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Sawmills and Swamps

Ecological Collectives in Zora Neale Hurston's Mules and Men and Their Eyes Were Watching God

Introduction

Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934), Hurston's first novel, opens with a vision of the swamp as a chronotope of the southern environment. John, a young black teenager, works at sharecropping in a town moated by a swamp and isolated from the outside world. Nature's intractability expresses itself through the soil—the "barren hard clay yard"—and the undeveloped, impassable danger of the swamp, of which John's mother warns him not to get "snake bit" (1934: 12). Slavery also haunts this "over-the-creek" place: in the exploitative system of sharecropping and more subtly in the psychology of white supremacy and subservience that makes Ned, John's stepfather, threaten to beat him for staring at the "white folks" walking by their home (1934: 2). In *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, the swamp is an ambivalent space, temporally stretched across human and environmental time.

From the mid-state Orlando region to the Everglades, almost all of Hurston's fiction and ethnographic stories take place in swampy south Florida. In this chapter, I focus on Hurston's ethnographic engagement with the southern environment—and particularly her representation of swamps—in the frame narrative of *Mules and Men* and in the final third of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Ecocritics, ecofeminists, and black feminist critics have foregrounded the importance of the southern environment in Hurston's writings. Hurston does more than reflect the swamp tropes that pervade twentieth-century southern and African-American literature. Her work shows how ecological

collectives are formed out of the shared exploitation of human, animal, and natural resources. This understanding informs her critique of environmental inequities and her approach to imagining civil rights. For Hurston, the swamp provides a space for ecological agencies that differ from those found in Washington's *Working with the Hands*. Much like Washington's representation of the plantation zone, Hurston represents the swamp space as existing outside the official public domain dominated by white supremacy; however, she focuses almost entirely on community and egalitarian collectives that resist this white domination. While Washington attempted to develop a program of racial uplift through ecological agencies, Hurston imagines the swamp as a space for ecological community.

In order to provide a literary and environmental context for Hurston's work, I briefly examine several figurations of the swamp in early-twentieth-century African-American literature. Swamps are prominent in Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911); two short stories published in *The Crisis* during the Harlem Renaissance; Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934); and Arna Bontemps's 1936 novel *Black Thunder*. These figurations show the swamp as a contradictory space of regulation and wilderness, of menace and utopia. Drawing on work in environmental history, I then approach the depiction of the southern environment in *Mules and Men* through its narrative framing device and the displacements and sublimations enacted in the folktales Hurston collects and recounts. The exploitive and utopian possibilities of the swamp come into focus in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when Janie and Tea Cake live "on de muck" or the Everglades (1937: 122). While the ontological gaps among species collapse in the swamp to form an ecological collective, racial segregation is quickly restored in the aftermath of a hurricane, showing the possibilities and limits of Hurston's vision of civil rights and environments.

Swamp Figurations: A Short Literary History

The swamp itself, while textually mediated, is also irreducible to the text, to figurations and tropes, for it contains real dangers of disease and violence, and the history of anonymous suffering under slavery and Jim Crow. Various

called bogs or marshes, swamps are officially known to ecologists as “wetlands.” The word “swamp” came into prominent use to describe the Americas, particularly the southern United States, during the colonial era. Swamps are numerous in the South; 50 percent of the states of Florida and Louisiana, for example, are wetlands (Wilson 2006: xiii). Abundant with cypress and pine trees, along with the rich soils, such wetlands were economically alluring but proved notoriously resistant to colonization and development. A mix of industries gathered at the outskirts of swamplands: turpentine stills, sawmills, paper mills, and cotton plantations. But the swamp also accrued cultural and spiritual significance. In *Shadow and Shelter*, Anthony Wilson claims that for Harlem Renaissance writers such as Hurston, swamps provide a sort of “spiritual race-memory” (2006: 124). This mixing of spiritual, cultural, and material dimensions of the swamp plays out across several literary works of the early-twentieth century.

In the chapter “Of the Black Belt” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois figures the swamp in the larger context of the southern environment and the sharecropping economy. Foreshadowing *Darkwater*, Du Bois takes the segregated train to Georgia, continually reminding us that he sees the Georgia landscape from the Jim Crow car (described generously as “not so good as the other,” but “fairly clean and comfortable”) (1903: 84). For ecocritic Anne Raine, Du Bois’s personal and geographical journey into the South signifies on nineteenth-century picturesque travel writings and evokes the romanticism of William Wordsworth, particularly in the swamp scene (2013: 324). After touring the “cotton kingdom,” Du Bois continues his picturesque journey to the “Land of the Unfenced” and to ever-intensifying degrees of wildness before finally arriving in the swamp:

The shadow of an old plantation lies at its edge, forlorn and dark ... Then the swamp grows beautiful; a raised road, built by chained Negro convicts, dips down into it, and forms a way walled and almost covered in living green. Spreading trees spring from a prodigal luxuriance of undergrowth; great dark green shadows fade into the black background. (1903: 90)

