REFOLIATING THE ANTHROPOCENE: PLANT BEING AND INDIGENOUS ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGES IN 20TH AND 21ST CENTURY BLACK WOMEN'S LITERATURE

by

Victoria Bradley Aquilone

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

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Victoria Bradley Aquilone

Approved: ____

John Ernest, Ph.D.
Chair of the English Department

Approved: ____

John A. Pelesko, Ph.D.
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

Approved: ____

Louis F. Rossi, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education and
Dean of the Graduate College

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed: ____

Lowell Duckert, Ph.D.
Professor in charge of dissertation

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed: ____

Ben Stanley, Ph.D.
Member of dissertation committee

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed: ____

Asa Spaulding, Ph.D.
Member of dissertation committee

I certify that I have read this dissertation and that in my opinion it meets the academic and professional standard required by the University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Signed: ____

Chara Armon, Ph.D.
Member of dissertation committee

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ABSTRACT

The Anthropocene is a time in which both human and nonhuman Earth beings experience the alarming disappearance of their built refuges. Plant beings are crucial to this constructed refuge, but plants are often considered raw, inert matter rather than integral members of larger ecosystems, so their loss is considered minimal from the perspective of the capitalist-patriarchy. But such a diminishing of plant life, also known as defoliation (Laist 10) should be quite concerning, not only because of human dependence on plants, but also considering the enchanting agency and intelligence of phyto-beings—agency that both Indigenous ecological knowledges and emergent Western science acknowledge. Given that textual plants have often been read and analyzed as symbols for the human experience (Laist 13), emergent science in plant capacity challenges traditional readings of literary phyto-characters, inviting us to refoliate the cultural imagination with plant-focused ecocritical readings (Laist 10). This project continues the trajectory of the Vegetal Turn with the theoretical groundwork of critical plant studies and material ecocriticism to consider how plants, as material beings with agency, are not merely literary symbols or motifs, but are storied matter that catalyze narratives in collaboration with the human. This project anticipates that restoring plants to their rightful place as agents in both our real and imaginary worlds will aid in refoliation of not only our reading practices, but also our planet.

Additionally, this project combines developing Western scientific knowledge of plant capacity with Indigenous ecological knowledges of plants to evaluate the role of plants as storied matter in 20th and 21st century Black women's literature. In so doing, this project also explores the subtle yet profound convergences of African American studies and Indigenous American studies, arguing that refoliation depends on an ecofeminist view of nature that departs from Western ways of being and knowing. As an alternative to Western ways of being and knowing nature, considering this set of primary texts—Black women's literature spanning 1937 to 2011—with Indigenous ecological knowledges offers us a set of BIPOC perspectives *of* the Anthropocene *in* the Anthropocene. Ultimately, this project suggests that literary plants from marginalized perspectives have something to teach readers in the Anthropocene about interdependent communal survival of both humans and nature.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: REFOLIATING GROUNDWORK: LEARNING FROM PLANTS IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

1.1 Anthropocene, Plantationocene, Defoliationocene: The Role of Plants in Our Current Ecological Epoch

In the popular Netflix sci-fi drama, *The OA* (2016), the main character—who is the OA, aka the "original angel," played by the show's producer, Brit Marling—experiences a telepathic connection with not only other human characters, but nonhuman characters, such as a giant octopus and the roots of a large tree.[1] In season two, when the OA falls through the ground and is greeted by the collective roots of several trees, the trees communicate that they've been calling to her for some time

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[1] Throughout this project, I will use the term "nonhuman" to refer to members of the collective of Earth-beings that are not humans, especially when more specificity is not contextually warranted e.g. when referring specifically to plants, animals, etc. The term nonhuman is limited, and some argue that it has a negating factor by defining these Earth-beings by their lack of humanity. Part of the problem with this term is that it evolved out of the tension of casting humans and nature as separate; as deep ecologists seek to consider humans as part of nature, simply calling nonhumans "nature" did not make sense, so the adjective "nonhuman" adequately modified the term to become "nonhuman nature." Instead of nonhuman, environmental humanists have offered terms such as more-than-human, other-than-human, and beyond-the-human to refer to this same collective of Earth-beings. Aside from their unwieldiness in prose, these phrases similarly define other Earth-beings in relation to the human. It would be less of a problem to define these terms in relation to their lack of humanity if humans could successfully ascribe value to Earth-beings that are not human, which this project ultimately hopes to remedy. I choose to use the term nonhuman as the current predominant term used by many of the environmental humanists cited here, and because it most simply captures and describes those Earth-beings that are a part of nature but are not human.

now, and they express frustration at the OA's lack of answer. *Thrillist* writer Emma Stefansky paints the picture: "As soon as [The OA] arrives, glittering messages expand outward like ripples amongst the roots of the trees. There are even shots of little fungi bubbling in excitement. The trees called her with the wind, they say—the very same wind OA heard when she was shot outside the school in the Season 1 finale," evidencing that they have been calling to her for a time. They give her a warning: "The one who seeks to own you is going to make a powerful discovery" (Stefansky). When the OA replies in such a way as to indicate she herself can handle this problem, the trees object: "No tree survives alone in the forest. When one tree falls ill, we all send food. For if one tree dies, the canopy is broken. Then all suffer the weather and pestilence that flood in" (Stefansky). Stefansky concludes that the trees are insinuating that "The family OA built for herself in Season 1 […] are vital to her survival." Even after she departs their presence, the OA continues to rely on clear signals from the trees throughout the remainder of the episode to find a missing young girl.

The trees' claim that they've been calling to the OA for a time now invites viewers to stop and think back to the earlier episodes to listen for the quiet whispers of the trees. And viewers will find such whispers sprinkled like pollen throughout the narrative. Stefansky lists the ways that plants have been subtly communicating their calling and agency in the narrative to both the OA and the viewers: in most of season one, which takes place inside a basement prison, the prisoners' cells are terrariums full of greenery that keep them alive despite their captivity. When Buck's family is about

to vacate their home, the only things left in the house are multiple houseplants still occupying the kitchen cabinets, counters, and fridge. When trying to solve the puzzle in the mystery house, the floor tiles that OA and Karim rearrange come together to form the image of concentric tree rings. As the villainous Hap gets closer to understanding the characters' ability to cheat death, in his Eureka moment he exclaims, "there is a seed inside every brain," and Hap watches as a sprout grows from a submerged human's ear. Thus, these seeds are not metaphorical but literal, and viewers later realize that the seeds are "building materials for an interdimensional map" (Stefansky). Finally, Hap "describes the multiverse as 'an actual garden of forking paths within us all,' made up of every decision and possibility in our own lives, each of which leads to a new possible reality" (Stefansky). Viewers of the show looking back on earlier episodes will quickly realize how plants story some of the most pivotal moments and revelations of the narrative. In other words, the story of the OA could not exist without the collaborative agency of the trees and plants that build the narrative.

But *The OA* stands apart from other contemporary and popular Western stories. It is rare that narratives grant such agency to nonhuman participants, especially plants, who are far down on the Aristotelian "Chain of Being" (Laist 12). Moreover, it's worth noting that *The OA* is a work of speculative fiction, suggesting that Westerners can only imagine plant agency in fantastical terms rather than realistic ones. In fact, Netflix cancelled the show after the second season, although it had had a five-season plan. Some may wonder if poor viewership played a role in the show's demise.

Journalist Phil Archibold points out that “Netflix doesn't release its viewing figures, so it's impossible to say whether the amount of people streaming *The OA* impacted the decision to axe it.” That being said, those who were fans of the show were big fans: the show received an 84% on Rotten Tomatoes (“*The OA*”), and a petition to save the show on Netflix garnered upward of 100,000 signatures on Change.org (and the website indicates that 150,000 signatures is a massive campaign success) (“Save *The OA*”). Even with positive viewership, Archibold explains that viewership is not the only factor in Netflix’s decision-making regarding continuing shows: “What we do know is that the streamer makes these decisions based on a simple ratio: viewership versus cost.” Despite the viewership, the high cost of production may have prevented Netflix from renewing the contract with *The OA*. In other words, plant stories may not be worth the cost of telling them.

The irony of an unwillingness to render value to plant agency is that humans could not live without plants. Indeed, while industrialized societies may easily forget it, humans are dependent on plants to both materially and discursively constitute our lives. Regarding plant material, consider human consumption patterns: food of plant origin, wooden furniture from trees, and fabrics from cotton, just to name a few. Discursively, plants are present in human language as well: words and phrases such as root, sprout, stem, glean, and graft populate everyday speech. Despite plants’ important material and semiotic role in human society, contemporary Westerners tend to regard plants as lowly creatures compared to humans and nonhuman animals. Randy Laist, literary scholar and critical plant studies theorist, suggests that in current

Western thought, plants are the most abject life form, routinely dismissed as inanimate, considered only to be raw, inert materials, consistently objectified by what ecofeminists would call the industrial capitalist-patriarchy (13).[2]

Western thought did not arrive at this view of plants overnight. The long arc of Western history and thought spanning back to the ancient Romans reveals the ways in which Westerners moved away from the Indigenous European views of nature as agentic—what Carolyn Merchant calls "organic cosmology"—to the Scientific Revolution's mechanistic view of nature as raw, inert material, which persists to this day (xx). In other words, Westerners have not always held to the contemporary view of plant agency (or lack thereof). For example, Nathan Elawa describes the pre-Christian Irish view of nature: "In the Irish lore tradition […] we find that humans are not the only focus in the created order; trees and rivers are also alive and are co-participants with humans in an enchanted universe, everyone caught up in a sort of

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[2] Zillah R. Eisenstein uses the term "capitalist-patriarchy" to "emphasize the mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring" (5). What does this have to do with ecology? As Greta Gaard says, "ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" ("Living Interconnections" 1). Thus, the capitalist-patriarchy is the entity that enacts the simultaneous oppression of women and nature. As an example, it is the capitalist-patriarchy that bolsters the idea that profits from concentrated animal feeding operations (capitalist) are more important than protecting women from experiencing the endocrine-disrupting effects of the pharmaceutical interventions that are required to maintain such operations (patriarchy). As Greta Gaard points out, "toxic pesticides, chemical wastes, acid rain, radiation, and other pollutants take their first toll on women, women's reproductive systems, and children" but also harm nonhuman nature ("Living Interconnections" 5).

cosmic dance," and Elawa contends that the European Enlightenment (as opposed to the mere Christianization of Ireland) is largely to blame for the shift away from this holistic worldview (135). Ultimately, through the major movements of Western thought, such as the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution, a purely mechanistic view of nature emerged, and Western thought gradually lost sight of the agency of nonhuman nature, including plants. Merchant contends that this worldview shift from organic cosmology to mechanistic cosmology "sanctioned the domination of both nature and women"—domination of nature that includes, but is not limited to, the continued destruction of plant bodies in myriad endeavors from deforestation to monocropping to herbicide use (xxi). Despite humans' clear and age-old dependence on plant bodies, Western thought moved away from acknowledging plant agency due to a number of historical and intellectual movements.

Scholars have attempted to periodize and name exactly when Western thought abandoned acknowledgement of nonhuman agency: terms like Plantationocene acknowledge earlier historical moments of human attempts to strictly control nonhuman nature dating to the 17th century (Haraway et al), while Capitalocene highlights the ways in which economic markets affect nonhuman nature (Malm). Alternatively, a term like "Anthropocene" emphasizes the increasing human agency and power behind ecological destruction as occurring in the 20th century. While the term Anthropocene is now used even in pop culture, scholars debate when the Anthropocene began and what characterizes it, such as in *The Shock of the Anthropocene,* or the seminal conference proceedings between Donna Haraway et al

entitled "Anthropologists are Talking about the Anthropocene" in which they coin the term Plantationocene as covering greater historical ground than the term Anthropocene. One way scientists define the Anthropocene as beginning in the 20th century is thanks to plants: scientific evidence has shown that documented global changes in stratigraphic deposits, notably evidenced in the annual rings of pine trees dated in 1964, suggest that the deposits were a direct result of what geologists call "The Great Acceleration" (Maslin and Lewis 176). According to Maslin and Lewis, The Great Acceleration began in the postwar era characterized by "major expansion in human population, large changes in natural processes, and the development of novel materials from minerals to plastics to persistent organic pollutants and inorganic compounds," as well as "the global fallout from nuclear bomb tests" (176). Scientists purport that the very fact that such activities register in the tree rings evidences their geological impact in an unprecedented way. While the Anthropocene is not the beginning of such a treatment of plants, the Anthropocene bears the fruit of centuries of rejection of the agency of the natural world.

Indeed, the industrial practices that characterize the 20th and 21st centuries often include some form of violent defoliation, though some are more obvious than others. For instance, deforestation and clearcutting—the practices of cutting down entire forests—though practiced historically continues as a clear example of the violence of removing of plants from the Earth. Something like the spraying of herbicides is an obvious defoliation effort—herbicide literally means "plant killer." And then there are pipelines: companies often destroy habitats of native plants and forests in order to run

pipelines from point A to point B. Consider climate change as well: while it's caused by greenhouse gas emissions (from the oil in those pipelines!), in its downstream effects warming climates will make it impossible for certain plants to grow and thrive—the "greenhouse" metaphor for the atmosphere seems ironic when plants will be victims too as plants usually thrive in "greenhouse" climates. It may be difficult to see how other endeavors of the Anthropocene harm plants: we might think chemical fertilizers help plants thrive, but they in fact harm soil fertility and thus plant health in the long term. While an Anthropocentric agricultural practice such as monocropping may seem plant-positive, it in fact prioritizes certain species of plants over others and relies on toxic pesticides, reducing biodiversity of plants to the detriment of ecosystems (that include other plants).

These defoliation activities also characterize the Plantationocene, a concept that undergirds many chapters of this project. In a roundtable conference discussion, Donna Haraway, Noboru Ishikawa, Scott F. Gilbert, Kenneth Olwig, Anna L. Tsing and Nils Bubandt coined the term "Plantationocene" as an alternative to "Anthropocene" that addressed some critiques of the term Anthropocene and better described the phenomenon in question. One critique addressed by the new term is that the Anthropocene's commonly-held inception in the mid-eighteenth century seemed too late in terms of the historical reality it is meant to describe (Haraway et al 555). Moreover, the term Anthropocene focuses on one agent, humans (as denoted by "anthro") where Plantationocene highlights networks of human actors, human-created institutions and systems, economic agents, and nonhuman nature, as well as accounts

for the abstraction of these agents (particularly the marginalized agricultural workers and nonhuman nature) in the plantation assembling process (Haraway et al 556). According to Haraway et al, plantations continue into the 21st century in the form of concentrated animal feeding operations and other agricultural systems, and thus the Plantationocene is not historically bound to the time of the Atlantic Slave Trade as many assume (556). Yet, even this example of the Plantationocene's tentacular reach into the present risks ignoring the plants involved in favor of highlighting the plight of animals.

Even so, the term Plantationocene simultaneously acknowledges the human victims of plantation operations while also highlighting the very real and exploited plant-beings for which plantations are named. In short, plants don't like to be monocropped as plantations arrange them; they are more vulnerable to pests and disease without the biodiversity of other plants, and soil richness and fertility degrades in monocropping conditions, rendering the plants less nourished each subsequent season. In order to make a profit, plantations (well, their marginalized workers) must closely manage plant bodies, often preventing the otherwise organic ways plants would organize themselves among each other in pursuit of optimal flourishing. In other words, as Noboru Ishikawa remarks, "plantations are just the slavery of plants" (Haraway et al 556). Similarly, the term Plantationocene also highlights the role of marginalized people of color in the larger system of the plantation, bringing together the exploitation of both humans and nonhuman nature in the plantation system. For example, some of the defining characteristics of plantations are the relocation of

humans as laborers (Chapter 1). As Haraway says, "labor is brought in from elsewhere, even if, in principle, there is local labor available. Because it is more efficient in the logic of the plantation system to exterminate the local labor" (557). While the plantation enslaves the plants and human laborers materially embedded in the plantation system—commodifying both plant and human bodies (James 164)—it also marginalizes the plants and humans it displaces in its enactment. Importantly, some of the humans made most vulnerable to this system have been Black and Indigenous peoples (in the form of both exploited labor and forced displacement), inviting consideration of the intersection of these groups and their experience (despite typically being disciplinarily separated) within the field of Afro-Indigenous studies, especially in the context of our current ecological epoch. Ultimately, the Plantationocene is marked by the downstream ecological effects of the abstraction and migration of humans and plants for profit. As a term, Plantationocene generatively encompasses the species-based construal of the Anthropocene as well as the economic motivations characterized by the term Capitalocene. All of these endeavors that characterize the Anthropocene's and Plantationocene's human-nature relationships harm plants as well as humans, revealing the interconnectedness of humans and nature.

Invoking these unfolding conversations, this dissertation argues that the most prominent aspect of the devolution of human relationships to the natural environment throughout Western history is defoliation. Defoliation is a term originally used by Laist in the introduction to *Plants and Literature*: he uses it to briefly describe how the

"cultural imagination" is rarely populated by plants, especially agentic ones or plant "main characters" (10). The cancelling of *The OA*, a show that foregrounded plant agency, may be an example of this continued defoliation of the cultural imagination. Laist acknowledges that "Vegetation plays a crucial role in the formative myths of all cultures, from Yggdrassil, the World Tree of Norse lore, to Asvattha, the cosmic tree of the Upanishads, to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden," suggesting that plants have faded from the cultural milieu rather than never having been there at all, hence the word "defoliation" (10). And *why* is the cultural imagination defoliated? The defoliation of the cultural imagination mirrors the literal, material defoliation of the planet, in which members of the plant kingdom have been forcefully removed from the face of the planet en masse for centuries—if not millennia in the form of agriculture—as explained by terms such as Plantationocene and Anthropocene.

Perhaps "Defoliationocene" would best capture the centrality of plants' demise to the current ecological epoch, but I do not wish to join the chorus of voices issuing new and better names for our time, because—regardless of what we call it—the exploitation and destruction of plant bodies is a common thread. Instead, my project both voices and enacts ecofeminist modalities of healing the many aspects of our current engagement with plants encapsulated in each "cene" offered. [3] Thus, in this

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3 Ecofeminist praxis is overtly concerned with healing human-Earth relationships as opposed to merely identifying problems. For example, Judith Plant's work *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* claims that, in the face of capitalist-patriarchal domination, all people have to "to take our

project, I will use the term “Anthropocene” to generally refer to the acceleration of harmful industrial activities in the 20th and 21st centuries (but this is not to suggest that the human activities that characterize the Anthropocene were not occurring in some fashion beforehand) and the term “Plantationocene” to highlight the particular factors the term represents: plantation economics characterized by imported, exploited, or enslaved labor and the simultaneous exploitation of plants in agriculture and other industries. The term Plantationocene best highlights that this exploitation of plants goes beyond the plants themselves to the humans that tend and depend on them; plants and humans alike are victims of the Plantationocene.

