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Digging Deeper: Gardens in Postbellum Southern U.S. Literature

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Digging Deeper: Gardens in Postbellum Southern U.S. Literature

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B.A., University of Oklahoma, 2002
M.A., University of Oklahoma, 2009

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An abstract of
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Abstract

Digging Deeper: Gardens in Postbellum Southern U.S. Literature
By Ieva Padgett

The metaphor of the garden has been of particular significance in the literature and history of the U.S. South. The idea of the Garden of Eden helped provide both the impetus and the justification for colonizing the New World, including the southeastern region of what is now present day United States. European colonists' Edenic visions of the southern landscape eventually morphed into and became conflated with the exploitative economic entity of the southern plantation. The garden trope often functioned as a device through which the plantation became cleansed of its brutal economic facts, including full implications of enslaved labor, and emerged as an idyllic place where harmony defined human relationships with one another and the environment.

This dissertation aims to complicate the dominant image of the garden in southern U.S. literary studies as an idyllic metaphor that is complicit in attempts to neutralize the horrors of colonialism and slavery. By examining representations of actual, ordinary gardens in the fiction of George Washington Cable, Edith Summers Kelley, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, and Eudora Welty, I explore how the narrative focus on garden sites as material places in which people labor and plants grow can generate productive tensions when analyzed against the background of idealized, discursive gardens of early colonial literature as well as literature of the plantation tradition. Cable's use of gardens reveals their counter-colonial potential and challenges the historical dominance of the plantation in the literary southern landscape during the decades following the Civil War. By removing gardens from the province of the economically privileged, Kelley and Roberts employ gardens in ways that legitimize claims of belonging by the southern underclass of tenant farmers in the 1920s, an era of relative national prosperity. When juxtaposed with the novel's background of environmental degradation, the gardens of Welty's *Losing Battles* do not render the natural environment in mythical terms, but compel reflection about responsible environmental practices in the face of significant economic pressures to do the contrary. Reflecting on southern gardens as material sites that also signify larger ideas and historical legacies enriches our understanding of southern U.S. literature and its history.

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Introduction: Southern Gardens as Material Places

The Hamlet, the first of the novels in the Snopes trilogy by William Faulkner, concludes with a spectacle of a poor farmer Henry Armstid digging in the garden of the Old Frenchman's place, "a site of a tremendous pre-Civil War plantation" (1). Armstid is looking for money that the planter, whose name has long been forgotten, supposedly buried thirty years ago as Grant's army was approaching. True to his role as the novel's indomitable capitalist, Flem Snopes capitalizes on the legend of the buried treasure and spends his nights digging in the garden, ostensibly looking for the hidden money. So perfect is Flem's appearance of secrecy—digging under the cover of nightfall while ensuring just enough sound and moonlit visibility to be found out—that the itinerant seller of sewing machines, V.K. Ratliff, persuades Armstid and another farmer Bookwright to investigate the garden plot for themselves. Throughout the course of *The Hamlet,* Ratliff had seemed to be the one person to have the ability, if not to outsmart, then at least to resist being taken advantage of by Flem Snopes. However, when Ratliff, Bookwright, and Armstid also take up their spades one night and find the money that Flem had planted for them to find—and then proceed to buy the ten acres on which the old mansion stands for an outrageously high price—Ratliff has to admit that he has been spectacularly and conclusively conned by Flem and Flem's harnessing of the myth of the Old South.

The factor that plays a sizeable role in Flem and Ratliff's decisions to acquire the old mansion site—and, we might infer, in Will Varner's as well—is the plot's history as the residence and immediate environs of an antebellum planter. For all of Flem's ingenuity, he could have devoted a lifetime to nocturnal excavations in one of the nondescript fields that surround the hamlet of Frenchman's Bend, without ever provoking Ratliff into heedless deal-making. Even if Flem himself does not buy into the myth of the Old South, which the ruined mansion

represents, he correctly predicts someone else would. It is the vision of antebellum "Old South" that beckons to Ratliff and his companions. On one level, Ratliff is convinced that there must be something to the legend of the buried money if Flem Snopes, whose sole purpose in life appears to be accruing wealth, apparently believes in it. Flem's actions, however, derive their significance from romantic misrepresentation of the antebellum U.S. South, [1] especially its plantations, in the decades after the Civil War. Not only did the literature of what is now generally referred to as Plantation School foreground harmonious relations between slaveholders and the enslaved people, plantations themselves became idyllic places, which housed no spiritual or earthly cares, for everyone was happily in their place, and the planters were implicitly so rich that everyone was well provided for—according to their station, of course.

Seen through the eyes of the (presumably white) public, romantic haze also engulfs the Old Frenchman's place, *The Hamlet's* plantation. At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator alerts the reader that something may be amiss with the portrayal of the former plantation site. It has receded into a mythical past, which is much more distant than the thirty years that have elapsed would seem to warrant: "[N]ow nobody knew what he [the planter] had actually been, not even Will Warner, who was sixty years old . . . Because he was gone now, the foreigner, the Frenchman, with his family and his slaves and his magnificence" (4). With living witnesses conveniently (and suspiciously) eliminated, it is the presumed former magnificence that shimmers like a mirage.

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[1] I employ this term to designate (roughly) the southeastern region of the United States in a nod to the hemispheric/transnational "turn" in American and southern U.S. literary scholarship over the last few decades, which has usefully pointed out the rather arrogant exceptionalism that rendered the U.S. as plainly *American* and the U.S. South as simply *the* South, as if there were no other places to which such labels applied equally well. Although I will be using the terms *U.S. South* and *South* interchangeably throughout this dissertation, in order to reduce the cumbersome prose the more proper designation sometimes engenders, I always mean the U.S. South in acknowledgement that the U.S. constitutes only part of the hemispheric Americas and that its southeastern regions exist within broader southern contexts, which may be designated as the global South, circumCaribbean or plantation America.

Ostensibly, only one aspect of the romanticized plantation past appeals to Ratliff and his companions: its material riches. They go through the troubles of stalking, digging, wheeling and dealing, because ultimately they hope to be rewarded by money. However, the trio's entrance into the garden—the container of the treasure they desire—muddles such a straightforward account of what motivates them. Their encounter with a former antebellum garden reveals that the three men are invested in the myth of the Old South in far more complex and insidious ways than just financially. When Ratliff, Bookwright, and Armstid approach the sloped garden site, the narrator remarks: "The slope had probably been a rose-garden. None of them knew or cared, just as they, who had seen it, walked past and looked at it perhaps a hundred times, did not know that the fallen pediment in the middle of the slope had once been a sundial" (375). At first, the party's disregard for that cliché of the refined plantation culture—the rose garden—appears to indicate that they have not bought the pretensions to gentility inherent in the immensely popular postbellum portrayal of plantation life. The rich connotations of the term *pediment* in the next statement, however, indicate that the men may have succumbed to the myth of antebellum glory at an even deeper level than if they had merely appreciated its decorative gardens. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, *pediment* may refer to the triangular gable, which tops the (often columned) façade of a Grecian style building, or it may be a reference to a "broad, gently sloping rock surface at the base of a steeper slope, often covered with alluvium, formed primarily by erosion." The simultaneous suggestion of a manmade architectural element and a naturally occurring geological phenomenon naturalizes, in a manner of speaking, the favored architectural style of the wealthy southern planters (who admittedly formed but a tiny fraction of the population) by making it appear as organic and uniquely wedded to the natural order of things. Associating an attribute of a stereotypical southern mansion with a geological formation implies

that the former, like the latter, exists in a stable, rather static condition, largely immune to the frantic pace of human society. At the same time, the descriptor of the pediment as *fallen*, combined with connotations of erosion attending the geological meaning of the word, shrouds the bygone culture, that the pediment is a monument to, in a romantic aura of tragic and inevitable demise due to external forces. Altogether, when they perceive the slab of rock as a pediment, Ratliff and his companions signal their acceptance of the myth of the Old South as an American Arcady—a world that was idyllic, harmonious, aligned with nature, and irrevocably, tragically lost.

Unfortunately for them, and as they are about to find out through their ruinous investment in the literal old plantation, they are not looking at a pediment. They look at, but do not see, a sundial. There is a crucial distinction between not knowing and not caring, as was the case in their attitude towards the roses, and simply not knowing, which is their position with regard to the sundial. Recognizing the sundial for what it is would entail the introduction of temporality into the midst of a mythically rendered place. In part, of course, the sundial, as an ancient form of keeping time, is but another aspect of white southern antebellum pretensions (aggrandized in the traditional plantation novels) to an old culture with time honored traditions. However, as it sits in the literal middle of the southern garden, it also points to the historically constructed nature of the culture such a garden supposedly represents. Far from being "an idyllic sanctuary, a kind of sunny Shangri-la, into which the cares of the world rarely intruded" (W. Taylor 150), both the plantation that gave rise to the mythology and the actual place in which the three men find themselves have always been thoroughly permeated by social and economic forces. Its current mythical timelessness, in other words, is very much a present construction. Time, literally, sits centrally within it in the shape of a time-measuring device.

Incapable of seeing the sundial, however, Ratliff is unable to separate the space of the garden from the mythical realm and locate it within the historical present.[2] If he were able to, he would realize how unconvincing he sounds when trying to entice Bookwright to invest in the legend of the buried money:

> Dont you know folks have been looking for that money for thirty years? That every foot of this whole place has been turned over at least ten times? That there aint a piece of land in this whole country that's been worked as much and as often as this here little shirt-tail of a garden? Will Varner could have raised cotton or corn either in it so tall he would have to gather it on horseback just by putting the seed in the ground. The reason aint nobody found it yet is it's buried so deep aint nobody had time to dig that far in just one night and then get the hole filled back up where Will Varner wouldn't find it when he got out here at daylight to sit in that flour-barrel chair and watch. (378)

Thirty years is an awfully long time to dig in any garden, even if done in nightly increments, and not find anything. It takes only a couple of days of digging in the said garden before Ratliff sheds the mythical vision that had clouded his judgment and finally connects the dots on how Flem Snopes tricked him (by having a distant relation pretend to be another interested party in purchasing the garden site and thus whetting Ratliff's appetite even more).

The Hamlet's thoroughly turned over patch of land, which lies adjacent to the big house of an antebellum southern plantation, serves as a useful point of departure for examining the portrayal of gardens in the postbellum and twentieth century literature of the U.S. South, which

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[2] Owen Robinson also registers different temporalities in which the former plantation site exists: "Flem brings the Old Frenchman place out of the past tense, even in its ruined state, and turns it once again into a source of profit . . . The house and garden is rumored to harbor buried treasure, a staple myth of plantations sacked during the Civil War . . . this legend, of course, is an inherent part of what is seen as a monument to. Flem takes this monument, and . . . uses its legend to his advantage, thereby making its significance temporarily alive" (79-80).

is the topic of this dissertation. The garden on the Old Frenchman's place encapsulates a number of salient issues that make such critical inquiry at once challenging and worthwhile. I will provide a brief overview of the challenges as well as my reasoning for pursuing garden study, before presenting each in greater depth. First, the web of legends that entangles the garden site reminds the reader how thoroughly the trope of the garden is enmeshed in the historiography of the region. Because it metonymically represents the plantation and alludes (especially in the Americas after the arrival of the Europeans) to the Garden of Eden, it is inextricably linked with colonization and slavery. Second, the garden—both as an idea and a patch of land—has significantly contributed (and continues to contribute) to maintaining a romantic aura around antebellum plantation culture, as seen both in literature and in the still extant or restored gardens of various former plantations in the 21st century U.S. South. Whereas the dilapidated mansion in *The Hamlet* functions mostly as a sort of stage piece, the garden emerges as a space where the Old South myth is so alive that Ratliff and his many predecessors try to claim some part of it for themselves. Third, despite the crucial rule that the garden plays in the legend of buried money and efforts to reclaim it, the garden as a horticultural entity—as a place where plants grow and people work—disappears under the weight of signification with which it is tasked. Neither the narrator nor the characters can apparently be bothered to consider any factors (e.g. plants, which used to grow there) that have historically made the place a garden.

The aim of this dissertation is to complicate the dominant image of the garden in southern U.S. literary studies as an idyllic metaphor that is complicit in attempts to neutralize the horrors of colonialism and slavery. To return to the garden in *The Hamlet* by way of illustration, it seems to me that we have figuratively dug in the southern garden as an extension of a whitewashed antebellum plantation long enough. Digging in the garden on the Old Frenchman's place helps

Ratliff to shed—finally—any nagging belief that there must be something to the legend of the buried treasure and, by extension, the mythical Old South. Likewise, a sustained critical engagement with literary gardens of the U.S. South might lessen the power of the ideological deployment of the garden archetype for oppressive, racist ends. In their introduction to the special issue of *The Global South* devoted to "Plantation Modernity," Amy Clukey and Jeremy Wells declare their (and the issue's contributors') "conviction that the 'plantation' ought not to remain a euphemism, that it and all of its associations must be deromanticized" (4). By restoring the label of the *garden* to places that are gardenlike in the more conventional sense of the term—i.e. small, regularly cultivated plots of land—makes the concept of a *garden* less available for euphemistic references to southern antebellum plantations or the project of colonization. Furthermore, acknowledging various gardens that populate the literature of the U.S. South—e.g. an urban Creole garden, a vegetable garden of a tenant, a flower garden of a farm wife, which constitute the focus of the subsequent chapters—provides alternate southern genealogies, not only of gardening, but also of imagining one's relationship to the geographical place and the natural environment.

When people cultivate or are otherwise involved with gardens, they are engaged with their immediate surroundings. At the same time, they participate in centuries-old traditions that often endow their horticultural activities, even their passive horticultural pleasures, with rich cultural signification. A garden is at once a small plot of land, and a site that often gestures beyond itself, the way a metonym might.[3] Rather frequently, given the grandness of discourses in which gardens have participated (and arguably continue to do so), e.g. colonization, it is precisely the more modest literary gardens that can be rich sources of cultural meaning and

[3] I am indebted to Benjamin Reiss for this articulation of the garden concept.

engender alternative cultural narratives. Within postcolonial contexts, therefore, Shelley Saguaro calls for attention to "'Other' gardens that are posited in contrast to those of the dominant culture"; such gardens are "smaller, diverse, include more food crops [and] are, literally, 'closer to the ground,' products to eat or sell or exchange" (128). Throughout the history of the United States, gardening has also been closely linked with ideas of democracy and conscientious citizenship,[4] therefore garden sites are imbued with political significance (as we will see in Chapter 1 and, to a lesser degree, in Chapter 2). At the same time, gardens provide an experience of "everyday nature."[5] Far from presenting a pristine wilderness that we can afford to view as being at some remove from us and our social sphere, the interdependence of the natural environment and the human exists at the very heart of a garden, making garden sites ripe for exploration of environmental-and-human concerns. Although prosaic and small in scale, garden sites thus have the potential to encapsulate key complexities of human lives and imaginative responses to them.

In the context of southern United States, gardens carry a heavy historical and ideological burden. Historically, the idea of a garden has been associated both with the impetus for and the practice of colonialism (as was already hinted by Saguaro, quoted earlier). In his magisterial study of the twin development of environmentalism and imperial expansion, *Green Imperialism*, Richard Grove traces how a web of interactions among European, Arabic, and Indian cultures gave rise to an idea of some faraway place, often a garden, into which no worldly care intruded. The "discovery" of lands, which were new to European systems of knowledge, made locating the earthly paradise a possibility. As Grove puts it, "The developing scope of European expansion

[4] George Washington Cable, the main focus of Chapter 1, espouses such views. For a broader historical context, see Emmett, pp. 11-43.

[5] Scott Hess describes "everyday nature" as a quest for "an understanding of 'nature' that includes habitual as well as heightened experience, work as well as leisure, human as well as nonhuman relationships" (96).

during the Renaissance offered the opportunity for this search of Eden . . . to be realized and expanded as a great project and partner of the other more obviously economic projects of early colonialism" (4). Garden and island were, according to Grove, "metaphors of mind" (14) or "totemic forms" (13), which allowed colonists to manage the veritable deluge of new information—concerning both the natural world and the processes that were taking place in the colonies—within comfortingly familiar and circumscribed parameters.

The beginnings of English settlements on the North American continent were also heavily dependent on the garden, both as an idea and a practice. Patricia Seed notes the "remarkable ordinariness of English possession" evident in the fact that building homes and planting gardens were the key signifiers of land ownership (17). Planting a garden and enclosing it meant having a legal claim on the land: "By acquiring a physical boundary, the English garden began to signify possession." Conveniently, therefore, even though the colonists encountered gardens of Native Americans, they were deemed to be merely "resembling" gardens instead of actually being gardens and therefore were no indicators of rightful ownership (28). Given the weight of possession that gardening conferred, it is no surprise that the English referred to their activities in the overseas colonies as planting a garden (27). When the founders of the Virginia Company requested of the English king for authorization "to make habitation [build houses] and plantation [plant gardens or crops]" (qtd. in Seed 18), their formulation revealed that the physical characteristics of a garden, as a place where the actual activity of *planting* happens, were inseparable from the metaphorical power it held for establishing a colony (*colony* itself being one of the meanings of the word *plantation*, according to the *OED*).

To backtrack even further, though, the colonists were planting gardens in large part because they already were—serendipitously and, perhaps, even providentially in their minds—on

a continent they were determined to see as a garden. When English captains Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe recounted their approach to the coast of modern-day North Carolina, they employed decidedly horticultural language: "The second of July [of 1584] we found shole water, wher we smelt so sweet, and so strong a smel, as if we had bene in the midst of some delicate garden abounding with all kinde of odoriferous flowers, by which we were assured, that the land could not be farre distant" ("The First Voyage" 2). Plausibly, Patricia Seed offers this and similar passages in early colonial literature, some relating to New England, as evidence that the "Englishmen were predisposed to experience the overseas world as a garden" (26), not least because they stressed the olfactory effects of gardens as was fashionable in contemporary garden literature (26, n50).

I linger on Seed's analysis of colonists' gardens because it so effortlessly combines the metaphorical meaning of the garden with its "remarkable ordinariness" as a site of human labor, albeit in this case with legal implications. As we will see, such an easy transition between metaphor and fact is something of a rarity when it comes to gardens, which are located in the southern U.S. regions. For example, in *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) Leo Marx points to a moment in Robert Beverley's *History and Present State of Virginia* (1705) where the two registers of the *garden* collide. Noting that Beverley pays homage to an established tradition of portraying New World as a garden (in fact, Marx cites the very quote by Amadas and Barlowe mentioned earlier), Marx observes that Beverley is ultimately unable to embrace it. That is because the bountifully abundant natural environment of Virginia (garden-as-metaphor) has made the European settlers so lazy that they cultivate few actual gardens of their own (garden-as-fact). Beverley, in other words, has identified a disjuncture between the two meanings of a garden that he cannot resolve: between "a wild, primitive, or pre-lapsarian Eden in which

[Beverley] thought to have found the Indians, and a cultivated garden embracing values not unlike those represented by the classic Virgilian pasture" (87). The idea of Virginia as a garden overshadows and, indeed, even prevents actual gardens from coming into being. Fact and metaphor conflict.

Marx describes Robert Beverley as a colonial, native-born writer whose work somewhat presciently addresses a quintessentially American subject: "the affinity between the conditions of life in America and the pastoral ideal" (75). Beverley, however, engages with only one conception of America (to adopt Marx's usage): America as a garden, not the contradictory image of America as "a hideous wilderness." The latter conception, Marx somewhat blandly notes, was preferred by the New England Puritans because habitation in the wilderness entailed work and, by extension, called for "aggressive, intellectual, controlled, and well-disciplined people" to do it (43). If Marx is aware of incipient regional stereotypes his argument delineates, he does not address them explicitly. However, they are embedded in his text nevertheless—on the one hand, one encounters indolent southerners immobilized by the natural profusion of their environment, and resourceful, highly motivated New Englanders on the other. Furthermore, the northern folk are overall immune to environmental factors because they themselves choose to embrace the *wilderness* characterization of their surroundings, instead of its imperceptibly affecting them.

Writing roughly a decade later, Annette Kolodny engages more directly the differences between North and South vis-à-vis the natural environment. Kolodny's introduction, where she provides initial evidence for her assertion that Europeans were prone to look at the American landscape as a virgin or a mother, relies heavily on textual support from the early encounters with nature in southern colonies. Amadas and Barlowe's aforementioned description of the coast

as "some delicate garden abounding with all kinds of odoriferous flowers" is particularly pertinent for Kolodny's purposes, because it encapsulates the view of the land as feminine. Quoting Paul Shepard, Kolodny finds in these early colonial writings the affirmation that "the garden may in fact be 'an abstraction of the essential femininity of the terrain'" (5). There is no mention of regional inflection of such experiences; what Kolodny describes appears to be a proto-American view of the New World landscape, in which the garden provides one of the major metaphors.

In the next chapter, "Surveying the Virgin Land," a curious change occurs. Kolodny argues that American attitudes towards the landscape became bifurcated. According to Kolodny, writings out of southern colonies, such as Beverley's *History* (also discussed earlier by Leo Marx), began to signal unease that the natural environment satisfied (male) human needs and desires so completely that it resulted in a degradation of the colonists themselves, because both their ambitions and their work ethic suffered. Determined to avoid such detrimental effects of the landscape, the accounts originating in the New England colonies emphasized the need for labor before the landscape could become truly welcoming or Edenic. Because writing from the southern colonies showed the dangers of nature's fulfilling too well "the instinctual drives inherent in the pastoral impulse" (15), the northern writers took a different strategy. They went to great lengths to show that unlike "[t]he sensuously abundant ambience of the South" (19), the nature in northern colonies required significant investment in terms of human labor. In short, the overall goal of the writers stressing the labor aspect was "that the easeful, self-indulgent capitulation before an overwhelming abundance, and the consequent outcries against such idleness, which had become the dominant pattern of southern life and writing, not be repeated in the North" (20).

While it is a thought-provoking observation on Kolodny's part, the neat dichotomy of North/South views on nature and its relation to "the pastoral impulse" becomes suspect upon closer examination. To begin with, there is the basic problem of chronology. With the exception of rather oblique references to John Smith's early writings on Virginia, Kolodny cites mostly 18th century documents, chiefly promotional tracts, to show that the southern colonies were cast in paradisiacal terms. The texts she uses are dated in 1717, 1731, and even Robert Beverley's *History,* if we recall, was published in 1705. In contrast, the northern-authored narratives, which supposedly self-consciously resist the effects of profligate southern nature, have been penned in the first half of the 17th century, such as John Smith's "Description of New England" (1619) or John White's "Planter's Plea" (1630). Even setting aside the problem of positioning earlier narratives as responses to a much later body of literature, the uniformity of northern and southern voices does not hold up. For example, Kolodny concedes she focuses on writers who reinforce New England's overarching theme of labor "despite such glowing accounts [of New England landscape] as Francis Higginson's and Thomas Morton's" (18-19). In another instance, when Robert Johnson's "Nova Britannia" (1609) serves as an example of a text written in a northern colony, it comes as a bit of a surprise that the land being discussed as needing improvement (that is, not exactly paradisaically indulgent) is, in fact, Virginia (21). The inconsistencies that threaten to blur the boundary between North and South suggest that the author herself may be invested, on some level, in the conviction she attributes to John Smith—namely, that it is "the cold, rocky New England coast where, with sufficient human labor, . . . the *true* garden of the New World might be cultivated" (20; original emphasis).

Kolodny's analysis of early colonial literature suggests that while the southern landscape lends itself more easily to gardenlike descriptors, there is something amiss within it that makes it

a suspect garden, if not a patently false one altogether. The serpent in the garden that produces such feelings of unease is, of course, the fact that the garden becomes the southern plantation, with its inevitable implications of slavery. As technological and industrial developments of the 19th century made it ever more difficult to imagine a landscape where human activity could avoid producing ruinous effects, American writers turned to devices, often located in the past, in which some magic of the previous promise of human/natural harmony could be recovered. Using William Gilmore Simms as an example, Kolodny argues that for southern writers, the plantation came to embody the maternal embrace by the land. Often, it was the decorative grounds of fictional plantations that provided the material means of gathering the characters against the maternal bosom. Recycling the potent quote by Paul Shepard she used in the introduction, Kolodny observes: "With the plantation garden as 'an abstraction of the essential femininity of the terrain,' the South had managed to protect its pastoral impulse, actually applying 'the symbolic vision to the alteration of reality itself'" (131). The need to be comfortingly engulfed within the landscape was so powerful that the white southerners could not fathom relinquishing slavery, which had made the pastoral ease of the planters' life possible. Viewed from such an angle, the plantation garden provided the fulfillment of the deepest instinctual desires and demanded, in a manner of speaking, that the horrors of slavery be continued so that the wealthy planter idyll not be interrupted. If such is the somber fate of a southern garden, Kolodny's early desire to separate and establish an alternate version of the New World garden in New England may well be understood.

Although lacking the feminist bent of Kolodny's analysis, Lewis P. Simpson's *The Dispossessed Garden* provides a similar narrative of the South as a garden. Published in 1975, incidentally the same year as *The Lay of the Land*, the book includes lectures that Simpson had

delivered in 1973 as part of the Lamar Lecture Series of Mercer University. Bypassing the regionally confusing garden imagery of the early colonial period, Simpson focuses on the 18th century literature to establish the contrast between northern and southern regions. Virginians, he argues, "defin[ed] their mission not as an errand into a howling wilderness, in the midst of which as God's regenerate band they would make a pleasure garden for Him, but as an errand into an open, prelapsarian, self-yielding paradise, where they would be made regenerate by entering into a redemptive relationship with a new and abounding earth" (16). In literary imagination, plantation became "the fruition of the errand into paradise" (17), but ultimately chattel slavery spelled doom for the white southerners' efforts to conceive of their life in the pastoral tradition: "chattel slavery asked to be taken into the general myth of the New World as a reactionary and redemptive garden; or, more specifically speaking, it demanded to be incorporated in the myth of the South as an errand into paradise" (20). Try as they might to fashion a role for the slaves as unobtrusive and virtually invisible gardeners in their pastoral vision, Southern writers, such as Thomas Jefferson and the previously encountered William Gilmore Simms, could not transcend slavery as the defining feature and problem of the southern garden, thus explaining Simpson's designation of antebellum plantation South as "a Southern 'garden of the chattel'" (2).

Despite their different approaches, Marx, Kolodny, and Simpson all weave similar narratives in which European colonists' Edenic visions of the southern landscape provide a kind of foundation for the eventual and deeply problematic garden of the southern plantation. In other words, if at first the term *garden* broadly designates the luscious flora of southern colonies, eventually it morphs into and becomes conflated with the exploitative economic entity of the plantation. It is no accident that Lucinda MacKethan concludes her richly informative study, *The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in Southern Literature* (1980), with an image of a garden to

represent the "pastorally grounded image of a South of old as an Arcadian community" (217). Even though MacKethan contends that various southern authors used the supposedly Arcadian past in complex ways, as opposed to merely glorifying it, she too uses the *garden* as a shorthand for the plantation society. In her discussion of antebellum plantation mistress as a kind of southern Eve, Kathryn Lee Seidel provides perhaps the most elaborate example of how the garden motif is intertwined with pastoral justifications of colonialism, racism, and sexism. Employing the imagery of the Garden of Eden, she notes how postbellum literature continued and at the same time exaggerated the idyllic qualities of plantation life, as portrayed in antebellum literature:

> The plantation was not an analogue but a symbol of Eden, powerful enough it its cognitive and emotional associations to invoke the cultural myth of the Garden. The plantation as Eden myth, as it appears in fiction after the Civil War, envisions an ideal society of genteel, distinguished landowners, gracious and lovely wives, pure and winsome daughters, and faithful, industrious blacks, all working harmoniously in a bucolic setting of well-kept rose gardens and white-pillared mansions. (128)

Garden of Eden, paradise, Arcady: all of these concepts connote gardenlike places, and all of them have played a role in tying the garden to the antebellum plantation South, especially when donning its idyllic garb. As Elizabeth Jane Harrison notes in her introduction to *The Female Pastoral: Women Writers Re-Visioning the American South* (1991), "Whatever the origin of the garden archetype, it served the southern white patriarchy--including its male authors--for over two hundred years as an effective metaphor of ownership of both land and labor" (2-3). And indeed, Harrison's transition from the U.S. South as virgin land to the white woman's "embodiment of the southern garden" (4) feels rather self-explanatory, given the weight the

archetype of the garden has carried. Furthermore, when Harrison introduces different "versions of the southern garden" (13) as created by female southern writers, there is no expectation that literary representations of any actual gardens will be examined. One anticipates, instead, the engagement with the *idea* of the South as a garden, including all of its oppressive, apologist implications.

As my overview of several influential statements about American literature in general—and southern U.S. literature in particular—reveals, the garden archetype has been an eminently flexible concept. Its role within the context of southern United States has encompassed not only a certain attitude towards the New World that has abetted in the project of colonization but also a romanticized view of antebellum society, structured around the economic unit of the plantation. To put it differently, the plantation-as-garden myth draws some of its power from the earlier conception of southern landscape as a garden, and both of those iterations of the garden are saddled with legacies of colonialism and slavery. The heavy historical burden that the trope of the garden carries in the U.S. South may be better understood, if contrasted with the meaning of gardens in literature of the Caribbean. Sarah Casteel Phillips prefaces her examination of gardens in Caribbean literature with this statement: "the figure of the garden in a Caribbean context necessarily evokes its dark underside: the plantation." [6] As a result, Casteel goes on to note, "in contemporary Caribbean writing, the paradisal landscape often is haunted by the historical legacy of plantation agriculture and the slave labor that sustained the plantation economy" (135). At the risk of putting the matter too simplistically, the plantation of southern U.S. constitutes no dark underside to the garden. Instead, in a historically important subset of southern literature and critical scholarship the plantation *is* the garden. In Casteel's formulation, the garden retains its

[6] In *Pathologies of Paradise: Caribbean Detours* (2013), Supriya Nair provides a similar pairing. The garden in Caribbean literature, she asserts, "has an evil twin in the plantation" (15).

earlier connotations of the land as a Garden of Eden, which distracts from and obscures the violence wrought by colonialism and the subsequent plantation economy. In the U.S. South, the garden, rather than masking the existence of plantations, often functions as a device through which the plantation becomes cleansed of its brutal economic facts, including full implications of enslaved labor, and emerges as an idyllic place where harmony defines human relationships with one another and the environment. Even when scholars elucidate how the garden imagery has been used to justify or deny key facts about antebellum southern U.S. life, they further solidify the association between garden and plantation.

The link between gardens and plantations thus entails different models of relationships in different geographical locations, illustrating the larger point Elizabeth Christine Russ makes in *The Plantation in the Postslavery Imagination*: "although the plantation generated comparable—and comparably paradoxical—patterns of social and economic relations throughout the Americas, each region responded in distinct ways, and their varied responses are reflected in their literary imaginations" (7). For example, Russ postulates that different etymologies of the very words to describe the economic entity of the plantation played a role in surrounding southern antebellum plantations with a romantic aura. If *plantation*, as an actual word utilized in the (predominantly) English-speaking U.S. South, connotes settling, being rooted, and planting of a culture, the word *ingenio* that often denotes the plantation in the Spanish speaking Caribbean heavily implies the totality of the sugar production process: "In the first case, the plantation is imagined as an idyllic place. In the second, it is not a place at all but rather a system, a structure, or a machine" (7). Imaginative construct of the plantation as an idyll is also at the heart of Deborah Cohn's observation that, for southern U.S. and Spanish Caribbean writers, a look at the past in order to critique the present has often meant getting back to different pasts: "Where

[white] southerners upheld the plantation as an idyll emblematizing their (now fallen) way of life, Spanish America's experiences have repeatedly been expressed in images situated in a paradigm presupposing an earlier paradise," expressed partly as "an idealized, primitivist vision of the pre-Columbian past, in which nature was still perceived to be inviolate" (20). To translate this into the language of garden metaphors, southern U.S. writers enlist (or confront) the myth of plantation as a garden whereas Spanish Caribbean writers gesture towards the Edenic garden of the pre-contact islands.

Given the role that the garden has played in fashioning the plantation as an idyllic place in the southern U.S. literary imagination (and the critical discourse surrounding it), it may be fair to say that the transnational "turn" in southern literary studies[7] over the last few decades has done no favors to the garden archetype. The plantation has been identified (perfectly logically, one might add) as a key agent in joining the experiences of the U.S. South to those of geographic areas outside the U.S. borders. For example, as Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn write in their introduction to the landmark collection *Look Away!: The U.S. South in New World Studies* (2004), "the plantation—more than anything else—ties the South both to the rest of the United States and to the rest of the New World" (6). The outpouring of scholarship, grounded in the transnational commonality of plantation structure and its effects, testifies to the accuracy and

[7] The mention of "transnationality" in conjunction with southern U.S. literary studies often acts as a signal that one actually means New Southern Studies (or NSS, for short), even though the scholars most associated with NSS bemoan the equation of NSS with transnational focus (see esp. "Forum: What's New in Southern Studies - And Why Should We Care?" in *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2014, pp. 691-733, and also Jon Smith's response to it, "What the New Southern Studies Does Now" in the same journal, vol. 49, no. 4, 2015, pp. 861-70. Later I will discuss at greater length how my project fits within the (trans)national framework, but I hesitate a little using the NSS label to describe the directions that southern U.S. literary studies have taken in the last few decades. As should be clear by now, one of the core tenets informing this dissertation holds that the way critics have discussed certain topics in the past influence the way those topics are being discussed now. Proceeding from the assumption that a radical break has occurred may risk blinding us to potential continuities or making unhelpful caricatures of what came before.

generative power of this insight.[8] The increased visibility of the plantation also keeps visible the figure of the garden and its entanglement with a desire to deny or justify the violence of colonization and plantation economies. When issuing a call for the continued scrutiny of how the plantation has been constitutive of modernity instead of marginal or opposite to it, Amy Clukey and Jeremy Wells use the figure of the garden to hint at the deceptive rhetoric that has long cloaked plantation realities. They urge scholars to investigate "what makes a garden like an outpost of empire like a forced labor camp like a garden again?" (3). The last part of their question refers to a particularly pernicious brand of plantation "pastness,"one forcefully associated with the U.S. South. This is revealed through their follow-up question: "How did [the plantation] become in mass culture a sign of prestige and object of desire: a place one should long to obtain, to visit, or, Scarlett O'Hara-like, to go back to?" (3). It seems that if the plantation has been a kind of garden in different eras and different locales, in the U.S. South its gardenlike qualities have been particularly intensified to serve a vicious social agenda. Although not concerned with the plantation per se, John Lowe advocates the transnational lens of what he calls the circumCaribbean geographical area by distancing it from the reactionary and insular impulses the garden figure represents. Southern U.S. literature must be put in conversation with other voices, says Lowe, because "[t]he South has long since ceased to be merely a New World garden, and in any case, as Fernand Braudel [in the Mediterranean context] declared, 'history can do more than study walled gardens'" (10). Even though the very concept of the New World

[8] In addition to numerous articles, this is evidenced by books like Deborah Cohn's *History and Memory in the Two Souths: Recent Southern and Spanish American Fiction* (1999), Valérie Loichot's *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse* (2007), Matthew Prattt Guterl's *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (2008), Elizabeth Christine Russ's *The Plantation in the Postslavery Imagination* (2009), Jeremy Wells's *Romances of the White Man's Burden: Race, Empire, and the Plantation in American Literature, 1880-1936* (2013).

garden is thoroughly saturated with transnationality, Lowe relies on the strength of the garden metaphor to suggest self-serving insularity and strategic misremembering of the past.

There is no denying that scholarly use of garden-as-metaphor has yielded rich insights into hemispheric American writings of different eras. However, it is also true that through the conflation of "southern garden" with the Garden of Eden, and with the romanticized plantation, representations of more ordinary, everyday gardens have suffered critical neglect. What Shelley Boyd has observed about the study of gardens in Canadian literature thus resonates in the context of literature of southern United States: "With such emphasis on archetypal gardens with respect to the environment on a large scale (the wilderness 'bush garden' [substitute 'plantation' here], or the 'paradise' of the new world), the garden as a relatively more immediate terrain is often overlooked, effaced, or viewed as inconsequential in terms of writer's strategies and social critiques" (6). One might revise Boyd's statement to reflect the fact that a writer's focus on gardens in the U.S. South may at times be perceived as something less benign than merely "inconsequential." Rather, it may signal an effort to endow with picturesque qualities the history that is in fact beset with horrors.

At this point a perfectly reasonable question may arise: why write or think one's way into the minefield that the study of the garden in the U.S. South apparently entails? Why not leave rest a problematic category so hopelessly mired in discourses of subjugation of people and the natural environment? One very simple reason to continue thinking about gardens has to do with their materiality, an aspect so profoundly ignored in application of the term *garden* to things like entire continents, large-scale economic entities, or aggregates of strategically naturalized social and economic relations. Until we have another word to describe those various terrains, marked by regular interactions between humans and the land, we cannot do away with the designation of

a *garden*. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the most common meaning of a *garden* is a "plot of land used for the cultivation of flowers, vegetables, herbs, or fruit." [9] A more detailed definition of a garden offered by anthropologist Thomas W. Killion helpfully captures something of the immediacy of the garden experience even under the most prosaic circumstances. "The term *garden*," Killion writes, "refers to a polycultural mix of cultigens and useful economic species grown on small plots where the cultivator focuses on individual plants and their microhabitats by small inputs of labor on a continuous basis" (13 n2). To talk about gardens, then, means talking about places that are in relative physical proximity to the cultivator and/or owner of the garden and demonstrate the effects of past or present human actions in the landscape.

Acknowledging the simple fact that the cultivator may not always be the legal owner of a garden cracks open the Pandora's Box that is the garden's involvement in all things pertaining to humans, i.e. culture. Though the complete naturalness of the garden's traditional opposite, the wilderness, has long been exposed as a largely manmade construction, the garden's explicit dependence on proximity to and regular activity by humans in order to be thought of as a garden in the first place makes it a particularly potent place that reflects, mediates, and challenges human relations. Every aspect of a garden—its plant assortment and arrangement, size, purpose, shape, tools of cultivation, symbolic meanings—are inseparable from the social and geographical circumstances of its gardener(s). Equally crucial for the identity of a garden as such are the natural elements that are irreducible to culture and exercise a kind of will of their own. Edward Casey reminds us that "in a garden [we are] in the presence of things that live and grow, often on

[9] Consistent with the importance of garden enclosure in the eyes of English colonists, as noted earlier by Patricia Seed, the primary meaning of *garden* in the *OED* reads: "A piece of ground, usually enclosed, where flowers, fruit, or vegetables are cultivated."

their own schedule" (154). Casey's concise statement gets at the heart of a garden as a fundamentally uncontrollable space. Social anthropologist Catherine Alexander elaborates that a garden "needs to be worked at in order to keep it within cultural construction, indeed to keep it *within* at all" (861; original emphasis). Imperfect attempts to control a garden through labor and borders cannot even pretend to curtail perhaps the unruliest garden characteristic of all: its temporality. Alexander distinguishes between a *lived* and an *achieved* garden. An achieved garden embodies the state of a garden the gardener aspires to attain, "a transcendental moment of eternal stillness," but because the reality of a *lived* garden cannot accommodate stasis, the achieved garden is at best "a series of occasional gardens, landscape tableaux imposed on the relentless cycles of growth and death" (862-63). Alexander does not aim, I think, to attribute some uniform desire for accomplishment to all gardeners, even in the limited subset of suburban English gardens of which she primarily writes. Rather, her purpose is to draw attention to the tension that lies between how a garden is thought of (or perceived) and its never quite being that particular garden. Reflecting on the ways that gardens always and continually work against containment—conceptually, materially, temporally—helps recognize change, motion, perhaps even disturbance, that exist at very core of a garden.

