuming North. Southern planters and sectionalists complained that Northerners not only gained wealth from the South’s natural resources and agricultural products, but the South was, in turn, heavily dependent on the North’s manufactured goods and commodities. In addition to these more traditional networks of consumerism, I understand the plantation’s relationship to consumption in terms of its role as a machinic

9 Ibid., 198.
assemblage that consumes bodies—and land—for the production of commodities under capitalism.

This project is interested in the consumption of both bodies and land in its exploration of the historical relationships between exploited lands and exploited peoples in plantation geographies of the South. An understanding of the plantation as a consuming machine that chews on and transforms forms of bare life emerges in Marcus Rediker’s study of the slave ship in seventeenth-century Atlantic world.\textsuperscript{10} Rediker describes the ship alternately as a plantation, a machine, a “floating prison,” and a factory. He writes, “The wide-ranging, well-armed slave ship was a powerful sailing machine, and yet it was also something more […] It was also a factory and a prison, and in this combination lay its genius and its horror” (44). The confined architectures of the Middle Passage make the association between the slave ship and the prison obvious enough even though in the seventeenth century, “the modern prison had not yet been established on land” (45). The ship further metamorphosized into a factory when recently captured men and women were transformed into a “commodity called ‘slave’ to be sold in American plantation societies” (45) during the voyage across the Atlantic. The slave ship was an integral link in the plantation system:

The spread of sugar production in the 1650s unleashed a monstrous \textit{hunger} for labor power. For the next two centuries, ship after ship disgorged its human cargo, originally in many places European indentured servants and then vastly larger numbers of African slaves, who were purchased by planters, assembled in

large units of production, and forced, under close and violent supervision, to
mass-produce commodities for the world market. (43; italics are mine)

In revealing the slave ship’s inextricability from the plantation complex, ocean and land
mix together: the Atlantic slave ship enfolds into the landed plantation of the New World.
The ship is a factory that produces slaves, and the plantation is a factory that both
consumes slaves and produces the slave ship itself.

Defining the plantation is thus a difficult task, especially considering its
resemblance and proximity to other heterotopic spaces of the New World, including the
factory, the slave ship, the farm, the garden, and the prison.11 As many scholars have
noted—some in an apologist attempt to downplay the prominence of slavery in the South,
and others in an attempt to change the way we understand the geography and nature of
slavery—most plantations were small and many, especially in the eighteenth century,
were situated outside of what we now call “the South.” At the start of the Civil War, the
majority of enslaved people in the Southern plantation zone were concentrated on a
surprisingly small number of large plantations. Despite such heterogeneities of the
plantation system, I argue that three crucial factors constellate to produce “the
plantation”: (1) the production of agriculture monocultures; (2) the dependence on slave

11 In opposition to the “placeless place” of utopia, Michel Foucault defines heterotopias
as real spaces that contain and juxtapose several spaces within one space. Heterotopias
“have the curious property of being in relation to all the other sites, but in such a way as
to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror,
The essay was originally published as “Des espaces autres” in the October 1984 issue
of Architecture-Mouvement-Continuité; it was taken from a 1987 lecture and published
after Foucault’s death.
labor or other coercive systems like indentured servitude or sharecropping, and (3) the presence of an enclosed, ecologically unique space inflected by a pastoral imaginary that figures the plantation as an unenclosed and pre-industrial environment, untainted by the corruptions of enslavement. By chronicling how these factors combine into various configurations to produce what Houston Baker calls the “plantation arrangement,” we are able to rethink the antebellum plantation as a system while illuminating the afterlives of the plantation in the postbellum period and beyond.\textsuperscript{12} The plantation is not a static, monolithic site: it is a bounded system of dynamic relations, an enclosed ecology.

\textbf{Reproducing the Plantation}

The maintenance of enclosed plantation ecologies depended on complex negotiations of reproduction within such environments. Planters were invested not only in reproducing the plantation family to ensure inheritance along “pure” biological lines of kinship, but also sought to direct reproduction of the enslaved, since the livelihood of the plantation depended on the reproduction of labor.\textsuperscript{13} The antebellum plantation was a central space of controlled reproduction in the South.\textsuperscript{14} Scholars have extensively documented the sexual exploitation of enslaved women both on and off the plantation under enslavement, while others have worked hard to establish slavery as both a

\textsuperscript{13} Concerns over maintaining the “Anglo-Saxon” purity of the planter family line illuminate important eugenical impulses on the plantation.
\textsuperscript{14} See Sylvia Wynter’s “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument” in \textit{The New Centennial Review} 3.3 (Fall 2003): 257-337, on the oppositions between the productive Global North and reproductive Global South.
peculiarly raced and sexed institution. However, few have considered the complex ways that gender, sexuality, and coerced reproduction intersected with the particular demands of plantation agriculture. Jennifer Morgan’s Laboring Women is one exception and in this study, Morgan points out that even into the nineteenth century, agricultural field labor, especially crop-picking, was understood to be “woman’s work.” Morgan explores the double burden placed on women enslaved on eighteenth-century Caribbean plantations as both field hands and reproducers (or “breeders”). Throughout the dissertation, I chronicle how the controlled cultivation of agricultural monocultures affected other system of reproduction on the plantation, including the propagation of plant species, livestock, and enslaved persons. I refer to systems that sought control over the reproduction of various “species” (plant, animal, and human) in the terms of a “plantation proto-eugenics.” I go back to the fields, the gardens, and the crops—those central spaces of green production on the plantation—in order excavate a system of plantation proto-eugenics that was deeply concerned with the proper and maximum yield of both crops and bodies.

17 I focus more on the fields and other spaces of agricultural production than on the plantation home. On the plantation home and the roles of house slaves, see, for example, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s Within the Plantation Household. I am interested throughout the dissertation, however, in the figuration of the entire plantation as a domestic space and how the domestication of the plantation fields draws the external spaces of the plantation into the big house’s more “domestic economy.”
The origins of what I call plantation eugenics might be located in the violent birth of modern (agri)culture. Michel Serres defines agriculture as an exclusionary operation that begins with the extermination of species in some enclosed space:

Gathering precedes cultivation, so they say. We don’t know how to do anything, and already, we are demanding. We choose. We refuse, in that choice, other vegetable species. We eliminate them. The motion of exclusion or expulsion is there already at the gate […] Thus the purge, the sacralization of a given space, of a *templum*, of a garden, begins by the total and radical expulsion of all species. And not only of the hare. Agriculture could not have begun before the complete denuding of certain areas of ground. Before they served as a clear spot of a *tabula rosa* for their covering of vegetables. The field is first of all a spot from which everything is removed. A battlefield: everything has left the camp, uprooted. And when I say radical, I mean that the very roots have been eradicated, that the ploughshare has been pushed deep enough to destroy everything, even the rootlets of the ejected species. It wasn’t a question of fertilizing and fecundating the earth through labor but rather of extirpating, suppressing, and banishing. Of destroying. The blade of the plough is a sacrificial blade, killing all the plants to make a clean space. (177; italics are Serres’)¹⁸

Paradoxically, the fields must be cleared of all uncontrolled growth in order to be transformed into empty, “virgin” (178) fields. Agriculture, according to Serres, effectively “eats space” and the farmer is a “parasite” on the reproduction of various species: “The production of living systems is their reproduction. Animal-raising and vegetable farming are practices that are parasitic on the reproduction of living things” (82). Throughout this project, I bring human reproduction into the parasitic ecologies of agricultural production in order to understand how the plantation—that clean spot constituted through expulsion—requires constant and compulsory “extirpations” of all kinds of fugitive species.

Indeed, the production of purified agricultural spaces must be continually maintained, since parasites, diseases, non-native or native species, and any number of other invaders continually threaten to encroach upon enclosed fields and re-colonize those spaces. The plantation necessitates absolute vigilance regarding parasitic, or fugitive, invasions because of its commitment to mono-cultural production.¹⁹ The production of one agricultural species, in other words, requires that all other species be exterminated, or at the very least, contained: in this sense plantation proto-eugenics aspires to a state of perfect hygiene through the production of clean agricultural spaces.

Mine is a strategically anachronistic use of the term eugenics. Francis Galton did not coin the term until the late nineteenth century and the social and scientific movements that promoted the perfection of human heredity did not become a significant cultural

¹⁹ Typical monocultures included tobacco, sugar, cotton, rice or other kinds of cash crops. While smaller plantations would likely include varied crops, larger plantations usually sought to profit from the intensified cultivation of one main crop.
force until the turn of the twentieth century.20 However, as Celeste Condit notes, following Kenneth Ludmerer, “social applications of Darwinism were well established as a thread in popular American consciousness long before the term genetics was coined in 1905 and before Mendel’s genetics was rediscovered in 1900” (29; italics are Condit’s).21 The practices of selective breeding were important pre-cursors to properly eugenical understandings of reproduction. The selective manipulation of plant and animal species through breeding was common practice on farms and other rural spaces throughout the nineteenth century, where breeders sought to increase the quality of their live-“stock” by selecting for preferred characteristics. This often involved breeding large animals together to increase the body size of a particular species. Importantly, Condit insists upon the contingencies of controlled reproduction: although perfectability was the goal of such efforts, stock breeders “experienced breeding largely as a matter of chance” (31). Condit goes on to trace how stock breeding became the central metaphor for the earliest period of human heredity discourse (1900-1935), “in part because it was closer to the popular experience of the still heavily rural citizenry” (31). The notion that human beings could be bred like plant and animal stock became a dominating trope of human genetic discourse in the early twentieth century.

Condit’s account of the rhetorical functions of stock breeding in the field of human genetics, however, assumes that experiments in human reproduction did not begin

20 The Oxford English Dictionary cites Galton’s earliest usage of the term in his 1883 publication of Inquiries into Human Faculty, which, according to Galton, sought to examine “various topics more or less connected with that of the cultivation of the race, or as we might call it, with ‘eugenic’ questions” (italics are mine).
until the twentieth-century inception of eugenics. However, as the following chapters suggest, the antebellum plantation was an active site of experimentation into human “stock” long before the official establishment of genetics as a field of scientific study. Insisting on the presence of a plantation eugenics in a pre-eugenics period illuminates various experiments in “racial stock” breeding: experiments in human reproduction that co-existed with were entangled with other forms of stock breeding. As early as the mid-eighteenth century, the plantation was mobilized as an enclosed, ecologically unique space, the perfect environment in which to experiment on various forms of life situated within the plantation’s borders.

**The Plantation Pastoral**

“Shackled in the Garden” examines a set of flashpoints in plantation history from the middle of the eighteenth through the early twentieth century. It is not intended as a comprehensive account of the plantation, but rather sets upon moments of crisis that illuminate key, and sometimes surprising, transformations in the organization and function of plantation space. In Chapter 1, I examine Scottish poet and physician James Grainger’s 1764 “West-India georgic,” *The Sugar-Cane*, a poem that marks a critical turning point in fantasies about the New World as an Edenic paradise. During this period, looming threats to the Atlantic slave trade terminated beliefs that the brutal plantation economy of the West Indies and the U.S. South would be endlessly replenished by slave labor from abroad. At the same moment, colonial scientists, public officials, and planters began to decry the destruction that agricultural monoculture had
wrought on the lands of the Americas. In the face of an exhausted supply of bodies and land, the plantation was revealed as an unsustainable institution.

I argue that in the midst of this crisis, the plantation metamorphosized from an idyllic geography of botanical bounty and pure soil to a “toxic paradise”: a tainted space that enclosed usable bodies and usable lands to be put in the service of increasingly experimental purposes. This peculiar conjoining of racialized subjects and the environment transformed the plantation into a privileged site for investigations into natural history, which sought to catalog and organize the natural world. Understandings of natural history as an innocent and feminine pursuit based on non-intervention and simple observation of the environment covered over and hid rampant experimentation on all kinds of “specimen” on the plantation including botanical species, agricultural crops, livestock, and enslaved persons. While emergent biological models in the mid-nineteenth century began to understand race and identity as being rooted in the body, climatic or environmental determinations of identity continued to hold rhetorical power. Biology may have achieved a hegemonic position with the increasingly legitimated theories of Darwinian evolution, but natural history did not wither into oblivion. While individuation, mechanization, and biology flourished in the North, the plantation South continued to be figured as a natural ecology, a geography where identity refused its disentanglement from a dangerously miasmic and tropical environment. Moving from James Grainger and Thomas Jefferson through Thomas Wentworth Higginson to Booker T. Washington, I explore how a literary imaginary of the plantation pastoral, which continued to represent the plantation as an unenclosed, pre-industrial and green
geography in the face of extensive industrialization and environmental degradation, figured the plantation as a “natural” space of experimentation.

The relationship between the pastoral and the plantation has been rarely considered by scholars, which is particularly surprising considering the enduring preoccupation with the pastoral in American Studies. 22 While this term is normally used to refer to a specific genre of poetry in the British literary tradition, in American Studies, the pastoral has been routinely detached from poetry and expanded to describe the whole of American literature. In his comprehensive overview of pastoralism in the U.S. context, Lawrence Buell notes, “Ever since an American literary canon began to crystallize, American literature has been thought of as markedly ‘pastoral’ in the loose sense of being preoccupied with nature and rurality as setting, theme, and value in contradistinction from society and the urban” (2). 23 I argue that the pastoral has been a particularly powerful mode used regularly to both represent and organize plantation space. At the same time as pastoral representations of the plantation circulating in a transatlantic print sphere shaped cultural understanding of that space as an idyllic, pre-industrial landscape, a pastoral literary imaginary simultaneously affected the organization of plantation space across Southerly geographies. Indeed, literary influences loomed large in the initial planting and organization of many plantations. As early as the eighteenth century, planters emphasized the pastoral setting of their estates when naming their plantations while others stole titles straight from popular works of British

22 Lawrence Buell briefly mentions, but does not explain, something that he calls the “plantation-style pastoral” (13) in “American Pastoral Ideology Reappraised,” American Literary History 1.1 (Spring 1989): 1-29.
23 Ibid.
literature. From the beginning of European settlement, the Americas were understood, and indeed promoted, as a utopian space where the pastoral ideal could be unleashed from the realm of the imaginative and mapped onto an expansive unenclosed, green landscape. Plantations were particularly popular sites for the construction of pastoral utopias in the “real world.” The irony lies in the fact that planters defined and dramatized their organization of the environment into a pastoral space by enclosing their personal utopias. The pastoral as a literary mode, however, emphasizes unencumbered movement across an unenclosed landscape.

Pastoral literatures naturalized plantation enclosures while hiding the embarrassments of slavery within an idyllic botanical scene. In order to excavate the complex relationships between race and nature in the plantation South, I understand the plantation as an ecological space: a space of networked relations in which racialized bodies and technologies are aggregated and disaggregated by a powerfully tropical environment. Examining plantation ecologies involves tracking networks between bodies and environments on the plantation itself, as well as understanding the plantation’s imbrications in other kinds of regional, national, or transnational networks. This approach seeks to make several critical interventions. First, it attempts to reorient how we understand the geography of identity in the South, specifically in examining how the

24 For example, a nineteenth-century plantation in South Carolina was named after Sir Walter Scott’s 1819 Anglo-Saxon romance, Ivanhoe. This name was likely taken to emphasize the planter’s own pure and “noble” Anglo-Saxon family line. Even more strangely, an eighteenth-century plantation in Hanahan, South Carolina was named after the Castle of Otranto, the 1764 novel by Horace Walpole that is generally regarded as the first gothic novel published in Britain. The Otranto Plantation was owned by Dr. Alexander Garden, the famous American botanist after whom Linnaeus named the gardenia. The Otranto plantation was also the inspiration for George Ogilvie’s 1776 georgic poem, “Carolina; or, the Planter.”
plantation organizes industry, bodies, labor, race and gender. Secondly, my emphasis on plantation ecology intervenes in conversations about slavery in African American Studies by insisting on the importance of the environmental contexts of enslavement. Finally, I am interested in how attention to the heterotopic space of the Southern plantation, as a hybrid temperate/tropical ecology, troubles the borders of the nation-state. Throughout the project, I map a plantation zone that alternately territorializes, de-territorializes, and re-territorializes geographies across spaces of both the Global North and Global South.

An ecological view of the plantation additionally destabilizes problematic mobilizations of the South within Southern Studies. Many of the best-known histories and literary studies of the South in the twentieth century rallied around a regional distinctiveness legitimated through claims to an exceptional Southern environment. Ulrich B. Phillips’ epic tome *Life and Labor in the Old South*, for example, starts with the bold statement, “Let us begin by discussing the weather, for that has been the chief agency in making the South distinctive” (3). The New Southern Studies, although it has productively rethought the South’s supposed “insularity” by tracking cultural flows and networks of circulation between the U.S. South and Global South, still, at times, falls back on problematic regionalisms. The field’s understanding of the South as a more

hemispheric, tropical geography often makes alternative geographies and political imaginaries visible, between, for example, slaves in the U.S. South and maroon communities in the Caribbean.\(^{27}\) However, this recourse to a tropical climatic distinctiveness can just as easily replicate notions of a sectional, self-reliant South, sealed off from the North and from the rest of the world. “Shackled in the Garden” destabilizes environmentally enabled Southern exceptionalisms by paying close attention to the uneven tropicalization of plantation spaces. A few scholarly precedents for thinking about plantation ecology do exist in Southern Studies, and they serve as a foundation for this project in addition to numerous works on environmental history, ecological imperialism, and environmental discourses in the Caribbean.\(^{28}\) This project is especially indebted to environmental history’s demonstration of the complex ways that property bounds ecosystems. While narratives that take up the transformation of the commons

\(^{27}\) Phillips, like many historians of the (Older) Southern Studies, refuses to admit the tropicality of the U.S. South, insisting “The South is nowhere tropical except at the tip of Florida, for it has winters with killing frosts” (3).

into private property often emphasize the alienation of people from the land, the process of enclosure has also had distinct and in many cases, massive ecological consequences.²⁹

The language of ecology offers a systems approach to the plantation. Such an approach allows me, first, to understand the plantation as an exceptional and bounded space that throws into relief relationships between different life forms and the environment that exist within the plantation’s enclosures. The plantation is secondly, a microcosm that concentrates and makes visible connections among bodies, technologies, and environments that exist outside the borders of the plantation. Thomas Jefferson illuminates both of these points: he spoke, for example, of Monticello as both a unique environment for controlled experimentation with the biota of the plantation and as a microcosm of a larger political experiment in America. And thirdly, plantation ecology highlights the importance of thinking transnationally at the same time as it illuminates national institutions of enslavement: the antebellum plantation circulates as both the most absolutely insular and closed institution of the U.S. and as a tropical geography that continually breaks down national borders into a wider transnational plantation geography. Jefferson also understood his plantation estate as a premier site of cultivation that showcased the organization and productivity of a temperate American agriculture at the same time as he filled his gardens with botanical and vegetable wonders from across the Southern, more tropical, hemisphere.

In response to a rapidly disintegrating plantation complex, Jefferson fortified Monticello as an ecologically unique, fully enclosed geography: an experimental space

cut off from the contingencies of the outside world. Jefferson clearly understood his plantation to be a laboratory, as the Monticello website explains, “where he could experiment with imported squashes and broccoli from Italy, beans and salsify collected by the Lewis and Clark expedition, figs from France, and peppers from Mexico.”

Jefferson wrote in his Garden book, “I am curious to select one or two of the best species or variety of every garden vegetable and to reject all others from the garden to avoid the dangers of mixing or degeneracy.” This statement captures the central dynamics of plantation ecology: the plantation as an ecologically unique space and privileged site of experimentation where worries over reproductive “mixing” and “degeneracy” traverse plant species and human bodies. In Chapter 2, I locate with Jefferson the beginnings of a plantation proto-eugenics: practices that attempted to control the reproduction and movement of all kinds of species, plant, animal, and human. In his Notes on the State of Virginia (1785; 1787), the plantation is mobilized as a central institution for the production of empirical knowledge about the new nation. At the same time, it circulates as a kind of ghostly site, detached from its connections to New World enslavement and agricultural production. In the eighteenth-century U.S., enclosed plantation ecologies were increasingly exploited as experimental spaces, just as in the Caribbean. However, the U.S. plantation, along with its internal ecology of bodies, technologies, and microenvironments, was continually hidden within a landscape that was increasingly understood as being part of a distinct region, “the South.”

Attempts to stabilize and naturalize bounded plantation ecologies through the pastoral were first challenged by the sectional conflicts of the nineteenth century. Conceptions of the plantation as a secure unit of social, economic, and racial organization were transformed as the plantation emerged as an increasingly unstable environment, a potential breeding space for both black and Confederate rebellion. African American writers from Martin Delany and Pauline Hopkins to Charles Chesnutt and Jean Toomer, recognized histories of the plantation as a racialized experimental space and forged aesthetic responses that challenged regimes of enslavement, enclosure, and racial terror in the U.S. by figuring the plantation as a fertile space for what Delany called “a revolutionary crop.” These authors wrote of dynamic plantation ecologies that exposed racist articulations of race and nature while imagining alternative ways of mobilizing the plantation through what I call a black natural history.

In Chapter 3, I explore Union Officer and writer Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s surprising appropriation of the more permeable spaces of the mid-nineteenth century plantation during his training of an experimental regiment of black soldiers on an abandoned South Carolina plantation. Higginson’s pastoralizing of the Southern scene in *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1870) attempted to discipline a regiment of ex-slaves and an untamed Southern landscape, both of which threatened to rebel against his orders of command on the plantation. Representations of the plantation as an ecologically bounded space that rooted enslaved persons in the soil suppressed the fact that the plantation was, in reality, an open system that required constant and vigilant surveillance over all kinds of “fugitive” species. The planting of slaves, in this way, simultaneously produced fears that the forced intimacy between black bodies and the soil both corrupted agricultural
plots and racialized the plantation. I demonstrate that at the same moment as the plantation emerged as an experimental space, it was revealed as a black geography.

While Higginson constantly fought against the relationship of the plantation to both blackness and fugitivity, Martin Delany was one mid-century figure who excavated the secret of the plantation as “fugitive” black space to oppose the plantation complex itself. In his 1852 essay on the promises of African American emigration to Latin America, Delany made this hidden association between plantation and blackness even more dramatic by arguing that the plantation was actually of African descent. Delany set out to demonstrate how the Southern plantation complex was forged out of the agricultural expertise of African laborers. He cites the African origins of supposedly native species of the U.S. South and notes that “Tobacco, cotton, rice, hemp, indigo, the improvement in Indian corn, and many other important products, are all the result of African skill and labor in this country. And the zig-zag, or ‘Virginia Worm Fence,’ is purely of African origin” (64). In the 1860s, Delany went on to link the plantation’s associations with blackness, experimentation and a volatile tropical environment as the possible “grounds” for race revolution in his serial publication, *Blake; or, the Huts of America* (1861).

While Northern commentators like Higginson treated widespread disillusionment in the midst of the Civil War by representing the plantation as an unchanging, pastoral space of antebellum nostalgia, Delany revealed the plantation’s hidden connections to subterranean organization and insurrection. While enslaved persons were organized and

made visible to masterful scientistic gazes within the cultivated spaces of experimental plantation geographies, I argue in the second half of Chapter 3 that Delany promoted the organization of black rebellion in the dark recesses of a more secret and tropical plantation South. Like Delany, Jean Toomer understood the heterotopic spatiality of the plantation as both temperate and tropical space. In his 1923 experimental novel *Cane*, Toomer deployed a plantation poetics to denaturalize pastoral plantation spaces in the postbellum South while rooting—and routing—a different kind of experimental South for black modernity, as I suggest in my Epilogue.

The organization of bodies and technologies within the “natural” space of the antebellum plantation produced a model of social and spatial organization that has persisted into the twenty and twenty-first century. Into the twentieth century, plantation geographies continued to be understood and utilized as ecologically unique spaces for experimentation, as the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments made brutally apparent (Chapter 4). Throughout the project, I chronicle the uncanny spaces of plantation history in the work of authors such as Grainger, Jefferson and Higginson who cultivated them and those such as Delany and Toomer who were more interested in unearthing them. I show how re-mapping the antebellum and postbellum U.S. through plantation ecology offers insight not only into that moment, but enables us as well to rethink contemporary naturalizations of race, labor, and space in what remains a global plantation South.
Chapter 1 // “An Alien Mixture Meliorates the Breed”: James Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane* and the Rise of the Experimental Plantation

“In a West-India georgic, the mention of many indigenous remedies, as well as diseases, was unavoidable. The truth is, I have rather courted opportunities of this nature, than avoided them. Medicines of such amazing efficacy, as I have had occasion to make trials of in these islands, deserve to be universally known. And wherever, in the following poem, I recommend any such, I beg leave be understood as a physician, and not as a poet”

—James Grainger, *The Sugar-Cane* (1764)¹

In one eccentric, though certainly not uncharacteristic, line of James Grainger’s 1764 four-book poem, *The Sugar-Cane*, the poet-physician warns that in the years to come, the island of St. Christopher may be transformed into a barren wasteland: “As, not indulg’d, the richest lands grow poor;/And Liamuiga may, in future times/If too much urg’d/her barrenness bewail” (1.205-7).² In an earlier stanza, Grainger laments the cruel treatment of cattle during what appears to him as a “degenerate” age. Grainger’s ominous lines are particularly jarring in the context of the poem’s generic mode and object of praise: *The Sugar-Cane* is a georgic poem set in the West Indies, composed

² Liamuiga is the indigenous name of St. Christopher, which was settled and named by the British in 1624. It was the first successful British colony in the West Indies. The island is known today as St. Kitts, though as John Gilmore notes, it was casually referred to as St. Kitts as early as the eighteenth century. See Gilmore’s comprehensive introduction to Grainger’s life and best-known poem, *The Poetics of Empire: A Study of James Grainger’s ‘The Sugar-Cane’* (New Brunswick, N.J.: The Athlone Press, 2000).
during the golden age of British imperialism. It was published in the aftermath of the Seven-Years War, out of which the British gained control of much of the East and West Indies while securing dominance over France and Spain on the global imperial stage.\(^3\)

Although the poem begins as a proper georgic, celebrating the wonders of agriculture on the islands while providing “farmers hearty instruction in the science of productive husbandry” (McKeon 268), it soon devolves into a catalog of various environmental catastrophes and diseases that relentlessly threaten the integrity and purity of the colonial “green plantation” (1.195).\(^4\) Shaun Irlam notes that “Grainger’s poem is intended above all as a handbook for the successful reproduction of colonial planter society through the careful duplication and custodianship of its economic base: sugar-cane” (378).\(^5\)

However, *The Sugar-Cane* turns quickly from schooling would-be planters in the technicalities of reproducing the plantation’s mode of production to advice on managing the reproduction of disease across various plantation “species.” Grainger’s prefatorial claim that writing a “West-India georgic” inevitably leads to mention of various indigenous diseases points toward his inability to sustain a properly “healthful” (or “hearty,” in Michael McKeon’s terms) georgic in the hostile climes of the Caribbean.

Indeed, the mid-eighteenth century marks a critical turning point in fantasies—literary and otherwise—of New World *sustainability*. During this period, looming threats

\(^3\) See Jim Egan, “The ‘Long’d-for Aera’ of an ‘Other Race’: Climate, Identity, and James Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane*” in *Early American Literature* 38.2 (2003): 189-212.


to the Atlantic slave trade terminated beliefs that the brutal plantation economy of the West Indies and the U.S. South would be endlessly replenished by slave labor from abroad. At the same moment, colonial scientists, public officials, and planters began to decry the destruction that agricultural monoculture had wrought on the lands of the Americas, particularly in the West Indies. Richard H. Grove has argued that widespread recognition of land misuse and environmental exploitation in tropical colonial spaces gave birth to modern environmentalism in Europe. Noticing that “the seeds of modern conservationism developed as an integral part of the European encounter with the tropics,” he argues that “as colonial expansion proceeded, the environmental experiences of Europeans and indigenous peoples living at the colonial periphery played a steadily more dominant and dynamic part in the construction of new European evaluations of nature and in the growing awareness of the destructive impact of European economic activity on the peoples and environments of the newly ‘discovered’ and colonized lands” (3).6 Despite his recognition of the ravaging effects of colonialism on tropical environments, the colonial plantation and New World slavery are both strangely absent from Grove’s account of the “birth of modern environmentalism.” This chapter re-situates the plantation at the center of environmental destruction in the Caribbean in the spirit of C.L.R. James’ recognition of the role of the West Indian plantation in the historical degradation of both West Indian soil and slaves in his masterful revisionist history of the Haitian Revolution, The Black Jacobins (1938).7

century, an exhausted supply of bodies and land revealed the plantation as an utterly unsustainable institution. The plantation metamorphosed from an idyllic geography of botanical bounty and pure soil to what Grainger termed a “toxic paradise”: a tainted space that enclosed usable bodies and usable lands to be put in the service of increasingly experimental purposes.

This chapter examines how an enduring, yet ultimately untenable, plantation complex came to be understood as an ecologically unique and enclosed site for experimentation. The bizarre and often fragmented form of *The Sugar-Cane* makes visible both the fraught process by which the plantation was transformed into an experimental space, and in turn, how that transformation wreaked havoc on an emergent plantation poetics in the colonies of the New World. I explore *The Sugar-Cane’s* promotion of the plantation as an ideal site for medical and scientific “trial” and consider how the “unclassic ground” of the experimental plantation de-formed the Virgilian template into a distinctively “West-Indian georgic.” Throughout the poem, British models of temperate agriculture on the colonial plantation are continually undone by a powerfully tropical Caribbean environment that disorders (tropicalizes/creolizes) plantation bodies, crops, and cycles of production. Moving from Book I’s carefully manicured and well-guarded plantation plots to Book IV’s anxieties over multiplying vectors of contagion (“a virulent contagion!”) that colonize the plantation while

such a soil as San Domingo slavery, only a vicious society could flourish. Nor were the incidental circumstances such as to mitigate the demoralization inherent in such a method of production” (25).

8 In speaking of the poet’s use of the georgic to treat West-Indian subject matter, Samuel Johnson claimed that Grainger had tread on “unclassic ground.” Quoted in Irlam, “‘Wish You Were Here,’” 392.
challenging its integrity as an ecologically exceptional, fully enclosed space, Grainger’s georgic ultimately dissolves into a more pastoral order that reveals how enclosed plantation ecologies were constantly compromised and opened up by fugitive tropical species from the outside.

*The Sugar-Cane* both illustrates this crucial turning point in the history of the plantation Americas, when the fantasy of a pre-lapsarian plantation pastoral gave way to an understanding of the New World as a creolized, fallen Eden, and reveals how an imperial poetics in the island colonies anxiously sought to manage that transformation through the organizing tropes and cultivating conventions of the georgic mode. Despite the poet’s attempts to cultivate, enclose, and whiten the “Cane-isles” through the georgic mode, the plantation is ultimately revealed as a hybridized space of disease, miscegenation, and mixture through an extensive botanical footnote apparatus that continually threatens to overwhelm and tropicalize the main body of the poem. The wildly sprawling footnotes of the poem offered a wealth of empirical knowledge about the tropical environment of the West Indies to a British reading public eager to learn the “truth” about the fantastical sounding islands of the Caribbean. After the 1764

9 Although the language of hybridization seems appropriate, I use it cautiously in the eighteenth-century context since, as Jill H. Casid notes, the term “hybrid” was not in regular usage until the nineteenth century. See her *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). I prefer *creolization* and *tropicalization* because these terms better replicate the languages with which colonists talked about the intimate, mixed-up relations between different kinds of peoples, environments, and technologies in plantation landscapes of the Caribbean and to some extent, the U.S. South. On creolization in the Caribbean, see Antonio Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996; Second Edition). On tropicalization, see Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688-1804* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).
publication of *The Sugar-Cane*, London critics largely ignored Grainger’s poetic project, informing potential readers that the poem would be valuable to them because of its massive archive of scientific footnotes. The poet-physician attempted to seamlessly integrate valuable facts about the New World into the classical form of the poem. What results, however, is a bizarrely fragmented text that continually eschews poetic imagination for the realm of the empirical.

An understanding of the plantation’s status as a particularly privileged site for the production of empirical knowledge increasingly interrupted the imaginative, fantastical imperatives of poetry written in and about the British West Indies. Grainger foregrounds the New World plantation’s privileged relationship to experimentation from the very beginning of the poem. In the preface, the poet emphasizes that he was encouraged to compose a “poem on the cultivation of the Sugar-Cane” not only because of the “novel” nature of the undertaking, but more importantly because “as the face of this country was wholly different from that of Europe, so whatever hand copied its appearances, however rude, could not fail to enrich poetry with many new and picturesque images” (167). Grainger’s nod to the revered tradition of poetic *imitatio* ("copied its appearances") quickly gives way to the notion that his observation of the “face” of a “wholly different” country like St. Christopher opened the door to completely new images for the European literary imagination. He goes on to suggest that the unique climate and pharmacosm of the West Indies additionally offered a completely new set of percepts to the scientific imagination. Later on in the poem, the “poet-physician” more explicitly figures the plantation Americas as a privileged site for the production of empirical knowledge when
he refers to the British empire as an “Empire of the senses.” Indeed, Grainger insists from the first lines of the preface that his poetic “precepts,” to put it in his terms, are solely the “result of Experience.” While invocations of Experience (with a capital “E”) were a common poetic convention during the period, Grainger’s opening recourse to Experience is bound up with an emergent understanding of the plantation as an ideal site for scientific experimentation.

“The Georgic Revolution”

Sometime in 1766, James Grainger addressed a letter “home” to Thomas Percy, a young clergyman who traveled in literary circles in London and spent much of his life promoting and preserving Grainger’s reputation. Grainger conveyed to his close friend that he “mean[t] to remain some years longer in the torrid zone.” Although Grainger intended to return to London at some point in the future, he most likely passed away soon after composing this letter. Like so many other British subjects eager to profit from the lucrative plantation economy, Grainger hoped to make his fortune in the West Indian colonies and then escape for more temperate climes in order to avoid the enervating, creolizing effects of the tropical environment. Grainger’s desire, however, to stay on for


11 Quoted in Gilmore, Poetics of Empire, 20.
just a bit longer in the “torrid zone” opened the door to his complete creolization: buried in the rich alluvial soils so highly praised in *The Sugar-Cane*, Grainger became an eternal resident of St. Christopher Isle.

I place “home” in quotation marks because Grainger’s own relationship to the metropole was a precarious one. Although he spent some years living in London, he was born in Berwickshire, Scotland, attended the University of Edinburgh and spent three years in the Scottish army, serving as a surgeon, before receiving his medical degree in 1753. His future poetic ruminations on imperial Britain’s incorporation of the West Indies into its domestic economy are particularly interesting since Scotland was itself incorporated into Great Britain in 1707 under the Acts of Union. As McKeon notes, “The union of England and Scotland as ‘Great Britain’ sought to dissolve the old quasi-colonial opposition within a singular national unit. In fact, it had mixed results: the Scottish remained ‘Northern Britons,’ both familiar and estranged from English identity” (286). 12 Grainger moved to London soon after 1753 and began practicing as a physician. In order to make ends meet, he began to publish reviews, short articles, and poems in reputable local papers. As John Gilmore notes, the poet-physician was a respectable and desirable dual profession in eighteenth-century London: Richard Blackmore, Samuel Garth, John Armstrong, and of course, Oliver Goldsmith, were all well known as men of the medical and literary arts. 13 Although Grainger did become

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12 See McKeon, “The Pastoral Revolution.” The author goes on to suggest that the fraught “quasi-colonial” relation between Scotland and England replicated conventional oppositions of the pastoral (city vs. country): the highlands of Scotland came to be associated with nature, pre-capitalist relations and rural life while the English lowlands represented culture, civilization and art.
interested in the literary scene of the metropole, regularly seeking connections with literary elite like Samuel Johnson and his cadre, it seems most likely that he was originally made a poet out of necessity. Throughout his time in England, he kept watchful of pecuniary opportunities.