As these historical movements unfold and continue to bear their fruit, Western thought is now experiencing a generative revival of plant agency—as seen in critical plant studies—and that very agency will aid in the restoration and recovery of a more balanced relationship between humans and plants. As Robin Wall Kimmerer says, “Plants are the first restoration ecologists” (332), reminding us that plants have the power to heal and restore what has been lost or destroyed. This project invites us to

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own authority, be responsible for ourselves, our communities” (3). And this authority-taking must be grounded in interdependence with fellow humans. Plant gives the example this positive authority-taking: “It is becoming increasingly apparent to me that people all over the world are organizing at the local level against logging, toxic wastes, mining, nuclear power plants—any corporate invasion that threatens the well-being of its citizenry. And the methods that they are using to make decisions and to take action are, more often than not, a reflection of the consensus of the group” (3). In line with Plant’s imperatives and observations, ecofeminist Wangari Maathai started the Green Belt Movement when she saw rural Kenyan women struggling to provide for their families in the context of soil erosion and lack of firewood (Kanogo 71). While the Green Belt Movement is known for planting trees and promoting conservation, “it served as a vehicle for seeking social justice, advocating democracy, and fighting corruption” (Kanogo 72). Wangari Maathai’s work illustrates how ecofeminist principles can be healing and solutions-oriented, and it rightfully earned her the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.

consider what we might learn from plants in an effort to respond to—and perhaps even heal—the changing environmental conditions around us.

As I introduce my methodology, I want to situate myself and my identity within these conversations about environment, gender, and race. As a White woman, I position myself as a learner in this project, a student of the wisdom and experiences of the Black women, Indigenous people, and even the plants who contribute to this project. My goal is to be an ally and do justice to these marginalized communities while pursuing my larger project of refoliating the Anthropocene. In no way do I intend to speak for groups of which I am not a part; I intend to learn from and convey their wisdom in an effort to be a better ally in the project of pursing just and equitable relationships—with each other and with nonhuman nature.

1.2 How to Learn from Plants: Where Critical Plant Studies Meets Material Ecocriticism

An ecofeminist ethic of care invites humans to recalibrate our expectations of plants as nonhumans with whom we share this Earth. Rather than seeing plants as raw, inert materials to be consumed, humans can read plants—both real and imaginary—in a way that honors their agency, intelligence, and abilities. What's more, we can even learn from plants as a way to respond to the changing conditions of the Anthropocene so as to justly care for all creatures who inhabit this Earth. Thus, a fundamental principle of my literary analysis of textual plants is that plants are agents that have

something to teach us, which depends on two major fields of scholarship: critical plant studies and material ecocriticism.

In order to uncover the agency of plants, we should consider plants within the scholarly field known as critical plant studies, as well as the Vegetal Turn which has occurred in the environmental humanities. The Vegetal Turn hinges on critical plant studies' findings of plant sentience. According to Greta Gaard, critical plant studies evolved out of the disciplinary history of critical animal studies, which sought to acknowledge the sentience and subsequent rights of animals (27). The unfolding revelation of plant sentience invites similar lines of questioning regarding the rights of plants, but this conversation is often much more uncomfortable for humans. Animal sentience is sometimes more natural for humans to understand—we are, after all, mammals. Critical animal studies has productively uncovered the extent of animal agency and subjectivity, but unfortunately the field often reserves sentience and subsequent political protection for animals alone, denying the same "personhood" to plants, despite abounding evidence of plants' own type of sentience or "vegetal mind" (Gagliano 217), which actually warrants their designation as "other-than-human persons," according to Matthew Hall (10). This denial is undergirded by the West's embedded heuristic of animacy, otherwise known as the Aristotelian "Chain of Being," in which humans stand at the top of a hierarchical pyramid of animacy, with animals somewhere in the middle, and plants near the bottom—but still above rocks! (Laist 12).

But around the 2010s, the Vegetal Turn started unfolding: scholars began discussing plants in a very similar way they were discussing animals in the 90s and early 2000s—as beings that "communicate, move, decide, transform, and transgress in ways that are sometimes uncomfortably 'like' animals (including humans)" (Gaard 27). Thinkers such as Monica Gagliano, Matthew Hall, Michael Pollan, Catriona Sandilands, Randy Laist, and Michael Marder effectively blur the stark line of sentience, animacy, and political consideration that hovers with trepidation between plants and animals. These initiators of critical plant studies build the field on both scientific and intuitive knowledge of plant ability. Greta Gaard suggests that Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird's 1973 "new age" work *The Secret Life of Plants* catalyzed the field (27). While now considered pseudo-science, *The Secret Life of Plants* revolutionarily revived (for Westerners) a wide extent of plant agency, suggesting that plants could detect danger, remain connected with their caregivers across a city, and read people's minds. Ultimately Tompkins and Bird contended that plants' deep "cellular consciousness" perhaps even perceived the world better than human consciousness (42). While the evidence for plant sentience was scant in 1973, the intuition of Tompkins and Bird began to emerge as data from the hard sciences through the work of scientists such as Gagliano, Stefano Mancuso, Anthony Trewavas, and Suzanne Simard, research that has informed the philosophical pursuits of Hall and Marder.

While the work of those biologists and philosophers risks staying within academic circles, Michael Pollan's 2013 *New Yorker* essay "The Intelligent Plant"

made foundational waves in the public perception of plant ability using emergent scientific data. Gaard relays that Pollan's essay (and other works of his) "reports the findings of biologists—molecular, cell, plant—confirming capacities that new materialists would call agency and that suggest paradigm-shifting parallels to animal capacities as well" (28). Similarly, Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* offers a more public audience a deep dive into tree consciousness, communication, and epistemology. Such research on trees abounds more and more each day with documentaries such as *Intelligent Trees* drawing on the work of Wohlleben and tree communication expert Suzanne Simard. Even pop culture is catching on as seen in the opening example of *The OA*.

Despite the growing common knowledge of plant sentience, most average Westerners consume plants wholly unaware of the enchanting perception and sentience with which they are imbued, likely due to the aforementioned movements in Western intellectual history referenced above. Laist reminds us that, while plants are the building blocks of all human life and experience, these historical movements have relegated plants to the lowest ethical consideration (9). While much of what Westerners now consume is mineral-based and manifested as plastic, we still can consider the role of plants in the everyday human experience: wooden furniture made from trees, fabrics and textiles made from linen and cotton, cosmetics made of seed oils, fragrances and medicines from plant essences, and—of course—food. But acknowledging plant sentience would challenge the human activities that characterize the Anthropocene and Plantationocene discussed above. Thus, Laist posits that

modern Westerners "repress" the significance of plant life in their own experience…or what Laist calls the "defoliation of the cultural imagination" (10), which is why my project endeavors to refoliate our consciousness and perhaps, therefore, our culture.

"Refoliation" suggests that Western humans previously experienced a more robust understanding of plant animacy. In her essay "Vegetate," Catriona Sandilands explicates the etymology of the word "vegetate," revealing to readers that "The word originates, however, in the Latin vegēre, 'to be active,' and applies […] to a range of persons, plants, and other beings, including the active first-person human singular: vegeō, I am lively, I am active, I excite, I arouse" (17). In other words, at one point in the history of the English language, plants were understood to be lively, active members of the Earth. Yet the contemporary West has lost sight of this activity, evidenced by the more popular connotation of vegetate to sit on the couch all weekend or to have one's existence rely on a machine that helps carry out the basic functions of circulation, respiration, digestion (Sandilands 16). Plant being, in our current discourse, is relegated to lower forms of animacy, when it previously served to represent among the highest forms of activity. The reluctance to allow plants their animacy is ironic in light of the etymology of the word vegetate, but our current understanding of that same word reveals our need for refoliation.

While the Scientific Revolution and Age of Enlightenment historically played a large role in rejecting plant agency in Western thought, it is contemporary Western scientists and philosophers who are actively revealing plant agency through their work in critical plant studies. Forest ecologists such as Simard make groundbreaking claims,

such as "plants are increasingly recognized as having agency that leads to decisions and actions, characteristics of intelligence usually only ascribed to humans or perhaps animals" ("Mycorrhizal Networks" 193). Similarly, Gagliano summarizes the evolving understanding of plant cognition: "These recent findings that experimentally demonstrated associative learning in plants not only qualify them as proper subjects of cognitive research, but in so doing, they officially open the door for the empirical exploration of cognitive processes like learning, decision-making and awareness in plants" ("Inside the Vegetal" 215). Philosophers such as Michael Marder use the science of plant biology to completely upend the Western understanding of plant agency and consciousness. Marder's groundbreaking 2013 work *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* traces Western philosophy's attitude(s) toward plant consciousness as far back as Aristotle, interrogating the Aristotelian "Chain of Being" (Laist 12). This hierarchical way of thinking paved the way for the complete evasion of animacy for all but the human. Marder's work seeks to flatten the hierarchy and restore plants to their place as subjects and agents on this animate Earth. Similar to Marder, Matthew Hall's work *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* calls into question the West's inability to ascribe personhood to plants. Hall traces plant subjectivity as viewed by a number of traditions such as the Greco/Roman view, Christianity, Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist texts, Indigenous animisms, and pagan traditions, while also detailing current work in plant neuro-biology, a.k.a. "plant intelligence." Hall attempts to recover plant personhood from those traditions that preserve it.

Hall's work importantly foregrounds the fact that, though Western science is in the process of recovering plant agency, Indigenous cultures/traditions have never forgotten the animacy of plants and welcome them as persons. In other words, Indigenous cultures center around a capacious concept of personhood that welcomes plants and other beings of the natural world. Among the Indigenous writers propagating plant animacy are Robin Wall Kimmerer, Winona LaDuke, and Luther Standing Bear. Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* is profoundly interested in plant agency and wisdom, as Kimmerer is a botanist, but her work serves to question the boundary between plants and animals as well. Indigenous animist traditions both inspire and serve my project by offering ways to take plants on their own terms and encounter them as subjects with desires, agency, and power who make crucial contributions to life on Earth. This project is indebted to Indigenous ecological knowledges (IEKs) of plants. Ultimately, the field of critical plant studies is recently beginning to recover the agency of plants from a Western epistemological perspective, while Indigenous epistemologies have been teaching people how to learn from plants for millennia.

We have seen that the Vegetal Turn's increased awareness of plant agency results from the work of critical plant studies theorists and aligns with IEKs of plants. In order to consider how plant agency affects our reading of literary texts specifically, we need to explore the field of material ecocriticism; when critical plant studies intersects with material ecocriticism in the Vegetal Turn, we can read literary plants as material agents with the capacity for storytelling. Put another way, critical plant

studies allows us to see real plants as agentic, and material ecocriticism highlights plants—both real and imagined—as partaking in the compositional process as storytellers or co-authors of narratives. As Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann put it, “the world’s material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be ‘read’ and interpreted as forming narratives, stories” (1). In other words, material ecocriticism engages both the stuff of the world and the words, stories, and language in, with, of, and around that stuff, or, what Donna Haraway calls the “material-semiotic” (*Staying* 88). Indeed, Iovino and Oppermann suggest, in concert with Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman that material-semiotic methods “open an interpretive horizon for the complex interrelations between discourse and matter” (2).

In fact, the material-semiotic agency of narrative plants is so significant that they co-create stories with other actants. Iovino and Opperman call such co-creating matter “storied matter” (1). In other words, stories are not merely discursive but are necessarily made of matter, e.g. the way Milkman’s backyard maple stories his mistreatment of his sister and nature in chapter 2. While we can (perhaps) easily acknowledge the ways in which imagined, literary matter is “storied,” Iovino and Oppermann suggest that, “the stories of matter are everywhere” because “All matter, in other words, is a ‘storied matter’” (1). What Iovino and Opperman call “storied matter” is similar to Gagliano et al’s conception of “vegetal textuality” in that “a textual work with plant-based themes […] always comes into existence in dynamic relation to actual, living flora” (“Introduction” xvi). Material ecocritics, then, seek to recover the agency of the nonhuman by “examin[ing] matter both *in* texts and *as a*

text, trying to shed light on the way bodily natures and discursive forces *express* their interaction whether in representations or in their concrete reality" (Iovino and Oppermann 2, emphasis in original). In this way, the material-ecocritical approach acknowledges that literary nonhumans are both made of matter and of words, resulting in a grounded analytical method that refuses to reduce literary nonhumans to either metaphor (with no embodied agency) or prop (with no linguistic power). Plants, then, are in texts as well as forming texts, serving not just as symbols or landscapes, but co-creators of the texts themselves. Material ecocriticism is a methodology that branches out from the trunk of the Vegetal Turn to acknowledge the material agency of plants in the imagined world of literary texts, as well as how plants contribute to the formation of literary worlds.

Key to reading plants as narrative-catalysts is the fundamental, material-semiotic interdependence between humans and nonhumans as well as the subjective agency and animacy of the nonhuman actors beyond their ability to exist as objects. This is in contrast to reading methods that reduce nonhuman natural beings to simply "objects"—these methods only serve to reify the story that plants are raw, inert material rather than intelligent beings. In worlds where natural beings are mere objects, they may be conceived of as props for the human actors. If not props for human actors, "plants become, at most, the correlatives of human emotions, eliciting feelings of pleasure and displeasure, triggering memories, and reflecting human states of mind, including inner turmoil or spiritual meditation," as Gagliano explains ("Introduction" x). But material ecocriticism denies such a reading of nonhuman

nature in light of its agency, according to Alaimo and Hekman, "Nature can no longer be imagined as a pliable resource for industrial production or social construction. Nature is agentic—it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world," and critical plant studies reveals this truth (4-5). The key difference between viewing nonhumans as agentic objects versus agentic subjects is the role they play in constructing the narrative itself, i.e. as storied matter. While the material-semiotic space of human experience relies profoundly on the agency, animacy, consciousness, and other characteristics of nonhuman actors, it also, importantly, encompasses *human* perception of nonhumans. This approach does not seek to remove agency or subjectivity from humans, but is simply a "nonanthropocentric approach" that allows us to "analyze language and reality, human and nonhuman life, mind and matter, without falling into dichotomous patterns of thinking" (Iovino and Oppermann 2). Evading these dichotomous patterns of thinking is a goal of the broader field of new materialism in general, according to Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (4). Methodologically, then, this means I am not merely interested in examining nonhuman agency, but also the *human experience* of nonhuman agency. Literature is born of the agentic bodily, sensory, and perceptive enmeshments of human and nonhuman actors; these relationships give birth to phenomenological experiences, which give birth to stories.

Since both real and imagined plants are in fact agentic, and in ways that are often unique to their particular species, material ecocritical readings of such plants should account for their specific epistemologies and material circumstances. In other

words, botanists and biologists do not treat plants as a monolithic group, so literary scholars should not either. For example, though we draw general principles on how forests think and communicate, that doesn't mean that all forests do this the same way, nor that all trees are the same. While there are legitimate similarities between beech and oak trees, that doesn't mean that oaks and beeches are identical, or have all the same goals and desires or ways of being (Wohlleben 69). Moreover, as we move beyond plants that are in similar categories, such as from deciduous trees to coniferous trees, we see multiple epistemologies based on those different trees' ways of being, and, in the case of deciduous versus conifer, ways of seeding. How we read trees may also be dependent on whether or not those trees are forested or alone, young or old, or other circumstantial realities that affect their material experience.

Consequently, my material ecocritical method emphasizes this species-uniqueness, uniqueness related to material being and material history. Instead of seeing plants as mere symbols or metaphors—where any textual tree can stand in for any other because they are simply representations of some human idea or experience—I treat them as material agents within the text, agents with their particular ways of being and knowing, and my analyses exemplify this treatment. Take *Song of Solomon*, for example: in chapter 2, I attend to the long-suffering maple not as a tree that represents Milkman's selfishness, but as a maple—and all that that may entail—who is materially affected by Milkman. The fledgling backyard maple is not just a victim of Milkman's acute mistreatment, but of the globalized and material effects of climate change driven by industrialization. The tulips in Milkman's backyard are not

simply flowers that represent femininity, beauty, kindness or whatever other stock "flower" literary symbol; on the contrary, *Song of Solomon's* tulips exhibit toxic masculinity and have a material history embedded in colonialism and capitalist-patriarchy that is pertinent to an ecofeminist reading of Milkman's reverie. The sweetgum tree is not just a landscape element that represents wildness but is a motherly member of an interactive forest community that exerts its agency on Milkman. Such a method of understanding the role of plants in the novel refoliates our literary scholarship by offering as many ways of reading a text as there are plants who have "written themselves into" that text (Sandilands 157).

Additionally, my reading method seeks to de-center the human and refoliate the field of literary analyses by offering readings that include analyses of what I've termed "phytomorphism." According to Britannica, phytomorphism is a term originally used in religious studies to describe iconography in which gods are depicted as or with plants ("Phytomorphic motifs"). Beyond this narrow meaning, phytomorphism is not a currently well-known or commonly-used word in literary studies, aside from one monograph: the term phytomorphism is used by Leslie Wylie in her monograph *The Poetics of Plants in Spanish American Literature* to describe literary instances of humans turning into, i.e. "metamorphizing" into plants *and* vice versa. For Wylie, this literary phenomenon, especially in Spanish-American culture, reveals the fluidity of the nature of life in that "anthropomorphism and phytomorphism are often tied to indigenous animist beliefs, which consider plants not to be separate from humans but to be part of a broad continuum of life" (136). While I

take Wylie's point that phytomorphism may rely on a sense of inter-species fluidity and Indigenous ecological knowledges of nature, when I use the term phytomorphism, I mean it as more of a foil to the literary terms "anthropomorphism" or "personification." Both of these terms describe figurative language in which human traits are granted to nonhumans. Personification refers to a deliberately descriptive device, whereas anthropomorphism refers to granting human qualities to nonhumans, with the implication that such ascriptions are mistaken or false. In my view, anthropomorphism has a negative connotation due to the perception that it denigrates the human by ascribing human characteristics to nonhumans. Additionally, anthropomorphizing as a practice has been rejected in the field of Western science; anthropomorphizing nonhumans in the lab not only denigrates the human, but also risks erasing the unique characteristics of the nonhuman. In using the term phytomorphism, I both further and challenge the way anthropomorphism has been used: indeed, I intend to blur the perceived boundary between human and nonhuman by uncovering the ways literary characters are cast in the image of the plant; in so doing, my goal is not to denigrate either plant or human but rather venerate both. Moreover (to come back to Wylie's use of the term), phytomorphism, as I use it, refers not necessarily to the wholesale material exchange of a human body for a plant body (metamorphosis), but an ascribing of plant characteristics—which are materially grounded—to humans, in contrast to anthropomorphism or personification. In phytomorphism, humans retain their material bodies but may be discursively described as having the material facets of plant-being, such as when the narrator of *Song of*

Solomon says Pilate "looked like a tall black tree" (39). In this way, phytomorphism can simply be a simile or metaphor of a phyto variety, but it could also be far more than that, such as when Lauren Olamina says "I am Earthseed" (78). In this way, phytomorphism is a material-discursive enmeshment of human and plant. Thus, I offer phytomorphism as material-ecocritical literary device in which plants' material bodies discursively story humans, de-centering the human while refoliating our reading strategies and textual interpretations.