The basic question this dissertation asks is how the literary gardens of the U.S. South—those representations of rather ordinary, small scale gardens—refuse to be contained. This question, of course, is but a stepping stone towards others, which might ask: what geographical, material and cultural boundaries do these gardens decline to stay within? What silenced histories do they stand witness to? How do they make visible or defamiliarize their gardeners and the labor that goes into making them? What preconceived expectations about their purpose (or material circumstances, or meaning) do they challenge us to revise? How might they change the

terms in which we speak of gardens (and other things)—southern and not? Posing these questions does not automatically decree that the narrated gardens must be somehow dramatic in and of themselves. Rather, frequently it is the mere fact of a garden's existence, a kind of audacity on the part of the narrative to include a garden at all, that can produce destabilizing effects and rich implications.

One particular type of historical garden can illustrate how a garden can unsettle master narratives simply through its existence. We find such gardens at the very beginnings of historical events that would eventually produce the region of the U.S. South. They challenge the colonist idea of the South as a garden, and undercut the power of the image of plantation-as-garden. These are, of course, gardens maintained by Native Americans. The rhetoric of the New World as a garden collided not only with decidedly not-gardenlike climatic conditions, such as hurricanes and droughts, but also shortages of usable land. Settler accounts from colonial Virginia indicate that this shortage can be attributed to the fact that Native Americans were skilled at identifying the best places and claiming them for growing their staple crops. These plots of land were a great source of envy for the European settlers. At the same time, the colonists tried to diminish their importance, because the presence of indigenous inhabitants that did not blend into the natural environment, but instead were active agents in shaping it, forcefully clashed with Edenic conceptions of empty welcoming land. We need not reduce all of the Native American landscape-altering activities to garden rhetoric to see that their actual gardens provide a powerful counter-image to the region as an Eden vacated by its Adams. Imaginative recovery of Native American gardens complicates the myth of Edenic origins and any idyllic conception of plantation beginnings.[10]

[10] For information about landscape altering activities of southern Native American tribes, see Cowdrey 29, Warren 288-289, and Cronon, Ch. 3, "Seasons of Want and Plenty." For a good survey of how Native Americans have

Due to the looming presence of the behemoth that is the image of plantation-as-garden in the U.S. South, this dissertation purposefully focuses on gardens that are at some temporal and spatial remove from the antebellum southern plantation. This distance is intended to act as a safeguard against such gardens being subsumed by the garden variants associated with the plantation—either the romanticized plantation of the past or the ruined garden as a symbol of the fallen order. That is, the garden's existence outside of the plantation is the first step to its being uncontained, both in the spatial sense and the discourse surrounding the plantation as a garden. The larger motive behind the distancing of the plantation, other than the tainting of the garden as a trope, is to insist on the heterogeneity of gardens and places within the U.S. South (I will revisit this idea more extensively in Chapter 1). Without diminishing the reach of the plantation, as a material reality or a cultural construct, it is important to recognize that the plantation holds no exclusive rights to the designation of the "southern garden." Gardens located in the urban spaces of the antebellum South, the Upland South, or the hill country of Mississippi, among others, demand recognition as southern gardens as well, in the process broadening and potentially transforming the connotations of the concept itself.

"A garden's edge delineates, encloses, and separates. But great garden edges are also places of encounter and negotiation, where differences between inside and outside can be brought into strong relief," writes the landscape architect Elizabeth Meyer (25). The edges of the garden study I am pursuing here are relatively straightforward; my chief interest lies in the literary representations of actual, "real" gardens (to the degree that literature can represent anything real) that may exist in productive tension with the larger cultural discourses

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shaped southern environmental history, see James D. Rice's "Into the Gap: Ethnohistorians, Environmental History, and the Native South." *The Cherokee Rose* novel by Tiya Miles, which I discuss in the "Afterword," shows to some degree the disorienting effects produced by Native American presence on the plantation.

surrounding gardens, but nevertheless are rooted in representations of gardens as material spaces. Restricting my focus is strategic, as it paves a way for rich encounters among several fields that are pertinent to the study of gardens as material places within a particular historical and geographical context. Landscape studies help articulate why the study of ordinary gardens is worthwhile in the first place. Ultimately, though, it is the convergence of postcolonial and ecocritical modes of inquiry that prove the most useful for thinking through the complexities of the southern garden as a way of being in place, with all the fraught implications of environmental and human exploitation that being in place may entail.

The core idea that this study of gardens borrows from landscape studies may be summed up via a statement by an influential scholar of American landscapes, Peirce Lewis: "all human landscape has cultural meaning—no matter how ordinary that landscape may be" (176). John Dixon Hunt has done perhaps more than any other landscape historian to validate the cultural meanings of ordinary gardens. The introduction he and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn co-wrote for *The Vernacular Garden* acknowledges that the regular questions the historians of landscape architecture are used to asking (e.g. about patronage) largely do not apply to ordinary gardens, but that should not be a deterrent from taking such gardens seriously. They assert that "[o]nce we can isolate the proper materials, relate them to other evidence that sets them in relief, [ordinary gardens] can be no less articulate on behalf of their creators' and owners' identities and dreams, no less an expression (susceptible to analysis) of cultural significance than, say, Versailles, Stourhead, or Dumbarton Oaks" (4). Writing about one type of ordinary garden, the English cottage garden, Karen Sayer helpfully underscores that gardens can be not only reflective, but constitutive of identities and social relations: "Gardens should not be treated as simple 'staging grounds' within which identity, difference, politics or power are performed, but as part of the

'real' space through which these things are enacted and created" (36). In other words, even the simplest gardens are rich with meaning, and what they communicate is important. Furthermore, they are not passive containers of cultural signification that is generated somewhere else, but instead play an active role in generating and shaping it. In the realm of literature, such a view of gardens helps bring them out of background into the foreground and compels us to consider what cultural meanings they produce and convey.

Gardens, as we have seen, have remarkable international currency and carry the legacy of being both products and tools of violent encounters between cultures, as forced by colonialism and imperialism. A transnational study of hemispheric American gardens may have been expected. However, while there are some transnational elements (especially in Chapter 1), this project is self-consciously national and regional. One reason for this focus lies, as we have seen, in the powerful and regionally specific connotations of "southern (U.S.) garden." By being located in the U.S. South, the literary gardens in this study are inheritors of and participants in the discourse about southern gardens, and drawing national-regional borders around them enables a more substantial reflection about how they complicate the terms in which we think and talk about gardens in the U.S. South. Another and more important reason behind the curtailed focus of this study is the desire to situate literary gardens as precisely as possible within the context, which shapes the experiences of their gardeners and occasional visitors. My focus on gardens as actual places makes it all the more important to approach literature, in the words of Minrose Gwin, "as a crucial source of material and cultural specificity, located in place, out of which real people's embodied knowledges emerge and come to be represented and performed imaginatively" (527).

Michael Bibler's excellent analysis of Scott Elliott's *Coiled in the Heart* (2003) helps illustrate the benefits of thinking seriously about southern gardens. The novel's main protagonist Tobia encounters a dilemma when wanting to make his family's old plantation into an environmental haven that would operate as a public park. He faces an impasse of how to repurpose a southern plantation without also restoring its ideologies of mastery over land and subjugation of people. Plantation-as-garden myth (and its traces in Southern Agrarian rhetoric) hangs over any plan to retreat from industry-fueled suburban sprawl and live in a supposed harmony with nature, leading to Bibler's insightful observation that Tobia's problems arise "as much from literary models of the plantation as they do from historical ones" (130). Bibler suggests that "a radical break from the past" (135) must occur in order to realize that it is the future in which new sustainable models of natural/human relationships must be imagined. For this to happen, it is imperative "to change the idea of the 'southern garden' from something beautiful and constant to something fragile and endangered—threatened not only by capitalism but also by climate change" (132). The injunction to break with the past is a daunting and ultimately dubious one, therefore I think it is more realistic to break open instead the safely ensconced trope of "southern garden." By recovering the more varied literary models and meanings of "southern garden," we might catch glimpses where it already exhibits something of the unsettling fragility needed to prompt environmental awareness or contains human and environmental histories that cannot be subsumed into the plantation regime or its pernicious misremembering. "I would plant a garden," muses Elliott's Tobia when thinking of his need to reconnect with the land (qtd. in Bibler 120). His plan is doomed if plantation dominates as the only source of historical and literary meaning for planting a garden in the U.S. South. If, however, we view southern gardens as palimpsests which they are, gardening need not be

exclusively reactionary or misguided activity. In fact, the role of gardening as a kind of conscious place-making in American culture and the continued associations of gardens and the U.S. South underscore the importance of not making the South again "the backward region" when it comes to gardens. By examining southern literary gardens as places that insist on telling disturbing cultural narratives, reveal the potency of human desire to be attached to some place, and compel reflection on human responsibilities to the natural environment, this dissertation seeks to provide a richer understanding of southern gardens and, by extension, of the national and transnational discourses in which they participate.

The first chapter of the dissertation, "Planting the Creole South, Uprooting the Nation: Gardens in George Washington Cable's Fiction" revisits some of the themes outlined in this "Introduction" and situates the portrayal of urban New Orleans gardens in Cable's stories in conversation with the popular plantation fiction of the postbellum era and "local color" literature. I draw on Cable's non-fiction garden writing to illustrate that the Creole gardens function in such a way as to make place in the newly reunified U.S. for the Louisiana Creoles and the racially and colonially suspect histories they represent.

The second chapter, "'Our Own Place Maybe': Tenant Gardens and the Plight of the Landless in Two Kentucky Novels of the 1920s," examines how the gardens of tenant women embody the tragedy of being unable to form attachment to any place in two novels, *Weeds* and *The Time of Man*, by Edith Summers Kelley and Elizabeth Madox Roberts. Although physical contact with the land provides momentary feelings of empowerment and fulfillment in lives generally lacking either, the protagonists' socioeconomic situation engenders chronic rootlessness, a condition which produces detrimental physical and spiritual effects in the novels' characters.

The third chapter, "'The Fault of the Land Going Back on Us': Intersection of Poverty and Environment in Eudora Welty's *Losing Battles*," provides a reading of Welty's novel as a meditation on how economic factors influence and shape people's interaction with their natural environment. Examination of the novel's varied gardens reveals that the relationship between economically disadvantaged people and the natural world need not be always understood in antagonistic terms (in the sense that the poor attempt to become less poor through unsustainable use of the land), but instead needs to be conceptualized as a project of common interest, "the environmentalism of the poor" in Rob Nixon's formulation, against capital-driven exploitation of the land *and* the people.

In "The Afterword" I address the further paths an examination of southern gardens ought to take. Specifically, I focus on Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) and Tiya Miles's *The Cherokee Rose: A Novel of Gardens and Ghosts* (2015) as novels that radically revise the popular romantic links between southern plantations and gardens. They do this by making the labor in the plantation garden visible (Gaines) and including an actual garden as a source of alternate knowledge and agency within literal view of the mansion cloaked in romance (Miles).

CHAPTER 1

Planting the Creole South, Uprooting the Nation: Gardens in George Washington Cable's Fiction[1]

Most of the individual pieces of George Washington Cable's short story collections, *Old Creole Days* (1879) and *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* (1888), were originally published in *Scribner's Monthly* and the *Century*, respectively (Turner 84, 237). Edward King, who is credited with "discovering" Cable during an 1873 excursion to the U.S. South under assignment from *Scribner's Monthly*, promoted the stories of the first collection to the Eastern publishers (52), and it was these stories in particular that established Cable as an expert on the lifestyle of a quaint regional culture, the Louisiana Creoles, as well as an astute interpreter of their dialect. Depicted in their natural habitat of the old New Orleans, a world of intricate wrought ironwork, cloistered courtyards and subtle decadence, Cable's Creoles[2] seem to live in a time that is already past, a time to which George W. Cable is paying an eloquent, yet nevertheless final, farewell. Cable, thus interpreted, becomes not only a local colorist, who dutifully supplied reassuring reading material for the rapidly industrializing U.S., but also a documenter of the departing culture, a culture that must be sacrificed in order to accommodate the future of the newly reunified nation.

By highlighting continuities between Cable's short stories and his numerous non-fiction writings about gardening, I will show that Cable's portrayal of Creole gardens in his tales contains radical commentary on the national U.S. culture. By privileging a small urban garden over its formidable southern colleague—the plantation—Cable succeeds in blurring a number of

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[1] A portion of this chapter was originally published as an article in *The Southern Literary Journal*, volume xlvii, number 2, spring 2015. © 2015 by *The Southern Literary Journal* and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Department of American Studies. All rights reserved.

[2] I use uniform capitalization for the term *Creole*, both to have consistency and to acknowledge that historical differences in capitalization only underscore the complex racial implications—biological and cultural—of the word (see, for example, Ladd, 22-30). I will return to the significance of the term itself later in the chapter.

key binaries: black and white, North and South, past and present. Through their ambiguous qualities these gardens resist incorporation into the plantation complex and introduce heterogeneity into southern geography, uncovering sites of overlooked histories and complicating regional dynamics. Cable's Creole stories may be seen as forming a kind of counterpoint to the myth of plantation literature, which was contemporaneous to Cable's writing. By focusing on different places in the U.S. South than plantations, Cable attempted to portray a different kind of South, with greater democratic potential and greater relevance for the present of the nation—in short, a South that was much harder to exclude from the national narrative. Furthermore, when Cable planted the Creole South, he also recast the terms of nationhood within the United States.

In much of Cable scholarship, his shorter Creole tales take a back seat to the first of his novels, *The Grandissimes* (1880), and his later writings, like *The Silent South* (1880) and *The Negro Question* (1890), chiefly because of the sharp criticism of racial relations they offer. The shorter tales, invariably classed as local color, have been perceived as much less—if at all—radical. For example, in the "Local Color in Louisiana" chapter of *The History of Southern Literature* (1990) Thomas Richardson noted that *Old Creole Days* is a result of Cable's "preoccupation with a doomed Creole community" whose "dignity in the face of defeat makes them attractive" (201). Such a view endows Cable's sympathy towards Creoles and Creoles themselves with nobility, but ultimately dismisses both the fiction and its subject as rather irrelevant. Two decades later, Mark Noonan observed that Cable "obliquely" addressed southern racial caste system in his Creole stories before addressing that same subject more forcefully in *The Grandissimes* and polemical pieces (77; 145). Even when the shorter Creole pieces are not explicitly demoted, Cable's work is evaluated for the ways that they fulfill implicit requirements

of the larger national culture. George Handley, for example, reads Cable's work as a form of a wider regionalist genre meant to provide the fledgling New World nations and cultures with a measure of independence from their European predecessors by establishing an alternate set of unique roots, either in the form of subdued yet unique indigenous cultures or the legacy of plantation slavery (33). While acknowledging the subversive potential of racially suspect Creoles in an increasingly supremacist nation, Jennifer Rae Greeson has proposed that ultimately Cable's fiction helped contribute to the impression of the former confederate states as a kind of interior colony poised to be overtaken by the imperialistic United States. Greeson credits this peculiar status of the South as endowing its internal colonizers with a comfort of feeling empathy towards their fellow citizens while simultaneously satisfying the drive for expansion (263-268). Greeson points to "Jean-Ah Poquelin" and other Creole stories as evidence that Cable made the imperial project of northern U.S. a foregone conclusion through his portrayal of Creoles: "When Cable characterizes his Creoles as hybrid, he obviates the notion that an identifiable class of Southern elites exists to be dispossessed by U.S. rule" (266).

I contend that the racial and cultural indeterminacy of Cable's Creoles gains greater and more powerful significance when viewed in conjunction with the settings which they inhabit—namely, small urban gardens. The variedly luscious and secluded Creole gardens in Cable's writings, particularly if viewed in light of Cable's later work *The Amateur Garden* (1914), suggest that his stories constitute more than a mere homage to the quaint disappearing Creoles—in fact, they depict the Creole culture as eminently capable of contributing to that of the national U.S. Creole gardens in Cable's eyes embody the ideal of an American garden. This is of crucial significance because gardening for Cable constitutes a form of citizenship; having a proper garden expresses proper regard for one's country. Creoles with their eminently American

gardens can, by extension, be perceived as being eminently American. Therefore, it may be argued that rather than merely supplying easily digestible material for the ravenous appetite of the newly reunified nation, Cable actually sought to find a place in the national narrative for the Creoles and the historical legacies they represented.

The garden in George W. Cable's Creole stories warrants closer attention because, to put it plainly, for Cable, a garden is never just a garden. Instead, it is the ultimate expression of one's commitment to local and national communities as Cable expounds in *The Amateur Garden*, a collection of essays published in various magazines over approximately a decade (Turner 333, 341).This book, which due to its heavily nationalistic tone may have been more accurately titled *The American Garden*, draws partly upon Cable's experiences as one of the founders and key judges in the Northampton Carnegie Garden Competition. *The Amateur Garden* offers some practical gardening advice and argues the crucial importance of gardens and gardening in the civic life of the nation. Cable's steadfast conviction of the social importance of the garden manifested itself in non-textual ways as well. When the ailing Cable missed the 1922 ceremony of awarding prizes for the aforementioned gardening competition, it was his first absence in twenty-three years (Turner 354).

Cable was not the first to endow gardening with nationalistic attributes. As Philip J. Pauly has noted, horticultural activities were already loaded with national significance at the time of (and leading up to) the American Revolution, when the fate of imported and native flora was viewed as a potential indicator of the ability of European transplants—both human and botanical—to flourish in the New World (9-32). Throughout the antebellum period, gardening for gentlemen entailed personal improvement (partly by tempering the supposedly corrosive effects of the business world) and provided opportunities to contribute to the national good,

especially through improved horticultural yields (Pauly 51-79; Armstead 70-83). At the turn of the 20th century, numerous urban and school gardens sprung up, geared towards urban dwellers (especially immigrants) and children. They were meant to "improve both the environment and the behavior of the participants" (Lawson 21), including increased civic mindedness and participation (17-112). Perhaps because Cable was primarily concerned with decorative gardens, he felt the need to reiterate the relevance of gardening to the national life: "It seems droll to call grave attention to such humble things in a world so rightly preoccupied with great sciences and high arts, vast industries, shining discoveries and international rivalries, strifes and projects; yet what are all these for, at last, but the simple citizen, his family and his home, and for him and them in a cottage as well as in the palace?" (*Amateur Garden* 151). In contrast to the highly visible and grand preoccupations of society, the significance of the garden for Cable lies precisely in its more modest and local qualities, since gardening contributes to the shaping and tending of the citizen. After enumerating several key qualities of the properly "American" garden, Cable offers this tentative hope: "if in following these lines [i.e. peculiarly American traits translated into gardening principles] we can contrive to adhere faithfully to the worldwide laws of all true art, who knows but our very gardening may tend to correct more than one shortcoming or excess in our national character" (50-51).[3] Gardens and gardening, for Cable as for his predecessors and contemporaries, constitute the means of contributing to and productively engaging with the American national culture and increasing its value in the global context.

In *The Amateur Garden* Cable notes that the American garden has not properly evolved yet, but when it does, this peculiarly American garden will "express the traits of our American

[3] Louisa Klein Miller, author of an influential book *Children's Gardens for School and Home: A Manual of Cooperative Gardening* (1904), echoes Cable's sentiments on a more personal level: "The greatest care is necessary in planting, which must be done in a systematic, orderly manner. A garden-line is a necessity. There is great moral force in a straight line" (qtd. in Lawson 85).

domestic life; our strong individuality and self-assurance, our sense of unguarded security, our affability and unexclusiveness and our dislike to high-walled privacy" (*Amateur Garden* 50). The inherent openness of an American garden, seemingly endorsed in the list of these initial specifications, soon becomes subject to substantive qualification. Lamenting what he perceives to be an utter lack of privacy plaguing many American gardens, Cable sounds the following note of disapproval: "In our American eagerness to publish everything for everybody and to everybody, we have published our gardens" (61). In this, he prefigures Vita Sackville-West who declares in the mid-20th century: "Our American friends do not like hedges. They do not share our love of privacy, and maintain that if you plant a hedge round your garden you are doing something undemocratic and may even have 'something to hide'" (103). In an anachronistic agreement with Sackville-West, Cable's ideal American garden is expected to mediate between the high-walled exclusivity and the temptation to bare everything. In yet another instance Cable again endorses a certain amount of privacy in a garden by asserting that the latter "may have its concealments; they are as right as they are valuable" (*Amateur Garden* 58). The unguarded security referred to earlier as an inherently American trait does not therefore translate into a compulsion to confess everything, even garden-wise.

In writing of a garden's privacy, as well as its other aspects, George W. Cable is primarily concerned with what kind of garden may be cultivated by the average citizen. Although the photographs interspersed throughout *The Amateur Garden* reveal an assumption of a certain level of monetary affluence—evident in the style of personal dress, the size of houses and the accompanying land lots—attributed to the gardening citizen, Cable's text seeks to link "Americanness" with those qualities of the garden that can be achieved on varied incomes and a range of lot sizes. The lamentable "obliteration of private boundaries" has resulted in the reality

that "our gardens, except among the rich, have become American by ceasing to be gardens" (61). Unprotected from the outside intrusions, not least in the shape of dogs and children, the unfenced and unhedged garden, especially if not protected by a sizeable amount of land, becomes a thoroughly public space instead of the semi-private garden.

In a similar vein that he disapproves of the elimination of fences that offer crucial protection to modestly sized gardens, Cable also dismisses formal gardens as unfit for ensuring gardening equality. After all, in order "[t]o be beautiful, formal gardening requires stately proportions" (49) and thus automatically privileges those with the expanse of space and the necessary wallet weight to bring about the desired effects of the formal garden. Sure, Cable notes, "the tiny gardens of British and European peasants" have achieved a certain degree of formality but theirs is necessarily such a limited form of gardening that it will simply not to do in the United States. Americans desire something grander and freer: "in America we have no joy in contemplating an American home limited to the aspirations of peasant life" since such severely curtailed aspirations are "wholly unfit to express the buoyant, not to say exuberant, complacencies of the American home" (49). Thus it is not the refinement per se that makes the formal gardening of the British, Japanese or "any politically shut-in people" (50) an unviable option on the American soil. Rather, the objection to such gardening stems from its inapplicability in all but a few instances of social privilege. Formal gardening dismissal notwithstanding, Cable asserts: "Almost any good American will admit it to be a part of our national social scheme, I think, —if we have a social scheme, —that everybody shall aspire to all the refinements of life" (43). Hence, what will please the presumably unambitious and socially inhibited European peasant will not be met with approval in the freer, in deeds and dreams, United States. Even if grand in its aspirations, the American garden should at the same time

refrain from demanding excessive investment of labor as evident in the following entreaty by Cable: "And let us not have a garden of tiring care or a user up of precious time. That is not good citizenship" (38).

Freed from the ties linking it either to a certain gardening style or size specifications, an American garden emerges as a set of principles instead of technical mores: "a garden should never compel us to do anything"; "No garden should ever tell a lie. No garden should ever put on any false pretense" (55-56); "a garden may not lie nor steal" (58); it "should never . . . be frivolous or lacking in candor" (59); an American gardener "should rule without oppression" (76). A good American garden is thus a place free of pretense, allowing privacy and pleasure for the owner and friends, and reflective of the owner's spirit. Cable notes that the gardening competition in Northampton has confirmed his initial conviction that "for a private garden to be what it should be—to have a happy individuality—a countenance of its own—one worthy to be its own—it must in some practical way be the fruit of its householder's own spirit and not merely of some hired gardener's" (51). One's garden is at once a profoundly private and public affair. Not only does the garden serve as a test of whether one's energies are spent in a show of good citizenship or whether they are spent in an empty and ostentatious display, the garden also functions as an offering to fellow citizens: "A garden should be owned not to be monopolized, but to be shared, as a song is owned not to be hushed but sung. … At any rate it cannot help but be a public benefaction and a public asset, if only its art be true" (117).

Bearing in mind Cable's prescriptions for an American garden that demonstrates good citizenship on both the personal and the public level, some of the gardens in his Creole writings emerge as prototypes for the American garden. The prime example of such a garden is the green enclosure surrounding Pére Jerome's humble abode in "Madame Delphine." After a brief

introduction to the dwelling of the priest, the authorial focus returns to linger on Pére Jerome's garden:

> There was a walk in Pére Jerome's little garden, of which we have not spoken, off on the right side of the cottage, with his chamber window at one end, a few old and twisted, but blossom-laden, crape myrtles on either hand, now and then a rose of some unpretending variety and some bunches of rue, and at the other end a shrine, in whose blue niche stood a small figure of Mary, with folded hands and uplifted eyes. No other window looked down upon the spot, and its seclusion was often a great comfort to Pére Jerome. (*Old Creole Days* 64)

Eminently private and unpretentious, as painstakingly pointed out by Cable in his reference to the roses' lack of an impressive pedigree, Pére Jerome's garden possesses the individuality of its owner and serves him personally by providing comfort. Significantly, it also figures in a public capacity as a site where Pére Jerome counsels and consoles those seeking his advice, among them Olive, a daughter of the quadroon, who by law cannot marry the white Creole Monsieur Vignevielle, until her mother denies her as a biological daughter. Pére Jerome's garden, by virtue of its individuality, functional privacy and public significance, conforms to the requirements G.W. Cable has drafted for an American garden.

The garden of Olive and her mother offers another, though somewhat more problematic, candidate for the American garden. Secluded in ways that offer a semblance of privacy (although this privacy is soon dispelled as fiction by the intrusion of the soon-to-be lover Monsieur Vignevielle), the garden of Madame Delphine, Olive's mother, offers the melancholy mother and daughter a place for repose and refreshment of spirits. Suggestive of a lack of sheltering forces in the life of the embattled quadroons, the garden itself suffers from want of careful tending; it is "a

broad, ill-kept, many flowered-garden, among whose untrimmed rose-trees and tangled vines … the coco-grass and crab-grass has spread riotously, and sturdy weed stood up in bloom" (42). Yet the drawbacks of the garden pale in comparison to its central figure of "the clump of jasmine." The "overpowering sweetness of the night-jasmine" (41) provides an irresistible lure for Monsieur Vignevielle and so propels the love affair between Olive and her suitor. The aroma of the garden foregrounds yet another aspect of the public nature of the garden. Louise Beebe Wilder, an American garden writer and a contemporary of Cable's, notes that the fragrant garden is never "wholly our own"; rather, such a garden always exists, in a gesture of complete disregard for the owner's wishes, in the capacity of "common property" (29). Since Madame Delphine's garden coexists in harmony with the householder's spirit (e.g. the fortuitously named Olive at one point appears as "the goddess of the garden" [Cable, *Old Creole Days* 45]) and through its public presence hastens the advent of a social institution of marriage, this garden too possesses key characteristics of the American garden Cable was to advocate later.

It may be rightly pointed out that the two discussed gardens function as sites of resistance to the dominant society instead of bolstering the production of national character as the praiseworthy gardens of *The Amateur Garden* do. However, by securing readers' sympathy for the virtuous Olive, the courageous former pirate Monsieur Vignevielle, and the tragic caring mother Madame Delphine, Cable invites the possibility that a refusal to abide by the unjust, racially divided society's laws constitutes precisely the kind of buoyant and exuberant American spirit so highly esteemed in Cable's later work. In contrast to the modest but highly individualized gardens of Pére Jerome and Madame Delphine, the domestic environs of Jean Thompson and Doctor Varrillat, Monsieur Vignevielle's rigidly law-abiding (at least with regard to racial intermixing) friends, lack any personal flavor. This suggests that instead of thinking for

themselves, the owners of these particular terrains are mere vessels of socially sanctified conventions: "Each had his large, white columned, four-sided house among the magnolias, —his huge live-oak overshadowing either corner of the darkly shaded garden, his broad, brick walk leading down to the tall, brick-pillared gate" (70). Cable invokes stereotypes of southern white pillared mansions rising out of fragrant magnolia bowers only to discard them as an insignificant masquerade that lacks individuality.

Cable's rendering of this domestic architecture may hold significance beyond showing the harmful conventionality of its inhabitants. When coupled with the rigid beliefs of their owners with regard to race relations, the white columned dwellings cannot help but evoke the "Big House" found on some (thought certainly not all) antebellum plantations. Cable's wry formulation might have been taken out of W.J. Cash's description of the myth of the Old South, according to which planters "dwelt in large and stately mansions, preferably white and with columns and Grecian entablature" (ix). Cable's invocation of a stereotype connotes what Cash explicitly states in the following sentence: "Their estates were feudal baronies [and] their slaves quite too numerous ever to be counted" (ix). To invoke certain aspects of the white antebellum South—such as a columned mansion—cannot be separated from invoking slavery. Slavery, in turn, is ineradicably linked to the plantation, the basic unit of the economic system that was fueled by slavery before the Civil War. Although Cash wrote of the rosy antebellum past from the perspective of roughly six decades after the Civil War, during which the image of the South (Old or New) crystallized and morphed, in Cable's day the mythmaking of the southern past was no less energetic. Though the image of the hellish Simon Legree's plantation from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) certainly had not faded from the memory of the nation, the myth of the Old South and its pastoral plantations, where the gay belles whirled and

aristocratic gentlemen performed gallant deeds, formed a vital and increasingly more dominant part of the conversation, as I have briefly mentioned in the "Introduction." The importance of Cable's choice to depict a modest, urban southern garden must be evaluated within this plantation-saturated literary context.

Francis Pendleton Gaines in his 1924 book, *The Southern Plantation*, provided one of the earliest efforts to trace the pervasive presence of plantation in literature. He argued that the background of the plantation provided a continuity between the work of slavery defenders and abolitionists: "the two opposing sides of the fiercest controversy that ever shook national thought agreed concerning certain picturesque elements of plantation life and joined hands to set the conception unforgettably in public consciousness" (30). While one side focused on the gentle gentility, whose existence was made possible by the happy slaves, who were harmoniously integrated into the social structure, the other, Gaines noted, exaggerated the glamorous decadence of the planter class to highlight the horror of slave conditions. The literary portrait of plantation has received much more nuanced and rigorous treatment since Gaines's writing, but his observation of the remarkable staying power of the plantation setting still rings true. Nearly a century later Greeson began her analysis of the South as an "internal other" in *Our South* with the delineation of the construct of a Plantation South, which functioned as an imaginary geographical container for the recent colonial past and for the practice of slavery, even as enslavement of African Americans persisted in non-southern states. According to Greeson, starting around 1830s, images of an idyllic South were increasingly replaced by the Slave South, "an imaginative realm produced through the modern exposé mode being developed to fathom the new industrial cities" (118). Thus, Simon Legree's plantation in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes a metaphor for the "Northern industrial city" (188) as opposed to the idyllic village of the Shelby

plantation or the exotic residence of St. Clares. In Greeson's reading, different plantations act as mirror images of their northern counterparts; e.g. the Shelby plantation acts as an idyllic rural New England of Stowe's childhood (180), while Legree, a transplanted northerner, represents the worst of capitalist modernity. Although the degree to which Stowe intended *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* locales to reflect New England may be debated, the settings of the various plantations remain an important part of Stowe's powerful narrative. W. J. Cash would have likely disagreed with Greeson in that Stowe's rendering of the Shelby plantation signaled her affinity for pastoral rurality of New England. Rather, Stowe's choice of the low-born Legree for Cash may have indicated that even critics of the South had trouble resisting the aristocratic Cavalier planter myth and, by extension "the habitual association between plantation and aristocrat" (63).

In the decades following the Civil War, reunion literature, especially narratives originating in the South, often featured former slaves haunting the old plantation sites and wistfully longing for the supposedly golden days of yore. Even if scholars quibble about the precise details of the overall picture, it is now generally accepted that literature of reconciliation and its portrayal of rural plantation appealed partly because people across the nation were uneasy about industrialization and its various effects, from dirty cities to uprooted lives and gender relationships.[4] The calm and measured rhythm of commerce-free (as they were invariably portrayed) plantations offered a sense of a golden and reassuring past. While arguably the most famous representative of the "plantation school" literature, Thomas Nelson Page (1853-1922), came into his popularity in mid-1880s, the romanticized postbellum portrait of the plantation started appearing quite a bit earlier. Lucinda MacKethan observes that Joel Chandler Harris's "Uncle Remus was firmly ensconced in his plantation cabin by 1880" ("Plantation" 212). Mark

[4] See especially David Blight, *Race and Reunion*, and Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*.

Noonan places the beginnings of the genre even earlier; he sees Thomas Dunn English's poems, which appeared in *Scribner's Monthly* as early as 1871, as "the urtexts of the plantation myth school" (128).[5] Arguably, the most important aspect of the postbellum plantation literature was the figure of the faithful former slave. "Most important of all," David Blight writes, Harris "infused the literary reunion with the authority of Uncle Remus's voice" (228). If slaves themselves remembered the days of slavery with nostalgia, then the North and the South could reconcile in their joint longing of the idyllic, pre-industrial ideal of the slaveholding South, in the process recasting slavery in benevolent terms and perceiving the Civil War and the failure of Reconstruction in terms amenable to white supremacist goals.[6]

As important as the authority of the conciliatory black voice was, the plantation setting continued to be loaded with significance, as it was in antebellum years. Although Greeson and Jeremy Wells reach virtually opposite conclusions about implications of Uncle Remus tales for the postbellum period, yet it is the setting of the plantation allows both to make their respective interpretations. For Greeson, the prominent presence of an old former slave and a young boy highlights the absence of elite in the South, much like in Cable's "Jean-Ah Poquelin" (343, n42). For Wells, "the cross-racial comprehension" (171), enacted by a white person's retelling of folk stories in a semblance of a black dialect, makes the space of plantation uniquely qualified to take on challenges of national scope, as U.S. turned imperial gaze towards other regions of the world and their frequently non-white inhabitants. My purpose here is not to privilege one interpretation

[5] In "The Preliminary Seventies" section (pp. 66-73), Gaines catalogues a number of authors who employed signification plantation motifs during the 1870s, such as Francis C. Tiernan (Christian Reid) and Elizabeth W. Bellamy. By and large, the works he mentions have by now sunk into oblivion.

[6] Granted, this is a simplistic account of the postbellum plantation fiction. For a good overview on the complexities of the genre in general, see Grammer, "Plantation Fiction." Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit have long been discussed as a locus of subversive potential. For an example of such a reading, see Cochran, "Black Father: The Subversive Achievement of Joel Chandler Harris."

over another but, rather, to illustrate how the plantation setting, in which many a postbellum story was set, continued to figure prominently as *the* southern place.[7]

Cable's work, which started appearing in *Scribner's* in 1873, followed by "Madame Delphine" in 1881, may be seen as participating in a dialogue with plantation literature, notably through the comparative absence of plantation spaces in his body of work. This was already apparent to Gaines, who wrote that "plantation as a definite locale is largely missing from the work of George W. Cable" (70). At the outset, however, it must be clarified that focusing on Cable's less plantation-centered fiction does not mean that the historical fact of plantation life itself is insignificant. On the contrary, the (chiefly cotton and tobacco) agriculture-based economy exerted a powerful influence on the dynamics of social relations and the manner of region's relations to other parts of the nation and the world. Furthermore, the historical southern plantation remains, to a large degree, an embodiment of the brutality of slavery, inflicted upon people of African descent on American soil; the plantation's legacy also includes the violence (until quite recently overlooked in the scholarship) against the native tribes. As Elizabeth Christine Russ puts it, "The displacement and extermination of native populations, the forced exile and enslavement of millions of Africans, the tragedy of the Middle Passage, the ravaging of peoples and lands: these form the irreducible core of the legacy of the slaveholding plantation of the Americas" (3). The focus on other places in Cable's fiction than plantation does not stem from a desire to gloss over the violence of plantation history; rather, it is an attempt to discover what might be called "liminal" or "in-between places" in Homi Bhabha's words—places that complicate and disturb dominant narratives and provide possibilities for alternate imaginings (4).

[7] Although my study is concerned primarily with literary representations of plantation, it is useful to remember that the actual plantation structure in the U.S. South survived well into the 20th century. See especially Aiken, *The Cotton Plantation South since the Civil War,* and Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* ("Prologue" and Ch. 1, especially).

Cable's non-fiction indicates that Cable's muteness, comparatively speaking, on the subject of the plantation stemmed from deep disdain. For example, in *The Negro Question* (1890), Cable indicted plantation ideology for the core wrongs of the southern society: "In the South, the corner-stone of the social structure was made the plantation idea—wide lands, an accomplished few, and their rapid aggrandizement by the fostering oversight and employment of an unskilled many" (27). Cable's focus here lies on the "plantation idea," yet the first association with this idea is of material nature: the "wide lands." The statement thus resists any propensity to romanticize the material embodiment of this undemocratic ideal. Subtle critique of plantations is evident throughout Cable's Creole stories as well. Perhaps the starkest evidence of this is the sinking of the Belle Demoiselles Plantation in the story by that same name. The "merciless, unfathomable flood of the Mississippi" swallows the plantation, a place where "the shady garden full or rare and beautiful flowers" used to outshine "the distant quarters of the slaves" (*Old Creole Days* 142; 123). Since Cable does not deign to direct sufficient narrative attention either towards the belles or their home prior to this drastic conclusion, the demise of the plantation fails to evoke feelings of nostalgia for the bygone days.

The story of Alix de Morainville in *Strange True Stories of Louisiana* also relegates several plantations to the narrative margins. The story is framed as a compilation of several old manuscripts, allegedly found among the family documents. It details a six-week trip of two teenaged Creole belles, who accompanied their father on a land purchase voyage from New Orleans to St. Martinville at the end of the 19th century. As they travel through the "wilds" of the current day Louisiana, which turns out to be home to assorted medleys of "Catalans, Acadians, negroes, and Indians" (55), as well as an occasional Swede (82), the girls are also received at a number of imposing plantations. The focal center of the story, however, is the wife of a French

gardener, Alix. Part of the French nobility, Alix arrived in the colonies after escaping the French revolution. En route to America Alix married Joseph, the son of the gardener family who basically raised her while her actual mother spent time in Parisian courts. In the reminiscences Alix writes for her young Creole friends, she recollects the gardener's "cottage . . . situated among the gardens" (123) where she spent most of her childhood and adolescence. It is in that cottage that Joseph's love for her blooms, although Alix admits that at the time the idea would have struck her as preposterous: "a laboring gardener lover of his lord's daughter? Ah, I would have laughed heartily then if I had known it!" (126). Nevertheless, the end of the narrative finds Alix tucked away with Joseph in "a little cottage embowered in a grove of oranges" in Louisiana (80). Alix is at peace with the crossing of class borders but shows her awareness of the magnitude of her transgression when she pleads with the girls to keep the closest friend of her youth in the dark about her current situation. Thus, in keeping with their democratic potential, which Cable extolled in his garden writing, as seen earlier, in this story gardens also play a role in facilitating more equal relations, as evidenced by the marriage of a noblewoman and a gardener. Given the earlier quoted Cable's view on plantation ideology, it is no accident that he leaves Alix de Morainville installed, once more, in a cottage within a garden, not the "big house" of a plantation.