In 1759, Grainger took up one such opportunity, traveling to the West Indies as the paid companion of John Bourryau, whose father owned plantations on the island of St. Christopher. Shortly after arriving in the “British isles” of the Caribbean, he wrote home to report that he had cordially parted ways with Bourryau after meeting and marrying a Creole plantation heiress named Daniel Mathew Bart. Contemporary critical accounts and biographical sketches have often stated that after marrying Grainger became a manager of his wife’s family’s plantation estates. Such accounts, however, have misunderstood the managerial position from which the poet offers advice to gentlemen planters in *The Sugar-Cane* as reflecting Grainger’s actual role in the West Indies. However, there is no historical evidence to suggest that Grainger actually managed a plantation. He was instead responsible for watching over the health of plantation slaves: Gilmore notes, for example, that Grainger was employed part-time by his wife’s cousin, Daniel Mathew, to care for ailing slaves on the family’s estate. Grainger continued to make ends meet by treating ailing colonists and serving as a part-time plantation doctor. Although Grainger spoke of a desire to own a sugar plantation, he acquired only enough capital to purchase a few slaves to stock a plantation he was never able to afford. Although he may not have been the singular manager of a plantation as his hubris in *The Sugar-Cane* leads one to assume, it is clear throughout the poem that he understood the
proper role of the plantation doctor as one of tracking the health not only of slaves, but also of managing a larger plantation ecology.\textsuperscript{14}

Grainger expressed excitement about the possibility of writing a grand poem about the West Indies very soon after arriving in St. Christopher. He likely began composing the piece straight away. In 1763, he returned to Scotland to attend to family business and then traveled to London to find a publisher for \textit{The Sugar-Cane}. He vetted the manuscript with several friends and authors during his stay. In the \textit{Life of Samuel Johnson}, James Boswell famously relayed that when the manuscript was read aloud at Sir Joshua Reynolds’ home, the literary group in attendance laughed—perhaps with horror—at Grainger’s audacity in devoting long sections of verse to the uncouth subject of rat infestation on the plantation.\textsuperscript{15} The poem was published in London in 1764 and again in Dublin and London in 1766. It was repeatedly reprinted and collected in anthologies of British literary works throughout the rest of the century. \textit{The Sugar-Cane} received one printing during the nineteenth century, in 1836, but disappeared from the canon until Gilmore’s recuperation of the text in his 2000 edition.

In eighteenth-century Britain, the Caribbean was seen as an ill-suited subject for literary treatment.\textsuperscript{16} While travel narratives and exploration accounts of the region were plentiful and popular, the fact that Grainger used the classical mode of the georgic to survey the exotic West Indian geography was ambitious, to say the least. A quick glance

\setstretch{1.25}

\textsuperscript{14} In his historical account of colonial medicine and slave health, Richard Sheridan approaches plantation spaces as “ecosystems” in order to better understand the miasmic, tropical conditions of the West Indies. See Sheridan, \textit{Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680-1834} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 128.


\textsuperscript{16} See Egan, “The ‘Long’d for Aera’ of an ‘Other Race’,” 193.
at the original publication offers insight into the peculiar pressures the “torrid zone”
placed on the shape and content of the classical georgic. Grainger, who is listed on the
poem’s frontispiece as “James Grainger MD,” takes his expertise as physician seriously
as he crams all kinds of botanical, medical, and scientific knowledge about the Caribbean
into sprawling footnotes that threaten to overwhelm the body of the poem itself. 17 The
footnote section of The Sugar-Cane serves as an impressively comprehensive catalog of
medicinally and commercially useful flora and fauna of the region. It follows the
conventions and content of Caribbean natural histories that had been popular ever since
the 1672 publication of Richard Blome’s natural history of the West Indies.18

The Sugar-Cane operates as part didactic poem on Caribbean monoculture, part
New World natural history, and part medical handbook on the proper management of
plantation health and disease. After completing the poem, Grainger extracted its medical
and botanical information to compose a medical treatise entitled An Essay on the More
Common West-India Diseases; and the Remedies which that Country itself produces: To
which are added, Some Hints on the Management, &c., of Negroes. By a Physician in
the West Indies. The essay was first published in London in the same year as The Sugar-
Cane (1764). Richard Sheridan notes that the publication of this work was a significant

17 I prefer Krise’s edition of the poem because Grainger’s extensive footnotes are
included in the main text, instead of being relegated to the endnotes as in other
contemporary editions. This layout gives modern readers a better sense of why
eighteenth-century commentators were so struck by the sheer amount of botanical and
medical knowledge presented in the poem.
18 Blome, A Description of the Island of Jamaica, with the Other Isles and Territories in
America, to which the English are related, viz. Barbadoes, St. Christophers, Nievis
event since Grainger “was the first doctor to write a medical manual for the treatment of slaves in the British West Indies” (28).\(^{19}\)

A second edition of the essay was republished in 1802 by a colonial press in Jamaica under the title *Three Tracts on West-Indian Agriculture*.\(^{20}\) The other two tracts in the volume included *An Essay Upon Plantership* by Samuel Martin, “Esq. of Antigua,” and Grainger’s own beloved *The Sugar-Cane* (See Figure 1). In the 1802 advertisement to *An Essay on the More Common West-India Diseases*, Dr. William Wright notes, “although [the essay] was principally intended for the use of the owners and managers of slaves in the Sugar Islands, yet I know the physicians and surgeons in that country have profited much by it both in the knowledge of the diseases of the Negroes, and of the indigenous remedies” (vi). The presentation of Grainger’s medical essay and georgic poem as tracts “on West-Indian Agriculture” illuminates how multiple kinds of texts from the New World, including poems that we might today too quickly categorize as imaginative literature, could be received in the metropole as objective documents providing useful and truthful information about the region. The shared publication of *The Sugar-Cane* and “An Essay on the More Common West-India Diseases” is also compelling, especially since, as the advertisement attests, vigorous debate ensued among Grainger’s friends over whether or not the poem and essay were a suitable pair: although some friends, including Percy, thought the medical essay would serve as a “valuable appendix to The Sugar Cane [sic],” one “Dr. Anderson hesitated concerning the propriety

\(^{19}\) Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves.*

\(^{20}\) See *Three Tracts on West-Indian Agriculture* (Jamaica: Reprinted by Alexander Aikman, 1802). To the second edition were appended “practical notes, and a Linnaean Index, by William Wright, M.D., F.R.S., Physician to His Majesty’s Forces.”
of associating a Medical Treatise, of a popular nature, with his Poems” (vii). Wright ultimately praises “Dr. Grainger” for the “liberal pains taken […] to enlarge the knowledge of the medicinal virtues of the indigenous plants of the West Indies” not only in his medical essay, but also in the “Notes to his admirable West-India Georgic.” The medical handbook and West-India georgic were, in Wright’s view, both recognizable as works of useful information, and not, crucially, as poetry, or as art, more generally.

![Three Tracts on West-Indian Agriculture, and Subjects Connected Therewith; Viz. An Essay Upon Plantership; By Samuel Martus, Senior, Esq. of Antigua; The Sugar-Cane, A Didactic Poem, in Four Books; and, An Essay on The Management and Diseases of Negros, with the Easiest Means of Cure: The two latter, by James Grainger, M. D. of St. Christopher’s.]

Jamaica: Re-Printed by Alexander Aikman, Printer to the King’s Most Excellent Majesty, and to the Honourable the Assembly. 1802.

Figure 1: Title Page, Three Tracts on West-Indian Agriculture. Jamaica: Alexander Aikman, 1802

Many critics shared Wright’s sentiments: after the first publication of The Sugar-Cane, commentators noted that the footnotes composed the most valuable component of the poem. The extensive scientific footnote apparatus as well as the emphasis placed in
the preface on the wide array of medicinal products and empirical knowledge to be
gleaned from the American tropics both point toward a deceptively simple, yet central
question: why did Grainger choose to present this kind of information as a poem? And
why, more specifically, did he turn to the georgic? Anthony Low has argued that the
seventeenth century witnessed a “georgic revolution” as an emergent bourgeois class
increasingly favored rustic visions of labor in the countryside over the aristocratic
contempt for work that had so often characterized the pastoral. 21 The mode received
another boost in popularity when Dryden’s translation of Virgil’s Georigcs was published
in 1697. Karen O’Brien argues that by the late seventeenth century, the georgic served as
an artful response to the problems posed by Britain’s imperial growth overseas:

British versions of the georigic mode presented readers with a model of social self-
understanding which allowed them to comprehend the country and the city as
separate yet integrated spheres of activity within an expanding British Empire.
Unlike earlier versions of pastoral and georigic, which tended to treat trade and
agriculture as discontinuous enterprises, later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century
georigic subsumed the binary opposition of country and city within the larger
imaginative structure of universal, peaceful empire. It was georigic, more than
any other literary mode or genre, which assumed the burden of securing the
aesthetic and moral links between country, city, and empire. (161) 22

22 O’Brien, “Imperial Georigic, 1660-1789,” in The Country and the City Revisited:
England and the Politics of Culture, 1550-1880, ed. Gerald MacLean, Donna Landry,
O’Brien further contends that writers took advantage of the “uneasy middle style of
georic” to negotiate the contradictions of Empire. The georic was especially popular
among writers who were living in the colonies: by the mid-eighteenth century, the
georic had become the preferred mode for an emergent imperial poetics.

In *The Sugar-Cane*, the poet repeatedly emphasizes his choice to compose a
georic. Early in Book I, he offers an encomium to “Imperial George, the monarch of the
main/Hath given to wield the scepter of those isles/Where first the Muse beheld the spiry
Cane/Supreme of plants, rich subject of my song” (1.20-23). “Imperial George” refers to
George III, who ascended the throne in 1760, the year in which Grainger most likely
began to compose *The Sugar-Cane*. Grainger found the georic to be a particularly
timely choice under the recently anointed reign of the King. The “imperial georic,” to
use O’Brien’s apt phrase, additionally offered Grainger a set of tropes and poetic
conventions with which to organize, cultivate, and manage the wild tropical landscape of
the island colony.23 Throughout the poem, the poet attempts to overcome his own initial
designation of the poem as a “West-India georic,” continually refiguring disordered,
overly productive, creolized Caribbean landscapes as carefully organized plantation
spaces of the temperate (not torrid) zone.

23 Beth Fowkes Tobin understands the “georic’s and natural history’s use of the catalog
as a way to organize information about tropical nature” (xiv) and situates Grainger within
an emergent class of bourgeois managers in the colonies. Tobin additionally argues that
the eighteenth-century “imperial georic” worked hard to erase slave technologies and
knowledge of indigenous plant reproduction. See Tobin, *Colonizing Nature: The Tropics
in British Arts and Letters, 1760-1820* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,
2005), 32.
Grainger’s footnotes visually disrupt such poetic purity: on many pages, the footnotes appear as a kind of wild overgrowth that territorializes, or counter-colonizes, the cultivated spaces of the colonial plantation. In the 1802 publication of the poem, for example, just two lines of verse appear on the eighth page of Book 1: “The Cane will joint, ungenial tho’ the soil/But would’st though see huge casks, in order due” (1.26-27). The rest of the page’s white space is overcrowded by a monstrous botanical footnote on “the spiry Cane” that begins on page 6, stretches across page 7 and 8, and finally concludes on page 9 (See Figure 2 and 3). It almost appears as if the main body of the georgic cannot control the tropical knowledge it has itself produced. Just like the rapidly replicating flora and fauna outside the plantation that continually threatened the enclosed and temperate purity of the colonial plantation, the botanical footnotes continually tropicalize/creolize the well-manicured lines of georgic verse. Grainger’s practical advice on the proper cultivation of the cane is undercut by sprawling descriptions of tropical productions that naturally, and perhaps too rapidly, reproduce without the planter’s guiding hand. In The Sugar-Cane, the frames of the georgic mode and the natural history catalog attempt to organize information about the teeming “vegetable productions” of the region, which continually defy imperial cultivation and systemization.

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24 The poem often plays with the double meaning of lines, as both lines of the poem and furrows in the fields.
This choral band, and from their precepts leave me
To deck my theme, which though to song unknown,
Is most momentous to my country's weal!

So shall my numbers win the public ear;
And not displease Aurelius; him to whom,
Imperial George, the monarch of the main,
Hath given to wield the scepter of those isles,
Where first the Muse beheld the spiry Cane,
Supreme of plants, rich subject of my song,
Where'er the clouds relent in frequent rains,
And the sun fiercely darts his Tropic beam.

Sugar, I cannot discover; probably it soon found its way into
Europe in that form, first by the Red Sea, and afterwards
through Persia, by the Black Sea and Caspian; but the plant
itself was not known to Europe, till the Arabs introduced
it into the southern parts of Spain, Sicily, and those provinces
of France which border on the Pyrenees mountains. It was
also successfully cultivated in Egypt, and in many places on
the Barbary coast. From the Mediterranean, the Spaniards
and Portuguese transported the Cane to the Americas, the
Moluccas, the Canary and the Cape-Verde islands, soon after they
had been discovered in the fifteenth century; and in most of
these, particularly Madeira, it thrives exceedingly. Whether
the Cane is a native of either the Great or Less Antilles,
cannot now be determined; for their discoverers were so
wholly employed in searching after imaginary gold mines, that
they took little or no notice of the natural productions. Indeed
the wars, wherein they wantonly engaged themselves with the
natives, was another hindrance to physical investigation. But
whether the Cane was a production of the West Indies, or not,
it is probable the Spaniards and Portuguese did not begin to
cultivate it either there or in South America (where it certainly
was found), till some years after their discovery. It is also equally
uncertain whether sugar was first made in the islands, or on
the continent, and whether the Spaniards or Portuguese were
the first planters in the new world; it is indeed most likely
that the latter erected the first Sugar-works in Brazil, as they
are more lively and enterprising than the Spaniards. How-
ever, they had not long the start of the latter; for, in 1505,
Francisco the Catholic, ordered the Cane to be carried from
the Canary to St. Domingo; in which island, one Pedro de
Atenas soon after built an ingenio de açúcar, for so the Spa-
niards call a Sugar-work. But, though they began thus early

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Figure 2: First Two Pages of Four-Page Footnote on “the spiry Cane” in 1802 Jamaican Edition of James Grainger's The Sugar-Cane. See Three Tracts on West-Indian Agriculture
The Cane will joint, ungenial tho' the soil. But wouldst thou see huge casks, in order that, Raw'd
to turn their thoughts to Sugar, the Portugueze for outstripped
them in that trade; for Lisbon soon supplied most of Europe
with that commodity; and, notwithstanding the English then
paid the Portugueze at the rate of 4s. per cwt. for muscovado,
yet that price, great as it may now appear, was probably much
less than what the Sugar from the East Indies had commonly
been sold for. Indeed, so earnest was the crown of Portugueze
in extending these Brazil trade, that that of the East Indies
began to be neglected, and soon after suffered a manifest decay.
However, their Sugar made them ample amends; in which
trade they continued almost without a rival, for upwards
of a century. At last the Dutch, in 1621, drove the
Portugueze out of all the northern part of Brazil; and, during
the one-and-twenty years they kept that conquest, these
industrious republicans learned the art of making Sugar.
This probably inspired the English with a desire of coming in for a
share of the Sugar-trade; accordingly they, renouncing their
chimerical search after gold mines in Florida and Guiana,
settled themselves near after, at the mouth of the river Surinam,
where they cultivated the Cane with such success, that when
the colony was ceded to the Dutch by the treaty of Breda,
it maintained not less than 40,000 whites, half that number of
Indians, and employed, one year with another, 15,000 tons of
shipping. This success was a severe blow to the English trade,
which did not recover for several years, though many of the
Surinam planters carried their art and negroes to the Bermudas
and Jamaica, which then began to be the object of 
political consideration in England.

Sugar is twice mentioned by Chaucer, who flourished in the
fourteenth century; and succeeding poets, down to the middle
of the last, use the epithet sugar-like, whenever they would
express any thing unnecessarily pleasing. Since that time, the
more

Roll'd numerous on the bay, all fully fraught
With strong-grain'd muscovado, alvery-grey,
Joy of the planter; and if happy Fate
Permit a choice, avoid the rocky slope,
The clay-cold bottom, and the sandy beach.
But let thy hewing axe with ceasless stroke
The wild red cedar, the tough loosest fall:
Nor let his nectar, nor his silken pods,
more

more elegant writers seldom admit of that adjective in a metaph- plumed scene; but herein, perhaps, they are affectingly squan- mids.

Ver. 29. muscovado.] The Cane-juice being brought to
the consistence of syrup, and, by subsequent colution, granu- lated, is then called muscovado; a Spanish word probably,
though not to be found in Floridas, vulgarly known a Sugar; the
French term is sucre raffiné.

Ver. 34. wild red cedar.] There are two species of cedar
commonly to be met with in the West Indies, the white and
red, which differ from the cedars cultivated in the Bermudas:
both are lofty, sturdy, and of quick growth. The white suc- ceds
in any soil, and produces a flower which, infused like
ferre, is useful against fish-poison. The red requires a better
soil, and always emits a disagreeable smell before rain! The
wood of both are highly useful for many mechanical purposes,
and best for little ploughs.

Ver. 34. locust.] This is also a lofty tree. It is of quick
growth, and handsome, and produces a not disagreeable fruit,
in a flat pod, or figumen, about three inches long. It is a
serviceable wood. In beetled books, I find three different
names for the locust-tree; that meant here, is the silicea
elaeis.

The
The georgic’s celebration of agricultural cultivation additionally offered a
template through which to re-imagine West Indian colonization as a simple, non-violent
extension of British plantation into the New World.25 O’Brien notes that beginning in the
seventeenth century, “commentators expressed pride in the fact that the British Empire
was not, like the Dutch Empire, simply an affair of exports and trading bases, but a
process of agricultural improvement overseas” (166). After offering preliminary
instruction on superior soils, compost, plantation topography, weather, manure, and the
early stages of planting the cane crop, the poet turns to the important topic of fences. The
enclosing of the sugar plantation is represented as if it were absolutely contiguous with
histories and ongoing acts of land enclosure in Britain:

[...] ah, when will fate,
That long hath scowl’d relentless on the bard,
Give him some small plantation to inclose,
Which he may call his own? Not wealth he craves,
But independence: yet if thou, sweet maid,
In health and virtue bloom; tho’ worse betide,
Thy smile will smoothe adversity’s rough brow. (1.544-50)

Such lines figure the act of plantation as a modest enterprise (“some small plantation to
inclose”) severed from its connection with aggressively imperialist commercial activity:

25 Shaun Irlam argues that Grainger attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to construct a “mimic
English landscape” (384). See “‘Wish You Were Here.’”
the New World planter craves “not wealth,” but “independence.” The focus on modest agricultural independence transforms the colonial planter into a yeoman farmer who toils over his crop without African slave labor. Such lines additionally illuminate a desire to imagine the West Indies as an innocent extension of British soil: the repetition in the verse of the terms “British Isles” and “Cane isles” presents the West Indies and Great Britain as one single archipelago of temperate agricultural cultivation. In *The Repeating Island*, Antonio Benítez-Rojo understands the colonial history of the Caribbean in terms of the construction of a plantation “machine” that constantly fights against the chaos of the islands.26 While John Dyer’s popular eighteenth-century georgic, *The Fleece*, emphasizes the “whitening” and purifying effects of sheep grazing within enclosed British fields (“Whole flocks innum’rous whiten all the land” 1.40)), Grainger’s plantation has to be continually fortified as an ecologically bounded space against the threat of creolization.27 I argue that the external threat of tropical infestation and internal threat of slave rebellion effectively transforms Grainger’s pure, white plantation, into black space.

In the face of “island chaos,” the poet offers readers extensive direction on the erection and maintenance of plantation fences. After all, “inclosing” some small space is

26 Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 29. The author refers to the plantation as the “modern Caribbean machine” (8).
27 See Dyer, *The Fleece: A Poem in Four Books* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1752). Dyer’s celebration of the British wool industry is a stark counterpoint to *The Sugar-Cane*. Where *The Fleece* offers scene after scene of “healthy and gay” fields, *The Sugar-Cane* is unable to steer clear of the unhealthy elements that plague agricultural spaces in the island colonies. Dyer’s georgic, like Grainger’s, is a four-book poem written in Miltonic verse.
a never-ending process in a tropical landscape that always threatens to re-colonize the plantation and take it back to the state of nature:

Thy fields thus planted; to secure the Canes
From the Goat’s baneful tooth; the churning boar;
From thieves; from fire or casual or design’d;
Unfailing herbage to thy toiling herds
Would’st thou afford; and the spectators charm
With beauteous prospects: let the frequent hedge
Thy green plantation, regular, divide.

With limes, with lemons, let thy fences glow,
Grateful to sense; now children of this clime:
And here and there let oranges erect
Their shapely beauties, and perfume the sky. (1.492-502)

The first stanza lists a motley mixture of goats, boars, thieves, and a fiery blaze, four actants that endanger recently planted crops through their utter disregard for property lines. The planting of a “frequent hedge” around “thy green plantation” serves two roles: it keeps destructive parasites at bay at the same time as it visually orders and

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28 I use actant here in the way that Bruno Latour understands the agency of non-human subjects and objects. The clearest summary of actor-network theory (or ANT) can be found in Latour’s Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
beautifies the plantation grounds. Grainger is quick to aestheticize the fence in order to make it appear as a natural part of the plantation landscape. He suggests adorning the fence with citrus (“With lemon and lime, let thy fences glow”). The invocation “let” suggests that oranges will naturally embellish and beautify the plantation while perfuming the air with its intoxicating odor. By this point in Book I, the poet-physician has associated citrus with plantation “health,” having previously listed the various medicinal qualities associated with the fruit. In these stanzas, the fence, that primary technology of land enclosure, becomes a naturalized feature of the West Indian landscape.

The healthful and aesthetically pleasing “natural fence,” however, gives way to visions of a more toxic enclosure:

Yet, if the cholic’s deathful pangs thou dread’st,
Taste not its luscious nut. The acassee,
With which the sons of Jewry, stiff neck’d race,
Conjecture says, our God-Messiah crown’d;
Soon shoots a thick impenetrable fence,
Whose scent perfumes the night and morning sky,
Tho’ baneful be its root. (1.509-15)

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The stanza lists several poisonous plant species that may be planted at the border of the plantation for an even more proactive approach to warding off plantation parasites. The “acassee” both “shoots a thick impenetrable fence” and has the potential to poison (“tho’ baneful be its root”). In these stanzas, the poem depicts the Caribbean pharmacosm as a kind of “toxic paradise,” containing an array of exotic, and potentially dangerous botanical wonders that can be harnessed for the proper enclosure, management, and surveillance of the plantation’s ecosystem. The poem’s near obsession with naturalizing plantation enclosure ultimately reveals the colonial plantation as an ecologically exceptional site within the larger tropical landscape of the Caribbean islands. Visions of the plantation as a fully enclosed and well-managed space of agricultural cultivation helped give rise to what I call the “experimental plantation,” a mobilization of the plantation as a perfect site for what Grainger refers to as scientific “trials.”

“Black sugar” on “thy green plantation”

By the mid-eighteenth century, the frenzied intensification of the slave trade and severe soil degradation in the New World surely interrupted any lingering fantasies that the overseas colonies were simply part of a benevolent extension of British agricultural reform. The Sugar-Cane oscillates between a fulfilled fantasy of the transformation of the Caribbean islands into a well ordered, whitened plantation system and a recognition that the plantation was, in reality, a highly hybridized and racialized space of transplanted

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plant species, livestock, and slaves.\textsuperscript{31} While critics have often viewed the popularity of the georgic in terms of its ability to celebrate the health and vitality of the British empire, Richard Feingold argues that the late eighteenth century actually marks a critical period of demise for both the pastoral and the georgic.\textsuperscript{32} He suggests that by the late eighteenth century, the georgic was widely viewed as a highly degraded poetic form. Because of its transformation from high “art” into a more “middling verse,” the georgic became a site for satire and, in his terms, “colonial experimentation.” While the heavily footnoted verse of \textit{The Sugar-Cane} seems at times to spin out of the poet’s control, effectively creolizing the cultivated geographies laid out by the georgic verse, we might also consider the ways Grainger deployed the decaying, degraded form of the imperial georgic to reflect on how the peculiarities of the colonial situation in the West Indies, particularly the stifling presence of slavery and an enervating, dangerous climate, actively de-formed British verse and imperial subjectivity. Grainger’s decision to write in Miltonic blank verse, after the style of \textit{Paradise Lost}, speaks to the poet’s cognizance of the precarious post-lapsarian status of the West Indian islands.\textsuperscript{33} Feingold argues that poets like John Dyer and William Cowper blended georgic and pastoral modes to fit their own purposes, creating an amalgam of elements that were kept separate in Virgil (16). Such generic

\textsuperscript{31} In \textit{Sowing Empire}, Jill Casid writes on the importance of recalling the double connotation of \textit{diaspora} as the dispersal of both people and seeds. See her introduction, xvii.
\textsuperscript{33} In response to Christopher Smart’s “The Hop Garden” (1752), also composed in blank verse, Alexander Pope complained that Miltonic verse was inappropriately suited for a “pastoral theme.”
mixings were especially useful for the composition of a specifically “West-India georig.”

Grainger’s object of praise, the colonial sugar plantation, presents several challenges to the classical conventions of the georig. For example, the plantation’s dependence on slave labor impedes the georig’s standard valorization of the individual farmer. The poem singularizes a heterogeneous collective of slaves on the sugar plantation by referring to the multitude as the “Negroe-train” (see, for example, 1.439 and 3.96). After a lengthy account of a fire on the plantation, Grainger offers an image of the “Negroe-train” surveying the scorched fields as if the slaves compose just one sensory body. However, such affective amalgamations come undone as the meticulous attention paid to various diseases that plague the plantation environment ultimately dis-aggregates the “train” into multiple bodies (“disorder seiz’d his Negroe-train” (1.617)). The healthy georig is continually “disordered” by the multiple vectors of contagion that threaten the plantation’s enclosed ecology.

While scholars have often criticized the poem’s obfuscation of slave labor in representing the process of cultivating sugar cane, I see labor as the primary focus of Grainger’s georig: the poet simply works hard to naturalize, but not obscure, the brutal work of the enslaved within a rustic landscape that attempts to mimic the English countryside. In an anomalous moment in Book IV, the concluding ode to the “Genius of Africk!” (4.1), Grainger directly addresses the slaves instead of their planter-master:


34 On the use of the georig to obfuscate slave labor, see Beth Fowkes Tobin’s Colonizing Nature, 32, and Karen O’Brien’s “Imperial Georgic” in The Country and the City Revisited, 174.
Nor, Negroe, at thy destiny repine,

Tho’ doom’d to toil from dawn to setting sun.

How far more pleasant is thy rural task,

Thank theirs who sweat, sequester’d from the day,

In dark tartarean caves, sunk far beneath

The earth’s dark surface, where sulphureous flames,

Oft from their vapoury prisons bursting wild,

To dire explosion give the cavern’s deep,

And in dread ruin all its inmates whelm? (4.165-73)

Slaves should not “repine” since their “rural task” is far more pleasant than the drudgery of wage laborers forced to toil and “sweat” in dark, noxious mines. The emphatic reminder that the miners are white (“white men these!” (4.182)) ironically suggests that sunny plantation labor in “blissful climes” (4.187) gives slaves access to a pastoral experience denied even to many white British subjects.

From this point in the verse, Grainger’s focus on plantation enclosure through the georgic dissolves into a pastoral mode that celebrates unencumbered movement and healthful leisure in an unenclosed “rural” landscape. The slaves are repeatedly referred to throughout the poem as “thy swain,” as if they are able to freely roam about the countryside herding their sheep. Of course, the possessive “thy” exposes the slaves’ true condition as planters’ property, effectively enclosing them back within the property lines

35 The poet’s repetition of the term “repine” (and “re-pine”) is compelling, particularly considering the kinds of animal-human-plant hybridizations that pepper the verse.
of the Caribbean plantation. In one pastoral scene at the end of Book III, a melancholic poet grieves for the company of his literary friends from London. He subsequently imagines the trans-plantation of “Johnson, Percy, and White” to the West Indies, where the group might join together to drink in the “fair landscape; where in loveliest forms/Green cultivation hath array’d the land” (3.524-25). The mere presence of the British poets transforms the colony’s tropical “black” soil into a “fair landscape” where properly pastoral scenes may now be enjoyed. Their eyes even seize upon an amusing pastoral scene in which “frolick goats/Butt the young negroes” (3.534-35) on an unclosed hill.

Karen O’Brien notes that the “pastoral exit” was a common route of escape for a number of colonial island poets:

[A]n acute awareness of the problem of slavery, heightened by anti-slavery campaigns at home, rendered unworkable the thematic reconciliation of dignified labor, agricultural didactic, and imperial prospect required by the georgic mode. Faced with the moral problem of slavery, many West Indian colonial poets took the pastoral exit, and described instead an abundant, luxuriant, and seasonless landscape with no trace of labouring people. (174)\(^{36}\)

I find, by contrast, that in The Sugar-Cane, “traces of labouring people” mark the entire poem. As the uneven georgic-pastoral poetics of The Sugar-Cane suggest, colonial poets like Grainger more likely paired these modes explicitly to negotiate the proliferating

\(^{36}\) See O’Brien, “Imperial Georgic, 1660-1789.”
contradictions of British plantation in the West Indies. In other words, where O’Brien reads an evasion of the problem of slavery through the pastoral, I locate a hybrid or “mixed” poetics that engages with the very contradictions of New World enslavement, particularly plantation slavery’s relationship to agricultural labor. Opposing a long critical tradition dedicated to keeping the pastoral pure by carefully drawing borders around it, Annabel Patterson argues, as many have after her, that scholars should be more concerned with what the pastoral “does” than with what it “is.” She notes that attempts to define the pastoral have been futile since the sixteenth century, “when the genre began to manifest the tendency of most strong literary forms to propagate by miscegenation” (7; italics are mine).37 While Patterson’s description of the reproduction of the pastoral by way of “miscegenation” is offered as a provocative turn of phrase, it is a compelling one, especially since the imperial pastoral and georgic mixtures of the eighteenth century displayed a deep formal and thematic concern with miscegenation.

While the plantation circulated in metropolitan discourse as a site of monoculture composed of highly cultivated and tame “temperate” species from the metropole, the colonial plantation was in reality composed of species transplanted from all over the globe. Jill Casid notes, “the colonial hybridized landscape is the emblem of imperial power, but it needs to keep the specter of miscegenation at bay” (24).38 Grainger’s untamed footnotes reveal the miscegenated and uncertain genealogies of fauna and flora across the colonized landscape. While the presentation in *The Sugar-Cane* of the

38 See Casid, *Sowing Empire*. 
uncontrolled “mixture” of flora and fauna in tropical spaces outside of the plantation are shot through with an anxious language of racial miscegenation, Grainger suggests that the careful orchestration and management of hybridization within the plantation enclosures actually improves the health of the colonial estate: “In plants, in beasts, in man’s imperial race/An alien mixture meliorates the breed” (1.458-59). Grainger’s interests in how calculated “alien mixtures” might “meliorate” plants, beasts, and humans illuminates a plantation proto-eugenics that sought to manage and purify the reproduction of all kinds of species on the plantation. Grainger marks an important moment in the rise of the experimental plantation. By the mid-eighteenth century, the plantation was increasingly understood as an ecologically unique and fully enclosed geography of temperate cultivation, the perfect geography for controlled experiments in reproducing the biota of the plantation’s ecosystem (including crops, animals, and slaves).

“Driving poisons from the infected frame”

The Sugar-Cane’s initial promotion of planter-controlled regimes of “genetic” hybridization is rapidly undone by a litany of zoological, botanical, and microbial aliens that plague fortified plantation spaces. The sugar plantation emerges in such sections of the poem as a perpetual war zone, where “monkey-nations,” “insect tribes,” and “humble weeds” continually attack and assault the plantation (see 2.34-155). The figuring of these zoological and botanical collectives as “nations” and “tribes” transforms the plantation into a sovereign nation, a metonym for imperial Britain, whose control over the West Indies is continually put into jeopardy by adjacent colonial powers. The poet speaks of the tropical plant and animal “kingdom” in terms of its ability to re-colonize the
cultivated colonial landscape, which is lorded over by the monoculture of “imperial Cane.” The poem’s account of the “monkey-nation” shares significant similarities with eighteenth-century accounts of West Indian maroon communities:

Destructive, on the upland sugar-groves
The monkey-nation preys: from rocky heights,
In silent parties, they descend by night,
And posting watchful sentinels, to warn
When hostile steps approach: with gambols, they
Pour o’er the Cane-grove. (2.34-39)

The acts of the “monkey-nation” echo colonial narratives that focused on the maroons’ sinister occupation of mountains surrounding the plantations and continual attacks on the planter elite. The poem goes on to figure the colonization of the plantation by “fugitive” tropical species as analogous to the threat posed to the British Empire by competing European powers: “So when, of late, innumerable Gallic hosts/Fierce, wanton, cruel, did by stealth invade/The peaceable American’s domains” (2.55-57). Competing imperial powers, maroon nations, and the tropical flora and fauna of the island collude to counter-colonize and deterritorialize the colonial plantation.

39 Shaun Irlam points out that the poem is filled with “immigrant populations” of “Dryads, Naiads, sprites, and ‘woodland tribes’” that have been “resettled” in the Caribbean from classic English literature. See “‘Wish You Were Here,’” 385. We might also think of Grainger’s “West-India georgic” as being filled with marooned figures from English verse.
While the maroon nations of the island threaten the plantation of *The Sugar-Cane* from surrounding rocky cliffs external to the plantation, the poet’s reference to the “slave gang” alternatively as a “Negroe-nation” simultaneously raises the possibility of erupting rebellion and disorder by an oppositional black nation within the plantation. The poem obsesses over proper enclosure in large part because of a fear that disruptive alien species are actually produced internal to the plantation’s ecosystem. In one fascinating stanza, the poet worries that the cane itself might offer a home for multiplying insect parasites that blight and devour the cane crop. The poet ponders over whether the “plunderers” are “hatch’d” in some “distant clime,” or if the “Cane a proper nest afford/And food adapted to the yellow fly” (2.167-68). The poem’s extensive catalog of parasitical agents both external and internal to the plantation reveals the plantation’s closed ecology as a fiction, exposing it instead as a highly permeable, open system.

In response to the zoological, botanical, and microbial colonizations that relentlessly threaten to “infect” the “frame” of the plantation, the poet-physician presents a careful handbook on the production of clean and healthy plantation spaces. The poet’s properly georgic concern with the “art” (*techne*) of agriculture quickly transfers over to lengthy didactic stanzas on the proper management of disease on the sugar plantation.40 Although Grainger clearly attributes the high rates of disease on the plantation to uncontrolled “mixtures,” Richard Sheridan makes the important observation that *monoculture*, the intensified propagation and “unnatural crowding” (32) of a single crop

in a small area, was actually to blame for intensified disease conditions on plantations.\textsuperscript{41} Near the end of Book 1, the poet frets over the state of a sick cane plantation. An account of infected crops from a recent plant blight turns immediately into a discussion of the dangers of yellow fever (2.559-572) for human inhabitants of the estate, figuring the plantation as an unstable, unhealthy environment. Grainger illuminates a concern with maintaining the health of the entire plantation estate, and in these stanzas, suggests that disease always threatens to put the plantation into disarray, disordering the carefully managed fields and laborers, at the same time as equalizing vectors of contagion organize plants, animals, and slaves into one plantation ecology.\textsuperscript{42} Shaun Irlam argues that Grainger “attempts to ‘landscape’ slavery by zoologizing slave labor as some additional species of exotic fauna alongside the extensive botanical and zoological information he accumulates” (386).\textsuperscript{43} While I disagree that Grainger obfuscates slave labor in the poem, Irlam rightly recognizes the inclusion of enslaved persons within Grainger’s catalog of West Indian flora and fauna, a cataloguing that attempts to organize the disordered bodies of an unstable, disease-ridden tropical environment.

Grainger’s association between disease and the creolization of plantation space through tropical invasions figures the plantation as a zone of containment and quarantine. Rampant anxiety over the permeability of plantation borders along with a realization of the intimate relationships among plants, animals, and slaves gave rise to an emphasis on “plantation hygiene,” which continued to shape the management and maintenance of

\textsuperscript{41} Sheridan, \textit{Doctors and Slaves}, 32.
\textsuperscript{42} On the role of contagion in making human interconnection and community visible, see Priscilla Wald, \textit{Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative} (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).
\textsuperscript{43} Irlam, “‘Wish You Were Here.’”
racialized plantation spaces in the Americas even into the twentieth century (see, for example, Chapter 4 on the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments). The Sugar-Cane’s guidance on controlling the reproduction of disease on the plantation is connected to the poem’s larger concerns with crises of reproduction on the plantation. His reflections on the rapid decimation of both crops and enslaved laboring populations belie an anxiety about the future unsustainability or “barrenness” of the plantation complex. In a passing comment, Sheridan hints that the common practice whereby enslaved African Caribbean women aborted their pregnancies was related to a reaction against the plantation’s violent and total control over systems of reproduction on the plantation: these women, according to Sheridan, engaged in a form of “gynecological resistance” that was a “refusal to perpetuate life under a labor regime dominated by the rigors of plantation monoculture and driven by the rapacity of managers and planters” (66).

Grainger’s didactic program for propagating and sustaining “healthy” and hygienic reproduction on the plantation outlines what I call a “proto-eugenics”: systems of reproductive control on the plantation that shuffled among the bodies of crops (monoculture), livestock (stockbreeding), and enslaved women. The intensified concern with carefully cultivating and controlling the reproduction of all kinds of tropical species within the controlled

44 I excise planters from the intimate networks of plantation ecology in this case because of the planter’s supposed immunity from the diseases that traversed other kinds of bodies on the plantation. In The Sugar-Cane, for example, the poet only once mentions the possibility that those diseases that plague slaves might also be transmitted to plantation managers. The lack of fear surrounding black-white contagion in the poem points to climatic understandings of race that understood black bodies as being closer to tropical biota than to colonial bodies who remained “aliens” to the miasmas of the “torrid zone.”