This description of the swamp is a chronotope, where time and space entwine and thicken. The swamp lies somewhere between the past—the shadowed ruins of the old plantation—and the present, the return of slavery through

forced convict labor. Du Bois deploys a trope that would appear across many twentieth-century representations of the swamp: that of slave-like, convict labor in the swamp. The “pendent gray moss” and hellish atmosphere (the burning wood, “smouldering in dull red anger”) give way to the road, which seems to order the landscape, to show a direction out of—or at least a way for navigating within—the swamp. The trope of convict labor, the threat of snakes, and the eco-melancholia: all point to the swamp as a dangerous yet beautiful space in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Published almost eight years after *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois’s novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* ambitiously interweaves multiple characters and storylines into a Marxian attempt to imagine the global cotton economic system in its totality. Even given the ensemble of characters, it is also a *bildungsroman* about Zora, a black southern girl who spent her childhood in an Alabama swamp. Zora, a “child of the swamp,” is discovered by a young black man named Bles Alwyn in the opening of the novel (1911: 44). The chapter previews an ambivalence toward the swamp that runs through the novel. In one scene, Bles wanders through the claustrophobic night on his way to a backwoods schoolhouse set up by a white northern philanthropist. He hears a song—with “no tune nor melody . . . just formless, boundless music”—that cuts through the darkness and, following it, stumbles upon Zora’s cabin, where she lives with her mother, the alleged witch and folk healer, Elspeth. They hear Bles and, startled, he flees through the woods. In the novel’s opening, the swamp appears as a mythical space, seemingly outside of history—formless and boundless like the music—even to the point that Bles recalls the event as “some witch-vision of the night” (1911: 16). The swamp is, in Zora’s words, a “mysterious” place full of “dreams,” and fairies and devils (1911: 19). In later chapters, she leads Bles through the “swamp-world” with its “great shadowy oaks and limpid pools” (1911: 45).

After attending the same school as Bles, Zora, a promising pupil, is recruited by Mrs. Vanderpool and taken to New York City. Upon her arrival at Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue, Zora equates the urban setting to a swamp. Initially, Vanderpool laughs at the analogy, but Zora explains: “I mean, it is moving—always moving” (1911: 245). The image synthesis of city and swamp is unusual because the city is usually analogized to wilderness, the jungle, or an ecosystem rather than a swamp, whereas the swamp is typically figured as

the antithesis of the urban because of its recalcitrant ecology, its resistance to settlement and development. Zora enthusiastically dives into her education, and the silver (not golden) fleece of the novel's title merges her knowledge of Greek mythology with cotton production. Thus, instead of two opposing spaces between the northern city and the southern swamp, we have three primary spaces represented in the novel: the mythical swamp, the plantation zone, and the urban environment.

In *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, the swamp must be transformed into a synthesizing vision of pastoral reconciliation between the primitive swamp and modernity ([1911] 2015: 141). Using a check she received from Vanderpool, Zora has the swamp cleared so black farmers can grow cotton. Soon begins an aggressive pastoralization of the swamp space. Though she does not explicitly mention it, Zora is determined to follow the Tuskegee philosophy of racial uplift: "We must have land—our own farm with our own tenants—to be the beginning of a free community" (1911: 362). With the relatively small sum she has from Vanderpool, Zora resolves to buy the swamp. Through the mechanisms of formal education, travels in the north, and eventual return to Georgia, Zora's story is dialectical because she retains the spirit of the swamp (she says at one point, "We black folks is got the *spirit*") (1911: 46). Du Bois affirms an essence of black primitivism much like he does in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

In a preview of Hurston's ecological collectives, the black community unites to pastoralize the swamp and turn it into a black-owned, black-run agricultural cooperative. The workers throw themselves into action: the "ringing of axes and grating of saws and tugging of mules was heard ... until at last a wide black scar appeared in the thick south side of the swamp, which widened and widened to full twenty acres" (1911: 375).¹ The workers rest in the afternoon, cradled in an abundant pastoral scene: with "ravenous appetites the dark, half-famished throng fell upon the food, and then in utter weariness stretched themselves and slept: lying along the earth like huge bronze earth-spirits" (1911: 375). However, the swamp exists more in a dialectical relation to the external world rather than an object of pastoral assimilation. Zora must be formally educated, uplifted from the swamp, yet it is her continued connection to the swamp that preserves her affinity for the folk. Du Bois makes it clear that it is the swamp still inside Zora—a kind of spiritual

essence—that motivates her leadership. She proposes to Bles Alwyn a “plan of wide scope—a bold regeneration of the land,” calling the swamp her “university” (1911: 399–400). By the end of the novel, the swamp has “transformed” and is “now a swamp in name only” (426), yet it is still “living, vibrant, tremulous” (1911: 433).

In ways that envision the swamp as more dangerous than Du Bois imagined, a Harlem Renaissance-era short story brings together themes of race and labor within the setting of the southern swamp. Winner of a distinction award in the 1925 *Crisis* literary contest, N. B. Young Jr.’s “Swamp Judgment” begins *in media res* with a southern black sharecropper’s flight from a lynch mob and into the “Big Swamp” and to the Little Cedar River, where he hopes to cross the Alabama border into Florida (1926: 65). Young imbues the swamp with menacing atmosphere: “voracious mosquitoes struck him with unrelenting force and frogs sprang under his feet” (1926: 65). While the swamp is figured here as a kind of refuge from the lynch mob, it still remains a dangerous space where water moccasins might strike at any moment. “Yet,” the narrator says, “what he was fleeing from would out-torture both experiences” in the swamp and in the trenches of France during the Great War: “He had often thought the trenches overrun with vermin had been the very bottom of the earthly anguish, but now he knew the batter-like ooze in its dank surrounding was worse” (1926: 65). We know little of the sharecropper’s background, other than his experiences in France’s Argonne Forest, which left him a wounded leg that handicaps his flight through the swamp. The reason for this escape is revealed midway through the story: the greedy “overlord” of the cotton plantation had come to collect his “share” of cotton bales, which our protagonist had already turned in a week earlier. He initially hides from the overseer, but then shoots the overseer with his “old army automatic” when the overseer physically attacks his wife and children for not disclosing his hiding place (1926: 65).

