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Off the Grid: Zora Neale Hurston's Racial Geography in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

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CRAFT CRITIQUE CULTURE, Work of Recognition

Off the Grid: Zora Neale Hurston's Racial Geography in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Alexander Ashland

On either hand, far down below, rolled the deep foamy water of the Potomac, and before and behind the rapidly approaching step and noisy voices of pursuers, showing how vain would be any further effort for freedom. Her resolution was taken. She clasped her *hands* convulsively, and raised *them*, as she at the same time raised her *eyes* towards heaven, and begged for that mercy and compassion *there*, which had been denied her on earth; and then, with a single bound, she vaulted over the railings of the bridge, and sunk for ever beneath the waves of the river! (Hurston 207)

The following passage, taken from William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, famously depicts the death of Thomas Jefferson's fictional mixed-race daughter. It also helps establish a literary tradition in which bridges fail, at least for some.¹ Part of what makes Brown's hybrid text so remarkable, though, is its ability to imagine the unexpected linkages that begin to emerge in response to society's own infrastructural defects. Particularly in this scene, *Clotel*'s raised hands and upward gaze transfigure

the body itself into a kind of bridge, one whose vertical alignments call attention to the actual horizontal support systems that reduced the body to a mere property transaction. Clotel's suicide demonstrates what the de-propertying of American slaves looks like given a system that positions "freedom" in terms of territorial expansion, ownership, and regulation. Rather than return to the land of her captors, she "vault[s] over" into water, and this act of self-(un)making is motivated by and dependent on a sequence of surficial arrangements that are themselves inseparable from the personal and political landscapes to which they are a part. For Brown, such freedoms are always performed within a spatial arena that is at once physical and political, topographical and social, concrete and discursive. He sensed the ways in which human and geographic "bodies" were managed according to similar logics of territorial importance. Clotel, for example, had intended the "Long Bridge" to communicate her to safety, yet the romantic ideal she crafts of being able to "bury herself in a vast forest" (205) ultimately reveals itself as little more than an ironic foreshadowing of her being routinely "deposited" in a "hole dug in the sand" (207). Situating Clotel's nameless, abandoned corpse in relation to other well-known "bodies" like the Potomac River enables Brown to plot those sites of resistance normally muted by the neutralizing gestures of commercial maps.

To deny that these geographic spaces code subjectivity the same way as Clotel's living (and dying) presence ignores the geopolitical significance of water *as a body*, as a measureable thing whose meaning is generated by a combination of material and immaterial investments. For the slave owner, the river signifies a capitalist futurity which cannot be detached from the physical property it transports. For Clotel, it serves as a destructive force capable of stalling the violent economizing of human "goods," while at the same time serving as a potential site of spiritual deliverance. Each case reveals agency as being intimately attached to the physical spaces in which it is activated. At stake too are the biogeographic equivalencies that organize separable "bodies" under a set of shared commercial rubrics. As Donald Sweig points out, the Potomac River was a "major commercial artery" (507) for the trafficking of slaves, and the catastrophe with which Brown ends his novel dramatizes the exact limit at which such capital/corporal investments are capable of being sustained. Clotel's suicide joins two distinct yet related bodies, the radical conflation of which—corpse is place, place corpse—threatens to remap dominant commercial and ideological terrains according to the associations of the sold rather than the seller. Clotel's "vertical" notion of freedom proves incompatible with those strong horizontal networks of corporal regulation, control, and distribution. Her resistance is one of radical perpendicularity, and these intersections unsettle the idea of land as a fixed site of guaranteed freedom.² Clotel's final "burial" serves as an almost desperate attempt to conceal a malfunctioning apparatus. Indeed, her sinking body problematically relocates American democracy in the fluid backwater channels of racial commerce, and the matter-of-fact way in which she is retrieved and "deposited" into the earth suggests a renewed commitment to those racist layerings on which national "freedoms" are supported and maintained.³