45 See Sheridan, Doctors and Slaves. Women would often consume native plants that were known abortifacients. For more background on plantation abortion, resistant uses of the plantation pharmacosm, and enslaved female doctors and conjurers plantations in the U.S. South, see Chapter 5 of Sharla Fett’s Working Cures, “Doctoring Woman,” 111-41.
space of the plantation helped to transform it into a privileged site for scientific investigation beginning in the eighteenth century.

**The Experimental Plantation**

*The Sugar-Cane* registers an important transition in the eighteenth century from the privileging of experience on the New World plantation to the rise of more systematic regimes of scientific and agricultural experimentation in plantation spaces. In the preface, Grainger quickly moves from “Experience” to a more specific interest in scientific experimentation on the plantation, insisting that whenever he makes medicinal recommendations, “I beg leave to be understood as a physician, and not as a poet” (168). He apologizes to his reader for the untraditional look of his georgic, but points out that “in a West-India georgic, the mention of many indigenous remedies, as well as diseases was unavoidable” (168), suggesting that it is the very inclusion of medicinal information about the tropical pharmacosm that distinguishes a classical georgic from the West Indian type. Grainger notes that in composing the poem, “I have rather courted opportunities of this nature, than avoided them. Medicines of such amazing efficacy, as I have had occasion to make trials of in these islands, deserve to be universally known” (168). In these opening lines, the self-proclaimed “poet-physician” speaks of the ample opportunity he has been afforded to make “trials” of medicinal plant species in the West Indies as he looks forward to the “universal” application of such remedies in the metropole. He remains, however, suspiciously silent about how these medicinal “trials” were conducted. As the plantation doctor charged with the management of the slaves on several plantation estates, Grainger enjoyed the privilege of experimenting with all kinds
of medicinal treatments and drugs on a quarantined and contained slave population. The Sugar-Cane ultimately promotes a vision of what I call the “experimental plantation,” an enclosed site from which empirical knowledge is produced, extracted, and transplanted from tropicalized lands and bodies.

In her comprehensive history of agricultural innovation in the Deep South during the years between 1730 and 1815, the “region’s golden era” (4), Joyce Chaplin argues that planters were highly influenced by contemporary economic and historical thought.\textsuperscript{46} She suggests that the emergence of a highly provincial, anti-intellectual, and avowedly anti-modern plantation culture during the early nineteenth century has obfuscated the dynamic ways in which English, and many Scottish, planters encountered and negotiated European theories of modernity in the “semitropical” backdrop of the Lower South. Chaplin’s account figures the eighteenth-century plantation zone of the Deep South as a space of empirical secularism, focusing primarily on the ways that planters interpreted and were influenced by thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, especially Adam Smith, David Hume, Henry Home, Lord Kames, Adam Ferguson, John Millar, William Robertson, and Edward Gibbon (30).

Chaplin goes on to argue that many Lower South whites turned to modern scientific pursuits on the plantation in order to fight against an enervating tropical climate thought to weaken white bodies and minds (67). This understanding of the eighteenth century Deep South plantation as a space of empirical modernity that constantly worked to ward off a dangerous tropical environment fits nicely with Grainger’s plantation

empiricisms in the British West Indies. We might return for a moment to recall that Grainger was himself a Scot who was reared in a lively intellectual culture and schooled at the University of Edinburgh in the tradition of Hume, Ferguson, and other central figures of the Scottish Enlightenment. Grainger clearly understood the sugar cane plantation in terms of its experimental status, as an enclosed site that offered the perfect conditions for empirical study.\(^7\) The Caribbean plantation was doubly “experimental” in its profligate exploitation of soils, plants, animals, and slaves.

Although the footnotes of The Sugar-Cane practically overflow with knowledge about indigenous plant and animal species on St. Christopher island, the poem is nearly silent about Native and African medicinal practices that heavily depended on the use of herbs, flowers, and other species of the West Indian pharmacosm. As several scholars have noted, the Africanist conjuring practices of many slave doctors were often interpreted as ominous threats to the planter class. Some planters severely punished slaves who received treatment from “witch doctors” or outlawed forms of healing and instruction that were not bestowed by the planter’s benevolence. In The Sugar-Cane, Grainger does not mention any alternative medical practices that would have competed

\(^7\) Hume’s famous essay, “Of National Characters,” is a fascinating departure from eighteenth-century theories (especially from Montesquieu and Buffon) about the influence of climate on individual temperament. Where Grainger, for example, clearly understands Britishness and the different nationalities of African slaves as climatic productions of the temperate and torrid zones, Hume argues that the character of a national people is determined by shared manners: “if we runover the globe, or revolve the annals of history, we shall discover everywhere signs of sympathy or contagion of manners, none of the influence of air or climate” (116; italics are mine). By turning away from climate and toward manners, Hume also resists arguments about creolization: “the same set of manners will follow a nation, and adhere to them over the whole globe, as well as the same laws and language. The Spanish, English, French, and Dutch colonies are all distinguishable even in the tropics” (118). See Hume, Selected Essays, Ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 113-25.
with his own attempts to treat slaves. In his 1764 *Essay on the More Common West-
India Diseases*, he leaves out quantitative amounts when listing certain “empirical
compositions” for fear that untrained Creoles might try to replicate such concoctions
without the guidance of a trained physician: “Creoles,” he writes, “are too fond of
quackery” (95). Throughout *The Sugar-Cane*, Grainger works hard to purify colonial
medicine and empirical investigation in the colonies by separating such legitimate
endeavors from the questionable practices of both Creole “quacks” and troublesome
Africans.

Anxieties about alternative medicinal practices and competing systems of
plantation “health” come to the surface in one particularly intense passage that offers
instruction on the benefits of slave provison grounds. The poet encourages “to every
slave assign/Some mountain-ground: or, if waste broken land/To thee belong, that broken
land divide/This let them cultivate, one day each week” (4.445-48). He goes on to list the
many crops that slaves might grow to “repel” their hunger in addition to a number of
fruits, vegetables, and herbs with known medicinal applications. But Grainger’s
temporary utopia of “black plantation” quickly erodes. In Book 1, Grainger figures the
act of plantation in terms of its ability to give the individual planter not wealth, but
independence (“Give him some small plantation to inclose […] Not wealth he craves/But
independence” (1.546-48)). With the association between plantation and freedom firmly
rooted in the architecture of the poem, the threat of slave rebellion and fugitivity
inevitably returns in a seemingly innocuous account of the provison grounds.

In *The Sugar-Cane*, the slave garden is figured as a radical counter-plantation
within the enclosures of the colonial plantation. I have talked extensively about how
anxieties about mobile “fugitive” species proliferate throughout the poem, but here the poet suggests that planting can also pose a severe threat to the plantation order. The humble act of black planting (“to every slave assign/Some mountain-ground”) opens the plantation up to “negroe-fugitives” who pose threats from the outside:

But let some antient, faithful slave erect
His sheltered mansion near; and with his dog,
His loaded gun, and cutlass, guard the whole:
Else negroe-fugitives, who skulk’mid rocks
And shrubby wilds, in bands will soon destroy
Thy labourer’s honest wealth; their loss and yours. (4.482-87)

The transformation of idyllic provision grounds into an ad hoc surveillance state (“his loaded gun, and cutlass, guard the whole”) squelches fears about how black planting might also cultivate a desire for freedom among the slave population internal to the plantation.48 Grainger’s enclosure of the provision grounds as a site of continual surveillance for fugitives transforms a healthful garden of sustenance and independence into an inhospitable zone controlled by the planter’s disciplinary “monoculture.”

In An Essay On Plantership, the didactic essay that was printed alongside Grainger’s The Sugar-Cane in 1802, Samuel Martin points out the ironic situation that

48 Sylvia Wynter notes that the folk culture produced out of slave plots “became a source of cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system” (100). Wynter draws the plots of slave gardens into the same circuit as slave “plots” for insurrection and rebellion. See Wynter, ‘Novel and History, Plot and Plantation” in Savacou 5 (1971): 95-102.
most Caribbean plantations, focused as they were on the intensified production of cash
crops for the world market, did not even produce what was needed to sustain those who
lived on the local plantation grounds.⁴⁹ In Martin’s account, and eventually in
Grainger’s, the fantasy of the plantation as a self-sustaining, humble farm transposed onto
a New World landscape quickly unravels. I opened this chapter by claiming that by the
mid-eighteenth century, widespread environmental degradation and threats to the Atlantic
slave trade revealed that the plantation was ultimately unsustainable. I conclude by
adding that the strategic refusal of sustenance to, or un-sustaining, of slave populations
was, in fact, internal to the logic of the experimental plantation from its very beginnings.

⁴⁹ See Martin’s Essay Upon Plantership, collected in Three Tracts on West-Indian
Agriculture, 9.
Chapter 2 // “Productions Mineral, Vegetable, and Animal”: Plantation Eugenics and the “Peculiar Soil” of Slavery

“Men are like plants: the goodness and flavour of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow”

—J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer (1782)

“I like a plantation in a pure soil; that is, where people are not displanted to the end to plant in others. For else it is rather an extirpation than a plantation”

—Sir Francis Bacon, “Of Plantations” (1625)

Grainger’s 1764 georgic ode to the Caribbean sugar plantation bombastically celebrates the rise of the experimental plantation, from which valuable empirical knowledge and various medicinal products were transported to the metropole alongside the more standard agricultural productions of the New World. Although Grainger, among other British West Indian poets and writers, was clearly uncomfortable with the central role of slavery in propagating the economy of the sugar islands, his celebration of the plantation, particularly its unmatched ability to organize space and cultivate subjectivity, never wavered. While the plantation was highly visible in British imperial discourse about the West Indies, the status of the plantation in the new republic of the United States was much more precarious.

Thomas Jefferson famously valorized the model of an agrarian democracy and held up the figure of the yeoman farmer while he was himself a slave-holding Southern planter. In Notes on the State of Virginia (1785; 1787), he completely excises the
plantation from his painstakingly meticulous panoramic view of the state’s institutions.¹

When Monticello is invoked in the text it is not in terms of its status as a fully functioning plantation, but as a site of measurement for the statesman’s scientific and statistical exploits. Jefferson clearly understood the controlled, enclosed environment of Monticello to be an ideal geography from which to compile data about America and its “Productions Mineral, Vegetable, and Animal.” In Notes, the plantation is mobilized as a central institution for the production of empirical knowledge about the new nation.² At the same time, it circulates as a kind of ghostly site, detached from its connections to New World enslavement and agriculture. In the eighteenth-century U.S., enclosed plantation ecologies were increasingly exploited as experimental spaces, just as in the Caribbean. However, the U.S. plantation, along with its internal ecology of bodies, technologies, and microenvironments, was continually hidden within a landscape that was increasingly understood as being part of a distinct region, “the South.”³ While positive connotations of “plantation” attached to the settlement of colonial New England

¹ The first edition of Notes on the State of Virginia was published in France in 1785. My citations of the text come from the 1787 edition, which was published in London by the printer John Stockdale. That version is collected in the Penguin Edition of Notes (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).
² “Productions Mineral, Vegetable, and Animal” is the title of Chapter VI of Notes.
³ Southern Studies has long been concerned with the question of when the South, as a monolithic region defined by its differences and alienation from the nation, actually came into being. While scholars have traditionally argued that “the South” did not exist before the sectional conflicts beginning in the 1820s, the New Southern Studies has destabilized this chronology with alternative histories and mappings of Southern space. Jennifer Greason, for example, locates the emergence of a South in literature during the post-revolutionary period, when “early U.S. writers consistently amalgamated the five southernmost states of the new union (Maryland through Georgia) into a totalized figure of ‘the South,’ which they differentiated from the U.S. at large based upon its residual coloniality” (209). See Greason, “The Figure of the South and the Nationalizing Imperatives of Early United States Literature” in The Yale Journal of Criticism 12.2 (1999): 209-48.
still lingered in the late eighteenth-century U.S., the contradictions of the increasingly more Southern plantation, that exemplary space of democratic independence that simultaneously contained an enslaved labor force, posed serious problems for a government that wanted to consolidate a people and a nation around the egalitarian ideals of democracy.

Histories of colonial America have often emphasized the important role of both experience and experiment in the planting of diverse religious and political sects in the New World.⁴ Two of the best-known examples include William Bradford’s “religious experiment” at Plymouth Plantation and William Penn’s understanding of his Quaker colony as a “holy experiment.”⁵ Into the eighteenth century, architects of the nation picked up on earlier iterations of the primacy of experience in the New World to formulate the “American experiment” in political terms. Writing in The Federalist Papers (1787-88), James Madison explicitly referred to the proposed system of

⁴ While contemporary readers might recognize importance tensions between “experience” and “experiment,” particularly in light of the consolidation of experimental science (where experiment is rooted in the systematic repetition of experience), these were substitutable terms in the colonial context. With Jefferson we begin to see an important disarticulation of experiment from experience in the American context. On the important affinities and tensions between experience and experiment in the modern French context, where l’expérience denotes both terms, see Georges Canguilhem, Knowledge of Life, trans. Stefanos Geroulanos and Daniela Ginsburg (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008). Experience and experiment additionally share an etymological root, the Latin expir, meaning “to test, or try.”

government for the early republic as a “political experiment,” a phrase that was echoed throughout the early national period and into the nineteenth century (see, for example, Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*), and even continues to reverberate into our own moment.  

Contemporary accounts of early American experimentation in social, political, and religious contexts often romanticize innovation in early America or incorrectly locate an American geopolitical hegemony a century or two before the U.S. would become a global imperial power. The phrase “American experiment” is also deployed today by conservative groups who desire a return to the country’s supposedly pure religious and political origins set forth in the ideals and programs of patriots like James Madison, John Jay, and other so-called “fathers of American conservatism.”

This chapter is interested in outlining a different, but surely related, geography of New World experimentation by turning to more Southern geographies of early America. While the primacy of experience in New England largely depended on emergent religious

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6 Letter 39 of *The Federalist Papers* (1787-88): “The first question that offers itself is, whether the general form and aspect of the government be strictly republican. It is evident that no other form would be reconcilable with the genius of the people of America; with the fundamental principles of the Revolution; or with that honorable determination which animates every votary of freedom, to rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government. If the plan of the convention, therefore, be found to depart from the republican character, its advocates must abandon it as no longer defensible.” See Alexander Hamilton, John Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Signet Classics, 2003). See also, de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America, Volume I* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 25, which was first published in 1835.

languages, the rise of scientific empiricism in Great Britain and across the European continent had a profound impact on the figuration of tropical geographies of the New World as a secularized space of experiment. While the harsh conditions of New England provided a dramatic backdrop for spiritual journey through the “American wilderness,” the tropical climates to the South emerged as spaces of extraction for commercial and scientific pursuit beginning in the seventeenth century with the help of a natural history that spanned interest in both racialized bodies and the natural environment.  

In her recent study, Susan Scott Parrish recognizes the not-so coincidental co-emergence of British empirical methodologies and colonial interest in the Atlantic world. She writes:

Because the development of modernity itself and of Enlightenment natural science in particular was so fueled by the European nations’ competitive drive to exploit, collect, catalog, and understand the material richness of the Americas, both American nature and the hybrid types of knowledge forged in the colonies were inseparable from that development […] because America was a great material curiosity for the Old Worlds and its immigrants to the New, America’s unique matrix of contested knowledge making—its polycentric curiosity—was crucially formative of modern European ways of knowing. (7)

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Such “polycentric curiosity” points to how often British travelers—frequently merchants, colonial scientists, itinerant adventurers and commercial investors—were forced to rely on native informants to help interpret and contextualize a radically alien environment. The writing of natural history, that genre where “nature appears to organize itself”, was not a facile task since the ocular observation privileged by the New Science was thought to do little good for European eyes—and bodies—so far outside their native political, social, and geographic climes. Parrish’s study rethinks agency in the production of scientific knowledge on both sides of the Atlantic, demonstrating how non-European peoples were integral to currents of Enlightenment intellectual exchange and the development of what she calls “cultures of natural history in the Anglophone Atlantic world” (19; italics are Parrish’s). The rise of empirical science and British commercial interests in the colonial world were, then, not only co-emergent, but also mutually constitutive phenomena. Scientific and commercial interests in systematizing the natural world in the Americas were tightly conjoined with one another; the difference between reaping resources from the Americas and gaining knowledge from it—which often involved the collection of specimens, flora, fauna and other “American curiosities” for exportation back across the Atlantic—was increasingly blurred into the eighteenth century.

11 “Cultures of natural history,” for Parrish, are constituted by many different genres and publications that included descriptions and analyses of local nature: Travel narratives, travelogues, sermons, black Atlantic autobiographies, oral transmissions, and even pastoral and georgic poetry compose the diverse field of nature writing in early transatlantic contexts.
In tracking such circuits of knowledge, scientific objectification and commodification across the Atlantic, a colonial world emerges that is highly invested in Southern American geographies for the production of experimental knowledge. Such a southerly orientation of the American experiment, I find, diverges from the political and religious experiments of New England more commonly referred to in histories of early America. Parrish writes, “Despite the historical penchant for seating the nation’s religious, intellectual, and political traditions in Boston and Philadelphia, the British Empire in the Augustan period, through its mercantile and scientific networks, took a greater interest—in both senses of the word—in a more Southerly America” (19). While Parrish is primarily interested in rethinking agency across the field of New World natural history by attending to excluded voices that participated in the construction of transatlantic scientific knowledge, I am interested in how the associations between a southern-oriented New World and an emergent transatlantic empiricism contributed to the emergence of the South as an experimental space that has historically justified and propelled forms of racialized experimentation and violence in Southern spaces. It seems important to recall that while racialized subjects from across the Atlantic world may have participated in the endeavors of natural history, these figures also became “subject” to that same enterprise. Native bodies were often catalogued alongside native plant and animal species in texts of natural history. The ironic inclusion of enslaved Africans in the catalog of New World natural history sought to naturalize the very unnatural presence of a large population that had been forcefully transplanted to the Americas because of a bloodthirsty plantation system. During the nineteenth century, enslaved bodies subjugated under the sign of the “natural” in such a way became prime subjects for the
dissecting impulses of comparative anatomy. But before more invasive investigations of corporeal difference were institutionalized in nineteenth-century race science, enslaved bodies were naturalized into the landscape of the American scene as specimens of natural history.

In this chapter, I examine how early networks between the plantation, natural history, and an emergent state science laid the foundation for a distinctively Southern experimental plantation. I turn to Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* to examine how an understanding of the moderate republic of America as being squarely situated within the temperate zone of the Global North was continually undone by the teeming and toxic tropical productions of an emergent plantation South. The chapter moves on to Francis Bacon and J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, two other key transatlantic figures who expressed fears over planting in the potentially corrupted soil of the New World’s toxic paradise, a worry that extended to the “impure” bodies of Africans, criminals, and other unsavory types trans-planted to sow the soil. Finally, the chapter moves to Jefferson’s palatial estate, Monticello, to demonstrate how worries about the purity of American reproduction in the dangerously tropical zones of the South produced a proto-eugenics that influenced the reproduction and cultivation of both bodies and crops fixed within the garden plots of the plantation.

*New World, New Science*

Deborah Cohn and Jay Smith understand the South’s exceptionality in terms of a history of denial about the centrality of the plantation in national and transhemispheric economies: “The plantation—more than anything else—ties the South both to the rest of
the United States and to the rest of the New World” (6). In the colonial period, the New World plantation was an important linchpin in early transatlantic and transhemispheric circulations of bodies, commodities and knowledge. Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627) and political essays offer an early articulation of the relationship between the New Science and the American plantation complex. Bacon’s concern over the purity of bodies and soil in New World plantings additionally marks the emergence of what I call plantation hygiene. Such early discourses about the health of the New World plantation animated a plantation proto-eugenics that continued into the eighteenth century to worry about the purity of both bodies and crops rooted in the enclosures of the plantation.

Although he died in virtual obscurity, Francis Bacon was reclaimed by the members of the Royal Society as the “founding father” of the New Science. Bacon outlined his inductive empirical method—sometimes called the Baconian method—in both the fragmentary volume *Novum Organum* (1620) and in *Advancement of Learning of Man* (1605), which argued for increased scholarly interest in the science of man. His *Sylva Sylvarum: A Natural Historie* (1627) was appended to a work of imaginative fiction. Bacon’s scientific utopia, *New Atlantis* supplemented the text of *Sylva Sylvarum* and served as a kind of interpretative model through which readers were asked to consider the implications of the empirical method for observing and interpreting the

natural world.\textsuperscript{14} Bacon’s setting of his scientific utopia in the South Seas illuminates how New World plantation geographies occupied a central place in the imaginary of early modern empirical science.

*New Atlantis* takes place on the secret island of Bensalam, where a crew of Englishmen finds itself run adrift at the start of the tale. Bensalam is an island oasis of worldly knowledge, although no one in the world, except for the British explorers who have recently landed there, seems to know of its existence. The narrative is dominated by lengthy descriptions of the intricate organization of the island’s Salomon’s House, an institutionalized scientific arm of the state and the “eye” of the Kingdom that stands at the center of the island’s political, social, and religious affairs, which are decidedly, and devoutly, Christian. As a scientific utopia, the text outlines the organization of a new kind of scientifically enlightened society placed in an exotic setting that appears increasingly English and domesticated as the plot proceeds. While it is of course true that *New Atlantis* takes place in the no-place of utopia, it has a geographical imaginary with which readers would have been familiar: “We sailed from Peru (where we had continued by the space of one whole year), for China and Japan, by the South Sea, taking with us victuals for twelve months […] But then the wind came about, and settled in the west for many days, so as we could make little or no way, and were sometimes in purpose to turn

\textsuperscript{14} Margaret Cavendish’s *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy*, ed. Eileen O’Neill (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001) is another scientific treatise appended to an imaginative utopia. The volume’s original title emphasizes a self-conscious split between “fact” and “fiction”: *Observations upon Experimental Philosophy, To which is added, The Description of a New Blazing World* (London, 1666; Second edition, 1668). The pairing of a literary experiment and a treatise on scientific experiment seems more than a historical anomaly—such hybrid publications carry an important theoretical or explanatory currency, illuminating, for example, how the literary has the potential to re-narrativize the scientific.
back” (457). The phrase New Atlantis echoes “New Atlantic,” or the New World. Throughout the narrative, Bacon links the New Science to the New World as not only parallel, but paired endeavors. The Americas are imagined as a space rife for scientific experimentation more than a century before the founding fathers would refer to the political “experiment” of America in terms of founding a democratic republic. Bacon’s New Atlantis offers a powerful example of the role the southern Americas played in the British empirical imagination, a blank slate of play for the sciences, an empty no-place paradoxically described as a land of abundance, overflowing with resources, food, and most importantly for Bacon and others interested in natural history, an incalculable number of novel specimens.

Bacon understood the plantation to be a particularly intense and rife site for experimentation in the New World. His thoughts on the New Science and the inchoate plantation economy emerge in his letters of counsel to the Court, which were published as The Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral in 1625. In short essays like “Of Plantations” and “Of Gardens” various experimental contexts and colonial endeavors by the British are tied up with interests and anxieties about plantation ecology and economy. Bacon published a severe critique of English plantation settlement in “Certaine Considerations Touching the Plantation in Ireland” (1606), but he later became a subscriber to the Virginia Company of London and supporter of plantation endeavors abroad. Although some skepticism remains, in “Of Plantations” (1626) Bacon considers the possibilities and dangers of English plantation abroad. In this essay, he advocates for the “health of the plantation” (409) as he critiques the corruption produced out of plantations too hastily “planted” with the “scum of people” (407) from Europe in attempts to profit from the
land. Bacon prefers a plantation established and cultivated “in a pure soil” (407). The term “plant” (408) here retains its etymological link meaning “to colonize,” a kind of colonization that extends beyond the land to include the bodies that are trans-planted there as well. Bacon worries about population problems in the colony (“cram not in people” (409)) and the quality of life to be planted (“consider likewise what commodities the soil where the plantation is doth naturally yield” (408)). As he writes against the growth of non-native crops abroad, “Of Plantations” also stresses the danger of planting unnatural or non-native people, out of sync with the climate and nature of the New World: “It is a shameful and unblessed thing to take the scum of people, and wicked condemned men, to be the people with whom you plant; and not only so, but it spoileth the plantation” (408). The planting of poor, criminal, or other unruly subjects in the Virginia colony is linked with the purity of the soil itself. Bodies and climate collide in this essay through an ominous reference to “extirpation”—a killing or weeding out that foreshadows brutal regimes of enslavement and rampant violence against Native American tribes that would begin to make “pure” plantation soil a cruel and bloody impossibility. One might even say that a proto-eugenic logic underwrites Bacon’s obsessions with the purity of flora and fauna, human and non-human, alike, a logic that would continue to shape systems of plantation agriculture, discipline, and hygiene into Jefferson’s age and beyond.

In contrast to worries about “extirpations” in “Of Plantations,” Bacon’s “Of Gardens” revels in the Edenic bliss of homegrown, cultivated spaces ordered according to divine decree throughout green England:
God Almighty first planted a Garden. And indeed it is the purest of human pleasures. It is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man; without which, buildings and palaces are but gross handy-works: and a man shall ever see that when ages grow to civility, men come to build stately sooner than to garden finely, as if gardening were the greater perfection. I do hold it, in the royal ordering of gardens, there ought to be gardens for all the months in the year; in which severally things of beauty may be then in season. (43)

Despite Bacon’s insistence upon the national character of the carefully cultivated gardens, the Royal Gardens of the seventeenth century were themselves a hybrid space of botanical experimentation, composed of plants, flowers, fruits and vegetables transplanted from all over the world. In other words, Bacon’s domestic gardens and unruly plantations are actually coterminous geographies that both depend upon the “transplantation” of “non-native” species.

Through extensive networks of plant transfer between the metropole and the colonies—where, for example, indigenous plants were transported from Latin America, manipulated, experimented with at the London Kew Gardens and then transported to Southeast Asia for cultivation—economic botany became a central component of Britain’s rise to prosperity during the first Industrial Revolution. In Science and Colonial Expansion, Lucile H. Brockway tracks the role of the British Botanic Gardens in the rise of British imperialism.\(^\text{15}\) In contrast to Bacon’s depiction of the garden as “the purest of

human pleasures,” Brockway establishes the British Botanic Gardens as an important point of encounter between the British garden utopia and the fraught, dystopic space of the colonial plantation. Indeed, while “Of Plantations” and “Of Gardens” seek to describe two radically different spaces, the idyllic garden and the fallen plantation fields continually fold into one another: especially when in the Americas, the same people labored and suffered in both the agricultural fields and the carefully manicured gardens often modeled in the English style. Such gardens abutted the plantation fields in an ostentatious display of decorative plants, meticulously cultivated botanical wonders that stood in sharp and ironic contrast to the laboring bodies sowing the soil nearby.

In his writings as well as in practice, Jefferson worked hard to minimize the fraught relations between the plantation gardens and fields by transforming and presenting the whole of Monticello as garden space. He often spoke of Monticello as if it were simply a large, English garden instead of a fully functioning slaveholding plantation. In an 1806 letter addressed to William Hamilton, he wrote of his desire to return home after retiring at the end of his presidential term in order start work on improving the grounds of the estate “in the style of the English gardens” (502). While Jefferson does not readily admit the true tropicality of the Virginian landscape, he does recognize important climatic differences between the location of his estate and Great Britain. He lists a number of ways he has sought to compensate for such differences in his planting and cultivating of an English-style estate on American soil. For example, he

See also Londa Schiebinger’s *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

suggests to Hamilton, “Let your ground be covered with trees of the loftiest stature. Trim
up their bodies as high as the constitution & form of the tree will bear, but so as that their
tops shall still unite & yield dense shade. A wood, so open below, will have nearly the
appearance of open grounds” (503). Jefferson is so pleased with his efforts he claims that
if Hamilton comes to visit Monticello he “will have an opportunity of indulging on a new
field some of the taste which has made the Woodlands the only rival which I have known
in America to what may be seen in England” (502). Having accounted for important
climatic differences, Jefferson carefully manages the unstable environment of his
Virginia plantation, cultivating it into a more temperate space. In so doing, he substitutes
a dangerously “torrid” plantation, run on the sweat and tears of transplanted African
slaves, with an English garden filled with “native” species.

While Grainger was able, albeit briefly, to indulge in a fantasy that the colonial
plantation system was a simple extension of British agricultural reform, Jefferson was
more unsure about climatic contiguities between the Old World and New. In Notes, he
writes that America runs “through the torrid as well as temperate zone” (49). Jefferson’s
(ghosted) plantation operated as a microcosm that concentrated and made visible the
hybrid constitution of the new nation as both a temperate and torrid zone. While
Jefferson the politician worked hard, as illuminated in his letter to Hamilton, to make
Monticello appear as a temperate landscape that reflected the moderate republican
government of the new nation, Jefferson the scientist exploited the tropical space of the
plantation to produce scientific knowledge and to domesticate American “Productions
Mineral, Vegetable, and Animal” through a plantation proto-eugenics.
Notes in the State of Virginia, which is often read by scholars for its delineation of politics and the nature of governance in the early republic, might be understood as a different kind of text when read in light of the fact that the plantation complex is completely absent in Jefferson’s survey of the state of Virginia. Although the Southern plantation system is made invisible it still looms large in the text, which is concerned throughout with both articulating a temperate, national natural history and outlining how the nation might put controls on the uncontrolled reproduction of tropical flora, fauna, and racialized bodies.  

Although absented from Notes, the plantation served throughout the late eighteenth century as a central management tool for controlling teeming tropical reproductions that continually threatened to undo the reproduction of the temperate republic.

Jefferson’s engagements with nature in Notes are newly illuminated when read in the context of plantation empiricism and eugenics. Jefferson, like Bacon, was a vociferous advocate of both empirical science and the planting of pure, native plantations in the Americas. He was additionally known to complain that his political duties often interfered with his various scientific endeavors, which he cited as his true passion. Indeed, although Jefferson, like Bacon, split his intellectual pursuits between what might

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{17}} \text{In The Spirit of the Laws, a text that heavily influenced Jefferson, Montesquieu’s account of the relationship between law, government, and climate collapses blackness with tropical climates. His account of slaves that are black “from head to toe” abstracts racialized bodies into a blackness that blends in with the impurities of the torrid zone (250). See The Spirit the Laws, ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989). The volume was originally published as De l’esprit des lois in 1748.} \]

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{18}} \text{Silvio A. Bedini, Thomas Jefferson: Statesman of Science (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990). Jefferson also listed Bacon among the three thinkers who had most influenced his thought.} \]
be categorized as “science” on the one hand, and “politics” on the other, his revered status as founding father to the nation has often elided critical engagements with Jeffersonian science. Moreover, critical discussions about natural rights have in some ways over-determined discussions about Jefferson and the “politics of nature.”¹⁹

In Notes, Jefferson’s emphasis is on the moderate qualities of the American government. At the same time as he figures the nation as a space of temperate governance, his scientific curiosity continually draws him back to the tropical plant and animal “kingdom” of the Americas, which did not always operate in accordance with the rules of republican democracy. Throughout the text, a model of Nature (with a capital “N”) from political theory continually competes with the unruly Southern nature that surrounded Jefferson at Monticello. While legacies of natural rights inherited from philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke do of course stand at the center of Jefferson’s rights-of-man political discourse and remain important loci for continued critical investigation, Jefferson’s diverse engagements with nature cannot always be reduced to natural philosophy. That is, the “natural” in natural history cannot be so easily conflated with the “natural” of natural philosophy, which was the foundation for the formulation of natural rights.²⁰ Jefferson’s status as political thinker, for example, has often obstructed critical treatments of his engagement with natural history. Instead of being understood as serious engagements with the peculiarities of the New World habitat, Jeffersonian natural history is usually read as political allegory. For example, in

“Jefferson and Democracy,” Michael Hardt seeks to move beyond the problematic binary of Jefferson scholarship that either unquestioningly reveres Jefferson’s concept of democracy in the form of jingoistic worship, or, conversely, wholly rejects his promotion of democratic equality among all men, which extended theoretically even to African and Native Americans, because of his status as slaveholder.\(^\text{21}\) Hardt insists that Jefferson be viewed primarily as a “political thinker,” instead of in terms of “the practical choices of his political career or the moral choices of his personal life. If we are to take seriously Jefferson’s thought and read him as we read other political theorists we need, first of all, to accept that there will be inconsistencies and even contradictions not only between his life and his thought but also within his thought” (43). Rather than dismissing Jeffersonian republicanism because of personal hypocrisy, Hardt wants to use the gaps and contradictions in his thought as a point of departure for further philosophical investigation. Departing from more traditional historicist methodologies while recognizing the historical distance that separates contemporary readers from the eighteenth-century United States, Hardt asks what Jefferson’s concept of democracy “can do for us today”: “This does not mean to excuse his shortcomings because of those of his times, but rather to discern the political operation his thought attempted with respect to his own society and then discover what a parallel one would be with respect to our own” (43).

While the move beyond biographical contradictions to think more critically about Jefferson’s concept of democracy is productive, the attempt to understand him first and foremost as a “political thinker” leads to an understanding of Jefferson’s

engagements with debates in natural history as nothing more than covert political arguments. Rather, I insist upon the importance of parsing Jefferson’s thoughts on politics and natural history in order understand him as an important transatlantic intellectual of natural history alongside important interlocutors like Comte de Buffon and Carolus Linnaeus. In Notes, such scientific interlocutors are at least as important to Jefferson’s formulations as political theorists like Montesquieu, Locke, and Hobbes. Hardt’s understanding of Buffon’s claims as both “bizarre” and “absurd” wrongly subordinates natural history under political theory. Buffon’s quantitative claims about the natural world certainly would not have seemed immediately bizarre and absurd to Jefferson or to his contemporaries. His arguments on animal size and degeneracy in the Americas were part of a much larger debate about the influence of climate on animal size and constitution in transatlantic natural histories during the period. Jefferson engages with Buffon throughout the text, taking the import of his thought seriously even during moments of vehement disagreement. Notes is most clearly a sustained engagement with discourses of natural history across transatlantic geographies: its status as purely political, is at times, tenuous, at best.

Notes was first printed privately in France for a small readership, translated in France and England later in the decade, revised and expanded, and finally published in the U.S. in 1787 after U.S. newspapers had already published excerpts of the piece. Importantly, the U.S. publication run was initiated by interest generated in the text by American scientists. The composition of the manuscript was originally prompted by a request made in 1781 to Jefferson, then governor of Virginia, by François du Marbois, the French secretary of legation. Du Marbois desired more information about the state,
inquiring into the geographic particularities, climate, commerce, religion and other aspects of Virginian nature and culture. *Notes* is organized around each of the secretary’s queries, to which Jefferson responded, chapter by chapter. Du Marbois’ inquiry included questions such as: “An exact description of the limits and boundaries of the state of Virginia?,” “A notice of its rivers, rivulets, and how far they are navigable?,” and “The administration of justice and description of the laws?” In what has become the most famous section of the text, Jefferson addresses Buffon’s theory that animals in the New World were smaller in body size and fewer in number than in Europe. Buffon’s argument is evidenced in climatological terms: hot and dry climates (like France) produce larger species than cold and humid ones (like America): the “cold and humid” description of America reinforces Jefferson’s view that the country ran through both the torrid and temperate zones. Hardt insists that Jefferson must argue for the equality between animals and plants of the Old World and the New because of a political need to legitimize the U.S. and its mode of democratic governance. Buffon’s claim is apparently part of “a political debate displaced onto a biological terrain” (45). There certainly are political valences to Jefferson’s argument regarding animal size in the New World. However, rather than transposing Jefferson’s argument onto a grand narrative about national politics, I find that his anxieties have more to do with Buffon’s placement of America with more Southerly, tropical climates, other “humid” locales that are also associated in natural history’s theories of racial climatism with the production of blackness. That is, 

22 At this historical moment, however, politics and the biological were not yet intertwined in the ways in which, for example, one might understand the biopolitical in Foucauldian terms. The kind of transference that Hardt locates between the biological and the political may not simply have made sense in Jeffersonian America, especially since biology proper did not emerge until the nineteenth century.
instead of looking immediately to transatlantic circuits between the Continent and a
Northern-centric U.S. we should perhaps consider Jefferson here as a distinctly Southern
thinker, one who is equally invested in legitimating a Southern geography of the country
as a civilized, democratic, and whitened part of the emergent nation. To do so, Jefferson
must establish the differences between the climatic mixtures of the U.S. South and those
unruly, similarly creolized spaces of the Caribbean.