In light of these emphases—plant agency, storied matter, and phytomorphism—my project asks: how is a pear tree storied matter in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? How does a sweetgum tree enmesh with a human character to teach him arboreal becoming and communal becoming in *Song of Solomon*? How do seeds' transportation mechanisms, such as bolting, reveal their intersubjective agency in *Parable of the Sower*? How do staying mimosas write themselves into *Salvage the Bones*? Crucial to the examination of storied matter is the assumption that these "matters" not only instigate embodied experiences within the world of the text but catalyze the narrative itself.

1.3 Learning from Those Who Learn from Plants: Ecofeminist Notions of Refoliation in Black Women's Literature and Indigenous Ecological Knowledges

Refoliation will require us to enact visions of refoliation, such as those offered by the texts comprising this dissertation. My project features literary works that

simultaneously deal with plant-focused ecological issues of the Anthropocene as well as ecofeminist human-plant relationships. Within the context of Anthropocene studies, one of the valid critiques of the use of the term "Anthropocene," offered by scholars such as Kathryn Yusoff, is its homogenizing narrative of the human experience. My project seeks to engage this critique and further Anthropocene scholarship by looking at Black and Indigenous perspectives that are often erased by the term "Anthropocene" in its assumption that all humans equally contribute to the problem (Morton 13). Thus, in order to make my argument about the potential benefit of plant knowledge amidst the Anthropocene, I turn to the marginalized perspectives of Black women novelists and IEKs. The novels I will analyze are *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston (1937), *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison (1977), *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler (1993), and *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward (2011). These texts span the mid 20th and beginning of the 21st century, offering several touch points on different stages of the Anthropocene, including its "Great Acceleration." While there is a modest body of ecocritical and ecofeminist scholarship on these texts, there is a dearth of analysis from the perspective of plant studies, so my plant studies readings will add to the budding subfield of ecocritical scholarship on these texts. More importantly, since each text engages issues of the Anthropocene such as neoliberal economic development, climate change, and resource scarcity while simultaneously offering portraits of human-plant relationships in their context, my readings highlight the value of literary studies for plant studies, especially in the Anthropocene. Finally, considering these texts together offers a fuller picture of

BIPOC perspectives *on* the Anthropocene *in* the Anthropocene. While producers such as Brit Marling (producer of *The OA*) are collaborating with plants in the wake of the Vegetal Turn, Black and Indigenous women writers have been doing so for centuries.

Additionally, each of these texts exudes an ecofeminist ethos by narrating human-plant relationships that teach the nature of self as interdependent in community and the shared oppression of women and nature, given that ecofeminist and subsequently plant-like self-hood is "commonly expressed by women and various other nondominant groups" ("Living Interconnections" 1). In so doing, these stories—and the plants that tell them—reject a Western mechanistic view of nature. Moreover, these novels resist the capitalist-patriarchy's attempt to subject both women and nature to male dominance by envisioning women and plants as primary narrative agents whose collaboration results in storied matter. In this way, these novels also resist the logic of the Anthropocene and envision alternative responses to changing environmental conditions. Ultimately, if I am interested in re-foliating the cultural imagination, it doesn't necessarily make sense to turn to the perspectives most responsible for defoliation in the first place, namely texts that embody the devolution of the West's relationship with nonhuman nature. Thus, my project asks, what do Black women's literature, literary plants, and IEKs have to teach us about mutual flourishing and long-term survival for plants and humans alike (Kimmerer 15)? What lessons can be learned from considering contemporary Black women's literature as a site of refoliation and ecological knowledge production?

Before we consider what is to be gained, we must acknowledge what has been lost. It's important to note the tension in the intermingling of African American literature and ecocritical studies. As Jennifer C. James points out, “the legacies of trauma and injustice have attenuated African Americans' connection to nature” (164). In light of such legacies, James offers the idea of “ecomelancholia” as a way to capture the nuanced ethos of the African American relational “return” to nature post-slavery (165). Similarly, writers such as Sarah Jane Cervenak in *Black Gathering* attempt to bring nuance to the multifaceted relationship of Black people and nonhuman nature. Cervenak suggests that Black art (including literature) “makes for another imagining of relation, one that indicts anti-Black and anti-earth extraction” (4). In other words, in line with James and Cervenak’s work, I argue that the texts in this project offer a “return to” and an alternate “imagining of relation” between humans and plants, one not based on extraction or exploitation, but a relation based on a respectful disposition of learning from plants. While this tension is present and valid, my project’s goal of refoliation contends that such refoliation can have a healing effect on sites of trauma. In this way, this project does not attempt to ignore or diminish the Plantationocene history of forcing enslaved Black people to labor among nonhuman nature, but instead hopes to expose the ways in which such Plantationocene dynamics continue while also offering visions of ongoing healing that stem from painful historical contexts.

Indeed, pointing out the intersections between Black women’s literature and IEKs within the context of Afro-Indigenous studies is a goal of my project. Before I

discuss the emerging field of Afro-Indigenous studies, I first need to clarify what I mean by IEKs.[4] IEKs are, broadly construed, a set of beliefs that are generally widely held by Indigenous groups, with variation due to locality in terms of tribe, region, or time period. Due to the regionalized nature of Indigenous people's land-relationships, bodies of Indigenous nature-knowledge are far more localized and dynamic than a static body of knowledge or the general "tenets" or overarching shared worldview beliefs referenced in the all-encompassing term of IEKs. Thus, IEKs exhibit a plurality of knowledge as there is not one singular or monolithic Indigenous experience or worldview (hence the term "IEKs" instead of merely "IEK").

Even so, there are some overarching shared tenets of IEKs that one can distill. These concepts are not necessarily true of all Indigenous groups but are general principles that permeate my project. As Sean Cubitt points out, "There is a common self-designation among indigenous peoples, expressed in Te Reo Maori as *tangata whenua*, 'people of the land,'" so some overlap is understandable (Cubitt 282, emphasis in original). One of the main concepts guiding my project is animacy, and animacy branches out into other concepts such as kinship, reciprocity, and mutual flourishing. Animacy is often related to Indigenous religions or origin stories. For example, Chief Standing Bear of the Lakota, writing in the 1930s, explains that the

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[4] An alternative term used to describe IEKs not limited to the United States Indigenous populations is "Traditional Ecological Knowledge." Another term used is Ancestral Ecological Knowledge. Sometimes these terms are interchangeable, but in this project I exclusively use the term "Indigenous ecological knowledges" or "IEKs."

Lakota worshipped a creator known as Wakan Tanka, and "from Wakan Tanka there came a great unifying life force that flowed in and through all things—the flowers of the plains, blowing winds, rocks, trees, birds, animals—and was the same life force that had been breathed into the first man. Thus all things were kindred" (192). In other words, for the Lakota, all nonhumans possessed the same life force as humans, resulting in the belief that all nonhumans were of significant value as animate beings. There is no sense that humans are exponentially more valuable than nonhumans. For Standing Bear, this belief in animacy leads to a sense of kinship between humans and nonhumans: "Kinship with all creatures of the earth, sky, and water was a real and active principle. For the animal and bird world there existed a brotherly feeling that kept the Lakota safe among them" (192). In fact, "The animal had rights—the right of man's protection, the right to live, the right to multiply, the right to freedom, and the right to man's indebtedness—and in recognition of these rights the Lakota never enslaved the animal, and spared all life that was not needed for food and clothing" (Standing Bear 193). In contrast to the image of the modern-day factory farm, the Lakota's belief in the animacy of nonhumans resulted in the treatment of animals as beings with rights to whom the Lakota were responsible as caregivers rather than mere consumers. Indeed, the Lakota concepts of animacy "gave him a reverence for all life; it made a place for all things in the scheme of existence with equal importance to all" for all creatures were "of one blood, made by the same hand, and filled with the essence of the Great Mystery" (193). For the Lakota, their religion imparts belief in

animacy, and that belief in animacy results in treatment of nonhumans as kin deserving of a reciprocal form of care.

While Standing Bear does not use the term "reciprocity" outright in his descriptions of Lakota IEK, Kimmerer (member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation) does in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Kimmerer derives the concept of reciprocity from the creation story featuring the falling Skywoman, a story containing the Original Instructions to the original people of the Great Lakes (7). In short, Skywoman was the First Mother, but she did not get to her Earth home all by herself; she had the help of many animals, including a muskrat who sacrificed his own life for that of Skywoman (Kimmerer 4). When the muskrat's body is found, clenched in his fist is a bit of mud, which was spread on the back of the willing turtle to create Turtle Island, a place for human dwelling (Kimmerer 4). As a show of thanks, Skywoman gifted the animals her grasses, flowers, and trees from her previous home which fed the animals and humans alike (Kimmerer 4-5). Drawing on the agency and value of the animals, Kimmerer sees reciprocity as the foundational ethos of the interactions between humans and nonhumans in the Skywoman story (9). Additionally, Kimmerer emphasizes that Skywoman was pregnant when she began inhabiting Turtle Island, highlighting that "Knowing her grandchildren would inherit the world she left behind, she did not work for flourishing in her time only" (9). Skywoman exemplifies another reigning pillar of IEKs: that the Earth is borrowed from the future, not inherited from the past. The current generation has a responsibility to pass down a healthy and thriving ecosystem to their children and grandchildren. In these brief vignettes from Standing Bear and

Kimmerer, we can see how the overarching values of animacy, kinship, reciprocity, and imparting such wisdom to future generations imbue the worldview(s) from which IEKs are born.

Due to theses overarching beliefs in nature's animacy, beliefs in serving nature reciprocally as kin, and beliefs in sustaining nature for future generations, Indigenous groups possessed intimate knowledge of their natural surroundings. In this way, IEKs are constituted by far more than factual knowledge of the natural world and are more like worldviews through which all knowledge is constructed and filtered. Even so, while IEKs do not consist merely of factual ecological knowledge, they are not necessarily less than that. Their expansive knowledge of plants, animals, weather, seasonal patterns, is born out of their beliefs about nature, yet the knowledge is still expansive and often surpasses the knowledge of Western science. For example, while many tend to assume Indigenous groups were historically hunter-gatherers, M. Kat Anderson debunks this assumption by showing how the different tribes in California intentionally altered their landscapes to enhance, for example, the acorn harvest each year, rather than simply collecting whatever acorns were produced naturally (125). Ultimately, IEKs are legitimate and extensive, often times not only reinforcing but going beyond the ecological knowledge generated by Western scientific methods.

One of the pitfalls of engaging IEKs in this project is the potential appropriation of Indigenous people or furthering a trope known as the "ecological Indian." James defines this trope in the context it emerged, in the 1970s: "Idealized as peaceful, kind, and connected to nature, Native Americans were made to symbolize all

that Americans were not" (169). According to James, the "ecological Indian" trope is really just another reductive way White people cast Indigenous people. Resisting the "ecological Indian" trope, in my estimation, requires acknowledgement that, while I'm deeply interested in IEKs, ecological knowledge is not the only identifying factor of the Indigenous experience. Moreover, it's important to pay careful attention to particular tribes' ecological knowledge rather than painting all Indigenous people with a broad brush, but this has complications as well. For instance, Cubitt suggests that "A particular aspect of the, as it were, posthumous cult of indigenous ecological knowledge is nostalgia for place, for environmental belonging," a belonging that is no longer available to Westerners due to the very consequences of Western culture (282). Cubitt blames the Western construal of nature as non-human and non-agentic for this ongoing abstraction (282-283). Cubitt's use of the word "posthumous" also reminds us that such a way of engaging Indigenous culture also assumes these real people only existed in the past, whereas the truth is that many Indigenous groups persist into the present and should be recognized for their present contribution and needs. Ultimately, Cubitt cautions against Western appropriation of IEKs: "The ethnographic attempt to arrive at the truth of indigenous culture is only a way of structuring indigenous experience as Western knowledge" and warns against the construction of utopias based on perception of Indigenous ways of being (Cubitt 283-284). Beyond appropriation, even when there is a positive intention to engage IEKs as something worth learning from, we can easily fall into perpetuating the trope that Indigenous

people are only ecological beings, that there is nothing else to their culture or being beyond their relationship with a local ecosystem.

While this project is, by nature, an attempt at Western knowledge production, I believe that Westerners *can* learn from Indigenous values in a generative way without harming Indigenous groups or reducing them to one aspect of their values or lifestyle. While I will choose to focus on Indigenous relationships with local ecosystems, I acknowledge that Indigenous groups possess culture with complexity far beyond being "sustainability influencers," as it were. But if there is "truth" in Indigenous values or ecological knowledge, as Cubitt says, that truth should be found, uplifted, and honored, so long as we give credit where credit is due. Ultimately, if Westerners and those in industrialized societies can alter their relationship to Earth as a result of recovering or learning Indigenous ways of being, it will have positive effects on the whole planet, for humans and nonhumans alike, given the extent of Western and industrial global economic power. In fact, Chief Standing Bear suggests as much. Responding to calls for Indigenous peoples to be "brought up to the white man's plan of thought and action," Standing Bear noted in the 1930s that "It is rather a case where the white man had better grasp some of the Indian's spiritual strength" (xiv). This project resists the temptation to outright appropriation by using Indigenous voices to define and explore IEKs, rejecting a Western notion of extraction even in the field of knowledge production, especially by bringing together the oft-separated yet co-marginalized perspectives of Black and Indigenous people to aid in the process of knowledge production.

While Indigenous and African-American studies are often disciplinarily separated, some scholars do examine the generative threshold of these fields. This project's engagement with both Black women's literature and IEKs allows it to join a larger conversation about the overlapping concerns of Black studies and Indigenous studies. Scholars have tended to think about Black and Indigenous studies as largely different fields. For example, the work of Frank Wilderson, *Red White and Black*, uncovers and examines the nuanced experience of Indigenous and Black people in America in relationship with White settlers, especially in the context of film and media, arguing that the Indigenous relationship with White settlers is mediated through genocide, while the Black experience is mediated by slavery. Similarly, Mark Rifkin highlights the importance of acknowledging the clear differences in the Black and Indigenous experience in America in *Fictions of Land and Flesh*, which casts the Black experience of slavery and ongoing state-sanctioned violence as an oppression enacted upon Black bodies while Indigenous "political imaginaries tend to turn on questions of collective territoriality and governance" (5). Both Wilderson and Rifkin emphasize that, while both groups are oppressed by White settlers, the Black and Indigenous experiences of oppression are largely unique and even perhaps grounded in different motivations on the part of the White settlers. While these disciplines have been sealed off, as it were, scholars are uncovering overlapping similarities that warrant further investigation. For example, Tiffany Lethabo King in *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* builds on Wilderson's work by bringing together Black studies and Native studies, asserting that "the shoal functions

as a space of liminality, indeterminacy, and location of suture between two hermeneutical frames that have conventionally been understood as sealed off from each other" (4). Similarly, Kyle T. Mays' *An Afro-Indigenous History of the United States* highlights the shared struggle for freedom among BIPOC in the American context. Moreover, in his article "Why We Need to Rethink Afro-Indigenous History in the United States," Mays argues for a needed perspective-shift that people stolen from Africa in the Atlantic Slave Trade should be regarded as Indigenous, but their indigeneity was stolen from them. James corroborates May's assertion by pointing out that "Much of African American religious thought reflects African beliefs in an animated universe," meaning that every natural entity, even plants, animals, and rocks, are alive (163). While James does not address Indigenous American concepts of animacy, one can see how such similarities would aid our reading of African American literature and Indigenous writers. While Wilderson and Rifkin explore the clear divergences of the Black and Indigenous experience, King, Mays, and James highlight the convergences and "sutures," as King puts it, of Black and Native studies. In this project, I see Black and Native studies as often having the appearance of diverging when they are ultimately converging, even if that convergence is subtle. Thus, on the one hand, scholarship on my project's texts lacks attention to the role of IEKs in the texts, but there is also a bigger-picture invitation to explore the overlap between African American studies and Indigenous studies, a liminal theoretical space that this project occupies. In doing so, this project illustrates the value of interdisciplinary thinking in the face of environmental ills in the Anthropocene.

My perspective on the intersection of African American and Indigenous studies is much like the phenomenon of trees occupying the same space right next to one another yet not visibly "on top of" one another, what I will call "being-next-to." Trees share unseen resources underground through fungal root networks and communicate with chemical signals invisible to the naked human eye. This is largely new information to Western audiences, who previously would have seen simply several trees occupying the same space. What *is* visible to the naked eye is the phenomenon in which trees' branches at the crown only grow as far as another tree next to them grows. In other words, trees will sense a neighbor's spread of branches and divert energy from growing further "out" so as to not need to compete for light at the canopy. In this way, the naked eye sees virtually no relationship between the trees except mere shared proximity; however, much overlap of resources, communication, desires, and needs occurs "under the surface" that is worthy of exploring. What humans may see as a form of competition or separation is actually a type of sharing and responding-to. And yet, the trees are distinct beings as well; different histories, stories, and experiences of the world they inhabit. This is how I see my intervention into the space of Afro-Indigenous theory: these texts exhibit a shared proximity, a being-next-to of Black women's literature and IEKs. In the scholarship, this being-next-to is often unaddressed, likely because it's seen as merely an unrelated sharing of space, the divergences explored in the work of Wilderson and Rifkin. But what if this being-next-to is more of a compelling intertwining of some instinctive and corresponding knowing, being, inter-relating, collaborating, and more—all invisible to

those who would only look at one tree or the other? In other words, I see these two epistemologies—Afro and Indigenous—located near each other, distinct in their selves yet occupying the same space and communicating with one another, and I seek to uncover what intertwining might be present below the surface, what epistemological coalescence we are missing by maintaining disciplinary divides.