The story’s most distinctive mark—and its value for contextualizing *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—is its abundant descriptive passages of the swamp. The sharecropper is “ankle-deep in slush” (1926: 66); a “miasmal fog . . . hangs in the tops of the dense growth” of the cypress trees (1926: 65); the “ancient moss-draped cypress” (1926: 66); and a “kingfisher rattled its metallic cry as it darted above him” (1926: 66). After passing out from exhaustion, the

sharecropper awakens to hear the bloodhounds on his trail and, in the story's ambiguous ending: he spots a water moccasin in a cesspool, having "rolled himself against a cypress sapling just off the edge of a stagnant pool of greenish water and was ready to shut his eyes to it all when a slow vibration in the scum of water caught his attention" (1926: 67). The cypress trees, the water moccasin, the kingfisher, the fog, and the slush: all are anthropomorphized with intentionality and infused with agency. This portrayal is not as ambivalent as previous figurations of the swamp in slave narratives and in Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*: the swamp is clearly menacing and dangerous. Yet it also serves as an environmental correlative for unjust social systems. In terms of degrees of menace and danger, though, the swamp in Young's story seems preferable to the violence of the Jim Crow and sharecropping systems of the South. Indeed, the story ends with a kind of magical merger of human and nature.²

Hurston's contemporary, Arna Bontemps, likewise recognized the historical significance of the swamp in his 1936 novel, *Black Thunder: Gabriel's Revolt, Virginia 1800*. The novel dramatizes the failed slave revolt in Richmond in 1800, led by Gabriel Prosser, a figure similar to Denmark Vesey and John Brown. Unlike Hurston, Bontemps was immersed in the black radical politics of the Chicago Renaissance and Popular Front of the 1930s. While official accounts of Gabriel's failed revolt and subsequent hanging gave Bontemps a historical basis, he imagined the event from the perspective of history's silent others: the black men and women who planned the revolt without leaving behind a scrap of paper; the author uses the past to serve his own radical vision during the 1930s and thus turns Prosser into a proletarian hero and martyr (Rampersad 1992: xiv). Echoing the swamp versus city dichotomy in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, the staging ground of the revolt against Richmond is the Brook Swamp, a place that provides the best cover for an attack and "where the creek broadens and the thicket is dense" (1936: 38). The novel dramatizes the failed rebellion; Prosser's capture, trial, and execution; and the newspapers' attempts to contain and narrativize the event as a product of French revolutionary agitators. Prosser's plan was to break the rebel slaves into groups so that they could overtake the town's supply of weapons and set one of the "biggest fires these here white folks is ever seen" (1936: 60). During the revolt,

Bontemps evokes the connection between African-American identity and nature: “It was the earth that spoke” (1936: 61). But it thunderstorms the night of the revolt and the subsequent flooding makes it impossible for the slaves to coordinate their attack. In keeping with the historical events, Prosser is betrayed, captured, tried, and executed by the end of the novel. The swamp in *Black Thunder* holds spiritual as well as strategic significance, and returns us to Wilson’s concept of race memory. This more positive vision of the swamp continues in Hurston’s *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Hurston’s Cultural Ecology and *Mules and Men*

Hurston’s characters in *Mules and Men* embody the sort of primitivism represented in *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, though she embraces such primitivism as an end in itself rather than a stage on the way to transcending the double environments imposed by segregation. Smith contends that “black intellectuals had a troubled (not to say tortured) relationship with primitivism and regionalism: they were drawn to the notion that black folk had something distinctive and valuable to contribute to American culture, but they struggled with the movement’s conception of those folk” (2007: 137). The question of regionalism is important because it is tied up with notions of the black folk and southern culture in general.³

There is probably another influence on Hurston that reflected an emerging new problematic in anthropology. Her approach to ethnography parallels ideas developed by a contemporaneous anthropologist: the theorist of “cultural ecology,” Julian Steward. He introduced ecology into the discipline of anthropology through his notion of cultural ecology, elaborated in his watershed book, *Theory of Cultural Change*. Though published in 1955 (a decade after Hurston’s active literary career had ended), it collects previously published papers from the 1930s and 1940s, and collates a framework initially elaborated in those decades. Cultural ecology focuses on the interaction between culture and environment; it places greater emphasis on human and nonhuman environmental influences than Boasian anthropology did.

Hurston's methods in *Mules and Men* were no doubt similar to cultural ecology.

The research for *Mules and Men* began almost a decade earlier in two periods in 1927 and 1928. Writing *Mules and Men* took Hurston over six years and consumed a great deal of her energy, as opposed to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which she drafted in six weeks while in Haiti collecting material for *Tell My Horse* (1938). The process was multifaceted: it involved a lot of traveling, transcription of folktales, frequent consultations with Boas, and assembling the "lies" into a readable, coherent form.⁴ Hurston biographer Valerie Boyd describes the book as "part folklore, part hoodoo chronicle, and part immersion journalism" (2003: 280). In 1927, after studying with Boas at Barnard College and approaching graduation, Hurston received a six-month-long fellowship to study black folklore in the South (Boyd 2003: 142). In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston gives a now well-known account of her research—what she defines as "formalized curiosity"—in Polk County, the setting for the middle section of the book (1942: 143). After purchasing a used car and a pistol (the Jim Crow cars on most trains were too dangerous for black women, as were the backroads of Florida, where Hurston risked lynching and sexual assault), Hurston moved from the cities of Jacksonville and St. Augustine southward to the small towns of Eatonville, Palatka, and Sanford—all located in lake-dense central Florida, just northeast of Orlando (Boyd 2003: 142–3). Hurston settled in Eatonville and took up residence at the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company, where Hurston ingratiated herself to a community of black working-class men (Boyd 2003: 162). Hurston describes the dynamic eyesore upon her arrival at the sawmill camp: the "asphalt curved deeply and when it straightened out we saw a huge smokestack blowing smut against the sky. A big sign said, 'Everglades Cypress Lumber Company, Loughman, Florida'" (1935: 59). This sawmill camp serves as the setting for the frame story of *Mules and Men*.