Understanding Jefferson as a writer of Southern natural history is not to claim
Jefferson for the South (although Bernstein notes that Jefferson called himself a
“Southern man”), but rather illuminates an important moment of transformation during
the early republican period when New England “plantings” gave way to a distinctively
Southern plantation. I argue that Monticello represents an important turning point: from
American plantations that privileged the realm of experience, to Southern plantations that
became sites of systematic experiment into the relationships between blackness and a
distinctive Southern environment. Ultimately, the interarticulation of race and nature
collapsed together the biota and abiotica of the plantation, rooting blackness squarely
within the experimental geographies of the plantation.

_Dismal Latitudes_

A literary imaginary of the plantation pastoral, which continued to represent the
plantation as an unenclosed, pre-industrial and green geography in the face of rampant
industrialization and environmental degradation, helped to keep the experimental
matrices of the plantation invisible beginning in the Jeffersonian period. Leo Marx’s
1964 _The Machine in the Garden_ outlines an important history of how the pastoral has
mediated the relationship between the technological and the natural throughout American history. Marx argues that from the beginning of the early republic, America, imagined as a utopian virgin landscape, was actually being constructed rhetorically within a technological landscape. Early republic orators easily placed “the machine in the garden,” arguing that industrial technology would be purified in the American context because of the machine’s greater proximity to and closer contact with nature. Into the nineteenth century, writers cultivated and attempted to maintain what he calls “a middle landscape” that straddled the pastoral and the industrial, a strategy that became less rhetorical and more ideological as mass industrialization became an increasingly powerful force into the late nineteenth century.

Interestingly, the scenes of pastoral design that Marx discusses are almost always either implicitly or explicitly racialized. My dissertation title, “Shackled in the Garden,” invokes Leo Marx’s 1964 title. By replacing Marx’s machine with an allusion to shackles I mean to point to that other “technology” that stands at the heart of the American pastoral ideal. Perhaps Marx remained so silent on the peculiar institution because of the progressive politics he sought to locate in the pastoral.24 Writing during a

24 Marx is one scholar among several other Cold War Americanist critics who turned to American nature, especially the frontier, amid desperation and cultural anxieties over nuclear war, industrialization and fascism. Although contemporary Americanists are quick to critique these critics’ valorization of American exceptionalism, or uncomplicated “democratic” ideals tied to the frontier, a more generous reading might see these critics as reacting against the formalisms and mute racisms of the Southern Agrarian New Critics. See The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism, ed. Paul B. Thompson and Thomas C. Hilde (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), Henry Nash Smith’s 1950 Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press), and Perry Miller’s 1956 Errand into the Wilderness.

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burgeoning environmental movement and in the face of the disillusionments of Vietnam, Marx sought to claim a “back to nature” ethos that could work toward peace, solidarity, and global healing, but in so doing, he also denied the problems going “back to nature” necessarily entailed. The American pastoral, I argue, is a mode that must continually erase the laboring bodies that populate the scene of the idyllic. In some ways, then, Marx extended the same kind of fantasies about the virgin land of America that we might also locate in Jefferson’s model of agrarian democracy or in J. Hector St. John Crèvecœur’s 1782 agricultural utopia, Letters From an American Farmer. The American pastoral works to obscure important connections between racialized bodies, technologies, and environments, particularly in plantation geographies. Although, for example, scholars like Saidiya Hartman have worked hard to conceptualize the antebellum plantation in terms of scenes of trauma, romantic pastoralizations of the plantation still proliferate in both contemporary popular and academic discourse.

25 By 1986, Leo Marx began to question the inherent political progressivism of the pastoral. See his “Pastoralism in America” in Ideology and Classic American Literature, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 36-69. He writes, “the appeal of pastoralism may be too exclusively confined to the relatively privileged groups that would defend (or regain) residual values” (66). It seems that Marx had, by this point, been influenced by theories of the pastoral and the counter-pastoral from Raymond Williams’ 1973 The Country and the City (New York: Oxford University Press).

26 Marxist analyses of the pastoral in British contexts have made the case for a working-class politics attached to the generic mode. See, for example, William Empson’s Some Versions of Pastoral (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1974). Raymond Williams’ The Country and the City mentions the erasure of labor in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British pastoral poems like Ben Johnson’s Penhurst and To Sir Robert Wroth or Marvell’s The Garden. For example, in discussing Jonson and Carew, Williams writes, “Yet this magical extraction of the curse of labour is in fact achieved by a simple extraction of the existence of labourers” (32).

figuring of plantation spaces as green, unenclosed, and “natural” obscures the industrial nature of plantation economies and in so doing, merges enslaved bodies with an idyllic, pre-industrial landscape.

Crèvecoeur’s *Letters From an American Farmer* was published in 1782 and although it received little attention in America, it was incredibly popular in Europe appearing in multiple editions in three different languages.  

Although the book is framed autobiographically as a set of letters from a new settler written back across the Atlantic, it is, at best, a very rough estimate of Crèvecoeur’s own life. The volume privileges a pastoral mode of description in order to celebrate the Edenic aspects of the American landscape, particularly the farm. The narrator describes the Americans as a “race of cultivators” and the country as a place where “everything is prosperous and flourishing.” Although several of the early chapters exhort the life of a “humble American planter,” the narrator attempts to unhinge the planter from the plantation, which remains suspiciously out of view. The narrative’s bucolic musings continue for much of the text, until Chapter IX, “On Charles Town and Slavery” when the narrator apologizes for his recent melancholic tones and “gloomy thoughts” that have oppressed him since bearing witness to a startling scene in the woods:

I was leisurely traveling along, attentively examining some *peculiar plants* which I had collected, when all at once I felt the air strongly agitated, though the day was perfectly calm and sultry. I immediately cast my eyes toward the cleared

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ground, from which I was but a small distance, in order to see whether or not it
was not occasioned by a sudden shower, when at that instant a sound resembling a
deep rough voice, uttered, as I thought, a few inarticulate monosyllables.
Alarmed and surprised, I precipitately looked all around, when I perceived at about
six rods distance something resembling a cage, suspended to the limbs of a tree,
all the branches of which appeared covered with large birds of prey […] they all
flew to a short distance, with a most hideous noise, when, horrid to think and
painful to repeat, I perceived a Negro, suspended in a cage and left there to expire.
I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes. (170;
italics are mine)

I take my heading for this section (“Dismal Latitudes”) from what I locate in this chapter
of Letters From an American Farmer as the turning point in the text, where the farmer’s
horrifying encounter with a caged slave “suspended to the limbs of a tree” ruptures the
pre-lapsarian fantasy of the American pastoral.29 The narrator goes on to state, “I found

29 However, Crèvecoeur’s scene certainly does not stand on its own. In Harriet Jacob’s
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), a slave is punished by being screwed into the
cotton gin and placed in the woods until he dies. This is yet another example of Leo
Marx’s “machine in the garden” taken to an extreme: where the pastoralizing and
purification of the machine in the American landscape works by violently crushing an
enslaved person inside the cotton gin. One might also place George Schuyler’s 1931
Black No More in such a genealogy, a novel in which Dr. Junius Crookman discovers a
machine that turns black folks white. And then perhaps most famously, we might recall
Ralph Ellison’s cogent comment in the Invisible Man (1952): “we are the machines in the
machine.” Where pastoral texts cover up the laboring subjects enslaved in the garden,
subjects upon which the dream of the pastoral is built by, literally in this case, stretching
their bodies across the divide between the technological and the environmental, African
American authors like Schuyler, Ellison, Jean Toomer, Du Bois, Pauline Hopkins and
others, open up what Latour would call the “black box” of technology to reveal the
myself suddenly arrested by the power of affright and terror; my nerves were convulsed; I trembled; I stood motionless, involuntarily contemplating the fate of this Negro in all its dismal latitude” (179). Ultimately, this pastoral rupture paralyzes the narrative: soon after the horrific scene, the narrator abruptly packs up and moves back to Europe. The text abruptly concludes.

Crèvecoeur’s “dismal latitude” foregrounds colonial obsessions with tropical climates and their effects on individual temperaments. One might first be apt to read this phrase in light of the narrator’s obsession with acclimation—that is, how certain bodies are adapted or made adaptable to particular climates. As Joyce Chaplin documents, Europeans were extremely anxious about the potential hybridization of their bodies in the harsh climate of the New World. Throughout the text, Crèvecoeur is particularly interested in the relationships between bodies and climate, or perhaps to be more specific considering the agricultural bent of the narrative: between bodies and soil.

The “dismal latitude” comes to signify something else besides, or perhaps in addition to, a specific geographic coordinate in the South. Latitude here carries the ironic meaning to be “free from narrow restrictions.” The narrative brings the geographical notion of latitude into an intimate relationship with the shackled and caged body of the slave. And it is at this moment that climatism goes awry in the “dismal latitude.” Where climate and networks of blackness circuited inside. See Latour, Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (New York: Signet Classics, 2000); Schuyler, Black No More (New York: The Modern Library, 1999); Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

bodies had previously harmoniously co-existed in Crèvecoeur’s cosmology—a symbiotic ecology between the natural world and bodies—the introduction of the slave in the cage in the American landscape brings Leo Marx’s “machine in the garden” to its grotesque limit. *Letters from an American Farmer* dramatizes the troubles of sustaining the fantasy of the New World as paradise regained. After this key scene of pastoral paralysis, the narrator is unable to recapture his idyllic relationship to the landscape, recognizing instead how the horrors of enslavement have tainted the pure soil of the New World.

**The Invisible Plantation**

Although *Letters from an American Farmer* valorizes the farmer instead of the planter to keep intact a pastoral fantasy of America as an agricultural utopia, the independent yeoman farmer was something of an anachronism in a nation that was heavily dependent upon the Atlantic slave trade and plantation economy. Both the planter and the plantation are also mysteriously absent in Jefferson’s *Notes*. In detailing the agricultural productions of Virginia, for example, he notes only that “our Farms produce wheat, rye, barley, oats, buck, wheat, broom corn, and Indian corn” (43; italics are Jefferson’s). The text continually re-routes du Marbois’ questions about the nature of the Southern state of Virginia into lengthy discussions about the state of the nation. I read *Notes* as an early document of the plantation South that, nonetheless, refuses both “states rights” and the plantation in favor of a vision of a unified nation. For example, Jefferson’s attempts to secure a place for the United States in the temperate zone require him to outline a national natural history that steers clear of the many tropical “Productions Mineral, Vegetable, and Animal” of his native Virginia. His discussions of
state topography regularly devolve into lengthy discussions of the geological record, through which Jefferson attempts to establish a deep history for the nation. Post-revolutionary Virginia is radically defamiliarized in these sections of the text, where ancient natural curiosities like waterfalls, mountains, geysers, and the “natural bridge” tower over the growing cities and plantations that were in reality the most auspicious components of the state’s “natural” landscape.

In such complex rhetorical modulations between the state, the South, the nation, and a transatlantic political economy, Monticello circulates in Notes as a strangely hidden, or even ghostly, site. When it is evoked, it is not in terms of its status as a plantation, but as a privileged site for the collection of data, from which Jefferson draws all kinds of scientific conclusions: “But a more remarkable difference is in the winds which prevail in the different parts of the country. The following table exhibits a comparative view of the winds prevailing at Williamsburgh and at Monticello. It is formed by reducing nine months observation at Monticello to four principal points, to wit, the North-east, South-east, South-west, and North-west” (83). At the same time, Monticello’s role as an experimental geography is masked over throughout the text by obscuring the laboring bodies and technologies networked inside the plantation’s enclosures.

Monticello was—and perhaps even continues to be—a kind of “black box” of race and technology: a pastoral utopia of agricultural and garden spaces that can only remain as such through a naturalization of the racialized labor—and bodies—that work
(literally) to perpetuate such a fantasy.\textsuperscript{31} In her biography of Jefferson, R.B. Bernstein notes that the architectural layout of Monticello guaranteed that Jefferson and visitors to the estate would rarely have to look upon the spaces where slaves lived and worked.\textsuperscript{32} Oversight of the slaves was left almost solely to Monticello’s overseer. Jefferson, more the architect, natural historian and planner of the estate’s crops, garden plots, and manufacturing, and less the farmer, was known to spend most of his time in the fields taking measurements of the soil or recording the daily temperature for his meteorology log. Indeed, Jefferson’s philosophy of an agrarian democracy remained a purely “theoretical” stance on his plantation as well: he left the doings to others. Though out of sight in the hopes of being out of mind, Jefferson’s slaves were still meticulously accounted for—not in a financial ledger, as many slaves were commodified—but in his Farm and Garden Book. Each enslaved person was recorded and classified under the same rubric as crop rotations and lists of plant species at Monticello.\textsuperscript{33} Crèvecoeur’s argument that “men are like plants” extended beyond Jefferson’s climatological understanding of race and personhood in his political writings into the practical accounting techniques and methods of “species” definition of both flora and fauna alike at Monticello itself. Such formal lists of black bodies and flowers were part of an already established scientific tradition: Carolus Linnaeus, the father of modern botany, used his

\textsuperscript{31} On the role of the “black box” in making science and technology seem ready-made instead of “science in the making,” see Bruno Latour, \textit{Science in Action}.
classificatory system to name both the greenery of the natural world and the races of
human society.

The experimental imperatives of Jefferson’s gardens are made explicit in a section
of the Monticello website devoted to Jeffersonian horticulture:

\[T\]he vegetable garden was a kind of laboratory where he could experiment with
imported squashes and broccoli from Italy, beans and salsify collected by the
Lewis and Clark expedition, figs from France, and peppers from Mexico.
Although he would grow as many as twenty varieties of bean and fifteen types of
English pea, his use of the scientific method selectively eliminated inferior types:
“I am curious to select one or two of the best species or variety of every garden
vegetable, and to reject all others from the garden to avoid the dangers of mixing
or degeneracy.\(^3^4\)

Jefferson’s worries about “degeneracy” and “mixing” in his vegetable garden could just
as easily be applied to the kinds of amalgamation worries espoused in natural histories of
blackness by Jefferson and others. The title of the website, “Jefferson: Scientist and
Gardener,” nicely captures the central dynamics of plantation ecology: the plantation as
an ecologically unique space and privileged site of experimentation where worries over
reproductive “mixing” and “degeneracy” traverse plant species and human bodies. With
Jefferson, we might locate the beginnings of a plantation proto-eugenics: practices that

\(^3^4\) [http://www.monticello.org/gardens/vegetable/science_gardener.html](http://www.monticello.org/gardens/vegetable/science_gardener.html) (Accessed 5 May 2007); italics are mine.

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attempted to control the reproduction and movement of all kinds of species, plant, animal, and human.

While *Notes* attempts to stabilize the American environment as a space of temperate cultivation, the “torrid zone” continually haunts the text. Monticello and other plantations are excised from Jefferson’s landscape of Virginia not only to downplay the role of slavery in both the state and national economy, but also because of how the plantation threatens to tropicalize national space. Jefferson poses a strange query at one point in the text, asking “whether nature has enlisted herself as a Cis or Trans-Atlantic partisan?” (68). This question illuminates an uncertainty over whether the hybrid torrid-temperate landscape of North America shares more in common with the cold European North or the tropical spaces of the Caribbean and South America. Suspended somewhere between New England plantation and the Caribbean sugar plantation, the Southern plantation emerged during this period as a hybrid space that contained and concentrated both the torrid and temperate climes of a larger plantation zone. Jefferson understood his plantation estate as a premier site of cultivation that showcased the organization and productivity of a *temperate* American agriculture at the same time as he filled his gardens with botanical and vegetable wonders from across the Southern, more tropical, hemisphere.

Ultimately, Jeffersonian science picked up on the heterotopic spatiality of the plantation to produce empirical knowledge for the (temperate) nation compiled from meticulous observations of the tropical flora, fauna, and enslaved persons enclosed within the plantation estate. In *Notes*, Jefferson laments the fact that “though for a century and a half we have had under our eyes the races of black and of red men, they have never yet
been viewed by us as subjects of natural history” (150). This section ultimately explodes the fiction that natural history was an innocent endeavor that required only simple observation of the world and its natural productions, as Jefferson argues that definitive conclusions about the mental inferiority of black persons “requires many observations, even where the subject may be submitted to the Anatomical knife, to Optical glasses, to analysis by fire, or by solvents” (150). The cataloguing of racialized persons into the annals of natural history is revealed here as a deeply interventionist and violent endeavor.

Jefferson’s interest in the black and red races obviously extended beyond the field of simply observation: Throughout Notes, he returns again and again to the nation’s investment in promoting the reproduction of useful species while hindering the reproduction of “those which are noxious” (142). Notes turns specifically to the state of Virginia’s interest in the “preservation and improvement of the races of useful animals, such as horses, cattle, deer; to the extirpation of those which are noxious, as wolves, squirrels, crows, blackbirds” (142). Jefferson’s excising of the plantation in this section is particularly striking since the plantation was a central, if not the central, location for controlling and domesticating reproduction across the plantation South. Although Jefferson was not known to experiment on his slaves (or he at least did not make this data public), he clearly understood his plantation as a site for controlling New World reproduction. Recalling Bacon’s worries of “extirpations” on the colonial plantation, Jefferson too engaged with a eugenics logic shuttled between the bodies of men and the bodies of plants (“his use of the scientific method selectively eliminated inferior types”). However, in contrast to Bacon, for Jefferson, a little bloodshed was imagined to help “fertilize” the plantation, and by extension, the larger democratic society. Jefferson once
posited in a letter to a friend: “What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree
of liberty from time to time must be refreshed with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is
its natural manure.”35 The experimental matrices established on plantations in the late
eighteenth century paved the way for regimes of race science that would so easily move
from the province of the botanical to the enslaved body with the rise of comparative
anatomy in the nineteenth century.

In his classic history White Over Black, Winthrop Jordan suggests that Great
Chain of Being explanations of a tidy natural world gained popularity during the latter
part of the eighteenth century because of the desire of elite Anglo-Americans to maintain
order in a highly unstable post-revolutionary moment.36 Indeed, for Jefferson it was
always a balancing act, between advocating “healthy” forms of rebellion in the spirit of
democracy and continually worrying that such acts might run out of control, particularly
in the case of potential slave rebellion. The specter of the Haitian revolution loomed
large over a Southern aristocracy still insecure about the region’s “Americanness.”
Contained within his garden book, Jefferson’s slaves seemed unlikely to uproot
themselves from Monticello.

And still ghostly slave presences must have surrounded and haunted Jefferson at
an estate where things seemed to get done as if by magic. Bernstein recounts that
Jefferson rigged Monticello with pulleys so food and other items could be delivered to
various rooms without having to confront a slave’s face. Such ghostly operations of
Monticello persist even today, as the popular tourist destination is presented as a palatial

35 Quoted in Bernstein, 70; italics are mine.
36 Jordan, White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812 (Chapel
and magical well-oiled machine that almost runs itself. The Monticello website invokes the “experimental” plantation paradigm as the gardens are described as an “experimental laboratory” where Jefferson reigned as both “scientist and gardener.” Jefferson, again, is imagined as the sole proprietor, mastermind, and laborer behind all of the work that surely went into the maintenance of such complex planting systems. One can’t help wonder who labors in the gardens today, while the ghostly presence of Jefferson, the eternal proprietor of Monticello, continues to reap the credit.
Chapter 3 // Nature’s Nation: Civil War Botany and the Politics of Cultivation

“Flowers seem spontaneous things enough, but there is evidently a secret marshalling among them”

—Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “April Days” (1863)

“Here Henry found himself surrounded by a different atmosphere, an entirely new element. Finding ample scope for undisturbed action through the entire region of the Swamp, he continued to go scattering to the winds and sowing the seeds of a future crop, only to take root in the thick black waters which cover it, to be grown in devastation and reaped in a whirlwind of ruin”

—Martin R. Delany, Blake: or, the Huts of America (1861)

It might appear that the leisurely pursuits of natural history had no place in the U.S. South during and leading up to the tense military conflicts of the Civil War. It is certainly true that by the 1850s, the Southern landscape could no longer be imagined as a safe haven for the white bourgeoisie but rather became effused with a militarism that charged the entire nation. Narratives of an Edenic South no longer feasible, representations of the region as a tropical, even jungle, war zone proliferated in popular newspapers and other print sources throughout the North. In spite of these developments, investigations into Southern natural history persisted as observers from the North, South, and beyond, sought to prove the distinctiveness of Southern flora and fauna. One might say that a strategically militarized form of natural history emerged during these years, serving both the Union and the Confederacy, albeit in radically different ways. Tina Gianquitto has argued that since the U.S. was consumed by the war, Charles Darwin’s 1859 publication of On the Origin of Species received little notice until several years after
1865.¹ Indeed, with the South weighing heavy on the imagination of both the Northern and Southern states, investigators continued to look inward and obsess over cataloging the “natural” history of the region, even as the tenets of Darwinian evolution gave rise to experimental biology across the Atlantic.

Natural history remained particularly important for the Confederacy, which struggled with Union blockades that made importing drugs into the region virtually impossible. The Confederate Surgeon General’s office, located in Richmond, Virginia, responded to the scarcity of medicine for soldiers and civilians by opening up medical laboratories all over the South which conducted research and manufactured medicines from plants native to the region. These laboratories sought to replicate common drugs normally produced in the North and concocted substitutions of medicines that could not be produced from Southern flora. In 1862, the Surgeon General’s Office published a document on the medicinal use of local plants that also encouraged Southern residents to begin their own searches for medicinal plants throughout the South.² To supply their laboratories, the Confederacy hired medical purveyors in charge of securing indigenous plants and also employed citizens to cultivate what they referred to as “useful plants.”³ While such measures clearly responded to pragmatic concerns of the Confederate States

of America, Confederate Botany also became a powerful tool for imagining and promoting the South’s economic independence. For example, citizens’ search for necessary plants and other indigenous material for the Confederacy both directly contributed to the war effort and acted out the South’s self-sufficiency. Whether the Southerners who collected Southern flora actively endorsed this view is another question, especially since the Surgeon General’s Office had to offer payment as motivation for “turning in” valuable specimen. Nonetheless, Confederate Botany performed sectional independence by becoming its own cure: developing a drug market through supposedly indigenous remedies while cataloging a distinctively Southern pharmacosm.4

The sectional undertones of what I refer to as Confederate Botany are especially noticeable in the Surgeon General Office’s 1863 publication, *Resources of the Southern Fields and Forests, Medical, Economical, and Agricultural*.5 The 600-page report was authored by the Civil War surgeon Francis Peyre Porcher, who in the introductory pages of the *Resources* notes that the report was prepared “by direction of the Surgeon-General, for which purpose the author was released temporarily from service in the field and

4 On the African American pharmacosm, see Theophus H. Smith’s *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Smith draws from Jacques Derrida’s writings on Plato’s *pharmakon* in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). See also Sharla M. Fett’s *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). I have placed *indigenous* in quotations throughout this section to signal that by the mid-nineteenth century, the South, just like the rest of the U.S., was overflowing with all kinds of non-native species. In other words, Confederate botany’s “Southern” landscape was composed of species transplanted from all over the world.

hospital” (iii). A massive catalog of “useful properties of the trees, plants, and shrubs,” Porcher’s document is not an original natural history reflecting first-hand empirical observations of the Southern landscape, but rather a collection of the most authoritative and most often cited natural histories of the period, many of which were written outside of the U.S. for a non-American audience. Porcher thoroughly Southernizes natural history from the Global North (the Northern United States and Europe) in order to make 
*Resources of the Southern Fields and Forests* the authoritative text of, in Porcher’s terms, “medical botany of the Confederate States.” We should not forget the importance of natural history in distinguishing the early American republic from Europe in its quest for independence.6 Almost a century later, the “Confederate States of America” sought to establish its own independence through recourse to a similar claim of natural distinctiveness.

After its publication, *Resources* was used as a common reference guide in Army hospitals, Confederate “pharmaceutical labs” and on the battlefront. Porcher additionally hoped that Confederate botany would remain relevant once the war was over and the reign of the plantation restored; he writes that the book was intended for the “Regimental Surgeon in the field, the Physician in his private practice, or the Planter on his estate” (iii). The author’s militarized nature is extended to Southern plantation spaces as he looks forward to the post-war application of Confederate Botany under the restoration of slavery. Porcher’s delineation of the “vegetable productions of the Confederate States” as well as his emphasis on the renewed importance of empiricism in the South are

repeatedly connected with the sectional agenda. He insists on the importance of concocting botanical substitutions for foreign imported plants and medicines. In another moment, the author cites a quotation from W. Gilmore Simms, who in the *Charleston Review* insisted that “sectional independence” depended on the success of the South’s mobilization of empirical investigation. “Sectional Resources,” Simms argues, will only be developed when “every citizen who thinks himself in possession of a *truth* or a *fact* which he deems to be not generally recognized, should make it public—put it to challenge—that it may be subjected to investigation” (vi).

While Confederate scientists, doctors, and other authorities sought to mobilize Southern nature, figuring the region as a pure space of extraction, observers from the Union Army and North more generally worried about what Porcher calls the “wonderful exuberance” (vii) of vegetation in the South.⁷ Porcher’s “teeming products of every variety of soil and climate” (vi) invoke the miasmic, diseased conditions of a tropical Southern environment, allude to the ability of Southern nature to produce independently and abundantly in opposition to the Northern economy, and reference the region’s too-abundant landscape: disorganized, overgrown and in short, the perfect space to be peopled with Confederate soldiers, lying in wait in their natural environs.⁸ The thought of a “teeming” tropical South that offered its resources only for the benefit of native Southerners while refusing to be mapped and navigated by Northern outsiders, was surely

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terrifying to those Union officers and soldiers who had rarely, if ever, left the North’s temperate environment.

This chapter examines contesting mobilizations of Southern nature during the years leading up to and during the Civil War. I argue that while the Confederacy cataloged and militarized its landscape, effectively transforming the region into a fully observable and usable space, the Union Army moved in the opposite direction, romanticizing the South as a closed, pastoral region where the plantation still ordered otherwise unruly Southern geographies. In other words, in order to squelch fears about the unknowability and racialization of tropical Southern landscapes outside the order of the plantation, Union botany attempted to “Reconstruct” Southern nature long before 1865. This chapter examines Union Colonel and writer Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s dependence on the Southern plantation and the modes of botanical discipline its built environment enabled during his training of an experimental regiment of black soldiers on an abandoned South Carolina plantation. Higginson’s pastoralizing of the Southern scene attempted to discipline a regiment of ex-slaves and an untamed Southern landscape, both of which threatened to rebel against the Union officer’s orders of command on the plantation.

While the first half of the chapter tracks the Union’s surprising attempts to reinvest in the plantation form, the second half considers other kinds of plantation militarizations during the period, turning specifically to Martin R. Delany’s mobilization of unruly plantation geographies in his 1861 serial publication, *Blake; or, the Huts of America*. While Northern commentators like Higginson treated widespread disillusionment in the midst of the Civil War by representing the plantation as an
unchanging, pastoral space of antebellum nostalgia, Delany revealed the plantation’s secret connections to slave organization and insurrection. His was a distinctly black plantation system that cautioned of violence and race war in the Global South. While enslaved persons were organized and made visible to masterful scientistic gazes within the cultivated spaces of experimental plantation geographies, I argue that Delany sought a different kind of black organization in the dark recesses of a more secret and tropical plantation South. Higginson’s Southern natural histories utilized a literary imaginary of the plantation pastoral, which represented the plantation as a timeless, unenclosed space of non-violence and botanical wonder, to naturalize the discipline and cultivation of his black army regiment in the plantation zone. Delany, on the other hand, exposed racist articulations of race and nature hinged to the plantation complex through a black natural history that rooted black revolution in the tropical, subterranean networks of the plantation. While their plantation projects were opposed in most respects, both Delany and Higginson were interested in a mid-century militarization of nature that wrested natural history from feminine influence.

“Spring flowers move in little platoons”

Although investigations in natural history began as early as the seventeenth century, in both the theories of Continental naturalists and in the furious gathering of specimen by naturalists and commercial investors in the New World, the field was not popularized until the Swedish naturalist, Carl von Linné published his system of plant
classification in the mid-eighteenth century. Linnaeus’ sexual system favored the flower in its taxonomic system and ordered plants by counting “male” and “female” reproductive organs. Although Linnaeus focused on the explicit topic of plant sexuality, the newly gendered field of natural history opened up a space of involvement for bourgeois European women, many of who became active participants in the aristocratic activities of polite botany. Eighteenth-century botany included differently gendered sub-fields: economic botany (for commercial exploitation), scientific botany (taxonomic), and horticulture (concerned with plant reproduction), were all considered masculine pursuits, while polite botany was primarily associated with the feminine and aristocratic. Although polite botany was intended as a chaste, modest activity for women, the sexual connotations of flower gathering and analyzing remained, making botany an ambiguously gendered and sexualized enterprise. The association between botany and sexual impropriety remained in play into the nineteenth century. Despite efforts to contain femininity within the category of polite botany, investigations into the plant kingdom by men continued to be understood as feminizing scientific pursuits.

Ann B. Shteir argues that by the year 1830, English botany was beginning to be disarticulated from the realm of femininity. At this point in time, botany began to diverge from Linnaeus’ sexual system of taxonomy in favor of commercial and professional interests in physiology, morphology, and plant reproduction. Shteir tracks the masculinizing of botany during the mid-nineteenth century through the figure of John


Lindley, the first professor of botany at London University and major promoter of “the modern science of botany,” who sought to professionalize botany as a serious science by disassociating it from the realm of feminine fancy. To legitimate botany as a profession and distance it from leisure, Lindley supplanted the female naturalist with the gentleman botanist. Lindley was successful in narrowing a formerly diverse field into two separate camps: the masculine pursuit of professional botany and the frivolous activity of women gathering flowers in the field.

On the American scene of the 1860s, where the professionalization of science lagged behind Britain by several decades, I argue that the Civil War played a major role in the dissociation of botany from the province of femininity. At the same time, connections between femininity and the botanical, especially the floral, did not easily lay to rest, popping up in even the most explicitly militaristic accounts of the natural world. In Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s natural history writings, which were written during the late 1850s and early 1860s but were published during the Civil War while Higginson was stationed in command of a black Union Army regiment in South Carolina, the domestic and sentimental language of botany mingle with a pre-Civil War natural environment electrified by masculine aspirations for rebellion and war. At the same time, the racialized dimensions of Higginson’s floral landscape illuminate the bizarre conjoining of race, gender and a bellicose nature in the years leading up to the Civil War.

In turning to Higginson as naturalist, I follow other scholars who include all kinds of writing in the genre of natural history, including scientific reports, newspaper
accounts, and popular travel narratives. More specifically, I argue that in the general vacuum of official scientific investigation during the Civil War, popular accounts from the battlefield became important sources of empirical knowledge from and about the U.S. South. During this period, Union officers replaced civilians as the privileged observers of “nature’s nation.” Higginson’s status as a New England Union officer in the South legitimated his expertise in a number of fields of knowledge. An expert, apparently, on all things related to Southern nature, black soldiers, and slave insurrection, he became a prolific correspondent for the Northern press.

Higginson’s nature writings also illuminate what Mary Louise Pratt describes as the bureaucratic and militaristic valences of natural history, which, for her, always involves an imperial gesture of commodifying nature (where nature is transformed into a natural resource) through the ordering imperatives of the catalog. I insist that the cataloging of natural history during the Civil War became inextricable from the Southern plantation zone. During the 1850s and 1860s, the plantation was increasingly figured as a dangerous, militaristic environment, inhabited by both Southern rebels planning to attack and slaves ready for revolutionary insurrection. Both groups, though normally opposed to each other, threatened to use a formerly-Edenic-turned-sinister tropical Southern nature to their advantage in combating the state. Northern observers worried that the tropical scene of the plantation would aid both black and white rebels in their anarchic schemes against national unity and stability. Where the plantation in earlier decades had been more convincingly figured as an Edenic space, the very model of social organization

11 See, for example, Mary Louise Pratt’s Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturati (New York: Routledge, 1992).
in harmony with nature, the plantation into the mid-nineteenth century was more
thoroughly tropicalized, increasingly associated with an oncoming war and the specter of
race revolution in the Caribbean. The U.S. plantation complex and the war zone of the
Caribbean were increasingly aligned prior to the Civil War through an imaginary of an
unruly, rebellious nature.

The ambiguous environment of the Southern plantation war zone took center
stage in Higginson’s “natural history” writings about his Army regiment of “colored
troops.” However, Higginson’s pre-Civil War writings on Northern nature, which
circulated in a variety of publications throughout the 1850s, also registered anxieties
about race, nature, and insurrection. Although composed before the War, Higginson’s
nature essays were collected together in the Out-door Papers and published while he was
stationed with the South Carolina Volunteers in 1863. The nature writings illuminate
pre-war anxieties about the militarization and racializing of Northern environments at the
same time as they participate in the mid-century masculinization of natural history.

Throughout the essays, Higginson expresses an admiration for nature’s
harmonious order, a uniformity dramatized through the language of army discipline and
organization. In “April Days,” a distinctly bellicose Southern nature emerges in the
unlikely context of a New England spring blossoming. The feminized cult of the floral
is intertwined with masculine militarism: spring flowers are described as moving in
platoons “with little straggling” (232), while “rue-leaved anemones” become soldiers

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12 See Out-door Papers (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), especially the essays “April
Days,” “My Out-Door Study,” “Water-Lilies,” “The Life of Birds,” “The Procession of
the Flowers,” and “Snow.”
13 See “April Days” in Higginson’s Out-door Papers, 223-46.
standing at attention “in stem” (230). Higginson’s depiction of a pure botanical landscape, filled with perfectly disciplined native species, also prefigures the Union Army’s imagined role in reproducing the nation. Higginson’s accounting of the “true Native Americans” as so many New England botanical species highlights Union botany’s concern with the purity of American reproduction. Higginson laments the inevitable extinction of many of New England’s pure and native plants, and in response, imagines a militaristic mode of reproducing the nation’s nature to counter the degeneration of Northern stock. Throughout the essay, the author blurs models of human and plant reproduction in his imagining of a militaristic masculinity that can autonomously regenerate and revitalize the natural landscape.

Higginson’s account of a veritable army of spring blossoms belies a worry that plants not cultivated by human hands might self-organize in their natural habitats: “Flowers seem spontaneous things enough, but there is evidently a secret marshalling among them” (232). The author returns to a worry that nature organizes secretly, transforming a benign field of spring flowers into a sinister self-cultivating landscape that threatens to revolt. The flowers of New England not only secretly marshal among themselves, but once organized, reproduce profusely: “Each species seems to burst upon us with a united impulse; you may search for them day after day in vain, but the day when you find one specimen the spell is broken and you find twenty” (232). With the

14 A spectral Native American presence haunts many of the natural histories of New England. William Cronon discusses how the retention of Indian names of ponds, towns, rivers, and other environmental niches signaled former ecological relationships that had been radically changed by Native American removal, the transformation of agricultural practices to non-Native models, and intensified industrialization. See his Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003; Revised Edition).
insurrectionary and multitudinous potential of nature established, it is perhaps not surprising that this personified New England landscape also encodes threats of black rebellion.

Higginson expresses his interest in tracking the “secret movements of vegetation” (325) and in his essay “Water-Lilies,” it at times becomes unclear whether the author is indeed describing the dramatic flowering of a plant floating on New England’s waters, or offering his own secret transmission of how, in his own terms, a “black mass” might rise up and collude with nature in an organized revolt against the state. Higginson’s metaphors initially forward an idyllic vision of a white island nation, “islands and continents of lilies, acres of charms, whole, vast, unbroken surfaces of stainless whiteness” (275). 15 This figuration of a lily-white nation stretched across a continent with “natural and permanent” borders imaginatively fulfils the tenets of a natural Manifest Destiny while absolving the nation-state from its originary violence of claiming territory by expunging and redistributing all kinds of Native populations (human, animal, and plant). Higginson soon reverses the “stainless whiteness” of the previous passage, noting that upon approaching the lilies, a “faint glory of pink” (275) is made visible in each flower. Higginson’s lilies suddenly conjure up an image of young, white soldiers at sea, sacrificing their blood in a “regatta of blossoms” (275).

The “stainless whiteness” is again compromised when the narrative reveals that the “too white and beautiful” flowers are actually supported by an ambiguous “murky mass” under the water’s surface: “Its great black roots, sometimes as large as a man’s arm, form a network at the bottom of the water” (287). Higginson’s comparison of the

15 See “Water-Lilies” in Higginson’s Out-Door Papers, 269-92.
“black roots” to a “man’s arm,” and his later mention of “black heads” clearly invests this innocent scene with the threat of black collectivity and violence. Higginson’s racial landscape figures black organization (the black “mass” or “network”) as a powerful, yet subterranean force that threatens to “uproot” the entire nation. Although Higginson’s evocation of a “murky mass [that] disengages itself from the muddy bottom, and rises slowly through the waves” (271) is intended to describe nature’s display of its wonder in the pure landscape of New England, one can’t help but notice the eerie, unsettling, and even unnatural presence of that “murky mass” moving stealthily through the water.