Thus, I want to be clear that my intervention is not to simply "apply" Indigenous ecological epistemologies and theory to primary texts written by Black women. Instead, I seek to uncover the *already* coalescing theorizing that Black and Indigenous writers exhibit. All of the texts in this project overtly reference Indigenous peoples to varying degrees: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* features a migrating group of Seminole who rightly ascertain the danger of impending weather; *Song of Solomon* is about Milkman's journey to his Indigenous ancestors; *Parable of the Sower* locates Lauren's acorn knowledge in texts written by the Indigenous people of California; and *Salvage the Bones* invokes the history of Indigenous people helping enslaved people escape to freedom while suggesting that the Batistes have Indigenous ancestors. Indeed, I am not imposing Indigenous themes or modes of thought on these texts; I am showing how they are already present and at work in them. My project asks, How are ecofeminist texts written by Black women in dialogue with Indigenous perspectives? In what ways do Black women's writing and IEKs theorize and re-theorize each other? How do the overlapping experiences of White supremacy embedded in both Indigenous and Black histories reverberate in contemporary American literature? How

do the seemingly separate branches of Black women's literature and Indigenous ecological knowledges stem from shared roots?

This project suggests that Afro-Indigenous studies make space for a generative coalescence of Black and Indigenous perspectives in the face of the changing environmental conditions of the Anthropocene. In *Their Eyes*, for instance, the knowledge of the Seminole to flee the region when the sawgrass blooms parallels Janie's impulse to observe the pear tree bloom and to learn from it. These instances offer a message from the margins to mainstream readers in the Anthropocene: in light of the forces at play in the Anthropocene, it is not enough to simply observe what plants are doing; we have to evaluate them, trust them, and respond accordingly. This project contends that such messages and lessons are found in these texts' visions of refoliation, messages of how to face the changing environmental conditions of the Anthropocene without losing our humanity or our Earth. The chapters that follow argue that plants can teach us how to adapt to our surroundings for mutual flourishing: from their communal nature to their bolting, from their staying to their salvaging.

Chapter Preview

First, the project exhibits short interludes that serve to intertwine my personal experiences and inspirations that are germane to the project. The first interlude is a summary of my experience working on a permaculture farm as an intern, which

greatly informs Chapter 3 on *Parable of the Sower*. My final interlude is a story about how I met some mimosas in Virginia, an encounter that provided richness to the process of writing chapter 4 on *Salvage the Bones*.

Chapter II: "'Ah hope you fall on soft ground': Seeds of Refoliation and Ecofeminist Plant-Being in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" sees Hurston's novel as a seed planted before its time, germinating in the fecund soil of the 1970s ecofeminist movement. In addition to its re-publishing in the 70s and ecofeminist flavor, *Their Eyes* also features plant characters driving the narrative, phytomorphism, reverberations of the Plantationocene, and IEKs. Such motifs render *Their Eyes* "grandmothered" into the archive of contemporary Black women's literature I examine here. This chapter on *Their Eyes* both establishes key aspects of my reading method—phytomorphism, plants as storied matter, learning from plants, and species-specific material ecocriticism—and foreshadows the later texts I analyze. We will also see how Janie learns from plants-as-storied-matter through her observations of real biological processes, such as pollination, and how Janie phenomenologically makes meaning out of her own experience through what she sees occur in nature. Indeed, this chapter would not be possible without pear trees and their varied parts—branches, blossoms, pollen—as well as their material relationship with other nonhumans such as bees. Finally, this chapter engages the ecological knowledge of the Seminole in the face of changing environmental conditions. In this way, this chapter also foregrounds the mimetic context of the Anthropocene by examining the Plantationocene at work in

the Florida Everglades in the exploitation of the regions plants and humans—including the Seminole, the sawgrass, and the main characters, Janie and Tea Cake.

Chapter III, "Arboreal Becoming, Communal Becoming: Tree Teachers in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" uses material ecocriticism and critical plant studies to examine *Song of Solomon* as an ecofeminist text that exemplifies the simultaneous objectification of women and nature at the hands of the male characters. This chapter argues that arboreal agents in *Song of Solomon* serve as teachers of ecofeminist community values to a young man, Milkman, through his own "arboreal becoming." Drawing on emergent science regarding arboreal notions of community as well as IEKs of trees, this chapter will consider how Milkman's aunt, Pilate—who at times is construed as a tree herself—and the text's trees serve as teachers. For example, a dream of tulips is an epiphany of his mistreatment of his mother; a backyard maple tree teaches Milkman the extent and ugliness of his selfishness; the sweetgum forest intermingles with his body and challenges his own sense of agentic selfhood. I contend that these trees are more than symbols; they catalyze Milkman's transformation into a less-selfish human, suggesting that plants indeed do have something to teach humans about how we, too, can adjust our relationships with humans and nonhumans alike to promote mutual flourishing.

Chapter IV, "The Ways of Seeds: Symbiotic Refuge through Permaculture Community in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*" establishes what I'll term "permaculture theory"—a burgeoning field in agroecology, built on Indigenous and ancestral farming wisdom that offers more just futures of food production that value

all members of ecology. Drawing on IEKs of acorns as well as critical plant studies, this chapter argues that seeds and plants teach the novel's main character, Lauren, how to survive the Anthropocene with strategies that she observes in the plants, such as "bolting" and "non-identity amidst biodiversity" (Marder 162). Lauren implements these strategies to the benefit of new kin she meets as they collectively bolt to safety, ultimately resulting in the building of an ecofeminist permaculture community known as "Acorn." Further, Lauren looks to plants as teachers of not only survival, but also spirituality as she uses these plant teachings to create her own "God-is-Change belief system" called Earthseed. Ultimately, Lauren curates symbiotic refuge between human and plant community even in the midst of unpredictable environmental conditions.

Chapter V, "Refuge Unmade: Staying, Salvaging, and Managed Retreat in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*" furthers the same argument of the previous chapters—that plants and trees are beings with significant agency who have something to teach. In so doing, this chapter advances scholarship on this text by providing a critical plant studies reading of a work that is often read through an animal studies lens. This chapter contributes to my project's refoliation efforts by considering the text's phyto-characters as agents; it's easy to see some of the text's plants as just landscape fixtures, but the most abundant trees in the text—pines, oaks, and mimosas—actually teach the main characters the plant-wisdom of staying and salvaging, according to emergent science in plant intelligence. The Batistes are well-acquainted with staying and salvaging even before the hurricane, so they decide to stay and weather the storm and salvage their home with the help of each other and

their larger community, and they do so with hope—a lost concept in many current conversations about the Anthropocene. This chapter both highlights the wisdom and shortcomings of staying and salvaging in the Anthropocene by considering *Salvage the Bones* alongside the Indigenous history and experience of the Gulf coast, which faces coastal erosion and continued vulnerability in the Anthropocene. Considering staying as one possible response on a spectrum of staying and going, this chapter culminates in a discussion of managed retreat as a perhaps welcome "middle ground" in the discussions around staying and going in the face of changing environmental conditions, highlighting the value of coherent community and institutional support for vulnerable groups like the Batistes and BIPOC inhabiting the Gulf region. The nature of the Anthropocene is that longstanding refuges will be unmade, and *Salvage the Bones* both envisions and challenges a plant-inspired way of responding to unmade refuge: adapt, in community, and with hope.

I conclude the project with Coda: Lessons of Loss, Growing from Death. This conclusion reminds us that refoliation requires loss and subsequent new growth. Thus, the conclusion will reflect on the sense of loss that characterizes each text of my project. *In Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie loses all of her husbands, with Tea Cake's death being the most tragic. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman loses his father's respect as he transforms into an image of Pilate, but he also loses Hagar due to his own abusive treatment, and Pilate dies just as Milkman learns to appreciate her. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren must leave behind her childhood community to pursue long-term survival, and she loses her family and community members along the way.

Finally, in *Salvage the Bones*, the wake of hurricane Katrina includes loss of not only material shelter, but also the potential loss of a cherished pet. If we turn to plants once again, what do they teach us about loss? On the one hand, plants experience loss as a regular part of their cyclical being; on the other hand, plants complicate our understanding of loss in generative ways. The conclusion invites us to consider the ecological reality in which loss and potential closely coexist. I'd like to leave my readers with a sense that, while it may be painful at times, we can together leave behind harmful anthropocentric constructs while refoliating a new garden of possibility based on mutual flourishing.

Literature, perhaps more than any other art form, harnesses the power of language to imagine capacious possibilities of human-plant relationships. The ecological problems that face us are at many times literally inconceivable. The ineffability of climate change, mass extinction, and ocean acidification is due to the sheer scale of the problems, and it often results in either polarizing fear or denial—neither of which is ultimately helpful. But literature offers readers encounters with plants in ways we can both understand and emulate. Thus, in the pages that follow, I seek to closely examine literary human-nonhuman relationships at an accessible locus that refutes fear, denial, and empty pity by inviting intimacy, knowledge co-construction, and enchantment. We must work to recover plants from the strict cage of victimhood and see them as co-creators of the future of mutual flourishing we could have together. I believe my project—by examining contemporary literature that imagines intersubjective human-plant relationships—can start to begin to co-create

that imagined future, but it requires that we listen for stories perhaps only faintly told. As Kimmerer suggests, "Our relationship with the land cannot heal until we hear its stories" (9). What stories are plants telling us about their experience of the Anthropocene? I now turn to the literature to see what these plants, as storied matter, have to say.

Chapter 2

"AH HOPE YOU FALL ON SOFT GROUND": SEEDS OF REFOLIATION AND ECOFEMINIST PLANT BEING IN *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

2.1 Introduction: The Plantationocene Comes to Florida

Although written in 1937 and often analyzed alongside other texts of the early 20th century without much thought to its relationship to the Anthropocene present, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* inhabits the urgency, potency, and potentialities of the ecological *now*.[5] For example, the same Seminole people who were displaced by the sugarcane industry in *Their Eyes* likely have descendants in the Gulf region, where the Seminole were forced to move in relocation, illustrating that the injustices of the Everglades sugarcane industry reincarnate in the injustices of Hurricane Katrina ("Indian Resistance"). The ways the incarnational and mimetic qualities of *Their Eyes* resurface in later Black women's literature invite us to read *Their Eyes* as a seed germinating among the novels of late 20th and early 21st century Black women writers. Such a direct thread from Hurston to Ward can only be understood in the context of both a granular consideration of these texts' plants as well as an orienting of our analyses of these texts in the larger ecological present as represented by the term "Plantationocene," as discussed in the introduction. Indeed, in

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5 Perhaps in a similar way that Chief Luther Standing Bear's 1933 *Land of the Spotted Eagle* reads as a relevant summary of Lakota culture and tradition even nearly 100 years later.

order to understand *Their Eyes'* relationship to the ecological now, we must turn to the text's plants, those plants that sit at the intersection of the overwhelmingly large Plantationocene and the specific context of *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

The history of the plantationization of the Everglades Agricultural Area—where part of *Their Eyes* takes place—illustrates the way in which *Their Eyes* occupies the ecological now with roots deep in history, as well as the way the text sits at a generative convergence of Black and Indigenous perspectives, the colonization of plant bodies, and the early 21st century ecological landscape. Environmental advocates suggest that, as far as the Everglades are concerned, the region's plants and people (the Calusa and Tequesta tribes) were thriving prior to the Spanish occupation and then the "American period" of Everglades occupation (beginning ~1880) (Kushlan 339). While the Spanish occupation decimated the Indigenous Calusa and Tequesta populations, scholars estimate that the pre-Spanish era was characterized by sustainable land interactions on the part of the Indigenous peoples, and that the land benefitted from a rest period between Indigenous/Spanish occupation and American occupation, as well (Kushlan 339). In the mid-1800s, US government "Indian removal policies" drove "Creek Indians" from Georgia and the Carolinas into the Everglades, where the Creek and their descendants—along with escaped African American slaves—evolved into the Seminole nation (Kushlan 339). Importantly, then, the Seminole are a group with distinct African American and Indigenous American ancestry, highlighting the value of exploring *Their Eyes* from an Afro-Indigenous perspective. While the newly formed Seminole learned to live with the land, American

expansion brought changes to the landscape of the Everglades Agricultural Area that may not have been welcomed by the nonhumans who had been thriving for a century before.

In 1880, American national expansion ideologies driven by plantation logic drove a series of events that significantly affected the Everglades' physical and economic landscape, events including the agricultural development (read: plantationization) of the area (Kushlan 340). In order for the marshy landscape of the Everglades to be agriculturally productive, it had to be "drained," and "By 1881, 9,800,000 [hectares] of the Everglades had been sold by the state of Florida for drainage, and, through various incarnations, the process continued for 40 years" (Kushlan 340). Thanks to the extensive and state-sanctioned drainage operations, by 1900, "new residents [of the Everglades] were able to use technological innovations to dig through the muck and rock, build extensive canals, elevate land, and fill bay bottoms in ways that had been impossible before" (Kushlan 340). In other words, plantation agriculture was now possible, at the expense of the nonhuman landscape.

We clearly see practices of exploitation in the 40-year drainage operation whose end goal was agricultural profit. Scholars suggest that 20th century draining operations, for the purpose of enhancing agricultural potential in the region, diverted around 50% of the typical flow of water, as well as displaced native plant species (such as the sawgrass we will meet later) illustrating severe damage to the ecosystem of the region (Stainback et al 1). As early as 1938, just one year after the publishing of *Their Eyes*, the Everglades National Park reported decreases in water quality and

significant environmental disturbances (Chimney and Goforth 94). And these negative effects of exploitation reach into the 21st century: in 2000, Congress passed the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) to address the environmental disturbances affecting the bioregion of the Everglades (Stainback et al 1). Moreover, climate scientists suggest that the Everglades will be negatively impacted by the effect of a changing climate on the wetland ecosystem: "These ecologically significant decreases in water depths and inundation duration periods would greatly alter current ecosystems through severe droughts, peat loss and carbon emissions, wildfires, loss of the unique ridge and slough patterns, large shifts in plant and animal communities, and increased exotic species invasions" (Nungesser et al 824). The now-dubbed Everglades Agricultural Area continues to struggle against the consequences of the American expansion begun in the late 1800s, which failed to honor nature in an attempt to master the region for European-American agricultural ideals, ideals that could only be actualized by a complete overhaul of the landscape.

And whose hands molded and built this new and precarious ecosystem? Migrant laborers' hands. This plantationization brought an entire economy to South Florida, including the migrant labor that bolstered it. Kushlan suggests that virtually all occupants in the Everglades by the 1900s were migrant in nature, highlighting the plantation conditions of human labor that Tea Cake and Janie endure in Hurston's tale (339). According to the National Park Service, census records affirm Hurston's vision of the labor market in Everglades: in 1910, most of the African Americans residing and working in the Flamingo area were of Jamaican and Bahamian descent ("African

Americans in the Everglades"). Notably, the drainage operation made the area more susceptible to flooding, another vulnerability imposed on the migrant laborers, as we will see later in *Their Eyes*. In other words, the American exploitation of the Everglades as an ecosystem not only parallels the exploitation of the workers responsible for altering the landscape in poor working conditions, but also locates *Their Eyes* within the Anthropocene context of climate change.

In order to tackle present-day ecological situations, we must think about their origins, their roots, and therefore think with Zora Neale Hurston's plants and the fruit borne by *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in our current season. When one follows the root shafts of the text's sawgrass and sugarcane, we find these plants telling a story from Indigenous occupation of the Everglades, to human and plant displacement, to migrant exploitation, and the story of Janie Crawford. Such root-digging illustrates the value of returning to the past to make sense of the present and future—which the novel itself does as Janie retells her story with the help of plants. Without the pears, pollen, seeds, sugarcane, beans, and sawgrass of *Their Eyes* as material agents, Janie would have no story.

Synopsis

Their Eyes Were Watching God narrates the flashback-retelling of the life story of a young Black woman named Janie Crawford. We are first introduced to her when she is a blossoming 16-year-old living with her grandmother, Nanny, a previously enslaved woman who escaped upon the birth of her daughter (Janie's mother), Leafy.

Nanny catches the adolescent Janie kissing a boy from school and decides it would be best for Janie to be married off to a prominent Black man in town, Logan Killicks. Logan is the first of three men Janie will marry, all of which are abusive toward her in some way. Even so, Janie's third husband, Tea Cake, presents a stark difference to her previous two husbands, treating her with respect and care throughout their courtship and early marriage, despite his youth. In the final segment of the novel, a hurricane hits their area in Florida and Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog in the swell. Janie ends his life to protect her own when the rabies results in violence. Through the retelling of Janie's marriages, the text exhibits ecofeminist themes related to the dangers of capitalist-patriarchy and illustrates ecofeminist lessons Janie learns from plant-teachers.

Argument

Janie's story would not exist without plants, both materially and discursively speaking, revealing the agency of the text's plants as storied matter. In addition to Janie's conceptual sense-making of her life as "a great tree in leaf" early on in the novel, Janie's observation of a real pear tree and her subsequent response to it goes on to shape the rest of the narrative in two significant ways: First, the quintessential pear tree scene illustrates that Janie has a personal relationship and connection to nature that she draws on later in the narrative, and second, this scene depicts ecological "marriage" as an interdependent and pleasurable affair to which Janie compares her later human marriages in order to evaluate them. As Janie tells her story of marriage,

including its dawn and doom, plants participate in this storying by being the real example of interdependent ecological relationships to which Janie compares each of her marriages. The primacy of the plants in Janie's marriage meaning-making challenges the humanistic assumption that plants are little more than inert, raw material; instead, *Their Eyes* invites us to see plants as examples of interdependent and ecofeminist ways of being that humans can generatively emulate (phytomorphism), as well as seeing plants as co-authors of the very narrative that stories this interdependence.

Beyond the unfolding narrative and Janie's development is a big-picture takeaway for readers in the Anthropocene: as the Anthropocene evolves, those who seek to abate its ecological issues often look to mechanistic science and technology, an attempt to rationally "innovate" our way out of climate change and ecosystem collapse. But *Their Eyes* invites us to consider different ways of evaluating our circumstances. As many IEKs claim, plants have innate wisdom that humans can learn from, and *Their Eyes* showcases this learning. An Afro-Indigenous reading of this text highlights two of the possible paths taken (whether intentionally or unintentionally) by distinct groups of Black Americans: join the capitalist-patriarchy and seek power according to Western ways of being, or band with the displaced Indigenous, learn and share their wisdom, and live in ecologically-minded community. The being-next-to of African American and Indigenous perspectives in this novel is underscored by the multi-ethnic band of Seminole and migrant workers that makes a different choice than the Black migrant workers and White capitalists in the face of the hurricane. Indeed, I

argue that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* explicitly casts IEKs as a wise foil to the logic of capitalist-patriarchy, suggesting that these are the two paths before the reader as well.