In Eatonville, the authorial Hurston records folktales told by the residents, while Hurston the narrator/character overhears the stories, she also engages them as an active participant, lending them a communal sense of authorial presence. Critics have noted both the communitarian spirit and the self-reflexivity of *Mules and Men*. D. A. Boxwell argues that Hurston's participation in the action is "not unique to the ethnological writing of her time, but

the presentation of herself as a strong ordering force in the text is” (1992: 5). In her essay “Thresholds of Difference,” Barbara Johnson points out that in works such as *Mules and Men*, Hurston undercuts the conventions of ethnographic writing with its “inside/outside oppositions,” and in the process transforms the “plane of geometry of physical space into the complex transactions of discursive exchange” (1985: 318). According to Johnson, “Hurston’s own introduction begins with a paraphrase of *Psalm* 122 which replaces the Biblical ‘they’ with an unnamed ‘somebody,’ and it ends by placing itself geographically just outside the town line of Eatonville” (1985: 324). Another way of thinking through these “complex transactions of discursive exchange” is community and the community-shaping work of the tales, the jook joints, and the worker solidarity. In *Mules and Men*, this undercutting begins with the book’s initial framing, the preface by Boas, and the retroactive framing of the book’s glossary and appendix (Johnson 1985: 324).

In the frame narrative, Hurston develops a covert critique of capitalism. Private property appears as a strange thing in Polk County: “signs all over that this was private property and that no one could enter without the consent of the company” (1935: 59–60). Published in 1931, Charlotte Todes’s *Labor and Lumber* gives accounts of the lumber industry’s influence on the southern environment: “smoke and fire from the sawmill burners are the sign posts of lumber towns built around the industry” (21). Todes reports that over 100,000 black workers were employed across Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, and other southern states (1931: 83).⁵ In the twentieth-century South, the timber industry thrived on the exploitation of (mostly black) prison labor and the seemingly infinite supply of cypress trees.

Hurston’s interest in the southern lumber industry and its dependence on black labor goes back to “Spunk,” a short story published in *Opportunity* (1925). This David versus Goliath ghost story and folktale is often celebrated for its use of a southern African-American vernacular in the tradition of Charles Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Jean Toomer (Boyd 2003: 97). “Spunk” tells the story of its brash title character, who, accustomed to getting whatever he wants, gets entangled in a tryst with Joe Kanty’s wife. While the story’s use of dialect and ethnographic authenticity previews *Mules and Men*, the southern environment also plays a prominent role. Spunk works in a saw mill, and his ability to excel on the job makes him reminiscent of other

black folk heroes such as John Henry. Spunk's sexualized displays at work reflect his behavior in town: "[h]e rides that log down at saw-mill jus' like he struts round wid another man's wife" (1925: 26). Joe Kanty, the underdog in this story, is terrified to confront the physically intimidating Spunk Banks. One night, Spunk shoots Joe in the woods with a pistol, claiming a "clear case of self-defense" (1925: 29). Joe's ghost, however, returns to haunt Spunk in the form of a black bobcat, described by a witness as a "big black bob-cat, black all over, you hear me, *black*" (1925: 30). Once the bobcat—its blackness taking on a menacing, metaphysical quality—appears, the woods surrounding the town gain an eerie, southern gothic ambience: "Dusk crept in from the woods" (1925: 27). One day at the saw mill, Spunk falls (or Joe "pushes" Spunk – as Spunk claims with his dying breaths) into the mill's giant "sing-ing, snarling, biting, circle-saw" (1925: 29). This gruesome maiming brings together themes of haunting with the parallel exploitation of black bodies (the workplace accident that Spunk dies in) and natural resources (the sawmill industry's deforestation). This parallel exploitation—its imagery and narrative elements—runs through the sawmill frame story of *Mules and Men*.

In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston describes her stay at the Polk County sawmills during the time of *Mules and Men*. In a passage similar to the descriptions of felling trees in "Swamp Moccasin," Hurston characterizes the black workers as artists:

These poets of the swinging blade! The brief, but infinitely graceful, dance of body and axe-head as it lifts over the head in a fluid arc, dances in air and rushes down to bite into the tree, all in beauty. Where the logs march into the mill with its smokestacks disputing with the elements, its boiler room reddening the sky, and its great circular saw screaming arrogantly as it attacks the tree like a lion making its kill. The log on the carriage coming to the saw. A growling grumble. Then contact! Yeelld-u-u-ow! And a board is laid shining and new on a pile. All day, all night. Rumble, thunder and grumble. Yee-ee-ow! Sweating black bodies, muscled like gods, working to feed the hunger of the great tooth. Polk County! (1942: 147)

In this aestheticization of work and erotics of felling trees, Hurston celebrates the worker and lionizes the sawmill's machinery in a move typical of proletarian literature and the Marxian dialectic, in which the instruments of production are good but the modes are bad. This section undercuts itself, however,

when it describes the smokestacks that “dispute” the air, the boiler room that reddens the sky, and the saw that screams “arrogantly” and “attacks” the tree.