Cable's focus on smaller gardens resists the dominance of the plantation. An attempt to tell the story of southern gardens—actual and literary—can highlight what kind of places and narratives the plantation pushes to the margins or obscures altogether. One of the pitfalls of focusing more or less exclusively on the plantation is the potential tendency to observe only the phenomena of a certain scale. In such a case, the fields of cultivated crops risk overshadowing other places of work or pleasure. The written accounts of visitors to southern states illustrate the

imposing nature of commercial crops on plantation geography. For example, Fanny Kemble, writing circa 1839, recounted trying to enlist the support of an overseer for starting a decorative garden and eliciting the following reaction: "He laughed, and said rice and cotton crops were the ornamental gardening principally admired by the planters." The day after this dispiriting conversation, Kemble observed the luscious natural surroundings and lamented the lack of garden appreciation she observes around her: "It does seem cruel, with such a sun and soil, to be told that a garden is worth nobody's while here." Kemble attributed this gardening apathy to the "curse of utter stagnation [that] slavery produces." Traveling through the slave states to the south of Virginia, Frederick Law Olmsted also found the slaveholding society short of sophistication, as evidenced by, among other things, the dearth of gardens. While visiting families of a certain social standing, Olmsted wrote, one is entitled to certain expectations, such as "to lift the sash without effort, to look into a garden and fill my lungs with fragrant air." After all, a "man of [a certain] disposition cannot exist in the country without ladies, and ladies cannot exist in the country without flowers" (2: 284). Yet "[n]ine times out of ten, at least," Olmsted complained, he "found no garden, no flowers, no fruit, no tea, no cream, no sugar" and no other life comforts, taken for granted in a gentleman's life in other parts of the country (2: 285).

Kemble's and Olmsted's complaints about ornamental garden shortcomings in the South arise from the place of privilege. Though motivated by different sentiments and lamenting a different kind of flora variety, several decades later, and on the other side of the Civil War, Booker T. Washington also struck a chord of disapproval at the dominance of cash crops. When traveling in what he called the "plantation districts," he was struck by the uniformity of land use and its harmful effects on the sharecroppers' diet (88). He observed them eating inferior, store-bought food "notwithstanding the fact that the land all about the cabin homes could easily have

been made to produce nearly every kind of garden vegetable that is raised anywhere in the country." He went on to note that the sharecroppers' "one object seemed to be to plant nothing but cotton; and in many cases cotton was planted up to the very door of the cabin" (89). Washington's overall message of self-sufficiency may have prevented him from telling the fuller story of sharecropper gardens—that the decision not to cultivate a garden patch frequently arose not from apathy, but from the financial pressures of sharecropping and the owner insistence that workers buy everything at the commissary-type stores, instead of raising food themselves (Kirby, *Mockingbird* 104, 205-10).[8]

Of course, expansive cotton (or rice) fields do not tell the whole of the garden story on the plantation. The antebellum South in popular (white) imagination was tied up with elaborate and stately European-style gardens. As W. J. Cash noted, the prevailing myth of the Old South involved "a sort of stage piece out of the eighteenth century, wherein gesturing gentlemen moved soft-spokenly against a background of rose gardens and dueling grounds" (ix). Although there were decorative gardens in the South that provided some foundation to this pervasive romantic view of the antebellum South, they were few and far between. Garden historian James R. Cothran notes that if "the colonial manorial model of a fine house and ornamental garden remained the ideal throughout the antebellum period, it was seldom achieved" (113). The relatively few large gardens that did exist on plantations effectively hijacked the history of gardening in the South, especially prior to the Civil War. Writing in 2003, Cothran saw his book *Gardens and Historic Plants of the Antebellum South*—which also included a section on town gardens—as atonement for historiographic neglect, since the landscape history of the antebellum

[8] The politics of land (un)availability for gardens by sharecroppers and tenants will be addressed in greater length in Chapter 2.

South had tended to privilege plantation gardens (81).[9] Nearly a century and a half after the conclusion of the Civil War, southern gardens and plantations continue to be linked in much of public discourse. This is evident in publications like *Historic Virginia Gardens* (2009), National Register of Historic Places, and numerous tourism websites.[10] The nostalgia in which many a plantation (and its garden, if one exists) is cloaked in the informational materials becomes especially unsettling, if one pauses to consider just what plantations and their beautiful gardens commemorate. Anthropologist Antoinette T. Jackson recalls "hav[ing] taken numerous organized tours of antebellum plantations turned tourist sites and marveled at the splendor and beauty of these picturesque places—these monuments to the institution of slavery" (61). Jackson's sentiments are echoed by many others, such as Patricia Klindienst in *The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture, and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic Americans*. On the island of St. Helena off the North Carolina shore, upon entering an old elaborate garden on the grounds of the Middleton Place plantation, Klindienst faces the glaring omission in the literature that has been provided to her: the absence of the "most salient act about the creation of this entire landscape"—a decade's worth of labor by one hundred slaves, as the family legend has it (61).

Partly as an effort to represent the history of plantation sites more fully, during the last couple of decades more attention has been directed towards the less glamorous gardens that were also part and parcel of many plantations: the household vegetable gardens and individual slave gardens. These gardens sprinkle the writings of the aforementioned Frederick Law Olmsted. For example, on one plantation he observed: "Each [enslaved] family has a half-acre of land allotted

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[9] A notable exception to this trend was S. Starr's *Southern Comfort: the Garden District of New Orleans*, with editions in 1989 and 1998.

[10] National Register of Historic Places is available at http://www.nps.gov/nr/. Plantations and their gardens are also well represented on the web, e.g., the Middleton Place (SC), www.middletonplace.org; Rosedale Plantation (NC), www.historicrosedale.org; Rosedown Plantation (LA), http://www.crt.state.la.us/louisiana-state-parks/historic-sites/rosedown-plantation-state-historic-site.

to it, for a garden; besides which, there is a large vegetable garden, cultivated by a gardener for the plantation, from which they are supplied, to a greater or less extent. They are at liberty to sell whatever they choose from the products of their own garden" (1:251). Though not all slaves were permitted to keep gardens or had sufficient time to cultivate them, gardening was one avenue for slaves to practice a greater degree of independence (Westmacott 14-20). Furthermore, individual vegetable gardens were significant providers of food. As Jay Temple Kirby puts it, food "sufficiency and surplus alike were owing to slaves' own initiatives"— gardening a crucial one among them (*Mockingbird* 212).[11]

Recovering non-ornamental gardening history on plantations has been one way to shift the focus from planter class to those whose stories have all too often been silenced. Peter J. Hatch, gardener and historian of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, notes that "[n]either documentary nor archaeological evidence has shed light on the character of [Monticello] slave gardens" (67), yet the household ledgers of Monticello and other plantations include transactions involving the purchase of garden produce from the slaves. Subfloor pits that have been uncovered during archeological digs of slave cabins also provide support for conjecture that garden harvest was stored there during the cold months (64). Uncovering such history and recreating slave gardens on plantations provides a fuller record of plantation life. In a similar vein, plaques in front of the flower and vegetable gardens by the Lee-Custis Mansion (located in

[11]Although generally seen as less direly needed for basic sustenance, than on the Caribbean islands, the U.S. South's slave gardens were many and varied, and allowed for a degree of independence, resourcefulness and community building. Gardens of the enslaved in antebellum U.S. South have chiefly attracted attention of historians, not literary critics. For general information about slave gardens, see Carney and Rosomoff's Ch. 7, "Botanical Gardens of the Dispossessed," Berlin and Morgan, Eugene Genovese (pp. 535-40), and Glave, *Rooted in the Earth*, pp. 120-122. For more contextualized discussions of southern U.S. slave gardens, see contributions by Stephen Miller, John Campbell and Roderick McDonald to *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (edited by Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, U of Virginia P, 1993) and Jeff Forret's "Slaves, Poor Whites, and the Underground Economy of the Rural Carolinas," *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 70, no. 4, 2004, pp. 783-824.

what is now Arlington Cemetery in Washington D.C.), informs the park visitors of the white family's reliance on slave labor. For instance, the plaque in front of the flower garden informs: "The enslaved also labored in the garden: weeding, hauling manure, [*sic*] and buckets of water."[12] The word *also* indicates that the presence of the African Americans still comes as an afterthought—after the mention that white women frequently worked in the garden. However, the material fact of the garden compels an explicit acknowledgement of the enslaved and their crucial role in plantation life. At Oak Alley plantation in Louisiana, a memorial of a different sort exists: there pecan trees have been planted in honor of an enslaved gardener Antoine, who was the first to graft a paper shell pecan ("Plantation Highlights").

Cable's urban Creole gardens may be seen as a kind of precedent for such efforts to complicate the history of the South through gardens, with one important distinction. The historical and ideological weight of the plantation imposes strict separations between black and white spaces, separations that hold even in the case of such important historical work as the recovery of history of slave gardens. Although there is no question of interracial interactions (including sexual encounters, most often perpetrated by violence and domination) of every kind on the plantation, the plantation space itself was highly racialized. In her study of how space shapes and interacts with social, economic, and cultural developments in the South, Thadious Davis notes this rigidly categorized nature of the plantation space. Davis argues that "the plantation, with its spatial distinctions [of] the fields, the quarters, the big house with parlors, porches, and outbuildings—kitchens and cabins—emerged as the primary organizational structure" (*Southscapes* 187). Davis sees evidence that this plantation-derived structure continues

[12] Visited by the author on July 16, 2014.

to influence conceptions of southern places into the 21st century.[13] As we shall see, the Creole legacy makes such spatial distinctions much harder to enforce. Cable's choice to depict an urban Creole garden indicates his quest for less ideologically charged spaces that allow a possibility of different race relations and social structures. By insisting on other southern places—of leisure and land cultivation, however humble in scope—Cable's stories illustrate Edward Kamau Brathwaite's reminder that the plantation "does not contain all that is planted" (4). Although Brathwaite was writing of the Caribbean context, his call to look beyond the borders of the plantation finds echoes in Cable's work. Furthermore, by locating the Creole gardens beyond the borders of the plantation, Cable destabilizes regional boundaries of North and South. Whereas the space of the plantation indeed makes it easier to deem all it contains as southern and therefore "Other," as evident in much of the literature written in or about the South, Cable's Creole gardens make any such distinction a more daunting task.

The way that the Creole garden muddles the boundaries between the South and the rest of the nation becomes especially evident in the concluding chapter of *The Amateur Garden*, entitled "The Midwinter Gardens of New Orleans." The key features of a typical New Orleans garden—its small size, aspirations to privacy, interesting and fragrant plants—place Cable's reader right in the middle of the Creole garden already encountered in his fiction where they fulfil important personal and public functions. Lest any doubts remain about the suitability of this regional model for the national garden, Cable assures the reader of the inherently democratic nature of the southern garden:

> if this New Orleans idea—that enough private enclosure to secure good home gardening is not incompatible with public freedom, green lawns, good neighborship, sense of room

[13] Davis reserves this observation primarily for the Deep South (*Southscapes* 187), but it could be argued that her analysis is relevant for the region more broadly conceived.

> and fulness [*sic*] of hospitality, and that a house-lot which is a picture is worth more to everybody (and therefore is even more democratic) … if this idea, we say, finds any credence among sister cities and towns that may be able to teach the Creole city much in other realms of art and criticism, let us… show in floral, arborescent, redolent detail what is the actual pictorial excellence of these New Orleans gardens. (179-180)

The strength of the New Orleans Creole garden lies precisely in its picturesque and quaint qualities, which, by virtue of being interesting and engaging to its neighbors, fulfills its civic duties and becomes a genuine participant in the democratic process. If its (presumably northern) sister cities can boast superiority in terms of education and sophistication, the Creole gardens of New Orleans remain unsurpassed as a national paragon in Cable's eyes. Cable also praises New Orleans gardens for their year round aspirations to beauty, thus turning the historically suspect tropical climate into an asset. While he advocates that northern gardeners follow New Orleans by making their gardens picturesque for longer portions of the year, Cable aims to soften the blow of having New Orleans serve as a role model through the following disclaimer: focusing on the year-round appeal of the garden is "merely by adoption a New Orleans idea, while through and through …it is by book a Northern voice, the garden gospel of Frederick Law Olmsted" (185).

Such a half-hearted attempt to establish the superiority of the North shows to what degree Cable is conscious of the charged North/South, center/margin framework within which he is operating. The juxtaposition of New Orleans and the northern United States in this particular instance serves to highlight the assumptions that underlie much of the remaining Cable's text: namely, that Northampton, Mass., counts as national (as opposed to regional) space and that, by extension, the generic American garden of *The Amateur Garden* is actually a New England one. On the surface, then, Cable's text falls in line with the larger cultural pattern of the 19th century

(and earlier) whereby New England became conflated with the republic at large in what Joanne Pope Melish characterized as "the triumphant course of New England nationalism" (236). Melish traces how through active cultural and material amnesia the region denied both its past involvement with slavery and the continued presence of black people in order to arrive at a myth of a homogenously white and slavery-free New England. This myth then expanded to include the Unionist North and eventually the entire U.S. Similarly, Joseph A.Conforti has written of "New England's national regionalism" with additional focus on such phenomena as Jedidiah Morse's influential geographies and Forefathers' Day celebrations (79-202). As mentioned earlier, the idea of the South as not quite American also drives Jennifer Rae Greeson's *Our South*. Yet despite Cable's seeming complicity in "othering" New Orleans (and, by extension, the South), his conviction that gardens are an important form of nationalism suggests that his Creole tales serve another purpose besides offering material to further marginalize the region. What happens if we take seriously Cable's insistence that the enclosed New Orleans garden is a more authentic performance of the American ideal of democracy than the spacious unobstructed lawn, more readily found up North? First, through their association with Creole culture and history, New Orleans gardens plant the colonial past of the United States—entangled from the start with slavery—at the heart of the nation. Second, they redefine the very terms in which to think about one's membership in the nation.

The notion that a Creole garden has fundamental American qualities not only decenters New England from the would-be homogeneous national narrative, but also makes it harder to eliminate the complicated racial and colonial history of the United States. The term *Creole* alone carries the weight of history that the dominant U.S. discourse of Cable's time would rather forget. Barbara Ladd has argued that the uncertain position of a white southerner at the time of

the South's re-entrance into the U.S. after the Civil War prompted writers like Cable and Mark Twain (and later, William Faulkner) to revisit the complex situation of racially and culturally suspect Creoles following the cession of Louisiana territory to the United States. As colonialist practices of assimilation and nationalist practices of exclusion conflicted with one another, the white Creoles found themselves in a predicament. From the vantage point of the Anglo-American U.S., where the racial and cultural boundaries were drawn more rigidly, the Creoles were racially and culturally suspect. As Ladd puts it, Anglo-Americans were prone "to associate Creoles—regardless of whether they believed those Creoles to be biologically 'tainted' or not—with the colonialist site of slavery, miscegenation, and political and cultural degeneration" (25). Despite the attempts of white Creoles to defend their racial status—for instance, by insisting that the capitalized "Creole" referred exclusively to the racially pure descendants of Europeans—they found their purity hard to defend (Ladd 24).

Given this backdrop, Cable's suggestion that the Creole garden expresses genuine American spirit shows that discussion of American spirit cannot be separated from the nation's history of racial oppression. The most honest conversations about race relations in "Madame Delphine" take place in a secluded garden, e.g. when Madame Delphine exclaims to Pére Jerome: "from which race do they want to keep my daughter separate? She is seven parts white! The law did not stop her from being that" (62). This insightful remark, coming from the depths of her heart, is in stark contrast to the lie she procures for her main inquisitor about Olive's racial status, "the half Americain" lawyer Jean Thompson (13), when she tells him that Olive is all white. The interaction between Madame Delphine and Thompson moves from a public bench outside his residence to the inside of the house (because it would not do for a quadroon and whites to sit together in public), yet the price Madame Delphine pays for entering this privileged

private space is the denial of miscegenation and, arguably, her eventual death (73-75). The specificity with which Cable renders various spaces in this exchange highlights the importance of gardens encountered elsewhere. As they blur the line between private and public spheres, they also appear as places that enable a more honest encounter with facts of slavery and colonialism. When Cable characterizes such a historically charged space as a secluded New Orleans garden as pre-eminently American, this entails recognition of the involvement of the entire United States, from its very inception, with slavery.

In addition to carrying the history of slavery, Creole gardens also serve as a reminder of the European transplantation to the American hemisphere. If one goes back far enough, every white citizen of the United States hails from Creoles, according to the term's earlier meaning: people of European descent who are native to (in the sense of being born on) the non-European soil (Spitzer 59). Far from planting their feet effortlessly and standing tall from the very beginning, British America, too, experienced its share of worries over cultural and biological degeneration of European stock. As Ralph Bauer has argued, even though the term *Creole* is not used anywhere in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Jefferson was explicitly engaging with the 18th century Europeans, who traveled to the (primarily) Spanish America and found it wanting due to what they deemed were harmful effects of the natural environment (this included miscegenation) on European transplants, be they human or otherwise (46-54). Jefferson's text set out to prove them wrong, and the apparent need he felt to do it shows that the Spanish and the British Americas were not so far apart in his mind as to assure him of the utter inapplicability of concerns from one area to another. Thus, to suggest that anything Creole is inherently American is to suggest that American identity is also inherently Creole—transplanted, adapted, and shaped by encounters of many cultures. Of particular use here may be Nicholas R. Spitzer's argument

for a "creole approach to American society," which focuses on "cultural creolization"—constant formation of "new cultural wholes" alongside the continuity of distinctions between different communities (59). Thus, another way to look at "the colonial hybridity" of Cable's Creoles is to interpret them as participants in new cultural formations (without glossing over the violence frequently attending such interactions) where they both influence and are influenced by other cultural forces. Approached from this angle, Cable's Creoles and their gardens present a coarser version of cultural fluidity and interdependence portrayed by Edouard Glissant in yet another take on a Creole garden ("jardin créole") in *Tout-Monde*:

> You believe still in the isolated thing, the race, the language, the land, the idea. You believe in unity. However, look at the Creole garden, you put all the species on such a small strip of land, the avocadoes lemons yams canes ripe oranges mandarins soursop mint peppers sweet corn onion cinnamon breadfruit ambarella and still thirty forty species on this small piece of land that climbs the slope for no more than seventeen meters, some protect the others in the great Circle, everything flows into everything. (471)[14]

Like Glissant's plants that run together in the absence of commas or any other punctuation marks, Creoles in Cable's stories embody an amalgamation of cultures, languages, races. Because the plants are edible, their profusion teems with life and life-giving forces. Separating them would strike at the very heart of sustaining interdependencies. Similarly, in Cable's fiction, an attempt to achieve "the isolated thing," such as forcing Madame Delphine's daughter Olive to

[14] Translated by Nicole B. Mills. "Vous croyez encore à la chose isolée, la race, la langue, le terrain, l'idée. Vous croyez à l'unicité. Pourtant regardez dans le jardin créole, vous mettez toutes les espèces sur une si petite languette de terre, les avocats les citrons les ignames les cannes les oranges sûres les mandarins les corros sols la menthe les piments le maïs doux l'onion-péyi la cannelle le fruit-à-pain les prunes de cithère et encore trente ou quarante espèces sur ce bout de terrain qui monte le morne sur pas plus de dix-sept mètres, ells se protègent l'une par l'autre. Dans le grand Cercle, tout est mis dans tout."

be one race or another, precipitates the loss of vitally important connections and can only conclude in death. On the other hand, the heroine's name of Olive—with its connotations of life, growth and, crucially, not exactly white skin—endows Olive and her newly-started union (with a man, who wanted to marry her even when before finding out about her alleged pure whiteness) with a possibility of future and continuity. Thus through the presence of Creoles Cable affirms the fluid, dynamic, and powerful nature of cultural encounters, both past and present. The Creole culture in Cable's work comes to embody what Thadious Davis sees as "a now-lost opportunity" for the emerging United States in her discussion of texts produced by the Louisiana Creoles of Color. In Davis's eyes Creole Louisiana presented "a potential model for formulating a multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual society" (189). Cable's efforts to argue for relevance of Creole gardens and their history may be read an as attempt on his part to hold on to that tenuous promise held by Louisiana in the early years as a state.

The terms of discussion about the relationship between Creole culture and the prospects of its survival or subsumption hearken back to the peculiar status of Creoles. Their geographical location, the U.S. South—part of the emerging hemispheric and global power and yet something to be used and enveloped by it—straddles the colonizer/colonized binary, as suggested by various scholars, especially in recent years.[15] The figure of the garden occupies a similarly liminal space. As outlined earlier in the "Introduction," gardens have been associated with

[15] This conception of the U.S. South constitutes much of the drive behind the New Southern studies. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn's "Introduction: Uncanny Hybridities" in *Look Away!: the U.S. South in New World Studies* remains one of the most cogent articulations for the need to approach the U.S. South transnationally, with focus on its unique status in the postcolonial world. At the same time, they issue a call to remain attentive to specificities of place and history in order to avoid the pitfalls of assuming a "facile homogeneity in the Americas" (or indeed elsewhere in the "Global South") as George B. Handley phrases it in the pages of same collection (25). In *Our South* Greeson examines the multiple purposes the South's status of an "internal other" has served (1 and passim). *Reconstructing the World: Southern Fictions and U.S. Imperialisms, 1898-1976* by Harilaos Stecopoulos addresses links between southern regionalism and U.S. imperialism not just in the Caribbean but also in Asia. For continued importance of the U.S. South's unique position, see Jon Smith, "The U.S. South and the Future of the Postcolonial."

culture and colonization. Gardens have all too often served those with the power to produce historical records. In some ways Cable's gardens participate in this obliteration of other histories, especially because all of Cable's gardens are spaces of material and historical privilege, whether it is the garden of Pére Jerome, Madame Delphine, or the overgrown marsh surrounding the house of Jean Marie Poquelin. Nearly all Cable's gardens are tended by ghost laborers otherwise omitted from the stories. Lastly, for all his endorsement of affordable gardening in *The Amateur Garden*, Cable's gardens are frequented by a cast of relatively economically privileged and white, or nearly white, characters. Yet alongside Cable's gardens' entanglement with the more privileged versions of culture and history, their subversive potential—their ability to resist the dominance of the plantation and foster fledgling democratic impulses—must be acknowledged.

If the postbellum South found itself in the position of an internal colony, Cable's gardens—especially their racially indeterminate inhabitants--may also be viewed as resisting colonization. The subversive quality of Cable's gardens becomes even more apparent if considered in the light of popular postbellum travel literature in which landscape imagery, including that of garden, rendered the South as feminine and passive (Silber 84-87). In this regard, Cable's gardens prefigure more recent interpretations of garden ideology that allow for more transgressive characteristics. For example, when discussing contemporary writers like Jamaica Kincaid and Michael Pollan, Sarah Phillips Casteel argues that gardens are strategies of "diasporic emplacement" (117) whereby so-called displaced people claim belonging, or a certain version of rootedness, in a place where dominant narratives aim to deny the legitimacy of alternate histories. In *Garden Plots: The Politics and Poetics of Gardens,* Shelley Saguaro examines the work of such diverse writers as J. M. Coetzee, Toni Morrison, V.S. Naipaul and Leslie Marmon Silko to suggest that each employs gardens to recapture the past that has been

lost or denied in the processes of colonization and displacement. Cable's endorsement of the Creole gardens in the newly reunified U.S., then, constitutes a kind of emplacement effort on behalf of Creoles and the histories they represent.[16] Even the problematic Jean Marie Poquelin's garden, having fallen into ruin and become breeding grounds to "half a hundred sorts of thorny or fetid bushes, savage strangers alike to the 'language of flowers' and to the botanist's Greek" (*Old Creole Days* 180), serves as a testimony to economy that relied upon exploited labor to maintain the grounds of privilege where one might boast one's knowledge of the botanical jargon or employ the lofty terms of sophisticated flower appreciation.

In addition to creating space for groups and histories that the dominant narratives would rather forget, Cable's focus on material connection with the land, if only for the purpose of molding it into a garden, holds unsettling implications for any community's attempts, including those of the nation, to lay superior claims to a geographical locale. The garden, by virtue of its being only partly under human control, has a way of disrupting social hierarchies and human narratives. Jill Casid in *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* has mined Shani Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* for ways in which the European employment of a garden as an ideological tool of domination has turned against itself. Casid argues that Mootoo's work illustrates how the "European landscape garden, and the colonial order of imperial and heterosexual dominance it has so often upheld, are subsumed by their own gardening practices. Transplantation and intermixing release the garden's uncanniness, making of Paradise an unsettlingly queer place of overwhelming and excessive beauty and stench" (Casid xxi). The Paradise, according to Casid, is still there, but it has been rendered unrecognizable and threatening.

[16] Certainly, Louisiana Creoles are not the only or the most enduring inhabitants of the territory in question. This chapter's focus on Creoles does not seek to obliterate the presence of Native American tribes in the region.

In a similar vein, even as Cable celebrates gardens as supreme examples of national participation, the gardens wreak havoc on the very concept of national belonging. Homi Bhabha has written about the disjunctive temporalities plaguing the modern nation as the latter faces the need to view itself as "a priori historical presence, a pedagogical object" (147) with "the pre-given or constituted historical origin *in the past*" (145; original emphasis), yet, in a marked contrast to the idea of an already accomplished completeness, also needs to produce itself through continuous performance. This performative aspect of the nation allows it "to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity" (145) and live up to its reputation as "that progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion—*the many as one*" (142; original emphasis). As Bhabha notes, the performative aspect of the nation allows for the minority discourses, or marginal voices, to enter "the contest of narrative authority" (150) in the ongoing narration of the nation. George W. Cable's focus on gardening as a national activity highlights the performative component of the nation. His efforts to define just what the quintessential American traits are (and how they are to be translated into gardening) gesture at the empty space looming in place of an originary American essence. By seemingly prescribing proper "Americanness," Cable opens up the very idea of national identity to infinite (re)interpretations. If the enclosed New Orleans garden may be redefined as authentically American (this notion being, in and of itself, already performative), there is no reason to believe that other claims to the more genuine American identity—be they based on linguistic, ethnic, racial, economic factors—are any more immune to the possibilities of redefinition.

Furthermore, Cable's insistence on gardening as the proper way to engage with the national soil introduces certain humility into one's relationship with the land. Edouard Glissant's elaboration on two different models of identity—based on "root" or "relation"—may help

illuminate the far-reaching implications of Cable's advocacy of gardening. The root identity, according to Glissant, perceives itself as originating in the distant past and feels legitimized through what it deems to be an unbroken chain of filiation. Such a view fosters the community's feeling of "entitlement to the possession of a land, which thus becomes a territory," often preserved through aggression and subsequent legitimation of new conquests (143-144). In other words, the intolerant root identity seeks to reduce the complex relationships of people with each other and the land through violent "sectarian exclusiveness" (147). The relation identity, instead, grounds itself in "the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures" (144). As a result, rather than perceiving itself as being metaphysically entitled to claiming a territory and then extending its possession outwards, the relation identity conceives of the land as a "place where one gives-on-and-with rather than grasps" (144). Relation identity relies on immediate connections with the land: "passion for the land where one lives is a start, an action we must endlessly risk" (151). Of crucial importance here is the requirement of attachment to the land *where one lives* as opposed to the land one feels entitled to through the myth of filiation. Even such a position is in danger of leading to the all-too-familiar violence over "grasping" the land (hence the risk). Thus, a genuine connection with the land is possible only through a careful and continual engagement with it.

George W. Cable's portrayal of the relationship between the American national identity and the land incorporates significant aspects of Glissant's relational identity. At the risk of putting the matter too simply, Cable quite clearly implies that it is not one's status as an American that gives one the right to possess the land, but it is one's relation with the land that establishes one as properly American. In a striking passage that warrants extensive quotation, Cable expounds the following views on patriotism:

> Patriotism! Can you imagine a young man or woman without it? And if you are young and a lover of your country, do you not love its physical aspects …? And if so, do you love only those parts of it which you never see and the appearance of which you have no power to modify? Or do you love the land only and not the people, the nation, the government? Or, loving these, have you no love for the nearest public fraction of it, your own town and neighbors? Why, then, your love of the Stars and Stripes is the flattest, silliest idolatry … Your patriotism is a patriotism for war only, and a country with only that kind is never long without war.
>
> You see the difference? Patriotism for war generalizes. A patriotism for peace particularizes, localizes. (*Amateur Garden* 124-125)

If we ignore for the moment the zealous nationalistic tone of the passage, it starts to reveal glimpses of a more humble relationship to the land. One's legal national status as an American does little to guarantee that one is genuinely patriotic. If the commitment to the nation ends either with loyalty to the abstract notion of "our land" (as represented by the parts of the land the phony patriot does not see) or the ungraspable idea of unity allowing one to rally in a centrifugal fashion around the non-existent center in order to project and justify aggression against "others," such patriotism does not even merit its name but becomes a sacrilegious version of itself, as the religiously laden term "idolatry" suggests (one might be reminded here of Glissant's notion of "risking" the passion for the land). Only through specific connections—to one's neighbors, one's immediate natural surroundings—can patriotism merit its name. Such patriotism, by virtue of its specific embeddedness, directs energies towards connections in relation to the land rather than reaching outwards to claim other territories of possession. The true patriotic American, far from passively relying on the legitimating myth of the root identity, grows his patriotism through

fostering direct and specific connections with the land and the people surrounding him or her. While echoes of the relation identity in Cable's definition of patriotism do not neutralize the potentially dangerous glorification of all things national, they introduce moments of rupture in attempting to conceive of genuine patriotism, and by extension, nationalism, in purely exclusionary, genealogically based terms.

In 1874, at the close of *Scribner's* monumental "Great South" series, the editor Dr. Josiah Holland rejoiced in the hope that wise legislation and competent work could "make [the South] a garden of happiness and prosperity" ("The Great South") . Though George Washington Cable likely would have been the first to admit that the South needed more "happiness and prosperity," his writings problematized the passivity of Holland's garden metaphor. In Cable's hands the garden became a more potent, perhaps even ominous, force. When he employed the imagery of a garden, a concept so dear to his heart, as a way to complicate the spatial geography of the South and to plant the unsettling Creole culture in the larger United States national narrative, his strategy carried potential to explode that narrative altogether. As Cable extolled the garden as an effective tool for inscribing the individual into a rigidly defined identity category as a national subject, he also introduced ruptures that threatened to undo the neat cohesion of such an argument. While endorsing an idealized version of nationalism, Cable highlighted the performativity of the nation, thus calling into question the very idea of a homogeneous national identity. Furthermore, by privileging gardening as an eminently national activity he brought to the foreground the awesome recording powers of the landscape, capable of summoning the disturbingly heterogeneous webs of relations obscured by the national narrative. In fact it seems that while embarking on a quest to define a friendlier version of American nationalism, Cable

exposed the phantom nature lying at the heart of any authentic American identity, and the seeds for this unsettling idea appear first to have been planted in a Creole garden.

CHAPTER 2

"Our Own Place Maybe": Tenant Gardens and the Plight of the Landless in Two Kentucky Novels of the 1920s

Weeds (1923) and *The Time of Man* (1926)—the first novels, respectively, of Edith Summers Kelley and Elizabeth Madox Roberts—share very similar plotlines. Each follows the growth and maturation of a bright, impressionable young girl, who becomes a wife of a Kentucky tobacco tenant farmer. Judith Pippinger Blackford (of *Weeds*) and Ellen Chesser Kent (of *The Time of Man*) bear several children, and both of their marriages weather infidelity as well as life-threatening (in one case, life-taking) illness of a child. Their families move every few years in search of better land and livelihood, but poverty and lack of social mobility continually complicate their experiences as daughters, wives, and mothers. Incessant labor, whether in the house or in the tobacco fields, is their constant companion, yet the prospect of a brighter future eludes them—and will continue eluding their children as well, the narratives suggest. Each novel concludes with the heroine deciding to cast her lot with her husband and to do the best she can with the farming and family life she has been given.

That Elizabeth Madox Roberts would one day write a novel (or several, in fact) about Kentucky, if she were to take to writing at all, was not altogether a surprise. A fourth-generation Kentuckian on the maternal side of her family (paternal lineage in Kentucky being not much shorter), the writer was born and spent most of her life in Springfield, Kentucky. Her parents were proud Confederates and remained such till their passing well into the 20th century. Roberts attended college, University of Chicago, rather late, starting at the age of thirty-six and taking a degree in English in 1921. There is no doubt that the Chicago years, spent in the company of literary minded peers like Glenway Wescott and Yvor Winters, among others, were formative to

her growth as an artist. Equally, if not more, important was the decade, roughly 1900-1910, that Roberts spent teaching pupils in Springfield and the small rural schools of the surrounding area. She observed the ways and speech of her rural students, all of which informed her fiction.[1] In an undated note, Roberts wrote: "I know the life of which I wrote at first hand, for I lived near it and merged into it although my family did not belong to the tenant class. The language these people speak has often arrested me with its peculiar poetry, but it is merely an archaic speech which had wide use a hundred years or so ago. Indeed, I absorbed much of it from my grandmother."[2] Roberts poured into fiction, in other words, what she knew from her family lore and lifelong experiences as a Kentuckian.

Edith Summers Kelley came to the subject matter of *Weeds* rather differently. She was Canadian by birth and graduated from the University of Toronto in 1903. After graduation, she spent a few fears in New York, for a time working as a secretary for Upton Sinclair, and was engaged for a short while to Sinclair Lewis. Helicon Hall, Upton Sinclair's communal experiment, was Kelley's home for a few months before it burned down to the ground. After separating from her first husband, with whom she had two children, Kelley became common law wife to sculptor C. Fred Kelley, and bore her third child. The couple decided to get away from the city and tried a few unsuccessful ventures, including running a farm-turned-boarding house in New Jersey and farming in Imperial Valley, California. Their first stint as farmers, however, was living for a time on a Kentucky tobacco farm. Kelley's husband was a manager on the farm, but the family lived in a cabin like the tenant farmers. Kelley wrote *Weeds* while already living

[1] Campbell and Foster 3-38, Keller 4-5.

[2] Unless otherwise specified, any unpublished writing is drawn from the Elizabeth Madox Roberts Papers, Library of Congress (designated as "Papers" in parenthetical citations). The collection houses manuscripts in various stages, notes on her fiction, as well as a few letters, newspaper clippings and miscellaneous notes.

in San Diego, where her husband worked in a slaughterhouse.[3] In one of her letters to Alfred Harcourt at Harcourt Brace she sounded this note of exhaustion: "It has been a terrible task to write the book [*Weeds*] underneath the same roof with three irrepressible children who had nobody to care for them but me" (qtd. in Goodman, "Afterword" 360). Indeed, some critics have observed that Judith Pippinger's struggles to develop as an artist due to domestic overwork and childcare mirror those of Kelley as a writer.[4]

Kelley's peculiar positioning in regard to her subject matter—an outsider to the geographical area and yet intimately familiar with the logistics of running a household and cultivating tobacco for a living—is reflected in the text she produced. *Weeds* houses passages that showcase an outsider's point of view, an urbanite's condescension for the periphery: "In backwoods corners of America, where the people have been poor and benighted for several generations and where for as many generations no new blood has entered, where everybody is cousin, first, second or third, to everybody else for miles around, the children are mostly dull of mind and scrawny of body" (13).[5] Although it can be doubted how easily Elizabeth Madox Roberts, given her family's background and education, could "merge with the tenant class," as she wrote, such sentiments of eagle-eye view condescension are nevertheless unimaginable in her novel.[6] At the same time, Kelley, like Roberts, writes with firsthand knowledge of the specific rural labors her characters perform, such as tobacco setting, bulking, stripping, and the multitude of tasks that face the rural Kentucky wife.[7]

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[3] Goodman 353-60.

[4] See Ammons 177-81, Hatchett 35-7.

[5] It was in part passages like these that alerted critics to Kelley's engagement with the discourse of eugenics. For discussion of *Weeds* against the contemporary landscape of eugenics, see Berg 78-101, Fontana 77-112.

[6] For similar interpretation of the outsider/insider point of view, see Hatchett 35.

[7] For examples, see *Weeds*, pp. 124-29, 138-40, 149-50, 194-96.

The authors' dissimilar paths of arriving at the same subject matter at least partially explain why, despite the surface similarities, *Weeds* and *The Time of Man* are very different texts. Their differences will be addressed in more detail later, but here it suffices to say that *Weeds* is often described as a naturalist novel, while Roberts's *The Time of Man* is written in a style that may be best described as "poetic realism" to use its author's own words. Employing extensive, gritty detail, *Weeds* portrays how poverty, unchecked reproduction, and (to a lesser degree) patriarchal oppression destroy the novel's heroine and her extraordinary potential. *The Time of Man*, on the other hand, is written in a rhythmic, lyrical prose, peppered with arcane expressions of folk speech and creates a kind of timeless, mythical impression while at the same time presenting a realistic portrayal of rural life and its impoverished tenants. The novel's focus on the individual consciousness as well as its preoccupation with language broadly aligns it with the modernist aesthetics. Besides stylistic choices, the biggest difference between the two novels lies in the attitude of the two protagonists at the end of their respective narratives. After decades of daily drudgery and bleak material conditions, Kelley's Judith is beaten down and resigned. Roberts's Ellen is hardened and realistic but hopeful yet. Judith's life has mangled her spirit; Ellen's life burnishes hers.

The authors' differing treatment of the same subject matter led to different trajectories of popular and critical reception of the two texts. Most of the substantive criticism of *Weeds* has focused on Kelley's portrayal of childbearing and motherhood. And with good reason. Not only does the novel explicitly and extensively address the toll that lower class motherhood extracts from its mothers, but it is also home to a remarkable chapter about the first of Judith's labors and childbirths, called "Billy's Birth," which has been deemed to be "without precedent in American literature" (Berg 80). The chapter was excised from the original text by the editors at Harcourt

Brace for the dubious reason that it depicted an experience that was too universal, but it has since been restored as an addition to the novel in the two printings (1982 and 1996) by the Feminist Press. The novel's increasingly secure inclusion within the ranks of American naturalism also encourages critical attention to the embodied female experience of *Weeds* against the cultural background of the first few decades of the 20th century.[8] The pronounced critical focus on biological and associated cultural demands, which are placed on the female body, largely obscures the specific circumstances of the protagonist's position as a tenant farmer. Often, Judith's status as a tenant serves as a shorthand for her poverty and working-class existence, which then act as stepping stones towards discussions about motherhood under difficult economic conditions. In the event that specifics of tenant farming are mentioned, they usually underscore some aspect of the same primary goal of analysis—e.g. how thankless tenant labor conditions correspond to the equally thankless work of mothering (Berg 93), how the logistics of tenant women's lives exposes the middle-class bias of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist utopia, including its vision of communal child rearing (Zink), or how the farmer's ability to exercise control over nature (through elimination of weeds, for example) contrasts with the poor rural woman's lack of control over her own reproductive nature (Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground* 122-123).

In short, the analysis of tenant farmer conditions in *Weeds* serves mainly as a significant footnote to the primary critical focus on the working-class female reproduction. Even in this background role, however, the *Weeds'* protagonist's social class has received heaps more attention than in several decades' worth of scholarship on *The Time of Man*. In his argument that

[8] Donna Campbell analyzes *Weeds* as a representative of "unruly naturalism" (as opposed to "classical naturalism"), in part because of its focus on the laboring body in childbirth in *Bitter Tastes*, pp. 260-3. Also see Berg 88, Goodman 365. *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* (2011) and *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* (2011) include Kelley among the naturalist authors.