Brown's emancipatory politics are literally embedded in the groundwork of

denied citizenship, and *Clotel*'s final placement speak to this fact. Despite the near century-long gap between Brown's and Hurston's novels, there remains a remarkably consistent skepticism regarding the bridge as an ideal site of safety or freedom. Certainly true of both authors is a shared belief in the impossibility of crossing from one place to another using existing modes of transportation. Toward the end of Hurston's novel, Janie and her transient lover, Tea Cake, attempt to escape the hurricane that has devastated the South Florida "muck." After hours of struggling to survive, they come to the bridge at the Six Mile Bend. There, Janie and Tea Cake "thought to rest. But it was crowded. White people had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room. They could climb up one of its high sides and down the other, that was all. Miles further on, still no rest" (164). As a liminal space, the bridge ought to have literally and metaphorically functioned as a neutral zone; instead, it reveals how racist systems are infrastructurally supported to preserve the privilege of some while confirming the refugee status of others. The vertical ideations of Hurston's protagonist are almost identical to that of Brown's, in turn generating an almost uncanny sense that Janie is picking up right where *Clotel* left off.⁴ Indeed, the total lack of "room" reveals race as both spatially inhabitable and geographically mappable, and it is because of this that Hurston is able to problematize the notion of land as a wholly egalitarian site of democratic possibility.⁵ Space carries multiple lineages at all times, and the parallel oppressions endured by both *Clotel* and Janie push back against the idea of property as a signifier of American freedom and democracy, instead using it to disrupt notions of "settled" racial economies.

This essay considers Janie's desire to live "off the grid" and away from socially prescribed and economically fortified spaces. If abstract notions of democracy and American nationalism are concretized in the recuperable remains of *Clotel*'s body, then Hurston's characters renegotiate place in terms that resist the static categories to which it is confined. Indeed, her racial geography localizes unmappable spaces of psychic, sexual, and spiritual identity, ultimately translating them into a traversable economy of narrative moments. To make this argument, I turn to the history of America's public land survey system, which itself runs parallel to the institutionalization of U.S. slavery. First, though, it needs to be acknowledged how the survey system emerged from European legacies of management, exploitation, and control, all of which Hurston brings to bear on the plot itself. The sudden and exponential increase in saleable land in sixteenth-century England forced wealthy landowners to pursue more precise methods of real estate distribution. By 1620, Edmund Gunter popularized an easily replicable system of measurement whereby land could be surveyed and sold with mathematical exactitude. As these spaces became more intensely regulated, many fled England or were forced to the colonies. The increasing deprivation of common acreage, coupled with the drastic increases in rent that had resulted from land enclosures, made formerly habitable parts of England simply untenable. Those arriving in the colonies found themselves in similar poverty, but with the added option to measure for themselves a livable if still limited portion.⁶

Eventually, American settlements adopted this empirical system of

measurement as part of a broader effort to limit excessive ownership, and create reliable markets for usable land. Gunter's chain inaugurated a statistical worldview wherein wealth quite literally became mappable, and land a visual metric of capital growth and human worth. In America, ownership still existed, but the exactitude with which it could be measured and distributed was believed to have ushered in more democratic, egalitarian means of accessing land.⁷ The idea was to maintain the core idea of private property while at the same time protecting against what was perceived to be the threat of feudal interference. Two organizing principles emerged as a result: Jeffersonian agrarianism, and the public land survey system, the latter of which being more commonly referred to as the "grid" or "rectangular" survey system. On the one hand, democracy was to be cultivated by farmers and laborers, an idea which more or less faithfully conformed to Enlightenment thinking that property rights stem from man's engagement with the earth itself, as opposed to feudal inheritance and the arbitrary "claiming" of land. From this yeoman economy townships would emerge, and the way in which early American geographers and surveyors imagined regulating growth was to divide these communal settlements according to standardized units of measurement: 36-square-mile townships divided into 1-square-mile lots called "sections." These sections were then monetized and sold for one dollar an acre, with four sections being reserved for government use, such as schools or administrative buildings (Linklater 73).⁸

This brief overview is intended to show how liberalism in early America depended on both regulatory control and progressive freedoms. Gunter's chain—a Euro-aristocratic system of measurement used by both colonial elites and disenfranchised exiles—is a useful starting point in that it shows the ways in which wealth, politics, and religion constellate within measurable, quantifiable geographic spaces. But Hurston rejects the notion of land as an accessible, universally available source of self-enfranchisement. In America's collective imaginary, chains serve to remind of the way in which democratic nationalism conforms to a contradictory logic of freedom and restraint. There exists a kind of cognitive dissonance inherent to American liberal policy insofar as freedom for some necessarily comes at the expense of a subjugated other. The Jeffersonian ideal of equal land distribution (as manifested by the Public Land Survey System) became constitutionally enforceable by the late eighteenth century, but as Hurston shows, these developments were inherently gendered and racially motivated, and any attempt to authorize an alternative position within the global structure eventually failed.⁹