In the Polk County section of *Mules and Men*, Hurston ventures into the swamp with the all-male workers. In her representation of the swamp, Hurston acknowledges the danger that we see in the stories by Young and Matheus. Whenever Hurston mentions sawmill and turpentine still jobs in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she puts “jobs” in scare quotes, just as the law is the “law” in these areas. She portrays these camps as lawless and dangerous frontiers, where the mere perception of slight could get one killed: “since the law is lax on these big saw-mill, turpentine and railroad ‘jobs,’ there is a good chance that they [the murderer] never will be jailed for it” (1942: 146). The men “look out” for Hurston and “see to it that [she] didn’t get snake-bit nor ‘gator-swallowed” (1935: 66). The white watchman, Hurston learns, was killed by a panther two weeks before. She feels safe, though, for the men are like warriors as well as workers: “[t]hey can hurl their axes great distances and behead moccasins or sink the blade into an alligator’s skull” (1935: 66). The danger is neutralized in this account and the swamp is treated with a sense of irreverence. Despite the all-male work camps, Hurston visited nearby phosphate mines and work gangs in the cypress swamps (Boyd 2003: 168). A group of workers undertake a journey to a sawmill in search of work. Along the way, they exchange stories like the travelers in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

Following the adage “God made de world and de white folks made work,” the black migrants display various forms of resistance to the racialized capitalist system. They live in a community of work and play. An example of Leo Marx’s machine in the garden, the intrusive whistle of the sawmill sonically marks the line between work and play: the “big whistle at the saw mill boomed and shrilled and pretty soon the log-train came racking along” (1935: 69). But the heat of the swamp makes work unbearable, and the workers just “naturally” take a siesta in the shade: “Phew! Sun and sawdust, sweat and sand. Nobody called a meeting and voted to sit in the shade. It just happened naturally” (1935: 84). When the “mill boss” refuses Hurston and the workers she is with, it shows that the mill depends on a surplus of reserve labor to keep wages down. In one incident, Eatonville local Jim Allen decides to go fishing when Mrs. Bertha Allen implores him to help clean up their living quarters. But Jim refuses to work the mill boss’ property for free, finding a pocket of

resistance in the constant give-and-take with the white mill owners: “You ain’t de Everglades Cypress Lumber Comp’ny sho nuff. Youse just shacking in one of their shanties. Leave de weeds go” (1935: 92–3). This battle between the white boss and a collective of workers develops a few years later into an ecological collective in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

These “lying sessions,” so called by Hurston in *Dust Tracks on the Road*, focus on a range of human and animal characters. The tales include such characters as John Henry the railroad worker who outworks the company’s steam-driven machines (1935: 56–7; 248). Many of the tales reflect a nostalgia for a more agrarian way of life. One lying session involves bragging about who’s “ole man” had the richest land, and the virtues of commercial versus natural fertilizer (1935: 101–2); Sack Daddy claims that “mosquito dust” makes the “finest fertilizer” (1935: 100), boasting that one year his father “raised pumpkins so big dat we et five miles up in one of ’em and five miles down and ten miles acrost one” (1935: 100). They then turn to bragging about who has seen the poorest land. One man saw land “so poor they had to wire up to Jacksonville for ten sacks of commercial-nal [commercial fertilizer] before dey could raise a tune on dat land” (1935: 102). Other tales revolve around anthropomorphized accounts of animals—lies of resistance, ironic reversals, and allegorical significance. Such tales relate comic accounts about snakes getting their poison (1935: 96); the “gator’s” evolution (1935: 105–06); the boll weevil (1935: 99); and anthropomorphized, talking rabbits and mules (1935: 172).

The framing device and some of the tales bear a conscious/unconscious relationship, in which the tales are displacements and sublimations of the text’s eco-unconscious—a repository of catastrophic events (e.g., floods and hurricanes) and fears of the wild. Hazel Carby argues for a form of historical, cultural, and mythical displacement that, I argue, coincides with the operations of displacement in the eco-unconscious: “Hurston’s representation of the folk is not only a discursive displacement of the historical and cultural transformation of migration, but also is a creation of a folk outside of history” (1990: 77). In her introduction to *Mules and Men*, Hurston claims that migration is central to the collection, for Florida offers a “cross section of the Negro South” (1935: 1). Reasons for migration were environmental as well as social: natural disasters such as the Johnstown

Flood of 1899 and the Mississippi Flood of 1927; the 1926 and 1928 Florida hurricanes; the boll weevil's decimation of cotton monocultures; and the droughts of the 1930s.