Roberts creates a heroic and timeless farmer figure, Peter Nicolaisen offers an explanation for the dearth of sociohistorical criticism on Roberts's novel: "Given Roberts's efforts to transcend the mundane, it is easy to forget that *The Time of Man* deals with twentieth-century Kentucky sharecroppers and tenant farmers" (194). The author herself played a hand in this tendency to overlook the novel's historical specifics. In an oft-quoted personal note she remarked that the novel "could never be an analysis of society or of a social stratum because it keeps starkly within one consciousness" (Papers). The prescription of the author more or less held for several decades. For instance, in their 1956 book Harry Modean Campbell and Ruel E. Foster framed Roberts's fiction within decidedly ahistorical parameters: "we are never allowed to forget that the setting is the earth, and the people who act herein are of the earth; and these rustic people, unlike the swarming metropolitan hordes, have nothing to separate them from Mother Earth" (89). With a telling choice of words, they wrote: "Washington County is typical of this area [of central Kentucky]; and in this rural—*but not degraded*—county, Miss Roberts has set the locale of [her novels]" (88; my emphasis). Three decades after the publication of *The Time of Man*, the scholars seemed invested in distancing the novel from whatever social problems a rural location in Kentucky might entail.[9]

Over the last two decades or so, there has been a steady trickle of sociohistorical criticism of *The Time of Man*. It picks up the strands from the 1970s readings by Sylvia Jenkins Long and Richard Gray and explores how the novel portrays the white landless farmers in the post-Civil

[9] Similar assertions of distance between Roberts's work and historical contexts, in which it is rooted, abound. Creating a bit of a strawman, Earl Rovit contended that "prais[ing] the novel as an attempt to show the sordid realities of life . . . is somewhat like admiring the *Iliad* for its verisimilitude or its indignant exposé of the brutality of war" (24). In less drastic terms Robert Penn Warren held that "the novel presents Ellen Chesser, not in active protest against the deprivation and alienation of the life of the sharecropper, but in the process of coming to terms, in a personal sense, with the tragic aspect of life" (xxvii). Although *The Time of Man* certainly does not warrant reading it as a protest novel, neither does it warrant exclusively the study of how "Ellen Chesser can symbolize the fundamental humanness of man" (Rovit 25).

War U.S. South, including their multigenerational poverty. Nicolaisen argues that the novel comments on social realities despite itself: "Roberts barely seems aware of the social and economic potential her material contains. Nonetheless, the systems of sharecropping and tenant farming that form the background of the novel are at least partly responsible for the fact that in the end Ellen Chesser falls short of the self-realization the author has in store for her" (202). Wendy Pearce Miller goes a step further and interprets the novel's understated approach to tenant life as a calculated choice on the part of the author. For Miller, the narrative is "a subtle indictment of the South's tenant system disguised as a female bildungsroman. Roberts ensures that her subject matter is made palatable to the polite reader's sensibilities . . . and the reader is influenced gently in the 'proper' direction, possibly unaware of any subversive meaning" (116). Miller's reading is generally consistent with Janet Galligani Casey's view of the novel. Situating *The Time of Man* in the context of other popular "farm novels" of the 1920s, Casey classifies it as material for the middlebrow audience. That is, she sees Roberts as offering social critique in a way that is not overly threatening or disconcerting to the mainstream reader even as it addresses the concerns of rural lower classes. Yet Casey insists that the subtlety of such social commentary does not discount its influence, especially because middlebrow fiction generally reaches wider audiences than one containing more radical ideas (95).

Joining this recent, historically situated scholarship on *The Time of Man*, my argument aims to bridge the hitherto largely separate critical commentary on the two novels by examining closely the most substantial aspect that joins them together—namely, the portrayal of a female tobacco tenant farmer's life in the beginning of the 20th century Kentucky. More specifically, I explore what the novels' gardens reveal about the lives of tenants, and tenant women in particular. Since the tenants were dependent on the land for their livelihood, yet essentially

condemned to wander without settling, their encounters with the land provide significant insights into their existence. For the tenant women, especially, gardens were the prime sites of interacting with the land. Kelley and Roberts highlight the importance of garden sites by having their protagonists and their families think and talk about gardens, work in them, and consume the edible garden bounty. Because gardens are tangled up with complex issues of labor, leisure, land ownership and survival, they are spaces in which the economic vulnerability of the tenant women (and tenants in general) is most apparent, as is their strength in the face of the continual displacement of their lives. The procession of gardens in the two novels exposes the injustice of the economic system, especially in terms of unequal access to the land, which consistently fails to reward hard work. Paying close attention to the garden patches on the pages of *Weeds* and *The Time of Man* thus helps illuminate the web of circumstances that entrapped tobacco tenant farmers roughly a century ago and compels consideration of others who may be similarly trapped, albeit in different eras and different ways of life.

Situating this argument more precisely within the critical landscape may help clarify its stakes. As mentioned earlier, much of the scholarship on *Weeds* productively explores how the novel, while dealing exclusively with the tenant farmers, problematizes working-class motherhood in general. At the risk of seeming to split hairs, the line of inquiry proposed here, through its focus on gardens, insists on the specificity of the tenant farmer poverty and its causes. As we will see, virtually any analysis of gardens is inextricably bound up with the issue of land ownership, which in its turn underscores, time and again, the landless status of the novels' tenant farmer characters. Furthermore, the tenant farmers' permanent state of landlessness is an enormous factor in their remaining permanently poor. Kelley and Roberts portray tenant farmers caught up in a terrible cycle: their landless status makes them work harder, but the excess of their

labor continually falls short of enabling them to leave the landless class. The focus on gardens zooms in, as it were, on the distinct factors that contribute to the hardships of tenant farmers, instead of illuminating connections between the landless folks and other groups of impoverished people. In the process of persuading Kelley to agree to the excision of the "Billy's Birth" chapter, Alfred Harcourt proceeded to devalue the novel's vast-reaching theme of childbearing in astonishingly condescending terms: "We don't think you need all of the first obstetrical incident. It is a powerful piece of writing and is what thousands of women go through, but—almost therefore—it is not peculiar to the story of Judith or the Tobacco country" (qtd. in Berg 89). Unlike Harcourt, I emphatically do *not* want to discount how the two novels transcend their immediate geographical and social contexts. I do, however, want to insist that there are valuable insights to be gained by scrutinizing more closely the reasons behind the nearly always assumed synonymity of the terms *tenant farmer* and *poverty*, just as there is value in considering how the predicament of tenant farmers resonates with others of the working class more broadly. Examination of tenant gardens helps shed light on the distinct causes and experiences of poverty, as well as the coping strategies, in the lives of tenant farmers, particularly the women.

The concept of a *vernacular garden* provides a helpful starting point for thinking about flower and vegetable plots in the fiction of Roberts and Kelley. Vernacular gardens may be defined as gardens of ordinary people, which "occur whenever there is a need for them, depending on local, demographic and cultural conditions" (Hunt 79). In his delineation of thirteen garden types, landscape historian John Dixon Hunt distinguishes the vernacular garden from other gardens by its tenuous relationship to the gardener who tends it. Among examples of vernacular gardens Hunt includes allotment gardens, community gardens, as well as ephemeral gardens that sprout up illegally in vacant plots. The fate of a vernacular garden depends on a

range of factors that may include political atmosphere, municipal support, gardener's determination and sometimes just sheer luck.[10] Such unpredictable existence distinguishes the vernacular garden from a more conventional personal garden—"a gardener's garden" in Hunt's words (25-26)—the fortunes of which generally depend mainly on the whims and resources of its gardener. Due to the heterogeneity of circumstances under which vernacular gardens can emerge, Hunt resorts to scare quotes when attempting to pin them down as a category: "What characterizes this 'type' in general is a combination of need and desire, of opportunism and disregard of 'proper' social behaviour and aesthetic taste" (80). According to Hunt's definition, then, vernacular gardens grow in places, where the "need and desire" for gardening are so intense that people overcome inconveniences and other deterrents to do it.

In his focus on the vernacular garden as a kind that faces exceptional challenges, Hunt diverges from a more inclusive definition of such a garden by John Brinckerhoff Jackson, a foundational American reader of vernacular landscapes. In his brief history of vernacular gardens, Jackson describes what he deems to be the original instance of this type of garden: "Located close to the house and kitchen, it contained a mixed assortment of a limited number of vegetables, flowers, and herbs (all used daily in the household), and also a number of fruit trees. In fact, often it was called an orchard" (12). As agriculture adopted the horticultural practices of gardeners, the vernacular garden gradually lost its original significance as a source of food. Within the American context, Jackson dates mid-19th century as the period in which the final separation between vernacular gardens and food production occurred. As a result, in Jackson's

[10] It may seem counterintuitive to include allotment gardens, which have long been a mainstay of several European countries, as examples of fundamentally insecure gardens. Margaret Willes recaps the challenges faced by the British allotment gardens, illustrating their political and cultural vulnerability (115-22). On a more personal level, an individual may lose his/her right to an allotment garden through improper care (Hunt 82). Such a consequence is not generally faced by those who garden on the land they own or lease on a more permanent basis.

view, the most common contemporary iteration of an American vernacular garden is the ubiquitous suburban front lawn, especially when coupled with the more diverse horticultural practices, which are relegated to the backyard (16). In contrast, it seems that for Hunt, once the garden loses the compelling need of its gardener (e.g. for food, being closer to "nature," sense of belonging, etc.) as the primary reason for its being, it ceases to occupy the ranks of vernacular gardens and crosses over to the more common category of a gardener's garden.

Parsing out differences between the two takes on vernacular gardens is less important for my purposes here than recognizing that the tenant gardens in Kelley's and Roberts's texts serve the multitude of functions attributed to vernacular gardens in both the historical sense, which Jackson recaps, and the more contemporary—one might say, more radical—sense, as explicated by Hunt. In most instances, the tenant gardens are crucial, because they provide nourishment to a population that cannot afford to be casual with regard to food. To say that food does not appear effortlessly on any tenant's table is to put the matter lightly. And yet, there is a sense in *Weeds* and *The Time of Man* that the tenant women do not work in the gardens simply because they *must*. Rather, it may be more accurate to say that providing for their families is but one aspect in which the women assert themselves in garden spaces. In the process of hoeing their beans and cabbages, they also compel the readers to take note of their capabilities and aspirations, despite the hardships.

Writing about the unauthorized gardens of the urban homeless, Hunt posits that a key component of such garden plots is "a mixture of self-identity and self-promotion in parts of society where it is hard to have an identity that can matter to others outside these transitory gardens" (Hunt 88). In a similar fashion, gardening grants the tenant women a greater degree of importance than is generally accorded to them in their marginal socioeconomic status. The

gardens of tenants succeed one another at a fast and unpredictable pace, which makes their comparison with squatter gardening not as far stretched as it may seem at first glance. Though the tenants are not homeless, they are landless. This makes their task of earning a livelihood from the land an uncertain and complicated one. Gardens, as a rule, thrive with longevity, which allows for things like long-term improvement of the soil, the maturing of perennial plants, and others. For the most part, all these advantages that arise from being securely in one place elude the tenants and their gardens.

The intertwined nature of gardens and their gardeners' lives is on full display throughout *The Time of Man* and *Weeds*. Contemplating considerable differences between the two texts in terms of narrative styles and authorial goals, the intertextual continuity of their portrayal of gardens is quite remarkable. That is not to say, certainly, that the treatment of gardens is identical or stresses the same aspects. Rather, the pronounced interiority of *The Time of Man*, and the more outwardly focused, richly detailed narrative of *Weeds* may be said to complement one another in their varied depiction of the tenant farmer gardens. In both novels, the flower and vegetable gardens are important in what they reveal about the existence of those who cultivate them. The nearly nonexistent flower gardens are significant precisely because of their scarcity, which reflects their unattainability. It is almost as if the flower garden embodies the ideal of the garden—and the ideal of a life that would make such a garden possible—and the vegetable gardens constitute the reality. The remainder of the chapter will address each type of garden in turn.

Flowered Dreams

When women dream, they dream of homes—at least they do so in the novels being discussed here. And very often, when they dream of homes, those homes are adorned with

flowers. Upon closer inspection, it appears that flowers around the home signify a manageable, non-threatening kind of domesticity for many female characters. *The Time of Man* begins when the Chesser family—Ellen and her parents—separate from their traveling companions (identified as "road people" in the text) because their wagon had broken down. The complicated hierarchy of the lower classes becomes apparent when Ellen's mother comforts her about being separated from one of those road people, a woman named Tessie: "Your pappy and mammy don't belong to that that-there parcel of road trash, nohow . . . Your pappy is a farmen man" (28). For the adolescent Ellen, Tessie represents worldliness and culture. Tessie reads books and has taken Ellen inside the Nashville cathedral; she is an example to follow (23). It impresses deeply upon Ellen that Tessie's dearest dream in life is to have a house. In the evenings, Roberts writes, Tessie always talked of homes for she was "always wanting a house" (30). Ellen longs for Tessie once the Chessers are settled and takes a long nighttime walk to the town of Rushfield, where she hopes Tessie and her partner Jock, a horse trader, may appear on court day. On the way to town, she sees a breathtaking moonlit vista from a bridge over a river. Ellen lacks words to articulate her feelings upon seeing the dreamy beauty before her. When her words fail her, she resorts to using Tessie's: "Such a leetle house is all I want, no matter how leetle. . . . I'd make it fair some way or how with things set about proper, or with vines and trees and flowerpots" (56). The fact that these words offer themselves to Ellen at the moment of attempting to express the wonder of the world attests to the emotional power with which she had heard Tessie say them and reveals how much they find an echo in her own desires. It encapsulates the yearning of a lifetime. A house is what Tessie wants, but she has further plans of beautifying it, and decorative plants—"trees, vines and flowerpots"—are part and parcel of making that dream house pretty. Tessie's dream, however, is beset with economic worry. Cognizant of the fact that a spacious abode is out

of her reach, she modestly scales down her want to just "a leetle house . . . no matter how leetle." Making that house fair is also a bit of a challenge. Uncertainty hovers above the tentative statement, "I'd make it fair some way or how." There is a sense, too, that "things set about proper" would be Tessie's first choice of making the home lovely, but the chronic shortage of material goods casts doubt on the viability of such a decorating scheme; there might simply be not enough things to arrange. Instead, it is things that grow, trees and decorative plants, that are more likely to be available to the woman doing the dreaming.

Tessie is not the only "road-woman" daydreaming of homes and flowers. In *Weeds,* Judith also goes to town on a court day. Although she has no friend she longs to meet, she encounters a wife of a "hoss trader" and mother to three little girls: Curlena, Sabrina, and Aldina. In keeping with the novel's theme of motherhood as an identity-erasing endeavor, the woman herself remains nameless. Out of her anonymity, she speaks a bit like a representative of an everywoman, when she confides in Judith: "There hain't nothin' I'd like bettter'n to have a little home o' my own an' never have to move out'n it. I'd have flowers in the yard an' lace curtains on the front winders; an' I'd keep my three little gals dressed nice an' have a white cloth on the table. But seems like folks hain't in this world to git what they want, 'specially wimmin" (*W* 179). Out of a list of items that make a permanent home, "flowers in the yard" in her mind come first. For Judith, these desires are more or less just "finicky little housewifely instincts"; she secretly thinks to herself that the traveling "life would be a jolly one, if one had no babies" (179). All along Judith has been described as standing apart from others in her milieu—"like a poppy among weeds" (88)—perhaps to illustrate better the detrimental effects of her surroundings, so it comes as little surprise that she is dismissive of things that other women desire. However, even she is forced to admit that a life of perpetual movement does not agree

with having children—and by and large, children come unceasingly and uncontrollably into the lives of most women like her.[11]

Another reason why Judith might be less prone to daydreaming about flowered yards lies in the simple fact that she had already encountered them and found them lacking. Unlike the women on the road, who idealize rootedness and having a home, Judith knows that reality often falls far short of the idyllic daydreams. What members of the tenant class can call home is frequently not much more than a roof over one's head. Judith's own sister Lizzie May, the stereotypical frilly female, who would be the prime candidate for having flowers and white curtains, lives in a sad affair of a house: "It was a gaunt, two-story box standing bleakly on top of a hill. Not a tree stood anywhere near and it looked as lonely as a water tank at a desert railway station. Its four weather-grayed sides were turned sullenly to the four winds" (*W* 117). The overwhelming impression this description creates is one of impermanence, with the setting being likened to a railway station, a space devoted to passing through. Further, it is implied that nothing in the environment supports the life inside the desolate box. Whatever is life-giving is inside, much like water in the tank in the middle of the desert. Indeed, Lizzie May's husband Dan dies very young. He freezes to death on his way back from town, having had a bit too much drink as a consolation after a disappointing sale of tobacco due to the sudden drop in tobacco prices (*W* 231). Thus, in a way, he does give up his life to the environs that demand he exhaust himself with raising tobacco but provides no guarantees that his labor will be justly rewarded. Lizzie May and Dan's living arrangement is not atypical for the tenants depicted in the novels.

[11] One significant exception is Hat Wolf in *Weeds*, who seems privy to information that allows her to remain childless and has a better life in many respects because of it. For more extended analysis of Hat's character, see Zink 214-21.

Time and again, the reader encounters them in ramshackle homes on hard, unyielding land with not a tree, vine, or flower in sight.

Judith's first house as a married woman had been luckier in that regard. The narrator expressly states that Jerry searched for "something that looked like a home" (*W* 104), complete with the lilac bush and a grape vine, where to bring his new bride. The setting up of the household goes auspiciously enough at first. In addition to starting the vegetable garden and setting up a chicken coop, Judith "plant[s] morning glories and nasturtiums about the house and train[s] them up on rude trellises made of tobacco sticks" (140). The arrangement of the flowers on a crude support system, left over from the primary activity of raising the cash crop, hints at the material challenges of having this modest garden in the first place. But economic obstacles to the garden pale in comparison with the real threat to it: the impending reality of motherhood. The nausea of the first pregnancy puts an end to whatever enjoyment Judith stood to get from her flowers: "The very morning glories and nasturtiums were gaudy and tiresome and the smell of the nasturtiums sickened her" (142). The garden that Judith had planted was already done in stolen time, in a manner of speaking, and soaked up the energy that would otherwise have been devoted to other work. The repulsion that Judith feels towards the flowers, besides being a physiological phenomenon, shows that they are no longer welcome in her life; there is no time or energy left to spare for them. Judith sows flowers just once more in the narrative. After a particularly brutal and long winter, grateful to have the spring arrive, Judith throws herself into housework: she "cleaned the house, raked up the yard, and burned the winter accumulation of rubbish, set out her garden and even planted some seed of sweet peas and nasturtiums about the house" (253). Her life had become such that a seemingly simple task of sowing the seeds is presented as something superfluous and rather out of the ordinary. Whereas the other tasks are

taken for granted, the planting of the flowers seems to indicate that her burst of energy was exceptional if she performed such an inessential task—she *even* planted some flowers.

In the context of these minimal flower gardens, Judith's reaction to the blossoming of a rose in her yard can be read in a way that is not purely symbolic. The rose bush grows, in effect, in everyone's way: "In the yard not far from the kitchen door stood a rose bush, a poor, battered, stunted thing, scratched and nipped by the hens and broken back again and again by straying hogs and calves." Despite all the hardships, it manages to produce a magnificent bloom: "not a frail pink blossom, but a silken, scarlet thing with a great, gold heart, heavy with dew and fragrance." When Judith smells it, "[t]ears from some strange, hidden source welled into her eyes" (273). There is an obvious symbolism here of Judith being likened to a blossom that flowers against all odds, the bloom of which is only short lived and unappreciated in an environment that conspires against it. But in addition to the symbolic implications, there is also the hard truth: if Judith's environment were more conducive to the rose (or other flowers), it would be less destructive on Judith herself. A life that could allocate a little bit more space for the decorative plant, that could allow for a separation of the livestock from the front yard, that could spare some energy and materials to protect the plant (e.g., by building a fence around it) would also be a life that could shield Judith from the poverty and the backbreaking labor.

Such a life, however, is but a pipedream for a tobacco tenant farmer's wife. Judith's sorrowful flower gardens perhaps help explain why flowers exist only in Ellen's dreams, not in her reality. Ellen, without a doubt the more conventionally feminine of the two protagonists, does her own share of dreaming about flowers. For example, when Ellen and Jasper are envisioning a life together, one of Ellen's contributions is this: "[O]ur own house sometime, that belongs to us and all our own stock in the pastures. Three quick taps on the farm bell to call you

to dinner. A rose to grow up over the chimney. A row of little flowers down to the gate" (*TM* 305). Flowers also figure in another vision of Ellen's future. A practical, poultry-minded suitor Sebe courts Ellen, but she feels no attraction for him. Yet there are certain aspects of a hypothetical life with Sebe that the young woman does not find altogether unappealing. One of such aspects is claiming residence in "neat tenant houses with bright dooryards full of hollyhocks whose culture took nothing from the care bestowed upon the chicks" (152). Even this purely conjectural garden— a patch of hollyhocks—needs to be accommodated in relation to other duties that are more important for simple living, such as the raising of poultry. The routine of a housewife on a tenant tobacco farm jealously guards her energy and time from any and all pursuits that do not contribute to the survival of her family. There is also the basic consideration of availability of land. According to historian Margaret Willes, the cottagers of England had to weigh carefully their desire of flowers, because "the land around the cottage, whatever its size, represented a vital source of food, and inevitably vegetables had to take precedence over the cultivation of flowers" (115). No comparable study of gardens by working Americans exists, but it is reasonable to surmise that allocation of land may well have played a factor in their decision to grow flowers (or not). Given the time, land, and labor constraints, it is not surprising that once Ellen marries, there are no more mentions of flower gardens. One suspects that cultivation of flowers takes a backseat to the other demands of life, much like in Kelley's *Weeds*.

Ellen does not plant a single flower in the course of *The Time of Man*. In fact, she makes specific floral cultivation plans—where and what to plant—only once. The circumstances that enable Ellen's design tell volumes about the absence of flowers in other areas (and at other times) of her life. To put it simply, the flowers are feasible because they are for a dead tenant woman, not a living one. Jasper tells Ellen that he would take her one day to visit his mother's

grave and hopes they would make his mother's resting place "smooth and decent." Ellen's idea is more elaborate yet: "she murmured that she would plant a flower beside it, a rose or a little clump of sweet-williams such as she had seen before the priory door at St. Lucy, for they were a fair sight with their round clusters of pink bloom that made a sweet smell all about" (*TM* 281). It appears that only in death can landless women be surrounded by cultivated flowers. If the patriarchal system in effect deems the flowers superfluous in other areas of a tenant woman's life, it sanctions the expenditure of time, energy, and resources on flowers here, as signaled by Jasper's participation in the plan. Flowers can be planted, too, because barring some unusual circumstances, death confers on a deceased person a permanent ownership of a small plot of land, i.e. the grave. It is worth noting that Ellen wishes to plant Sweet Williams in addition to the ubiquitous rose. Sweet William (*Dianthus Barbatus*) is a biennial plant, normally producing blossoms only in the second year, unlike the purely annual nasturtiums and morning glories, which Judith sows around her cabin in *Weeds* ("How to").[12] Planting a plant that demands a two-year period to bloom attests to a certain faith on planter's part that there will be no uprooting—both of the plant and of the planter's link to the place of planting. A couple of years may seem like a very modest measure of time, but even such short-lived stability had likely eluded Jasper's mother, herself a wife of a tenant.[13] As I will explore in greater detail later, the specter of impermanence is ever present in the lives of tenant farmers. From year to year, their staying in one place is subject to landlord's whims and the vicissitudes of weather, cash crop

[12] The properties of Sweet William were likely well known to Roberts, an accomplished gardener, who identified the flower in a letter from Orlando: "The flowers have been lovely for a month. We have pansies, roses, snap-dragons, sweet-williams, sweet peas, and azaleas all about us" (qtd. in Campbell and Foster 76).

[13] That Jasper's parents were landless tenants can be inferred from the fact that upon their death, Jasper "went back home to get what little was a-comen to [him] after the stock was sold, but it was a little trifle" (277). There is no mention of any land to be bequeathed.

prices and personal circumstances. In her death, Jasper's mother transcends all that; her resting place may therefore finally have flowers, if Ellen finds a way.

In her characteristically opinionated piece, "Woman's Place," the late writer and gardener Eleanor Perenyi provides a concise overview of how men have minimized the role of women in agriculture (and relations to the natural world in general). One way the women were marginalized, Perenyi argues, was through "the two-thousand-odd years of women's incarceration in the flower garden" and other forms of associating women with flowers, which are "the least menacing and the most useless" of all plants (261). For women in Kelley's and Roberts's' novels, flowers mean something different from the gilded cage Perenyi describes. Flowers for them represent a reprieve from instability, barebones poverty, and ceaseless housework. The characters' inability to sustain cultivated flowers in their daily lives stems from their inability to lighten their daily burdens.

It is well known that Elizabeth Madox Roberts took great pleasure in her garden, which she carefully cultivated for at least two decades (Campbell and Foster 40, 77). During the summer of 1920, she wrote the following to Glenway Wescott:

> My garden is a joyous place. It is a little more of a garden this year than last, when it was largely a vision and a plan. This year I have a bench and a chair there, under a locust tree, and along the fence—a high wire fence that looks into a neighbor's vegetable garden, I have planted cinnamon vines and the flowering cucumbers and morning glories, to try to get a wall of green to keep the neighbors on the side from seeing me when I sit a under the tree with my book. (They never sit under a tree with a book, poor dears). (qtd. in Campbell and Foster 34).

The garden in her letter emerges as a place of repose and, because it is a place of reading, a place of leisure and education. The pain Roberts takes to make the garden private, by concealing it from the neighbors' view, shows that seclusion is a highly valued characteristic of her garden space. Whether Roberts intends it or not, in her letter the fence between the two gardens becomes a boundary that groups flowers, books, and repose on one side of the fence while delegating vegetables and non-literary minded public on the other. The importance of the writer's flower garden to her artistic sensibilities are also apparent in this note from 1922: "I am still planting and digging, far seeing into the time when my garden will be a burst of color, a symphony surrounding me magnificently with—at least, my reward. Blue iris and red rose, zinnia and salvia and pflox [*sic*], ivy vines and scarlet runner and peonies. I ought to have some things with lovely names, like delphinium" (Papers). The joy and ambition of a creator are palpable in the passage ("a symphony surrounding me magnificently") as well as the insecurity of an artist (if the garden falls short of being a symphony, it will be, "at least, my reward"). Flowers and their hues constitute the medium through which this artistic activity becomes possible.

A perusal of Roberts's garden writing provides some insight into what kind of opportunities—for creativity, for physical rest, for replenishment of the mind—Ellen is denied through the absence of flower gardens. If Roberts reads in her flowery retreat, Ellen, it seems, cannot gain meaningful access either to flowers or books. [14] Precisely because she has few other resources, the dearth of flower gardens may be particularly felt by Ellen.[15] Nearly half a century

[14] Ellen was given a book by Tessie once, but left it with Tessie for safekeeping and lost the book when she lost contact with her friend. She dreams of reclaiming it somehow: "It would be the dearest thing in life if I could find my book someday" (47). Ellen continues to be deprived of books her entire life. When one of her sons, Dick, expresses desire to read them, his brother Hen responds: "Where are any books? We got no books" (394).

[15] Though Judith of *Weeds* does not exactly seem like the knitting type, her search for a knitting needle (in order to try induce abortion) shows how sorely her life lacks any semi-artistic outlet, even in the modest guise of practical crafts. She finds the needle "half buried in a crack of the cupboard drawer, hidden away under a frowsy accumulation of tangled scraps of twine, half empty spools, rusted fishhooks, odd washers, screws and nails, and crumpled grocery bills." After clearing all of that, she has to lift it out by a hairpin (282).

later Alice Walker wrote about her mother's gardens as a form of art into which her mother could pour her creativity. Being a poor sharecropper's wife, the garden provided her with one of the few avenues—perhaps *the* avenue—for expressing her artistic gifts. Walker elaborates on the meaning of her mother's work in the garden, her "mother's art": "Her face, as she prepares the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them. For her, so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life" (A. Walker 238). As a result, Walker writes, "my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena ... and on and on" (241). One must be careful not to elide the differences between being a poor black and a poor white person in the early to mid-20th century U.S. South. Still, Walker's recognition of the challenges her mother overcame in order to produce her garden-art may be carried over to the lives of tenant women in general. It takes extraordinary vision and perseverance to practice respect, as Walker puts it, "for all that illuminates and cherishes life" even in such a seemingly accessible manner as the gardening of flowers. It is therefore no surprise if circumstances become too much to overcome, if flowers bloom only in dreams that recede in the face of tenant farmer realities, the way they do in the novels by Kelley and Roberts.

Vegetable Gardens

Flower gardens may be elusive in *Weeds* and *The Time of Man*, but another type of garden, the vegetable garden, figures prominently. Unlike their floral counterparts, vegetable gardens are not optional, because having a garden often means having something to eat. In turn, cultivating it is an obligation rather than a freely chosen activity. The very first garden in *The Time of Man* is thrust upon Ellen without her consent. While the Chessers' broken down wagon

is being fixed, a farmer by the name of Hep Bodine recruits the family to plant some tobacco. After some trial labor, Bodine offers Ellen's father Henry to be his tenant. There will be money ($20 per month), roof over their heads, meat to eat, and plenty of fire wood. Either as an afterthought, or as a bonus with which to entice Henry to stay, Bodine also suggests starting a garden: "You can have a garden patch here by the creek. Time enough to plant some truck, and I'll give a day off from farm-work to let you put it in. That-there gal can keep it hoed and keep the weeds out" (26). Ellen's initiation into gardening reveals much about her position in the socioeconomic system. First of all, the garden is only possible if a landowner grants her family the right to cultivate it. Secondly, the responsibility of a garden is imposed upon her based on a patriarchal consensus. The farmer suggests, her father acquiesces, and everything is decided without any input from Ellen. Lastly, her work in the garden is a kind of invisible labor. Clearly, it is expected that she will work hard, but her labor does not appear to figure in any tangible form in the discussion of the two men. Ellen's contributions, in other words, are wholly subsumed within her father's. Work she must, but voiceless she is to remain. Given these unenviable terms on which Ellen is to garden, it is but of little surprise that she rebels. Roberts writes, "Inside the cabin Ellen stood listening while her immediate future was being arranged, little darts of pain shooting out from the inner recesses of abdomen and chest, anger making a fever in her blood" (27). The most direct reason for her anger stems for Ellen's desire to follow Tessie, but she is also reacting to the physical and emotional pain of being constricted into place, in terms of work and gender expectations.

Gardening continues to be associated with forced labor and involuntary settling in the scene where she and her father actually plant the garden. As Ellen still dreams of a life on the road, her father plants the garden with her help, offering the following encouragement: "If you

water your garden and keep the weeds down you'll have a right sharp parcel of truck here in no time. . . . You'll be right proud of your garden after a spell" (28). Unconvinced Ellen looks on dejectedly, "her mind full of pity for the corn, pity for the father" (30). Yet before long, the changing plants show her that a garden can be a dynamic place: "She ran to the garden eagerly each day to watch for the changes, and her pleasure in the growth of the corn was very real" (31). In a little while, Ellen "liked to sit in the corn after it grew waist-high or more. In the soft clods of the bright days or in the soft loam of the days after showers she would sit, looking about, feeling herself moving with the corn" (32). Her vegetable garden, so described, provides her with privacy, as she sits presumably unseen, and provides her with feelings of unity with her environment. She notices and experiences with her body the effects of the weather on the texture of the soil and the plants themselves. When the corn moves, she feels the movement also. The garden chore at once encumbers Ellen by demanding her labor and at the same time enriches her inner life as well as furnishes pleasure in the fruits of her work.

One aspect of the garden in particular highlights both the forced nature of garden work and the empowerment such work provides. This key property of a garden, because grasped through the adolescent Ellen's eyes, remains mostly veiled—namely, the garden's ability to feed. The beans, "brooding in stillness in all hours of the day and growing rank and full and lush," indicate the close bond that binds them to their gardener. "I'll be you; you wait and see…" they say to her (31). The imaginary communication reveals an important truth about the garden plants—they will literally become Ellen because she will consume them.[16] In fact, the produce of the garden probably has something to do with the fact that Ellen's "thin, almost emaciated body"

[16] Consumption as a mode of relating to the natural environment will be addressed at length in the next chapter.

(11) at the start of their tenure at the Bodine place looks different in a few months: "During the summer there had always been food and she had grown less thin" (47).

When Ellen first steps into her vegetable garden, she steps into an ideologically loaded space. Her initiation into the world of gardening recaps in broad strokes the entire history of women's association with domestic gardens, the produce of which is intended mainly for personal consumption. Although such gardens have provided vitally important (and high quality) food for thousands of years, the significance of women's contributions has consistently been diminished or downright overlooked. According to the farmer's conversation with her father, Ellen will bear the brunt of labor-intensive care of the garden (weeding, hilling, staking, etc.), which has also historically been a woman's lot. Yet despite all the ways that subsistence gardening has been devalued, Ellen experiences moments of pleasure, belonging, and empowerment. Her feelings may be interpreted, in part, as summoning back the magic of the ancient vernacular gardens from a time when the worship of Earth Goddess or Earth Mother was prevalent. However, occasional feelings of strength or rejuvenation, even if supported by an extensive lore that empowers women through association with nature, are not enough to transcend the static social system that denies genuine roots—to gardens, or tenant farmers.[17] The first of Ellen's vegetable gardens thus introduces a number of themes that resonate across the two novels: the socially determined insecurity of tenant gardens; their vital, if underappreciated,

[17] See Carolyn E. Sachs, Ch. 2 "Women's Work with Plants," for the history and contemporary issues of women's participation in horticulture and agriculture, including domestic gardens. For gender divisions in horticultural labor, see Worobec 85-88. John B. Jackson alludes to connections between women's horticultural practices and mythical female-centered conceptions of nature (12-13). Carolyn Merchant's *Ecological Revolution* provides a specific example by narrating the coexistence of the Corn Mother myth with women-led horticulture (70-81). Interestingly, the novel's implicit argument that women's empowerment through gardens cannot transcend the social systems that exploit them finds echoes in the logic that precipitates movement towards social/socialist ecofeminism and away from cultural ecofeminism (see Merchant, *Earthcare*, pp. 10-18).

function of supplying food; and, finally, their potential to provide a significant, though ultimately unsatisfactory, sense of empowerment to the women who tend them.

Gardens of the Landless

The tenuous nature of tenant gardens is apparent very early in *Weeds*. Much to her father's dismay, Judith hires herself out to a wealthy family, Ezra and Eppie Pettits. The wealth of the family traces its roots back to Eppie's father, who fortuitously acquired vast swaths of land when the state of Kentucky was being settled. As the narrator says, Aunt Eppie assiduously learned the lessons of post-Civil War hardships by becoming "niggardly and penurious" (*W* 64). These qualities of Eppie's inform how she runs her household affairs, including canning. Judith works for Eppie during an exceptionally abundant fall and well earns her keep because her mistress is determined to preserve all she can. Judith and another helper spend their days "pickling, preserving, and canning" (77). Because this performance is repeated annually, the family is not able to consume all that is canned, and the Pettits' cellar overflows with preserves of several years. Still, Aunt Eppie puts away more and more, to the utmost of her household's capacity. Sharing resources with her neighbors does not come naturally to her unless the circumstances insist otherwise: "When the plenitude of peaches or grapes or cucumbers was so great that it was a human impossibility to can them all, she gave of her surplus to the tenants, grudgingly, yet with a certain Lady Bountiful pleasure in bestowing favors" (77). Her generosity comes with the price tag of condescension and sanctimonious lecturing. As she allows her tenants to partake of the bounty, she berates them for not being in a better economic position themselves:

> I'm sure I've give away twenty bushel this year if I've give one. An' all the tenants could have 'em just as plentiful as us if they'd only plant 'em and tend 'em. I do think it's a

> shame for folks to live like hawgs from hand to mouth an' never plant a tree ner a bush ner hardly a tater to put in their mouths. Jes look at all these tenant houses! Not a fruit tree ner a berry bush ner hardly as much as a row o' beets an' cabbages! The shiftlessness of some folks is sech that it's a wonder the Lord A'Mighty don't send a plague on 'em. (77)

Aunt Eppie's smug contempt makes her sound like a villain out of a proletarian novel. Blind to the advantages she has had (due to her father's actions, not her own), she justifies her position in the world by pretending it was solely her hard work that had gotten her there. Convinced or trying to convince herself that she exists in a meritocracy, she can then rest easily that her good fortune came to her because of her merit. In Eppie's worldview there are no entrenched inequalities, because the people rise or fall due to their willingness to work, and little else. Gardens, or lack thereof, for this wealthy landowner are a measuring stick by which a person's level of motivation can be gauged. Eppie's view of tenant gardens differs only in degree, not in kind, from the one Arthur F. Raper attributes to most landlords in his *Preface to Peasantry*: "The typical tenant, asserts the typical landlord, will take no interest in a garden . . . the tenant simply does not see that he would benefit by a good garden instead of a poor one" (158).

The conviction that anyone could have plenty to eat, "if they'd only plant 'em and tend 'em," starts falling apart at the seams when Eppie's formulation is examined more closely. As it turns out, the tenants have precious few opportunities to take advantage of planting and tending. In large part, that's because they shift, not because they are shiftless, to borrow social historian's Jacqueline Jones's formulation.[18] In the space of her short speech, Aunt Eppie articulates two lists that illustrate the indolence of the tenant population in her eyes. In one instance, she says

[18] A chapter of Jones's *Dispossessed*, which I reference a few times, is titled "Shifting and Shiftlessness."

that tenants "never plant a tree ner a bush ner hardly a tater." In another list, while presumably looking at the tenant cabins, she exclaims, "Not a fruit tree ner a berry bush ner hardly as much as a row o' beets an' cabbages!" A number of parallels can be observed in the two lists. Both catalogues indicate that there are no trees or bushes planted by the tenant homes. The tricky little world *hardly* allows Eppie to diminish whatever there is that's planted—potatoes, beets, and cabbages. The succession in which the plants are listed—trees, then bushes, and, finally, annual vegetables—presumably indicates the order of diminishing importance. The ever-practical Aunt Eppie likely takes into account that trees require least care, once grown, and can produce great volumes of fruit. Bushes, being generally less sturdy than trees, require a little more upkeep and are less impressive in the volume of berries they yield. Last in place are the vegetables that have to be planted and intensively weeded each season in a process that has to begin anew next year. If plants can indeed be viewed as a stairway to a more plentiful life, as Eppie implies, then trees constitute the biggest, steepest steps that can propel the person upward.

And yet, for all the advantages of trees, the tenant cabins on the horizon stand bare and forlorn. That is because there is a glaring disconnect between the landowner's arboreal praise and the reality of most tenant farmers. Trees require time—lots of time—to grow. For the vast majority of tenants, who measure their lives in yearlong commitments, sticking around long enough to see a tree they planted bear fruit amounts to a fantasy. No matter how well things are going—and they frequently do not go well—impermanence haunts every tenant cabin. Across the two novels, the list of bad luck that can precipitate moving runs long: an allegedly lost heifer that serves as a pretext for driving tenants off, drought that ruins tobacco crop in a bad year, the market so glutted with tobacco that the crop becomes nearly worthless in a good year, jealous landlords, false lovers, and unjust accusations. Granted, not all moves are propelled by negative

developments. Some of the periodic relocation is an occupational hazard of tobacco farming. Judith and Jerry move from their first home after a couple of years because "[t]obacco exhausts the soil in about three years and has to go through a renovating period" (*W* 242). But what propels the tenants most often, it seems, is the ineffable sense that things are bound to be better in a new place, somewhere just over the horizon. This hope keeps tenant families on the move even when there is no obvious reason compelling them to uproot.