While critics have rightly linked the novel to postrevolutionary Haiti as an ideal space of utopic resettlement, rarely has it been discussed the degree to which this Caribbean imaginary exists within the real, post-emancipated continental U.S.¹⁰ Patricia Stuelke observes that Hurston's conflation of U.S. slavery and colonial expansion, revealed in the temporal ruptures and historical overlap of occupied Haiti and the bellum South, demonstrates the ways in which the Civil War can be "repositioned as a practice ground for U.S. imperialist ventures overseas" (762). Eatonville resembles a kind of Black utopia, a remote space that calls to mind Nanny's imagined island "way off in de ocean where de black man is in power"

(14). But this same space also preserves an oppressive legacy of paternalistic imperialism. Janie's second husband, Joe, is the man who "walks in the way of power and property" (48), ultimately reinscribing inherited policies of unequal access to land. He co-opts the fantasy of open space and resituates it according to a strict logic of enclosure. Indeed, his house signals a regression back into an antebellum slave economy, and although he professes to have reoriented the Jeffersonian ideal of landed progress toward an African American purpose, the radically disproportionate circulation of wealth and opportunity in Eatonville reveals the baselessness of such claims.

Janie's own progressions are often discussed in relatively linear terms, citing the fact that her traversal through and ultimately out of various enclosures stems from a refusal to conform to middle-class life (Gates 185). Her relationships with Logan Killicks and Joe Starks suggest as much, and the manner in which each codes his status speaks to an emerging bourgeois sensibility: Brother Logan has the "onliest organ in town" (23), and Starks decorates his house with "gloaty, sparkly white" paint and a "gold-looking vase" (47). But Joe's performance of middle-class wealth conceals a more perverse subtext. His house imitates the expansive, colonial estates of the plantation South, and compared to Joe's residence, "[t]he rest of the town looked like servants' quarters surrounding the 'big house'" (47). The associational chain Hurston develops between economic exploitation and racial inheritance motivates Janie's unwillingness to ascribe to bourgeois values, and her movement away from progressively larger enclosures produces a wariness of what "settled" institutions are capable of offering.

Hurston rejects the idea that domestic property and the freedom it implies can be detached from the global exploits to which it owes its security. Joe succeeds in acquiring property from Cap'n Eaton and Mr. Laurence (36), both white landowners, but the "far horizon" (29) he uses to lure Janie away from Killicks is remarkably similar if not altogether identical to the racist southern economies he had talked about abandoning. Joe and Janie ultimately control all private and public spaces, with the market economy essentially functioning as a monopoly, and the federal post office established by and operating through the Starks name alone. Moreover, Joe's near-mythic purchase of two hundred acres of land gestures toward pre-Revolutionary territorial expansion in which Anglo-American settlements were less meticulously regulated. Despite all this, radical inequality remains not only hypervisible, but reluctantly endorsed. Early in the novel, Sam reflects that

[Joe's] de wind and we'se de grass. We bend which ever way he blows . . . but at dat us needs him. De town wouldn't be nothin' if it wasn't for him. He can't help bein' sorta bossy. Some folks needs thrones, and ruling-chairs and crowns tuh make they influence felt. He don't. He's got uh throne in de seat of his pants." (49)

Here, European lineages are acknowledged but never adequately resolved. The black bourgeoisie Joe works to cultivate manifests itself as more of a neo-feudal caste system.¹¹ As Jefferson imagined it, the farm was supposed to lead to the

formation of local municipalities, where those towns would then expand outward and reinforce a network of shared national interests. Janie's movement from Logan's plot to Joe's empire has the opposite effect insofar as it limits the town's access to the outside world. Indeed, this geospatial regression is effective precisely because it, like the plantation, conceals interior and exterior spaces and presents them as one.