These particular lies, usually comic in nature, sublimate and displace communal affects that can be found in the frame narrative's references to the southern environment of swamps, forests, sawmill camps, and turpentine stills. For example, the story of the Johnstown flood is separated spatially and typographically by the frame narrative. The tale undergoes a series of displacements: the tale, which takes place in western Pennsylvania (incidentally, near the setting of *Blood on the Forge*), is told in Eatonville, Florida. The Johnstown Flood of 1889 was, at the time, the most destructive flood in US history with a seventeen million dollar cost and over 2,000 dead. Located east of Pittsburgh, Johnstown was a steel mill town that could be found downriver from a dam, which burst during the flooding. Hurston sets up the tale: "So James told the story about the man who went to Heaven from Johnstown" (1935: 11). The tale itself is an outlandish retelling and resetting of the biblical flood in the American South. As James recounts and Hurston writes: "[i]n one place they call Johnstown they had a great flood. And so many folks got drowned that it looked jus' like Judgment day" (1935: 11). In the tale, a black southerner dies in the flood and goes the heaven. The joke on John is that once he arrives in heaven, he meets the angels Peter and Gabriel and tells them repeatedly about the flood, "jus' like [they] didn't know already" (1935: 12). Even though the angels give John a harp, he keeps "right on stoppin' every angel dat he could find to tell 'im about dat flood of water" (1935: 12). But John gets the cold shoulder from one very old angel, and he goes to Peter, who responds with the tale's punchline: "'Aw shucks,' Peter tol' im. 'Dat was Ole Nora. You can't tell *him* nothin' 'bout no flood" (1935: 13). The lie ends there, with Noah winning a bragging contest he never entered. The traumatic incident of the Johnstown flood is rendered comical. Also, given that much of this ethnographical material was gathered in 1928 and 1929, James's tale also invokes the Mississippi River flood of 1927—the most catastrophic flood in the region in recent history. The community Hurston studies, with its mesh of voices and affects, previews the workers in the Everglades in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Ecological Collectives in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

The last third of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* take Janie and Tea Cake to the Florida Everglades, near Lake Okeechobee, with West Palm Beach to the east and Belle Glade to the south. The geography is important here because it contributes to the relative autonomy (as well as tragic outcome) of Tea Cake and Janie's romance. The vernacular expression "on de muck" substitutes the colonial name "Everglades" for a form of folk signification. In this way, it is what Gates calls the "speakerly text," a text that is "oriented toward imitating one of the numerous forms of oral narrative to be found in classical Afro-American literature" (1988: 181). Gates argues that the swamp functions in the opposite way that it does in Du Bois's *Quest of the Silver Fleece*: "[w]hereas the swamp in Du Bois's text figures an uncontrolled chaos that must be plowed under and controlled, for Hurston the swamp is the trope of the freedom of erotic love" (1988: 193). My approach here is to treat the swamp in its figurations, in Hurston and across early-twentieth-century African-American texts, while also considering the swamp in the context of its environmental history; moreover, the swamp is more than a "trope of the freedom of erotic love"; it is also a space for an ecological, multiethnic community.

The restless and whimsical Tea Cake spends his days roaming the muck, where he enjoys a freedom of mobility rarely possessed by African-Americans in the South. This freedom contrasts with Janie's relationship with her deceased husband, Joe Stark—a relationship that is literally defined by immobility, by sitting still. With reference particularly to *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Scott Hicks argues that Hurston's writings "embrace global consciousness, repudiating emplacement in and fealty to a world order that denies her characters autonomy and equity" (2009: 64). Thus, according to Hicks, Hurston refuses to yoke race and place together, even as she focuses on a black South, she "envision[s] transformed black relationships to southern landscapes" (2009: 64). While mobility is certainly a running motif throughout her work, I do want to emphasize her regional specificity, or rather, her ability to synthesize the local with mobility.

Environmental historians remind us, however, that life in the swamp is irreducible to tropes: it is the space of very real dangers, suffering, and

memory. Wilson argues that southerners saw the swamp as the “last pure vestige of undominated” southern environmental culture, and that the swamp “resisted, revised, or rejected” the southern nationalist project of white supremacy (2006: ix). Aarthi Vadde calls swamps (referring to the context of India) “backwaters spheres,” a “third space of subjective formation” that goes beyond the public or private spheres (2009: 524). The backwaters sphere is a space of “cross-species solidarities” that form an “ecological collectivity” (2009: 524). This interspecies solidarity and collectivity that constitutes backwaters ecology are key notions that inform my reading of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Like the real-life complexities of the swamps, Hurston’s portrayal of African-Americans goes far beyond Richard Wright’s infamous criticism that the novel stays in “that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears” (1937: 22). Hurston introduces the Everglades/“muck” with a vision of the swamp sublime (to borrow a concept from Allewaert):

Big Lake Okeechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything. Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were eight and often ten feet tall down there. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild cane on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too. (1937: 123)

Hurston repeats the word “wild” several times with a sense of wonder similar to romantic writers of the nineteenth century—its positive valuation reinforced by the repetition of “w” sounds: wild, weeds, well, wheat, and world. The marshes are also a mix of wilderness and weeds with fertile ground “waiting” for agricultural development. Even the uncultivated roads easily trounce Kansas in agricultural potential. It is worth noting that for most of Florida’s history, the Everglades were regarded as a useless bog, unsuited for agricultural and economic development (Wilson 2006: 4). For Hurston, the muck is a wondrous and wild space, bigger than human dominion.

The swamp also becomes a site that combines multiethnic solidarity with—albeit modest—forms of ecological agency. Janie and Tea Cake frequently mingle with Seminoles, Bahaman migrants, and poor white farmers.

The Seminoles, idealized by Hurston, enjoy a kind of ecological agency, “calmly winning their living in the trackless ways of the ‘Glades’” (1937: 124). Much of the intermingling among groups occurs in the recreational space of the jook joints, where the workers, after a full day in the bean fields, engage in “[d]ancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing, winning and losing love” (1937: 125). At one point, Janie is intrigued by the rhythms of the Bahaman drummers, observing them accompany Tea Cake on guitar every night (1937: 133). Later, it is a large group of Seminoles that warn Janie about the impending hurricane (1937: 146). Even a “white doctor who had been around so long that he was part of the muck” provides further evidence for the diversity of this milieu (1937: 167).