What underlying reason fuels the move makes no appreciable difference in the hardships it presents for a motivated gardener. Ellen's abortive gardening efforts in *The Time of Man* form a direct response to the criticism of the tenants' indolence by the self-righteous Aunt Eppie in *Weeds*. Laziness plays no part in the stark surroundings of Ellen's abode. Her permanent landlessness and consequent wandering do. This is made plain through her gardens, which she cultivates in a kind of hopeless procession and which she is perpetually forced to abandon.

Elizabeth Madox Roberts's notes reveal how prominently the landless status of her protagonist figured in her conception of *The Time of Man*. In an undated note she remarked, "I began with the amn [man] stripped back to the bare essentials of existance [*sic*], a creature subtracted from the land, having no claim even upon the soil, being even less than the herbs of the roadside." Further reiterating this point, another note described Ellen as first appearing "as a waif floating in upon the land from the act of travel. She has no claim upon the land on which she stands." These comments show that Ellen's relationship to the land—or, rather, the tenuousness of this relationship—is a key characteristic of her existence. The link between Ellen and the land is one of great uncertainty, as indicated by the use of such phrases as "subtracted from the land" and "having no claim on the land," even less so than the plants on the roadside. The comparison of Ellen to plants along a manmade road is instructive. Ellen and a plant are

both life forms, but Ellen's right to grow into the land, to become rooted, is determined by a social structure external to her. Instead, she and her family are compelled to move on the roads that had been in a sense prepared for them. Plants, on the other hand, are not subject to such social forces and therefore are in a less vulnerable position than Ellen.

In light of Roberts's notes, Hep Bodine's casually tossed remark—"You can have a garden patch here"—serves as an ominous preview of insecurity that will permeate each plot of land that Ellen cultivates. Always subject to the landowner's consent and the relationship between the landlord and tenant, every garden bears marks of its impermanence. Her first garden as a married woman is no exception. Her and Jasper's landlord Joe Phillips provides her with "grape cuttings to plant and a little cherry tree" (325). Yet she and Jasper move before the plants have a chance of maturing. In a few years Jasper runs into Joe Phillips again, and they have a chance to live once more in the place they had left. Ellen is overjoyed to move back, partly because she gets to see her plants again: "The cherry tree would be bearing by this time and she was in a fidget to know what had come to the grapevines she had planted along the fence" (337). Ellen's joy at something so seemingly simple—a chance to see how something she had planted grew—highlights what a rare occurrence this is in her life.

Ellen is also thrilled to have the garden again: "it came to her, mingled with the pleasure of the return, that she would be planting the garden in six weeks, perhaps, with Joe Phillips in and out to give her seeds and plants and to show her ways and praise her skill" (337). The atmosphere of sexual attraction between Joe Phillips and Ellen is inseparable from what he represents to her: the stability of land ownership and a vision of what becomes horticulturally possible with some longevity in one place. Joe's "own garden was a marvel of neatness and economy, and she tried to make hers the same. She dug in the garden during the growing season

until dusk drove her to the house" (345). As admirable as Ellen's determination is, it is clear that no amount of labor on her part can compensate for that which she does not have: a steady claim to a patch of land, however modest it might be. The narrative drives this point home by leaving Ellen unable to compete in garden quality with another tenant woman, let alone the landowning Joe Phillips. When a fellow tenant housewife Marthy Shuck compliments Ellen, "You must have a fine garden by now . . . You always do have the earliest of anybody," Ellen happily responds: "I'm right proud of my peas, ready to stick by a Tuesday of this week. I'm right proud on account how early my peas are a-comen on." Marthy then proceeds with a punchline: "Are you? . . . I got peas in bloom. They was stuck two weeks ago, I reckon" (339). To be sure, Ellen's neighbor loves to upstage others, but it is Ellen's recent move that has put her in a position where she can be upstaged. It has likely hindered her ability to put in a garden as early as she otherwise would. If relocation negatively affects short-lived annual gardens, its effects on long-term gardening are even more pronounced. Whereas moving may only delay or diminish the yield of an annual garden, it may altogether prevent the tenants from harvesting perennials. From that perspective, Joe Phillips's gift of "twenty or thirty raspberry cuttings from his garden" (345) upon Ellen's return is but of dubious value. The narrative has prepared the reader that Ellen will move well before the raspberries produce much of anything worth counting. And she does.

The unstable nature of Ellen's itinerant life makes the harvests of her gardens unpredictable for reasons other than weather patterns. She hardly ever finds herself in a position where she can reap the gains of well-thought out gardening plans. Her inability to protect her gardens from the turmoil that constitutes the reality of her social class elicits sympathy and regret, because it is clear Ellen is capable of achieving more than she does, in the space of a

garden and beyond. The contrast between Ellen's potential and the circumstances of her life may help explain a rather puzzling episode towards the end of the narrative.

One day a man by the name of Luke Trimble comes into the suggestively called Rock Creek country, the latest of the places in which Ellen and Jasper find themselves. Luke sells commercial fruit trees and can name a dizzying array of their various kinds—peaches by the names of Mayflower, Carmen, Elberta, J.G. Hale, Crawford Late, and apples like Hawkseye, Greening, Secor, Salome, Jonathan, Sharon as well as the American Beauty (371-2). Just the mere mention of these fruit types brings a whiff of worldliness and unaccustomed opulence to the dinner conversation in the simple cabin of a tenant. Luke represents a world of commerce and scientific approach to agriculture, as is apparent in the way he gently disagrees with Jasper about the moon as a guide for planting: "I wouldn't set any great store by the moon to tell me when to plant. The moon has got some properties that I'd say, but I never set out by the moon" (372). Precisely because he is a messenger from the larger world beyond the confines of Ellen's narrow sphere, his preference for her over the richer, landholding farmers seems significant. On an elementary level, of course, he has simply fallen in love with her. But on another level, he recognizes in her qualities that readers also note: her intelligence, spiritual maturity, perseverance and indomitability.

Before Luke leaves, he brings an apple tree as a gift for Ellen and plants it in "a sunny, wind-sheltered place" (377). It is an odd planting scene. As he goes through the motions of pulling up the sod, digging, setting the sapling, and shoveling the soil back around it, Luke verbally catalogs trees he has recently planted in the orchards of surrounding farmers. He rhapsodizes about the savory textures of various fruits as well as the beauty of domestic and wild trees in bloom. Luke's monologue serves as a background for his conviction that Ellen

represents the best of everything. "Honey is the fruit of the bee," he says, and the bees "take the sweet outen the grass even, and even outen the mud" (378). Likewise, he seems to suggest, Ellen has managed not to be subdued by the harsh conditions in which she exists. He tells her: "You got the very honey of life in your heart. Today I says to myself while I dug the holes for the Sharons and the Elbertas in Arland Booker's orchard, I says, 'She's got the honey of life in her heart'" (379). Luke Trimble's dreamily elevated prose cannot obscure the sad reality that despite Ellen's many wonderful qualities, she is no Sharon or Elberta—neither a prized apple tree nor a woman, whose station in life provides her with any "sunny, wind-sheltered place." Keeping this fact in mind, the fruit salesman's gift of a Kentucky Bell, "a great apple to ripen in the fall, delicious to eat in the hand and to store away for the winter" (377), seems diminished in value. The great qualities of an apple sound almost like taunts, when said to a person who will not be able to taste a single fruit from that tree. True to the overarching pattern of the novel, just a few months after the apple tree's planting, Ellen and the family are on the move once more.

Perhaps the apple tree and the raspberry bushes that have been planted in the course of the novel will bear fruit and alleviate some other tenant's need, but Ellen's compromised relationship to the land does not allow her gardens to reward her work reliably. In her otherwise useful reading of *The Time of Man* as a combination of the male quest and female domesticity, Constante Gonzalez Groba misreads the novel's gardens, when insisting on their hopeful, upward trajectory: "Ellen's gardens become larger and more fertile, and by the end of the novel she is growing onions, peas, beets, cabbages, sweet potatoes, cherries, raspberries, and grapes" (58). If only it were so. In Ellen's case, however, benefits of gardening do not accrue on an ever expanding, securely possessed piece of land. The fruits of her labor, as well as those of the plants she has tended, are scattered across the farms that belong to someone else. A note of resignation

comes into Ellen's life: "A year on Robinson's place, a year on McKnight's, it was all one, or if there was a hoe to dig the garden or a mattock, a fork or a spade" (361). This concise statement hides the physical and emotional costs of constant uprooting, of having to adjust over and over again to different conditions of the soil, and of mastering the different tools that those various types of soil demand. In light of Ellen's garden experiences, one can understand why a tenant housewife might be tempted to banish all but the most basic gardening of annual vegetables. Trying to cultivate anything that requires more time to grow is likely to be wasted labor anyway. Tending to bushes and trees, which Kelley's Aunt Eppie had advocated, therefore follows the suit of other futile tasks. "Although some women took pains to decorate their sparse dwellings and the immediate area outside," Jaqueline Jones notes, "'quits' as well as 'fires' came too swiftly to make such effort worthwhile in the long run" (121). Something that cannot be guaranteed for any substantial duration is better not done at all. Gardens are no exception.

Worse yet, there are continual reminders throughout both novels that the tenants are permanently condemned to wandering. When Judith and Jerry relocate from their first place of tenant farming, an "old couple" comes to farm in their place, who are much less ambitious in their agricultural goals. They will "raise only a patch of corn and perhaps an acre of tobacco" instead of the five Jerry has worn himself thin cultivating (*W* 242, 212). The older couple's fate serves as an indicator of an unenviable future that the young Blackfords face. Too old to work at full capacity, the couple still works as tenants for someone else. They will remain landless till the day they die.

All along, Jerry has been adamant that their life would be different from those who work as tenants until their deaths. When the couple is courting, he paints their future in rosy colors of land ownership: "An' after a few years we kin buy us a little place of our own. I don't want to be

like all these poor devils that lives all their lives from hand to mouth a-workin' on somebody else's ground an' never havin' a foot o' land that they kin call their own. It hain't no way to live, Judith" (102). Judith only teases him about his ambitions, but largely stays mute on the subject. Unlike Jerry, she is not invested in the dream of buying their own place. For one thing, she is physically less able to contribute to earning cash, because her successive pregnancies make her less and less fit for fieldwork. For another, domestic life does not hold much charm for her. She had always been honest about this: "I hain't never been very fond of keepin' house, Jerry" (102). She likely surmises that having a permanent place to perform domestic chores does not make them any more palatable. Another reason for her lack of enthusiasm may simply be a greater dose of healthy skepticism. Judith does not dream of buying a home because she knows it will not come to pass. Their life is gradually proving her right. Though the first year of farming brings encouraging profits, the subsequent problematic years of under- and over-production erase whatever head start had been made. Thus, after a few years, the couple is no closer to purchasing land. What they are closer to, though, is the birth of their third child. Miserable and exhausted Judith finally rips the veil of illusion from Jerry's dream of becoming a landowner. "You know durn well you'll never save enough money to buy a piece o' land," Judith says, "Tenants never does. If you ever git a chanct to own a place it'll be when yer dad dies. That's the on'y way." Jerry looks "like a dog that has been kicked" (*W* 245). Yet no matter how sympathetic Jerry and his aspirations are, there is the overwhelming sense that Judith, not Jerry, prophesies correctly about their fate and where it will lead them—to another tenant cabin down the road, even when they are too old to do much farming.

The only substantial difference between the couple in *Weeds* and Ellen and Jasper in *The Time of Man* is that the latter have been on a quest to quit their tenant status for much longer. At

first, the possibility of owning the land feels tantalizingly within reach. Even before their courtship properly begins, Jasper begins depositing money with Ellen for safekeeping. He is also clandestinely fattening a few hogs in the woods that he aims to sell for good profit. Therefore his words carry justifiable confidence when he tells Ellen that the money, both saved and projected, "would buy them their start in some better country, some fertile, well-watered land" (*TM* 282). Unfortunately, Jasper's romantic rival spills the beans on the hogs' whereabouts to the landlady's drunkard son, who steals and sells the unauthorized livestock. In the resulting fallout, the landlady's barn goes up in flames, and the money that has been saved (and then some) goes to courts and lawyers as Jasper defends himself against the charges of barn burning. The sudden and violent precipitation of events that annihilates the couple's plans to purchase land serves as an ill omen for their future aspirations. Towards the end of the narrative, Jasper voices scaled down ambitions "that in a year or two he might begin to buy the land he now farmed" (384). The plan is expressed in such tentative terms—maybe starting the process of buying at some vaguely defined point in the future—that it is no surprise when these plans unravel as well. Community vigilantes attack Jasper because they accuse him (definitely unjustly, this time) of burning yet another barn and drive him out of the community. Even prior to marrying Ellen, Jasper said he was "plumb tired trafficken about, good land and bad" (284). His journey is far from over yet. As depicted by Roberts (and Kelley), the situation of tobacco tenants is not so different from that of the cotton tenants. Of the latter, the authors of *The Collapse of the Cotton Tenancy* (1935) wrote: "The present system is so constructed that the landless remain landless and the propertyless remain propertyless" (Johnson et al. 22). As the Chesser family drifts down the road, their dreams of "[s]ome better country. Our own place maybe. Our trees in the orchard. Our own land sometime. Our place to keep. . . ." (394) express hopes not only of the Chessers and the

Blackfords, but of countless others whose lives hide behind the statistics of the growing landless population in the U.S. South in the first few decades of the 20th century.[19]

A number of critics have noted how the reality of tenant farmers like Ellen and Judith contradicts the Jeffersonian ideal of small yeoman farmers working the soil in a dignified and independent manner.[20] The lack of landownership, which is foundational to that ideal, makes moot any idea of long term planning or land stewardship, as well as notions of scientific experimentation and contemplation (Casey 132). [21] Mary Weaks-Baxter acknowledges that Ellen's family in *The Time of Man* is on a quest of a small farm in accord with the Jeffersonian ideal. However, for Weaks-Baxter, their failure to achieve the dream is of less importance than their pursuit of it: 'Their goals of the American farm may be elusive, but it is the passage from one place to another that now defines them" (154). That is, by surrendering permanent attachment to one particular place and reenacting "American migration in search of an American dream," southerners become Americans (142). The persistent failure of an equally persistently articulated dream of land ownership, however, shows that something may be amiss with the system that keeps such a dream always out of reach. In 1941, a federal report on the conditions of small farmers in Hinesville, Georgia noted that for rural southerners, "landownership—just a

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[19] According to Gilbert C. Fite, "Tenancy varied from 50 to 65 percent in the southern states, but for black farmers the figure went as high as 80 to 90 percent in some areas" of 2.6 million farms in 1920 (99). For more statistics and general conditions of the southern tenant system in the first three decades of the 20th century, see Johnson et al. 1-24, Flynt 64-69, Grubbs 7-8, Raper's *Preface to Peasantry* 143-156. For a more detailed discussion of tobacco tenants, see Tracy Campbell's *Politics of Despair*, Ch. 1 "A Legacy of Peonage."

[20] In *Virgin Land*, Henry Nash Smith outlines the basic tenets of what has come to be viewed as broadly Jeffersonian ideas: "that agriculture is the only source of real wealth; that every man has a natural right to land; that labor expended in cultivating the earth confers a valid title to it; that the ownership of land, by making the farmer independent, gives him social status and dignity, while constant contact with nature in the course of his labors makes him virtuous and happy; that America offers a unique example of a society embodying these traits; and, as a general inference from all the propositions, that government should be dedicated to the interests of the freehold farmer" (126).

[21] In contrast, the poor farmers' position as landholders in Eudora Welty's *Losing Battles* is what makes the question of environmental ethics possible, as discussed in the next chapter.

place to live and make a garden—was often synonymous with freedom" (qtd. in Jones 131). Conversely, gardens, which are cultivated under circumstances of permanent landlessness, illustrate the lack of freedom to settle down and gain some measure of independence. The virtual absence of upward mobility among the tenants shows that the landlords have accomplished well "the delicate task of attracting and retaining workers without disturbing the political system that kept those workers powerless and dependent" (Jones 120). The tenants' faithful but unrewarding cultivation of gardens contributes to the impression that the socioeconomic system plays a large hand in keeping the tenants hopelessly poor and hopelessly without rights to any land—or, as Roberts describes Ellen at one point, "ha[ving] claim upon all the land and no claim" (*TM* 381).[22] The garden may be a particularly useful tool in exposing the injustice of a system because of its long entanglement with the notion that growing one's food prevents or significantly mitigates poverty.[23] If, as Richard Gray argues, *The Time of Man* skillfully depicts the tension between agricultural life in its degraded form and its ideal (*Literature of Memory* 106-10), then it also implicitly asks what prevents the closer correspondence between the two. This goes counter to Gray's own view that both novels discussed here suffer from "elision between life and the social system, the conditions prescribed by the seasons or weather and those dictated by a particular history and certain economic arrangements" (*Southern* 189). The sympathy that the plight of the tenant farmers elicits can hardly content itself with placing the blame squarely on the elements or equally uncontrollable factors. Instead, the dogged labor in the space of gardens and elsewhere

[22] Michael J. Beilfuss productively reads two scenes—where the Chessers work Hep Bodine's land and where Mrs. Bodine prevents Ellen from gathering blackberries—as a commentary on the negative effects of unequal land ownership on both the land and the people (229-45). The tenants' work in their "own" gardens, because of greater investment in labor and self-motivation, exposes the injustice and the costs of land possession inequalities perhaps to an even greater degree.

[23] Ted Ownby points to officials touting the excellence of children's homes' gardens (in Alabama) as well as requiring paupers to keep gardens (in North Carolina) in the 20th century as expressions of a persistent southern belief that "the South really had no problems with poverty as long as people could grow their own food" ("Three Agrarianisms" 4).

that fails to result in land ownership asks hard questions about economic structures that make such failure inevitable.

Coercive and Empowering Gardens

Given the unstable and unenviable conditions of landlessness, under which the women garden, it will come as little surprise that gardening for most of them is a non-negotiable obligation. Contemporary voices help distill the main underlying cause of all the vegetable gardens encountered in *Weeds* and *The Time of Man*: hunger. Simply put, the women garden, because their gardening shields their families from going hungry. Margaret Jarman Hagood spent several months in 1937 and 1938 talking with white southern tenant women and summarized her findings in her pioneering study *Mothers of the South* (1939). Hagood noted that tobacco cultivation and its heavy demand for labor done by hands seemed out of place in the 20th century (19).[24] The static nature of tobacco farming means that sociological observations of the living conditions in the '30s may well apply to those of a decade or two earlier. The women Hagood interviewed regretted the amount of resources that were devoted to growing cash crops, often at the expense of feeding their own families. One woman wistfully wondered how different life might be if the work that went into preparing tobacco seed beds were redirected towards vegetable gardening instead: "if we was to spend even half as much time fixin' up the garden this size it would raise more vegetables than I could cook in a year" (18). Time and again, vegetable gardens were mentioned as crucial sources of nutrition. Another one of the tenant women shared: "the way the beetles have ruint all the beans and the rest of the garden these last few years sure makes it harder to scrape somp'n for a meal three times a day" (15). Remembering the years he spent growing up on a farm in Kentucky, Euell Sumner summed up the role that the vegetable

[24] See also Pete Daniel's *Breaking the Land*, especially Ch. 9, "The Persistence of the Old Tobacco Culture," also Kirby 343-47.

garden played in the family's life: "We had probably an acre and a half of garden because it was your source of livelihood. If you didn't have nothing in your garden you didn't eat. We never sold anything. They were used for your own use. Whatever we needed to eat. Whatever we had, that's what we ate" (van Willigen 101). Sumner's formulation reflects the experiences of Ellen's and Judith's families. When their gardens languish, they indeed do not eat, or eat much less and more poorly Sumner's family owned their land, which means they were at least one step up the economic ladder from the tenants, but the vegetables they grew formed a great part of their resources. For poorer tenant families, like the ones in Hagood's study and the novels being discussed here, the food they themselves grew was undoubtedly of equal or perhaps even greater importance.

Elizabeth Madox Roberts highlights the significance of a garden in the life of a tenant farm wife by making it inseparable from Ellen's entrance into marriage. After a false beau abandons Ellen to marry another, the Chessers relocate from Hep Bodine's to another farm, in what can be interpreted as a parental move to protect Ellen, by removing her from a place that holds painful memories. Though still a renting tenant, Ellen's father Henry is to be the "full proprietor for the time" (239). This means that when Henry injures himself while working, the responsibility for all the fieldwork rests with Ellen. Perhaps for the first time, the full reality of a farming life sinks in:

> The season lay before her as a vast unweighed burden, and all the stooping and dragging and hauling, felt in anticipation, rested on her shoulders, on her arms, on her thighs, on her mind. She wondered who would plow the corn, the next labor after the tobacco setting, and after that would be the cutting of the hay and there would be the garden to hoe and the little wheat crop to reap. (253-4)

The passage shows that though Ellen is well versed in the processes of farming, the hard physical labor inherent in them, particularly in a task like plowing, calls for more strength that Ellen feels she has.[25] Their neighbor Jasper Kent steps in to help. Jasper's living situation, as was mentioned earlier, is a complicated one, because he runs the farm of a widow, whose drunkard son Albert resents his mother for not turning over the reins of the household to him. Ostensibly because of Albert's drunken raids on his mother's premises, Jasper has been giving whatever money he saves to Ellen for safekeeping. Now he joins her in farming as a partner. He plows the Chessers' field in his spare time; he also helps her in the tobacco field, impressive in his strength: "she saw him move swiftly across the row, moving toward the end of the field with swift strokes of the hoe, three or four blows to each plant and it was finished' (263). Lacking means to hire help, or the land to offer to someone to work for partial profits (like the widow has done with Jasper), basically the only way for Ellen to leave her parents is to marry. The young people's joint effort in the tobacco field underscores Ellen's need for a life partner and, as a result, marks the moment when Ellen begins to think of Jasper seriously as a mate. The practical component of their budding attraction is clearly revealed in an instance that mingles flirting and Ellen's need for Jasper's labor: "When he came up to her [in the tobacco row] he stopped and looked at her and laughed a little, as if he knew that the conveyance of his arrival there had been the hoe" (263). His presence is welcome because he hoes, and does it well.[26]

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[25] Plowing had complicated cultural connotations. Arguably no more difficult than other field tasks, which women performed, it nevertheless frequently carried a stigma as work unsuitable for women (Sharpless and Walker 51-2).

[26] The focus on the hoe, which both Ellen and Jasper wield, as opposed to a plow, suggests Roberts's recognition of the equally significant contributions by men and women. However, my focus on women's gardening draws the focus away from gender dynamics in the fields and reveals more about what Deborah Fink (in another context about propertyless Nebraska farmers) has called "an equality of powerlessness" of the landless women and men (9).

At least initially, Ellen does not appear to be as smitten with Jasper as she was with Jonas, the lover who abandoned her. Her acceptance of Jasper as a romantic partner thus signals an adjustment of expectations and a realistic appraisal of her wants and possibilities, in the sphere of love and in life in general. All along she has been full of strivings she cannot articulate, of thirst for ideas and knowledge beyond her station in life. Overhearing Jasper use the wondrous words *equinox* and *morning star*, via indirect discourse she reconciles the life she is compelled to live with the longings she has by thinking about her garden: "The corn in the garden stood high and about it clung the beans, all inclined toward the wonder of the sun but belonging to their own hunger and to their labor in the furrows, all grown out of the soil and the rain and the seeds, but turned toward the wonder of the equinoxes, toward the light moon and toward the morning star" (273-4). Echoing Roberts's early reviewers, this passage can certainly be interpreted as describing the human condition in general, the limits of human mortality when juxtaposed with the grandness of the universe. The expressed sentiments, however, become even more poignant when one considers the difficult existence of a weary tenant farmer. Regardless of what aspirations she holds, Ellen has to eat. In her situation as a tenant farmer, the hunger and, by extension, the agricultural labor that works to appease it, go hand in hand. Whatever her unarticulated dreams may be, labor in the furrows must be attended to first. Perhaps there is little surprise that this realization is linked to the space of a garden, which has long been Ellen's prime spot for work that keeps hunger at bay.

As if reconciled to her lot of labor in the furrows, Ellen becomes more proactive in her approach to garden work. Two days after ruminations about the word *equinox*, she plans for the future: "The next year she would grow a large onion patch, she decided, and she rose from her hoe to look about on the garden, to scan its length, deciding then how great the onion bed should

be" (274). Designing for the future, and the feeling of agency when doing so, empower Ellen. She had fretted for a good while about Jasper's potential attraction to Susie Whelen and Susie's easy laugh. Suddenly, Ellen decides she would fret no more: "Dreamily it came to her that she would take what there was out of the hard soil and out of the stones and she would have, in the end, something from the clattering rocks" (275). Her resolution pertains as much to growing onions as to grander life plans. This is made apparent by her next step as she walks resolutely to the field where Jasper is working. Upon seeing her approach, Jasper meets her halfway in a lover's embrace, and this marks the beginning of their future together. The narrator unequivocally states that Ellen was "set upon her path by her thought in the garden" (275). Within the life of a daughter of an impoverished tenant farmer there are precious few opportunities for making choices. Choosing one's partner, albeit from a constricted circle of possibilities, is one of them. Working in her garden imbues Ellen with confidence and ambition enough to try and claim the man she wants. Because in the world of tenant farmers, the man of the household determines the value of the entire family (Jones 118), Ellen is not merely asserting a romantic preference but is casting a deciding vote (it must be acknowledged again, in a circumscribed way) for her entire future. Ellen is surely thinking of Jasper's seeming worldliness, his ease with words like *autumnal equinox*, and of his apparent ability to save money. He may prove to be an imperfect husband later, but he is chosen by Ellen after she overcomes her insecurities about her perceived rivals. Her vegetable garden thus is source of strength, and not only in the physical sense of providing nutrition.

Weeding one garden and planning another constitute a fitting backdrop for a serious courtship, because the lives of both Judith and Ellen attest that gardening is crucial for feeding a family. In *Weeds*, Judith engages in never-ending production of corn cakes, which is both a sign

of a monotonous diet and a stress factor for the woman who is responsible for the family's food. The worst are the winter months that drag on indefinitely after everything of the stored garden bounty has been eaten. One particularly long winter, "[i]t seemed . . . as if the spring would never come, as if there would never be an end to the arid routine of corn meal mush and coffee for breakfast, corn meal cakes and coffee for dinner, and coffee and corn meal cakes for supper" (*W* 207). Whatever dietary variation the people can get often originates in the garden. Very early in the narrative the reader gets a glimpse into the Pippingers' pantry as the winter wears on:

> "Roasin' ears," tomatoes, cucumbers, and such garden delicacies were gone with the early frosts. Sweet potatoes, dried out on a shelf behind the kitchen stove, lasted a while longer, but were soon eaten up. White potatoes, cabbage, and pumpkins lasted till about Christmas. After that the frost always got what was left of them, as the Pippingers had no cellar. Christmas, too, saw the last of the apples; for Kentucky is too far south to grow good winter apples. The cured and smoked hog meat hanging in the smokehouse sometimes lasted till spring; but more often, it was gone by February. The few jars of jam and cans of peaches and blackberries that Mrs. Pippinger managed to put up through the summer were turned into empty bottles almost before the frost came. (*W* 39)

Somewhat counterintuitively, what ought to sound like a celebration of plenty instead triggers worry about how much is needed and how quickly everything goes. Kelley allows the reader no enjoyment of a well-stocked pantry, because she mercilessly empties the shelves, leaving the reader to anxious calculations how much time must elapse between the consumption of one harvest and the raising of another. Such feeling of anxiety is well earned because Judith's own household never quite manages to replicate even what modest provisions her parents had been able to put away. One reason for this may be that Judith is but an indifferent housekeeper

compared to her mother, but another—and a likelier one—is that Judith's parents were landowners, with land at their disposal and more freedom to do with it as they wish, which makes a difference, as discussed earlier.

One winter, when Judith is pregnant with her second child, refuses to end. More than ever, her body is desperate for proper nutrition, but the earth does not consent to yield food. Judith's state of being mirrors that of her surroundings; she feels "as bleak, dry, desolate, and soulless as the landscape." Her hopes in her vegetable garden turn to disappointment: "Looking out of the little window at the bare garden patch where she had planted a few onion sets and some seed of lettuce and radishes, and which as yet showed no hint of green, she fe[els] dismal, hungry, and hopeless" (207). After a long cold season, the monotony of Judith's routine and diet has reached nearly intolerable levels, and the narrative practically palpitates with desire for change. Then suddenly, a release. Judith gives birth, and the land finally opens up too. Judith's kindred spirit Uncle Jabez answers the call for Judith's dietary longings: "Jabez came carrying the first young onions and first tender leaves of lettuce . . . To Judith, now rapidly growing stronger, these bits of green tasted better than anything else. Such succulence and flavor in the young onions! She had known every spring what it was to be hungry for green things; but young onions had never tasted so delicious before" (*W* 210). Good nutrition is vital for the recovery of Judith's body, exhausted as it is by pregnancy, labor, and now presumably a nursing child. At this key moment it is a carefully cultivated vegetable garden—the greens were "grown under a window sash in a sheltered spot against his kitchen wall" (210)—that furnishes Judith with the resources she desperately needs.

Jabez's offering, so deeply appreciated by Judith, underscores the relatively rare opportunity that gardening bestows upon the tenants—an ability to share and spread well-being

among friends and kin. A few weeks prior, Uncle Jabez had invited her, Jerry and other neighbors to feast on a ewe he had stolen from his landlord (after finding her stuck in a wire fence) (*W* 202). Contrary to the stolen lamb meat, gardening enables Jabez to provide for others, especially his favorite Judith, through other than clandestine means. In a virtually unique incident of gift-giving in *The Time of Man*, Ellen also draws upon her garden to make a present to her mother. Coming on the heels of Ellen's gardening disaster on the stony, hot hill, an ability to raise something and share it with others is especially welcome: "When the cherries ripened that year she sent a pail of them to Nellie along with a dozen early cabbage plants from her garden, proud she was to be able again to dispense gifts" (346). These actions by the novels' characters reflect common practices of sharing the garden produce among Kentucky farmers in the period between the wars (van Willigen 109-110). Such behavior might have been common, but ability to give to others is far from commonplace for the novels' tenants, for the simple reason that they themselves are always lacking in things.

If pleasure can be derived by sharing garden bounty with others, it is all the more satisfying when it feeds one's own flesh and blood. Deep satisfaction is palpable in a rare passage detailing Ellen's experiences as a housewife:

> Spring found her out with the first open days, spading for the onions. Later she cut sticks for the peas or she called Hen to drop the seeds when she had made the rows. Sun-stained and hearty, her body deep and broad, she tried to give each one the vegetable he liked best in ample profusion. Joe liked peas best; she would sow a plenty of peas, five rows. But Jasper was partial to beets, and she planted long rows of these, buying the finest seeds the peddler had. Or hoeing out the weeds after the rains she would smile to think

> of what Hen has said about a bird: "And the jaybirds have got longer tails 'n common this year. I took notice to that early in spring." (345)

Ellen is performing a chore, but the compulsory aspect of it gets obscured by the affirmation of her strength and joy in providing for her family. The garden enables her to transform a rather prosaic task of feeding her children into an activity that deeply affirms her capabilities and desires. Strong and mighty ("her body deep and broad"), Ellen is able to make decisions (what to plant, from what quality seeds, and in what quantities) and see them come to fruition. Yoked as her life is to Jasper, his rather difficult temper, and the never-ending care of her children, within the space of her garden she is an autonomous being in a position to assert her agency. Her thoughts about Hen serve a double function. For one, they show that gardening provides her with an opportunity for quiet reflection and musing about the unique qualities of her offspring, such moments being rare in a household with several small children. Ellen's remembrance of Hen in relation to a bird also makes the reader track back to the story of Hen and the owl. Narrated just a few paragraphs prior to the depiction of Ellen's garden, the anecdote involves Hen's mistaking the call of an owl for "Who—cooks—for you—all? for you—all?" and shouting in return, "Mammy cooks for us-all" (344). Jasper tells the story multiple times, roaring with laughter all the while, but (or maybe *because*) Hen's mishearing illustrates what monumental task Ellen accomplishes in rounding up food for the family under conditions of poverty. For Hen, it is entirely reasonable that through the call of a wild bird the surrounding universe would ask his family that ever-important question: "Who cooks for you all?" All the laughs of Jasper cannot diminish the importance of work that Ellen performs—and with such pleasure—in her vegetable garden, as the less jaded Hen readily recognizes.

By exercising a significant measure of control over an activity that is crucial to the family's well-being, Ellen herself feels empowered. The one farming situation where no garden is possible shows its significance in Ellen's life. After establishing a rather fine garden at Joe Phillips, Ellen finds herself on a stony hill, where her garden languishes in the sun. She wants to ask the new landlord for "a bit of the valley, a mere strip at the foot of the hill, to use for the garden" but Jasper objects: "You stay up here on this-here hill . . . where we belong now" (328). Jasper over-identifies himself with his new landlord, who is renowned for his fine horses (and poor treatment of tenants, it later turns out). He laughs when Ellen's garden burns in the sun, making fun of "her tomato vines and her withering beans" (328). Ellen's inability to garden contributes to her overall helplessness in the tenant house on the hill. When the cow is dry, "Joe and Nannie become hollow-eyed and thin, their beings waiting upon the hazards of the seasons" (331). The house is leaky and drafty. When a child falls ill, Ellen resorts to heartbreaking mental exercises: "Ellen thought, when Joe was sick, that he might die, and she tried to build an indifference about her helplessness. She could not help it, the matter; she could not then care" (331). Nowhere else in the narrative does Ellen explicitly worry about her otherwise healthy children's dietary needs or them dying. In Roberts's narration, the lack of a garden accompanies and contributes to all these feelings of insecurity and sorrow. Whatever else she cannot control in her life, a garden has always been a space where she could care for her family. In fact, when her toddler Chick, who has not seen a healthy day in his brief life, lays on his deathbed, the narrator states: "She must work in the garden and so her work there became a fervor of service to the child." So important is this sentiment, that after a few sentences it is repeated again: "Her work in the garden was a fervor of service to the child" (361). Throughout the novel we see Ellen imbuing daily tasks with transcendent significance or, what Richard Gray calls, a "certain quality

of ritual" (*Literature* 109). However, at the moment when her child hangs between life and death and her sorrow consumes her, her garden stands first in line to give her a measure of strength.

Ellen's gardening experiences find echoes in a passage that describes perhaps the one tolerable domestic chore in Judith Blackford's life of Kelley's *Weeds*. Barely recovered from giving birth to her second child, Judith nevertheless attends to her garden:

> Judith spent all the time that she could spare from the babies and the house working in her garden, chopping out the weeds while they were still young and tender, hilling up the potatoes, hoeing the rows of lusty beets and beans and turnips, training the pole beans to climb up on their poles and tying up the tomato vines to stakes. She liked this work. She liked the feel of the hot sun on her back and shoulders, the smell of the damp, warm earth. Some magic healing qualities in sun and earth seemed to give her back health, vigor, and poise. When she had hoed in the garden for an hour or two, she felt tired from her exertions, for her strength had only partly returned after the birth of the baby. Yet, in spite of the ache in her muscles, she was refreshed and in a way invigorated, more able to cope with the washtub and the churn, with the baby when he cried and refused to be pacified and with little Billy when he danced up and down and choked and grew purple in the face with rage. (213)

At first glance this passage and the one from *The Time of Man*, referenced earlier, are radically different. After all, garden work creates an impression of Ellen as a kind of Earth mother, who derives her deepest fulfilment from excelling in maternal and familial duties. For Judith, the value of the garden lies precisely in its ability to transport her away from her family and confining domesticity, and bring her one step closer to the natural environment. Her vegetable plot is a place where she can encounter and embrace the elements—the sun and the earth. By

cherishing her connection to entities that resist control, if only by their sheer magnitude, Judith reveals she appreciates the garden, unlike Ellen, not for what it can do for her family, but for the distance that lies between the space of the garden and other, perhaps more enclosed, household concerns. Diverging from the work of Annette Kolodny and Vera Norwood, in *Undomesticated Ground* Stacy Alaimo explores the various ways that American women have related to the natural world *besides* conceiving it as an extension of the domestic space. For many of the women she examines, nature is "undomesticated both in the sense that it figures as a space apart from the domestic and in the sense that it is untamed and thus serves as a model for female insurgency" (16). Judith's enjoyment of her garden space, where she is able to leave behind the multitude of duties as a wife and a mother and, at least momentarily, merge with the elements, stems in large part from her appreciation of the undomesticated aspect of the natural environment.

And yet—and this is crucial—Judith's work in the garden does not occur in opposition to her other cares. It is integrated into her routine, as is shown by the fact that she works in the garden during "all the time that she could spare," as opposed to in defiance of or to the neglect of her other chores. A garden can accommodate the restrictions, the *training* and the *tying* of unruly growth, while simultaneously encouraging the lusty growth of things through actions like hoeing and the removal of weeds. Similarly, albeit in a restrained manner, Judith is reinvigorated by her work in the garden, even though it is part of her domestic work. Garden work provides a temporary reprieve from the monotony of other, round-the-year and round-the-clock, duties. It is different through its contact with the natural world, its location away from the confining indoors, and through its enlistment of a different kind of labor that requires more physical, but perhaps less emotional effort. It would be naïve to read Judith's vegetable patch as a site of liberation

from the biological and cultural constraints that hold her firmly in place. It is a far cry from that, especially insofar as it temporarily dulls Judith's resistance to those elements of her life that she finds difficult to tolerate, such as the ceaseless demands of babies. At the same time, her feelings of strength and composure, which have become so rare since the birth of her children, should not be discounted. Garden's ability to provide her with a sense of rejuvenation marks it as an exceptional space within the bleak landscape of her life.

Taking into account the role that gardens play in the lives of these two rather different protagonists, it seems that the function of a garden is similar in each case, even if the end goal is different. For Ellen, caring for her children constitutes a substantial and fulfilling part of her life; therefore, she appreciates the garden because there she can become a powerful force who alone (albeit with obvious qualifications, such as the quality of soil) can determine how well her family will be fed. She is like Judith, though, in that she draws strength from the sun and from the earth, as the succession of strong positive adjectives shows: "[s]un-stained and hearty, her body deep and broad" (*TM* 345). In Judith's case, the garden also supplies strength, but in a different manner. Garden work reinvigorates her because it seems to stand apart from all the other ways in which her children exercise direct control over her. Laura Kay Crawley has suggested that feminist critics have been less than receptive to *The Time of Man*, because Roberts portrays motherhood in an overall positive manner, as forming an integral part of Ellen's development as an individual. This goes counter, Crawley argues, to the prevalent view of much of feminist criticism, which holds that "motherhood short-circuits a woman character's ability to become a fully realized and autonomous individual, and it is such autonomy that defines liberation" (28). Crawley's observation serves as a useful reminder that deferment to maternal sentiments need not be evidence of compromised independence or inherent weakness. Ellen's fulfilment in the

garden may stem largely from her identity as a mother while Judith's, on the contrary, stems from the ways it temporarily lifts the burden of motherhood, but for both of these heroines, their gardens provide rare and vital opportunities of feeling empowered.