Hurston's skepticism of geographic promise extends to other territories as well, in that psychic and sexual territories are under constant threat of seizure. Nanny envisions Logan Killicks as "protection" (15) against economic and sexual precarity. More specifically, the sixty acres of land he cultivates—itsself an indication of the possibility of African American proprietorship in a post-emancipated Southern landscape—represents a possible though still unsatisfying avenue toward self-enfranchisement. Nanny's problematic description of "colored folks" as "branches without roots" is resolved by an attachment to the kind of land that Killicks cultivates, not that which supports the revelatory "mystery" (10) of Janie's pear tree, itself evocative of the vertical imaginary of *Clotel's* surrogate spiritual freedom. Janie's grandmother places her faith in workable territory as opposed to "roots" of any other kind.¹² Far from operating solely as metaphors of sexual enlightenment or individual transcendence, tree imagery carries with it signs of deterioration and decay. The narrator describes Nanny's head and face as "standing roots," the "[f]oundation of ancient power that no longer mattered" (12). Janie's own resistance to the idea of settlement reveals an essential distrust of American policies of land cultivation and distribution. Elizabeth Jane Harrison posits the "female pastoral" to explain Hurston's resistance to existing southern literary traditions, wherein black women were unproblematically portrayed as mere extensions of an oppressive rural landscape. Female characters, she argues, often occupy a peripheral, almost voyeuristic role in matters both ideological and practical. Far from reinscribing patriarchalism, women writers—both black and white—reimagined southern landscapes as places of cooperative self-mobilization where bodies are liberated from being fixed as mere object accessories to the larger economy of land tenancy and labor. Operating against the familiar southern literary tradition of black women as "folk mothers," Hurston situates Janie within a new topographical and tropological legacy. The kind of pastoralism Janie imagines (i.e. the South Florinda "muck") is not simply a recoloring of a white, gentry leisure class; instead, her "female pastoral" begins to imagine cooperative rather than purely individualistic relations to the land.

But even this more collectively inclusive view of feminine identity fails to account for the fact that "community" often fails. While the "female pastoral" explains certain writers' resistance to a body of literature that catalyzed patriarchal traditions by reducing women to allegory, Hurston challenges the sustainability of such networks by looking at the contradictions that begin to emerge from within black communities themselves. Early in the novel when Nanny discovers Janie kissing Johnny Taylor, the narrator acknowledges that "[h]er eyes didn't bore and pierce" but "diffused and melted Janie, the room and the world into one

comprehension" (12). The scene is not so much one of disintegration as it is of coalescence, but Hurston renders this state of becoming not as liberating, but as a marker of profound personal loss and Janie's future exploitability. Indeed, her emergence into "womanhood" is described in wholly material terms, as if her body, now real, could be surveyed and owned like any other plot of land. "Janie," her grandmother says, "youse got yo' womanhood on yuh" (12). Not only that, but it becomes a discoverable space in which public and private are made legible. Her hypervisual sexuality negates the possibility of a private identity insofar as the protagonist's interiority is always already written across her body, and thus capable of being rewritten by anyone at any time.

For much of the novel, Janie is unable to distinguish between her private sexual identity and the public power she yields. The Eatonville community acknowledges that "[s]he slept with authority" (46), thereby confirming her place in the community as a kind erotic municipality where political power and sexual opportunity collapse into one body. Janie's inability to distinguish between interior and exterior spaces forces upon her a singular, essentialized identity. That is, of course, until Janie's "spirit" (71) leaves the marriage bed, in turn allowing her to control the ways in which she signifies: "[s]he had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them" (72). The ability to bracket interior and exterior spaces speaks to Janie's realization of how place—and thus one's place within them—can be navigated and traversed. Importantly, Janie's sense of individual freedom is traced to spaces which in the past have been marked by and regulated through colonization and enslavement. Sexual identity and the place in which sexual contracts are validated (i.e. the "marriage bed") is here relocated in an ethereal non-presence, a spiritual leaving that finds its parallel in physical departure. Indeed, her flight from and eventual return to Eatonville reveals a persistent tension between conceptions of "settled" black communities and the hierarchies they inspire.

Initially, her migration to the Everglades was meant to suggest an alternative space in which race, class, and gender intersect more fluidly with one another—where the fascicular logic of patriarchal oversight is replaced by a truly egalitarian and outwardly expanding labor economy. Even here, though, natural disaster renders this fantasy unrealizable. Hurston invokes the literal destruction of southern landscapes—and of the southern pastoral tradition—as a means of revealing the vulnerability of alternative spaces.¹³ Returning once again to the bridge, it ought to have functioned as a neutral point in the event of extraordinary catastrophe. In this instance, markers of power and property should ultimately disappear. The hurricane allows for circumstances in which hierarchies are demolished, power dynamics reversed, economic systems dismantled. But the bridge is full; the way toward new or out of old conditions is always already determined. Janie's progression from farm, to town, to South Florida "muck" ultimately shows both land and property to be neither reliable nor flexible in its openness to others, at least insofar as African American experiences are concerned. The multiracial utopia of South Florida reveals the inescapability of racial, economic, and gendered stratification.