Ecological community finds further expression in the forms of play and freedom of mobility that the swamp affords. The frequent fighting over loves lost and won, the gossip, and casual vices (e.g., alcohol and gambling) within this double environment contrasts with the systemic racism and exploitations of the official culture beyond the swamps: the forced labor, the sacrilegious mass graves, the refusal of healthcare to nonwhites, and the racist judicial system in Janie’s trial by an all-white jury. Play becomes a form of defiance against the seriousness of the white regulatory gaze. When Tea Cake recruits Janie for work in the bean fields because he cannot stand to be separated from her all day, their “goofing off” on the job is infectious: “all day long the romping and playing they carried on behind the boss’s back made her popular right away. It got the whole field to playing off and on” (1937: 127). Their house—full of guitar playing, drumming, dancing, and gambling—becomes the cultural center of the workers. They use forms of play against the “serious” white men and bosses.

For a moment existing as one part of a double environment, this ecological community in the Everglades is swept away by hurricane floodwaters in the novel’s climax. The most likely historical referent for the hurricane in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane. But two other hurricanes, the 1926 hurricane and the 1929 hurricane that battered the Bahamas also serve as significant points of reference. Hurston was collecting material for *Tell My Horse* in the Bahamas at the time the 1929 hurricane struck (Boyd 2003: 187). This experience seemed to have left Hurston with an indelible impression of the destructive power of the Atlantic storm cycle. She

describes the experience in *Dust Tracks on a Road*: “I lived through that terrible five-day hurricane of 1929. It was horrible in its intensity and duration. I saw dead people washing around on the streets when it was over. You could smell the stench from dead animals as well. More than three hundred houses were blown down in the city of Nassau alone” (1942: 159). The 1929 Bahamas hurricane, also known as the Great Andros Island Hurricane, did substantial damage to the Bahamas and claimed about fifty lives.

In many ways, the 1928 hurricane plays the farce to the tragedy of the 1926 hurricane. Both hurricanes were virtually identical in their wind power and landfall; both hurricanes flooded Lake Okeechobee and killed hundreds of black farmers, Seminoles, and migrant workers from Caribbean islands. Following the 1926 disaster, which killed 400 and displaced 40,000, a rivalry concerning how to manage the lake erupted between the Army Corps chief engineer and the *Everglades News* editor, Howard Sharp (Grunwald 2007: 186–8). The editor accused the Army Corps of refusing to drain the already high waters of the lake in the early summer of 1928. Tragic irony prevailed when Elliot defied his critics, refusing to clear drainage waterways and asserting that history would not repeat itself. The issue for Sharp was motivated by class: Elliot was protecting the interests of developments along the coast north of Miami in the West Palm Beach area. Elliot and the Florida governor eventually caved to pressure and passed a new property tax bill through the Florida legislature to fund a \$20 million drainage project. But wealthy coastal landowners sued the government, blocking the execution of any such project by the time another hurricane season arrived (Grunwald 2007: 186–94).

The 1928 hurricane is the second deadliest in US history (second to the 1900 Galveston hurricane). The hurricane hit Lake Okeechobee and flooded the cities around the lake, drowning an estimated 2,500 people. About three quarters of these were migrant farm workers. Hurston personifies the hurricane as “Old Massa” and uses military metaphors to anthropomorphize its behavior. The clouds gather and “arm themselves with thunders and march forth against the world” (1937: 150). Old Massa presides over the world like it is a plantation, rearranging the furniture, as Motor Boat phrases it: “Big Massa draw him chair upstairs” (1937: 150). Critics have noticed Hurston’s depiction of the inequality and exploitation of labor in the hurricane’s aftermath. But the novel points out that environmental inequities exist alongside ecological

collectives and prior to the hurricane. During the evacuation period, when the hurricane is still a mere ominous stillness, only the Seminoles and animals—rabbits, possums, rattlesnakes, deer, and panthers—flee the swamp for higher ground. Eventually others “hurried east like the Indians and rabbits and snakes and coons” (1937: 148). Thus, Hurston also dramatizes an ecological collective throughout the buildup to the storm.

This personification of the storm inadvertently underscores its tendency to amplify or exploit inequities already established by Jim Crow, segregation, and the legacy of slavery. Eventually Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat have to leave their own house and find shelter in an abandoned house. But then they face their main threat: flooding. The levee breaks and Okeechobee’s waters creep toward the house. The lake is a “monster” that “began to roll in his bed. Began to roll and complain like a peevish world on a grumble” (1937: 150). Tea Cake makes a quick calculation of the situation: “Lake Okeechobee is forty miles wide and sixty miles long. Dat’s uh whole heap uh water. If dis wind is shovin’ dat whole lake disa way, dis house ain’t nothin’ tuh swaller” (1937: 154). Janie and Tea Cake flee again, but Motor Boat decides to take his chances on the upper floors and the rooftop (he ends up surviving, and Tea Cake later says in hindsight that they should have stayed put).

Supposed divisions between human and animal, the living and the non-living, collapse into ecological collectives, before and throughout the storm, and temporarily replace carefully regulated racial and class dichotomies. Tea Cake reassures a man that a rattlesnake will not bite him—that “common danger made common friends. Nothing sought a conquest over the other” (1937: 156). The floodwaters are also “full of things living and dead,” indifferent to the distinction (1937: 156). This ecological collectivity breaks down in the aftermath of the hurricane, when Tea Cake and Janie reach the so-called city of refuge (1937: 158). When Tea Cake and Janie seek a dry point on “the fill” (landfill), they find that the bridge—the highest point of elevation—is already too crowded: “[w]hite people had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room” (1937: 156). This unraveling actually begins earlier, we find out, when Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog while in the process of intercepting the dog’s attack on Janie. The infection does not affect Tea Cake until weeks later, when his rabies-induced paranoia and jealousy compel Janie to shoot him in self-defense.