Throughout the New England nature essays, Higginson endorses natural history as an activity that affirms life, claiming that he prefers observation of the “fresh and living creature” to the “bleeding, gasping, dying body” (241). He uses the innocent language of natural history to associate his empirical surveying with life, although his militaristic rhetoric anticipates the nineteenth-century shift to comparative anatomy and ultimately, experimental biology, which, according to Foucault, instrumentalizes death in the pursuit of knowledge.16 Even in his most banal accounts of New England flora, Higginson’s figurative language transforms nature into a secret battlefield, where bodies organize and prepare to revolt under protective cover. During the war, Higginson’s attempts to connect the increasingly dissective impulses of natural history with life seem almost farcical, surrounded as he was by “bleeding, gasping, dying” (241) bodies scattered across the battlefield. Despite his best efforts to objectively survey and present Nature’s ordered variety and wonder to a Northern reading public curious about the

16 See Foucault, The Order of Things, 269.
tropical climate of the plantation South, his scenes of life-affirming observation were continually weighed down by the spectral presence of war, death, and (race) revolution.

**Cultivating Soldiers**

In 1862, Higginson received a letter from General Rufus Saxton inviting him to leave his post with the Fifty-First Massachusetts Regiment for an experimental venture in the unfamiliar war zone of the plantation South. Higginson eagerly took on the charge of commanding Saxton’s recently organized regiment in Beaufort, South Carolina despite the severe “uncertainty” (2) of the situation.17 Higginson apparently favored a Southern adventure over the comfortable complacency of serving at home in New England. This was, after all, no ordinary regiment: the First South Carolina Volunteers was “the first slave regiment mustered into the service of the United States during the late civil war” (1).18 As an accomplished essayist, novelist, clergyman, Abolitionist, and naturalist, Higginson brought an eclectic background to his service with the black regiment. As a scholar and author, he had a particularly romantic understanding of war. As Christopher Looby notes, his “conception of military endeavor was deeply informed by textual models” (9).19 But Higginson also viewed this unique experience as a supreme publication opportunity. His writing back to the homefront effuses with a romantic sentiment that says as much about a desire to appeal to a New England reading public as

18 Ibid.
it does about Higginson’s romantic attitudes at the battlefront itself. The Colonel’s literary aspirations for the war were obvious: he kept a diary throughout his stay at Camp Saxton in anticipation of a memoir to be composed after the war that would detail the regiment’s historic endeavor. Higginson’s understanding of his professional identity as both Colonel and war correspondent is highlighted by the fact that his writings on the regiment were published during the war itself. They read alternately as real time accounts from the front and nostalgic reminiscences of war days long gone by.

The *Atlantic Monthly* published the Colonel’s battlefront articles in installments beginning in 1864 and continuing through 1865. The essays offered a curious Northern reading public an aesthetically pleasing—or picturesque, to use one of Higginson’s favorite phrases—journey through the Southern war zone. Throughout the narrative, Higginson offers a detailed survey of dismantled and deteriorating plantation architectures in the South that had been abandoned with the onslaught of the War. He also documents a lavish, romantic scene of flowers, trees, shrubs, and other kinds of natural growth that were still thriving amid the ravaging destructions of war. In response to the Union’s destruction of the South’s infrastructure, Higginson’s pastoral account of the region’s flora and fauna reconstructs the South. Such pastoral reconstructions ambivalently recalled a romantic ante-bellum past as they projected a vision of national union with Union victory. Or perhaps more precisely, Higginson paradoxically used images from a supposedly idyllic ante-bellum past to figure the *natural* union between North and South after the war.

The *Atlantic Monthly* essays additionally provided widespread publicity for the unique military experiment at Camp Saxton. As Higginson repeatedly reminded his
readers, the regiment was a site of spectacle for national scrutiny and fascination. He writes of his strict orders on keeping camp clean and presentable since curious Northern spectators so often visited the site. The essays are stylized as an almost virtual visit, providing readers with an experiential tour that presents Camp Saxton as a grand spectacle for a national reading public. The *Atlantic Monthly* articles were eventually compiled together, prefaced by Higginson’s Camp Diary, and published by Fields, Osgood and Company of Boston as *Army Life in a Black Regiment* in 1870. Taken as a whole, *Army Life* is an almost whimsical account of war. Large sections of the prose detail the various types of flora and fauna that covered the Southern landscape, offering a thoroughly picturesque rendering of Camp Saxton’s setting on an abandoned South Carolinian plantation. Furthermore, descriptions of the regiment’s domestic life at the Camp are wrought with a romantic pastoralism that makes it appear as if the regiment’s soldiers were thoroughly contented with their situation.

Higginson’s pastoral designs did not, however, exist solely on the page: the pastoral became a serious, and even severe, disciplinary mechanism at the Camp itself. While Higginson used a pastoral literary imaginary to figure Camp Saxton as an unenclosed, green landscape, the pastoral also affected his understanding of the organization and function of plantation space. Higginson talked explicitly about his attempts to establish a “pastoral life” at Camp Saxton. In “Up the St. Mary’s,” the first account in *Army Life* of the regiment leaving camp for battle, the author claims to have rescued a flock of sheep during a battle raid from the Rebels.  

In a half playful manner, 

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20 Higginson’s comments on the necessity of training black soldiers in distinguishing between “public foraging” and “private plunder” are especially ironic in this regard:
he insists that the sheep were overjoyed to be released from their bondage on a Rebel plantation, where they had been living “in the shadow of Mrs. A’s slave jail” (61). Creating his very own pastoral fantasy on the plantation grounds, Higginson subsequently set the sheep to pasture at Camp Saxton. Higginson deployed a pastoral imaginary to cover over the reality that Camp Saxton was situated within the surveilled enclosures of a Southern plantation.

*Army Life* doubles as an ethnography of the regiment and as a natural history of the Southern landscape. Throughout the narrative, these two modes of inquiry bleed into one another. Higginson’s landscapes are highly and sometimes even consciously racialized, while the soldiers are categorized and systematized as specimens of natural history through a plantation pastoral aesthetic. The author’s background in an amateur natural history surely informed his approach to an apparently exotic group of men and exotic Southern landscape. Both are pleasurably “other” to the Colonel, and throughout the text, he imagines himself communing with both nature and blackness. *Army Life* becomes a kind of sensual tour of tropical landscapes that traverses both bodies and natures.

In *Army Life*, Higginson turns a naturalist’s eye on his soldierly “specimen.” Christopher Looby notes that Higginson’s categorization of his soldiers as “botanical species” (18) emerges out of his deep “investment in the aesthetic production of military spectacle” (11).21 In “Flowers of Manhood: Race, Sex, and Floriculture from Thomas

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“public foraging” is simply stealing that has been authorized by the Colonel. See *Army Life* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2002).

21 See Looby’s introduction to *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*. 
Wentworth Higginson to Robert Mapplethorpe,” Looby suggests more directly that although Higginson attempts to frame an erotic desire for black bodies as an “innocent aesthetic attraction” (113), the metonymic relationship figured between black male bodies and flowers belies significant connections between the homoerotics of race, militarism, and the “sentimental cult of floral symbolism” (119). By tracing the multiple cultural currencies of the floral in nineteenth-century America, Looby convincingly shows that the flower, while seemingly ornamental, circulated as a sexually explicit and erotically charged object: the flower is, after all, the sexual organ of a plant. Following Georges Bataille’s argument that human attraction to flowers is driven by an erotic substitution, Looby argues that flowers in the nineteenth century, especially for botanically-inclined Abolitionist military men like Higginson, became placeholder’s for repressed cross-racial desire.23

I want to push on the implications of what Looby calls Higginson’s “metonymic assimilation of the black soldier to floral culture” (136) to suggest that more than illuminating Higginson’s personal and perhaps even a larger cultural “racial xenophilia” (125), this seemingly strange mixture of militarism and the floral was also a central mode of gendered and racialized discipline at Camp Saxton. Higginson was known to be particularly strict about the discipline and order of those under his command. In his introductory statements to Army Life, he notes that “drill and discipline” (3) were of the utmost priority in the initial formation of the regiment:

I *naturally* viewed the new recruits rather as *subjects for discipline* than for philanthropy. […] The best Massachusetts regiments already exhibited a high standard of drill and discipline, and unless these men could be brought tolerably near that standard, the fact of their extreme blackness would afford me, even as a philanthropist, no satisfaction. Fortunately, I felt perfect confidence that they could be so trained […]. (2-3; italics are mine)

Throughout *Army Life*, the Camp Diary, and Higginson’s letters, the “cultivation” of properly disciplined soldiers occurs alongside Higginson’s cataloguing of his natural surroundings. I want to take seriously Higginson’s likening of his supervision of the camp to “landscape gardening” (149) and the cultivation of his men to the decorative art of arranging flowers. While the botanizing of his regiment illuminates a particular pathology in the white racialist imaginary, as Looby argues, Higginson’s metaphorical language surrounding the botanical cultivation of racialized subjects (“subjects for discipline”) also prodded on militaristic disciplinary tactics among a disorderly ex-slave population on the plantation. Moreover, while Higginson compares black bodies to flowers in his writings through metaphor, we know that a long history of plantation eugenics on the plantation pushed enclosed plants, animals, and enslaved persons into even more intimate relations. As a space that was heavily influenced and organized by a literary imaginary of the pastoral, the plantation might be understood as a place where metaphorical relations between humans, objects, and animals are continually and violently literalized.
More than just modeling the discipline of black soldiers through an imaginary of botanical cultivation, I argue that Higginson’s natural history was concerned with controlling the reproduction of blackness in a Southern plantation environment that bred discontent and rebellion among ex-slave soldiers. During the early nineteenth century, natural history began to move away from systems of pure classification (taxonomy) toward systems of function (organic structure or physiology). While Linnaeus’ sexual system used reproductive organs to catalog and order plant life, the actual mechanisms of plant reproduction were not understood until the early nineteenth century. An eighteenth-century tradition used the plants kingdom as a model for zoology since the external anatomy of plants made empirical observation an easier, and less invasive, endeavor. The rise of comparative anatomy during the nineteenth century along with an increasingly sexualized understanding of plant reproduction contributed to the botanical enframement of black reproduction. While in the eighteenth century “vegetal life” was taken as a zoological model for the purposes of taxonomy, nineteenth-century investigations into plant reproduction were increasingly used to understand and figure the physiology of animal and human reproduction. Racialized bodies, formerly classified into natural history alongside so many plants and animals, became privileged objects of study into the nineteenth century for comparative anatomy. Comparative anatomy more carefully distinguished between the plant and animal kingdom, but strategically figured bodies that would be put to death in the pursuit of empirical knowledge as “vegetable” bodies.

We might return momentarily to Shtei’s observation that botany was effectively de-feminized in mid-nineteenth century Britain.\(^\text{26}\) In the United States, while a newly masculinized botany understood human reproduction in terms of ambiguously gendered models of plant reproduction, Higginson’s militaristic natural history often reverted to residual associations between botany and the feminine to tame worries that armed ex-slaves might “breed” rebellion in the South.\(^\text{27}\) Links between war and the cultivation of a militant black masculinity were continually uncoupled through Higginson’s investment of black male bodies with the feminine cult of botany. With this background of a newly reproductive-conscious botany in mind, the space of Higginson’s militaristic experiment becomes especially important. Upon arriving at his post near Beaufort, South Carolina, Higginson wrote home to his mother, noting that Camp Saxton was “on a picturesque plantation with superb trees; though the live oaks have but a deathly beauty” (248).\(^\text{28}\) Higginson’s worries about black reproduction found a perfect panacea in the plantation, which operated historically as a central site of controlling human, animal, and plant reproduction in geographies of the South. Animal husbandry, the careful propagation of

\(^{26}\) See Shtei, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science.*

\(^{27}\) Tensions arose throughout the war over worries that African Americans armed by the Union might organize and revolt against the state. Margaret Humphreys notes that several groups of ex-slaves in the South self-organized into regiments after learning that President Lincoln had authorized the mustering of black regiments. Such an act, while seemingly loyal to the Union’s cause, challenged the authority of the Army and the President to control the mustering of black regiments, opening up a space for the organization of black militias that was opposed to the aspirations of the Union for national amelioration and reconciliation. On the raising of black regiments, see Humphreys, *Intensely Human: The Health of the Black Soldier in the Civil War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

agricultural monocultures, and the continual surveillance of slave reproduction formed a system of proto-eugenics concerned with the quality and quantity of multiple types of species on the plantation grounds. In commanding his regiment, Higginson sublimated worries over the proliferation of an unruly black multitude at Camp Saxton by redeploying a history of controlled reproduction on the plantation, a violent and coercive history that was obscured by the plantation’s quiet and “picturesque” botanical scene.

The Union’s occupation of an “old plantation” is further significant, as it set a naturalized stage for the bodily enlistment of ex-slaves and runaways into a new kind of disciplinary service during the war. In *Army Life*, Higginson informs readers that the First South Carolina Regiment was composed of hardly any freedmen, and “had not one mulatto in ten, and a far smaller proportion who could read or write when enlisted” (1). Men who had likely escaped from surrounding plantations found themselves subjugated back on the plantation, no longer under the demands of the planter or overseer, but under the command of the Union Army. One can’t help but wonder how the plantation itself, a site of violence, terror, and enslavement ensconced in a botanically rich scene, enabled Higginson’s apparently superb disciplinary skills.

Surrounded by colorful and “tropical vegetation” (5) in an exotic Southern environment, the Northern naturalist turned military commander’s aestheticization of his regiment was part and parcel of a popular pastoral imaginary surrounding the Southern plantation’s botanical scene. In the opening pages of the Camp Diary, Higginson recounts his initial approach to the plantation:
The shores were low and wooded, like any New England shore; there were a few
gunboats, twenty schooners, and some steamers, among them the famous
“Planter,” which Robert Small, the slave, presented to the nation. The river banks
were soft and graceful, though low, and as we steamed up to Beaufort on the
flood-tide this morning, it seemed almost as fair as the smooth and lovely canals
which Stedman traversed to meet his negro soldiers in Surinam. The air was cool
as at home, yet the foliage seemed green, glimpses of stiff tropical vegetation
appeared along the banks, with great clumps of shrubs, whose pale seed-vessels
looked like tardy blossoms. Then we saw on a picturesque point an old
plantation, with stately magnolia avenue, decaying house, and tiny church amid
the woods, reminding me of Virginia; behind it stood a neat encampment of white
tents, “and there,” said my companion, “is your future regiment.” (5-6)²⁹

The Southern environment appears at first just like “home,” the scene from the boat
looking “like any New England shore.” Upon approaching the camp, however, the
backdrop is defamiliarized as Higginson evokes a scene from the more Global South in
which John “Stedman traversed to meet his negro soldiers in Surinam.” Higginson goes
on to re-home Beaufort (“the air was cool as at home”), only to distinguish it by its
“tropical” (later “semi-tropical” (6)) flora. The “stiff tropical vegetation” emerges in the
scene as a row of black soldiers, standing at attention to Higginson’s aesthetic command.
In this short passage, the pastoral landscape is highly racialized. It evokes both the
objectification of black bodies naturalized within their “native” environs and the

²⁹ Sections of Higginson’s Camp Diary are collected in Chapter 2 of Army Life, 5-39.
Colonel’s hopes for a well-ordered, well-disciplined regiment under his military command. The narrative’s turn to slave rebellion is here, as in other places in the text, mediated by the presentation of a perfectly disciplined landscape. Robert Small was a South Carolinian slave who famously commandeered a Confederate ship to freedom. Small’s rebellion fits perfectly into Higginson’s narrative since the Union quickly intervened into Small’s plot. After sailing the Planter into the Charleston Bay, popular histories of the event recounted that the ship was quickly and willingly turned over to the Union. Small’s story is just one of many narratives of slave insurrection appropriated into Army Life’s grand emancipation narrative of the Union effort.

Once the “old plantation” comes into view, readers are introduced to a “stately” road of magnolias. The magnolia tree was an unequivocal symbol that “stood for” the South, and yet, in this passage, Higginson harnesses a row of magnolia trees into the distinctly Northern effort of disciplining a wild Southern landscape and regiment. The deployment of “stately” (“with stately magnolia avenue”) operates doubly: it recalls both the nation-state for which the Union was fighting and the specter of the sectional agenda of “state rights” in the plantation South. Higginson’s attempts to make Camp Saxton transcend the South in order to embody the noble spirit of the Union are ultimately unsuccessful. We might say that even before he arrived on shore, he was already too deeply entangled in the racial politics of the plantation pastoral.

Higginson’s romantic narrative also belies a peculiar kind of pity for the Southern landscape under the ravaging conditions of war. This is particularly interesting since Higginson rarely expressed such sentiments for the white people of the South, whom he
sometimes refers to as “crackers.” Higginson’s sympathy is attached specifically to the
decaying plantations, which had been grand repositories of botanical wonder during the
antebellum period. In one of many scenes in which readers are presented with an
abandoned, ghosted plantation, Higginson offers a view of “the loveliest tropical garden,
though tangled and desolate” (43). Although this plantation has been abandoned, a
gorgeous cornucopia continues to grow upon and beautify the house of the estate and its
surrounding spaces. A ghostly plantation indeed: in this scene it appears as if the
plantation continues to produce and run itself even after its Southern masters have fled.

Higginson’s lamentation of the uncultivated nature of the garden is rectified by
his own cataloguing of the estate’s plant species, which restores the plantation’s order
and aesthetic beauty. The antebellum plantation’s spectacle of order and discipline
always depended on the careful cultivation and cataloguing of the landscape. Through an
exhaustive cataloguing of “Chickasaw roses […] fig-trees, datepalms, crape-myrtles and
wax-myrtles, Mexican agaves and English ivies, japonicas, bananas, oranges, lemons,
oleanders, jonquils, great cactuses, and wild Florida lilies” (43), Higginson’s natural
history catalog disciplines as it aestheticizes a rebellious plantation geography.
Higginson goes on to reminisce, “the air had that peculiar Mediterranean translucency
which Southern islands wear” (43). His tropicalizing of the plantation garden attempts to
imagine a more global plantation geography detached from the sectionalist U.S. South
and its entrenchments in slavery, while retaining the natural beauty of the plantation

30 However, Higginson does show more sympathy for white Southerners than he does for
Northern-born people who relocated to the South before the War. He repeatedly offers
readers scenes featuring despicable “native born” Northerners who pass as Southerners
and support Southern institutions.
zone. Higginson attempts to re-map the plantation South repeatedly throughout Army Life. While the Mediterranean air invokes the tropics, the cataloguing of “Mexican agaves,” “English lilies” and other species from across the world figures the plantation as an even more cosmopolitan space, filled with both native and non-native species. By the end of this one short paragraph, Higginson once again re-routes the plantation, this time revealing its surprising Northern allegiances. He writes:

I could not waste much sentiment over it [the overgrown plantation], for it had belonged to a Northern renegade, Thomas Butler King. Yet I felt then, as I have felt a hundred times since, an emotion of heart-sickness at this desecration of a homestead, —and especially when, looking from a bare upper window of the empty house upon a range of broad, flat, sunny roofs, such as children love to play on, I thought how that place might have been loved by yet innocent hearts, and I mourned anew the sacrilege of war. (43)

Even as he so vehemently opposes the Rebel forces and the peculiar institution they defend, Higginson-as-naturalist aligns himself through sentimental structures of feeling with the very plantation architectures that buttress the system of slavery.

Higginson’s alignment with the built environment of the plantation coincides with understandings of the “picturesque” during the nineteenth century, a term that Higginson repeats almost obsessively in his descriptions of camp life, appearing with more regularity than even the term pastoral. The eighteenth-century English landscape artist William Gilpin coined the term to describe an aesthetic in painting that captured the
harmonious, yet varied, composition of nature. The mid-nineteenth century witnessed a revival of the picturesque as this kind of aesthetic framing of the landscape was often used to domesticate scenes from the American wilderness. These are exactly the kind of “picturesque” images offered in Army Life: Higginson enframes his black regiment through the picturesque—a mode of enclosing the landscape within the “artificial structures” (Gianquitto 126) of the plantation.

Eventually, Higginson makes his move into the big house at Camp Saxton, setting up what can only be described as an ad hoc plantation family composed of other white officers, a husband, wife, and even their baby. At two different moments in the narrative, the Colonel narrates his gaze as being intimately conjoined with the plantation house itself: “I look out from the broken windows of this forlorn plantation-house, through avenues of great live-oaks, with their hard, shining leaves, and their branches hung with a universal drapery of soft, long moss, like fringe-trees struck with grayness” (6). In this fascinating passage, the Colonel’s gaze is mediated by two kinds of determining plantation architectures: the plantation house and the “avenues of great live-oaks.”

Higginson moves on to describe a motley scene of plantation buildings and vegetation in need of serious cultivation:

Below, the sandy soil, scantily covered with coarse grass, bristles with sharp palmettoes and aloes; all the vegetation is stiff, shining, semi-tropical, with nothing soft or delicate in its texture. Numerous plantation-buildings totter around, all slovenly and unattractive, while the interspaces are filled with all manner of wreck and refuse, pigs, fowls, dogs, and omnipresent Ethiopian infancy. *All this is the universal Southern panorama*; but five minutes’ walk beyond the hovels and the live-oaks will bring one to something so *un-Southern* that the whole Southern coast at this moment trembles at the suggestion of such a thing,—the camp of a regiment of freed slaves. (6-7; italics are mine)

The contrast between the decaying, “unattractive,” and “slovenly” plantation buildings and the hygienic, aesthetically pleasing order of “neat” white tents visualizes the plantation’s transformation into a wholly “un-Southern” space. Higginson’s “drill and discipline” of the troops goes hand and hand with his discipline of an unruly plantation geography, and the decaying, yet still rebellious Southern institution it represents. In the chapter “The Negro as a Soldier,” he notes that to “maintain a high standard of discipline” (170), it is essential “to make them feel as remote as possible from the plantation” (170). In order to legitimate his own forms of command and discipline among his infantry, Higginson needed to detach his Camp from the legacies of coerced labor and violent discipline on the plantation. He attempts to transcend the plantation even as he writes an exhaustive survey of a landscape haunted by slavery. Higginson’s botanical regimes of military discipline inevitably place this Northern Abolitionist
Colonel in a long tradition of pastoral discipline and subjugation on the Southern plantation.

In perhaps the most explicit expression of botanical discipline in the text, Higginson claims a kind of partnership with nature’s disciplinary tactics: “external Nature does its share in their training” (35). Army Life works hard to mobilize nature itself in the project of commanding the black regiment. At a few instances in the volume, however, he belies his confidence in commanding both bodies and nature in the plantation South. For example, in ruminating on the odd suspension of the Southern seasons, where, he observes, it becomes difficult to measure the passage of time during the sweltering stillness of the summer heat, Higginson presents a surprising vision of the Southern climate, considering his normal romanticism. He contrasts the “pure, clean, innocent odors which so abound in the New England forest in early spring” (93; italics are Higginson’s) to the “luscious, voluptuous, almost oppressively fragrant” (93) quality of Southern magnolias. This could simply be an example of Higginson’s dramatization of the corrupting influences of slavery. The representation of a fallen Southern environment was often deployed to emphasize the perversion of the peculiar institution. However, his anxieties about the perversions of Southern nature also, like his pre-war nature writings, encode anxieties about insurrection in the black regiment.

Higginson was well versed in the question of insurrection. During the 1850s and 1860s he published several essays in the Atlantic Monthly on slave rebellions in the
Caribbean and U.S. South.\textsuperscript{33} He was also one of the six men who supported and armed John Brown’s Attack at Harper’s Ferry. Among the six, he was the only supporter who did not remain anonymous and because of this, he was recognized in the public eye not only as an Abolitionist, but as a supporter of violence in the quest for emancipation. In \textit{Army Life}, however, the theoretical support of slave rebellion was clearly at odds with the more urgent matter at hand: commanding an experimental regiment of ex-slaves on the Beaufort plantation.

Rebellion, in \textit{Army Life}, emerges as an event highly determined by the environment. That is, Higginson recognizes micro-environments outside the official jurisdiction of plantation, such as the everglades and the marsh, as sites of potential resistance. The marsh and the everglades make other forms of organization possible. Rebellion hinges on the ability to mobilize around specific environments and to navigate subterranean geographies of the South. Higginson even suggests that slave insurrections were more common in the Caribbean than in the U.S. because “they [enslaved men and women in the U.S.] had no mountain passes to defend like the Maroons of Jamaica, —no impenetrable swamps, like the Maroons of Surinam” (163). However, Higginson reports that small mobilizations around nature were still possible in the more tropical landscapes of the U.S. South.: “Where they had these, even on a small scale, they had used them,—as in certain swamps round Savannah and in the everglades of Florida” (163).

It would not have surprised nineteenth-century readers from the North that African American soldiers and the environment could collude in such a way: during this

\textsuperscript{33} These essays were collected together with some others in Higginson’s 1889 volume, \textit{Travellers [sic] and Outlaws: Episodes in American History} (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers).
period, both black bodies and the Southern environment were understood to share a “tropical nature.” Higginson attempts to squelch worries of soldierly rebellion by imagining himself as the leader of a courageous act of slave insurrection, a fantastical act of racial passing that puts the Colonel back in the position of command. He notes, “I used to seriously ponder, during the darker periods of the war, whether I might not end my days as an outlaw, —a leader of Maroons” (165). He goes on to claim that his men were so energized fighting on St. John’s River because “it was so much nearer the everglades” (165). Higginson ultimately subsumes revolutionary geographies into the Union’s war effort. Even though he seems supportive or at least seduced by the possibility of insurrection throughout the pages of Army Life, his ultimate allegiance is to the “drill and discipline” of his regiment. The everglades and the marsh, those outlying spaces that threaten the disciplined, and disciplining spaces of the plantation, challenged Higginson’s own mobilization of nature in the war effort. By appropriating tropicalized environments of insurrection into the temperate order and discipline of the Union’s plantation at Camp Saxton, Army Life seeks to suppress worries about the possibility of a genuine rebellion among the “free” black regiment.

**Countering the Plantation**

Higginson’s essay, “The Maroons of Surinam,” which was originally published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1860, illuminates how popularized narratives of slave insurrection and natural history framed the Colonel’s experience with the South Carolina
Volunteers. These narratives eventually informed the ways in which the Colonel understood the historical significance of arming ex-slaves in the U.S. In “The Maroons of Surinam,” Higginson re-tells the history of maroon rebellion against the Dutch planters of Surinam through John Stedman’s 1790 military/natural history, *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam.* Stedman, a Scottish-Dutchman who left the English Navy to join the Scots Brigade of the Netherlandish Army, arrived in the enchanting, yet dangerous “tropic beauty” of plantation Surinam in 1773 to suppress the maroon rebels’ assault on the colonial plantocracy. In Higginson’s retelling of what he calls “our hero’s” story, he shows himself to be an admirer—and eventual inheritor—of a tradition of militaristic natural history from Stedman, noting that “[a]bove all reigned his [Stedman’s] passion for natural history, a ready balm for every ill” (163). Although Higginson pokes fun at Stedman in some passages, recalling, for example, when the Officer spent his time counting the legs of centipedes while the maroons “kept their own course in the forests” wreaking havoc on the plantations, Higginson eventually presents himself as just such an “entomologist in the tropics” in his writings from the Southern battlefront during the Civil War.

Higginson’s account of the Surinam maroons is ostensibly sympathetic: he admires the maroons’ ability to hold their own “wild empire” outside the ordered jurisdictions of the plantation. He also envies the maroon community’s “topographical advantage” over the Dutch from their positioning in the mountains as well as their superior skills in navigating an uncultivated and dense tropical landscape. In some ways, Higginson’s account of the “wild empire” suggests that the maroons of Surinam sought not only to rebel against the plantation order but also to construct anti-plantations in the mountains (forms of social and spatial organization that directly opposed the plantation’s tyranny of order through systems of monocultural production and cultivation). Higginson also rejects the thesis that the maroon is defined simply by his or her opposition to the plantation, offering instead a more complex portrayal of the maroon community’s relationship to and with the plantation system. In the end, however, Higginson’s emphasis on a “hero story” privileges Stedman’s duty to “get into the woods and cultivate the society of the Maroons” (153; italics are mine) over his admiration for guerilla warfare. Higginson took Stedman’s lessons of “cultivation” and applied them to his own society of “maroons” in the U.S. South.

Higginson’s pre-war writings on the maroons evince some of the ways in which he understood his regiment of ex-slaves as being connected to a wild, tropical maroon history of insurrection against the plantation order. In addition to using this history to fashion his own military dominance, as in figuring himself as the leader of the maroons in *Army Life*, the black rebellion essays also code anxieties over the U.S. South as an increasingly militarized and rebellious geography, a wild, tropical landscape navigable best by the natives. By the end of “The Maroons of Surinam,” Higginson’s repetition of
the word “rebels” has evoked another landscape of “rebels” in the U.S. South, anticipating the Union’s racializing of the Confederacy as a rebel insurrection. Indeed, in many of Higginson’s narratives written on the eve of the Civil War, the rebellious slave and the white Southern rebel are blurred through the language of a general insurrection against the state. David Hunter, the Union Army’s General of the Department of the South, often complained that the Confederacy was filled with runaway masters who used guerilla warfare, like shooting on the ordered ranks of Union regiments from behind trees and bushes. Unleashed from the plantation, the plantation owner shares similarities with Higginson’s maroons. Hunter’s depiction of “runaway” masters racializes Southern planters by aligning them with fugitive slaves, but also suggests that Southern Confederates, like maroons or slaves, were better equipped to navigate tropical geographies of the South and better able to use Southern flora and fauna to their advantage.

Despite Higginson’s best efforts to “reconstruct” the plantation for protective cover during the Civil War, dissolving and disorganized plantation spaces of the mid-century South simultaneously threatened to provide a hospitable space for black and Confederate rebellion. The image of the plantation as a stable unit of social, racial, and economic organization gave way during the mid-nineteenth century to understandings of the plantation as an increasingly volatile and fragmented space, a potential hotbed for rebellion and revolution. Martin R. Delany, who like Higginson was a writer, political

38 See M. Allewaert, “Swamp Sublime.”
activist, and officer in the Civil War, also turned to the unstable environment of the plantation during the 1850s and 1860s. Where Higginson latched onto the plantation pastoral to harness an unexpected Southern institution into the problematic disciplinary methods of the Union Army, Delany was interested in unearthing the plantation’s hidden tropicality to mobilize race revolution.

Delany was one of the most prominent African American political figures of the nineteenth century, perhaps second only to Frederick Douglass. Born to a free mother and an enslaved father in Virginia (now West Virginia), Delany gained fame as a lecturer, essayist, physician, Union officer, newspaper editor, freemason, and ambassador, among other roles and professions taken on throughout a life committed to the enfranchisement of African Americans. In the twentieth century, Delany has often been cited as a grandfather to black nationalism because of his strong commitments to separatism, emigration, and a militant black masculinity at a time when most progressive political actors were pushing for assimilation into the national body politic. Today, he is best remembered for writing Blake, a novel of transnational slave organization and revolt that was serialized in part in the Anglo-African Magazine in 1859 and then published in its entirety in the Weekly Anglo-African in 1861 and 1862. Both magazines were published in New York City and enjoyed a wide readership of free African Americans and Northern

39 In his 1970 introduction to Blake; or the Huts of America (Boston: Beacon Press), Floyd J. Miller notes that Delany was one of the only African Americans to be featured in a book-length biography during the nineteenth century. See Frank A. Rollin, Life and Public Services of Martin R. Delany (Boston, 1868), as cited in Floyd’s introduction. Delany and Douglass had a strained relationship as two prominent, and often opposing, voices speaking for African American interests at the national level. Delany worked with Douglass at The North Star in Rochester from 1847 through 1849, but the two would ultimately break over the issue of emigration: Delany promoted emigration while Douglass campaigned for the acquisition of full citizenship rights in the U.S.
Abolitionists. The serial was rediscovered during the rise of the Black Power movement when black separatism and emigration had again become hot topics in the U.S. and in pan-African spaces. *Blake* was not collated and published as a novel until 1970. That edition remains incomplete since the last issues containing installments of *Blake* have never been found.⁴⁰

In response to increased institutional racism against both enslaved and free African Americans, Delany spent much of the 1850s investing hope and energy in emigration schemes for free African Americans to locales including West Africa, Canada, and Latin America. His emigration politics were most directly a response to the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, a law that, as he observed, transformed the U.S. into an absolutely inhospitable space for African Americans. For Delany and others, emigration was not a political preference but an absolute necessity for the survival of the race. He was later encouraged by the Civil War to turn away from emigration and re-embrace the possibilities for black citizenship within the nation. At the start of the war, Delany eagerly moved to the U.S. from Canada, where he had been making plans for black expatriation. Back in the U.S., he threw himself into the mustering of black regiments and soon became an important figurehead in the Union Army: he met with President Lincoln at one point and by 1865 had been named a Major. Delany was the first and only African American to hold that title in the Civil War.

In addition to their roles as Union Officers who served under General Saxton along with their shared commitments to raising black regiments, Higginson and Delany

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⁴⁰Floyd Miller’s 1970 edition of *Blake* remains the only published version of the serialized novel.
were both interested in how the plantation could be used for purposes that challenged (or were imagined to challenge, in the case of Higginson) the site’s normative role in geographies of the South. Threats to the sustainability of the agrarian economy during the 1850s and 60s transformed the plantation into a surprisingly vibrant site of political and social experimentation. Some individuals and groups depended on the plantation’s past history of enclosure and discipline to produce new units of social and economic organization: the use of abandoned plantations in the training of black Union regiments and the Southern postbellum factory, which was often modeled after the organization of space and labor on the plantation, are two such examples. Keith P. Wilson captures these dynamics of cultural change embedded in the old practices of the plantation in his study of black life in Union army camps, noting that “army life itself was similar enough to the plantation to encourage cultural continuity but different enough to stimulate cultural recreation and change” (xiii). Others took advantage of the disintegration of the plantation to imagine a clean break from the plantation complex. During this period, the fantasy of a fully enclosed plantation was revealed as fiction.

In short, Higginson’s experimental regiment and Delany’s plantation fiction both sought to colonize the newly vulnerable and permeable spaces of the mid-century plantation. These fascinating cases additionally reflect the plantation’s central role in the militarization of “nature’s nation” in the mid-nineteenth century. During the 1850s and 1860s, the plantation became a particularly intense site of contestation, suspended between the “good old days” of slavery and the time of revolution. While Higginson and

41 See Wilson, Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers During the Civil War (Kent, O.H.: Kent State University Press, 2002).
others who longed for an antebellum past represented the plantation as a timeless, unchanging space of nostalgia through the plantation pastoral, Delany understood how the plantation’s enduring tropicality linked this space with secret organization, insurrection, and race war. While Higginson’s plantation politics rooted blackness back within the time and space of enslavement, Delany unearthed subterranean roots—and routes—through the plantation space. At this point, we might recall Higginson’s account of the “murky mass” in “Water-Lilies,” the underwater root system that detached from the bottom of a New England lake while encoding black organization and rebellion. In Blake, Delany plays on such anxious metaphors of race and nature. His “murky mass” is a stealthily moving, subterranean system that has also been uprooted: a distinctly black plantation system that portends violence and race war in the Global South.

While slave narratives of the mid-nineteenth century often privileged fugitive escapes away from the plantation and out of the South, Delany planted race revolution in the unlikely and inhospitable ground of the plantation. Delany’s protagonist, Henry Holland, seeks refuge, not in the safe haven of the industrial North, but in a more global plantation South. This final section considers Delany’s interest in the plantation as a revolutionary environment in both his 1861 serial novel, Blake, and in his aborted emigration plans during the 1850s to build a plantation cotton economy in West Africa. In Blake, Delany turns the plantation’s usable, experimental space to different purposes, seeking to distort the experimental matrices of the plantation for revolutionary ends. While Blake expands the narrow genre of plantation fiction as it figures the plantation as a distinctly, and originally, black institution, Delany’s political experiments in blackness and plantation agriculture were more problematic. An analysis of Delany’s sometimes
surprising investments in the plantation form provides an important context for understanding the “nature” and transformation of the plantation in the mid-nineteenth century.