Gardens Lost to History

From the cultural point of view *Weeds* and *The Time of Man* stand out in the decade in which they were written because of their unsentimental focus on a poor tenant woman in the South. In her book about southern poor white characters, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66*, Sylvia Jenkins Cook offered the following astute observation about Kelley and Roberts: "Long before the documentaries of the 1930s were to parade photographs of the blank, despairing eyes and sullen bodies of poor white women through the nation's magazines, these two novelists had asserted the fertile visions, yearnings, and resentments imprisoned within the women's apparent acquiescence to the bleakest of existences" (20). One might say, in other words, that the writers' portrayal of the tenant life was asynchronous with the nation's interest in that particular subject matter.[27] Historical context lends credibility to this conjecture. Though the start of the Great Depression is dated in 1929, the agricultural sector fell prey to a longer period of depression, which started with the sharp drop in prices of agricultural production in the aftermath of World War I.[28] The long standing problems of poverty in the South compounded the effects of the economic slump, leading some to observe: "as the nation boomed during the 1920s, it is fair to say that the South hungered" (Godden and Crawford x). A handful of years after the publication

[27] Both Lootens and Casey point to the combination of subject matter and its treatment as a reason why the novels failed to form lasting readerships. Lootens about *Weeds*: "One explanation for the failure of the novel in the 1920s could be that it simply reached the wrong audience, one not ready or willing to see in themselves the tragic vision which was so readily accepted in the next decade (i.e., *The Grapes of Wrath*), and certainly its realistic method would not have appealed to the avant-garde literary establishment" (104). Casey about *The Time of Man*: "neither elite nor mainstream readerships were poised to appreciate fully a combination of modernist aesthetics and an incisive exploration of lower-class realities" (115).

[28] See Danbom 185-202, Fite 102-105.

of the novels in question, the onset of the Great Depression and the agricultural policies that precipitated the dismissal of sharecroppers and tenants brought greater visibility to the southern rural poor, both rooted and displaced.[29] John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) became perhaps the most famous literary portrayal of agricultural migrants. Photographic records like Dorothea Lange's iconic photography as well as the enormously popular *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White etched the plight of southern rural populations in cultural memory.[30] To paraphrase Caldwell, in the 1930s these unknown people became known.[31] It might be an exaggeration to say that the United States as a country was unaware of the plight of the South's landless and near-landless population in the decade that roughly intervened between the conclusion of WWI and the stock market crash of 1929. Nevertheless, when drastic poverty engulfed increasingly wider swaths of American society, the poverty of the rural poor demanded attention in a way that it had failed to do in the 1920s. Literary representations of the tenant women on Kentucky tobacco farms thus give voice to what was a largely overlooked or silenced population. Dispensing with the naïve assumption that Kelley and Roberts were *of* the social class of which they wrote, it is still possible to value each novel as an attempt to represent those who spent their lives on the cultural margins, especially when viewed within the larger national context. As we have seen, the gardens, by embodying the link between the gardener and the land, reveal much about the salient paradox of the tenants' lives, which is having to make a living off the land while being perpetually severed from it. The gardens of ordinary people, by not being associated with grand mansions or the legacy of master gardeners, have but little staying power and rarely make so much as a footnote in the history of

[29] See Fite, Ch. 7, "Crisis, Frustration, and Change in the Late 1930s," and Kirby 60-66.
[30] See Stott, Ch. 12, "The Documentary Book," Kidd 25-30, and Cook, "Tenant Farming" 881-2.
[31] "These are the unknown people of today, the tenant farmer of the South," wrote Caldwell in 1935 (5).

any place. The gardens of the tenant women portrayed in the novels are even shorter-lived because their gardeners drift across the landscape "buffeted about by the fates and weathers" (Roberts, Papers.) What John Dixon Hunt writes about the gardens of the homeless therefore applies especially well to the gardens of the tenant women: "the ephemerality [of gardens] has as much to do with these peoples' [*sic*] lives as with the gardens as such" (88). Still, on the pages of *The Time of Man* and *Weeds* these garden patches live to tell the tale of the unique difficulties of those women's lives as well as the remarkable strength that kept them hoeing.

CHAPTER 3

"The Fault of the Land Going Back on Us": Intersection of Poverty and Environment in Eudora Welty's *Losing Battles*

Eudora Welty published her longest novel, *Losing Battles*, in 1970, after roughly a decade and a half of near silence. Set in the northeast Mississippi hill country during the 1930s, the novel narrates a day and a half in the lives of poverty-stricken Beecham-Renfros[1] who have gathered for their annual August reunion and the 90th birthday of their matriarch Granny Vaughn. The reunion promises to be ruined if Jack Jordan Renfro, the beloved first grandson, does not return from the state penitentiary in Parchman to join the rest of his family in celebration. In keeping with the comic tone of the novel, Jack does not disappoint, but breaks out of prison a day early, along with his not-too-bright sidekick Aycock Comfort. Awaiting him is not only the family clan, but also his new wife Gloria and a toddler girl, Lady May, whom he has never seen. On the way back home, Jack helps an older affluent couple dislodge a pleasure car—a Buick—out of a ditch. As luck would have it, the older couple turns out to be Judge Oscar Moody, who sentenced Jack to Parchman for a prank, and his wife. They have gotten lost on their way to a funeral of a formidable countryside teacher—Julia Percival Mortimer. Jack's joy of return is marred when he realizes that he just helped out the very man who was the cause of separating him from his family. Determined to get his revenge, he sets out to land the Moodys' car anew in a ditch. Jack's plans go awry, when Judge Moody swerves the car to avoid hitting Jack's wife and the baby. In the process, the Buick becomes precariously perched on a cliff that is locally known as "Banner's Top" or "Lover's Leap." As the novel tumbles forward in a hilarious sequence of events to free the Buick once more, the Moodys find themselves at the reunion,

[1] It would be most accurate to call the family Vaughn-Beecham-Renfros since Granny Vaughn is still living, but for the purpose of concision, I will use the shorter hyphenation instead.

where the clan members astonish the judge by having the audacity to "forgive" him for sending their favorite son away. They also help him free his car by dynamiting the tree, which obstructs the car's descent on the safe side of the bluff. The family members talk nonstop throughout the reunion to unveil a web of connections between Judge Moody, the deceased teacher Julia Mortimer, and the murdered Herman Dearman, a modern day lumber baron who had been instrumental in decimating the forests around the family's homestead.

Perhaps encouraged by the combative attitude of the title itself—with its proclamation of *battles*—ever since its publication, the critics have focused on the conflicts in the novel. In particular, a lot of attention was directed to considerations of how the outlook of Beecham-Renfros clashes with the push for modernity and mobility, as represented by the formidable teacher Julia Mortimer and her successful protégés, among whom Judge Moody is to be counted. Although articulated over the years in various terms—rootedness vs. mobility, tradition vs. modernity, oral tradition vs. written word, domestic Granny Vaughn vs. emancipated Ms. Mortimer—the tendency to put the two factions in opposition persists to this day.[2]

At the heart of this sustained critical attention to the novel's conflicts lies the recognition that the Beecham-Renfros exist on the cusp of momentous socioeconomic and cultural change. The farming family appears to be faced with a choice, arguably more illusionary than real, of

[2] For example, Carol S. Manning contends that Welty parodically sets up a contrast between the rooted family and the alleged outside aggressors (146-149). Susan V. Donaldson frames the conflict as being between oral storytelling of the Beecham-Renfros vs. the written word, preferred by Miss Julia and her sympathizers. According to Ann Romines, the key conflict of the novel is that of the "female plots" of Granny Vaughn and the schoolteacher (*The Home Plot* 277). For Suzanne Marrs, Julia Mortimer is an agent of modernity against a traditional agrarian family (*One Writer's* 202-209). In a more recent interpretation, Adrienne Akins sees the conflict in terms of postcolonial dynamics. In her reading, the teacher and the judge figure as colonizing (if well meaning) powers. Akins is representative of a strain of criticism that not only identifies the feuding parties but also picks a side, such as when Jan Nordby Gretlund reads the novel as "a severe indictment of Mortimerism" (*Eudora Welty's Aesthetics* 272). See Donaldson for a helpful summary of the sympathies of the early reviewers (207, footnote 2). Then there are critics like Michael Kreyling who argue for "virtue and liability on both sides of the losing battles" (*Eudora Welty's Achievement* 143). For perspectives similar to Kreyling's, see also Heilman 300-302; Gross 328-333.

either going forward or staying put. The way forward involves formal education, mobility and acceptance of the wider world. The alternative entails the dogged continuation of their rooted life as small farmers, valuing family and homegrown wisdom above all else. While the majority of the family proudly declares their allegiance to keeping the way of life they know best, there is a sense in which they have already lost that particular battle. Whether they wish it or not, the agents of modernity and market capitalism—Herman Dearman, Julia Mortimer, and the Moodys with their Buick—have been finding them for decades and are hardly likely to desist. Furthermore, the environmental factors such as decimation of forests, drought and soil erosion conspire to make their accustomed way of life unsustainable. Therefore, it may be more accurate to view the Beecham-Renfros, despite their professed objections, as being carried on a wave of tumultuous changes against which they are powerless.

Economic changes and environmental factors collude against the embattled existence of the Beecham-Renfro family. As I will explore in greater detail later, Welty's depiction of the family's predicament is a historically accurate depiction of small farmers in the 1930s Mississippi (and elsewhere in the U.S. South). Welty had firsthand exposure to this life while traveling through the state as part of her job for the Works Progress Administration. In fact, Danièle Pitavy-Souques theorizes that the novel was "written out of a sense of moral debt to those whose poverty, and defiant courage to face life, ignited [Welty's] eye, heart, and imagination when she was working for the WPA" (11). Yet despite the fact that Welty situated her novel at a specific historical moment and locale—the northeast Mississippi during the Depression--there has been scant critical attention for the novel's historical and socioeconomic aspects. While the status of the family as poor small farmers gets a nod in virtually every discussion of the novel, sustained consideration of the novel's themes against the fast changing

economic and environmental landscape of the 1930s farming community remains largely unaddressed. One might speculate that the initial critical reluctance to read *Losing Battles* as a sociohistorical commentary stemmed from the Cold War pressures to distance literature and politics as well as Eudora Welty's enduring statement on the subject in her 1965 essay "Must the Novelist Crusade?" (she must not, according to Welty). Already the earliest reviewers made it clear that Welty should not be read as a social critic. For example, Joyce Carol Oates wrote that Welty "has no social arguments. She is aware of, but does not insist upon, the injustices of the economic establishment" (152).[3] Throughout the years this attitude more or less held, at times giving rise to such curious statements like this one by Jan Nordby Gretlund:

> *Losing Battles* is a stark portrayal of the situation for Mississippi farmers in the 1930s . . . [T]he description is realistic enough to imply criticism of the farming programs, or the lack of them, at the time. The events of the novel occur during the summer of 1930, so it will be a long time before the situation will improve for the farmers. Yet Welty does not accuse, preach, or crusade in the novel; she just portrays the situation in Banner County as it was. ("The Terrible and the Marvelous" 112-113)

The appearance of an ambitious collection of essays in 2001, *Eudora Welty and Politics: Did the Writer Crusade?*, established that, contrary to Gretlund's statement, Welty's portrayal of life "as it was" is ripe with political implications. However, the economics of *Losing Battles* remain largely unexamined. Attentive to the economic circumstances of the 1930s, Suzanne Marrs nevertheless depicts the family's situation as primarily a site of contention between "traditional agrarian values" and the "modernist opposition to them" (209). Martyn Bone acknowledges the

[3] See also, for example, John W. Aldridge: "she has been able to create and sustain a powerfully exact impression of their reality as people who are neither social types nor social problems but simply human beings trying to survive" (157). Also, Howard Moss of the *New Yorker*: "Because nothing is shirked and nothing is whimsical, poverty never makes a sociological point" (181).

economic tensions palpable in the novel, yet ultimately reads the novel as a kind of neo-Agrarian nostalgia that "demonstrates familial love redeeming an agrarian community that also, almost incidentally, resists finance-capitalism" (41).

As with the economic aspects of the novel, the novel's portrayal of the relationship between humans and the environment is also frequently alluded to, yet so far lacks extensive treatment. The novel's depiction of that relationship—as we shall see, at times seemingly harmonious, at times discordant—has produced corresponding schism in the reception of the novel. Thus, for example, an early reviewer, writing in the pages of *The New Yorker* in 1970, saw fundamental kinship between Welty's characters and their natural environment: "the long comedy is suffused by nature, not played against it and it departs from the natural only through the machine and the homemade" (Moss 179). Yet, the reviewer goes on, nature does not dominate, as the boisterous voices clamor for reader's attention: "For its author, a pastoral clearly needs farmers" (181). More recently, Marrs contends that the reunion members "live in harmony with nature," leading a "traditional agrarian life as subsistence farmers" (*One Writer's* 202). Marrs grants that the family perpetuates unsustainable farming practices, out of ignorance and prideful stubbornness, but overall sees in them a respectful, even worshipful, attitude towards nature and a feeling of awe in the face of uncontrollable natural forces (203). Other reviewers have been less sanguine in their view towards the family's agricultural practices. Louise Gossett, another early reviewer, does not glean any mitigating factors in the family's role in harming the soil. She sees Welty's characters as mindlessly committed to farming, even when the conditions have changed so drastically as to make the continuation of their lifestyle untenable: "the Renfros intend to stay on, Jack being expected to save them by the same methods of farming which have already exhausted the land and the people. There are no

Faulknerian meditations on the moral of the relationship between man and the complexity of the land, but the obtuseness of unthinking, uncultivated minds" (128). Some years later, Michael Kreyling would align himself to the latter camp of criticism in his reading of the environmental portrayal in the novel: "*Losing Battles* takes place in a rural world on the verge of exhaustion, a pastoral bower just about counted out, but the literary perspective on that world is rich in metaphor, image, and formal range" (*Understanding* 195). Furthermore, Kreyling underscores the disjuncture between natural and human perspectives: "use of imagery suggests the separateness of humanity at odds with nature" (195-96). In probably the most extensive environmental reading of *Losing Battles* to date, Mae Miller Claxton addresses at length the novel's portrayal of environmental degradation and its "landscape of violence, death, and destruction" (89), which, she argues, shows the kinship of *Losing Battles* to the literature of Appalachia.

I propose that the novel's economic and environmental concerns must be addressed simultaneously because, taken together, they constitute an exploration of a relationship between humans and the environment in face of pressing economic and social concerns. The historical moment Welty depicts—the decade of enormous changes in agricultural policy and technology, which drastically reduced the number of small family farms—is crucial for understanding the decisions made by the family and the significance of their interactions with the non-human world. Because they are faced with dire poverty, the Beecham-Renfros' relationship with the environment enables the reading of *Losing Battles* as an exploration of how economic factors affect human attitudes towards the environment. *Losing Battles* grasps for the possibility of a harmonious non-exploitative relationship of humans to the natural world, as can be seen through the novel's gardens. However, the possibility for harmony is continually undermined by

glimpses of a darker reality in which (frequently fruitless) socioeconomic ambitions trump any and all environmental considerations. Ultimately, I argue, Welty's text shows that the economic interests of the poor and responsible environmental behavior align in compelling and significant ways.

The Complex Environmental Vision of Losing Battles

As briefly mentioned, there is some discord in the portrayal of the natural environment in *Losing Battles*. The novel both celebrates the bounty of natural resources and acknowledges a severe lack of them. These conflicting impulses are readily apparent in the first extensive description of Beulah Renfro's flower gardens, which is worth quoting at length:

> From the waterless earth some flowers bloomed in despite of it. Cannas came around the house on either side in a double row, like the Walls of Jericho, with their blooms unfurled—Miss Beulah's favorite colors, the kind that would brook no shadow. Rockets of morning-glory vines had been trained across the upper corners of the porch, and along the front, hanging in baskets from wires overhead, were the green stars of ferns. The sections of concrete pipe at the foot of the steps were overflowing with lacy-leaf verbena. Down the pasture-side of the yard ran a long row of montbretias blazing orange, with hummingbirds sipping without seeming to touch a flower. Red salvia, lemon lilies, and prince's-feathers were crammed together in a tub-sized bed, and an althea bush had opened its flowers from top to bottom, pink as children's faces. The big china trees at the gateposts looked bigger still for the silver antlers of last year's dead branches that radiated outside the green. The farm track entered between them, where spreading and coming to an end it became the front yard. It lay before them in morning light the color of a human palm and still more groined and bare. (431)

The passage begins with a declaration of a shortage, since the earth is "waterless." Yet what follows is counterintuitive. It is a profusion of flora, all the more impressive because it ought not to exist at all, if the preceding statement is to be believed. The plants are not only growing in defiance of drought, but they are luxuriously abundant—as indicated by such terms like *overflowing, blazing, crammed*. Instead of being threatened by sunlight, the source of heat that aims to lessen the amount of an already scarce moisture, cannas, the first flowers encountered, embrace the harsh conditions—they "would brook no shadow." There is a surplus of vitality where the reader has been conditioned to expect barrenness. The end of the passage, however, strikes a different tone. The term *dead*, used to describe the old branches of china trees, sits at odds with the brimming life of the flower gardens. The authorial gaze uses the trees, with their simultaneous suggestion of life and death, to transition to a space completely devoid of life: a farm track that lays "groined and bare." The track's association with a human hand testifies that this bare spot has been produced by human activity. Although the gardens have also been obviously shaped by humans—e.g. morning-glory vines have been "trained"—the human effects in the case of the farm track are more explicit and extreme. The landscape appears not only to reflect human influence by looking like a human hand, but its human characteristics have been, as it were, intensified: it is "*more* groined and bare" than even the literal hands, which contributed to its existence. In effect, this patch of the land has become a figurative embodiment of what human action can do. These two images—of a lush flower garden and a deeply burrowed farm track where nothing can grow—represent two ends of the spectrum of human interaction with the environment in *Losing Battles*. By juxtaposing them so early in the novel Welty provides a preview of similar contradictions that the remainder of the book will furnish

the reader. For every outpouring of natural bounty, arising from a human interaction with the land, there will be a less sanguine counterpart of human activity that results in the stark diminishment of the natural resources.

It is precisely this twin environmental vision of *Losing Battles* that makes it a compelling study of the relationship of humans and the environment, viewed through the prism of economic considerations. *Delta Wedding*, Welty's novel that features a pedigreed plantation family, has been examined for ways that it depicts a kind of symbiotic harmony between nature and female fertility or nature and human community building.[4] However, *Losing Battles* makes it harder to characterize the human-nature relationship in terms of harmony or indeed any other comforting generalization, because it presents a less glamorous and at times disconcertingly close relationship between humans and their natural environment. Crucially, because the novel's main characters are farmers (and dirt poor ones at that), economic and social factors can never be ignored in analyzing the environmental aspects of the novel. Eudora Welty has shared that in *Losing Battles* she wanted to "show people at the rock bottom of their lives, which meant the Depression. I wanted the poorest part of the state, which meant the northeast corner, where people had the least, the least of all. . . . I wanted to take away everything and show them naked as human beings" (*Conversations* 50). Part of the family's nakedness, their poverty, immerses them in palpable ways in the natural environment. Not all dynamics of that immersion are comfortable to behold, particularly if considered from the environmentalist point of view, since the family's gaze towards their environment is so often blatantly utilitarian, if not downright exploitative.

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[4] See Ch. 3, "The Enchanted Maternal Garden of *Delta Wedding*," in *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor* (1985) by Louise H. Westling. Also, Kelly Sultzbach's "The Chiasmic Embrace of the Natural World in Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*" (2009).

Yet before condemning the Beecham-Renfros as ignorant and short-sighted abusers of nature, as some critics have done, it may be worthwhile to hear the cautionary voice of environmental historian Richard White. He notes that the environmentalist discourse has historically struggled with accommodating human labor that so obviously changes the environment. This, in turn, leads to an accusatory attitude towards those who work the land or interact with it in an equally direct way. White argues that no one can ethically separate him/herself from such people: "Having demonized those whose very lives recognize the tangled complexity of a planet in which we kill, destroy and alter as a condition of living and working, we can claim an innocence that in the end is merely irresponsibility" (185). In *Losing Battles* Welty never lets the reader forget this "tangled complexity" of the uncomfortable reality that allows humankind to exist at the expense of the non-human nature. We see Beecham-Renfros at times reassuringly respectful of nature, at times frustratingly oblivious to the environmental consequences of their actions and desires, but, however misguided their ambitions are, the narrator never lets the reader arrive at a smug place of patronizing condescension towards her characters. At every turn, there are hints of socioeconomic factors that make the behavior of Beecham-Renfros if not commendable, then at least fundamentally understandable. As Stephanie Sarver puts it, "texts that consider agriculture often reveal the interplay of nonhuman nature and human culture; thus they provide an ideal ground for examining not only how humans relate to nature but also how their political, social, and economic institutions influence the way they impact the land they inhabit" (7). Careful examination of *Losing Battles* suggests that whatever predatory environmental impulses the Beecham-Renfros reveal do not mysteriously originate within themselves but are in large part traceable to the broader political and socioeconomic systems in which we all participate.

Gardening, Food and Trans-Corporeality

Losing Battles is a curious novel in that it is unapologetically a novel about farmers, but not particularly preoccupied with farming per se. One of the Beecham uncles emphatically states: "Farming is what we do. What we was raised for" (628). Yet there are virtually no depictions of farm fields or discourse about farming practices. Rather, the prime patch of cultivated land in the text is Beulah's garden. The presence of this garden powerfully attests to the fact that the gathered family has immediate and extensive interactions with the world around them. Welty reveals that this constant immersion in the natural world has the potential to foster an awareness of interdependence of human and non-human worlds and a recognition that the natural world has an inherent value of its own.

In her argument that the beginning of *Losing Battles* alludes to Genesis, an act of the world coming into being, Naoko Fuwa Thornton reads Beulah's flower garden for its symbolic implications: "It is as if these flowers came into being through the act of being named, since there is no necessity in these particular flowers, and not others that would grow just as well, being there" (141). Susan Haltom and Jane Ray Brown, authors of *One Writer's Garden: Eudora Welty's Home Place*, would contest the interchangeability of floral species. In their view, Welty is strategic and purposeful in her depiction of the garden, which indicates the socioeconomic status of its owner: "the gaudy mix of hot colors—yellow, orange, magenta, and red—signals an uneducated eye. The gardener has lined up her cannas and montbretia in single and double rows, like a crop farmer. The plants are a combination of inexpensive annuals and pass-along perennials, hardy and low-maintenance" (112). Furthermore, Haltom and Brown suggest that farm women like Beulah were well versed in the properties of flowers to make the most of them. They note that Beulah employed "cheap but lovely morning glory vines to make a

cool bower of the porch" (112) and has raised the verbena bed, knowing well that it would spill over in an abundant display (113). The flowers thus are hardly incidental, but reveal something about the hands that planted them and reveal intimate knowledge of the planter about the climate and soil conditions under which she works.

Elizabeth Lawrence, a prominent southern gardener and author, and a friend of Welty's, recognized that the many flowers of *Losing Battles* "all came out of the market bulletin" (50). The bulletin Lawrence was referring to was the *Mississippi Market Bulletin*, published twice a month by the Mississippi Department of Agriculture (and still is, to this current day), in which "the old ladies" advertised and sold flower seeds and cuttings from their gardens (35). Welty herself corresponded with these rural gardeners and in fact introduced Lawrence to the bulletin by putting Lawrence's name on its mailing list around the time of World War II (23-25, 81).[5] At one point, when Lawrence sent Welty a gospel record she received through the gardening correspondence, Welty was appreciative: "You get the very air in the room, and the smell of the country flowers—I expect zinnia and gladiolus and salvia in a tub—and the warm day. It's all so expressive and Sunday-like" (qtd. in Lawrence in 81). Welty's richly textured response shows that her fiction is attentive to details like gardening, because for the writer they constitute key parts of the world she both knows and creates. In 1969, just prior to the publication of *Losing Battles*, Welty shared the following in her piece in *Delta Review*: "if one thing is consistent among the many Southern writers, different as they are from one another, it is that each feels passionately about Place. Not simply in the historical or philosophical connotation of the word, but in the sensory thing, the experienced world of sight and sound and smell, in its earth and water and sky and in its seasons" (*Occasions* 245). Granted, "Place," especially when

[5] Welty includes a nod to the Market Bulletin in *Losing Battles* by having Uncle Noah find his new wife through a bulletin ad "for a settled white Christian lady" (507).

capitalized, is a tired trope in southern literary studies, yet its invocation is hardly the most salient feature of Welty's formulation. What is striking instead is Welty's insistence on the concrete—"the experienced world of sight and sound and smell, in its earth and water and sky"—as the crucial component of depicting any place. It may be surmised that through her own gardening and her participation in a network of fellow gardeners, many of them women, Eudora Welty had amassed a treasure trove of experiences, which she could draw upon to create an environment of fictional gardeners like Beulah and her daughters.

The novel and the day barely get off to a start before the family members start bringing gifts for Granny. Nearly all the gifts have sprung from the soil with the assistance of human hands: "a double armload of dahlias, each stalk as big as a rag doll, a bushel of plushy coxcomb, and cooking pears tied in an apron" (436). A little later, another family branch brings "tomatoes and bell peppers, some fall pears, and a syrup bucket full of muscadines—all that set of children were now at large with purple hands." They also deliver "dahlias with scalded leaves hanging down their stems like petticoats, darker and heavier prince's-feathers that looked like a stormy sunset, and a cigar box full of late figs . . . in the leaves and purple and heavy as turned-over sacks" (437). At every turn the readers are greeted by a medley of edible bounty alongside floral offerings. However, because the flower garden is the only actual site of cultivation that the reader directly encounters (if only figuratively speaking), it remains the anchor that materially grounds the human experience of the soil in Welty's novel. Without that initial garden, planted by expert hands, the subsequent mentions of garden bounty would fail to remind that each gift of plant or fruit came from planting, tending, weeding, watering, and finally, picking (as hinted by the "purple hands" after gathering muscadines) by the humans encountered in the text. However, because Beulah's garden remains an ever present member of the reunion, each encounter with

botanical specimens bespeaks this unspoken truth: the plants came about because of the mutual interaction between the humans and their environment.

Each blossom of a domestic plant is a testament of the soil being prepared, the act of planting, and the environmental factors that cohered to produce the flower. In this sense, the flowers may be interpreted to signify what Stacy Alaimo has called "trans-corporeality," or "the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature' or 'environment'." To put it another way, "trans-corporeality" brings into the foreground how "the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" ("Trans-corporeal" 238). Keeping the idea of trans-corporeality in mind may help us make sense of the puzzling ritual taking place at the end on the reunion as Beulah bids farewell to her guests and presents them with flowers: "She was ready to load everybody home. Here was the duplication of what they'd come bringing here—milk-and-wine lilies, zinnias, phlox, tuberoses" (793). Ann Romines understandably puzzles over this act of Beulah's gift-giving: "Why send them home with flowers duplicating those they brought? And why did they bring those flowers, knowing Beulah grew them too?" (272). Romines argues that the gifts are both a form of competition and a desire for control by the female relatives. In addition to expressing relational dynamics suggested by Romines, the floral gifts that bookend the reunion also act as tangible reminders of the natural environment that functions—always—as an intermediary of human relations and as an agent that makes human transactions possible. The flowers that Beulah has received and the ones she sends home with her guests have been acquired through extensive and purposeful contact with the environment in a way that blurs the boundaries between human input—the act of weeding, for example—and an environmental factor, such as the makeup of the soil. When the unique circumstances of each gardener—soil quality, slightest variations in climate, the location of the

garden, etc.—are taken into account, it becomes clear that while the blossoms seem like duplication, an exact copy, they are anything but. Each was produced through its own singular process that cannot be duplicated, even if so desired. It is no accident that in arguing the case for trans-corporeality, Alaimo summons Ladelle McWhorter's reflection on growing tomatoes *in Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization*. By attempting cultivation of tomatoes, McWhorter is struck by the multi-level agency of dirt and all the ways it can enable or resist her own goals (166-167, qtd. in Alaimo "Trans-corporeal" 247). Although they cannot articulate the relationship so eloquently, the Beecham-Renfros are at all times aware that the environment is not a passive entity merely waiting to have their will imprinted on it.

The discourse surrounding one significant floral motif in the novel—the night-blooming cereus—highlights the lessons learned from an immediate, specific contact between the garden and the gardener. At the start of the reunion, Mr. Renfro's sister Lexie, not the most sensitive of characters, pulls a tub with the night blooming cereus for all to see and promptly gets in trouble with the gardener Beulah: "Little bantie you, pulling a forty-pound load of a century plant, just to show us!" (446). The Granny also tries to appropriate the plant for her uses, when she underscores the plant's independence in terms of blooming, "Can't tell a century-old plant what to do" (446). Granny, who misrepresents herself as being a hundred years old (she is actually ninety) is invested in presenting the plant as a symbol of longevity that is still fully in command, with no hints of frailty (430, 440). The catch is—the plant in question is not a century plant (*Agave Americana)* at all; it is a night-blooming cereus (*Selenicereus grandiflorus or Hylocereus undatus*) (Haltom and Brown 242). What makes the blossoms of this cactus plant so special is

that they bloom only for one night, once a year.[6] The plant is definitively and enthusiastically identified as the night-blooming cereus by Mrs. Moody towards the end of the reunion when it finally flowers: "You've produced a night-blooming cereus! . . . I haven't seen one of those in years." Beulah, the gardener, remains unimpressed by this nomenclature: "Yes'm, whatever in the nation you called it, it bloomed." She seems to downplay her input into the blooming: "And not a drop of precious water did I ever spare it . . . I reckon it must have thrived on going famished" (790). Yet Beulah's nonchalant attitude is contradicted by the actions of others. The narrator conveys the significance of this act of blooming through the atmosphere of awe surrounding the plant: "Little groups in turn looked down in a ring at the spectacle, the deep white flower, a star inside a star, that almost seemed to return their gaze, like a member of the reunion who didn't invariably come when called" (790). Obviously, the blossom is imbued with symbolism, especially given its appearance on the night of the family gathering. Suzanne Marrs productively reads the symbolic meanings that the short-lived splendor and yearly regeneration of the night-blooming cereus might hold for the different family members (*One Writer's* 200). In addition to the symbolic meaning, however, the plant is also a material representative of the natural world. A reference to it as a family member who does not predictably show up when called upon highlights the plant's separateness and independence from human influence. However, because it is blooming in a tub of all places and is fundamentally at the mercy of Beulah's good graces, it certainly is part of nature that does not stand apart from the human sphere—in that way, it is indeed a member of the family.

[6] Those familiar with Welty's biography will recall that she and her friends formed a Night-Blooming Cereus Club. The club members would attend the cactus blooming events, which were advertised in the local newspapers by the plant owners. The club's motto was: "Don't take it cereus, Life's too mysterious" (Marrs, *Eudora* 45).

Taking note of the intertwined quality of the relationship between the night-blooming cereus and its gardener might help answer the puzzling question of why Eudora Welty gave two different names to a single plant in the span of one novel, one of which she must have known was incorrect. One explanation might be that rural women did not always call plants by their proper, botanical names. Elizabeth Lawrence's writing sometimes reads as a series of mini mysteries in which she tries to uncover which colloquial name goes with which plant, the relationship between these two entities being only rarely a straightforward one.[7] Welty thus might have muddled the flower name to reflect the flower naming practices, which she had likely experienced in her own correspondence.[8] Another explanation might be Welty's deliberate exposure of the degree to which the non-human world has a life of its own. As Beulah states, whether the flower is called the century plant or the night-blooming cereus has no bearing whatsoever on the material fact of its blooming. What matters instead is what Beulah knows best—when to water it and where to position it. Of course, to insist on the absolute division between culture and nature is to oversimplify the case, and grossly so. A mere hypothetical consideration of intricate pathways of how a flower, such as night-blooming cereus, found its way into the category of plants that is considered decorative, how the scientific and other cultural discourses influenced, and were influenced by, the preferences of people like Beulah, shows how hopeless the quest to disentangle nature from culture is.[9] And yet, despite all that worthy

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[7] Lawrence frequently sent pictures from seed catalogs to her correspondents to verify what flowers were being offered under various names. For examples, see pp. 69-81.

[8] For example, consider the anecdote Lawrence recounts: "Eudora got a blue wonder lily from the market bulletin. She said it had never bloomed and she was still wondering" (41).

[9] Of the wealth of writing on the intersection of culture/nature divide, I am thinking here particularly of Kate Soper's *What is Nature?: Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (1995) on the cultural and extra-discursive implications of the term *nature*, Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (2007) on the ways that viewing nature as a separate entity impedes environmental thinking, as well as the recent *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* by Jedediah Purdy (2015), a compelling statement that it is no longer possible to think of nature apart from humans.

consideration, there is the material fact of a particular flower, like Beulah's cereus, that blooms regardless of what it has been or might be called. Some crucial part of it, in other words, remains irreducible to culture, and that material reality has to be reckoned with by humans.

Not only Beulah but also the rest of the Beecham-Renfros, being the farmers they are, cannot ignore the very real and material qualities of the natural environment, which engulfs them. They depend on cooperation of environmental factors to survive, so denying environmental facts is not a possibility, because they are felt in a corporeal way. One does not have to be a particularly astute observer to note that when Beulah loads her guests on their way home, she gives them only flowers, no fruits or other edible goods. Presumably, food items are not included because everything has been eaten, both by the ravenous guests and their hosts. The novel can be fairly characterized as being preoccupied with food and eating, partly because the specter of hunger haunts it. Brother Bethune, a preacher for the reunion, sums up the situation in the following manner: "Floods all spring and drought all summer. We stand *some* chance of getting *about* as close to starvation this winter as we come yet. The least crop around here it would be possible for any man to make, I believe Mr. Ralph Renfro is going to make it this year" (626; original emphasis). One of Mr. Renfro's brothers-in-law, Uncle Dolphus, supports Brother Bethune's narrative: "There's been too much of the substance washed away to grow enough to eat any more" (628). Their statements reveal a high degree of intimacy with the experiences of the land, mainly through the necessity to eat. The effects of rain and drought are not contained to the external landscape. Through the physical act of eating and drawing sustenance, the experiences of the environment become the experiences of humans. When the reunion members see how those "whirly-winds of dust marched, like scatterbrained people, up and down the farm track, or pegged across the fields," such an observation reveals more than just the state of the

environment (448). It portends of tangible effects on the very observers. Even in better days, the fundamental immediacy between the human body and the environment had not been substantially different. When Uncle Dolphus reminisces about pre-drought times, he prods Mr. Renfro's memory: "The spring after Jack went, General Green about took over your corn, remember?" (500). In Eudora Welty's vocabulary, "General Green" appears to refer to weeds. In a letter she wrote to John Robinson decades earlier, she informed him that "The garden is all right—General Green is about to get it. We have had rains and the whole place all at once was very lush" (Eichelberger 162). Therefore, even when the rain is plentiful, its interaction with the land still holds direct implications for the people directly dependent on it for food. Despite the playful name for the weeds that threaten the crop, the battle metaphor—also seen when Aunt Birdie fondly recalls Jack "fighting General Green in the corn" (Welty, *Losing* 639)—is only half humorous. At stake in the relationship with environmental conditions is the ability to eat and survive.

Welty's oft-discussed similes further underscore the close bond between the humans and their environment. Welty purposefully calls attention to the natural elements with the opening sentences of the novel that overflow with the natural imagery: a dog is lying "like a stone"; "[t]he distant point of the ridge, like the tongue of a calf"; chinaberry trees "like roosters astrut with golden tails"; light "as fast as the chickens"; "shaft of heat, solid as a hickory stick"; a girl's hair "pale as wax-beans" (429-433). The pattern continues throughout the book, often using various plants for comparisons, when baby Lady May's eyes "open all the way like vinca flowers at midday" (522), her hair gets likened to a "little coxcomb" (799) or Aunt Nanny is "walling up like a catalpa tree in full bloom" (705). At each turn these similes remind the reader how

intimately familiar the Beecham-Renfros are with their natural neighbors. To them these names are hardly an abstraction, but denote entities which they encounter on a regular, intimate basis.

A curious divergence between the ways that the narrator and the characters employ natural imagery suggests that the family may be on disconcertingly close terms with the natural elements. As seen before, the narrator's similes turn on resemblance between an object being compared and some natural element, often a tree or a flower. Thus, when the age spots on Granny Vaughn's hand seem "like pansy faces pressed into the papery skin" (726), the fragility of pansy blossoms reveal something about Granny's weathered appearance and suggest that her hold on life, too, is tenuous and for not much longer, like the short-lived flower's. However, when it's the novel's characters' turn to grasp for some way of conveying how they see the plants, their similes are surprisingly violent. For example, Mr. Renfro's sister Lexie refers to a wilted red rose as a "bird-dog's tongue" (683) and Uncle Percy praises the pickled peppers as being as "[p]retty as chicken gizzards" (659). Finally, in a classic Welty moment, harkening back to the Night-Blooming Cereus club mentioned earlier, Lexie remains unimpressed with the blooms of the cactus: "Yes, and those'll look like wrung chicken's necks in the morning . . . No thank you" (798).[10] In each of these instances, when looking at plants (or plant matter, as with pickled peppers), the characters resort to signifiers of violence. The bird-dog's primary purpose is to serve in hunting birds that have been shot, and the other two instances refer to mutilated bodies of domestic fowl: the neck that has been snapped and the gizzard that is only accessible if the body of the chicken has been cut open. The similes invoked, in other words, are hardly for the faint of heart.

[10] Welty recalled a Jackson lady describe the wilted cactus flower in this way (Marrs, *Eudora* 45).

Why such a difference between the narrator's more subdued, more aesthetic view of the natural world and the view of violence by the family members? Posing this question requires an adjustment of perspective. The language of Aunt Lexie and Uncle Percy strikes us as violent only if we purposefully juxtapose it with the narrator's calmer mode of employing natural imagery. The family clan that has gathered for the reunion would not think twice about what they said because actions of hunting, killing, and cutting animal bodies open are part and parcel of their world. Looking at their surroundings through the prism of consumption presents another side of Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality. In fact, Alaimo argues that food, through which "plants and animals become the substance of the human," might be "the most palpable" of all agents of trans-corporeality ("Trans-corporeal" 253). Thinking about the sustenance of a human body makes it clear to what degree human bodies are dependent on other bodies, that have the power to compose (or decompose) them. The seemingly harsh similes of Welty's characters thus reinforce what we already know about them: they are thoroughly enmeshed with their environment. The multidirectional pathways of consumption that have been alluded to through the similes convey that the bodies of the family members are inextricably connected to their natural surroundings. Even the animal body parts explicitly invoked, the tongue and the gizzard, further cement the impression of permeable bodies—bodies that both consume and are in turn consumed. Revisiting some of the similes in this spirit reveals that they might do more than merely describe the appearance. If Elvie's (one of Beulah's daughters) hair is "pale as wax beans" (Welty 433), it also suggests that Elvie herself is to some degree literally like wax-beans, for more than likely she had part in cultivating them, then consumed them and finally incorporated them into the makeup of her body.