2.2 Seeds of Criticism: The Realness of the Pear Tree

While Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching *God* (1937) is considered a canonical work of the Harlem Renaissance period and African American literature more broadly, more recently it is being interpreted through the lenses of ecocriticism and feminism, but rarely via both in the form of ecofeminism. For feminist readings, a central question is whether Tea Cake is fundamentally different than Logan Killicks or Jody Starks in terms of their enactment of patriarchal oppression.[6] My reading addresses these questions of patriarchy but from the lens of ecofeminism in which patriarchal oppression is inextricably linked to environmental oppression, suggesting that how we read patriarchy in this text is contingent on how we read nature. As for nature-readings—and in particular, tree readings—scholars are similarly interested in the role of the pear tree in Janie's marriage relationships.[7] I

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6 For example, Tracy L. Bealer scrutinizes the actions of Janie's husbands as unilaterally patriarchal, while Yvonne Mesa-El Ashmawi, and Mark Neal, and Kersuze Simeon Jones provide a more generous reading of Tea Cake's flaws and the reasons for them.
7 For example, Glenda B. Weathers examines the novel's tree imagery as she analyzes its relationship to Janie's moral development. Gurleen Grewal and Ines Casas Maroto see the pear tree as a vision that "blue print" the perfect marriage, compelling Janie to

argue that the tree is not a mere symbol or ideal form, but rather that Janie's material interaction with and understanding of the pear tree is what undergirds her evaluation of her marriages. Put another way, the pear tree isn't the "vision"—it's the real, material standard; the marriages are the "visions," or "representations" of the tree and its interdependent biological processes. I posit that the pear tree is a material agent of the narrative that phytomorphizes Janie, thus offering a material ecocritical reading of the text that both moves beyond seeing nature as a symbol and inverts the anthropomorphic impulse present in many readings of the pear tree. Similarly, another ecocritical reading by Joshua Bennett sees mules as a metaphorical nexus that *represents* the Black female experience of the power dynamics that uphold White capitalist-patriarchy.[8] My reading departs from Bennett's by breaking from a larger tradition that privileges mules and dogs and storms over pear trees and Palma Christi and sawgrass, the tradition out of which the Vegetal Turn emerges, locating this chapter within the movements of that Turn. In contrast to Bennett's, my reading centers plants as agents of the text, not as mere metaphors representing gendered experiences or power dynamics but as those with material-discursive power themselves to *effect* gendered experiences and power dynamics in the text.

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seek the pear trees in search of true love (Grewal 104) and "bring her own experience into harmony with her initial vision of the pear tree" (Maroto 72).
8 Joshua Bennett's book *Being Property Once Myself* (2020) shares the most overlap with my project in its extrapolation of the coalescing themes of Blackness, ownership, animalization, and femininity/masculinity in *Their Eyes*.

My reading of *Their Eyes* not only adds to the eco/feminist scholarship, but also newly invites consideration of the role of IEKs in the text. Some scholars have explored *Their Eyes* in conjunction with works by Indigenous American women.[9] These readings both focus on historical reception and minority literary representation as opposed to conceiving of how IEKs and Black women's writing theorize each other. My project engages the coalescence of Black women's literature and IEKs at the outset by uncovering how Janie exhibits a way of being with and knowing nature that mirrors Indigenous ways of being with and knowing nature, as well as examining the role of Indigenous characters in the text. Thus, we see *Their Eyes* theorizing something like IEKs as an intuitive way of being for a young Black woman, and we see IEKs offering us a theoretical lens through which to consider a work of Black women's literature.

Finally, this chapter expands Hurston criticism by putting *Their Eyes* in conversation with literary works of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century. It is Hurston's proto-ecofeminism that ties this text to the other novels in this project. Indeed, even Hurston's journey to holding a place in the hall of fame of Harlem Renaissance writers reveals its ecofeminist essence. While Hurston was a member of the community of Black writers that constituted the Harlem Renaissance, such as Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, her work fell into

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9 Sheila Hassel Hughes compares of *Their Eyes* to Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, and Dennis Cutchins compares *Their Eyes* to Louise Erdrich's *The Beet Queen*.

relative obscurity until Alice Walker highlighted it in her 1975 article "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston." Given the advent of ecofeminism in the 70s, as well as Walker's role in the development of a Black ecofeminism, I believe that *Their Eyes* came to the fore as ecofeminist ethics were gaining traction. In other words, I posit that Black women's literature has been theorizing ecofeminism, plant being, and Indigenous knowledge long before the contemporary period, suggesting that the past has something to offer us as we negotiate the Anthropocene future, and that the current soil may be even more amenable to new ideas and concepts related to ecofeminism. The genetic material of the ecofeminist movement has a beginning farther back than the 70s, and even farther back than 1937 when one considers the ecofeminist themes in ancestral IEKs. Hurston was ahead of her time, and it took until the 70s, when *Their Eyes* was republished for the first time, for it to be appreciated ("Zora Neale" 162). Thus, while scholars often consider *Their Eyes* among other Harlem Renaissance works, in this project I analyze it alongside contemporary (late 20th and early 21st century) works such as those occupying my later chapters: *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Parable of the Sower* (1993), and *Salvage the Bones* (2011).

Since I see themes occurring in *Their Eyes* bearing similar fruit in later texts, I use *Their Eyes* to develop an ecomaterial reading methodology utilized throughout the project. Additionally, I put *Their Eyes* in conversation with later texts as a generative exercise in ascertaining the value of the past for the present. In doing so, I propose we return to Black women's literature of a slightly earlier time period as worthy of consideration among those dealing with early 21st century issues.

2.3 The Primacy of Plants: Phytomorphism in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

One of the distinctive aspects of my reading of *Their Eyes* is an analysis of the way plants—and in particular, pears—drive the narrative, both materially and discursively. *Their Eyes* offers early examples of what I've termed phytomorphism or construing the human in light of the activities of plant bodies, which is an alternative to anthropomorphism (in which nonhumans are given human characteristics). The phytomorphism in *Their Eyes* functions to teach Janie lessons that she invokes later in the text. In *Their Eyes*, phytomorphism of humans in the image of trees, flowers, pollen, leaves, and seeds both discursively and materially undergird the characters' meaning-making processes of the human experience.

Some of the earliest instances of plants-as-storied-matter in Janie's story are references to trees as metaphors for the human experience of the characters, i.e. phytomorphism. In fact, Janie's telling of her life story opens with one such metaphor: "Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches" (8). Looking back on her life, as she considers how to tell her story to her friend Phoeby, Janie sees all of her range of experiences come together in the crown of a tree. In contrast to the possibilities located in a tree's crown, Nanny is also described in more solemn tree language: "Nanny's head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm. Foundation of ancient power that no longer mattered. The cooling Palma Christi leaves that Janie had bound about her grandma's head with

a white rag had wilted down and become part and parcel of the woman" (8). This description of Nanny begins with a simile comparing Nanny's affect to a destroyed tree, but then it shifts from metaphorical language to a material intermingling of Nanny and the medicinal leaves on her head.

Palma Christi leaves are the leaves of the plant that contains castor oil in the seeds. Castor oil is an ancient medicine used to treat aches and pains since the time of the Egyptians and Greeks (Voeks 153). Moreover, Palma Christi is an invasive plant in the US, brought over in the Columbian Exchange, and it is now widely distributed around the world with many cultures having an ethnobotanical relationship to the plant (Voeks 153, 155). In the context of the US, "Among enslaved Africans in the Americas, castor bean took on special cultural significance. As a treatment for body lice and skin disorders by slave traders, it was symbolically connected with their status as the possessions of others" (Voeks 157). The presence of the Palma Christi here in the narrative locates the novel in the long material and cultural history of this plant, from ancient cultures to enslaved Africans in the Americas.

Despite the plant's far reach and long history, the only part of the plant presented in the narrative is its leaves upon Nanny's head, visually affirming Nanny's comment to Janie: "You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots" (16). Nanny's head adorned with Palma Christi leaves reinforces that Nanny herself is a branch without roots; slavery has stolen her history. Nanny's use of tree branches and roots to make sense of her experience echoes Janie's vision of her life as a tree in leaf in which the branches hold the "dawn and doom." While it feels like an "echo" to

the reader, we know that in the chronology of the narrative Janie's conversation with Nanny actually occurs first, suggesting that Janie learned lessons of plant wisdom from her grandmother. In other words, Nanny's line that "colored folks is branches without roots" is a foundational concept Janie learned from her grandmother as she came of age, a concept she drew on later in the story when she recounted the tale to Phoeby and determines that her life is best described as a "great tree in leaf." The early phytomorphism in the text illustrates that the main characters make meaning of their lives through their understanding of trees, and is a signal of the material agency trees will exhibit in the narrative.

Trees serve as storied matter in Janie's ancestral history as well. When Nanny escaped her enslavement, she did so about a week after Janie's mother Leafy was born. The text does not indicate how Nanny chose the name Leafy for her child, but it does signal the role of nature in Nanny's own meaning-making, and it continues to reinforce Nanny's estimation that "colored folks is branches without roots" as "Leafy" references the crown of a tree. As Nanny escaped to freedom, she had to trek through a forest in hiding, a forest that Nanny remembers as foreboding and dangerous: "De noise uh de owls skeered me; de limbs of dem cypress trees took to crawlin' and movin' round after dark, and two three times Ah heered panthers prowlin' round" (18). Despite the danger posed both by animals and lynchers, the forest became a safe haven for Leafy: while traversing the woods, Nanny "could see a big ship at a distance and a great stirrin' round" and wanted to see if she could find out any information. Nanny "wrapped Leafy up in moss and fixed her good in a tree" and went down to the

ship's landing where she heard that "all of us slaves was free" (18). Leafy becomes part of the tree in which Nanny stows her, materially intermingling with the stuff of the forest, and finding temporary safety until Nanny returned with good news. In addition to the forest serving as a key actor in Nanny's escape to freedom, Janie's ancestral tie to the forest continues through her line to her mother, evidenced when Nanny tells the story of Janie's own conception. Nanny's employer helped Leafy go to a local school, but one day Leafy did not return home on time. Nanny recounts that "De next mornin' [Leafy] came crawlin' in on her hands and knees. A sight to see. Dat school teacher had done hid her in de woods all night long, and he had done raped mah baby and run on off just before day" (19). While the forest was a haven for infant Leafy, it became a site of trauma in her teens, a trauma that brought Janie forth. Indeed, Janie's connection to trees extended beyond her lifetime in both the hopeful potentialities of freedom and the "things suffered" by her matriarchs.

The early storying of trees signals the novel's challenge to the logic of patriarchy. For Janie, Nanny represents the status quo of patriarchal relationships, and her tree-stump affect confirms that the status quo does not contribute to women's thriving. Grewal elucidates Nanny's perspective on patriarchal inevitability: "Nanny's experience of oppression, her lack of autonomy and safety, gives her a pragmatic and transactional view of marriage and a shriveled, gendered script distorted by fear and insecurity from which Janie must free herself" (104). Nanny's view of marriage continues to give power to the patriarchal structures of her culture according to Weathers, who writes, "Despite her hatred of it, however, Nanny complies with the

social hierarchy that places black women beneath black men" (203). Nanny complies with the system when she renders marriage as a transaction, evidenced when she tries to convince Janie to marry Killicks by describing his material wealth: his sixty acres and "de onliest organ in town" (22). Nanny submits to these powers when she insists that Janie marry Logan Killicks—essentially against her will—in hopes that Janie will be protected: "'Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection" (15). As Maroto puts it, "[Nanny] sees in marriage the potential for Janie to have both the protection and the respectability that neither she nor her disgraced daughter had...she is convinced that without the 'protection' of a male-owned home, her Janie will face a future of physical and spiritual destruction" (73). Nanny's relationship with the patriarchy is complex; she is the victim of it but also seeks solace and safety for Janie in its structure. Nanny is empowered within her disempowerment to find Janie a husband Nanny finds suitable. While perhaps a misguided attempt to manipulate the oppressive circumstances in which these women find themselves, Nanny exhibits a form of agency in her arrangement of Janie's marriage to Killicks. Even so, the construal of Nanny's relationship with the patriarchy combined with her phytomorphism as a dying tree implies that the logic of patriarchy is ultimately harmful to women.

If Nanny's phytomorphism reveals the harms of patriarchy, Janie's pear tree experience invokes the power of interdependent relationships, signaling that plants can story a range of experiences. While Nanny genuinely believes that marrying Logan Killicks is best for Janie, Janie knows and believes differently because of what she

witnessed under the pear tree, inviting us to consider the role of this tree in teaching Janie about human relationships. Indeed, the most significant and critically examined early tree reference in the novel is Janie's experience of the pear tree, which is a tree that represents possibility and hope for Janie, unlike the forest of her conception, which Janie only finds out about after her first experience of the pear tree. When Janie tries to think of where to start her story, she "thought awhile and decided that her conscious life had commenced at Nanny's gate"—and all thanks to the pear tree (10).

2.4 "It Had Called Her to Come and Gaze on a Mystery": Janie's Pear Tree Experience

The reader's first introduction to the pear tree establishes its agency. Janie states that "ever since the first tiny bloom has opened […][the pear tree] had called her to come and gaze on a mystery" (10). The pear tree exhibits agency in its communication with Janie, evidenced by the word "calling." Janie also says that what she saw "stirred her tremendously" (10). Moreover, Janie's stirring is a form of arousal, perhaps sexual, as some scholars referenced below suggest, but more broadly a whole-body sense of excitement. The word "stir" as a verb meaning "to set in motion, to excite movement or activity" has a long history dating back to the 1000s that includes uses with negative connotations such as "to disturbs or trouble." It originated in the context of water but evolved to describe movement of humans as well. It's significant that the plant "stirs" the human, here; the very word for plants, "vegetable," comes from the word "vegetate" which—while it has a history of

meaning “to enliven”—is now associated with complete lack of activity or brain function (Sandilands 16).

In being “stirred,” Janie is excited and aroused; her body likely undergoes functions related to excitement such as a rush of blood away from her digestive tract and to her limbs; a release of adrenaline and maybe other beneficial hormones like dopamine that enliven her body. But is Janie troubled? Is she disturbed, as the term “stir” might indicate? Indeed: she has spent her whole life learning about relationships from Nanny, but the pear tree shows her things can be different. In both being excited and disturbed, Janie is changed by what she sees under the pear tree; her story is launched into motion by this stirring. By allowing the pear tree to excite and trouble Janie in this way, Hurston grants this pear tree agency akin to human agency, inverting the anthropomorphic expectation that Janie is the agent and placing the tree in the place of active subject. Moreover, the pear tree’s “stirring” illustrates how the pear tree is storied matter, how Janie’s story depends on the pear tree to help tell it. Ultimately Janie is stirred into action searching for answers to her life questions. The stirring instigates her choice to kiss Johnny Taylor, which is the kiss that stirs Nanny to arrange her marriage to Logan Killicks, which is the kiss that “end[ed] her childhood” (12).

The tree’s agentic power continues through the passage in its ability to “stir” Janie by infiltrating her conscious experience. First, the tree’s materiality interacts with Janie’s material experience of her senses of sight, sound, smell, and touch: Janie “gazes” on the “mystery;” she hears a “flute song forgotten in another existence;” she

smells that “the rose of the world was breathing out smell” (10). Moreover, Janie recounts that the tree “followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness” (10-11). The pear tree has the agency to help bring thoughts and feelings that, for Janie, were only “vaguely felt” to the fore of her conscious thoughts. The emergence of previously “vaguely felt” observations foreshadows that the pear tree aids Janie’s meaning-making in future experiences. In other words, this is not the last time in Janie’s story that the pear tree phenomenologically serves to help Janie process her experiences.

Answering its call to “come and gaze on a mystery,” Janie lays under the pear tree and observes its plant-doings, which in this case is pollination. While under the pear tree, Janie closely observes nature and internalizes the systems and relationships she sees, forming for her an ecological vision for human interaction and signaling Janie’s sense of connection to plants. The story’s first occurrence of the pear tree is a beautiful description of a well-functioning ecosystem:

> She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! (11).

Janie witnesses the pollination of a flower, a biological process that scientists have delineated in sexual terms, leading scholars such as Grewal (104-105) and Maroto (78) to read this passage as a sexual awakening. While the sexual awakening reading is compelling and foundational, it lends itself to more of a symbolic reading of the pear tree as opposed to a material one. I build on this foundational reading of sexual awakening by considering the physical act of pollination to see what it may reveal about the material agency of the pear tree in this passage.

Ecologically speaking, pollination is a complex process that requires the agency of many nonhuman actors: plants and their communication strategies (including but not limited to the process of flowering and the flowers' positioning, scent/pheromones, color) and bees and their communication strategies (vision, scent, desire). In short, pollination is a result of plants' general immobility, and is the process of transporting "pollen grains from one flower […] to the stigmatic surface of another flower, so that a pollen tube can germinate, grow, and penetrate the ovary, delivering a male gamete that effects fertilization and so gives rise to a zygote (the diploid embryonic seed)," according to biologist Pat Willmer (55). Due to plants' immobility, other nonhumans (such as bees or wind) aid in moving the gametes (Willmer 55). Thus, a "coevolutionary" relationship developed between bees and flowering fruit trees, according to Pollan: "In an evolutionary bargain like the one struck by the bee and the apple tree, the two parties act on each other to advance their individual interest but wind up trading favors: food for the bee, transportation for the apple genes" (14). Indeed, flowers benefit from bees' help in cross-pollination, as opposed to a flower

pollinating itself, a process Willmer describes as "selfing," which is less preferred due to poorer germination outcomes, since "self-pollen may germinate slower, tubes may grow slower, or selfed embryos may abort" (64). And bees benefit from this arrangement as well, given that they "use both nectar and pollen as foods and rely totally on them for both adult and larval nutrition" (Willmer 378). Given the interdependent relationship between bees and flowers in pollination, Pollan suggests that bees and flowers are both subjective agents in this process, concluding that pollination reveals that "the traditional distinction between subject and object is meaningless" (14) because "[b]y the same token, we're prone to overestimate our own agency in nature. […] Our grammar might teach us to divide the world into active subjects and passive objects, but in a coevolutionary relationship every subject is also an object, every object a subject" (28). In other words, pollination as a process upends our understand of subject-object relationships.

Moreover, Pollan notes that biologists cast the pollination process as a sexual encounter, the bee as the phallic male and the flower as the receptive female, as Willmer does above (134). Given the long-held assumption of the male-female roles in this process, the fact that *Their Eyes* construes it as interdependent and meeting the desires and needs for both parties challenges the patriarchal assumption that women exist for men in such a way that men are the subject and women are the object. Reading the bee as the male in this pseudocopulation lends itself to reading the bee as the main actor or agent, but in reality, both the bee and the flower are subjects with interests and desires.