“A revolutionary crop”

Delany composed *Blake* in the tense years following the passage of the Compromise of 1850, which sought to ameliorate tensions between the North and South over the status of slavery in territories newly acquired in the Mexican-American War. The Compromise also included the Fugitive Slave Act, which legally required all citizens to aid in the return of runaway slaves even in states where slavery was outlawed. The novel registers, and exploits, national and international preoccupations with the threat of Southern expansion into both the new territories of the United States and extra-national spaces of the Caribbean. Delany uses the travels of Henry Holland, an “exceptional” slave who organizes revolt across the spaces of the plantation South to reflect on the changing geography of the United States during the 1850s. Henry’s nearly supernatural skipping across plantation geographies, especially in states recently affected by the Compromise, documents the threat of the nationalization of slavery while simultaneously emphasizing heterogeneous forms of enslavement and resistance in different states across

42 Delany’s concern with the Compromise of 1850, particularly with the Fugitive Slave Act, was repeated in several of his major publications. His 1852 *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968) reprints the entire Fugitive Slave Act for readers since, as he writes, “there are thousands of the American people of all classes, who have never read the provisions of this enactment; and consequently, have no conception of its enormity” (147). The larger goal of this polemical volume aimed to encourage free African Americans to leave the increasingly hostile environment of the U.S. for Latin America.
the nation. The narrative strategically deploys a fugitive slave to survey the recent “constitution” of the United States. In his travels, Henry engages the national problem of fugitivity in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act and in so doing deconstructs the fictive union of the United States through the Compromise of 1850.

Henry is motivated to begin his revolutionary journey when he learns that his master, Colonel Stephen Franks, has sold his wife away to a family friend from the North who is traveling to Cuba, where slavery was notoriously brutal even in comparison to the Deep U.S. South. Fleeing the Franks plantation in Natchez, Mississippi, he successfully negotiates the uneven jurisdiction of the Fugitive Slave Act, moving throughout the old plantation states and into more recently acquired states, regions of the plantation South that correspond today to parts of the Midwest, Southwest, and even the North. Jeffery A. Clymer notes that “Blake’s travels are so varied that the narrative practically offers a tutorial in antebellum Southern geography” (719) while Eric Sundquist speaks of Blake’s “panoramic view of enslavement” (11).43 The serial reads in part like a grand travel narrative, following Henry’s movements across what feels at times like the entire Western hemisphere.

Henry turns widespread confusion over the legal status of slaves and slavery to his advantage, moving into and between the categories of slave and free man to spread word among enslaved plantation populations of a coming slave revolt. As a kind of Messiah figure, Henry unites a pluralistic population of slaves, fragmented by cultural

difference and geographic isolation, dispersed across different States, through the promise of a revolution to come. While Part I focuses on rumors spread across the U.S. South, or what the narrative sometimes calls “noise” to describe gossip and secretive talk among slaves, Part II turns to the transnational space of Cuba as Henry rescues his wife and organizes a multiracial, multiclass revolt against the planter elite of the island. In Cuba, Henry is transformed. In Part I, he appears to us as an exceptionally bright slave who elevated himself from lowly origins in the insular Deep South of the United States. In Part II, his true origins are revealed. Henry Blake is actually Carolus Henrico, the son of a wealthy black tobacco manufacturer who left Cuba at a young age for an adventure at sea. While Henry believed himself to be apprenticed on a “Spanish man-of-war,” he was actually onboard a slaver headed for the coast of West Africa. After offending the commander of the ship, the son of one of the wealthiest families in the Caribbean was sold into the U.S. slave system.

As a prodigal son of the Caribbean, Blake is embraced upon his return and named the “General-in-Chief of the army of emancipation of the oppressed men and women of Cuba” (241). Although the text never explicitly references race war, just one of many open secrets withheld from the reader, Part II implies a hope that the onslaught of revolution in Cuba will bleed into other slaveholding spaces, including the U.S. South. Thus, Delany fuels mid-century fears in the U.S. about the spread of race war from the Caribbean into the Southern states and perhaps beyond. Though revolution is the watchword of Blake, neither a widespread nor a recognizable revolt of any kind comes to

44 Blake’s naming as the “General-in-Chief” of a black revolutionary army is particularly interesting considering Delany went on to be named as a Major in the Civil War.
fruition within the pages of the novel. While Part I is composed of endless talk about a looming revolt that never comes to pass, Part II includes a long and convoluted voyage on a slave ship in which an insurrection plot is quickly interrupted and suppressed by a massive storm at sea. Delany’s depiction of the inclement weather symbolizes the ominous storm brewing inside the “frowning slaves: “The black and frowning skies and raging hurricane above; the black and frowning slaves with raging passions below, rendered it dreadful without, fearful within, and terrible all around” (234). Through repeated thwarted plots and coded “brewing storms,” the narrative produces and sustains a pervasive anticipatory terror across the entire serial.

The fact that the closing chapters of Blake have never been found has put an interesting twist on the question of representing revolution for twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers of Blake. Though we are presented in the final chapters with scenes of increased anarchy in Cuba, an island filled with terror over the threat of both slave revolt and attack by the Spanish, Henry and his group remain concealed in a household garret as they plan their course of action. The strange immobility of revolution, which stands in ironic contrast to Henry’s hypermobility, is part of the narrative’s questioning of the nature and temporality of revolution. The suppression of the scene of revolt points to the impossibilities of narrating historical rupture (how, for example, does one bring a “break” into the plane of representation?). The deferral of the revolutionary rupture additionally keeps readers in a kind of suspense like most of the white characters in novel, who wait anxiously for the for the “abundant harvest” that Henry expects from months of “planting seeds” of rebellion all over the plantation South. Such deferrals also appear clearer in the context of the material history of the publication: Blake was never
published as a novel, but rather in short installments in a magazine. Viewed in this light, the highly episodic narrative of *Blake* makes more sense as does the author’s desire to create suspenseful scenes that keep the reader looking forward to the next installment. Each chapter contains a kind of revolutionary kernel that is suspended over the course of the serial’s publication. Tied as it is to the mode of the installment, the serial was an apt form for the production of suspense and terror surrounding the looming threat of slave revolt. The serial allowed Delany to meditate on the problem of the break in a way that would have been more difficult, or perhaps impossible, within the linear narrative conventions of the novel form.

Delany’s refusal to narrate the scene of race revolution additionally keeps the secret organizing of the enslaved deliberately obscure. We might recall that the serial was originally published in magazines read by both free African Americans and Northern Abolitionists. By obscurring black organization in *Blake*, Delany protected slave rebellion from appropriation by white abolition. *Blake* did not serve in its nineteenth century context to rat out those making plans to smash the plantation system to anxious, bourgeois readers, but rather intended to support or even participate in such plans. *Blake* was not only incendiary because it represented widespread anxiety surrounding the threat of slave revolt. The text is itself a war-machine that seeks to produce white terror and germinate race rebellion among a Northern reading public.

**Radical Empiricism**

In *Blake*, Henry’s secretive survey of the plantation South opposes nineteenth-century empiricisms that sought to catalog, make visible, and fix racialized bodies within
the plantation’s borders. While scientific and agricultural experimentation on all kinds of plantation “species” contributed to the emergence of the plantation as an experimental laboratory in race and natural history, Blake turns the plantation’s experimentalism to oppositional purposes, appropriating its usable land as fodder for revolution. Blake challenges the empirical surveying and surveillance of the plantation that sought to transform it into a fully observable and knowable space. Instead of exposing the connections among bodies, technologies and environments, Blake’s dark natural history secrets such networks to hide black organization and rebellion on the plantation. I pick up here on the narrative’s repeated deployment of “secret” as a verb, as in “Henry secreted himself in a thick high growth of Jamestown weeds along the fence” (119). The ambiguity of the term, which can be read as “secreted” in terms of concealment, or “secreted” in terms of a bodily production (something secreted from the body), links secret slave organization with an overly fecund and seeping Southern nature that provides ample camouflage for Henry’s scientific expedition.

Delany was a committed and vocal empiricist, and Blake registers the author’s preoccupations with nineteenth-century debates over rationalism, empiricism, and skepticism. The narrative presents the reader with a model for a modern science of race revolution that definitively breaks with the mysticism of radical conjuring traditions in African American life. To do so, Henry explicitly rejects the space of the swamp as a privileged site for secret organization. After moving through plantations in the states of Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina in the matter of a few pages of text, Henry approaches the famous fugitive refuge of the “mystical, antiquated, almost fabulous” Dismal Swamp in Virginia where he is met by “a number of the old
confederates of the noted Nat Turner” who have apparently been lurking in the Swamp ever since the failed rebellion of 1831. The Swamp is also populated with men who claim “to have been patriots in the American Revolution” (113). Although the space of the swamp is ostensibly filled with fellow travelers, containing “some of Virginia and North Carolina’s boldest black rebels” (113), Henry is highly critical of the skeptical practices of the aged revolutionaries. In the scene, conjuring emerges as a kind of relic, a backwards practice that while perhaps necessary in the past has become ancillary in this revolutionary time. When the conjurers of the swamp anoint “him a priest of the order of High Conjurers,” Henry obliges simply because he finds this “time-honored superstition” to be “amusing enough” (114). Just one chapter later, Henry espouses a rationalist position, as he refuses to attach superstitious meaning to his own amazement at the meteors, comets, and stars in the sky:

At these things Henry was filled with amazement, and disposed to attach more than ordinary importance to them, as having an especial bearing in his case; but the mystery finds interpretation in the fact that the emotions were located in his own brain, and not exhibited by the orbs of Heaven. (124)

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45 Andy Doolan notes that given the temporal framework of the American Revolution and of the novel, this claim was factually impossible. See Doolan, “Be Cautious of the Word ‘Rebel’: Race, Revolution, and Transnational History in Martin Delany’s Blake; or, the Huts of America” in American Literature 81.1 (March 2009): 153-79.
Although Henry is happy to be supported by the “prayers, blessings, wishes, hopes, fears, pow-wows and promises of a never failing conjuration” (115), it is clear that he seeks a more scientific revolution.

At the same time as Henry rejects traditions of superstition in African American culture that took the swamp as a privileged space for secreting black organization, his version of empiricism in *Blake* similarly challenges the consolidation of modernity through regimes of scientific observation, transparency, and truth. Throughout the novel, Henry counters the surveying and surveillance of the plantation through empirical observations that refuse to be organized and systematized into a discrete episteme. While Henry’s visits to U.S. plantations are most obviously intended to spread the word of a coming revolution, they are just as often presented as research trips for collecting data on the nature of enslavement and plantation life in different geographic locales across the U.S. South. In Chapter 17, “Henry at Large,” Henry’s status as fugitive slave is subordinated to his role as “scholar”: “Being a scholar, he carefully kept a record of the plantations he had passed” (68). Henry amasses an impressive archive of interviews, topographical data, and other information about U.S. slavery. This information, importantly, is often presented to the reader as raw data. In other words, Henry rarely works through his data set to offer a scientific conclusion from his experimental survey. Instead, plantation life and plantation slavery appears to readers in all of its radical heterogeneity.

Critics have consistently complained about the artlessness of Delany’s fiction since *Blake* was rediscovered in the early 1970s. Certainly in Book I, the urge to document the multiplicity of experiences in the plantation South overtakes the aesthetic
requirements of the literary form. The accretion of empirical observations throughout the narrative obstructs the serial’s aesthetic imperatives. However, I argue that the documentary demands of Delany’s mission to represent slavery reconfigures the traditional aesthetics of the fugitive slave narrative. The fragmentation of the narrative through the inclusion of various empirical observations about enslavement dramatizes the impossible situation of the slave narrative, a genre that demanded that authors tell the “truth” about slavery while adhering to the fantastical conventions and romantic tropes of sentimental fiction. Blake’s narrative of fugitivity clearly diverges from the sentimental, fictionalizing imperatives of the slave narrative. Delany rejects the feminizing sentimental tropes of the slave narrative in favor of a masculine, “scientific” narrative that pushes on the limits of fiction.

The narrative’s status as fiction is repeatedly ruptured through the inclusion of seemingly factual, and bizarre footnotes such as “At the age of thirteen his daily task was 36 lbs, with his toes. This fact was received from the master by the writer” (74). In many of these footnotes, it is unclear whether such observations are made by Henry as scientific investigator or Delany as author. These footnotes may have been gleaned from Delany’s travels to the Mid- and Southwest during his short time as a reporter, subscription agent and co-editor, with Frederick Douglass, of the North Star. Robert S. Levine notes that just months after becoming co-editor at the paper, “Delany departed on what he called his ‘Western Tour of the North Star’—a tour of the free states west of New York in search of subscribers for the financially struggling newspaper” (72). 46

Between January 14, 1848 and February 24, 1849, Delany wrote twenty letters to Douglass about his travels that were published in the *North Star*.⁴⁷ In “Melville, Delany, and New World Slavery,” Eric Sundquist has shown that Henry’s travels in *Blake* were indeed based on Delany’s tour across the slaveholding states of the Southwest.⁴⁸ In this hybrid travel narrative, straddling the divide between fiction and fact, Henry serves as scientific surveyor of the national institutions of slavery who documents, without systematizing, the uneven effects and topographies of the Compromise of 1850. Over the course of Book I, Master Colonel Franks’ internal organization and surveillance of the plantation’s usable space is countered by Delany’s inter-organizational efforts *between* plantation enclosures. Moreover, Delany’s empirical surveying of the uneven development of plantation slavery situates the humble huts of the enslaved at the center of the plantation network, effectively displacing the big house as the central unit of architectural organization in the plantation South.

**Black Natural History**

Delany’s critique of the plantation as a geography that enables experimentation on racialized populations through the supposed non-interventions of natural history is most forcefully made in a surprisingly short scene in the narrative. Mid-way through Part II of the serial, when the scene of action has moved from the brewing of a widespread slave revolt in the U.S. South to the equally tumultuous atmosphere of Cuba, the narrator pauses to recount a scene that seems ancillary to the plot, but is actually absolutely

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⁴⁷ These letters, which Levine claims “constitute a major African American travel narrative,” are reprinted in Levine’s *Martin R. Delany*. See 73-143.
⁴⁸ See Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 192.
central to the narrative’s critique. The chapter opens on a cultivated plantation estate: “The shrubbery and grounds of the place were beautiful, affording ample residence for insects and birds” (239). In this scene, readers are given a glimpse into the relationship between Madam Seeley and her recently acquired servant Tony. Madam Seeley is a young woman from the U.S. North who has become the wife of a plantation estate owner and former slave trader. At the beginning of the chapter, the white woman and black servant are linked through their shared interests in the leisurely activities of natural history. Madam Seeley offers Tony the role of her assistant, “the securing of specimens for the cabinet [of curiosities] being the function assigned to the boy” (239). Tony takes his role as naturalist’s assistant quite seriously as he wreaks havoc upon the countryside, killing birds and insects “of every kind he met” during what is called his two hour mission of research (240). When Tony returns with a hatful of dead species for the cabinet, Madam Seeley is horrified by his careless killing spree: “‘O cruel, cruel!’ exclaimed Madam Seeley as the heap was placed at her feet. ‘Tony, why did you do so? What made you kill those beautiful birds—and oh! these lovely insects? Look, too, at the butterflies—poor little creatures!’” (240). The irony of the scene is located in the fact that Madam Seeley had sent Tony out to kill specimens for her cabinet of curiosities. Unable to swallow Tony’s pleasure in the murder licensed by the Madam herself, she recoils from his frighteningly deft abilities “in the art of killing” (240).

Tony’s killing spree exposes how death stands at the center of natural history’s supposedly innocent interest in cataloguing life at the same time as it reveals Tony’s willingness to revolt against Madam Seeley and the natural order of things on the plantation estate. Madam Seeley’s scientific investigations are described in terms of an
interest in “animated nature” (239), a term that is echoed throughout the narrative, including an earlier reference when Henry emphasizes the particular brutality of slavery in South Carolina, remarking that in this state, “the Negro…seems to be regarded but as an animated thing of convenience or a domesticated animal, reared for the service of his master” (109; italics are mine). Through the repetition of “animated nature” and “animated things” across several chapters, Blake reveals shared methodologies between natural history—the cataloguing of the world’s natural specimen—and an emergent comparative anatomy that often catalogued and experimented on racialized bodies. The narrative articulates a quick but biting critique of the supposed innocence of a feminized and de-fanged natural history, revealing instead how this field has operated historically to fix and violate racialized bodies in the pursuit of knowledge.

While this scene appears to provide a whimsical respite from the serious and more political matters of the main plot, Delany ultimately turns a light scene about feminine leisure and natural history into yet another dark and sinister sign of race revolution. In The Order of Things, Foucault argues that the nineteenth century witnessed the creation of depth in the natural sciences, which moved from taxonomic systems of natural history that believed animal and vegetable species could be made wholly visible to a comparative anatomy that increasingly understood living species as being composed of “dark, hidden, and interior forces” (268). By attending to plantation ecology, we are also able to see how this newly obscure, more interior natural world was produced out of emergent modes of racialization during the period. Throughout Blake, a new “order of things” emerges, a dark nature that is mobilized to turn the natural scene of the plantation against itself. Delany mocks the leisurely, feminine pursuit of botany as a quaint and myopic
activity that seeks to shut out the violent realities of the plantation economy in which Madam Seeley clearly participates. The narrative ultimately disarticulates the connection established at the start of the chapter between white femininity and an infantilized black masculinity. Tony is in part so terrifying to her because he is a mere boy who displays the violence of an adult man.

In opposition to the white bourgeois cult of botany that reigned supreme in the early nineteenth century, Delany turns to a black natural history that might better support a race revolution in plantation geographies of the South. While writings on Southern nature by Higginson covered over mid-century networks among nature, death, masculinity, and race war, Delany exposed these ecological relationships to reveal a black natural history that plays upon the dark, hidden recesses of an inherently violent natural world. In ending the scene with an image of Tony still “well satisfied with his reputation as a naturalist,” Delany reinvests the formerly feminine, bourgeois field of natural history with a revolutionary black masculinity.

Ultimately, Henry’s “radical empiricism” seeks to re-imagine the plantation zone as a dynamic network of “secreted” spaces.49 Through the proliferation of observed differences across the landscape of enslavement, such plantation networks refuse consolidation into a single privileged and enclosed geography. The narrative continually

undoes fantasies of the plantation as an exceptional space of temperate cultivation and complete enclosure. Delany’s plantation networks recast an entire hemisphere as a revolutionary plantation war zone, a tropicalized space of danger and difference filled with secreted organizations of slaves and looming with the constant threat of race revolution. *Blake* maps a different kind of experimental and exceptional plantation South for the mobilization of revolution. A history of the plantation as an isolated space of exception hidden behind profuse plant growth helped make it a fertile site for growing a “revolutionary crop” by hiding slave organization from public view. At the same time, Delany emphasizes the enduring tropicality of the plantation to link dissolving geographies of the U.S. plantation system with transnational plantation geographies in the Caribbean.

“Let us go and possess it”

In a short section of his 1852 political treatise on the possibilities of African American elevation through emigration to South America, Delany locates the founding and prospering of American industry—of both the North and South, industrial and agricultural—in the ancient practices and knowledge of African laborers. In order to make such an argument, Delany must quickly dispense with a spectral indigenous presence in America. According to Delany, although Native Americans and African Americans are “brothers” in their shared bondage, African laborers compose a superior race: “their superiority, and not inferiority, alone was the cause which first suggested to

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50 See Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States.*
Europeans the substitution of Africans for that of aboriginal or Indian laborers in the mines; and that their superior skill and industry, first suggested to the colonists, the propriety of turning their attention to agricultural and other industrial pursuits, than that of mining” (63). After replacing Native indigeneity with a properly African (American) birth of American industry, Delany further suggests that the Southern plantation complex was forged out of the agricultural expertise of African laborers: “It is notorious, that in the planting States, the blacks themselves are the only skillful cultivators” (64). He goes on to cite the African origins of supposedly native productions of the plantation landscape of the U.S. South: “Tobacco, cotton, rice, hemp, indigo, the improvement in Indian corn, and many other important products, are all the result of African skill and labor in this country. And the introduction of the zig-zag, or ‘Virginia Worm Fence,’ is purely of African origin” (64).\(^51\) In *Condition*, Delany argues that the plantation was actually of African descent.

Delany’s eccentric use of plantation geographies for revolutionary plotting in *Blake* was clearly influenced by his understanding of the plantation South as the creation of African labor and expertise. Delany’s location of the plantation as an originally black, and specifically African, institution also came into play in his pragmatic political plans during the 1850s. In the wake of the passage of the Compromise of 1850, Delany insisted that African Americans had been made utter aliens in their own land. Under such inhospitable conditions for black elevation, Delany argued that African Americans could

either suffer under the nationalization of slavery in the U.S. or leave the country, where
pressure could be put on the slaveholding states from abroad.

Delany’s plans for African American emigration were concretized in 1858 when
he left the United States for a trip to the Niger Valley. He was commissioned by a board
of expatriation advocates that had emerged out of the 1854 National Emigration
Convention in Cleveland to study and report back on the possibilities of establishing a
cotton economy in Africa run by African Americans. Delany and the board hoped that an
alternative, black plantation system could compete with and ultimately topple the
agricultural economy of the U.S. South. Although all kinds of proposals and counter-
proposals were made for emigration to various sites on the globe throughout the 1850s,
this scheme is particularly unique in its investment in a plantation economy for the
express purpose of causing total destruction to the plantation complex of the U.S. South.
Such surprising investments in the plantation form in the quest for black emancipation
illuminate the dramatic mid-century transformation of the plantation, from a fully
enclosed, insular institution of the U.S. South to a permeable ecology belonging to a
more global plantation South.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{52} Literary analyses of Blake have usually neglected Delany’s plantation politics.
Critical, non-literary, treatments of the Niger Valley Trip include Tunde Adeleke’s
“Unafri

\textit{Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission}


to Delany and Robert Campbell’s writings on their expeditions to Africa. See \textit{Search For

\textit{A Place: Black Separatism and Africa, 1860}, ED. HOWARD H. BELL (ANN ARBOR: THE

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS, 1969). ROBERT CAMPBELL WAS A PROMINENT PHILADELPHIAN

WHO CAME TO THE U.S. FROM THE CARIBBEAN. DELANY AND CAMPBELL ORIGINALLY PLANNED TO

EXPLORE AFRICA TOGETHER, BUT CAMPBELL SNUBBED DELANY AND DEPARTED ALONE WITH THE

FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF THE AFRICAN CIVILIZATION SOCIETY.

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The Niger Valley expedition is doubly significant since *Blake* was likely written in an attempt to raise funds for the trip. In this way, we might think of *Blake* and the Niger Valley trip as connected experiments with the plantation form. While *Blake* articulates a space for revolution in the ecological networks between plantation geographies, Delany’s personal experiments during the 1850s took up the plantation itself as a potentially transformative space of economic and sociocultural development for African Americans (but not necessarily for Africans who, in Delany’s accounts, only seem to exist in the timeless, mythic continent of African American origin stories).

Delany’s interest in resettling African Americans on African plantations was based on an understanding of the plantation as a premier site of cultivation for both black masculine subjectivity and agricultural crops. The plantation offered Delany a space for imagining the harvesting of a “revolutionary crop,” but it also offered a long history of controlled production and cultivation tactics that perpetuated fantasies of masculine auto-generation. Ultimately, however, the privileging of controlled production over revolutionary reproduction interrupted Delany’s visions for an oppositional black empire in the African tropics. While *Blake* wants to locate societal transformation and the possibility for revolution in the tropical recesses of the plantation South, the *Official Report of the Niger Valley Party* reveals the problem that the “feminine” fecundity of tropical environments posed for Delany’s model of revolution, rooted as it was in black masculinity.\(^53\)

**Black Empire**

In the *Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* Delany notes, “there have been in all ages, in almost every nation, existed a nation within a nation” (12). Interest in Delany resurged during the black separatist movements of the late 1970s. Scholarly recuperation of key texts on black revolution and emigration during the 1970s sought to reconstruct a nineteenth-century precedent for twentieth century interest in black separatism. These narratives typically date the origins of black nationalism to the mid-nineteenth century, when the passage of the Compromise of 1850 spurred the organization of a National Emigration Convention and other emigration interest groups. In the 1850s, African American proponents of emigration had to fight against an earlier history of pro-slavery interests in expatriation. In 1816, the American Colonization Society (ACS) proposed its plan to expatriate free African Americans to the African state that would eventually become Liberia. Critics of the plan argued that the ACS was composed of slaveholders and other pro-slavery advocates who wanted to rid the country of freemen so that regimes of enslavement in the U.S. could continue undisturbed.

African American proponents of emigration continued throughout the 1850s to struggle against critiques that emigration was just a scheme to depopulate African Americans from the U.S. Others, like Frederick Douglass, insisted that enfranchisement would only occur through recourse to national rights. Always a political pragmatist, Delany changed views on the question of emigration at several points throughout his life. While in the early 1850s he promoted the establishment of an empire of the “colored
races” in South America, the Civil War renewed his faith that African Americans might acquire full personhood through struggle at the national level. He eagerly joined the War effort and later continued to invest in the nation, serving as an agent of the Freedman’s Bureau. In the aftermath of the failure of Reconstruction, a disillusioned Delany turned back to the possibilities of African emigration late in his life.

Delany’s earliest advocacy of emigration rejected Africa as a site for removal and instead favored resettlement in South America. His hemispheric vision of the early 1850s was premised on the idea that African Americans could enter into a union with the oppressed peoples of South America to counter the empire of the United States. His plan for South American emigration is laid out in Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, a text that demonstrates how Delany and other prominent African American political figures of the time picked up on the promises of Manifest Destiny to legitimate and imagine a black empire in the Americas. In Condition, Delany goes beyond a pragmatic suggestion that African Americans might better pressure the Southern plantocracy from outside the racist structures of the U.S., arguing that one day people of color united in this more Southern tropical geography might “form a glorious union of Southern American States ‘inseparably connected one and forever’” (182; italics are mine). Delany’s geographical imaginary here anticipates the kind of revolutionary mapping that composes Blake. In Condition, the South is wrested from its associations with enslavement, racism and disenfranchisement through a more hemispheric mapping. This more global South instead becomes a black tropical empire in the Southern hemisphere, a safe haven for the “colored races” that simultaneously threatens the safety of slaveholding interests in the North (which is from
this perspective, the U.S. South). Also as in *Blake, Condition* interrupts dominant fugitivity narratives that could only imagine a linear flight from South to North. Instead, Delany suggests that fugitives should flee *deeper* into the South, insisting on the importance of the fugitive’s knowing “he has safety South” (186). Indeed, the vision of a specifically tropical empire filled with fugitive slaves pervades this text, a permeable and penetrating empire that threatens to creep into the Northern hemisphere.

Enthusiasm for resettlement efforts in Africa increased in the years following 1847, when Liberia was transformed from a colony of ex-slaves from the U.S. into an independent nation.\(^5^4\) The first National Emigration Convention was held in 1854 as a response and challenge to the domestic aims of the National Convention of 1852 in Rochester, New York. Curiously, the Niger Valley trip emerged out of the 1854 convention in Cleveland, although public invitations to that meeting explicitly stipulated,

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No person will be admitted to a seat in the Convention, who would introduce the subject of Emigration to the Eastern Hemisphere—either to Asia, Africa, or Europe—as our object and determination are to consider our claims to the West Indies, Central and South America, and the Canadas. This restriction has no reference to personal preference, or individual enterprise; but to the great question of national claims to come before the Convention.\(^5^5\)
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\(^5^4\) Some locate the “birth” of black nationalism in the 1847 founding of the Republic of Liberia
\(^5^5\) See Bell, *Search For a Place*, 28.
Delany reprinted this notice in his *Report of The Niger Valley Exploring Party*,
explaining that the stipulation was made simply because of pragmatics: “It was a mere
policy on the part of the authors of those documents, to confine their scheme to America
(including the West Indies), whilst they were the leading advocates of the regeneration of
Africa” (33). He later goes on to say that the emigrationists had always held Africa “in
reserve” (33): In the “Secret Sessions” of the 1854 Convention, Africa was promoted as a
rich site for economic exploitation and settlement.

In the expository section of his Niger Valley piece, Delany reports that in 1856 he
was made “Commissioner to Africa” by the Emigration Board of Commissioners, who
charged him with the duty of making a “scientific inquiry” into the “topographical,
geological, and geographic” qualities of the Niger Valley. He does not, however,
mention his intentions to survey the region for resettlement possibilities, insisting that the
journey was simply “for the purposes of science and for general information” (39).
While Delany’s Report back to the Commissioners does make a “scientific inquiry,” it is
obvious throughout that he is most interested in the question of whether or not this West
African region would provide hospitable ground for expatriate African Americans.
During his visit, he even signed a treaty with a Yoruba King that guaranteed settlement
rights.

In the *Niger Valley Report*, Delany recognizes the tenuousness of the Southern
slave system, noting that the prosperity of the country “hangs upon a thread of cotton,
which a blight of the plant, an insurrection among the slaves, an untimely frost, or an
increased demand in the Northern States of the Union, might destroy” (131). The South’s
overdependence on cotton monoculture, while providing an economic boom in the short
run, has ultimately made the South vulnerable to both “natural” and “unnatural” threats (the weather and slave insurrection). Africa provides a space where African Americans might forge a model nation that would prove the race’s superior capacity for self-government. At the same time, Delany forwards a vision of an African cotton economy that could compete with and ultimately topple the slaveholding plantation system of the U.S. South. In the Report, Delany embraces cotton as the key to African American political and economic success in the future, pointing out that African Americans have a more intimate knowledge of the crop since they have been “reared among the cotton of the United States” (140). He goes on to make a plea: “We only want additional labor; give us that and we shall very soon cultivate our own cotton” (132). It becomes clear in these pages that Delany imagined a society in which trans-planted African Americans would serve as managers in the fields, overseeing the labor of native Africans. Delany’s vision of a black empire in Africa was ironically saddled with the exploitations and enclosures of the American plantation system.

While some critical treatments of Delany’s life and work have addressed this ambitious agricultural plan, little attention has been paid to the fascinating fact that what Delany sought to construct in West Africa was another plantation society. In 1860, Delany left Africa for Britain, where he sought an alliance with British manufacturers who were increasingly anxious over the American cotton supply because of the sectional conflicts. In response to supply problems, the textile industry formed the Cotton Supply Association (CSA) to search for alternative cotton sources around the globe. By the time Delany arrived in London, interest groups including the CSA and the African Aid Society (AAS) had already been making their own plans to repatriate blacks to Africa for
agricultural labor. Delany received enthusiastic support for his plan from the popular press and from major firms in England. Although he signed contracts with some cotton dealers, the African plantation experiment never came to fruition. The signed treaty with the Yoruba quickly fell through while the beginning of the Civil War in 1861 subordinated eccentric transnational plantation experiments to the realistic fronts of U.S. national politics.

Delany’s “triple alliance” plantation experiment between British industrial interests, African American managers (or overseers), and African laborers is a fascinating example of the surprising ways the plantation form was taken up as a model of social and economic organization during the mid-nineteenth century. I am not interested in holding up the Niger Valley plans as a failed experiment, but in highlighting the vibrancy of a mid-century plantation imaginary at the very moment when the U.S. institution was threatened with total destruction. The productive spaces of the plantation clearly appealed to Delany because of the emphasis he placed on the need for African Americans to become independent producers and to break out of cycles of consumption that feminized the race. Worries about the enmeshing of black masculinity in the networks of female reproduction abound in both his Niger Valley Report and in Blake. In Blake, Delany refuses to accept the hyper-reproductive space of the swamp as the primary breeding ground of revolution. The plantation offered Delany a long history of controlled production and cultivation tactics for the fantasy of black male auto-generation.

Ultimately, however, the privileging of controlled plantation production over revolutionary reproduction interrupted Delany’s visions for an oppositional black empire. While Blake embraces ambiguous and veiled tropical environments, the Report exudes
fears about the harboring of disease and other “creeping things” in Africa’s tropical environs. Throughout the text, Delany continues to worry about the “rank growth of vegetable matter” (53) in an obscure tropical landscape that had been mobilized as the key to revolution in Blake. Delany’s plantation experiments highlight the extent to which the problem of reproduction haunts even the most revolutionary of plantation spaces. Where female reproduction disappears from the scene in Blake in order to masculinize a dark, obscure tropical nature, Delany’s African encounters with an overly-reproductive African climate prompted him to retreat from feminizing tropical spaces for the more temperate environment of the Union’s war effort.
Chapter 4 // “A Study in Nature”: Hygienic Pedagogy in the New South Laboratory

“I have often been asked to define the term ‘Black Belt’. So far as I can learn, the term was first used to designate a part of the country which was distinguished by the colour of the soil. The part of the country possessing this thick, dark, and naturally rich soil was, of course, the part of the South where slaves were most profitable, and consequently they were taken there in the largest numbers. Later, and especially since the war, the term seems to be used wholly in a political sense—that is, to designate the counties where the black people outnumber the white”

—Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery (1901)

A few years after the 1932 initiation of the Tuskegee Study, the U.S. Public Health Service’s observation of “untreated syphilis in the male negro” in Macon County, Alabama, the first clinical article on the topic appeared in the Journal of the American Medical Association. The paper was presented at the 1936 annual meeting of the organization and emphasized an “unusual opportunity” that arose after a survey of the “southern rural areas” revealed that a “considerable portion of the infected Negro population remained untreated during the entire course of syphilis” (856). The original survey, which provided treatment for rural populations with syphilis, was transformed by the Public Health Service (PHS) into a non-therapeutic study that tracked the natural course of the disease by following “the untreated syphilitic patient from the beginning of the disease to the death of the infected person” (856). Of course, the participants only

remained untreated because the PHS withheld treatment over the course of the study and misled the recruited men into thinking they were being cared for by government doctors.

Clinical articles published over the next four decades continued to emphasize the uniqueness of this situation in the South and repeatedly referred to the investigation as a study of the “natural history of syphilis.”2 The test subjects were often figured in these accounts as mere incubators for the reproduction of the disease, their bodies effectively de-acculturated by the focus on a natural history. As Allan Brandt has argued, a belief that “conditions in Tuskegee existed ‘naturally’”—and were not influenced by institutionalized racism, widespread poverty, and socioeconomic inequality—enabled the PHS to present a deeply interventionist human experiment as a simple, observational “study in nature.”3 For example, researchers cited the geographic isolation of the research population to justify the test group’s lack of access to “modern treatment.”4 The indigent communities of the rural South in these clinical discourses were transformed into non-modern enclaves that existed in a natural state, apart from the nation-state and beyond the jurisdiction of modern medicine.

The PHS’s dependence on the rhetoric of natural history in this geography of the U.S. South reveals an enduring scientific history on the plantation, which served


3 Allan M. Brandt, “Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment,” in Tuskegee’s Truths: Rethinking the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, ed. Susan M. Reverby (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 15-33. Brandt offers an important distinction between an experiment and a “study in nature,” as outlined by the French physiologist Claude Bernard in 1865. Where a study in nature requires only observation, an experiment involves intervention into the study’s conditions (18). Brandt concludes that Tuskegee was clearly an experiment.

throughout the antebellum period as a laboratory for all kinds of experimental investigations into the “natural history” of race. Despite a widespread belief that the poor, rural plantation districts existed outside of culture, a belief that certainly contributed to the study’s conditions of possibility, researchers still worked hard to ensure their test subjects blended into the background of the laboratory’s Southern scene. The Tuskegee clinical articles, for example, presented the residents of Macon County as non-modern folk who remained connected to a primitive agricultural landscape—the study was even scheduled around the crop seasons to accommodate participants’ work schedules.

In 1932, Macon County was still very much tied to its plantation past. Most of the men selected for the syphilis experiments were poor sharecroppers with little to no formal education who worked under white farmers in a system of debt peonage. The PHS was clearly attuned to the role the plantation complex played in organizing the human and agricultural geography of Macon County. Researchers figured Macon County as an ideal laboratory, a perfectly enclosed system that was produced out of the peculiarities of an isolated and insular plantation system. In other words, an understanding of the plantation as a closed system that effectively contained a laboring population allowed PHS officials to erroneously figure Macon County as a scientific laboratory, cut off from the contingencies and unwanted variables of the outside world. Over and over again, researchers emphasized the “non-migratory nature” (202) of their test population.\(^5\) In their attempts to figure Macon County as a sealed laboratory that

\(^5\) See Pasquale J. Pesare, et. al., “Untreated Syphilis in the Male Negro,” *American Journal of Syphilis, Gonorrhea, and Venereal Diseases* 34.3 (May 1950): 201-13. In a 1954 article, the authors note that “geographic isolation was a factor in favoring the unchanging nature of the group” (693). See Sidney Olansky, et. al., “Environmental
effectively enclosed a stable experimental population, the Tuskegee researchers extended
the laboratory life of the plantation into the twentieth century.

This chapter attends to a pre-history of the Tuskegee Study in order to better
understand how experimental plantation geographies were reproduced and managed well
after Emancipation and Reconstruction. I track how an emergent New South discourse at
the turn of the twentieth century sought to maintain the integrity of the plantation as a
closed system even as the natural resources of the South were being offered up for
Northern, industrial consumption. Turning to Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee
Institute, which was founded in Macon County in 1881, this chapter explores the
connections between the hygienic pedagogies of Washington’s South and the kinds of
spaces traversed—and bodies mined—for the benefit of the Tuskegee experiments.