Having said that, the insistence that liminality only reveals an opposition to white male authority minimalizes those intraracial politics Hurston sees as so

essential to black communities. Dale Pattison argues that Hurston's resistance can be spatially mapped. Specifically, he identifies "the porch" in terms of what Foucault called a "heterotopia," that is, a space in which hegemonic narratives and social consensus can be contested and scrutinized (11). Foucault understood resistance as operating within and among spatially inhabitable countersites. The porch functions as one such place—an in-between space that destabilizes rigidly enforced social hierarchies and disrupts social homogeneity. The back-and-forth conversations between Sam Watson and Lige Moss are often cited as examples wherein white, southern, patriarchal discourses are subverted by African American modes of expression. Indeed, Foucault's heterotopia can be extended to account for the ways in which African American culture struggled against its own homogenizing slippages. The "nature vs. nurture" dialogue shows how the porch functions as both private property and public forum, but it is a limited arena whose availability does not lend itself to female voices. In response to Janie's longing to participate in Sam and Lige's conversational banter, Joe says:

You'se Mrs. Mayor Starks, Janie. I god, Ah can't see what uh woman uh yo' sability would want tuh be treasurin' all dat gumgrease from folks dat don't even own de house dey sleep in. 'Tain't no earthly use. They's jus' some puny humans playin' round de toes uh Time. (54)

Hurston's deep ambivalence toward spatiality as an avenue toward self-enfranchisement is revealed here when Joe leverages the notion of "settlement" against Janie in order to keep her "in place." Joe has no problem with the cultural heritage Sam and Lige enact, and in fact his "big heh, heh laugh" signals an appreciation of African American expression even as he holds it at a distance. Joe Starks does not object to black culture so much as he does to the idea of fixed economic boundaries being breached by social inter-action and migrating gender expectations. Janie wishes to participate in Sam and Lige's conversation, but her husband ultimately forbids her based on the fact that "[h]e didn't want her talking after such trashy people" (54). Joe views Janie's association with Sam and Lige as an affront to the elevated social status he has constructed for himself. The limitations he enforces can thus be viewed as an attempt to observe strict divisions between property-owning, middle-class elites and the landless majority over which they rule.

Throughout *Their Eyes*, Hurston shows how the vernacularization of white dialect(ic) is intimately tied to place. But even though the porch suggests a kind of universal heterotopic space, it is important to recognize that sites of resistance contain their own social, political, and racial strata. As Pattison correctly points out, much of Janie's own personal journey is motivated by a desire to "dislodge discourses of race and gender from the physical sites that harbor them" (24). Sam and Lige's numerous scenes together show them acting in ways that contradict normal uses of language. Their conversations are "contest[s] in hyperbole and carried on for no other reason" (63). But Janie refuses to recognize the

sophistication behind these exercises in overexaggerated one-upmanship, viewing them instead as yet another manifestation of patriarchal privilege.

Perhaps the only reliable territory in which Janie finds a sense of proprietorship is the novel form itself. Given her return to Eatonville in the final chapter, Janie's framed storytelling constitutes a kind of narrative surveyorship, one which allows her to plot out the limits of her own self-expression. However, unlike the angular precision of the grid system, Hurston's racial geography is measured by an elliptical narrative transfer, one that enables her to chart the otherwise unmappable "horizons" of racial, sexual, and psychological citizenship to which she had previously been denied. Narrative enclosures serve as unique properties from which to establish personal identity, and it should be noted that the "horizon" she refers to in the final pages is not synonymous with any of the novel's earlier articulations of "house" or property, but more likely serves, among other things, as a metacommentary about literary production and the act of writing itself. Janie says to Pheoby, "Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons" (191). The associational link between horizon and property is certainly present, but in these final moments it would be wrong to conflate the two. Hers is a decidedly anti-agrarian gesture, and one that removes "land" and the discourse of property transaction from any valuation of body, mind, or soul.¹⁴ While Janie's personal narrative demands to be experienced with an intimacy unshared by anyone else ("you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there" [192]), the novel itself is in many ways a communal experience. Janie does insist on the possibility of retelling and perhaps rewriting (as Phoeby suggests she will do), and this in turn makes for a landscape that is at once exclusive, but also transmittable and open to the possibility of mutation.¹⁵