Even as this accidental infection appears natural, Hurston undercuts this naturalization of Tea Cake's seemingly inevitable doom by emphasizing his lack of access to adequate healthcare, as well as his unwillingness to seek it out. As with the 1927 Mississippi Flood, the American Red Cross is on hand, but it is virtually absent in the novel, mentioned only in passing (1937: 161). Instead, the grip of white authority dominates the decimated landscape. The novel's focus turns to the grisly aftermath of corpses in the street. Tea Cake is spotted by two white men with guns, who then force him to join a group of laborers tasked with burying the dead. The men take Tea Cake as though he were a fugitive slave, assigning him a new name and ignoring his pleas that he is a "workin' man wid money" in his pocket (1937: 162). In this case, the commons, the public lands are spaces of regulation and coercive labor:

Tea Cake found that he was part of a small army that had been pressed into service to clear the wreckage in public places and bury the dead. Bodies had to be searched out, carried to certain gathering places and buried. Corpses were not just found in wrecked houses. They were under houses, tangled in shrubbery, floating in water, hanging in trees, drifting under wreckage. (1937: 162)

The color line is administered even in the face of ambiguity. The white bodies are gathered and buried in coffins with marked graves, while the black bodies are thrown into an unmarked, "big ditch" (1937: 162). The workers, however, find it difficult to identify the color of the bodies because of their state of rapid decay in the Florida heat and humidity. "God have mussy! In de condition they's in got tuh examine 'em? Whut difference do it make 'bout de color? Dey all needs buryin' in uh hurry" (1937: 163). The white men with guns command the workers to divide the bodies based on hair if they cannot tell by skin color. Tea Cake remarks on how "mighty particular" these white men are about how these "folks goes tuh judgment" (1937: 163). When Tea Cake escapes and returns to Janie, it is the swamp where he suggests they seek refuge: "De quickest place is de 'Glades. Less make it on back down dere. Dis town is full uh trouble and compellment" (1937: 163). We learn later from the white doctor that during this period of forced labor, Tea Cake should have been seeking out care: some "shots right after it happened would have fixed

him right up” (1937: 168). The simplicity of this fix underscores the tragic irony of Tea Cake’s demise.

Conclusion

Hurston’s politics are notoriously hard to pin down. She is individualist, rejecting the notion of “race achievement”—that is, both notions of the Washingtonian uplift and the Talented Tenth—and simultaneously a promoter of southern black folk culture (Boyd 2003: 25). Hurston notoriously claimed in 1934 that “the Jim Crow system works” because, despite segregation, it promotes equality (Boyd 2003: 365). But Hurston said her statements were taken out of context: her point was that while the South officially sanctioned segregation, the practice was supported *de facto* in the north. Thus, no such “equal” spaces are provided in the North; desegregation laws would be inconsequential (Boyd 2003: 366). This controversy shows Hurston’s penchant for being contrarian, deliberately provocative and equivocal. Given this nonconformism, it is no surprise that her vision of ecological collectives does not align with Washington, Du Bois and *The Crisis*, or the black Marxism of William Attaway (discussed in Chapter 5).

Hurston’s work exemplifies several swamp narrative tropes and figurations: struggles with poisonous snakes; the simultaneous danger and refuge of the swamp; the swamp’s resistance to regulation and economic development; multiethnic, interspecies, and living/nonliving ecological collectives. In *Mules and Men*, the tales are framed by descriptions of black labor and white-owned spaces of sawmills, coal mines, and turpentine stills. These work spaces are juxtaposed with the small mostly black towns, jook joints, swamps, and evenings spent telling “lies” on the porch. These two opposing southern spaces are intimately linked through the tales themselves, for the tales render into comic form not only the traumatic experiences of slavery and racism, but also the southern environment itself with its floods, boll weevil attacks, and unpredictable wilderness spaces. In Hurston’s account of the southern environment, she sets up a contrast between communal folk and corporate-capitalist practices. The spaces populated by African-American, Bahaman migrant laborers, and Seminoles cannot be resolved

with the white-capitalist order. This irresolvability or mere coexistence, which takes its own forms in the writings of Washington and Newsome, is not coequal either, but it does provide a space for agency alongside a public domain ordered by white supremacy. In Hurston, the ontological blurring of interspecies solidarities, and of the living and nonliving contrasts rather than correlates with the separations imposed by anthropocentric and white supremacist biopolitical regulation. Though the tales in *Mules and Men* rely so heavily on anthropomorphism, Hurston seems more concerned (especially in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) with the effects of human activity on animals than other writers studied in this book (with the exception of Newsome).

In this chapter, I have tried to treat the swamp in its literary figurations in the context of environmental history and pull out the racial, political, and ontological implications. In the opening of her autobiography *Dust Tracks on the Road*, Hurston reflects on the mystical interfusion of memory and the material environment: “[l]ike the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me” (1942: 1). Just as Booker T. Washington’s writings reflect environmental and human time, Hurston’s words juxtapose the geologic time of the animistic rocks and the human time of memory. By 1941, William Attaway would develop this concern with race and environment into a black Marxist “land ethic” in his Great Migration proletarian novel *Blood on the Forge*.