This male-female intersubjectivity exhibited in the ecological process of pollination becomes the basis for Janie's understanding of what marriage should be: Janie sees marriage as a mutually pleasurable, mutually subjective relationship between equally powerful agents. The pear tree challenges the patriarchal logic of the type of marriage the narrative has shown us thus far. Janie phenomenologically engages this pollination process and recognizes it as marriage, but not the marriage that Nanny tells her about. Nanny tells her of a transaction within a context of hierarchy, not mutual submission and care. As Moroto explains, "Janie's awakening to romance and sexual desire constitutes a powerful antithesis to her grandmother Nanny's metaphors of the black woman as the mule of the world and the spit-cup of men, with all their suggestion of dehumanization and sexual exploitation" (72). Weathers takes a similar view to Moroto, arguing that the pear tree challenges Nanny's view of marriage: "Replete with the promise of fecundity, the pear tree argues against the tyranny of control that Nanny unwisely, perhaps unwittingly, chooses" (203). While I think a more generous reading of Nanny's actions is warranted given her lack of opportunity to see strong and interdependent male-female relationships, Nanny ultimately views marriage as a transaction within a system of domination. In other words, the pear tree pollination establishes marriage as an interdependent and pleasurable experience, in contrast to the rape and suffering of Janie's matriarchs.

It is this nexus of suffering and hope, pleasure and pain within marriage and between Black people that makes the pear tree a good choice for storying Janie's

marriages. Why not apples, or a citrus fruit like the grapefruit that stories Janie's body in the beginning of the text? A few aspects of the material history of pear trees highlight possible reasons why a pear and not another kind of tree stories *Their Eyes*. First, pear trees are not native to the US. They originated in Europe and Asia, with European and Asian pears having different looks and culinary uses, and European pears being brought over in the Columbian Exchange (Wells 465). Like the Palma Christi and the Black enslaved bodies that built America, pear trees are migrants in the US. In this way, the pear tree stories the American-colonial historic context of this novel in which the characters seek to reclaim the history and lives stolen from them by the slave trade.

Additionally, since pear trees can live to be hundreds of years old, there is a sense in which Nanny's pear tree is Janie's eldest grandparent, teaching her wisdom and allowing her to reclaim some aspects of the wisdom stolen from her ancestors in the history of colonization. Unlike Nanny, the pear tree has roots *and* branches, and even blossoms and pollen and bees to make it fruit. Moreover, the fertility associations with the pear fruit align with Janie's story of sexual awakening and her yearning for marital bliss, despite the fact that Janie remains childless through the novel. Visually, the pear's shape matches that of a wide-hipped woman, hips being associated with fertility in many cultures (Wells 464). Sitting at the nexus of feminine sexuality and the larger context of European colonization of the Americas and its Atlantic slave trade, the pear tree is fit to story Janie's marriages.

And marriage isn't the only thing the pear tree stories for Janie: Janie conceives of her life in "pear tree time." After her grandmother's death, Janie is still trying to take Nanny's advice to heart, the advice to be patient for love to grow. So, "Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time, and an orange time. But when the pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world she began to stand around the gate and expect things" (25). Here we see another subtle phytomorphism occurring: Janie uses plant-time to structure her experience and expectations. She could have easily said she waited a year, but instead of choosing to construe her experience in man-made calendar time, she marks it by the seasons. Moreover, the plant-time here is understood specifically in relation to tree leaves/flowers: trees bloom in the spring, turn vibrant green in the summer, and turn orange in the fall. She marks the end of her year of waiting with the presence of pollen resonant of her pear tree experience, suggesting that this plant-time is actually pear-tree time, and revealing that Janie uses the pear tree to make meaning of her experiences. Additionally, Janie "knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind. She often spoke to falling seeds and said, 'Ah hope you fall on soft ground,' because she heard seeds saying that to each other" (25). In the absence of her grandmother's mentorship, Janie looks to the natural world around her for wisdom, learning things that no human has ever communicated to her. She observes nature's ways and listens to its desires, and Janie exhibits compassion for the vulnerability of nonhumans such as seeds. Janie's embrace of plant-time, communion with trees, and compassion for

plant-beings suggests that she looks to plants as teachers and treats them with kindness while reinforcing the primacy of the pear tree in structuring her experience.

Readers may wonder if these passages describing the pear tree are simply instances of anthropomorphism rather than what I've termed phytomorphism. At first, it may seem like the pear tree is anthropomorphized by describing it as "marriage," which is a human institution. Janie's phenomenological interaction with the pear tree's agency, however, invites us to read it as a phytomorphism instead. First, as Janie considers her experience of the pear tree with her hypothetical knowledge of men from her Nanny, she phytomorphizes herself in the image of the pear tree, an epistemological act that she will conduct several times throughout the rest of the text. Janie proclaims, "Oh to be a pear tree—*any* tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! […] Where were the singing bees for her?" (13). Janie casts herself in the image of the pear tree, desiring a mutually subjective and pleasurable relationship.

Moreover, Janie only knows the pear tree; she does not know marriage through any personal experience or even secondhand from trusted women in her life. Janie tells of her lack of relationship with her parents, "Ah ain't never seen mah papa. And Ah didn't know 'im if Ah did, Mah mama neither…Mah grandma raised me" (8). Janie's mother Leafy was born "out of wedlock" due to Nanny being raped while she was enslaved (17), and Janie was conceived when her mother was raped by a school teacher (19). Her grandmother has no husband at this point, either, because she "wouldn't marry nobody, though [she] could have uh heap uh times, cause [she] didn't

want nobody mistreating [her] baby" (19). Janie's understanding of marriage is entirely hypothetical at this stage in her life. Thus, the pear tree, as an agent interacting with its ecological counterparts, exhibits a material relationship among two parties that allows Janie to establish her own understanding of marriage. It's as if Janie is saying, "I've heard about marriage, but I've never seen one until now." Janie's nebulous, vague, and intangible understanding of this human institution is entirely refigured by what she witnesses the pear tree experiencing, suggesting that she re-reads the human institution (marriage) through the plant-being (pollination) as opposed to anthropomorphizing.

Reverse engineering the human institution of marriage from ecological processes is all the more significant in regard to the history of slavery and how it affected long-term monogamous relationships among enslaved Black people. Nanny says as much when she recounts her experience, "Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of the hold-backs of slavery" (16). Moreover, reading marriage *through* ecology also challenges the patriarchal notion of marriage, which is steeped in male ownership of women as property, or as Nanny implies, the idea that women exist for men only. Even so, history reports efforts of enslaved Black people to resist disruptions in their family-forming through marriage despite their oppression, developing traditions such as "jumping the broom" to signal monogamous commitment in the context of

community.[10] But, Nanny doesn't recall any experience with any kind of marriage, recounting only that she was denied this human birthright to form families. In this way, Hurston insinuates that learning from plants is a form of liberation from both systemic oppression that excluded Black people from engaging in or benefitting from the institution of marriage as well as women in general from patriarchal constructs of marriage-as-ownership or marriage-as-purpose.

My argument that the pear tree scene constitutes phytomorphism instead of anthropomorphism is reinforced by the fact that Janie filters all of her subsequent marriages through the logic of the pear tree pollination, rather than the other way around; the pear tree is the original, the archetype, the standard by which she evaluates her human experience; it exemplifies the human institution for Janie. The pear tree "calls" and "stirs" and Janie answers and searches in response. For example, shortly before she must marry Logan Killicks, Janie questions: "Did marriage end the cosmic loneliness of the unmated? Did marriage compel love like the sun the day?" (21). Since the marriage is arranged, Janie does not know how she feels about Logan, and she wonders if love can come from such an arrangement. We see Janie's internal wrestling with the conflicting signals she gets from the human advisors in her life as

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[10] According to the African American Registry, the tradition of "jumping the broom" "was not a custom of slavery, but is a part of African culture that survived American slavery" ("Jumping the Broom"). In other words, enslaved Africans maintained their own cultural representation of marriage while simultaneously resisting the oppression that attempted to keep them from it.

opposed to the pear tree: “In the few days to live before she went to Logan Killicks […] She was back and forth to the pear tree continuously wondering and thinking” (21). When she needs advice on human relationships, Janie seeks out the pear tree. In this way, Janie exhibits a latent ability to learn from plants that will continue through the narrative.

2.5 Falling Short of the Pear Tree: Janie’s First Two Husbands

While Janie knows from her pear tree experience that good relationships are made of both giving and receiving, her marriage with Logan Killicks fails to meet the standards of an ecofeminist relationship as exemplified by the pear tree. Shortly after the wedding, Janie returns to Nanny’s house to get her advice on why the love she expected to follow marriage hasn’t come yet. Nanny scolds Janie for focusing too much on “love;” for Nanny, love isn’t the most important part of marriage; the transaction—and the protection it provides—is most important (23). Janie’s response indicates that she remains sexually unfulfilled due to her lack of love and affection (23). It's not just sexual fulfilment missing in Janie’s marriage: Killicks fails to treat Janie with basic respect and emotionally abuses her, exploiting Janie for her labor in service to his large profits, calling her “spoilt” for not helping split and haul wood (26). Maroto elaborates on Killicks’ treatment of Janie: “Killicks acts like a slave master with his insults and threats of violence when Janie refuses to obey him” (74). Janie’s first recorded response to his verbal abuse reveals the transactional nature of

their relationship: “Ah’m just as stiff as you is stout. If you can stand not to chop and tote wood Ah reckon you can stand not to git no dinner” (26). Rather than a marriage of equals who mutually consider the needs and strengths of each other as well as the ecosystem as a whole—as seen in the intersubjectivity of the pear tree—their division of labor becomes a source of contention and passive aggression rather than productive cultivation of different household spheres. Killicks objectifies Janie—like he chops the wood of tree bodies—by thinking he should mold her into a proper wife through emotional abuse and forced labor, affirming the view of marriage Nanny perpetuated.

Janie construes the inadequacy of her marriage in light of the pear tree. She tells Nanny, “Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think” (24). In other words, as Janie evaluates her short experience with marriage to Logan Killicks, she compares it to the standard of the pear tree experience and finds it wanting—there is no stirring—according to the narrator, “The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree” (14). This evaluation of Killicks is profoundly phytopomorphic: from a humanistic perspective, we expect the humans would be the primary and most real, but Hurston flips that expectation on its head by casting the pear tree as more real than Logan. Logan Killicks is reduced to a “vision”—an immaterial image, akin to a dream, a reverie, an imagined reality. In contrast, the pear tree is simply the pear tree. It is real and primary to the “vision,” and it is the vision, the immaterial, that desecrates the material. While the vision certainly has agency to enact something such as “desecration,” we see that Janie’s learning-

from-plants is reinforced by the pear tree's material primacy in her evaluation of her experience of being married to Logan Killicks.

Janie's hope for an egalitarian marriage derives directly from her relationship to and knowledge of nature, while Killicks' objectification of Janie mirrors his utilitarian view of nature. In other words, Logan's oppression of Janie stems from his desire to make money and retain power, and it is the same impulse that drives him to exploit nature for his profit, evidencing Killicks' complicity in the capitalist-patriarchy. Logan tells Janie, "Ah needs two mules dis yeah. Taters is goin' tuh be taters in de fall. Bringin' big prices. Ah aims tuh run two plows, and dis man Ah'm talkin' 'bout is got uh mule all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle 'im" (27). Logan sees both the mule and Janie as cogs in his production machine, an opportunity to make more money for himself. His desire for another mule specifically for Janie echoes Nanny's earlier quip that "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world" (14). By invoking this earlier sentiment from Nanny, the text suggests a relationship between the exploitation of women and animals, a relationship explored by ecofeminists, especially within the context of vegan studies, while simultaneously calling attention to the animalization of humans as an act of dehumanization.[11] While it's easy to see how Logan exploits Janie for labor, it might seem incongruous to say he exploits the mules. But from the perspective of veganism, any use of an animal for profit is

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[11] See Laura Wright's *The Vegan Studies Project*, Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat,* and *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, edited by Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen.

considered exploitation. The logic is that mules, for example, don't consent to sharing their labor. Logan's desire for profit causes him to use both Janie and the mules for labor they don't consent to sharing. Ultimately, the text invites us to consider the points of view of nonhumans such as plants and animals. In light of this, Logan exhibits a simultaneous love of material wealth that causes him to exploit plants and animals and a love of having power over Janie, revealing his complicity in the capitalist-patriarchy Janie knows there is something wrong with this because of the wisdom gleaned from the pear tree.

Janie's despondency with Logan and her rejection of her future of forced labor primes her to welcome a new suitor who seems to offer freedom from both. When we meet Joe Starks, he exudes modern charm and social capital in his appearance, exemplifying the meaning of "culture" in the ecofeminist notion of the nature/culture dichotomy. As Janie spots Joe coming down the road, she describes him as "a citified, stylish dressed man with his hat set at an angle that didn't belong in these parts. His coat was over his arm, but he didn't need it to represent his clothes. The shirt with the silk sleeveholders was dazzling enough for the world" (27). Joe learned his culture from "workin' for white folks all his life" (28).

At the outset of her relationship with Joe, Janie continues to invoke the pear tree to evaluate her experience of men. When she first meets Joe, she concludes that he "did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees" (29). As we saw with her evaluation of Killicks, we see that, for Janie, the plant entities—i.e. the pear tree and the pollen—are the original standard and the materially real. The human, Joe, is cast in

metaphorical terms, evidenced by the word "represent" and that what Joe doesn't represent is the materially real plant-beings; another phytomorphism. Janie's intuition, honed from a strong communion with plant wisdom, indicates that there is still something not quite right with Joe. Instead, Janie settles for the fact that "he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (29). What motivates Janie to settle for Joe seems to have nothing to do with the pear tree, indicating that, in a sense, she is tabling the pear tree vision for now in favor of simply escaping Logan. In this way, Janie erroneously tries to liberate herself from Logan with simply a new flavor of exploitation, all the while still beholden to the patriarchy, just a different expression of it. As Janie decides to go along with Jody, move with him to a new town he is founding, she seems to be in denial of what she knows to be true about the pear tree, what her intuition initially told her when she met Joe. It's as if Janie tries to will into existence that Jody *will be* the pear tree husband: "From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom" (32). It's not so much that Janie just ignores her intuition, it's that she settles for what she perceives to be a lesser evil, a more palatable survival, or an unknown with immense potential instead of what she knows, which is a dead-end, abusive, and exploitive marriage with Logan Killicks. In Janie's continual evaluation of marriage and men, we see that the pear tree wisdom guides her thinking, even when she negotiates with the capitalist-patriarchy in her attempt to survive it.

Despite Janie's hopes at the outset, Joe also fails to enact her vision of the pear tree due to his narcissism and abuse. Joe exhibits a patriarchal impulse on a different

end of the spectrum from Logan Killicks' exploitation of Janie for hard labor, one in which women are best suited for increasing class and social capital. As they enter the new town, Joe searches for the mayor and is incredulous to hear they don't have one: "I god, where's de Mayor?...Ah want tuh speak wid de Mayor...Ain't got no Mayor! Well, who tells y'all what to do?" (34-35). Weathers expounds upon this passage and Joe's desire for authority: "Hungering for power and authority, Starks booms his entrance into the town...Hurston's spelling transforms his expletive into declaration: I god. Joe Starks's 'god' with its lowercase g and capital M essentially reduces god while raising the Mayor wannabe to new dominance" (204). Weathers further argues that "Starks covets the mayoral position, forges his authority from the subjection, fear, and awe of the citizens, and perpetuates his stronghold by parading his successes, one of which is Janie—ornament-wife, a notch on his sword" (204). Indeed, Joe tells Janie when he meets her, "A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you" and that "he would be a big ruler of things with her reaping the benefits" (29). Grewal explains that "[Joe] wants to transform Janie into a house-wife. He wants to emulate the protocols of class and make her a lady" (107). Bealer similarly points out that "Joe also insists that Janie conform to his idea of genteel femininity at the price of her ability to interact with the Eatonville residents" (317). Joe imposes on Janie's feminine presentation of herself for his own benefit when the store opens: "Jody told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her...So she put on one of

her bought dresses and went up the new-cut road all dressed in wine-colored red" (41). Maroto suggests that Joe's treatment of Janie "resembles that of a slave master" (75), and Bealer's analysis illuminates the lack of ecological intersubjectivity in Joe and Janie's relationship as seen in the pear tree: Joe takes from Janie what he wants and needs without providing her what she wants and needs. Their relationship continually devolves into object-subject ownership evidenced by Joe's insistence on Janie covering her hair in the store, a requirement that spawned from his own jealousy, ignoring the fact that "This business of the head-rag irked [Janie] endlessly" (55). Joe's concern for social capital in the form of authority causes him to objectify the Eatonville residents as well as Janie for his own gain.

At this point, I've offered a feminist reading of Joe and Janie's relationship, but the way Hurston ties Joe's treatment of the head covering to the incident with Matt Bonner's mule indicates a relationship between how Joe treats Janie and how he treats this mule, which ultimately invites us to move beyond just feminist analysis to an ecofeminist analysis. After the reader learns that Janie is in the store for Joe to look at, the narrator continues, "But he never said things like that. It just wasn't in him. Take the matter of the yellow mule, for instance" (55). The narrator then launches into the drawn-out story of the death of Matt Bonner's mule. In short, Matt Bonner's mule was a common topic of porch conversation Janie enjoyed listening to—men would banter about the mule's malnutrition or disposition. When the mule ends up in front of the store one day, some of the local men are all too happy to tease and bait the poor creature. At first, when the men tantalize the mule, both Janie and Joe appear to have

sympathy for the animal: Joe buys the mule from Matt Bonner to give him rest (58); however, the reader later learns that only Janie's sympathy was true. Janie, given her communal relationship with nonhuman nature and continual association with mules as exploited work animals, truly despises the mistreatment of the mule:

> Everybody was having fun at the mule-baiting. All but Janie. She snatched her head away from the spectacle and began muttering to herself. "They oughta be shamed uh theyselves! Teasin' dat poor brute beast lak they id! Done been worked tuh death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatment, and now they got tuh finish devilin' 'im tuh death" [...] a little war of defense for helpless things was going on inside her. (56-57)

Janie's sympathy for the mule reveals both her connection to nature more broadly as previously indicated by her pursuit of plant-wisdom as well as her ability to compassionately identify with the mule. Sympathy for the "helpless things" (57) of nature reminds the reader of when Janie spoke to the seeds, hoping they would "fall on soft ground" (25). Additionally, though, Janie identifies with the mule: both her previous and current husband have exploited her for labor and mistreated her due to their hierarchical rather than ecological approach to marriage and relationships. When the mule finally dies, the townspeople must drag him out of town for sanitation purposes, and they hold a mock funeral where they "mocked everything human in death" (60). Joe shows a blatant disrespect for the animal when he "stood on the distended belly of the mule for a platform and made gestures" (60). The reader then realizes that because Joe owns the mule, he has a right to mock its death in this way.