Lastly, Hurston's own presence as an author, and thus as an individual responsible for managing her own intellectual property, is activated by the text's narrative slippages, where the novel's framed retelling disturbs moments of apparent third-person objectivity and omniscience, and reroutes them through the novel form's transcendent gaze. What emerges in the recharting and restructuring of these established modes are entirely new landscapes of identification. Again invoking Brown's radical perpendicularity, Hurston's intersection of real and imagined space makes subjectivity a mappable and therefore positionable event, and in doing so leaves *room* for different channels of movement and entirely new trajectories of experience. Property no longer becomes synonymous with acquiring land or navigating commercial goods, but is instead expanded so as to include the possibility of creative and intellectual freedom that is at once socially elusive and deeply personal.

Notes

¹ In recent years, scholars have demonstrated renewed interest in the literary and historical sources that influenced Brown's depiction of Clotel's death. See especially Lynn R. Johnson, "Contesting the Myth of National Compassion: The

Leap from the Long Bridge into Trans-Atlantic History in *Clotel or the President's Daughter* (1853)," *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 6.8 (2014): 11-26, accessed April 4, 2017; Geoffrey Sanborn, "'People Will Pay to Hear the Drama': Plagiarism in 'Clotel,'" *African American Review*, 45.1-2 (2012): 65-82, accessed April 4, 2017.

² This notion of perpendicularity finds further expression when considering the place of *Clotel's* incarceration. Waiting to be sold into the New Orleans market, *Clotel* is imprisoned in a holding cell (or "negro pen") that "stands midway between the capitol at Washington and the president's house" (204). The in-betweenness of *Clotel's* imprisonment suggests that political authority is inextricably linked to the settings in which commercial transactions take place. That such an economy is located at the nation's ideological *center* demonstrates that this is not simply an issue of North vs. South. Rather, as his Conclusion demonstrates, Brown's concerns are more far-reaching than a simple regionalist critique would allow. Instead, he implicates not only those "across the Atlantic" (227), but Christian nations in general.

³ Recent criticism invokes Giorgio Agamben's "state of exception" as a means of exploring the relations between state authority and U.S. racial violence. Orlando Patterson expands on Agamben's concept by acknowledging the "parasitism of slavery." He writes: "the dominator, in the process of dominating and making another individual dependent, also makes himself (the dominator) dependent . . . [o]n this intersubjective level the slaveholder *fed* on the slave to gain the very direct satisfactions of power over another" (336–337). Keeping this parasitism in mind, *Clotel's* suicide becomes in its very extremism an obvious act of subversion in that, without a host, the slave master—and by extension the state through which sovereign violence is enacted—dies. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 1995; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, 1982; Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, "Bare Life," *Impasses of the Post-Global: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, ed. Henry Sussman (Open Humanities Press, 2012).

However, the retrieval of *Clotel's* body poses significant problems to readings that situate state-sanctioned violence in terms of extralegal activity. In fact, the aftermath of *Clotel's* suicide reveals her death to be in concert with a *natural* order of things, the "strong current" of the Potomac river delivering her body to shore, she later being placed in "a hole dug in the sand . . . without either inquest being held over it, or religious service being performed" (207). Here, *Clotel's* exclusion is performed according to the normal limits of a slave's commercial (i.e. property) value. Her death is not exceptional, nor is it manifested in a "state of emergency" where established laws are suddenly and indefinitely suspended. Rather, *Clotel's* burial is powerfully suggestive of a reclamation of white patriarchal authority, wherein her "deposited" corpse, as an insurable symbolic reinvestment, stands in place of lost capital. Still, though, this being a potentially "preventable loss," one

would expect her would-be captors to reinforce and extend their regulatory efforts, especially through the courts which had—as in the case of Nat Turner’s “trial”—proven itself to have had a direct impact on both the slave market and public opinion. Instead, Brown gestures toward Clotel’s death as an instance of mob violence. Indeed, her failure to register as either a legal or religious subject implies what Andrew Hebard refers to as a “state of abandonment,” that is, “a situation in which the state relinquishes its monopoly on violence. The relationship between the legal and the extralegal is not just indifferent; it is, more specifically, ambivalent . . . the limits of the state are both marked and erased” (*The Poetics of Sovereignty in American Literature* 136).