Throughout his writings and at Tuskegee, Washington was obsessed with making
his students as well as a larger population of ex-slaves “useful,” advertising Southern
black folk as just another resource to be exploited in what sociologist Robert Bullard calls
the “sacrifice zone” of the South.6 The focus on personal hygiene and cleanliness at the
Tuskegee Institute opened the door for alliances with public health initiatives early in the
twentieth century, making the school’s student population as well as residents of
surrounding counties subjects of intense hygienic surveillance. In short, the residents of

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Factors in the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis,” Public Health Reports 69.7 (July
1954): 691-98. As the study continued, researchers became increasingly worried about
the increased mobility of the experimental group. See, for example, Stanley Schuman, et.
al., “Untreated Syphilis in the Male Negro: Background and Current Status of Patients in
Macon County had been transformed into a research population well before the 1932 initiation of the Syphilis Experiments.

**New South, Old Problems**

Although public health intervention in the Southern states focused primarily on urban spaces, the rural plantation became a site of legitimate concern for the medical establishment by the mid-nineteenth century. James H. Cassidy marks the 1840s as the period when “plantation hygiene” took shape in the context of the growth of medical topography, the rise of geological surveying, the establishment of the American Medical Association, the enthusiasm generated by sanitation reform in the North, and the increase in medical journalism in the South. Scientists believed that disease emanated from recently cleared land: since the turning of soil was believed to upturn unhealthy elements from the land, medical authorities encouraged planters to build their plantations quickly in order to counteract or minimize disease conditions. Experts directed planters to keep the plantation’s entire architecture, including the “culture of soil, building, drainage, ditching, and manure making,” as organized as possible, since disordered plantation geographies were thought to engender disease. Plantation organization in the nineteenth century was tightly conjoined with healthfulness: the ordered plantation, in these medical discourses, became the cure itself, the picture of health in the antebellum South. The plantation was figured as a kind of health management system early on, as planters

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8 These specific directions to planters came from the Southern physician John Douglass. Quoted in Cassidy, “Medical Men and the Ecology of the Old South,” 171.
sought to keep an entire ecology of slaves, crops, animals, and environmental factors in a salubrious order.

The onslaught of the Civil War renewed anxieties over the general health of the South, as the socioeconomic and cultural landscape of the region was viewed as being in need of serious melioration. Nina Silber notes that for many Northerners eager for reconciliation, the South became a popular tourist destination, particularly for the ailing elite. While some Northerners traveled south just to experience a supposedly pre-industrial and romantic plantation scenery, Silber cites a nineteenth-century travel writer who recognized that “a considerable area of the South [was] regarded as a sanitarium by much of the country at large” (68). At the same time as Northerners retreated to Southern landscapes for healthful rejuvenation, the region was also being diagnosed with a kind of post-war sickness. As Northerners reconstructed the South as a “land of idyllic plantation settings” (4), the dominance of rotting plantation structures on the landscape became a visible index of the region’s illness.

The fantasy of a Southern sanitarium was continually disrupted by worries of diseased and disintegrating plantation structures. By the turn of the twentieth century, public health initiatives became increasingly prevalent in the plantation districts of the South. Such efforts sought to organize the bodies and squelch the diseases that had been previously managed by the planter class. Black health was of particular concern since the antebellum plantation had formerly contained this population and its unpredictable diseases. An emergent New South discourse eagerly took up the issues surrounding the

health of the region, obsessively returning to the obstacles a disordered black population posed to reconciliation and reconstruction.

As a kind of panacea, the New South has been evoked during various historical moments as a hopeful cure for all kinds of social, political, and economic ailments in the South. But no matter what the historical context, every iteration of a New South has had at its core a desire to free itself from the “fetters” of the Old South. The concept of a New South was first articulated in the decades following the Civil War as planters, investors, politicians and other anxious white Southerners worried over their own “enslavement” to a decreasingly fruitful and archaic plantation system. The New South movement wanted a regional economy that was better attuned to the trends of industrialization, employed modernized agricultural techniques, and solved the nagging “Negro problem.” The phrase’s origin is usually attributed to Henry Grady, the Southern orator and editor of the Atlanta newspaper, the Constitution, who, in 1886 gave a speech entitled “The New South” to the New England Club of New York City.\(^\text{10}\) The speech reveals the extent to which proponents of the New South were interested in getting back in good favor with the North, particularly with its capital investments: “Never was nobler duty confided to human hands than the uplifting and upbuilding of the prostrate and bleeding South, misguided perhaps, but beautiful in her suffering, and honest, brave and generous always. In the record of her social, industrial, and political illustrations we

\(^{10}\) Harold E. Davis has argued that Grady’s reputation did not become so heavily grafted onto the New South until after his untimely death in 1889. In the wake of public mourning of the influential figure, Grady was memorialized as a leader of the New South movement in numerous publications and speeches. Davis faults New South historians of the twentieth century for perpetuating this historical inaccuracy. See his Henry Grady’s New South: Atlanta, A Brave and Beautiful City (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990).
await with confidence the verdict of the world”. Grady offers an image of the noble South as a passive body, prostrate and bleeding before the philanthropy of Northerners. Depictions of the South as a passive region abounded in New South propaganda, which sought to make the region newly relevant to the turbines of industrial capital as a premier extraction site for raw resources.

And yet, as the South ingratiated itself to the North through gritted teeth with talk of unification, it held out hope that it might still remain—or perhaps, finally become—a separatist, independent economy at the turn of the twentieth century. Such tensions proliferated in New South discourse, caught as it was between hopes for a newly nationalized industrial region and dreams of a renewed sectionalism rooted in an agrarian-based plantation economy. In a 1910 volume of The Annals of the American Academy of Political Science and Social Science dedicated to the subject of the New South, social scientists, forestry officers, historians, and other authoritative voices contributed articles on the status of the South’s economy in the fifty years since the War, rallying together to create excitement over everything the South had to offer in terms of natural resources, agricultural products, and labor. One contributor writes of a

New South, not the old, self-satisfied South of pleasant memories and tender recollections, that lay ever half asleep basking in her own sunshine, content to raise the cotton supply of the world and to allow her wonderful natural resources

of mine and forest to remain undisturbed, but the New South, awakening as a young giant, strong and vibrant, throwing off the fetters of commercial indifference, is at last aroused, to the fact that the beneficent hand of the Creator has given to her more natural advantages than He has vouchsafed to any other part of this great Union. (114)\textsuperscript{13}

The author imagines a radically reformed region literally “throwing off the fetters” of the Old South, turning from the lazy production cycles of a pastoral antebellum past to the modern, commercial pursuits that will make use of the “natural resources of mine and forest” with which God has endowed the South. And yet, there is something clearly amiss here, for the land and natural advantages that have been divinely bestowed upon the region do not constitute a sacred space to “remain undisturbed” or to be enjoyed by its inhabitants, but are commercial “advantages” to be turned into commodities for profit. While New South advocates claimed to make its land and its resources available to the market, opening the region up as a usable ground, they simultaneously retreated toward an elite, closed Southern society, clinging to traditional Southern values. In other words, the New South was, at times, difficult to distinguish from the old one.

In “Cotton in Southern Agricultural Economy,” an article from the same volume, Harvie Jordan animates the myth of a pure and noble Anglo-Saxon tradition of farming in the New World by conveniently forgetting slavery. He writes,

\textsuperscript{13} See J.F. Ellison, “The Inland Waterways of the South,” in The Annals.
With the dawning of the new century, the great army of white farmers in the South, typifying as they do the purest representatives of the Anglo-Saxon race on the American continent, seems to have shaken off the lethargy which appears to have possessed them for the previous quarter of a century. With renewed zeal and that unbroken determination characteristic of their race, they have launched out afresh to recover their lost fortunes and strive for the highest pinnacle of success in their chuse occupation. (5)¹⁴

An implicit goal of much New South thought was to imagine a Southern economy that no longer needed black labor. Jordan and others indulge in, or revert to, a color-blind fantasy of agrarian democracy unstained by the corruptions of enslavement. Indeed, many of the articles collected in the volume attempt to save the plantation system’s honor and relevance to modern industry by severing it from its dependence on slave labor. Jordan’s evocation of the “purest representatives of the Anglo-Saxon race on the American continent” ties his “great army of white farmers” into a turn of the century eugenics discourse anxious about the superiority of the white race. A deeply “conservative” impulse lies at the heart of New South ideology—conservative in its reliance on Old South valorizations of an elite Anglo-Saxon planter class, but also in its deep concern with how the region’s land might be misused by both outsiders and emancipated African Americans.

¹⁴ The Annals volume notes that Johnson served as the President of the Southern Cotton Association in Atlanta, Georgia.
Kimberly K. Smith recognizes a long history of racism in environmental conservation efforts in the U.S., pointing, for example, to the “significant ideological and political connections to white supremacy” (2) in early twentieth-century preservationist movements. During this period, similar kinds of eugenicist-environmentalist tendencies were flourishing down South through discourses that figured the old plantation system as wasteful in order to promote a newly efficient New South run on white labor. Increased soil fertility was linked with the recent emancipation of African Americans, who were charged with improperly cultivating fields through wasteful agricultural practices:

I do not know what we are going to do with the Negro. I do know that we must either frame a scheme of education and training that will keep him from dragging down the whole level of life in the South, that will make him more efficient, a prosperity maker and not a poverty-breeder or else he will leave our farms and give way to the white immigrant. No acre of land will long own as its master, the man or the race who mistreats it and makes it unfruitful. (45)

As the black farmer threatens to drag “down the whole level of life in the South,” terms of barrenness and loss (“will leave our farms,” “makes it unfruitful”) are deployed alongside a vocabulary of reproduction (“prosperity maker,” “breeder”). New South

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16 Clarence E. Poe, “Agricultural Revolution A Necessity,” *The Annals*. Poe was the editor of *The Progressive Farmer*, which was published out of Raleigh, North Carolina.
negotiations of black (re)production focused both on the reproduction of labor in the South and the influence of Emancipation on agricultural production. In the antebellum period, planters attempted to carefully manage both the production of crops and the reproduction of laborers for their estates. While New South discourse harped on the precarious status of agriculture after Emancipation, a shadow discourse was deeply concerned with the loss of control over African American reproduction in the South. The author’s statement that black laborers may now “leave our farms” and thus make the influx of white immigrant laborers an economic necessity, laments the antebellum plantation complex’s ability to keep laboring bodies confined within plantation enclosures. Rather than cite how soils were often exhausted in order to maximize crop yield under conditions of capitalist intensification, the onus of Southern barrenness—of both fields and human bodies—is placed upon a more mobile class of black southerners who, since Emancipation, could choose not to reproduce the social order.

Amid rampant theories of black extinction, whether within or in fleeing from the Southern socioeconomic system, Booker T. Washington swoops into The Annals’ New South volume to proclaim that black labor remains the South’s lifeblood. Washington’s arguments closely mirror those of the larger New South movement, illuminating how his writings and work at the Tuskegee Institute aligned with a dominant discourse of the time that was actively negotiating the tenability of a Southern economy that could no longer depend on coerced labor. Washington seeks to show how African Americans have been, and continue to be, instrumental to Southern progress. Echoing contemporary public health discourses increasingly concerned with a disease-ridden South, Washington

stresses the urgency of attending to the “Negro problem” by restating the threat that emancipation might pose to the health of the larger body politic: “More and more also, the southern people are beginning to realize, that in the matter of law and order, in the matter of health, and in the matter of upright moral living, the welfare of the whole community is more or less dependent upon that of its most humble citizen.” (133; italics are mine). Washington posits the African American (male) physician as a race man par excellence, a professional “better able to advise and direct them in matters of health” (133) because of a more intimate knowledge of the race.

Amid the professionalization of medicine in the U.S., the black physician emerges as a key figure of authority who will help make the Southern black population, in Washington’s terms, “more easily managed” (125). Indeed, health and moral living were key pedagogies at Washington’s Tuskegee Normal and Agricultural Institute, where the containment of black students within the enclosures of an abandoned plantation-turned-college campus, paired with public health-style maintenance of personal hygiene, extended plantation systems of slave health“care” into the twentieth century. In other words, Tuskegee’s strict hygiene and sanitation pedagogies helped to train an emergent black middle-class that went on to aid in the hands-on cultivation of a lower-class black work force for the New South. Hygienic pedagogies at Tuskegee, while surely aimed at the student population itself, were also designed to radiate outwards into the tenant farmer communities of Alabama and beyond.

that whereas under slavery the “Negro was ‘worked,’ […] now he has learned to work for himself” (14). Stone claims that since the war, black workers had actually suffered under conditions of increased exploitation since white employers no longer needed to concern themselves with the well being of their laborers, only with the amount of labor power extracted for profit. Under the antebellum plantation system, according to Stone, planters and overseers had to be savvy enough to successfully balance both “the care of the physical well being of its labor, as well as the financing of its operations” (13). After the war, smaller merchants—no longer the noble planters of days gone by—only needed to secure a small line of credit to begin exploiting black labor for the smallest price possible. These merchants had no concern with the health of their laborers: “Where before, his labor had been bought with his body, now it was his labor alone which came to be trafficked in” (13). While Stone’s remarks smack of a desire to return to the protective cover of the plantation system, they also illuminate that slave health was understood to be a major component of the plantation’s general “health” and success. In many ways, African American labor in the postbellum period could be separated from a concern with the body in a way that was impossible under the auspices of a plantation system that needed to keep an internal ecology of crops and enslaved laborers in balance to maximize profit. Sharla Fett has argued that plantation owners attended to slave ailments in terms of “soundness.”18 Of course, slavery was in no way a humane institution that properly cared for slave health, but it is crucial to draw attention to the important role of sickness management in the day-to-day operation of antebellum plantations.

Such regimes of plantation soundness established a kind of governance over African American subjects in the South that seemed to have become obsolete with Emancipation. This chapter argues that industrial schools and other training sites established for the education of ex-slaves effectively reanimated systems of health management in order to incorporate black subjects back into the coercive labor structures of the New South. Houston Baker has written on how particular institutions in the post-war South worked to confine African American subjects within “plantation arrangements” (81) into the twentieth century. Tuskegee serves as his prime example. Indeed, Tuskegee’s success in propelling such plantation arrangements was due in large part to how health management at “Mr. Washington’s plantation” stood central to the school’s practices and pedagogies. New South institutions picked up where the plantation left off: continued interest in maintaining the health of an institutional environment enfolded the black body—not just his or her labor—back into intimate structures of the New South economy. As in so many plantation environments under enslavement, Tuskegee’s management personnel was concerned with keeping the health of an entire institutional ecology in balance.

20 Local residents in Macon County colloquially referred to the Institute as “Mr. Washington’s Plantation.” Baker notes this as does Louis R. Harlan in his biography, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). Washington was also derisively referred to by some of his contemporaries as the “Wizard of Tuskegee”; Harlan additionally refers to him the “master of the Tuskegee plantation.”

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Mr. Washington’s Plantation

As critics have often noted, Washington foregrounds a certain concern with cleanliness throughout his writings, most notably in his 1901 autobiography, *Up From Slavery*. A deep concern with (racial) hygiene has made “dirt” a necessary passage point for most any scholarly engagement with Washington. *Up From Slavery* begins by opening on the “miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings” (3) of the Virginia plantation where Washington was born and raised.²¹ Along with meager food portions, insufficient clothing allowances, and the absence of educational opportunities and pastimes, Washington notes that the uncomfortable, drafty, and cramped cabin of his childhood stood at the center of his misery. The cabin was especially miserable for the young boy because it in no way replicated a proper home: Washington recounts that the poorly constructed abode was shot through with gaps and openings to the outdoors, making the cabin constantly vulnerable to poor weather conditions and intruders from the outdoors. The cabin’s proper role as a private, domestic space was additionally obstructed by the dual purpose it served: “The cabin was not only our living-place, but was used as the kitchen for the plantation. My mother was the plantation cook” (4).

Although his depiction of the conditions of enslavement is grim throughout the narrative, Washington refuses to ascribe blame to the white master-class. Rather, he figures slavery as a “net” in which both masters and slaves, stripped of agency, have found themselves entangled. By the end of the first chapter, Washington recuperates slavery as a system “where the black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did” (13).

Washington goes so far as to suggest that readers should offer their pity not to the enslaved, but to their masters. While enslaved persons were able to develop a strong work ethic and mastery over “some handicraft” in the “school of slavery,” “the slave owner and his sons had mastered no special industry” (13). Writing in the midst of rampant anxieties about the Southern economy after the fall of the plantation economy, Washington reveals the dire situation of a de-skilled, white planter class that had grown so utterly dependent on the domestic plantation. Washington compensates for the insufficient privacy of the slave cabin by figuring the entire plantation as a domestic space that offers protection for both its black and white inhabitants. In *Up From Slavery*, the plantation retroactively becomes a kind of home.

The narrative goes on to dramatize the traumas that Washington endured after losing his plantation “home.” Washington reports that after Emancipation, he was sent with his mother and brothers to join his step-father, who had fled to West Virginia during the war. Upon arriving in the squalid mining town of Malden, the young Booker T. was sent to work in the salt furnaces and later in the coalmines. Having recuperated the plantation in the narrative as a safe, domestic space, Washington declares that the industrial work in which ex-slaves found themselves engaged after the war was often worse than the agricultural labors of the plantation. At least on the plantation, they had been ensured “pure air”:

Our new house was no better than the one we had left on the old plantation in Virginia. In fact, in one respect it was worse. Notwithstanding the poor condition of our plantation cabin, we were at all times sure of pure air. Our new home was
in the midst of a cluster of cabins crowded closely together, and as there were no
sanitary regulations, the filth about the cabins was often intolerable. (19)

The “pure air” of the plantation recalls a pre-industrial Southern landscape that is
contrasted with the grimy, disordered industrial spaces of postbellum West Virginia.

I want to emphasize that the opening scenes of dirt and disarray in Up From
Slavery respond explicitly to an increasingly polluted industrial environment in the
postbellum period. The filth of Malden is presented as being markedly different from the
humble, rural squalor of the antebellum plantation. Washington’s attention to dirt and
disorder in West Virginia is a response to the lack of sanitary regulations, to be sure, but
it is also related to a deep concern with racial intermingling. Washington’s discussion of
the disordered, filthy cabins is immediately followed by statements about the “motley
mixture” of people who inhabit them: “Some of our neighbors were coloured people, and
some were the poorest and most ignorant and degraded white people. It was a motley
mixture. Drinking, gambling, quarrels, fights, and shockingly immoral practices were
frequent” (19). Washington emphasizes his self-willed separation from the mixture of
racialized bodies, pollutants, technologies, and “immoral practices” in the coalmines
through ritualized practices of (racial) hygiene: “Work in the coal-mine I always dreaded.
One reason for this was that anyone in the coal-mine was always unclean, at least while
at work, and it was a very hard job to get one’s skin clean after the day’s work was over”
(26). In the eternally unclean and cramped rooms of the coalmine, the distinctions
between race and class are erased: everyone left the coalmine “black” at the end of the
day. Washington reports that he rushed home each day to separate himself from that
“motley mixture” of races and faces through a ritual cleaning. Later in his life at the Tuskegee Institute, Washington reclaimed the orderly, domestic space of the New South plantation to clean up a tainted blackness: he enacted strict sanitary regulations lacking in Malden not only to segregate an aspiring black middle-class from what he calls a “motley mixture” of immigrants, but also to forward an agrarian vision that attempted to keep the pollutants of Northern industrialism at bay (even as he invests in the ideologies of an industrial education).

Throughout the autobiography, Washington emphasizes black gentility and respectability by separating his own “class” of people from working class white folks. In Malden, Washington learned an important lesson about gaining mobility by separating oneself from the “trash” (white and otherwise). After learning “in the darkness of the mine” (29) about a servant vacancy in the home of Mrs. Viola Ruffner, wife to the salt furnace and coal furnace owner, Washington recounts that he eagerly grasped at an opportunity to escape the degradation of the mine and to possibly continue his education at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia, one of the many industrial schools established in the wake of Reconstruction to educate and civilize ex-slaves and members of other unassimilated groups in the U.S. After hearing rumors that Mrs. Ruffner’s severity and strictness had driven off countless servants, he is pleased and relieved to learn after a few weeks of work that all she desires is a completely clean and ordered environment, a perfection that Washington is happy to help her maintain: “first of all, she wanted everything kept clean about her, that wanted things done promptly and systematically, and that at the bottom of everything she wanted absolute honesty and frankness” (30). Washington locates Mrs. Ruffner as the origin of his life-long obsession
with cleanliness and order: “Even to this day I never see bits of paper scattered around a house or in the street that I do not want to pick them up at once. I never see a filthy yard that I do not want to clean it, a paling off of a fence that I do not want to paint or whitewash [...]” (30) and so the compulsive list continues.

Houston Baker’s adroit analysis of the gendered and sexualized dynamics of Up From Slavery finds that Washington’s “sweeping” intimacy with Mrs. Ruffner enacts a “ritual purification from blackness” (47; italics are Baker’s). According to Baker, ties of identification bind Washington and Mrs. Ruffner together. Their shared confinement within the domestic sphere produces an interracial proximity that feminizes and hysterisizes both the black, Southern, male body, and the white, Northern, upper-class female body. Throughout Up From Slavery, Washington notes that he was heavily influenced by the ethos of Northern white women reformers such as Mrs. Ruffner, who emphasized thrift, hard work, and orderliness. Indeed, at Tuskegee, Washington brought the reformer’s model of Northern thrift, cleanliness, and a Puritanical work ethic to bear on a Southern population viewed as being in disarray.

The strict domestic regime at Mrs. Ruffner’s house is presented in the narrative as the perfect training ground for Washington’s enlistment into the military-like ranks of the Hampton Institute. The Hampton Institute was run by General Samuel C. Armstrong, whom Washington calls “the noblest, rarest human being that it has ever been my privilege to meet” (36). Washington claims that the lessons learned in Mrs. Ruffner’s

22 Baker, Turning South Again.
23 Washington, Up From Slavery. Armstrong had been an officer for the Union Army during the Civil War. He was assigned to lead the 9th Regiment, United States Colored Troops in 1863 and it was during this time that he became interested in the welfare of
impeccable sphere “were as valuable to me as any education I have gotten anywhere since” (30). After a long, hard sojourn to Hampton made on virtually no money, an unbathed and hungry Washington presented himself to the head teacher, Mary F. Mackie, “a ‘Yankee’ woman who knew just where to look for dirt” (35). He reports, “I could see at once that there were doubts in her mind about the wisdom of admitting me as a student. I felt that I could hardly blame her if she got the idea that I was a worthless loafer or tramp” (35). Washington’s successful admittance depended on his commitments to cleaning up—both his own body and the spaces he occupied: he immediately set to work to prove his own commitment to producing a hygienic environment: “Never did I receive an order with more delight. I knew that I could sweep” (35). Washington goes on to recount that his successful completion of the sweeping-exam led Miss Mackie to accept him into the school (“I guess you will do to enter this institution” (35)) and offer him a position as a school janitor.

Washington’s sweeping exam in Up From Slavery assures anxious white readers that black industrial schools were not interested in germinating black revolution or independence through education, but in maintaining the status quo. Although the sweeping examination might seem like an odd test for entry into an educational institution, we should recall one of the main, though unstated, goals of such schools: to incorporate a formerly enslaved population into the servant class. Although the rhetoric

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of industrial education emphasized middle-class aspirations, the focus on domestic training for both men and women sought to cultivate a properly domestic(ated) class of workers for an increasingly industrial era. Laura Wexler notes this in her treatment of the widespread extension of sentimentality from the realm of sentimental fiction into the disciplinary tactics of educational institutions in the late nineteenth century:

It is furthermore a matter of record that in at least some of these schools the Native American and black children who were students received domestic training not as the future householders and sentimental parents they were ostensibly supposed to become but as future domestic servants (for instance, as nursemaids) in the homes of others. (105)²⁴

The education provided in these schools was also strategically anachronistic. Such institutions were called industrial schools, but they, in reality, did little to endow students with the skills needed to survive and prosper in industrial settings. Such training in “individualized, small-scale, low-capital, unmechanized operations,” as Wexler notes, was more like “the kind of work that would fit easily into a pastoral setting” (149). Postbellum industrial schools cranked out docile bodies to be fit into newer industrial and agricultural systems of labor. In addition, Hampton, Tuskegee, and other such institutions gained reputations for turning out large numbers of teachers who went on to establish similar kinds of industrial schools especially in the rural South, or turned to

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other jobs involved with the reproduction and management of the lower-class African American laboring population.

The industrial education system served additionally as a domestic arm of a global imperial project in the U.S. that began to pick up speed toward the end of the nineteenth-century. As Amy Kaplan notes, it is no coincidence that in a post-Emancipation U.S. where worries over withering plantation-based economies proliferated, the nation-state began to look outward for new forms of economic and natural resources. Kaplan focuses on what Lora Romero has called the “home fronts” of imperial culture to dismantle traditional narratives of American imperialism that have constructed an artificial division between earlier territorial conquests on the continent and overseas empire-building later in the nineteenth century. Instead, Kaplan shows how American “domestic” politics have been historically tied to imperial efforts abroad. At the same moment as the U.S. reached out to gain control of territories and populations in places like Puerto Rico and the Pacific Islands, it found new and more intimate ways to keep the imperial project operative “at home.” In his treatment of Tuskegee and Hampton as sites of colonialist, missionary work, Jeremy Wells notes that Armstrong was heavily influenced by what he saw when his parents served as missionaries in Hawaii: later in life, he directly applied techniques for civilizing “the natives” abroad to the inculcation of the nation-state’s own unassimilated groups.

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In 1879 Washington was invited by General Armstrong to participate in an educational “experiment” involving the admission of over “one hundred wild and for the most part perfectly ignorant Indians” (64) brought East from reservations. In his new capacity at Hampton, Washington served as a “house father” to the Native students, taking over an essential aspect of their education: the disciplining of personal habits, hygiene and other intimate affairs. At Hampton, African American and Native education was at base about training supposedly unfit subjects to conform to particular standards of citizenship through a veritable whitening of racial difference. In an anomalous moment in Up From Slavery, Washington explicitly acknowledges that recognition by the dominant society requires a performance in and of whiteness: “but no white American ever thinks that any other race is wholly civilized until he wears the white man’s clothes, eats the white man’s food, speaks the white man’s language, and professes the white man’s religion” (65). At Hampton, as at Tuskegee, the civilizing process extended beyond the pedagogies of the classroom to include a hygienic disciplinarity that sought to keep clean, proper bodies situated within the domestic economy. In Up From Slavery, Washington rhetorically performs a ritualized, purified whiteness by obsessively returning to scenes of cleaning. At Hampton, Washington’s rhetoric turned into praxis for a Native student population being inculcated into forms of “colonial purity” (Wells 66).29

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28 Washington, Up From Slavery.
29 Wells’ thinking on “colonial purity” is indebted to Anne McClintock’s work on the role played by commodity fetishes like toothbrushes and soap in the maintenance of racial difference and colonial order in the nineteenth-century British metropole. See McClintock’s Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest (New York: Routledge, 1995).
Washington primed for his civilizing missions at Tuskegee in his domestic role as “house father” to the “red race.” In 1881, Washington was invited to head up an industrial school in Macon County, Alabama upon General Armstrong’s recommendation. The state legislature had recently approved an act that sought “to establish a Normal School for colored teachers at Tuskegee,” granting the school $2,000 annually, a meager sum compared to the allowances given to other educational institutions in the state. Washington eagerly took up the mission to bring the Hampton model of education into the deep South: to provide students with a “practical education” that favored practice in agricultural and work-related tasks over a classical curriculum that would apparently go unused in the rural South. In the process of “working with the hands,” students would grow to love the menial tasks that differed little from the toil of the (old South) plantation:

My plan was to have them, while performing this service, taught the latest and best methods of labour, so that the school would not only get the benefit of their efforts, but the students themselves would be taught to see not only utility in labour, but beauty and dignity; would be taught, in fact, how to lift labour up from mere drudgery and toil, and would learn to love work for its own sake. (98)

30 Quoted in Harlan, Booker T. Washington, 114.  
31 The question of classical versus technical education was a major point of contention between Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois.  
Washington finds something almost pathetic in the ex-slave’s aspiration for both class and geographic mobility through book learning. In his touring of the rural districts surrounding Tuskegee, he reports happening upon a sad scene (claiming it was “one of the saddest things I saw during the month of travel”) in which “a young man, who had attended some high school, [was] sitting down in a one-room cabin, with grease on his clothing, filth all around him, and weeds in the yard and garden, engaged in studying a French grammar” (81). This rural scene of instruction visualizes the superiority of practical pedagogies of hygiene over the supposed civilizing influences of an education in “French grammar.” The young man’s classical education does little, if anything, to instruct him in the proper ways of civilization. At Tuskegee, the cleaning up of rural “filth”—both the grimy rural subject and the weedy, overgrown space he or she occupied—became the primary aim of a decent education.

Washington saw honor and dignity in schooling that picked up on the mechanical arts traditions under slavery. In many ways, he viewed industrial training as a simple extension of skills learned on the antebellum plantation: he did, after all, refer to the peculiar institution as the “school of slavery.” Throughout Washington’s autobiography and in other works, nothing, at times, seems more disgusting to him than black class-aspiration, an aspiration for class mobility that gets coded as both foppish and morally degrading. Of course, Washington would eventually gain fame, mobility, and wealth through accommodationist rhetoric, becoming the urbane “New Negro” he claimed to despise. While he gained increased mobility in Northern, white, philanthropic circles, he

33 Washington, Up From Slavery.
encouraged black southerners to “cast down your bucket where you are.” Washington favored an industrial education because he did not want his students to consider moving up in the world by moving out of the South. Rather, he, along with other New South proponents, worried about black laborers completely abandoning the agricultural spaces of the South. Washington’s pedagogies at Tuskegee, while couched in the language of Northern, industrial modernity, encouraged students to remain in the plantation districts managing the New South Plantation.

In step with New South rhetoric about making the South industrial, Washington brought Northern models of work, thrift, and orderliness to bear on a rural, ex-slave population that apparently had to be taught in “industriousness.” In Working With the Hands, Washington even falls back on climatic determinations of race (explanations that had also been used to justify enslavement of African Americans in their “natural” tropical environs), to explain why “the great lesson which the race needed to learn in freedom was to work”: “The tropical climate had been generous to the inhabitant of Africa and had supplied him without effort with the few things needful for the support of the body” (16; italics are Washington’s). Extending his civilizing, near missionary work with the Native American students at Hampton, Washington engaged in strict pedagogies of hygiene on the New South plantation at Tuskegee in order to indoctrinate a lazy, wasteful Southern population into the clean, thrifty moral order of the Great White North. In fact, Washington held out hope that African Americans trained in Northern hygiene would turn a fallow South into a newly (re)productive landscape. Soon after his famous “cast

34 Washington’s Atlanta Compromise speech is reprinted in Chapter XIV of Up From Slavery, 142-54.
down your bucket” line in the Atlanta Exposition Address, Washington assured white Southern listeners that if they reached out to aid in the plight of their Negro brethren, they would find “that they will buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories” (144; italics are mine). A few lines later he insists that if the Southern black population is not aided, they “shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic” (145). In the postbellum period, anxieties over the productivity of the landscape in the South continued to be intimately linked with the health (or death) of its black laboring population. I call systems that attend to, and attempt to regulate, such reproductive ecologies—human and non-human alike—plantation eugenics. At Tuskegee, Washington carefully ensured the propagation of a healthy, clean black citizenry willing to make “blossom the waste places in your fields” through pedagogies of post-war hygiene.

Many scholars have documented the nearly obsessive regimes of hygiene and orderliness that stifled students, staff, and faculty in their daily activities at Tuskegee. Washington writes in Up From Slavery, “Over and over again the students were reminded in those first years—and are reminded now—that people would excuse us for

35 Washington, Up From Slavery.
36 See, for example, Harlan’s Booker T. Washington. In Schooling for the New Slavery: Black Industrial Education, 1868-1915 (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2007 [1978]), Donald Spivey documents the hostility of students, and sometimes even faculty, and staff to Washington’s impossible expectations. Spivey’s recognition that “students openly rebelled against the school’s disciplinary practices” (57) is an important intervention: where studies of Washington so often emphasize the control and mastery Washington wielded over his institution, Spivey’s treatment reveals the forms of everyday struggle that resisted the control of students’ bodies, habits, and movement at Tuskegee. The author reports that during the last ten years of Washington’s leadership at Tuskegee, faculty feared that students were armed and ready to attack (58). In 1903, students even waged a strike based on their objections to the rigid order at the school (59).
our poverty, for our lack of comforts and conveniences, but that they would not excuse us for dirt” (115). There was, however, a clear problem with the attempt to sweep the dirt of the Tuskegee plantation from out of public view. In *Working With the Hands*, Washington describes racial uplift in distinctively agricultural terms: “Our pathway must be up through the soil” (29). There is a paradox here: Washington promotes an impossible cleanliness of the bodies and spaces of Tuskegee at the very same time as he encourages racial uplift through hard, dirty toil in the Southern soil. Just pages after Washington insists in *Up From Slavery* that “absolute cleanliness of the body has been insisted upon from the first” (115), readers are offered a scene in which students work to erect the campus’s first building, “digging out the dirt in order to allow of the laying of the foundations” (118). Ultimately, Washington had to come to terms with the dirt of the still-agriculturally dependent South to make black labor in the New South’s soil a noble endeavor.

As Philip Kowalski notes, Washington’s hygienic pedagogy involves a “recuperation of dirt” in which he “transforms dirt from filth and rags into the bounty and richness of the Black Belt, and his fondness for ‘the potato-hole’ initially intimates that dirt in its proper sphere—out of the house and in the earth—can benefit blacks considerably when tilled for agriculture” (182).37 He goes on to point out that for Washington, the humble, pastoral life of Southern agriculture is celebrated, while urban spaces are “eschewed as the real centers of dirt and filth” (192). Indeed, a purifying

intimacy imagined between the bodies and the soil of the Black Belt causes Washington to forward a kind of human planting. In describing the “superficial” and spendthrift black classes of the North, Washington imagines their rural re-birth in the re-productive soil of the “country districts”:

How many times I wished then, and have often wished since, that by some power of magic, I might remove the great bulk of these people into the country districts and plant them upon the soil, upon the solid and never deceptive foundation of Mother Nature, where all nations and races that have ever succeeded have gotten their start. (59)\(^38\)

The purifying planting of urban African American bodies back into the rural plantation districts also belies a desire to rectify what Washington viewed as a feminized and urbanized black masculinity’s unnatural relationship to gender and reproduction. The back to nature impulse of Washington’s rhetoric hoped to draw bodies back to the fields, to make unproductive plantation economies newly profitable in the New South, and to ensure the biological reproduction of a labor force in a South worried about black migration and “extinction.” Washington’s organic, planting metaphors are also significant. Continually allaying white fears, metaphors of natural growth assure readers that the incorporation of African Americans into the larger national body politic will occur naturally and non-violently. In discussing the importance of having students erect many of the buildings on campus, Washington writes, “we built ourselves up year by

\(^{38}\) Washington, *Up From Slavery.*
year, by a slow and natural process of growth” (107). The built environment of Tuskegee is presented as just another organic component of the Southern landscape, an institution made non-threatening by its naturalization into the scene of the plantation.

**Dirt and Disorder: The Public Health Connection**

At Tuskegee, ideas of moral uncleanliness circulated through the actual dirt of the plantation. Washington negotiated Northern, Protestant, and perhaps even bacteriological, models of sanitation with the agricultural roots of the rural South, a necessarily “soiled” society. In her 1966 study of the role of purity in primitive and modern cultures Mary Douglas understands dirt as both matter out of place and the mark of a system. Modern taboos surrounding pollution are often tied to particular aesthetic and hygienic concerns, but dirt is also constituted by modern systems of classification. In the preface to the 2002 edition of *Purity and Danger* she writes, “there is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit” (xvii). Since dirt is disorder, “eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment” (2; italics are mine). I argue that Washington’s obsession with dirt elimination was also an effort to organize an environment in a post-War South worried about a “sick and dying” plantation complex that had formerly ordered unruly bodies and spaces of the rural South. Upon arriving at

39 Ibid.
41 In his introduction to Charles S. Johnson’s 1934 sociological study of rural life in Macon County, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), Robert E. Park writes, “On the whole, the plantation, as at present organized, seems to be
Tuskegee, Washington was heartened to find that the bodies and souls of African Americans in Alabama did not seem to have been weakened and degraded as in the cities. At the same time, he is struck by the disorganization of the plantation districts. Systems of hygiene at Tuskegee sought to order spaces of the South that had been formerly organized by the plantation system, and as I argued in Chapter 2, by earlier forms of plantation eugenics.