The mock funeral apparently becomes so absurdly funny that “the sisters got mock-happy and shouted and had to be held up by the menfolks” (61). Weathers elucidates the powerful imagery of the mule funeral in its implications for Janie arguing that “Starks treats Janie as irreverently as he does the mule,” fulfilling Nanny’s fear that Janie would be the mule of the world (204). Joe’s capitalist-patriarchal impulse to disrespect human and non-human nature manifests itself powerfully in his treatment of the mule, which mirrors his treatment of Janie.

While the conflation of Janie and Matt Bonner’s mule is somewhat subtle, Joe goes on to overtly reveal that his mistreatment of Janie is, in fact, catalyzed by the same impulse to disregard nonhuman nature as valuable. After the death of the mule, Joe’s and Janie’s relationship sharply declines; they can no longer contain their marital strife to their home, and they fight in the public sphere of the store. When Joe accuses Janie of misplacing a bill of lading, he insults her in front of the store: “‘Dat’s ’cause you need tellin’,’ he rejoined hotly. ‘It would be pitiful if Ah didn’t. Somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don’t think non theirselves’” (71). Joe simultaneously degrades Janie, all women, children, and animals by suggesting they are incapable of thinking, reifying a human/nature binary in which the only humans are men. The seed of Joe’s patriarchal mindset grows after this incident in the store, and his verbal abuse escalates into physical abuse: because her dinner recipe flopped, “he slapped her face in the kitchen...until she had a ringing around in her ears” (71-72). For Starks, considering Janie among “intellectually inferior” humans and nonhumans justifies his mistreatment of her, indicating that, in

ecofeminist terms, his abuse of women and nature stem from the same impulse for capitalist-patriarchal power.

Once again, in the face of Joe's abuse, Janie employs her recollection of the pear tree to bring meaning to her experience. As Bealer points out, "Joe's blows leaves a 'ringing sound in her ears.' Drowning out all other sound and forming an ugly inversion of the bees' 'alto chant'" (318). After he slaps her, "She wasn't petal open with him anymore" (71) and "she had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistering young fruit where the petals used to be" (72). As we saw when she first agreed to marry Jody, Janie felt like she could "manifest," i.e. bring into existence by sheer will, a pear tree marriage. We see her sense of agency present when *she decides* to no longer be "petal open" or "dust pollen over her man," and she refuses to fruit. In other words, Janie was keeping petal of this marriage open to potential pollen and she refuses to continue doing so. My analysis here is reinforced by the fact that the marriage takes a steep nosedive after Janie closes her "petal[s]"; they begin sleeping in different rooms, are not on speaking terms, and he doesn't let her care for him while he's sick. Janie uses her imagination to help her cope with the disappointment of her marriage to Joe: "Then one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending the sore and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and clothes" (77). Here the shade of the tree serves as a refuge for Janie's troubled mind, a trouble far from the "stirring" of Nanny's pear tree. In contrast to the original "stirring" of the pear tree, Janie realizes her shade-tree vision "was like a drug" that

allowed her to “receive[] all things with the stolidness of the earth which soaks up urine and perfume with the same indifference” (77). Janie’s experience of trauma and abuse has numbed the stirring of the pear tree; her indifference helps her cope with how terrible her marriage to Jody has become. In fact, Janie feels liberated when he dies, evidenced by her immediate “[tearing] off [of] the kerchief” and “let[ing] down [of] her plentiful hair,” a symbol of Starks’ capitalist-patriarchal control of Janie. Janie had hoped that marrying Starks had the potential of fulfilling her pear tree dream, but he, too, failed to meet the standard of the pear tree, where pleasure and intersubjectivity characterizes relationships. It’s as if Janie’s uncovering of her hair serves to open her petals again to the visiting bees.

2.6 “He Could Be a Bee to a Blossom”: Janie and Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods

It isn’t until Janie meets Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods after Joe’s death that she comes even close to a pear tree marriage. While Tea Cake most closely emulates the pear tree, his and Janie’s relationship is characterized by a tension between ecofeminist pear tree principles and the impulse of capitalist-patriarchy. In other words, Tea Cake’s intersectional identities as a Black man locate him at the nexus of capitalist oppression by White male structures while retaining standing in the patriarchal hierarchy over Black women such as Janie. An additional angle to this intersection is Tea Cake’s relationship with nature, one in which the capitalist exploits Tea Cake to exploit nature; in this way, Tea Cake’s relationship with the capitalist-

patriarchy is complex: it exploits him yet he becomes an agent of exploitation within the system. This intersectional tension is foreshadowed by Tea Cake's very name, a phytomorphic "Vergible Woods," and characterizes my extended discussion of their relationship.

Hurston's phytomorphic naming convention for Tea Cake lays the groundwork for my reading that Tea Cake both exhibits ecofeminist ideals as well as struggles with the tension between ecofeminist ethics, his own oppression as a Black man at the hands of capitalist structures, and the temptation of power offered by the capitalist-patriarchy. Scholars who have examined Tea Cake's given name agree that there is an ecological theme at play. For example, Grewal elucidates the significance of Tea Cake's given name, foreshadowing the "greening" role he plays in Janie's life as well as the way he challenges the capitalist-patriarchy: "Tea Cake's given name, Vergible Woods, allies him with nature and the necessary greening of Janie's life. If the novel critiques the bourgeois economy of work and relationship based on ownership and possession, [that economy] is flouted by Tea Cake, whose legacy to Janie is a packet of seeds he meant to plant" (108). Weathers suggests that Tea Cake's surname also "signifies the legitimate trees against which Janie measures her happiness" (211), as I and others have shown. Tea Cake's phytomorphism reveals the way in which the materiality of the pear tree surfaces again for Janie as she compares Tea Cake to pollination. Due to Tea Cake's last name "Woods," scholars often overlook the potential phytomorphic undertones of the name "Vergible." I'll briefly offer a few

reasons why the ecological motifs resonant in the name "Vergible" may help us better see the tension at play in Tea Cake's character.

In my estimation, "Vergible"—a name invented by Hurston—invokes two possible name connections that add depth to our understanding of Tea Cake's casting in the image of plants; these potential names are "Virginia" and "Virgil." On one hand, the name "Virgil" suggests a classical Western connection to the Enlightenment and the nonhuman environment that further underscores the tension Tea Cake occupies between oppressed and oppressor. Virgil, aside from being the name of the famous poet, lacks a clear etymology, according to the OED ("Virgils"). Even so, associating Tea Cake with the poet Virgil would concomitantly associate him with Western civilization as Virgil's *Aeneid* is considered a canonical work in the development of the West, and *The Georgics* is one of his other major works that also happens to be about agriculture, which Virgil characterizes as a somewhat violent and ongoing struggle between man and nature. Within this perspective, Virgil's *The Georgics* offers detailed descriptions of how to manage and curate nature for man's use, describing skills such as pruning and grafting. *The Georgics'* first book even ends with a fatal storm much like *Their Eyes* does. Thus, the word "Virgilian," surfaced in historical use in the Enlightenment period (earliest use is 1724) to refer to "One who practices agriculture after the methods laid down by Virgil," suggesting that Tea Cake's unique first name suggests a nature-connection within a Western context ("Virgilian"). For example, *The semi-Virgilian husbandry, deduced from various experiments* published in 1764 by John Randall illustrates the Enlightenment thinking

undergirding his agricultural exploration. Randall suggests that his methods will aid farmers who are "still as much wanting as in any dark age of the remoter generations, or earlier periods of the world" (2), setting up a contrast between "Virgilian" agriculture and traditional ecological knowledges that are relevant to my analysis of both Tea Cake as a character and *Their Eyes* more broadly. Moreover, the ideological seeds planted in the Enlightenment have borne the fruit of the Green Revolution—perhaps that "perfection" Randall refers to—whose methods harm both humans and nature. If we take Vergible to be etymologically related to "Virgilian" agricultural methods in use in the Enlightenment era, we can associate it with methods of plantationization, which are characterized by relating to nature through practices of domestication, control, masculinist logic, and modernity broadly construed as development of Western ways of being. Given a reading of Vergible as resonant with "Virgil" implicitly connects Tea Cake with the logic of Western ways of being and knowing nature in the Plantationocene.

In this way, Virgilian agriculture may be a fittingly colonialist application for the colonialist ideology present in the name "Virginia," which also resonates with the name "Vergible." A traditionally feminine name originating in the patriarchal value of virginity, the name Virginia signals a colonial impulse to see land as metaphorical for virgin women, available to be conquered, according to Annette Kolodny. Kolodny elucidates from primary text documents the gendered undertones of colonial expansion, especially as it relates to virginity. In 1632 Thomas Morton described New England as a neglected maiden, "Like a faire virgin, longing to be sped, And meete

her lover in a Nuptiall bed" (Kolodny 12). Associating Tea Cake with the meanings present in the name Virginia positions Tea Cake as an object in the colonialist view of Black people and nature. The potentialities of "Virgil" and "Virginia" taken together illustrate the nexus of oppression Tea Cake must negotiate both in his own experience and how he treats Janie.

Given the tension of associations with both "Virgilian" and "Virginia," the surname "woods" represents an engagement with nature related to wildness, chaos, femininity, and IEKs. The etymology of "wood," according to the OED reinforces this tension as early uses of the term "woods" referred to "A collection of trees growing more or less thickly together (esp. naturally, *as distinguished from a plantation*)" ("wood," emphasis mine). In other words, the tension between the woods and the cultivated plantation is the same tension at play in Tea Cake's character: the woods as a sort of wild place of (eco)femininity and radical interdependence, but also where Leafy is raped and Black bodies are lynched, and the plantation as the site of masculinist logic applied to agriculture in the exploitation of nature and racist-capitalist patriarchy in the enslavement of Black people and oppression of women. In other words, the plantation is a site that illustrates the intersectionality of gender oppression: Tea Cake, as a Black man, exists in the tension between the domination that comes with masculinity and the other-ness that comes with being a Black body on a plantation—a tension that comes to a head for Tea Cake and Janie on the plantation of the Everglades. Thus, while he is capable of exhibiting ecofeminist ideals—he is even on the *verge* of them—Tea Cake is not completely free of the temptation to

control and abuse women and nature for his own gain, and this tension is present in the phytomorphism of his given name, "Vergible Woods."

Such lengthy discussion of Tea Cake's given name may leave readers questioning the meaning of his nickname. The text doesn't give us much by way of how he got this nickname; Tea Cake tells Janie, "'De name mah mama gimme is Vergible Woods. Dey calls me Tea Cake for short'" (97). Janie replies, "Tea Cake! So you sweet as all dat?" and Tea Cake replies, "'Ah may be guilty. You better try me and see'" (97). If the name Vergible Woods connects Tea Cake to the capitalist-patriarchal temptation to control women and nature and his tension within that nexus, his nickname connects him to the joy of his Black ancestors, further revealing his complexity as a character. In the American South, tea cakes (cookies often served with tea) were a site of pleasure and culture-formation for enslaved Black people, according to food educator Etha Robinson. Robinson writes, "enslaved people were allowed to cook certain things at Christmastime, and one of those recipes was a tea cake," which was perhaps modeled after English tea cakes served in White homes (Robinson). Recipes and measurements were passed down orally due to lack of literacy (Robinson). Tea cakes are often a part of Juneteenth celebrations (Bates). Ultimately, even his nickname suggests a tension in Tea Cake's character: while his name indicates that he is indeed a sweet treat for Janie, the resonance of the experience of enslaved Black people finding joy in culinary creations reminds us of the extent of their oppression as well.

While this tension follows Tea Cake around the world of *Their Eyes*, when the reader meets him, it is immediately apparent that his approach to Janie contrasts Joe's patriarchal dominance. For instance, Tea Cake invites Janie to play checkers, an invitation that juxtaposes an earlier scene when Joe rudely addressed Janie and ordered her to bring him the checkerboard so he could play with someone else: "'You getting' too moufy, Janie,' Starks told her. "Go fetch me de checker-board *and* de checkers. Sam Watson, you'se mah fish'" (76, emphasis in original). While Janie and Tea Cake laugh together in the store, Tea Cake never critiques her for "moufy-ness" and instead asks, "'How about playin' *you* some checkers? You looks hard tuh beat'" (95, emphasis in original). Even Hurston's style choice to employ italics in these passages reveals the nature of the juxtaposition: the italics in Joe's statement emphasizes and highlights Joe's exacting demands of Janie by adding to the orders he dispenses; conversely, Tea Cake's emphasized "you" indicates that he is actually interested in Janie and having fun with her.

By asking her to play checkers, Tea Cake invites Janie into a male space to which she was previously denied access. Janie realizes the gravity of Tea Cake's invitation: "[Janie] found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play. That was even nice" (95-96). Janie's glowing insides invoke the stirring of the pear tree. Furthermore, Tea Cake and Janie actually have fun together: "They scrambled and upset the board and laughed at that" (96). Their shared fun in a previously male-dominated space equalizes them as peers and friends rather than maintaining the hierarchy previously inherent in the game of

checkers. Janie remains insecure in some ways due to Joe's abuse; however, Tea Cake slowly builds her back up, dismantling the hierarchy further: "'Jody useter tell me Ah never would learn. It wuz too heavy fuh mah brains.' 'Folks is playin' it wid sense and folks is playin' it without. But you got good meat on yo' head. You'll learn'" (96). Janie draws directly on the conversation where Joe likened her to animals and children, yet Tea Cake challenges the notion that Janie lacks sense or intelligence, assigning her dignity as a subject rather than catering to Joe's previous objectification. Even their initial friendship balances out the hierarchy Janie experienced in her first two marriages. Tea Cake sees Janie as an equal who possesses inherent value and deserves friendship and affection.

As their relationship grows, the presence of mutual pleasure invokes the image of the pear tree. Tea Cake exhibits a sense of value in Janie that is detached from any social or economic gain, unlike her first two husbands. Regarding social gain, when Tea Cake suggests that he desires Janie romantically, she brushes him off by commenting on their twelve-year age difference. Tea Cake responds, "De thought uh mah youngness don't satisfy me lak yo' presence do" (105). But then Janie thinks beyond just the two of them, considering how their relationship would be perceived by the town: "It makes uh whole heap uh difference wid most folks, Tea Cake" (105). After years of marriage to a man who only valued Janie for the social capital she brought him, Janie is conditioned to filter her romantic prospects through the perceptions of her social circle. But Tea Cake resists the capitalist-patriarchal urge to subsume romantic relationships into the realm of social capital: "Things lak dat got uh

whole lot tuh do wid convenience, but it ain't got nothin' tuh do wid love" (105). While Janie is skeptical of Tea Cake's sincerity, he proves her right when their relationship "goes public" and their social standing indeed suffers, but they remain committed to one another. The townspeople gossip about them incessantly, that Janie is settling for a low-class man and moving on too quickly from Jody: "Tea Cake and Mrs. Mayor Starks! All the men that she could get, and fooling with somebody like Tea Cake! Another thing, Joe Starks hadn't been dead but nine months and here she goes sashaying off to a picnic in pink linen" (110). In the gossip of the towns-people is a depiction of Tea Cake and Janie's "young love:" "Tea Cake and Janie gone hunting. Tea Cake and Janie gone fishing. Tea Cake and Janie gone to Orlando to the movies. Tea Cake and Janie gone to a dance" (110). Unlike Joe Starks, neither Janie nor Tea Cake is interested in using one another for social gain. And unlike Logan Killicks, Tea Cake seems uninterested in the capitalist-patriarchal urge to use Janie for economic gain. When the townspeople gossip that Tea Cake is just after Janie's money, Janie tells her concerned friend Phoeby, "He ain't never ask de first penny from me yet, and if he love property he ain't no different from all de rest of us" (112). In contrast to her earlier marriages, Janie is able to enjoy life with Tea Cake, rather than feel forced to serve him economically. In fact, Tea Cake inverts the experience of Janie's marriage to Killicks when she was given the job of getting seed potatoes ready; neighbors see Tea Cake take on the gardening tasks himself, such as "making flower beds in Janie's yard and seeding the garden for her" (110). Tea Cake sees Janie as more than an economic entity or one who can raise his social status—he likes her for who she is—

and he serves her as an equal partner in domestic tasks such as gardening, exhibiting ecofeminist ethics.

As hinted throughout my analysis of their early relationship, when compared to the pear tree of her youth, Janie's relationship with Tea Cake exhibits the most likeness to the ecological, interdependent, and intensely "stirring" process of pollination—yet a tension remains. Janie herself notices this and again returns to the pear tree to evaluate: After his confession of love, Janie can't stop thinking about him, and she also invokes the pear tree imagery: "He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (106). With Janie's evaluations of Killicks and Starks in comparison to the pear tree, the men were the immaterial, the metaphorical, the imagined realities that failed to stand up to the primary standard of the pear tree; however, Tea Cake is not cast in these metaphorical terms. Tea Cake is cast not as a vision (Logan) or representation (Jody), but simply as "he" followed by a "to be" verb. Even so, as evidenced by the uncertainty of the verb "could," there is a lack of full conflation of Tea Cake and the pear tree, and Janie's tentativeness reflects the insecurity about how men have failed to stand up to the example of the pear tree. We again see the sense of tension that characterizes Janie and Tea Cake's relationship; he "could be" the pear tree, but perhaps, ultimately, he is not. This offers another way of thinking of Tea Cake's given name, Vergible, which sounds "verge," meaning "inclining towards" or "on the edge of" or "to border upon a state or condition" ("verge, n.2, v.1"). Tea Cake is full of potential, on the verge of the pear tree. Whether or not Tea Cake lives up to the standard of the pear tree is yet to be seen, but this early

comparison signals the almost-ness that characterizes Janie and Tea Cake's relationship.

In this way, many characteristics of their relationship and Tea Cake as a person do hearken back to the pear tree. For example, their mutual pleasure in games, activities and each other, reveals a sense of intersubjectivity, as Bealer points out, "Tea Cake's desire for mutual enjoyment through play recalls the 'natural' space of pleasure and satisfaction Janie discovered under the pear tree" (320). In this instance, their shared ambivalence toward economic and social capital mimics the interdependence of nature in its sharing of resources. We also have evidence that Tea Cake similarly construes his relationship with Janie in ecological terms. After the late-night "heart to heart" in which he confesses his love to her, Tea Cake remarks, "Look lak we done run our conversation from grass roots tuh pine trees" (106). Not only does this remark invoke the earlier image of Janie's construal of her life as "a great tree in leaf" (and locates Tea Cake in that life story), it also indicates that Tea Cake also learns from plants similarly to the way Janie does, employing plants as discursive material to make sense of his experience. Considering that Tea Cake is both the only male character even seemingly capable of ecofeminist ethics, as well as the only male character who exhibits a propensity to learn from plants and see himself among them, the texts suggest these traits are meaningfully correlated—indeed, he "could be a bee to a blossom"—he is capable.