⁴ This sense of the uncanny is further reflected in Hurston’s description of the debris left behind. In one instance, she writes: “They passed a dead man in a sitting position on a hummock, entirely surrounded by wild animals and snakes. Common danger made common friends. Nothing sought a conquest over the other” (164). Shortly after, she writes: “On each side of the fill was a great expanse of water like lakes—water full of things living and dead. Things that didn’t belong in water” (165). The hurricane generates a carnivalesque atmosphere, but even in these grotesque scenes of nature, one is still able to identify a persistent familiarity in terms of social hierarchy, a reality which becomes all too clear upon arrival at the Six Mile Bend. Physical rearrangement or material transformation does not appear to alter the world in any fundamental or essential way.

⁵ Can freedom be spatially mapped? Is there a reliable “space” in which personal and collective identities can be negotiated so as to honor one without violating the other? Such inquiries demand a frame in which material features are allowed to signify in relation to cultural rhythms and practices. The interplay between people and the spaces they inhabit is part of what Brian Roberts identifies as Hurston’s “geosemiotic project” (122), and I draw on this interpretive frame as a means of examining the ways in which Hurston complicates the idea of land and property as discoverable spaces of personal and collective agency.

⁶ Andro Linklater writes: “That the land belonged to the Cherokee, Shawnee, and Six Nations was a detail that could be overcome by personal negotiation or by killing and terror. To the colonists it was obvious that . . . the entire area between the mountains and the river lay open for occupation” (46). The idea that “private property” as it is understood in these contexts can be essentially traced to Enlightenment philosophy is not only mistaken, but flatly wrong. Indeed, Locke understood property as an extension of man through his labor. Simply claiming ownership is itself an act of tyranny. Confronting a group of Plymouth settlers in 1620, Wampanoag leader Massasoit asked “How can one man say [the earth] belongs only to him?” (Linklater 44).

⁷ Although my analysis seeks to negotiate “place” in terms of Anglo-European and African American “settlement,” the history of Native American enslavement, displacement, and assimilation must not be understood as peripheral to such inquiries. As Alan Gally shows in *The Indian Slave Trade*, the parallel if still asymmetrical histories of African and Native American peoples, and their local and

international relationships with Euro-colonial empires, reveals the South as powerfully connected. As a trained ethnographer, Hurston would have been able to intuit the complex ways in which South Florida constellates around land, people, market economies, and institutions. See Allan Galloway, *The Indian Slave Trade*, 2003.

⁸ Religious and political exceptionalism are of course tied to geographic monetization. Winthrop's epitomic "city on a hill" and John O'Sullivan's "Manifest Destiny" both speak to the idea of national possibility as located in spiritually invested notions of settlement. Perhaps less well known is the post-war commoditization of land as a means of paying off debt incurred during the American War of Independence. Jefferson understood the nation could capitalize on untaxable land while simultaneously distinguishing American settlements from inherited European systems of governance and oversight (Linklater 70). He believed America's future depended on the affordable and egalitarian settlement of land. Others like Rufus Putnam and William Grayson, both extremely prominent individuals who influenced decisions regarding the public lands committee, echoed Jefferson's sentiments. Arguing against unregulated capitalist expansion, Rufus declared "I am much opposed to the monopoly of lands and wish to guard against large patents being Granted to individuals [sic] . . . it throws too much power in the hands of a few" and "retards its settlement" (Buell 222). Democratic stability depended on a self-regulating citizen economy, one that invested power in the hands of ordinary people, not corporate entities.

⁹ By situating the beginning of the narrative so close to the end of the Civil War, Hurston calls attention to land as a site of empty promise. Sherman's "Special Field Orders, No. 15" seized land as part of a limited strategy to secure borders and fortify national self-interest. From this order emerged the promise of "forty acres and a mule," one which resulted in failed land redistribution and an eventual reversal of those progressive political maneuvers first initiated by the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Foner 70; 161-65). By mid-1866, more than half the Bureau's land was given back to former owners, in turn forcing newly emancipated slaves to abide by contract laws which effectively reattached their "free" labor to land owned by white families, some of whom were former masters. The egalitarian vision behind land "redistribution" was ironically co-opted so as to reinforce a privileged class of white elites in the South. The "free market" that emerged allowed for widespread exploitation of black wage laborers. Planters could pay workers as low as two to four dollars per month, and this was justifiable given the legal contracts freed blacks were coerced into signing. See also Du Bois' discussion of The Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands in *The Souls of Black Folk*, as well as Linklater's brief but informative history of the 40-acre parcel (166).