In this light, the alliance between Washington’s Institute and the U.S. Public Health System was an ideal partnership. In the mid-nineteenth century, public health in the United States emerged primarily in industrial centers of the North, focusing on the containment of disease and promotion of sanitation measures in increasingly crowded, immigrant-populated cities. The supposed unhygienic practices of the “disorderly classes” were specifically blamed for contributing to disease miasmas in the North. The association between disorder and the underclass prompted public health authorities and sanitation officers (also known as the medical police) to criminalize immigrant communities as diseased populations that needed to be separated from the rest of the population through quarantine, zoning regulations, and other methods of urban organization and containment.

...a sick and dying institution” (xviii). Before he became the acclaimed Chicago school sociologist who helped found the field of urban sociology, Park had interesting connections to the project of rehabilitating the “sick” plantation complex of Macon County: he lived and worked at Tuskegee from 1905 to 1913, during which time he served as Washington’s publicity agent.

42 Returning to the scene of the West Virginia coalmine in *Up From Slavery*, we might also read Washington’s reference to the “motley mixture” of workers in the mines as registering anxieties over immigrants’ as a sources of pollution.
Into the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, public health efforts began to take more interest in the South as fears over yellow fever outbreaks proliferated alongside worries over the deleterious effects of a decaying plantation system on the Southern body politic.\(^\text{43}\) Like Washington’s efforts at Tuskegee, the Southern Public Health Movement was interested in organizing dangerous geographies in the South, particularly those socioeconomic units like the plantation that had been dismantled by the Civil War. Tuskegee’s formalized relationship with official public health initiatives included Washington’s establishment in 1915 of a “National Negro Health Week,” a 1909 conference held at the school entitled “General Health Conditions of Negroes in the Southern States,” and the regular publication of health sanitation pamphlets for the education of the public.\(^\text{44}\)

Tuskegee’s public health pedagogies extended, in a significant way, beyond the school’s pastoral boundaries (large trees that strategically bordered, and hid the school from the hyper-vigilant gaze of Macon County locals), and into surrounding areas.\(^\text{45}\) As part of their participation in the “Women’s Club of Tuskegee,” for example, students

\(^{43}\) James Cassedy notes that after the Civil War, Northern observers like Frederick Olmstead, worried that abandoned and rotting plantation structures—including decaying houses and barns—would breed disease. See Cassedy, “Medical Men and the Ecology of the Old South.” It is also crucial to note that outbreaks of yellow fever were more common in urban Southern areas. On the history of yellow fever and its role in the development of Public Health interest in the South, see Margaret Humphreys, Yellow Fever and the South (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

\(^{44}\) See John A. Kenney, “Health Problems of the Negroes” in The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 37.2 (March 1911): 110-20. Such publications and public service efforts at Tuskegee illuminate the (New South) plantation as epistemological site, and the degrees to which the plantation and the higher education institution have historically been related in the U.S. South.

made home visits to teach local African American residents about the principals of hygiene. In “Health Problems of the Negroes,” Dr. John A. Kenney of Tuskegee Institute writes of the visits:

The smallest details are looked after, as how to prepare and serve their food, how and when to bathe, how to ventilate their houses, how to care for their hair, the washing of their clothing, cleaning their teeth, sleeping between sheets, and all such subjects as tend to improve their home conditions. The special subjects of tuberculosis and typhoid fever have been discussed before the people in the most elementary manner possible. (364)46

It is of course significant that female students were “deployed” to inculcate a larger African American population into Tuskegee’s domestic ideologies of health, home, and hygiene.

Concerns about hygiene and disease in the camps of Washington, Public Health, and the social hygiene movement were inextricably bound up with anxieties about sexuality and deviance in African American communities.47 While public health efforts were clearly concerned with the eradication of non-sexual diseases, the focus on personal cleanliness and moral control in everyday activities reveals that authorities were mostly concerned with how sexual lasciviousness contributed to the spread of disease. Sexually

46 Kenney, “Health Problems of the Negroes.”
transmitted disease or not, public health discourse figured all kinds of disease as sexualized and racialized in its targeting of the “disorderly classes” as always already polluted.

In “Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality,” Roderick Ferguson marks the post-Emancipation moment, in which imperial and military tactics extended to territories outside of the U.S. simultaneously folded back onto marginalized populations on the domestic front, as one in which “sexuality becomes a mode of racialized domestic governmentality” (90). Critical of how the hegemony of the first volume of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* has steered conversations about sexual formation away from race, particularly in queer studies, he turns to Foucault’s concept of governmentality to consider “how the production of African American sexual normativity provided the grammar and logic for racialized strategies of governmentality within the United States” (89). Following Foucault, Ferguson marks this moment as the point when the domestic model of governmentality in the U.S. transitioned from the family to the population. He writes:

As population supplants family, governmentality ceases to be organized around the question of how to economize a household and is instead organized on how to economize a population. The transition from household to population, however, does not nullify the gendered and eroticized tactics associated with the domestic model of governmentality. Indeed, that transition begs the question of how those

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gendered and sexualized strategies associated with the family were inserted into the strategies appropriate to economizing a population. (90)

In his analysis of post-Emancipation industrial educational institutions as racialized, sexualized, and gendered sites of governmentality, Ferguson recognizes how the post-Emancipation domain of African American sexuality was, in his terms, “punctuated,” by concerns not only with gender and sexual propriety but also domestic health and education. Pedagogies of health and hygiene became a prime concern of the industrial schools in the pursuit of producing sexually and gendered normalized African American citizen-subjects.49

**The Tuskegee Experiment(s)**

During the antebellum period, the entire plantation was often represented as a domestic household in which slaves were enfolded, if only rhetorically, into the plantation “family.” Under Reconstruction, black laborers still inhabiting plantation geographies were, following Ferguson, effectively transformed into a population. Ultimately, it was this contained, “non-migratory population” that provided the perfect

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49 Ferguson notes that he uses Booker T as “shorthand for a discourse” in order to widen our thinking of nineteenth-century industrial education beyond Tuskegee: after all, it was a large movement in the South that resulted in similar institutions all over the country (and for multiple groups including Native Americans and European immigrants). Moreover, where a focus on the intellectual debates between Du Bois and Washington has constructed a sharp dichotomy between industrial and humanistic education, Ferguson understands this is a fictional divide, since both kinds of institutions were formed and popularized in the years following Reconstruction in order to normalize African Americans as proper citizen-subjects.
laboratory conditions for the Tuskegee clinical study. The Tuskegee Study emerged out of an earlier therapeutic program that was jointly funded by the U.S. Public Health Service and the philanthropic Julius Rosenwald Fund. Rosenwald, who was the President of Sears and Roebuck, had a long history of investment in the health of the South, was a trustee of the Tuskegee Institute, and a good friend to Washington. With the beginning of the Great Depression, the Rosenwald Fund withdrew its funding from the program and the PHS worried that their hard work would go to waste. Upon the suggestion of Dr. Taliaferro Clark of the PHS, the study was transformed from a therapeutic study, in which participants received treatment after a six-month observation period, into a “study in nature” in which doctors observed the course of the disease as it wreaked havoc upon the deteriorating bodies of its victims, an experimental group composed of around 400 men. The Tuskegee Institute was also an active participant with varying levels of involvement during different stages of the study. Conductors of the study went so far to protect the integrity of their research as to prevent participants from receiving penicillin when it became available in the late 1940s as the standard treatment for the venereal

50 For a more comprehensive overview of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment than I am able to offer here, see Susan M. Reverby’s edited collection, Tuskegee’s Truths. The older, and still very helpful, study is James H. Jones’ 1981 Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment (Revised Edition; New York: Free Press, 1993).
51 It should be duly noted that Rosenwald died in 1932 and may not have been involved with the decision to fund the study. However, the Fund’s involvement with the Tuskegee Experiment still reflects and extends Rosenwald’s longtime philanthropic interest in African American education and health in the South.
52 The control group consisted of around 200 men. The exact number in the experimental and control groups is unclear since researchers, in a blatant violation of standard research protocol, placed some subjects from the control group into the experimental group after they had become infected or were discovered to have already had syphilis. See “Selections from the Final Report of the Ad Hoc Tuskegee Syphilis Study Panel,” in Reverby, Tuskegee’s Truths, 165.
disease. The grotesque violation of these men’s bodies extended even into their death: family members were required to turn over the corpse for an autopsy in order to secure funeral benefits.\textsuperscript{53}

The study continued for forty years until a young PHS officer broke the story to a reporter from the Associated Press in 1972. However, the Tuskegee Experiments had never been a secret. In addition to the regular clinical reports published in medical journals, the study was well known among public health officials, other governmental authorities, and medical personnel. Since the years in which the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments were made public, it still remains a shocking case study in the history of medical ethics violations in the U.S. Something about the Tuskegee Study has made it almost inassimilable into a history of medicine already filled with countless cases of mistreatment, negligence, and abuse. Responses to the questions of how this could have happened, and furthermore, how it could have gone on for so very long, are obviously complex, and perhaps not fully answerable. Nevertheless, an earlier history of hygienic intervention in the region illuminates an important condition for its possibility: the priming of Macon County as an experimental site. Tuskegee, along with its surrounding counties, had long been established as a site of both experimental knowledge production and intensive hygienic intervention.

The founding of the Tuskegee Institute was often termed an experiment of its own. The school was originally approved as a kind of experimental venture by the Alabama state legislature. It was also an “experiment” in that the school was given little

\textsuperscript{53} The promise that family members would not be financially burdened by their death was likely a major participation incentive for many of the test subjects. The burial costs were subsidized through the Milbank Fund, another major Northern philanthropy.
money and was not expected to succeed. In his years fundraising for the school, Washington relied on this rhetoric, arguing that the Tuskegee Institute would “prove” to Northern observers the worth and capability of ex-slaves working their way up and out of the bondage of ignorance. Washington regularly invited wealthy Northern visitors to campus to serve as first-hand witnesses to the kinds of educational experiments performed at the school. Rosenwald was himself a contributor to the spectacular “Tuskegee Experiment” at the Institute. In 1915, he even “brought a private railroad car full of wealthy and prominent Chicagoans to see Tuskegee for themselves, and used the railroad journey to imbue his guests with his own enthusiasm” (141). Through the presentation of Tuskegee as an exceptional spectacle for Northern philanthropic consumption, the campus and its surrounding areas emerged as a “unique” empirical site for the (social) scientific observation of blackness.

The empirical surveying of the region continued with the 1934 publication of Charles Johnson’s *Shadow of the Plantation*, a sociological study of rural life in the South. Johnson surveyed over 600 families in Macon County to determine the effect of a disintegrated plantation system on the disenfranchised populations still inhabiting the Black Belt region of Alabama. *Shadow of the Plantation* is compelling for several reasons, particularly since the volume was published just two years after the inception of the Syphilis Study and was funded by both the Rosenwald Fund and the U.S. Public Health Service. In his acknowledgements, Johnson notes, “The study itself was made possible by the Julius Rosenwald Fund, through Dr. Michael Davis, who has been interested and in turn has interested the United States Public Health Service in certain of

the health problems of this and several other similar counties of the South” (vii). In a chapter entitled “Survival,” Johnson makes a passing reference to the beginning years of the Syphilis Experiments, calling it “a special demonstration instituted as an experiment by the Rosenwald Fund” (187). Johnson’s influential arguments about the lasting legacy of the plantation complex were even used as evidence to support particular aspects of the Tuskegee study in a 1954 article in *Public Health Reports.*

In his introduction to *Shadow of the Plantation*, Robert E. Park reiterates the multiple valences of experimentation at the Tuskegee Institute. In the years before he arrived at the University of Chicago, Park lived and worked at Tuskegee as Washington’s personal secretary and publicity agent. He was likely considered a particularly knowledgeable authority on Johnson’s geography of inquiry. Park calls Tuskegee a “rural laboratory” where Washington “carried on his experiments in rural education—experiments which graduates of his school and others, with the assistance of the Rosenwald Fund, have extended to most other parts of the South” (xv). He also refers to the ways in which the division of the South into various administrative units—the rural districts—made the work of compiling and analyzing statistical data an easier task for the social scientist: “available statistics […] have been collected and classified on the basis of existing administrative units rather than of the region or of any other sort of natural area” (xv). Indeed, Park’s figuration of Tuskegee and its surrounding county as a “rural laboratory” configures the area as an ideal empirical site—a geography primed for the accumulation of empirical data extracted from the bodies that occupied such laboratory spaces.

55 Olansky, et. al., “Environmental Factors in the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis.”
In a 1995 article published in the *Journal of the National Medical Association,* Benjamin Roy makes the bold argument that contemporary scholarship on Tuskegee has neglected a crucial point: Tuskegee was *not* a clinical study. He argues that the experiment was “instead the economic exploitation of humans as a *natural resource* of a disease that could not be cultivated in culture or animals in order to establish and sustain U.S. superiority in patented commercial biotechnology” (299; italics are mine). According to Roy, the Tuskegee Study was actually applied science, used first to standardize existing syphilis tests and later to provide sera that had been extracted from the research subjects to develop serological tests. Ultimately, the continual extraction of “renewable culture sources” (299) from Tuskegee’s test subjects allowed “U.S. investigators and biotechnology to wrest control from German researchers to dominate and maintain leadership in syphilis serology” (313).

Roy reveals that the Tuskegee test subjects quite literally served as natural resources mined in the government’s quest for biomedical dominance on the global stage, connecting an apparently insular and exceptional experiment in the deep South with the transnational commercial networks of U.S. science. The combination of “experiment” and “hygiene” in this rural plantation geography ultimately produced something that has been called, by some commentators, a form of racial genocide. Houston Baker refers to the Syphilis Experiments as “nothing other than a direct, disciplinary power-and-knowledge corollary of disciplinary enclosures, exercises, and tactics of the Tuskegee

plantation” (96). Indeed, there are significant links between the hygienic pedagogies of
the Tuskegee Institute, New South ideology, and the Tuskegee experiments, which took
Macon County’s experimental population as raw material for the production of modern
scientific knowledge. The rural African American subjects of the South were finally
“usable” to the project of the nation-state as Washington argued for, but certainly not in
the way he imagined.

Geographies of Containment, Geographies of Resistance

The nineteenth-century legacy of Macon County as an exceptional plantation
geography, standing outside time, space, and culture, helped to produce the myth of a
closed laboratory for the Tuskegee experiments in the twentieth century. Historically, the
plantation has been reproduced as a powerful site of exception: exempted from the
juridical reach of the nation, a space literally outside the law. Ann Laura Stoler, drawing
from Giorgio Agamben’s theory of the state of exception, argues that as an imperial
formation, the U.S. negotiates territorialization and deterritorialization by continually
producing excepted spaces and populations. In this way, we might think of Macon
County as one such extra-territorial space, where a geography internal to the nation-state
becomes an island unto itself, a “rural laboratory” for the nation’s experiments in

57 Baker, Turning South Again.
58 Stoler, “Imperial Formations and the Opacities of Rule,” in Lessons of Empire:
Imperial Histories and American Power, ed. Craig Calhoun and Frederick Cooper (New
York: The New Press, 2006), 48-60. On the state of exception, see Agamben’s Means
without End: Notes on Politics, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), and State of Exception, trans. Kevin
containment and the extraction of natural resources from human populations and landscapes.\(^{59}\)

Donald Pease notes that extra-territorial spaces are sites where the state dramatizes its biopower (the power over life and death) through the spectacle of bare life.\(^{60}\) In Macon County, the PHS clearly transformed local residents into bare life, to use Agamben’s terminology, stripped of their personhood and rights to protection from the government as citizens properly belonging to the nation’s territory.\(^{61}\) The production of Tuskegee’s residents as pure biological life transformed them into an ideal research population for an extractive enterprise that deceptively presented itself as a clinical study. While the PHS may have understood Macon County as a geography of containment, the men and women inhabiting the region refused to be fully inscribed within that space of exception, resisting their naturalization within the confines of Tuskegee’s laboratory through alternative forms of life. Over forty years of clinical articles reveal the extent to which researchers struggled, and ultimately failed, to present the plantation laboratory as a pure and enclosed space. As mentioned at the start of this chapter, researchers billed the study as a secure and properly scientific investigation by investing in the myth that their test group was a “non-migratory population.” As the study continued, an increasing

\(^{59}\) Thinking of Macon County in terms of an extra-territorial island links the Tuskegee Experiments with imperial “laboratory” sites of hygienic intervention and scientific experimentation in the Global South. See, for example, Warwick Anderson’s *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), and Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).


number of men in the experimental and control groups picked up and left town, 
sometimes keeping in touch with family members and other times disappearing without a 
trace. Other research subjects just stopped showing up for their routine “check-ups” with 
the government doctors. Such subjects remained within the official jurisdiction of the 
contained geography but resisted the biopolitical field through the very fiction of “black 
immobility.” Men in the research groups would sometimes claim they could not leave 
the fields or found other ways to negotiate demands for mobility during periods of 
examination by the PHS.

Despite their best efforts to contain and control the research population, just as 
planters had in the antebellum period, according to Stephanie Camp, attempted to fix 
enslaved people within the master’s version of plantation time and space, test subjects in 
Macon County refused the extra-territorial status of the region.\(^\text{62}\) The clinical articles 
repeatedly belie an anxiety over black movement and its disruption of the Study’s 
progress. These official documents of the scientific study also provide documentation of 
the demands test subjects made in and through their movements. Deciding that their 
odies were for something else while challenging the status of Macon County as an extra-
territorial space (or island), the general research population of Macon County, both men 
and women who were directly or indirectly involved with the study, challenged their 
transformation into a population. The Tuskegee Study demonstrates the extent to which

Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861” in The Journal of Southern History 68.3 
(August 2002): 533-72. This concluding section is also informed by Camp’s arguments 
regarding how enslaved peoples in the antebellum period created “rival geographies” 
(Arne Godlewska and Neil Smith’s phrase) by slipping away, if only for a short amount 
of time, from the controlled and controlling landscape of the plantation.
extra-territorial terrains may become contested spaces, even the most constricting of plantation geographies.
Epilogue // “Time and Space Have No Meaning in a Canefield”: From Plantation Experiments to the Experimental Black South

“I think my own contribution will curiously blend the rhythm of peasantry with the rhythm of machines”

—Jean Toomer, Letter to Lola Ridge (1922)

“The Southland is not a problem to be solved; it is a field of loveliness to be sung”

—Waldo Frank, Foreword to Cane (1923)

In the preceding chapter, I considered how the black industrial school system emerged out of Reconstruction in large part to contain an increasingly mobile ex-slave population within the agricultural landscapes, or work-scapes, of the plantation South. I argued that schools like the Tuskegee Institute, itself planted on the grounds of an abandoned plantation, sought to arrange plantation bodies and spaces that had been disordered by the Civil War through strict hygienic pedagogies and public health-style management that transformed the school’s student population and residents of surrounding counties into a heavily surveilled research population. An enduring legacy of the plantation as an enclosed experimental environment, cut off from the reach of


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modern culture and medicine, made the plantation districts of Macon County fertile ground for the Public Health Service’s 1932 initiation of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. While in the twentieth century the plantation has often been understood in terms of metaphor, where for example the plantation is evoked to dramatize the endurance of racist structures of exploitation and surveillance in the U.S., the Tuskegee case demonstrates how material plantation ecologies continued to reproduce into the twentieth century. They continue to endure into our own moment, where the plantation still operates as a central site of production in the U.S. and across the Global South. I mark the apotheosis of the “experimental plantation” with the atrocities of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments, which made use of exceptional plantation ecologies that had persisted long after the official demise of the antebellum plantation complex.

While Booker T. Washington’s hygienic pedagogies and the Tuskegee Institute’s exploitation of antebellum plantation enclosures perpetuated an understanding of the plantation as an ecologically unique, experimental space, other figures of the period resisted such problematic plantation empiricisms. In 1921, Jean Toomer moved down South to Sparta, Georgia to take a temporary position as principal of a black industrial school modeled after the Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes, as were most institutions of this type.\(^3\) William M. Ramsey reports that during his stay Toomer was “both repulsed and enchanted by what he saw” (75), prompting him to continue his researches into the

\(^3\) The Tuskegee Institute was highly invested in reproducing itself. The school regularly published pedagogical materials through the Tuskegee Extension Department, including instructional handbooks and architectural guides to be used in the construction of new industrial schools. See, for example, The Negro Rural School and Its Relation to the Community (Tuskegee, A.L.: Tuskegee Institute Extension Department, 1915).
beautiful culture of the black rural South, which he lamented was close to extinction. In 1922, he traveled with author Waldo Frank to Spartanburg, South Carolina for what they called a “research trip” on the condition of black folks in the South. Although Toomer expressed interest in researching a Southern landscape rapidly transforming under the conditions of agricultural decay and rapid urbanization, his 1923 experimental novel *Cane* opposes the desire to make the South transparent through empirical observation and objective documentation of the region and its inhabitants. In so doing, Toomer rejected plantation empiricisms in favor of a more radical, experimental black South. *Cane* takes advantage of the South’s highly extractable space. Throughout the novel, usable plantation spaces and bodies are up-rooted and re-routed across national and transnational geographies. Experimental plantation ecologies, which enclosed racialized populations within restrictive, cultivated spaces of surveillance, open up in the novel into a pastoralism that moves and ramifies within and outside the South, effectively transforming non-Southern, industrial environments into Southern, black space. I argue that *Cane*’s plantation pastoral poetics re-routes an urbanized, Northern black modernity down to a radically defamiliarized, more global South.

Where Martin Delany’s 1861 engagement with the experimental matrices of the plantation wrought interesting effects on the narrative form of *Blake*, as discussed in Chapter 3, Toomer’s novel is a full-fledged literary experiment that takes the plantation

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South as a central testing site for the application of modernist aesthetics to the
representation of rural African Americans. The novel is formally hybrid, composed of
pastoral poetry, pieces of drama, and short stories. Its tripartite structure moves in Part I
between pastoral scenes and highly violent representations of rural life in the post-
Reconstruction South, to the chaotic “technological shocks” of black life in urban centers
of the North and Midwest (Part II), to a final section of dialectical catharsis that moves
back down to what Ramsey calls Toomer’s “eternal South” (74). The book was
published in 1923 by New York publishers Boni and Liveright and although it did not
sell particularly well, it became a respected work among the literary avant-garde in
America and eventually in Europe. Having spent most of his life railing against
restrictive racial categories while emphasizing his own complex multiracial background,
Toomer was enraged when his publishers began to promote him as an African American
author. Despite the author’s rejections, his writings continued to be received as “Negro
literature” and by end of the decade, *Cane* was hailed as an early text of the Harlem
Renaissance. Toomer fought these associations throughout his life: he famously refused
to be collected in James Weldon Johnson’s *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922)

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7 Michael Soto discusses how Boni and Liveright promoted Toomer in some advertise-ments as a white modernist and in others as a “Negro author.” See Soto, “Jean
Toomer and Horace Liveright; or, A New Negro Gets ‘into the Swing of It’” in *Jean
Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith (New
and was unhappy at the inclusion of his picture and poetry in Nancy Cunard’s mammoth volume, *Negro: An Anthology* (1934).  

Toomer’s tumultuous relationship with the African American literary canon, and with the question of blackness more generally, continued even into the late twentieth century as scholars criticized the author for both race betrayal and misogyny. Critics such as Barbara Foley have argued that Toomer’s metaphysical depiction of the South in *Cane*, which subsumes “history under myth” (181), problematically aestheticizes—or “naturalizes”—racialized violence against women.  

Over and over again, critics have faulted Toomer for refusing to serve as an objective observer of the South, a role he clearly rejected in favor of a poetics of the South that was irreducible to empirical truth.

Early on in the text, the narrative prophetically notes that “time and space have no meaning in a canefield” (13).  

Toomer’s eschewing of realism for a narrative that stands outside space and time does not elide economic and social reality. Rather, *Cane’s* wild asynchronicity more powerfully captures the vicious cycling of history after “Emancipation” in the South, as irrational brutalities and systems of terror continued to police racialized, classed, and gendered bodies just as in the antebellum period. We might additionally think of Toomer’s experimental fiction in light of Sylvia Wynter’s argument that in the “plantation context” (95) history is itself a fiction.  

Wynter notes that in order to maintain the plantation’s central, yet always hidden, position within the

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8 Toomer’s letter to Johnson is collected in *A Jean Toomer Reader*, ed. Frederik L. Rusch, 105-6.
9 Foley offers a comprehensive overview of critical takes on *Cane’s* relationship to economic and social “reality” in “‘In the Land of Cotton’: Economics and Violence in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*” in *African American Review* 32.2 (Summer 1998): 181-98.
market economy, history had to be distorted: “the myth of history was used by the plantation to keep its power secure” (101). *Cane* picks up on the mythic dimensions of the plantation space to re-imagine the plantation as a black u-topia: a no-place that opens up other possible rootings, and routings, for black modernity. While Foley is troubled by Toomer’s misleading focus on cane fields since, “in reality,” sugar production in the South was nearly dead by the 1920s, I find that the saturating abundance of sugar cane in the text (cane fields dominate the landscape while the intoxicating scent of “boiling sap” fills the air) works to reveal the 1920s South as a deeply anachronistic space still rooted in an exploitative economic system tied to the plantation past. 12 The tripartite, cyclical structure of *Cane*, which moves from the South to the North back down to the South, aptly captures vicious cycles of racism and exploitation in the twentieth-century U.S.

In Part I, Toomer offers a number of Southern pastoral landscapes, in both prose and poetry, that are repeatedly unsettled by lynchings, rapes, and other racialized and gendered violences that proliferate across the narrative landscape. Rather than naturalizing such atrocities, the novel’s uneasy mixing of pleasing pastoralisms with horrific scenes of violence illuminates a long history of naturalized violence within pastoral landscapes of the monocultural South. At the same time, Toomer uses an industrial metaphors to reveal how literary imaginaries of the pastoral had to work ever harder into the twentieth century to mask racialized violence, especially lynching, in an increasingly industrial South. The figuration of the sugar cane’s “rusty roots,” for example, clearly imbricates the fading agricultural economy of the South with mechanical industry. The setting of “Blood Burning Moon” in a southern “factory town”

12 Foley, “‘In the Land of Cotton,’” 186.
further reveals the metamorphosis of Southern agricultural economies into industrialized spaces in the early twentieth century. The presentation of pine-smoke (which pervades nearly every scene in Part 1) as a natural emanation of the Southern landscape is continually undone by its associations with the sawmill, from which the sometimes pleasant, sometimes stifling, smoke is produced: “At sunset, when there was no wind, and the pine-smoke from over by the sawmill hugged the earth, and you couldn’t see more than a few feet in front […]” (3). Trees continually transform in the narrative from natural objects for lyrical praise into sinister accomplices to lynchings or raw materials for the destructive machinations of the sawmill. On the page following a poem that has just described lynched bodies as “dark purple ripened plums/Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air” (page 14, ln. 16-17), the poet attempts to naturalize the “whistles” and “buzz saws” of the sawmill into a bucolic scene featuring a “knoll and hill” and “soft settling pollen”:

The sawmill blows its whistle, buzz saws stop,
And silence breaks the bud of knoll and hill,
Soft settling pollen where plowed lands fulfill
Their early promise of a bumper crop.

Smoke from the pyramidal sawdust pile
Curls up, blue ghosts of trees, tarrying low
Where only chips and stumps are left to show
The solid proof of former domicile (page 15, ln. 9-16)
The scene is transformed into a spectral landscape as “blue ghosts of trees” that have been sacrificed to the sawmill return to haunt what was once a healthy forest. Wood chips and stumps scattered across the landscape are the only reminder, or “solid proof,” of the trees’ “former domicile.” Cane’s uneasy pastoral landscapes, which are continually threatened by the eruption of racialized violence, reveal the extent to which black bodies and lands continued to be exploited in Southern geographies long after the official termination of slavery. Although histories of plantation enslavement haunt nearly every page of Cane, there is only a single explicit reference to the plantation in the novel. At the same time, sugar cane, that most central and notorious monocultural crop of the antebellum plantation, appears everywhere in the novel. Toomer curiously unhinges sugar cane from the plantation.

Where James Grainger emphasized the control of both the sugar cane crop and enslaved bodies within plantation enclosures through the georgic mode in The Sugar-Cane (see Chapter 1), Toomer uproots cane from the plantation to emphasize ongoing fugitivity and movement up and out of the plantation South during the years of the Great Migration. In Part I, the author offers a fascinating image of the South transforming under the effects of rampant industrialization; but perhaps even more uniquely, in Part II, he releases plantation ecologies from their enclosures to reveal a Northern landscape that was being simultaneously transformed by the “trans-plantation” of Southern black folk onto Northern soil. Toomer’s poetic vision of rapidly replicating cane fields and racialized populations that reproduce outside of the enclosed economy of the Southern plantation undoes the enclosed experimental environment of the plantation, transforming
the entire South into an unenclosed space of experimental black cultivation and reproduction.

Toomer’s plantation fiction astutely depicts how the transition from agricultural to industrial economies in the United States played itself out through the field of biopolitics: graphic scenes of black female and male sexuality throughout the novel showcase the perversities of replicating the mode of capitalist production through racialized regimes of reproduction. For example, in Cane’s opening story, “Karintha,” Toomer articulates the link between the industrial sawmill and strange reproductions in the black South:

But Karintha is a woman, and she has had a child. A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest. Pine-needles are smooth and sweet. They are elastic to the feet of rabbits…A sawmill was nearby. Its pyramidal sawdust pile smouldered. It is a year before it completely burns. Meanwhile, the smoke curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself over the valley…Weeks after Karintha returned home the smoke was so heavy you tasted it in the water. (4)

The eerie passivity of this birthing scene transforms a sweet pastoral forest birth into something that appears highly “unnatural”: Karintha’s unwanted, or possibly even aborted, child carelessly falls out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles. Although readers are told the pine bed is “smooth and sweet,” the violence implied by a bed of “needles” lingers throughout the scene, just like the heavy pine smoke that chokes the surrounding air and eventually taints the water supply. Karintha’s unnatural forest birth
takes place in the ominous shadow of the industrial sawmill: the repeated mention of how
the pine smoke “curls up” recalls the contorted position of a fetus while the “odd
wraiths,” or spirits, that hang about the trees conjure up histories of lynching in the
pastoral South.

Rather than viewing Toomer’s depiction of “loose” women as mere misogynistic
representation, as many scholars have, Toomer was attuned to a history of experimental
plantation proto-eugenics that I have tracked throughout this dissertation, beginning with
Thomas Jefferson. Cane reveals the complex and perverse ways that black reproduction
continued to be intertwined with agrarian and industrial economies long after the official
demise of enslavement. Toomer’s depiction of hybridized plant and human species
(women, for example, sprout roots, and “ripen” like fruit trees) recalls a history of
controlled reproduction on the plantation that shuttled between the bodies of crops and
slaves. At the same time, he uses imaginative cross-species couplings to interrupt the
reproductive logics of whiteness that pathologized black reproduction and forms of life.

Toomer’s unenclosed cane fields reproduce rapidly and spread from the South (in
Part I) into the urban North and Midwest (in Part II), where trans-planted black bodies
from the South figured as plant-human hybrids territorialize and transform industrial,
urban centers into Southern, black space. As Werner Sollors aptly points out, Cane’s
“very form is an attempt at finding a literary equivalent for the dislocations that
modernity had wrought by moving people from soils to pavements” (20).13 Black bodies
are continually figured through botanical metaphors as the text negotiates the traumatic

13 Sollors, “Jean Toomer’s Cane: Modernism and Race in Interwar America” in Jean
Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith, 18-37.
dislocations, but also utopic possibilities, that emerge from the “Great Migration” of black folk from “soil” to “pavement.”

While Union Officer Thomas Wentworth Higginson deployed a metaphorics of botanized black bodies to help justify the discipline and cultivation of ex-slaves within the enclosures of an abandoned Southern plantation (Chapter 3), Toomer uses a similar figurative language to imagine the radical transformation of industrial and agricultural spaces throughout the U.S. into an experimental black geography. In one memorable scene from “Box Seat,” one of several stories set in the bustling African American district of Washington D.C., Dan Moore (who, we are told at the beginning of the story “was born in a canefield” (59), finds himself next to “a portly Negress” (65) who transforms into a tree while planted in her seat:

A soil-soaked fragrance comes from her. Through the cement floor her strong roots sink down. They spread under the asphalt streets. Dreaming, the streets roll over on their bellies, and suck their glossy health from them. Her strong roots sink down and spread under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver south. Her roots shoot down. (65)

While the language of “roots” has traditionally been used in support of essentialist and heteronormative narratives about African American heritage and genealogy, Toomer’s bizarre depiction of a woman-becoming-tree eschews black essentialism and normative
reproduction for a more radical becoming. The sprouting of spontaneous roots that shoot down below the asphalt and “waver” back toward the South illuminates how black bodies mediate and sustain (the asphalt streets suck sustenance from her roots) both Northern industrial and Southern agricultural economies. The woman’s rooting in the theater becomes a re-routing, as her ramifying roots, which shoot down but also spread horizontally under the river, remap and re-territorialize both the industrial North and agricultural South as a radically defamiliarized black, Southern space.

I began this dissertation with James Grainger’s 1764 “West-India georgic,” *The Sugar-Cane*, and conclude with Toomer’s *Cane*. While *The Sugar-Cane* marks the moment when the plantation emerged as a bounded, ecologically unique space of experimentation during the mid-eighteenth century, *Cane* marks an important imaginative transformation of the plantation South into a different kind of experimental space. In his foreword to the novel, Waldo Frank notes that in *Cane*, the entire state of Georgia is turned into a “black womb.” Throughout *Cane*, Toomer usurps a long history of controlled reproduction (proto-eugenics) on the plantation which racialized the plantation space in order to imagine the reproduction of a radical blackness across the Southern landscape and beyond. In exploding the plantation’s monocultural ecosystem, Toomer moves us from the enclosed black plantation to the black global South.

Although *Cane*’s scenes are set squarely within the nation, the cover of the first edition of the novel featured a surprisingly tropical landscape clearly situated somewhere outside of the U.S. (see Figure 4).

14 By *radical* I also mean to evoke the original meaning of the word, which according to the Oxford English Dictionary is “of, belonging to, or from a root or roots.”

The depiction of a colorful jungle scene on the cover of *Cane* illuminates how African American literature of the period was packaged and sold as expressing a deep African primitivism even when such descriptions did not accurately characterize the work at hand. A 1923 advertisement of the novel in the *New York Times Book Review* raved, “Jean Toomer’s *Cane* presents emotional, dramatic pictures (in Washington and Georgia) of negro life whose beat, like the primitive tom toms of the African jungle, you can feel because it is written by a man who has felt it historically, poetically and with deepest understanding. ‘It is a new and dramatic interpretation of negro life’”. Although Toomer’s eccentric and multisensory poetic language transforms Southern and Northern landscapes into radically defamiliarized environments, one would, I think, be hard

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16 The advertisement is reprinted in Michael Soto, “Jean Toomer and Horace Liveright; or, a New Negro Gets ‘into the Swing of It’” in *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Geneviève Fabre and Michel Feith, 174.
pressed to locate the sound of “primitive tom toms of the African jungle” in the narrative. The dust jacket nonetheless serves as a pictorial frame that tropicalizes the original 1923 publication. Although *Cane*’s focus on a fairly provincial North-South imaginary may appear to reproduce the nation in its restrictive domesticity, the narrative’s botanically-enabled black colonization and transformation of national space into a Southernized geography opens up into a wider, more tropical, global landscape. The visual framing of the text through the dust jacket image of an African jungle further tropicalizes Toomer’s poetics of an experimental black South.

This project has moved from pastoral naturalizations of enclosed, experimental plantation geographies (Jefferson, Grainger, Higginson, and Washington) to a surprising genealogy of African American “investment” in (Delany) and experimentation with (Toomer) the plantation form. How do we account for the emergence of a vibrant plantation imaginary at the very moment when the U.S. institution was threatened with utter destruction and into the early twentieth century when the plantation was believed to have withered away? The plantation space underwent a critical transformation during this period that exposed how central it was for a way of understanding structural relations in the U.S. Racist thinking produced one kind of plantation with its attending experiments, and anti-racist thinking, recognizing the importance of this enduring space, sought to harness it for its own ends. By placing the plantation at the center of discussions of race and nature in the U.S. and more Global South, these authors illuminate unlikely spaces of resistance, forms of agency, and “radical plots” that are often excluded from accounts of the period. In *Cane*, Toomer’s plantation poetics denaturalizes the anachronistic
pastoralisms of the experimental plantation at the same time as it plays on the heterotopic spatiality of the plantation to imagine a different, more global plantation South.
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Biography

Britt Rusert was born in Tonawanda, New York in 1981. She graduated summa cum laude with a B.A. in English and minor in Biology from Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. She is currently an Ashbel G. Brice Dissertation Fellow in the Department of English at Duke University and also holds a graduate certificate from the Program in Women’s Studies. Her article, “‘A Study in Nature’: The Tuskegee Experiments and the New South Plantation,” is forthcoming in the Journal of Medical Humanities.