The family with such immediate, corporeal ties to their surroundings can hardly afford to think they have the upper hand when it comes to their relationship with the environment. Their dependence on the land is one of the key factors touted by the Nashville Agrarians as a desirable quality of the agrarian life. Agrarians, as the Nashville Agrarians imagined them, fully appreciated their precarious position in the natural world. "Nature wears out man before man can wear out nature; only a city man, a laboratory man, will deny that. It seems wiser to be moderate in our expectations of nature, and respectful," wrote John Crowe Ransom in his contribution to the collection *I'll Take My Stand* (9). Now, nearly a century later, the increasingly obvious and distressing effects of climate change testify that, contrary to Ransom, the proverbial man can very much wear out nature. Still, Ransom's call for moderation and respect towards nature can find definite echoes in modern day environmental discourse. The appreciation for nature's power and importance springs from the family's sustained contact with the natural elements in one location. As Ransom elaborates, the farmer "identifies himself with a spot of ground, and this ground carries a good deal of meaning; it defines itself for him as nature" (19). Indeed, the rooted Beecham-Renfros, boasting of several generations in the same place, and subject to the mercy of natural forces, recognize the awesome power of nature to pursue its own course without regard to human desires or needs. Even more to the point, when they treat nature with respect, without exploiting it for profit, the natural environment seems to reward them with abundance, as we see in the case of Beulah's flower gardens.

Market Economy, Downward Mobility and Environmental Implications

Though *Losing Battles* is indeed "drenched in the bold colors of country flower gardens," as Haltom and Brown observe (204), Beulah's garden hardly sums up the extent of environmental depiction in Welty's text. Instead, the unfolding of the novel provokes some

uneasy reflection as to what causes the descent from the opening cornucopia of Beulah's garden into increasingly more desolate and lifeless landscapes. As Ruth M. Vande Kieft puts it, the initial narrator is akin to a "joyous creator" who later "broods over a ravaged natural world, the evidences of human greed, pride, envy, ignorance, the finality of death" (152). Paying closer attention to the historical and geographical positioning of the novel illuminates to what degree the landscape around Beecham-Renfros and their impoverished existence within it are caused by them and the broader socioeconomic systems.

The hardships of farming life, which we see in evidence on the patch of land owned by the Beecham-Renfros, is a historically accurate description of the 1930s small farm life in Mississippi and other southern states. After the boom in agricultural production and profits during the period of WWI, the prices of agricultural products plummeted as the demand tapered off. The various governmental policies aimed at reducing the production favored big farmers who profited the most from letting their acres lie fallow. The national memory is seared with images of the plight of sharecroppers, who were often unceremoniously (and illegally) let go by the landowners who meant to keep all the subsidies to themselves. While the small farmers were ostensibly better off, because they owned the land they farmed and thus suddenly did not find themselves homeless, their way of life was also profoundly affected. Often, the difficult economic position of the small farmer was further exacerbated by the prevailing belief that participating more forcefully in the market economy was the best—if not the only—way to prosper. To that end, farmers aimed to modernize their farms (often on loan) and plant increasingly more cash crops. This, in turn, devalued and reduced, when not downright eliminated, the homemade production of food and other items. When the markets performed poorly, the very measures that were designed to help the farmers get ahead sent them on a

tailspin of indebtedness. As Jack Temple Kirby puts it, "The federal government continued to subsidize bigness, and millions of the landless and near landless had been driven from the countryside" (77). The cumulative effect of all these factors—economic downturn, government policies, consolidation of farms, and increasing mechanization of farm work (e.g. tractors)—was a landscape of fewer, but much bigger, mechanized farms. [11]

While the family of *Losing Battles* has not invested in farm equipment, Jack's parents have splurged on an ostentatious piece of property in order to celebrate their son's homecoming: a brand new tin roof, which solicits passionate acknowledgment by the clan who has gathered for the reunion. "A new roof! You got a new roof!" shouts Uncle Curtis; "New tin! Why, Beulah Renfro!" chimes in Aunt Birdie (435-436). The new roof is more than eye candy, however; it is also a considerable financial strain, which everyone understands. Thus the Renfros field the following questions: "What'd you give for it?"; "Paid for with what?" (436; 496). At one point Beulah volunteers the following tidbit: "Mr. Renfro give up just about all we had left for that tin top over our heads" (496). The playful parting words of the family jester, Uncle Noah Webster, strike an even more ominous tone with regard to financing the roof: "Jack'll go on working the rest of his life to pay for that roof . . . You've got an acre of tin up there" (795). Acres of land, which Jack will work, have thus become subservient to the figurative acre of a commodity that was purchased, the narrator implies, not as a sheer necessity but as a symbol of status. Beulah explains that her husband "had to show the reunion single-handed the world don't have to go

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[11] For effects of mechanization and government programs on southern rural life, see Gilbert C. Fite's *Cotton Fields No More: Southern Agriculture 1865-1980* (1984) and Pete R. Daniel's *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880* (1986), esp. Ch.1 and Ch. 2. For cultural effects of the agricultural transformation and attendant migration, see Jack Temple Kirby's *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (1987). For women's peculiar experience during the years of change, see Melissa Walker's *All We Knew Was to Farm: Rural Women in the Upcountry South, 1919-1941* (2000). For the iconic statements documenting the tenant farmer life, see James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) as well as *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939) by Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor.

flying in pieces when the oldest son gives trouble," while Mr. Renfro proudly concurs: "That roof speaks just a world, speaks volumes" (496).

In their economic-anthropological 1941 study of the U.S. South, Arthur F. Raper and Ira De A. Reid provide an insight of just what such a roof communicates:

> Nowadays the bright tin roof on the cotton tenant's[12] cabin epitomizes the South's place in the nation. It reflects the exhaustion of local forests from which shingles were once rived; it emphasizes the unbalance between urban and rural economies, for the tin roof was made on machines driven by fossil fuels but paid for by cotton grown in the sun by hand. The price of the roof decreased scarcely one fifth during the depression, cotton over half. (vi)

Read in the context of Raper and Reid's analysis, the tin roof "speaks volumes," in Mr. Renfro's phrase, as to how inefficiently yet forcefully the Renfros have entered the market economy. They are left with trying to pay with devalued and unstable agricultural labor for a commercially-produced commodity. Their dubious investment appears even more questionable when the reader realizes that the family is barely able to feed itself. Once Jack returns, Beulah informs him the family has had to sell off most of the livestock in order to survive: "We had to have coal and matches and starch . . . [a]nd flour and sugar and vinegar and salt and sweet soap. And seed and feed. And we had to keep us alive" (Welty, *Losing Battles* 521). Finding out the family's sad financial affairs and that all the labor now falls on the sole remaining old mule, Jack sighs: "I was reading the signal from that roof pretty well" (522). Jack does not condemn the expenditure,

[12] Although the Renfros are not tenant farmers, Raper and Reid's central thesis is that with the increasing concentration of wealth, the characteristics of a tenant farmer life-- low wages, economic insecurity and low participation in community affairs—are no longer tied to a particular economic position but have become a reality for large swaths of the population.

but his reaction confirms how well he understands the ruinous effect of the roof's purchase on the family's budget.

Raper and Reid mention another fact to which a shiny tin roof stands witness: the decimation of local forests, which were used to furnish roof shingles. Their observation is confirmed by the novel, because the family lives in the presence of a poignant reminder that the woods around them are not what they once were: a silent so-called Wayfarer's bell. The bell used to signal the path for wanderers lost in the dense woods, but now sits quiet: "The wisteria that grew there with it looked nearly as old as the bell; its trunk was like an old, folded, gray quilt packed up against the post, and the eaves made a feathery bonnet around the black, still, iron shape" (658). At first glance wisteria may be read as a reassurance of nature's regenerative powers. But it cannot mask what has taken place: that the Beecham-Renfros live in a radically altered place, partly because of their own actions and partly because of outside forces. Rob Nixon might describe what befell the family as a "displacement without moving" (19), which is what happens when the very qualities that have made it livable have been compromised or downright annihilated.

Besides the decimated forests, the most salient proof of environmental degradation in the novel is the impoverished and eroded soil. While the Beecham-Renfro family may have contributed to depleting the soil, the story of Herman Dearman reminds us to what degree the poverty of the land (and, in turn, of the family) is imposed on them by greater forces from the outside. Dearman came in to make money off of lumber from the woods surrounding the current Renfro farm. The family's list of grievances against Dearman in extensive, the chief of which is that they have a living family reminder of Dearman's role in their life: Uncle Nathan murdered Dearman (for reasons that are never made entirely clear), let a black sawmill worker be unjustly

hanged for the crime, and then proceeded to cut off his own arm as a penance and condemn himself to wandering the countryside, posting homemade evangelical signs. Mr. Renfro's injury also dates back to the days when he worked for Dearman, dynamiting the stumps he had left behind. Curiously, the telling of Dearman's tale takes two tries, once by Mr. Renfro and once by his wife Beulah. The different approaches of these two storytellers are striking.

Asked by Aunt Cleo how Dearman came into possession of the store, which had been bequeathed to Mr. Renfro by his father, Mr. Renfro sheepishly admits that he was at home instead of participating in World War I—"I didn't go German-hunting" (781)—when Dearman took over the business. The story Mr. Renfro tells is the following: "I was *out* of the store some, blowing stumps, cleaning up after [Dearman]—he needed somebody knowing how to do that . . . And hunting some. And he all at once had my business. There ain't hardly what you could call a story to it" (781; original emphasis). Just as soon as he's done telling, however, Beulah moves in to discredit the tale: "It's your story. Not Dearman's. You don't know your own story when you hear it" (781). On the one hand, Beulah seems to bolster Mr. Renfro by telling him he is the rightful owner of the story. On the other, she dismisses his ability as a storyteller. Indicating that Beulah's proverbial feathers have been ruffled, the narrator submits that Beulah "whirl[s] on Aunt Cleo" with her version of events instead: "Dearman is who showed up full-grown around here, took over some of the country, brought niggers in here, cut down every tree within forty miles, and run it shrieking through the sawmill" (781). Dearman represents foreignness—unlike the Beecham-Renfros, who have been born and raised around those parts, Dearman "showed up full-grown." The sequence of events in Beulahs's narrative implies that Dearman's lack of attachment to the place contributes to his failure to care for the environment in which he finds himself. Beulah's racist term not only underscores the family's prejudices but also further

solidifies Dearman's origin from somewhere else. For example, earlier in the novel, while the family waits for Jack to come back, Uncle Curtis reminds them that Jack is currently in the Delta, "[w]here it's running with riches and swarming with niggers everywhere you look" (500)—in other words, a world completely foreign to the Banner country, where poor white farmers predominate. Beulah's choice of the word *shrieking*, while describing the sounds of the saw, also shows sympathy for the trees that have been cut by portraying them as alive entities that can feel pain and act on it, instead of a passive inanimate thing. Her speech thus marks her as different from Dearman, who seems to flaunt indifference to the devastation he causes. In Beulah's eyes, a clear boundary separates Dearman from the people at the reunion.

Aunt Nanny aids in rendering Dearman as a complete foreigner by remembering her astonishment upon his arrival: "I kept asking how he got in here and found us!" (781). In response to which, another one of reunion voices, perhaps Beulah's again, provides a ready answer: "Followed the tracks. The railroad had already come cutting through the woods and just barely missed some of us" (781). After clearing the woods, Dearman leaves, once more, via the railroad, only this time with money: "when he left . . . he had all the money he needed and a gang to with him and they just started up the railroad track" (782). Through Dearman's forceful association with the train, the readers find themselves faced with a familiar motif in American literature—namely, the machine in the garden. In his book by the same name Leo Marx focused on the 19th century literary depictions of what he called "the representative event" ("Pastoralism" 37): the technological advancement, as represented by the train, intruding into an idyllic pastoral world. Although living in a period some decades later, Welty's Dearman, who comes like the train on the tracks, repeats the same trope of invasion by technology and progress upon an unsuspecting landscape. Significantly, it is Beulah, often supported by other women's voices,

that paints a portrait of the pastoral world fallen into ruin due to Dearman's influence. This is in line with the gender coding of pastoral design, according to Leo Marx: "Most important is the sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction. It invariably is associated with crude, masculine aggressiveness in contrast with the tender, feminine, and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape" (*Machine* 29). Beulah implies that Dearman cleared the path in front of him with such a strength as to make resistance futile. Uncle Percy supports her version: "It was a tearing ambition he had to make all he could out of us" (782). The reunion members thus become part of the passive landscape, helpless in Dearman's path.

Beulah is dissatisfied with Mr. Renfro's story because she sees Dearman for what he is: an outsider who exploited the natural resources without leaving so much as crumbs behind for the more permanent residents of the place. It was Thomas McHaney who first noted that Eudora Welty's northeast Mississippi seems to be patterned after the West Virginia of the author's mother's, Chestina Welty's, youth (Claxton 85). Since the subplot of exhausted land is so crucial to the novel, the setting of Appalachia is appropriate because the region can in some ways serve as a poster child for irresponsible and exploitative use of resources, whether coal or timber. The novel's Dearman represents the larger process through which mining and logging companies exploited the region. One of the tragic aspects of the *Losing Battles*, however, is the failure on the part of some of the family to appreciate how much Dearman's goals have always differed from their own. There is something unsettling about Mr. Renfro's subtle pride of having been useful and necessary to Dearman, as evidenced by his saying that Dearman "needed somebody knowing how to do that." While he does not possess Dearman's ambition, the association with Dearman seems to enable him to live up to some version of himself. It is ironic that as he is out

blowing up tree stumps, he is also hunting without realizing that he is complicit in making this enjoyable, food-providing activity obsolete. Without making these explicit connections to deforestation, Uncle Noah Webster is still instructive when he tells his bride Cleo how things have changed: "the old place here was plum stocked with squirrel when we was boys. It was overrun with quail. And if you never saw the deer running in here, I saw 'em" (627). The deforestation both reduces wildlife and depletes the soil by contributing to erosion. It is therefore not as odd as it might seem, in the midst of a drought, that in this same conversation, Uncle Dolphus explains why the land does not provide adequate sustenance: "It's the fault of the land going back on us, treating us the wrong way. There's been too much of the substance washed away to grow enough to eat any more" (628). Dolphus's statement tacitly acknowledges that erosion has occurred (hence the "washed away") but does not make the connection between clearing the forest and the impoverished land, a connection that has been all too obvious to the U.S. South's environmental historians.[13] Writing about the highlands South, Jack Temple Kirby describes that most timber companies had "the policy of cut out and get out. They laid their own rails and pushed portable mills into the forests, cut, sawed, and moved on. . . . Sometimes agriculture was disrupted or destroyed for miles around such operations. Rich cove land dried up, creek- and riverbanks were changed" (84). The impoverished natural environment of the Beecham-Renfro clan resembles the devastated landscape in the wake of predatory logging practices. When Dolphus speaks of the land as if independently and stubbornly responsible for its own demise, his statement reveals not only ignorance but potentially something more unsettling. By being unreflective about their role in affecting the land—whether through farming

[13] See Cowdrey, pp. 149-168, on the role of deforestation in affecting soil quality and the positive effects of replenishing the soil through tree planting. Of particular interest to this novel that is so preoccupied with food and eating is the direct link between felled trees and poor diet. Cowdrey notes that pellagra's spread can be partly attributed to diminished access to wild meat as the forests receded (157).

or clearing the forestland—the male reunion members align themselves with the exploitation of natural resources for economic gain. What Beulah does not realize when she says that the story is Mr. Renfro's instead of Dearman's is that Dearman's and Mr. Renfro's stories converge in unsettling ways; both men are seduced by the dream of economic advancement, made possible by unsustainable land use.

A crucial difference between the two men, however, lies in the end results of the exploitative land use. Dearman's company made out like the proverbial bandits from razing the woods around the Beecham-Renfro farm. Mr. Renfro got only short-lived wages, and presumably modest ones at that, from cleaning up after Dearman's crew. In the process, he literally endangered his health and livelihood as a farmer, since his leg injury made him unfit for arduous farm labor and piled the burden of work on the shoulders of Beulah and his young sons. Mr. Renfro's body thus bears physical witness to the larger phenomenon, in which self-sufficient small farmers (who often supplemented their livelihood as hunter-gatherers) entered the labor force as wage laborers only to see those same jobs disappear once the natural resources were extracted. The story of the Renfro family follows the pattern of destabilization due to forces of modernity. Kirby notes, "Modernization had extracted great wealth in natural resources, created temporary semiskilled employment, damaged the environment, and wrought havoc with the semisubsistence economy" (86-87). It is fitting also that Beulah bears the brunt of Mr. Renfro's participation in the labor force, because homemade industriousness, often headed by women, frequently kept the farms and endangered livelihoods afloat during these times of economic uncertainty. Even though Mr. Renfro did not enter the farm commodity market per se, he entered the market economy by working for cash for Dearman. The following observation by Melissa Walker thus applies to the Renfro family: "As the region's farm men inched further and

further into the farm commodities market in search of elusive cash, most of the burden for family survival fell on the region's farm women" (5). The fact that Mr. Renfro literally becomes unfit for farming by working for money outside of the family's subsistence framework underscores just how detrimental economic ambitions can be to a small farmer.

Further highlighting the human cost of environmental damage are the laments of Jack's uncles that their sons have abandoned farming and their home farms. Uncle Curtis puts all his hope in Jack because all his sons left: "all my boys done up and left my farm . . . all nine of mine" (628). Departure from their family homes of the sons (and the absence of their voices from the reunion) may be read as a kind of anachronistic environmental refugeeism that Mitchell Thomashow warns us will become especially pressing during the 21st century (122-123). The mirage of economic riches floated in a similar fashion before the eyes of Dearman and Renfro. One, however, had he lived, stood to profit in earnest from depleting the natural resources. Mr. Renfro, on the other hand, was seduced by an economic dream that ultimately endangered his very way of life and put his family increasingly at the mercy of the market economy forces, represented by the likes of the storekeeper Curly.

One might think that having experienced firsthand the harm that comes from sacrificing trees to sophisticated machinery in the name of economic betterment, the Beecham-Renfros would be loath to perpetuate any practices so forcefully associated with Dearman. Any such notion, however, is put to rest by the unfolding drama of Jack's truck. At the start of the reunion, the family notes the truck's absence, marked by "a grease-darkened, grassless patch of yard with a trench worn down in the clay, an oblong space staked out by the stumps of four pine trees" (497). Similar to the farm track described at the start of the novel, the truck's spot shows the harmful effects of human activity. When a confused Aunt Cleo, a new in-law of the family,

inquires how the family managed to afford a truck in the first place—"You-all don't look like you was ever that well-fixed" (497)—it emerges that the primary agent responsible for bringing the truck into the family's life is the same one that brought Dearman: the railroad. After an irresponsible driver for the Coca-Cola company let the truck roll away, it got hit by the train known by the name of Nashville Rocket (636). Beulah explains how the grease darkened patch in the yard came about: "There was four young pines growing just right to suit [Jack]. He chopped 'em off equal and mounted the frame of that truck with its corners sitting where you could see the stumps" (637). The *stump* is a charged term within the world of the novel, as it becomes forcefully associated with Dearman and the family's darkest secret, Uncle Nathan's crime. In the midst of family's recitation of Dearman's crimes, Mr. Renfro offers this summative statement: "What he left us was a nation of stumps" (782). Stumps refer both to the trees that have been cut by Dearman's crew and the mutilated hand of Uncle Nathan. In an unsettling moment for the reunion members, Uncle Nathan exposes his hand. "Don't show us the stump! Don't show us that," cry the family members (784). Still, Uncle Nathan is unstoppable: "He took off his [prosthetic] hand and showed them the stump. There was good moonlight to see it by, white and clean with its puckered stitching like a flour sack's" (784-785). In a novel that overflows with human life—from tumbling babies to stout aunts—Uncle Nathan's body has become a marker for the loss of life. Significantly, his stump evokes the loss of both human and non-human life. Like the surrounding landscape, deprived of its towering trees, Uncle Nathan physically embodies the act of murder of an innocent African American and the exhaustion of the land.[14]

[14] This episode in Welty's text recalls the "Po' Sandy" tale by Charles W. Chesnutt, in which a slave is turned into a tree by his wife for his protection, until he is cut down for lumber. See Jeffrey Myers's *Converging Stories: Race, Ecology, and Environmental Justice in American Literature* (2005) on how racial oppression and environmental

Given the charged history of stumps in the novel, Jack's decision to cut down the seemingly accommodating pine trees, which happen to grow just in the right place to hold up the truck, gains ominous overtones. Far from having learned the cost of ravaging the land for the purposes of exploitation, Jack carries on the harmful legacy of Dearman. Tellingly, it is the men of the family that understand and validate Jack's obsession with the truck. Noah Webster remarks on the absence of the truck in terms that reverse the customary expectations: "I *thought* there's something about the place that's unnatural! . . . Where's Jack's truck, Jack's precious truck?" (497; original emphasis). The worldview of Uncle Noah Webster has gone topsy-turvy—the lack of a man-made machine strikes him as unnatural, even though it is precisely the truck itself that is the opposite of natural, and in fact antagonistic to the natural, as shown by the sacrifice of four pine trees. When the Beecham uncles rouse themselves in an uproar upon finding out that the truck has gone to Curly Stovall, the storekeeper, to pay for the family's debts, Beulah admonishes them to value the truck less: "It was nothing but a dirty piece of machinery" (497). Unabashed, Uncle Curtis continues to extoll the truck, albeit indirectly, by reminiscing about the "last time I seen [the truck] enthroned in your yard, Beulah" (497). By placing the truck in a position of privilege and power—on a throne—Curtis unconsciously highlights the hierarchy, according to which the Beecham-Renfro men value the non-human components that surround them. This is the kind of hierarchy that ranks human-made things of certain monetary value (the truck is "precious") above those occurring naturally.

The novel further underscores the persistence of this value system through the rescue of Mrs. Moody's car, on the surface a hilarious sequence of events that acquires darker qualities if examined for its effects on the natural world. As mentioned briefly in the summary, the pleasure

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destruction have complemented one another in American culture. For analysis of "Po' Sandy," see Ch. 4, "Other Nature: Chesnutt's Resistance to Ecological and Racial Hegemony."

car, a Buick, becomes precariously perched on Banner Top, lodged behind a lone tree that bars its way down. It is a tall and old cedar tree that is endowed with a history of its own: "The cedar had suffered from the weather, and was set with the pegs of many lost branches; some of the stumps were onion-shaped, as though the branches had been twisted off by teasing boys . . . The upper trunk was punctured like a flute to give entry to woodpeckers and owls" (563). Through the marks it bears, the tree shows its enmeshment with the human and non-human communities around it: boys, woodpeckers, owls. It may be worse for the wear, but nevertheless dear for the history it carries, and Jack promises accordingly: "It's been a good old tree . . . [a]nd I aim to take care of it" (563). Contrary to Jack's good intentions, it turns out that the tree has to be sacrificed for Buick's safety. Once more, it is Mr. Renfro who stealthily dynamites the tree in the middle of the night, purportedly to help with the rescue of the car, but also, one suspects, in order to relive the excitement of the older days, when he was out blowing up tree stumps for Herman Dearman. In fact, it is plausible that he uses dynamite from the old stock, since Jack's nemesis Curly complains after a delayed and unexpected blast: "He's using dynamite that's mighty old" (832). When the Buick's rescue party gathers in the morning to renew their efforts, they see the tree uprooted: "Nothing but memory seemed ever to have propped the tree. Nothing any stronger than memory might be holding it where it was now—some last tag end of root, that was all. . . . There in the rain, its underside went on raining, itself, into the hole, the starved clay raining down dryness from the old, marrowless, pink-and-white colored roots" (817). The tone of this passage is elegiac, with the tree's desperate hold on barren earth having become visible for all to see, as "the starved clay" falls from old and obstinate roots. According to the narrator's sleight of words, the tree's roots are memories made tangible. In this, the tree reminds the reader of the Beecham-Renfros themselves: there is little material sustenance that holds them in place—they

are, like the cedar tree, hanging on by memories, as shown by the incessant retelling of family tales during the reunion.

In another instance, the dangling cedar tree cushions the fall of Jack and Gloria as they tumble toward the ledge protruding some distance below the top. The narrator uses this instance as an opportunity to further highlight the nostalgic qualities of the tree's existence: "Still the tree held to its shape—like a summer's-old nest that had itself fallen out of some greater tree or vine, with all its yesterdays tangled up in it now" (831). Here we still see that tenacious quality of the tree—still hanging on, still maintaining its shape. The comparison of the tree to an old nest that had been perched in yet another "greater tree or vine" suggests the tree's entanglement in larger webs of life. It has both enabled various forms of life by being "like a summer's old nest," the latest of its feats being the cradling of Jack and Gloria; it is also alive itself, as indicated by "all its yesterdays" that it evokes. In effect, the narrator's voice recaps the key characteristics of a tree as a living entity, first gleaned in an earlier encounter with the tree, when the reader learned of the tree having been used by boys, woodpeckers and owls. But if the narrator continues to treat the tree as a living presence, the humans gathered to witness its plight do not feel the same way. On the contrary, Jack demonstrates nonchalance when he reassures Curly Stovall, who is shocked by the appearance of the dynamited Banner Top, by saying: "Don't worry. It's just minus one tree" (819). It seems that despite Jack's earlier promise to take care of the tree, the material interests, as represented by the Buick, trump whatever sentiments he aired earlier. Beulah may deride the various cars—both the Buick and the truck that has come to rescue it--by calling them "man-foolishness" (827), but at the end of the day, the machinery receives the privileged treatment at the hands of humans. This becomes starkly apparent in this juxtaposition: "The automobile was hanging by the rope and the tree beside it was hanging by its own last

roots" (823). The saving rope of human ingenuity is thus reserved for saving a manmade artifact, in a repeat of a scene seen earlier, when Jack propped up the truck upon pine tree stumps.

One final dynamite blast, coming some hours late on account of its being old, sends the tree on its final journey: "The tree had begun to move. It was leaving them. First it went slowly, and then it was bounding, rolling unevenly down on its wheel of roots and clay, diminishing under their eyes, firing off fainter sounds, until it was quiet and still—only a gray bundle in the grayness below, of no more size or accountability than a folded umbrella" (833). The distance between the group of humans gathered on Banner Top and a finally toppled tree brings into sharp relief how the people saw the tree all along—as something to be used, akin to an umbrella, that only now is absolved of its obligation to serve human purposes, as it is no longer "accountable" by being in no place or shape to be of any further use. Jack's reaction contrasts with the narrator's nearly-respectful farewell to the tree. Jack rejoices: "And now the Buick's got a sweet path open in front of her . . . Back to the road where she started" (833). In short, in the novel's economy of exchange, an old and majestic cedar tree has been dispatched to the greyness of oblivion so that a pleasure car can once more be on this way.[15] Of course, Jack might argue that he was merely showing his gratitude to the Moodys' for the saved lives of his wife and daughter. Yet when seen in a broader progression of events that originated with Dearman's forest decimation and continued with the enthronement of the Coca-Cola truck, the cedar tree becomes the latest natural offering on the altar of economic advancement. One of the tragedies of *Losing Battles* lies in the woefully apparent truth that there is, in fact, no economic advancement. The

[15] By looking at the rescue of the Buick from the tree's point of view, so to speak, I diverge from the more positive critical interpretations of the event. Seymour Gross, for instance, sees the incident as emblematic of the overall optimistic tone of the novel: the Buick's rescue is "the kind of salvation that occurs in the world of *Losing Battles*: it's a bit battered but it'll run" (327). For Deborah Clarke, the fact that the Buick belongs to Mrs. Moody bespeaks of Welty's positive outlook on opportunities and freedom provided to women by modernity and by what Clarke calls "automobility" (143, 155).

clan that has gathered for the reunion has only gotten poorer as their natural surroundings have diminished and profits have gone elsewhere. The loss of an iconic tree on Banner top may only be symbolic, but once more, the rescued Buick will grace the better-maintained roads in the wealthier parts of the state, while Jack and others will have to learn how to deal with yet another empty space in their natural environment.

Negotiating the Lure of a Non-Farming Life

Jack, his father, and his uncles are not particularly astute or even reflective about the ways that they themselves contribute to the environmental degradation around them and the ever deepening economic chasm into which they are falling. One might be tempted to entertain the possibility that a greater potential for introspection might change their patterns of behavior. One powerful episode in the book, however, puts any such notion to rest. The episode concerns Jack's younger brother Vaughn's reaction to an impressive blossom of the night-blooming cereus. Vaughn is an exceptional character in that, unlike much of the rest of the family, he thinks about things and is well aware of the world beyond his family's confines. "I've been to school! I seen the map of the whole world!" he exclaims at one point (434). Vaughn, more than many other characters, is alive to possibilities of a life different than his own. Vaughn's awareness reveals to the reader the hard truth of exhausting agricultural labor and an implicit desire to escape it.

Coming back to the house after everyone has gone to bed, Vaughn sees Jack and Gloria fast asleep on their pallet on the porch with the blooming cactus in the background: "He could smell their sweat—it went against his face as would the moist palm of a hand. Then he saw—the smell must be coming from the flowers. They looked like big clods of the moonlight freshly turned up from this night—almost phosphorescent. All of him shied, as if a harness had bloomed" (807). This passage occurs in a unique place in the novel—in the longest expository

episode in which, for once, the voices of reunion are quiet and there is time and room for Vaughn's interiority to emerge. These few moonlight-drenched moments mingle the language of natural beauty with the hard facts of agricultural labor. In addition to seeing Jack and his young wife asleep, Vaughn also smells their sweat, which is quite logical, since it is a hot Mississippi night and the reunited lovers have, not long ago, made love. Abruptly, however, Vaughn gets reoriented—the smell emanates not from the young bodies, but Beulah's rarely blooming cactus. The sudden pause demanded by the dash after the phrase of "Then he saw," underscores just how unexpected this revelation is—that the impressive, long awaited blossoms reek of human sweat. The flower further gains the earthy, bodily qualities, when the narrator describes its open buds as *clods*, a descriptor frequently reserved for clumps of earth. Those clods have been "freshly turned up" in a manner that the recently cultivated soil can be. Taking all of this in, Vaughn gets startled; he shies like a horse from a harness that has suddenly sprouted flowers. The beauty of the rare flowers that have managed to impress even the terse Mrs. Moody becomes associated with toil and sweat. Through the blossoms, the ethereal moonlight meets the earth in Vaughn's eyes. To him, the flower symbolizes labor, not all of it savory. The plant that grows thanks to human hands is akin to a harness, an instrument of control designed to harvest the energy of an animal body for someone else's purpose. The thought that this artifact might have beauty—a flower put forth—shocks Vaughn into fear. There is no sense of celebration or aesthetic appreciation; Vaughn's response is solely that of revolt. The revolt might be only temporary—shying away from a harness is not the same as shattering it to pieces—but it is there all the same. From the toiling Vaughn's perspective, humans and their animal companions expend energy in ways that are not altogether dissimilar in the everyday routines of agricultural life. Vaughn's realization reveals the complicated relationship that this young farmer—himself similar to a new

bud on an old plant—has with the labor that is richly abundant in the agricultural life into which he was born.

Taking a moment to linger on Vaughn's reaction to the cereus plant illustrates with what care Welty drew her portrait of a farming family. Rather than engaging in an uncomplicated celebration of a purportedly simple agrarian life, Welty does not shy away from capturing the inherently unromantic quality of often thankless agricultural labor. A farm boy does not see the flower that has bloomed as a straightforward celebration of a fulfilling life in the embrace of nature. To him, the primary association with the cultivated plant is the hard work—the sweat and the drudgery of being harnessed in a hard routine. Recognizing the ambivalence registered in Vaughn's moonlit rendezvous with the flower might help in distinguishing competing visions of human interaction with their environment. On one end of the spectrum we have Beulah's jubilant flower garden that seems to affirm the cooperation and continuity of human and non-human worlds. No shadows of mind-deadening labor or monetary considerations enter the relational dynamics in the space of those gardens. For Vaughn, the matter is more complicated as the affirming intimacy between humans and their environment becomes compromised through the necessity of exhausting labor that constitutes the life on the farm.

In her incisive, if by now somewhat dated, analysis of *Losing Battles* Carol Manning has written that on a subtle level *Losing Battles* is a parody of so called conventional Southern values, including honor, family unity, and reverence of the past: "as represented in a poor, hill-country family and community, the traditional values and customs seem caricatures of the sacred traditions lauded by the Agrarians of *I'll Take My Stand* and assigned to the wealthy big landowners of many Southern novels" (143). It seems to me that Welty makes a dark caricature

of yet another ideal of Agrarians—that of the leisurely aspect of the agrarian life. [16] As we saw, for Vaughn a blooming plant communicates less of moonlight (itself reminiscent of the cliché of "moonlight and magnolias") and more of the clods of dirt that he, the human horse, has been harnessed to turn over. Vaughn's reaction directly contradicts the carefree life conjured up by Southern Agrarians. For him, life on the family farm portends hard labor and little else. If we remember the subplot of saving, not incidentally, "a pleasure car" that is Mrs. Moody's Buick, it becomes clear that Vaughn's charged reaction to the flower is but one specific example of the other characters' inarticulate striving for something other than the drudgery of farming. The sensitivity with which Welty paints these farmers who have desires for consumer goods and leisure, echo Ted Ownby's response to those who would long for ostensibly simpler, better days of rural life in Mississippi: "When were the good ol' days when work was more satisfying, when values were more lasting, and when personal relationships were more meaningful?" (*Consumer Dreams* 5).

Gloria: The Figure of Compromise?

The environmental reading of the novel that has been presented so far has been largely dichotomous. On the one hand, we have seen Beulah, the goddess of her abundant garden, the space of which shuns the intrusion of market economy and the use of natural resources for material gain. On the other, we have seen primarily Beecham-Renfro males, who have plundered natural resources, after having been seduced by a mirage of advancement in an economic system

[16] Kimberly K. Smith helpfully summarizes and distinguishes between the two major types of agrarian thought in American history: democratic agrarianism and aristocratic agrarianism. The first type of agrarian ideology holds that life and work on family farms fosters the growth of virtues necessary to participation in the civic life of the republic. The second type of agrarianism (which Smith traces from antebellum South through to the Southern Agrarians and their sympathizers) places high value on leisure and hence on the hierarchical structure of society that enables the existence of gentleman farmers who can then devote themselves to learning (15-31).

that is hostile towards small farmers like them. There are constant reminders throughout the novel that the life the family lives is poor and difficult, and that the only resource, however scant, available to them is the land, which becomes means for other material pursuits. Whether it's a shiny new roof or a shiny car in someone else's possession, an outside world of flashier material objects, if not always of greater economic opportunities, beckons and lures as well as frustrates. One of the Renfro uncles says that the family "[f]armers still and evermore will be" (628), but the statement rings hollow in view of the family's challenges. Something has to change, if the family is to persevere. Beulah's garden, if viewed alone, risks remaining but an irrelevant oasis in an economic system, which gives no incentive other that exploiting what natural resources may be left. The narrative allows no comforting retreat into the pastoral harmony found in Beulah's garden, as it makes clear that the outside economic factors cannot be cordoned off from the rural realm of the family. Whether they like it or not, the Beecham-Renfros are vehicles for consumer desires that are not easily tamed. The narrator makes it clear that contentment with one's lot and meekness may not be the most reliable of human characteristics, as seen in Vaughn's reaction to farm labor or the family's dubious investments in a tin roof or the Coca Cola truck. Can there be a middle ground between an intimate, less blatantly exploitative relationship to the natural environment and one that accommodates more readily the ambitions of participating in an increasingly alluring economic system of modern capitalism? Such a middle ground appears to be at least a possibility in the novel, presented in the shape of Jack's young wife Gloria. In Gloria, the modern farm wife, one can glean both an acute awareness of the economic pressures faced by the small farmers and a glimpse of how those pressures might be mitigated without turning a wholly predatory eye towards the environment.[17]

[17] This reading of Gloria runs counter to interpretations that view Jack as the hero who would rescue the family's fate. For example, see Kreyling, *Eudora Welty's Achievement*, pp. 147-151.

Unlike the rest of the family, who often seem to be proud of what a simple and basic life they lead, Gloria is thoroughly saturated with consciousness that the family finds itself at the near bottom of economic and social ladder. The Renfro family act on their desires for costly commodities (e.g. tin roof or a truck), but overall seem unaware of how that pulls them into the world from which they proudly see themselves apart. In particular, one of the most unsettling episodes in *Losing Battles*, the figurative rape of Gloria by Jack's female relatives, suggests that the family is not cleanly cut off from the broader economic considerations and that it is Gloria in particular that is conscious of this fact. The aunts are elated after hearing the news (false, as it turns out later) that Gloria might actually be her own husband Jack's cousin by being the illegitimate child of the deceased Beecham brother Sam Dale. Gloria declines the honor of being Beecham by saying she is quite happy as is. Then the aunts—all Beecham by marriage—gang up on Gloria to accept her Beecham roots. They do this by pushing her down to the ground and shoving chunks of watermelon down her throat. The episode, for all its surface humor, is rife with violence: "'Say Beecham!' they ordered her, close to her ear. They rolled her by the shoulders, pinned her flat, then buried her face under the flesh of the melon with its blood heat, its smell of evening flowers. Ribbons of juice crawled on her neck and circled it, as hands robbed of sex spread her jaws open" (706). The invasion of privacy and the infliction of bodily harm on Gloria become explicitly associated with sexual assault when the women shout the following battle cry: "Let's cram it down her little red lane! Let's make her say Beecham! *We* did!" (707; original emphasis). The suggestion of vagina by the phrase of "little red lane" is fortified by the aunts' allusion to their respective wedding days and the presumed consummation of the marriages that follow. Sexual act constitutes a key component in those women's acceptance of the name Beecham for themselves. The disturbing scene can hardly go unnoticed

and correspondingly has attracted much critical commentary. The general consensus holds that the goal of Gloria's assault is to neutralize the threat to the communal conformity that she embodies through her desire to stand aside and be different. Robert B. Heilman, for example, reads it as a baptism that fulfills the function of "leveling": "The outsider, the teacher, the individual who felt apart, must be cut down to community size. Community survival would demand that" (298). Ann Romines asserts that the women are reacting to Gloria's resistance to domesticity, which they presumably find to be a threatening commentary on their own lives (282).

While the purpose of the attack may yield valuable insights, as the critical commentary cited above shows, a different question interests me here. It has to do with the choice of the thing used to carry out the attack. Why watermelon? In part, Welty's choice can be explained by the physical qualities of the watermelon, especially its redness and hard-to-control messiness when cut open. For Elvie, who is seven and watching the scene from her elevated swing "with a deadly eye of a trapeze artist whose turn would come next" to fall to the devouring crowd, the connotations of the fruit clearly indicate her eventual puberty and menstruation (706). In Elvie's matter-of-fact account, pregnancy may be around the corner: "If she swallows them seeds, she'll only grow another Tom Watson melon inside her stomach" (707). Ominously, after Elvie's pronouncement, a "melony hand forced warm, seed-filled hunks into Gloria's sagging mouth" (707). The otherwise prim Gloria sags, perhaps in an authorial nod to the effects of a pregnancy on the female body. The scene might therefore reasonably be read as a violence of initiation into womanhood that entails potential motherhood.