¹⁰ For more on this, see especially Jeff Karem, *The Purloined Islands : Caribbean-U.S. Crosscurrents in Literature and Culture, 1880-1959* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010); Daphne Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative,*

Culture, and Ethnography (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 162; Leif Sorensen, "Modernity on a Global Stage: Hurston's Alternative Modernism," *MELUS* 30 (2005): 3-24, accessed August 31, 2016; Patricia Stuelke, "Finding Haiti, Finding History in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *Modernism/modernity*, 19.4 (2012): 755-774.

¹¹ The type of "enclosure" Hurston imagines is most akin to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British "wastes"—previously undeveloped land with little to no history beyond the existence of isolated and vagrant individuals. As Williams explains, "[w]hat was being suppressed on the wastes was a marginal independence, of cottagers, squatters, isolated settlers in mainly uncultivated land. What was being suppressed in the open-field villages must have been a very different kind of community: the close nucleated villages of an old arable economy" (Williams 518).

¹² Hurston consistently reveals throughout her novel the ways in which arboreal metaphors resist static definitions. See Gates, 185-191. Also, Patricia Stuelke's discussion of "branches without roots" is relevant here. She reads Nanny's claim as gesturing toward the way in which "the ravages of slavery unmoored members of the transatlantic black community from the temporality of heteropatriarchal modernity, wresting from them the ability to control their familiar or reproductive lives" (760). Hurston's "erotics of time and narrative" renegotiates U.S.-Caribbean imaginaries in terms of cultural production, one that is "staged through the textual overlay of two historically divergent moments." The modernity of Hurston's novel "constructs a transcultural, transnational force that undoes the racist, heteronormative, patriarchal temporality of liberal modernity" (761).

¹³ The idea of freedom and individuality as corresponding to any particular place is altogether suspect given the legacy out of which Hurston's characters emerge. American slavery—often metonymized in the land upon which it was sustained—ultimately proved itself to be a penetrable institution despite southern writers' efforts to preserve its historical legitimacy. Lewis P. Simpson discusses the ways in which southern "gardens" functioned as familiar symbols in the pastoral imagination insofar as they invested the land with uncontested spiritual purity. Simpson discusses how southern chattel slavery politicalized the garden in order to justify it as a moral and necessary part of American democratic stability (40). Pastoral permanence was defended with a kind of pietistic devotion, and as Simpson argues, southern literary traditions (this is especially true of antebellum narratives) depended on their own alienation from the rest of society, whether in terms of resistance to northern industrialization, or in terms of economic limitations aimed at restricting the proliferation of plantation economies. The land, in other words, made the South exceptional—something to be revered and defended at all costs. See Christopher Rieger, *Clear-Cutting Eden: Ecology and the Pastoral in Southern Literature* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009); Louis D Rubin, Jr, *The Edge of the Swamp: A Study in the Literature and Society of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); Mary Weak's-Baxter, *Reclaiming the American Farmer: The Reinvention of a Regional Mythology in Twentieth-Century Southern Writing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Others have argued that Hurston's famous "horizon" places Janie beyond contingency, and thus beyond problematic American lineages. Hurston's invocation of nineteenth-century transcendental thought is one such justification for this, but even here Janie's visionary transcendence constitutes what Karen Jacobs calls an "embedded individualism" (355). That is, the radical selfhood offered by Janie's "horizon" is sterilized, in a sense, by problematic limitations of gender and race that will continue to exist long after the novel's closure. The individual reveals herself to be captured precisely at the moment of escape. I would argue against this reading insofar as there are many instances (the bridge especially) that position the novel within the lineal—and literary—traditions of other African American writers. Whatever transcendence she experiences at the end of the novel should not be viewed as an attempt to escape problematic histories; instead, this elevation maps her story onto others in the same way she hopes others might be mapped onto hers.

¹⁵ For more on the possibilities and limitations of storytelling, as well as the social politics of liminal spaces, see Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon, "Porches: Stories: Power: Spatial and Racial Intersections in Faulkner and Hurston," *Journal of African American Culture* 19.4 (1996): 95-110, accessed August 31, 2016; Leigh Anne Duck, "'Go There tuh Know There': Zora Neale Hurston and the Chronotope of the Folk," *American Literary History* 13.2 (2001): 265-94, accessed August 31, 2016.

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