In addition to symbolizing the dangers and potential burdens of female puberty, the watermelon is also a highly commodified plant in the novel. Carol Manning notes that the

watermelon's singular abundance in the novel contributes to its being particularly offensive to the newly initiated Beecham: "To Gloria, watermelon, which the otherwise barren land produces in bushel-basket size, is representative of Beechanism—common and low-class" (158). Manning gestures towards something crucial here. The plentitude of the watermelon is problematic. Its bounty, it seems, should be a cause for celebration, but instead provokes denigration. At one point, the preacher at the reunion disparages the overabundance of the melon: "Pigs is eating on the watermelons. . . . Too cheap to haul from the field this year! And yet! It'd be a mighty hard stunt to starve a bunch like us" (Welty, *Losing* 626). Watermelons, in other words, are available to members of the reunion, because no one else wants them. The reunion consumes natural scraps that have no economic value—in terms of the exchange value, they are worth nothing and therefore better left to rot than to incur costs of moving them. But as the preacher intones: "And yet!" And yet the fruit that has no value as a commodity provides at least some of the much needed nutrition, making it "a mighty hard stunt" to starve this poor family. The picture that Welty paints is a historically accurate depiction in a sense that the watermelon was known as the "Depression ham" throughout the hungry years in the U.S. South (Ficklen 11). The watermelon rape scene thus may be read as resistant Gloria's initiation into poverty. It also reveals to what degree the family do *not* live the subsistence farming life, if by subsistence farming we basically mean that the food is raised primarily for consumption with little to no thought given to trading and trade value.

Because of the association of watermelon with the economic value (or rather, lack of it), at least for Gloria the trans-corporeal dynamics of her relationship with the environment have been compromised. Awareness of the watermelon as an indication of an economic and social status for Gloria trumps the other salient fact about the fruit: that it can provide her body with

nourishment, and in that fundamental way it falls outside of the economic relations. One of the first loving disagreements between her and Jack arises from her refusal to let their baby Lady May eat watermelon. As Jack thumps a watermelon left behind in the field, Gloria warns him: "Don't crack Lady May one . . . I'm not anxious for her to start on common ordinary food." This is news to Jack: "What're you trying to tell me, Possum?" (527). His astonishment is great enough that he physically turns to look at her. The narrator lets Jack's question go unanswered as the authorial gaze turns towards the mule waiting at the pasture gate. Jack's inquiry thus remains suspended in air for the reader to answer as she will. Considering that it is hot and parched and that the watermelon can alleviate thirst, some extra-corporeal rationale prevents Gloria from consuming what is offered. One basic way in which the humans experience and interact with their environment has, for Gloria, become inseparable from socio-economic relations.

Gloria's socio-economic awareness is apparent at every turn. At one point, while discussing the departure of the children from the family home, the gentle Aunt Beck observes that country life "[t]akes a lot of doing without" (629). There is a meekness in Aunt Beck's statement, which Gloria, however, does not share. Gloria is different in her material aspirations from the family women. For example, when Beulah's three daughters line up to wait for the reunion guests, the girls are clothed in a uniform of thrift: "Their dresses, made alike from the same print of flour sack, covered with Robin Hood and his Merry Men shooting with bow and arrow, were in three orders of brightness—the oldest girl wore the newest dress" (434). What's good for Beulah's daughters isn't good enough for Gloria's. The toddler Lady May dons flour sack for everyday wear, but is outfitted by her mother in something rather different for the reunion: her "first real dress was not made of Robin Hood flour sacks, it was not handed down

from Elvie. It was solid blue and had pockets---starched till the pocket flaps stood out like little handles to lift her by" (524). The startled Aunt Birdies is provoked into crying, "And where do you suppose Gloria ever got her such a dress?" signaling how unusual Lady May's appearance is and prompting the discovery that Gloria had made it from her own dress (524). The pockets that Gloria had sewn in seemingly prepare Lady May for possession of material goods by which the baby might be lifted up not only physically, but figuratively as well.

In her book *A New Heartland: Women, Modernity, and the Agrarian Ideal in America*, Janet Galligani Casey explores the complicated role that the rural women played in the national imagination of an increasingly urban country during the first few decades of the 20th century. According to Casey, far from being irrelevant to the modern U.S., rurality served as a repository of an important national legacy of Jeffersonian agrarian ideals, which somehow needed to be comfortingly accommodated in the disruptive, shifting landscape of modernity. A farmer represented a "synthesis . . . of working-class experiences and middle-class social sensibilities—an ideal, if unrealistic, model for a country in social and economic flux" (Casey 37). With regard to the farm wife, one uneasy aspect of such synthesis could be observed in the patterns of consumption. Although self-sufficiency was lauded, so was the acquisition of commodities that served as markers of middle class life. Gloria's means may be limited, but she nevertheless aspires to goods beyond those available to her class, as seen in the case of Lady May's dress. Furthermore, when Jack finally makes his way back from jail, Gloria gifts him with a shirt—"a store shirt, never worn"—that she had acquired by trading walnuts at Curly's store (508). These small gestures show that Gloria is of a different (one might say, newer) mold than the other

wives of the family. Not only resourceful and resilient, she is also acutely aware of the cultural significance of her and her family's possessions. She is a modern farm wife.[18]

At every turn, Gloria voices her preference for change over continuity, for the new over the old. In a marked contrast to the family's (and Jack's) quest for continuity, Gloria does not possess inherent pride in keeping on, without changes. Her highest priority, in fact, is to get Jack away from his family. She shares with Jack her dream to "build us a little two-room house, where nobody in the world could find us" (874). She is unapologetically a brand new kind of woman, apparent in her statement: "I'm here to be nobody but myself, Mrs. Gloria Renfro, and have nothing to do with the old dead past" (802). Certainly, though, Gloria, like everyone, has a past that shaped her. In fact, her previous agricultural experiences give hope for a more harmonious relationship between humans and the land—a relationship that is also able to absorb the pressures of market economy without resorting to environmental abuse.

Curiously, the only time we encounter Gloria in an agricultural setting is under the mentorship of the teacher Julia Mortimer. Gloria tells the family that in order to be able to board Gloria during her high school years and keep the underfunded Banner school going, Ms. Mortimer had become resourceful by acquiring some cows and milking them before and after school (677). But that was not all. Ms. Mortimer, in Gloria's words, "had fruit bushes and flower plants for sale, and good seed—vegetables. She had a big yard and plenty of fertilizer . . . She'd sell through the mail. She wouldn't exchange. But she'd work just as hard trying to give some of her abundance this way . . . She put her lists in the Market Bulletin. She had letters and parcel post travelling all over Mississippi" (678). Ms. Mortimer's garden, as depicted by Gloria,

[18] Also see Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi*, pp.98-109, and Melissa Walker, pp.33-68, 98-141, on the commodity consumption of farm women and the changing philosophy of home extension agents with regard to teaching the rural women as well as their different messages to the white and African American clients.

is markedly different from Beulah's. It has been planted and tended with a concrete understanding of the market value of each plant, whether it be a bush, a flower or a vegetable. The teacher thus participated in the market economy, but without going to a single cash crop and sacrificing the variety of her garden and presumably without sacrificing her and Gloria's ability to furnish food from that same garden. By involving the postal system, Julia Mortimer's garden has ceased to be a standalone entity by participating in broader networks of industry and economy. As one aunt says: "I don't imagine she ever made her postman very happy . . . Carrying on at that rate with that many poor souls makes work for others" (678). While the aunt means her remark as criticism, this model of gardening presents a kind of garden that is enmeshed in larger economic system. The use of the fertilizer is significant too. Although Ms. Mortimer keeps cows, Gloria's wording suggests that the teacher used something more sophisticated and likely more commercial. The garden, therefore, benefits from certain technological advances and does not resist them indiscriminately. In this way, it forms a middle ground between a pastoral garden that is removed from any economic consideration and the agricultural model, in which the chase for profits annihilates any notion of self-subsistence from the garden.

Gloria further remembers when the older teacher sent out many free little rooted peach trees because she "wanted to make everybody grow as satisfying an orchard as hers" (678). The intimacy of Gloria's experience with the seedlings illustrates that the garden, even as economically minded as Ms. Mortimer's, still furnishes that trans-corporeal closeness between the gardener and the non-human nature. Gloria reminisces: "I hoed. And dug and divided her flowers and saved the seed, measured it in the old spotted spoon. Took the cuttings, wrapped the fresh-dug plants in fresh violet leaves and bread paper [a]nd packed them moist in soda boxes

and match boxes to mail away" (679). Gloria's account reveals the firsthand knowledge of how to treat tender saplings and the shrewd use of available resources (i.e. reusing of boxes). Furthermore, it is a communal endeavor. Although farming, by default, is often a solitary enterprise due to the spread out pattern of farmers, the teacher attempts to diffuse her knowledge and connect disparate members of the community. It is hardly an accident that it is the female recipients in particular that indirectly respond to this communal outreach. Whereas the uncles are dismissive ("I plain didn't plant mine," one says [678]), the aunts recognize the gesture as one of significance. One misunderstands it, but still responds: "I . . . supposed it was from somebody running for office. . . . And voted accordingly" (678). Another, presumably talking about the variety teacher sent out, volunteers the following information: "Good ole blood-red Indian peach will ever remain my favorite. . . I could eat one of mine right now" (678). Each in their own way, then, the aunts acknowledge the gesture of community building on Julia Mortimer's part, and in a relatively rare moment of unity, are of the same opinion as Gloria, who chides the uncles for their skepticism of the teacher's peaches: "It would have eaten good and sweet . . . She wasn't fooling" (678).

The last glimpse we catch of Julia Mortimer's garden presents a heartbreaking picture of abandonment. The teacher's merciless nurse, Aunt Lexie, describes the odyssey Miss Mortimer undertook daily, when she kept searching for some company, somewhere, of the people she taught, Gloria in particular:

> She was looking all at one time in the vegetable patch and in the shed where her car gathered dust and behind the peach trees and under the grape vine . . . There was I, chasing her over her flower yard, those tangly old beds, stumbling over 'em like graves where the bulbs were so many of 'em crowding up from down below—and on to the

> front, packed tight as a trunk with rosebushes, scratch you like the briar patch—and down into those old white flags spearing up through the vines all the way down her bank as far as the road, thick as teeth. (715-716)

The pairing of the "vegetable patch" and the car shed illustrates that in Miss Julia Mortimer's world, modernity and closeness to the land are not mutually exclusive entities. Although in the experience of the Beecham-Renfro males, the cars seem to require environmental sacrifices, the seamlessness with which Miss Mortimer moves between these two spheres suggests some potential for harmony.

Miss Mortimer's painful longing for Gloria underscores to what degree Gloria, despite (or perhaps because of?) marrying Jack and dropping out of the teaching profession, is the rightful heir to the old teacher's legacy. Not only Aunt Lexie "fell down on Virgil" when she tried to obtain her teaching credentials, but she fundamentally misreads the garden too (713). For her, the old garden is a place of decay and menace—a place of graves, aggressive thorns and teeth-like spears. What Lexie fails to see is that the garden is a place of overflowing vitality. When she stumbles over the beds, it's because they are overflowing with bulbs—themselves a potent symbol of concentrated life. And if the rosebushes scratch her, that's because there are so many—"packed tight as at trunk" (716). The wistful reminiscences of Gloria about Miss Julia Mortimer's gardening days suggest that Gloria would not misread the garden so, but instead would have the knowledge—both of the soil and the scientific advances—to restore it to its former glory.

Gloria and Jack are about as mismatched in their goals as two lovers can be at the closing of the novel. Jack reiterates the common theme of the novel by saying: "We got to eat! That's the surest thing I know" (878). Gloria, however, has something more advanced in mind: "And

some day . . . some day yet, we'll move to ourselves. And there will be just you and me and Lady May" (878). Jack expresses his wish for more children, but Gloria stays mute on the subject. The end of the novel leaves it suspended as to which vision of the couple's future will win out. One has a nagging suspicion, however, that Gloria's dream has at least as good a chance of coming true as Jack's. She is educated and clear-eyed in her desires as well as obstacles to fulfilling them. It may well be that whatever farming Jack does will be on Gloria's terms—and that she can be relied upon to bring Miss Mortimer's experience of a modern garden to bear on their way of living close to the land.

Towards the "Environmentalism of the Poor"?

A scene towards the end of the novel powerfully reveals the challenges that lay ahead for the protection of the land, regardless of how Gloria and Jack aim to farm At one point, as the young couple makes its way to Miss Mortimer's resting site, they spot the shopkeeper Curly and the local politician, the family's own in-law, Uncle Homer:

> As though magnetized to the tallest monument in the cemetery, both Curly Stovall and Uncle Homer Champion stood at Dearman's grave, both glaring straight in front of them, both with their candidate's hats laid over their hearts. A little taller than they were, Dearman's shaft rose behind them, on its top the moss-ringed finger that pointed straight up from its hand in a chiseled cuff above the words "At Rest." (871)

The closest representatives the novel has for market capitalism (Curly Stovall) and the political establishment (Homer Champion) are shown as being firmly aligned with the most prominent environmental exploiter Dearman. Although they have taken their hats off in homage to the deceased Julia Mortimer, their positioning implies that they are paying their respects to Dearman instead. The Beecham-Renfros make fun of Curly mercilessly and continuously throughout the

novel, but their jesting cannot hide the fact that they are increasingly and hopelessly in his debt, as his possession of Jack's truck, horse and the family's life stock demonstrates. The dynamic of Curly and the family confirms the observation of environmental historian Brian Donahue: "The market economy has consistently encouraged and rewarded farming that is exploitative of land and people, and has steadily driven farmers off the land. As it has operated in America, the market has systematically undercut all other agrarian values: care for the land, and healthy family and community life" (Donahue 39). Homer Champion's presence signals to what degree the political apparatus has upheld the interests of the likes of Curly and Dearman over and above the interests of a small farmer.

Dearman's phallic grave marker, which rises above the two men, symbolically asserts the deceased lumber lord's dominance over them and underscores the masculine camaraderie that marries this economic-political alliance with environmental degradation. Since Dearman profited by razing an ancient forest, his environmental exploits reenact the original settling of the Americas. The novel's gardens, however, remind us that alongside aggressive subduing of the continent, women's experience of the frontier offered something rather different. Annette Kolodny argues that the idea of a new continent as a virginal paradise denoted "radically different places when used by men and by women. For men, the term (with all its concomitant psychosexual associations) echoed an invitation for mastery and possession of the vast new continent. For women, by contrast, it denoted domesticity" (54). Women's strategy of taming the unfamiliar landscape relied on creating "spaces that were truly and unequivocally theirs: the home and the small cultivated garden of their own making" (6). The gardens tended by the

women of *Losing Battles* provide a continuity of sorts to this humbler approach to the natural environment—attempting to claim a patch of it instead of ravaging huge swaths of land.[19]

In a way, Beulah's lush country garden floats as a mirage of one of the foundational ideas of the United States: its land as a garden in which human art and nature combine harmoniously. Marx notes that "[a] garden is a miniature middle landscape. It is a place as attractive for what it excludes as for what it contains." Most notably what is excluded from such an idyllic middle landscape is history. Thus, at the founding of the republic it is still possible to fantasize that "if all America somehow could be transformed into a garden, a permanently rural republic, then its citizens might escape from the terrible sequence of power struggles, wars, and cruel repressions suffered by Europe" (*The Machine* 138). If Welty had ultimately retreated into Beulah's garden as an oasis of peace and harmony against the ravaged background, she could be accused of purveying a sentimental pastoral in Marx's terms. However, as seen earlier, Welty thoroughly undermines any idea of a possible retreat by showing that the whole Renfro farm is permeated by forces of market capitalism from the outside and the power of human ambition and consciousness of social status from the inside.[20]

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[19] I reference Kolodny's argument on frontier gardens for the purpose of imagining alternate possibilities of relating to the land, yet at the same time remain conscious of her argument's flaws. Later scholarship laid bare the uneasy recognition that may only be gleaned in Kolodny's book—namely, that the women's domestic pursuits aided and complemented the men's more obviously aggressive conquest behaviors. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Mary Louise Pratt calls this mode of representation, "whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" as the "anti-conquest" (7). In other words, the appearance of vulnerability and innocence does not erase the role that frontier women played in the violent conquest. Brigitte Georgi-Findlay's *The Frontiers of Women's Writing: Women's Narratives and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion* (1996) clearly shows how domesticity was complicit in the injustice and violence of expansion.

[20] In contrast, consider that one of old pastoral shepherd's "greatest charms always had been his lack of the usual economic appetites" (Marx, *The Machine* 127). Some might argue that Jack's return home in the final scene, while singing "Bringing in the Sheaves," indicates his lack of ambition (879). However, his actions throughout the novel, such as the truck episode, shows that he is more ineffective than unmotivated in his economic pursuits.

Because of the thorough saturation of these elements, it may be useful to consider *Losing Battles* as a "postcolonial pastoral," as coined by Rob Nixon. For Nixon, "postcolonial pastoral" encompasses "writing that refracts an idealized nature through memories of environmental and cultural degradation in the colonies" (245). While I do not wish to enter the heated debates as to the appropriateness of describing the U.S. South as a postcolonial space,[21] I want to suggest that Nixon's formulation helpfully illuminates some key factors about the Beecham-Renfro environment and the family's place in it. In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon contends that the discourse of environmentalism struggles with representations of "slow violence," i.e. environmental violence that is not clearly demarcated in time and space (in a way that an oil spill is, for instance), but instead unfolds over decades and even centuries. Too often, Nixon argues, the interests of capital, as represented increasingly by transnational corporations, move out of the affected areas leaving the often poor inhabitants (who reside primarily in the Global South) to live with the long term damage to the environment. It is the task of writer-activists, as Nixon calls them, to bear witness to this slow violence and make it visible. What the reunion members deal with daily is the ravaged landscape—lumber extracted, cash gone elsewhere—in which they struggle to make a living.

The notion of living more consciously closer to the natural world is often proposed as a remedy for countering the effects of life that ignores the indebtedness of human (or indeed any other animate) existence to the very basic fact of living on Earth. As we have seen, however, Eudora Welty's fiction problematizes the assumption that a more intimate connection with the natural world, often predicated upon attachment to what William Faulkner in a different context

[21] For one, insisting on the *post* in postcolonial contributes to the problematic biracial white/black portrayal of the U.S. South, a topic touched by, among others, Melanie Benson Taylor in *Reconstructing the Native South:* American Indian Literature and the Lost Cause (2012). For another, one cannot be too careful to acknowledge the differences between various postcolonial spaces, as addressed in Chapter 1.

called "a postage stamp size corner of the world," can neutralize the pressure to advance socioeconomically at the expense of the environment. For instance, Nixon differentiates between what he calls vernacular and official landscapes:

> A vernacular landscape is shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations, maps replete with names and routes, maps alive to significant ecological and surface geological features. A vernacular landscape, although neither monolithic nor undisputed, is integral to the socioenvironmental dynamics of community rather than being wholly externalized—treated as out there, as a separate nonrenewable resource. By contrast, an official landscape . . . is typically oblivious to such earlier maps; instead, it writes the land in a bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction-driven manner that is often pitilessly instrumental. (17)

Jack Renfro is emblematic of a person who sees his surroundings as vernacular landscapes in Nixon's sense. He remembers trading memories of his home place with a fellow prison inmate: "I reckon for every spot there is, there's somebody in the pen homesick for it. Old trusty told me every inch of Grinders, the same as I told him Banner" (548). Not only does he hold affection for every inch of his locale, he feels intimately bound to the elements that support other life forms. Gently, he reproaches Gloria for not visiting him and bringing the smallest bit of home to him: "You could've brought me a bottle of Banner water. And a pinch of home dirt—I could have carried that around in my shoe" (541). Water and dirt: that is what Jack feels separated from when not in Banner. It is worth pausing a moment to reflect on how unusual this expression of homesickness would be for many contemporary Americans. Yet as we have seen, feeling this affection does not shield Jack from desiring for such socioeconomic markers as cars and being willing to sacrifice his natural surroundings in order to accommodate them. It is as if his internal

vernacular landscape gets overpowered by the official landscape that views the natural elements merely as instruments in order to obtain material goods.

The experience of an impoverished farmer family in Welty's text suggests that a deep attachment to one's natural environment is not sufficient to protect that environment or one's livelihood in it. Counterintuitive as it may sound, the most compelling reason for the Beecham-Renfros to be more environmentally conscious is one of economy. Jumping on the environmental exploitation train (both literally and figuratively) has not exactly resulted in a financial bonanza for the family. While the men's economic ambitions jeopardized the family's subsistence farming, the women's less profit-oriented activities provided whatever modest bounty the family actually enjoys. It might ultimately take the shrewdness of Gloria to realize that fending off the outsider exploiters and being mindful of the land use themselves might be the best way to persevere and perhaps even prosper. The novel's implicit alignment of environmental protection and the interests of the economically disadvantaged people anticipates by a couple of decades the convergence of the fields of postcolonialism and ecocriticism. In his paradigm-shifting 1989 essay "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique" Ramachandran Guha faulted American environmentalism's preoccupation with wilderness preservation for being a harmful distraction from environmental problems (such as pollution, erosion, and consequent food and water shortages) that the poor people around the world face (75). He argued that the world's poor, who bear the brunt of environmental degradation, are more likely to come up with environmental solutions that also address key problems of equality and economic as well as political imbalance in the human society. They would, in effect, be able to provide an alternative to the pernicious effects of global capitalism: "If colonial and capitalist expansion has both accentuated social inequalities and signaled a

precipitous fall in ecological wisdom, an alternate ecology must rest on an alternate society and polity as well" (81). Among the reasons why the poor environmentalists would be better at providing solutions, Guha listed their more modest demands on the natural world and their access to a "reservoir of cooperative social institutions and local ecological knowledge" (75). Consistent with the environmental gender dynamics observed in *Losing Battles*, Guha later elaborated that it is the women who frequently lead the environmentalism of the poor and speculated that their involvement "stems from [the women's] closer day-to-day involvement in the use of nature, and additionally from their greater awareness and respect for community cohesion and solidarity" (*Environmentalism* 108).

Much excellent work has been done recently in illuminating how postcolonial concerns are not exclusively anthropocentric but inextricably tangled with environmental ones.[22] Part of this expanded purview is a nuanced perspective on different possibilities offered by the (often forced) proximity of the poor and nature. As Nixon observes, in "peasant communities" environmental tendencies are "often directly entangled with ongoing, quotidian struggles for survival" (254). Yet despite this frustrating complexity of at times competing interests, Nixon insists that thinking of environmentalism merely as a luxury that can interest only the world's privileged cannot be a defensible position or one that reflects reality (253). Beulah's garden in *Losing Battles* encapsulates the difficulties of thinking through the environmentalism of the poor. It would be easy, as some early reviewers did, to dismiss Beulah and her kin as representative of the worst kind of environmental exploitation. But here we are also faced with a bewildering question: why would a person downtrodden by agricultural labor spend precious energy to

[22] Lawrence Buell's *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (2001) is an important example of how the more anthropocentric concerns of postcolonial studies influenced traditional American environmental thought.

cultivate a patch of land for no apparent material gain? It would be possible but ultimately disingenuous to see the garden merely as an extension of the predatory attitudes toward natural resources. It is as if Welty summons the garden, this ideologically loaded middle landscape, to signal to her readers that Beulah does not view the natural environment as an incidental tool for human purposes. The garden is Beulah's quest to navigate those "ongoing, quotidian struggles for survival" without giving up on the idea of harmony between her lot and that of the natural surroundings.

Now, we must take care not to rhapsodize over the virtues inherent in Beulah's or anyone's close contact with the soil. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin caution, we might run the risk of oversimplifying complex realities for our own goals. They note that "both developmentalist and post-developmental discourses are inclined to fetishise local communities: in the first case as the beneficiaries of western development initiatives and, in the second, as primary agents or secondary partners in the establishment and subsequent monitoring of sustainable cultural/environmental projects and concerns" (68). Whatever tenuous environmental awareness Beulah's garden might indicate, Welty does not give her reader a moment's reprieve from reminders that poverty and social as well as economic inequalities are powerful agents for environmental abuse. Therefore it is hardly an accident that Julia Mortimer and Gloria, the novel's educated and comparatively worldly women, propagate the garden that holds the most promise of successfully marrying environmental and economic concerns. This garden, as we have seen, comes the closest to resolving this continuing dilemma (and what it is turning out to be the defining tragedy of our time) of aligning human and environmental goals. Far from providing a lasting solution or at least an imaginative escape from the world ravaged by human greed, Beulah's and Julia's gardens only provide a glimmer of hope. Yet it is a glimmer

that we cannot afford to ignore. Instead, we ought to reflect on what difficult, yet necessary, economic and social changes we have to make in order not to extinguish it altogether.

Afterword

As the introduction to this dissertation suggested, gardens and plantations have been entwined in the history and literature of the U.S. South in ways that cloak plantations in romance and make it difficult, I argued, to direct critical attention to the literary representations of actual, ordinary gardens. To release the discursive hold of the plantation, the chapters of this dissertation purposefully avoided literary gardens found on the plantation soil. However, attempting to maintain a rigid line between two categories of plantation vs. non-plantation gardens can lead to unfortunate stereotypes: the subversive, overlooked non-plantation gardens that can potentially generate alternative histories, and the contrived gardens of plantations, thoroughly subsumed by (and providing a façade for) oppressive ideologies. That such division of gardens cannot hold has already been suggested by my brief discussion of the gardens of the enslaved in the first chapter. Likewise, such division should hardly be artificially imposed on southern literature of the postbellum period and beyond. Thus an obvious question that needs to broaden the scope of inquiry into gardens of southern literature is the following: how have the writers imagined and portrayed gardens associated with the space of the plantation?

A more profound broadening of the project involves acknowledging the diversity of gardens in the southern U.S. literature, which reflects the cultural heterogeneity of the region itself. In 1988, Thadious Davis in her influential essay, "Expanding the Limits: The Intersection of Race and Region," surveyed how black southerners were consciously claiming their regional southern identity in ways that challenged the hegemonic discursive practices through which "whites in the South became simply 'Southerners' without a racial designation, but blacks in the South became simply 'blacks' without a regional designation" (4). Over the last decade or so, scholars have also worked to expose a different sort of erasure created by "the hegemonic,

biracial [white/black] plot of the region" (M.B. Taylor, "In Deep" 70), which contributed to overlooking the Native American presence in the history and literature of the U.S. South.[1] While the preceding chapters opened up the concept of "southern garden" to include literary gardens of lower social classes and, to some degree, different cultural tradition through focus on the Creoles, it is vital to recognize more substantially the heterogeneous cultural genealogies of southern literary gardens. I turn to two novels—*A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) by Ernest J. Gaines and *The Cherokee Rose: A Novel of Gardens and Ghosts* (2015) by Tiya Miles—to sketch out some directions in which an exploration of literary gardens, which grow on plantations, and engage with Native and African American gardening traditions, might take us.

The narrative of *A Gathering of Old Men* unfolds during one afternoon in the 1970s in the quarters of what is now a defunct Marshall plantation. With most of the plantation's sugarcane fields under long-term lease to a white Cajun family, the Boutans, the quarters are inhabited mostly by the elderly descendants of slaves, who used to work on the plantation before the Civil War and later became sharecroppers until the arrival of the tractor made their labor obsolete. Charlie, a fifty-year-old man, works for the Boutans cutting the cane with the tractor. The day of the narrative, no longer able to bear the insults, Charlie shoots Beau Boutan, one of the family's adult sons, in the yard of Mathu, an old, tough, and fearless African American resident of the quarters. For most of the novel it is presumed that Mathu is the murderer. A young white woman, Candy, a part-owner of the plantation, cannot bear for anything to happen to Mathu because he helped raise her and organizes over a dozen of old black men to come to Mathu's yard with

[1] See, for example, *The People Who Stayed: Southeastern Indian Writing After Removal* (edited by Geary Hobson, Janet McAdams, and Kathryn Walkiewicz, U of Oklahoma P, 2010), Melanie Benson Taylor's *Reconstructing the Native South: American Indian Literature and the Lost Cause* (U of Georgia P, 2012). Malinda Maynor Lowery makes a cogent case that the controversy surrounding Confederate statues across the South is far from being merely white and black ("We Are the Original Southerners," *New York Times*, 22 May 2018, https://mobile.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/opinion/confederate-monuments-indians-original-southerners.html).

shotguns and number five shells. She and the men meet the sheriff, all of them claiming they committed the murder. They also voice their determination to wait for the posse of Fix Boutan, Beau's father, an infamous night rider who inflicted suffering upon the families of the men gathered here. Before Charlie returns and dies in the shootout with the vigilantes who show up (though Fix does not), the old men communicate the many reasons they have for slaying Beau, and white people in general.

Gaines invokes the stereotypical garden by the big house (not so big in the novel to begin with) at the beginning of the narrative only to cast it aside for the dynamic and significant gardens in the quarters. The first encounter with Candy's rather horrifying aunt Bea takes place in the garden: she was "sitting in her rocking chair by the door, gazing across the flower garden toward the trees in the outer pasture. Beyond the trees was the road that led you down into the quarters." A faint breeze from the river fans the "odor from the sweet-olive bush which stood in the far right corner of the garden" (21). The vista before her discloses the domineering manner in which she perceives the world. The visual and olfactory pleasures of her immediate surroundings mask only partially the labor of others that have historically supported her existence. Simultaneously concealed and comfortingly present, the quarters are seen through the screen of flowers, which contribute to the green pastoral landscape. At first Bea creates an impression of a benign, if vacuous, older lady, until she asserts her rights to rule her African American kitchen maid. One of her imperious demands is to be served a drink of pea picker. The drink's name invokes a derogatory label for migrant laborers during the Depression as well as prosaic sites of labor (gardens or fields where peas grow), which are conspicuously absent from Bea's surroundings. Consuming the drink with a richly suggestive name, after she receives it from her black servant's hand, all in the idyllic view of thinly veiled (former slave) quarters,

indicates that past and present abuse of laborers cannot be neatly separated as it coheres to maintaining an oasis of privilege about a white planter's descendant.

The static garden before Bea's eyes contrasts forcefully with the living gardens of the quarters, which form an inseparable part of their gardeners' lives. With some surprise, Candy's reporter boyfriend from New Orleans observes that the cabin gardens are empty of their gardeners on his way to Mathu's cabin. Mathu's garden forms a concrete reference for the characters' physical location and actions in the novel. Although Mathu's garden is not described in detail, it is a living presence, which orients both the characters and the reader. Whereas the garden by the big house erases the gardeners (it is certainly not maintained by Aunt Bea), the gardens in the quarters are primarily gleaned through the lives of those who labor in them. The tight link between the garden and its cultivator is particularly keenly felt once the garden/gardener relationship is gone. Upon seeing sheriff Mapes's gaze slide over the vacant lots of the quarters, Johnny Paul inquires what the policeman sees. Mapes replies: "I see nothing but weeds, Johnny Paul" (88). Johnny Paul then explains two ways of not seeing: "Yes, sir, what you see is the weeds, but you don't see what we don't see" (89). At length, it appears that what Mapes does not see is the history of the place, tied up in gardens and those who took care of them. Johnny Paul prods the memories of others: "When they wasn't no weeds—remember? . . . Everybody had flowers in the yard. But nobody had four-o'clocks like Jack Touissant. Every day at four o'clock, they opened up just as pretty. Remember?" (90). Johnny Paul's questions produce communal memory, as the other people start recalling commonly shared experiences of spending time on porches, playing, and otherwise consuming the sights and smells of a particular person's garden as an entire community. Johnny Paul cites these memories as part of the reason he supposedly killed Beau: "That's why I kilt him, that's why . . . To protect them little flowers"

(90). He repeats the same motive again, when he includes the dead as part of the community, which he aims to protect: "I did it for every last one back there under them trees [in the cemetery]. And I did it for every four-o'clock, every rosebush, every palm-of-Christian ever growed on this place" (92). Johnny Paul's reasoning for the supposed murder stands out in its uniqueness among the others offered to Mapes. Whereas many other stories involve family members who have been killed, maimed, or driven insane due to white violence, Johnny Paul articulates the need to protect—violently, if needed—those landscapes that hold memories of community ties and the strength they produced. With the former sites of field labor now being worked by an indifferent tractor, it is the erstwhile garden places that hold the key to preserving the memory of those who worked the fields and felt strengthened in their gardens. The concept Johnny Paul introduces—that it is possible to not see in a way that recovers that which is no longer there, that which is not seen—holds powerful implications for thinking about lacunae which may be present in cultural memory. Patricia Yeager wrote that "place is never simply 'place' in southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape" (13). Ernest Gaines implies that when not seen the right way, southern places, perhaps especially southern gardens, can also be sources of enriching communal experiences that empower across the generations. They can communicate about "centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love," as Alice Walker wrote about the cultural heritage of black southern authors (21). The challenge, Gains seems to suggest, is how to keep alive this paradoxical "not seeing," especially when material landscapes undergo radical transformation.

The Cherokee Rose by Tiya Miles is preoccupied with this very question of how to grasp the meanings of a place, both past and present, and how to do justice to those meanings in the

world that insists valuing every place as real estate. The novel narrates how the paths of three women converge on the site of a former plantation in contemporary Georgia, which was owned earlier by James Hold, a slaveholder of Cherokee and European descent. Cheyenne, a rich African American woman from Atlanta, purchases the Hold House in hopes of uncovering her Cherokee roots, which her family lore holds contributed to her stunning good looks. Ruth is the Minnesota-born daughter of a black woman from Georgia, who died at the hands of Ruth's abusive white father (who then successfully covered it up). And Jennifer "Jinx" is a Muskogee Creek Indian from Oklahoma, who has come in search of information about Mary Ann Battis, a girl of mixed Creek and African heritage, who had mysteriously remained in Georgia even as the Creeks were forcibly relocated from Georgia to Oklahoma. The key that largely unlocks the mysteries of the Hold plantation is the diary Ruth finds, with the help of Mary Ann Battis's ghost, by one Anna Rosina Gamble. Anna Rosina was the wife of the Head Missionary to the Cherokee Indians by the Moravian Church and an ardent botanist. She maintained an ambitious garden on the plantation and sent many a plant from the Cherokee country to her fellow botanists in Pennsylvania and Salem, North Carolina. With the help of Anna Rosina's diary and the sleuthing by the three women, it appears that the handsome Adam Battis, college educated national park employee, is the descendant of the son by James Hold and a slave girl Patience. Cheyenne has no Cherokee blood after all, as it turns out, but is instead a descendant of Anna Rosina and an emancipated black preacher. Cheyenne and Adam become romantically involved. Jinx and Ruth become a couple as well, after having faced their respective tribal and personal histories.

The material garden the three women encounter on the Hold Place serves as a vital link between the present and the past. The discursive garden of Anna Rosina's diary only confirms the key facts about the garden that Ruth had already grasped by experiencing it:

> Roses are growing everywhere, though they're hard to spot at first . . . It looks like someone planted them ages ago. Others were added over time. And see those wild Cherokee roses? The ones still in bloom? Give them an inch and they'll take a mile. They love to grow in places people have left behind, kind of like memories. This is a rose garden, hidden among the weeds and wildflowers, and it's been here for years. (107)

Later, when they discover the diary, they find out that the garden has been initially planted to honor Patience's grave, an act in which all of the women on the plantation participated (206-207). Significantly, it is Ruth, who has the least direct connection to the Hold House, who unlocks its mysteries. This is because, arguably, she is the one who interprets and feels the garden most meaningfully. As if buoyed by the memories of her mother's cultivation of the river cane that grows in Georgia, among other plants, she grasps the desperate but also powerful feelings a garden can reflect and express. It is also Ruth who assigns the proper meaning to the decorative motif of the Cherokee rose in the attic of the Hold House, where, it was reported, people were tortured, including Patience. After someone murders James Hold, his Cherokee wife Peggy proceeded to honor the site of Patience's suffering by decorating the ceiling with Cherokee roses, each of which has a pure gold center, thus confirming the rumors of treasure Hold was supposed to possess. Ruth notices this detail because she does not overlook the flowers. By taking seriously, at every turn, the garden and its echoes, Ruth can uncover "the memories of the Cherokee Rose built into the bones of the house, planted in the soil of the garden, safeguarding generations to come" (235). Contrary to the neglected garden of *The*

Hamlet, which we encountered in the introduction, there is a genuine treasure, unearthed through respectful engagement with the land. Even the reason behind the rumor—the report of there being "a trench of pure gold buried by the mound building Indians who dwelled in this valley in ancient times" (76)—is different from merely glorifying the Old South. It acknowledges (with deeply problematic motivation, of course) the substantial indigenous cultures which the European settlers encountered.

The plantation gardens (there are rose, vegetable, and herb gardens) of Miles's novel defy and subvert our expectations at every turn. There is a treasure where none should be found. The stereotypical Indian has not merged with nature thus vacating space for an exclusively European grandeur, but presides over the plantation and its gardens as a planter. The clichéd rose garden does not honor the memory of a slaveholder, but that of a murdered slave instead. The account of the botanical garden does not silence or take credit for Native and African sources of botanical knowledge, because an old African female slave and a Cherokee man are portrayed as the chief dispensers of such knowledge. Acknowledgment of th Native American (in this case, Cherokee and Creek) presence in the region, it seems, has made everything unfamiliar. It appears that understanding the history of a place depends not only on the right sort of "not seeing," as we saw in Gaines, but also on not misinterpreting, according to pre-held biases, what we *do* see.

It is perhaps somewhat easier to identify which prejudices and biases cloud our judgment when it comes to the past than the present. The last pages of *The Cherokee Rose* put to the test the reader's prejudices with some very consumerist images of the renovated Hold plantation. A year later, when Jinx and Ruth return from Oklahoma (where Ruth had planted yet another garden that bears the legacy of her mother, Mary Ann Battis, and others), they are greeted with scenes out of *Southern Living* magazine: "They stepped onto the wide veranda filled with white

wicker rockers, potted, pink geraniums, and pale, delicate ferns. A bronze National Register of Historic Places plaque had been affixed to the brick beside the antique doorbell" (243). The unassuming cabin, where Anna Rosina had lived and where the main kitchen of the Hold House was, has become "a shabby-chic country cabin fit for a magazine spread. The walls were a soothing eggshell white from milk paint common to the structure's original era. The front room was filled with overstuffed white linen furnishings, Ralph Lauren floral throw pillows, and a sisal rug. A painted iron chandelier hung from the cabin's rafters" (245). Given what has transpired on the place, it is a bit disorienting to see a kind of whitewashed "southern charm" subsuming the place. Miles, though, implicitly seems to be asking what alternative fate we want for the Hold Place, and perhaps the U.S. South.

Prior to setting out for Georgia, Ruth quickly pens a 600-word "feel-good piece" about how immigrants from Latin America incorporate their heritage into the carpets they are making in present-day Georgia. She titles the article: "Aztec Influence Colors Georgia Carpet Kingdom" (36). On the surface, it is a kind of observation that acknowledges the transnational nature of the southern region, and adds a flair of refreshing foreignness to the conservative connotations of "southern." Ruth herself, however, knows that the "real story was labor exploitation in the heart of the industrial Sun Belt" (36), but it is the kind of story that will not sell. Though more conservative in nature, *The Southern Living* sheen of the Hold House does not appear to be any more distortive than the story Ruth pens. Miles leaves us in a bit of a dilemma how to ethically engage with southern places. The garden of the Hold House has remained largely the same, but the stories it tells still risk being overshadowed—this time not by buried histories, but by a clean glare of a comforting consumer package. Still, our best option, it seems, is to continue digging

and imagining, finding productive ways to not see and second guess what we do see. With careful reflection, literary gardens can show the way how to do both.

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