While we see in Tea Cake some admirable examples of his ability to embody ecofeminist values, Janie and Tea Cake's time in the Everglades exhibits a more

erratic back-and-forth tension for Tea Cake as he negotiates his love for Janie with his own insecurity in his identity and the way that insecurity is both fueled by and pacified by the capitalist-patriarchy. First, even in his motivation to go to the Everglades, we see Tea Cake's propensity to view money as liberatory in the form of providing a means of facilitating fun. For example, after some time in Jacksonville, Tea Cake suggests they go to the muck in the Everglades: "Oh down in de Everglades round Clewiston and Belle Glade where dey raise all dat cane and string-bean and tomatuhs. Folks don't do nothin' down dere but make money and fun and foolishness" (128). Further, we see Tea Cake's relationship with nature as one that fundamentally serves his larger purposes of monetary gain: "All day Ah'm pickin' beans. All night Ah'm pickin' mah box and rollin' dice. Between de beans and de dice, Ah can't lose" (129). What seems at first to be "money and fun and foolishness" may actually be a larger problem Tea Cake has with gambling; this was foreshadowed when Tea Cake stole Janie's money and promised to pay her back by winning more through gambling. Killicks' capitalistic engagement was in the form of a profitable farm, and Starks was more interested in social capital and luxury, but Tea Cake is interpellated by capitalism through gambling. We see evidence of an addiction when Tea Cake views his job as merely fuel for his gambling: the parallelism of all day/all night and picking beans/rolling dice evidences that his day activities are only to serve his nightly gambling endeavors, underscoring that Tea Cake is unconsciously roped into several capitalistic ventures that objectify him.

But as Tea Cake continues working, it turns out he does lose something "between the beans and the dice"—Janie. While Tea Cake works on the muck, he begins to miss Janie during the day and comes home to see her, highlighting his affection for her: "Janie, Ah gits lonesome out dere all day 'thout yuh. After dis, you betta come git uh job uh work out dere lak de rest uh de women—so Ah won't be losin' time comin' home" (133). Tea Cake's invitation could be read both positively and negatively. On the one hand, a cynical reading is that Tea Cake is trying to "have his cake and eat it too," by having Janie join him in the work. On the other hand, this invitation could be read generously as Tea Cake initiating a flattening of the usual patriarchal hierarchy by inviting her to share a male dominated workspace with him. These potential readings underscore the tension undergirding this time in Janie and Tea Cake's marriage. Either way, Janie accepts the invitation. Janie and Tea Cake have fun working together, and since they both spend the day working, "Tea Cake would help get supper afterwards" (133) indicating a balanced division of home labor as Janie joins the workforce.

In addition to Tea Cake's attempts to negotiate making and spending money with spending time with Janie, we see a capitalist-patriarchal tension—especially as it pertains to the simultaneous oppression of humans and nature—in the site of the muck itself, which operates as a sort of plantation in which seasonal labor is exploited. Tea Cake giddily joins the fray of competing for a place on the payroll of the muck: "Ah'm gone right now tuh pick me uh job uh work wid de best man on de muck. Before de rest of 'em gets heah" (129). Tea Cake seems to subconsciously realize this

seasonal industry on the muck is exploitive, but he sees it as a challenge to be overcome with his own high performance as a competitor. Tea Cake's giddiness in his dialogue contrasts the narrator's descriptions of the seasonal workforce:

> Day by day now, the hordes of workers poured in. Some came limping in with their shoes and sore feet from walking. It's hard trying to follow your shoe instead of your shoe following you. They came in wagons from way up in Georgia and they came in truck loads from east, west, north, and south. Permanent transients with no attachments and tired looking men with their families and dogs in flivvers. All night, all day, hurrying in to pick beans. Skillets, beds, patched up spare inner tubes all hanging and dangling from the ancient cars on the outside and hopeful humanity, herded and hovered on the inside, chugging on to the Muck. People ugly from ignorance and broken from being poor. (131)

This description is rife with the tension that accompanies the uncertainty of such a lifestyle. The oxymoron of "permanent transients" is reinforced by the juxtaposition of "no attachments" with "men with their families"—an inherently attached group of people. The refrain of "day by day" and then "All night, all day" of the traveling seasonal laborers echoes Tea Cake's earlier excitement of "beans all day, dice all night," locating Tea Cake (perhaps ironically, as he does not seem to see himself this way) among the throng of exploited workers, exploited not only by the labor conditions, but also the capitalist endeavors that prey on his wages (i.e. casinos and gambling). Finally, the breathless, exasperated "h's" of "hopeful humanity, herded and

hovered" echoes the panting of these walking hordes, exemplifying the exhaustion such poverty produces. Additionally, in describing "humanity" as "herded," this passage both re-invokes the text's early references to mules as well as highlights the tendency of these operations to exploit humans as if they were herd animals, which are also often exploited for their agricultural labor.

While the muck represents a site of exploitive agriculture and its poor working conditions, the Everglades are also a site of major tension for Tea Cake and Janie's romantic relationship as he negotiates with the patriarchal temptation to control Janie. Both Tea Cake and Janie experience their first bouts of jealousy on the muck, and the respective ways they deal with their jealousy expose the depths of their commitment to ecofeminist ways of being in relationship. Janie gets jealous first when "A little chunky girl took to picking a play out of Tea Cake in the fields and in the quarters" (137). A brief phytomorphism gives us a glimpse of how Janie processes her jealousy: "Tea Cake didn't seem to be able to fend her off as promptly as Janie thought he ought to. She began to be snappish a little. A little seed of fear was growing into a tree" (136). In other words, Janie's fear that Tea Cake would be unfaithful began to grow. One day Janie "rushed around into the cane and about the fifth row down she found Tea Cake and Nunkie struggling" (137). Like the pear tree, the cane plants draw her in and become the site of her rage. Janie intervenes and the girl runs away, leaving her and Tea Cake to talk it out. Tea Cake defends himself: "'She grabbed mah workin' tickets outa mah shirt pocket and Ah run tuh git 'em back,' Tea Cake explained, showing the tickets considerably mauled about in the struggle" (137). At first, Janie

doesn't believe him and accuses him of being unfaithful. Their fight evolves into a sexual encounter of reconciliation. Bealer examines the fight and sexual encounter, concluding that “The evolution of the physical fight into sexual reconnection physically enacts productive conflict negotiation between subjects” (322). This is another example of somewhat productive conflict resolution; even though Tea Cake hurts Janie, she forgives him and reconnects with him physically to restore balance to the ecosystem of their relationship, revealing her devotion to the greater good of their relationship.

Conversely, Tea Cake responds extremely poorly to his bout of jealousy, his behavior devolving into outright abuse, abuse motivated by his desire to retain a sense of patriarchal standing in his social circles. Janie becomes close to another woman working the muck, Mrs. Turner, and Tea Cake overhears Mrs. Turner suggest that Janie consider a relationship with Mrs. Turner’s brother. Then, Mrs. Turner actually brings her brother to the muck to meet Janie, and Tea Cake gets upset, even though Janie gave no indication she would be unfaithful: “Tea Cake had a brainstorm. Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss” (147). Tea Cake betrays their egalitarian relationship for a hierarchical one in which he is “boss” to selfishly assuage his own fears and insecurities, insecurities that are racially inflected: “Ah didn’t whup Janie ‘cause *she* done nothin’. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss. Ah set in de kitchen one day and heard dat woman

tell mah wife Ah'm too black for he" (148). Here we see Tea Cake benefitting from an intersectional dynamic in which Black men are oppressed on account of their race but rewarded for their gender, whereas Black women are oppressed on account of both. Tea Cake exploits Janie to prop himself up in front of people who make him feel small, only compounded by competitive capitalistic work environment. He betrays Janie and her love for him when he uses her this way, desecrating the pear tree he was previously emulating and, instead, actualizing the tree of fear that grew from the seed of jealousy.

2.7 The Invitation of the Seminole: Indigenous Plant Knowledges and Resisting the Capitalist-Patriarchy

Janie's marriages are not the only element of this text that signals its interest in ecofeminist themes; the narrative's final chapters in which Janie tells her story of the hurricane also offer an ecofeminist invitation to resist the call of the capitalist-patriarchy and instead consider the role of IEKs in this story and beyond.

While Janie has been learning from plants since her teen years, readers are introduced to another group whose connection to plants' wisdom began in ancient times and continues into the present of *Their Eyes*: the Seminole. When the Seminole enter the narrative of *Their Eyes*, we learn that Janie is somewhat familiar with the Seminole, as "She had seen Indians several times in the 'Glades, in twos and threes" (154). However, this time was different: "she saw a band of Seminole passing by. The men walking in front and the laden, stolid women following them like burros. […] this

was a large party. […] About an hour later another party appeared and went the same way. Then another just before sundown" (154). The presence of the Seminole at this point in the narrative invites readers to consider what lesson they and the plants they know have to offer readers in the Anthropocene.

It's first important to note the complications with examining the Seminole in this work. First, we only have a few passages from which to build an analysis. Second, Hurston herself a Black woman is representing Indigenous people in her writing as opposed to the Seminole writing themselves into her text.[12] Third, the nature of the narrator poses some questions related to textual representation. While the first complication is out of my control, I will consider the issue of representation and specifically how the narrator factors into such issues. Hurston's narrator (and by proxy, perhaps, Hurston herself) may not be completely unbiased in their estimation of the Seminole, such as when they say "Beans running fine and prices good, so the Indians could be, *must* be, wrong. You couldn't have a hurricane when you're making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans. Indians are dumb anyhow, always were" (155, emphasis in original). This line is not from Tea Cake, not from a White capitalist—it's the narrator, even though it resonates with Tea Cake's later lines, "You ain't seen de bossman go up, is yuh? […] Man, de money's too good on the muck […] Indians don't know much uh nothin', tuh tell de truth. Else dey'd own dis country still.

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12 Jennifer C. James illuminates some of the stereotypes and tropes often employed in representing Indigenous people in fiction in "Ecomelancholia: Slavery, War, and Black Ecological Beginnings."

De white folks ain't gone nowhere" (156). This raises questions about how the Seminole are being represented. Is the narrator sympathetic to Tea Cake's racist comment? What are the implications of this on our trust in the narrator? Who even is the narrator?[13] Amanda Bailey points out that many scholars understand the narrator to be an omniscient third person who is sympathetic to and knowledgeable of Janie's feelings and memories; in a way, the narrator represents Janie but is not her because this third-person narrator knows things that Janie could not know (320). Moreover, many scholars, as elucidated by Michael Awkward, agree that Hurston's narrator is somewhat flawed ("The Inaudible" 60). And yet, the frame of the story is Janie telling her story to Phoeby, so it is not unreasonable to see a clear link between Janie and this third-person narrator. If this is the case, are these thoughts about the Seminole being "dumb" Janie's thoughts and beliefs? To make things more complicated, Awkward contends that Hurston's narrator represents a shared or collective voice, one that includes Janie but also all the narrative agents that tell her story, and even Black cultural wisdom at large ("The Inaudible" 104). Ultimately, I think this narration reflects Janie's attempt to reconcile her intuition about the wisdom of nature that the Seminole possess and the trust and respect she has for Tea Cake and other members of

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13 Scholars debate much about the narration in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* Considering that much scholarship, according to Deborah Clarke and Amanda Bailey, sees the novel as a profound instance of a Black woman finding her voice, some critics highlight a tension between this casting of the novel and the way the narration actually functions. For instance, Bailey points out that, while the novel begins with Janie's first-person narration, this narrative frame shifts to a third person narration in which Janie herself only has about seventy lines for close to 200 pages of the story (320).

the community who may question the Seminole's knowledge. Readers can sense this tension when the narrator says "so the Indians could be, *must* be, wrong" (155) Is it that they "could be" wrong, or that they "must be wrong?" The narrator reflects Janie's hesitancy with the way Tea Cake perceives the Seminole, which I believe comes from her intuitive desire to heed the wisdom of nature, which the Seminole convey to her in the simple line "Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming," as will be discussed below (154). While there is much more to say about Hurston's narrator that is beyond the scope of this project, I do think it safe to say that *one* aspect of how the text represents the Seminole—especially through the words of the Seminole man in response to Janie's question about where they are going—is to highlight from a sort of anthropological perspective the wisdom of their ecological knowledge, even if we can take issue with other ways the text represents this Indigenous group.[14] The discrepancy between the narrator's depiction of the Seminole and the Seminole man's own words reminds us that it is best for the communication of Indigenous wisdom when Indigenous people represent themselves.

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[14] While there are certainly issues with how anthropologists represent Indigenous people writ large, the casting of the narrator as anthropological, which is John D. Kalb's contention, allows us to consider how the narrator may effectively reduce bias or subjectivity in their representation of *all* the people who populate this narrative while also participating in the constructing of the narrative. Moreover, as Kalb points out, Hurston herself was both sympathetic to the folk communities of Florida while also undertaking her research as an ethnographer, and the disciplinary practices of ethnography and anthropology are similar to some of the ways Hurston's narrator operates, even as the narrator seems to move between spectator and participant (171).

Our introduction to the Seminole is an interaction that illuminates their local ecological knowledge. When Janie's curiosity leads her to ask one of the groups where they were going, she receives the reply, "Going to high ground. Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming" (154). This simple reply contains a wealth of material-discursive information both regarding the material reality of the sawgrass marshes as well as the sheer fact that the Seminole received the message found in these material realities and their implications for the world of the text. Regarding the material reality of sawgrass and hurricanes, I offer a brief foray into the botanical desires of sawgrass. What might be the significance of the sawgrass blooming, though, as the Seminole said to Janie? A marshy plant, sawgrass thrives in the Everglades' wetland environment. Sawgrass is a tall (up to ten feet) grass-like plant named for its sharp blades that could indeed cut intruders ("Sawgrass"). As with many plants, the sawgrass desires to spread its airborne seeds far and wide, and hurricanes are often a welcome way for sawgrass to collaborate with the wind and moisture to launch seeds as far as possible. According to ecologist and Everglades expert Thomas Lodge, hurricanes "assist in the inland transport of floating seeds on storm surges, as well as carrying airborne seeds" (626). In other words, blooming prior to a hurricane is the sawgrass plant's way of readying its seeds for transport, a phenomenon that conveys to the Seminole that a hurricane is indeed coming.

Additionally, the sawgrass may be, in fact, "bolting"—a plant-survival concept discussed in-depth in my chapter on *Parable of the Sower*. In short, plants "bolt" or send their seeds out quickly if they sense the external environment to be threatening to

continued development of the current plant. Given that sawgrass is vulnerable to excessive flooding, their sensing of the hurricane may have triggered a bolting reflex to bloom and release seeds quickly so as to be effectively dispersed by the winds (Lodge 170). Thus, this short passage reveals the twofold profundity of IEKs: on the surface, the sawgrass is a wetland plant found in the Everglades, a plant that exhibits seed-spreading desires like any other; but moreover, the Seminole *saw the grass* bloom. In other words, it wasn't just that the sawgrass bloomed; it's that the Seminole read it, interpreted it, translated it, and acted accordingly; the Seminole and the sawgrass together tell a story of impending ecological upheaval. The knowledge of the Seminole parallels Janie's impulse—that has guided the narrative thus far—to observe the pear tree bloom and learn from it. This convergence of Indigenous and Black perspectives offers an invitation from the margins to mainstream readers in the Anthropocene: it is not enough to simply observe what plants are doing in response to the forces of the Anthropocene; we have to evaluate them, trust them, and respond accordingly if we want to negotiate the challenges of changing ecological conditions.

In this way, the depiction of the Seminole in this novel serves to contrast the pursuit of the capitalist-patriarchy by the Black characters with the Indigenous rejection of the White man's plantation logic. Indeed, the narrator conveys the general dismissiveness of the muck workers in response to the Seminoles' migration, a dismissiveness reflective of those wishing to maintain the status quo of the Plantationocene:

> Everybody was talking about [the hurricane] that night. But nobody was worried. The fire dance kept up till nearly dawn. The next day, more Indians moved east, unhurried but steady. Still a blue sky and fair weather. Beans running fine and prices good, so the Indians could be, must be, wrong. You couldn't have a hurricane when you're making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans. Indians are dumb anyhow, always were. (154-155)

In contrast to the knowledge of the Seminole, those committed to the capitalist endeavors of the muck are in denial that danger could be looming. First, their nature-knowledge has dwindled to the point that they believe the current weather experience is indicative of what will happen in the near future; but with hurricanes, things can change very quickly. Moreover, instead of attuning to nature's signals (which in the subsequent passage are even more clearly elucidated), they attune to the capitalist market. The statement "Beans running fine and prices good, so the Indians […] must be wrong" is simply illogical; the forces that determine bean prices are distinct from the forces that determine if a hurricane is looming, and yet the logic of the Plantationocene concludes that bean prices are a better determinant of future weather than a group of Indigenous people who have attuned to the weather and passed down nature's wisdom for centuries. In fact, the underlying assumption Tea Cake makes here is one that is still operative today: that the capitalist economy is more powerful than nature's forces; capitalism can overcome nature. This moment of "beans running fine" is a contrast to "Saw-grass bloom" in which the workers misinterpret the beans because the beans are being objectified in this capitalistic arrangement. Given that

lessons from IEKs are often lessons from plants—as seen in the Seminole garnering hurricane information from the sawgrass—we can read the dismissiveness of the Seminole as part and parcel of a dismissal of plant wisdom. To return to the Everglades industrial history for a moment: sawgrass was among the primary plant species to be removed in the "draining" of the region for agriculture. The Everglades were simultaneously purged of both the human groups and plant groups whose relationships display a method of wise interpretation of nature, one that relies on collaboration in the Anthropocene. Thus, as the Seminole are dismissed as "dumb," by proxy, so is the sawgrass. For what is the sawgrass in the face of profits garnered by beans and sugarcane?

Indeed, this capitalist logic and dismissal of the wisdom of Indigenous people is reinforced by the history of the Seminole in South Florida, as well as the Seminole's ability to negotiate survival in such conditions. The US government began to force Seminole to migrate west upon Spain ceding the land consisting of Florida in 1821 ("Indian Resistance"). The Seminole resisted such force resulting in the Seminole Wars ("A Timeline"). While many Seminole were forcefully relocated on their own "Trail of Tears," a number successfully remained in Florida. Around the time of Hurston's writing, there was a "re-emergence of those Florida Seminole who had resisted removal, and [who] survived economically by selling plumes, hides, fish and game to whites on the edges of the Everglades" ("A Timeline"). This economic arrangement reveals the tension at play in *Their Eyes* due to wage-labor capitalism; the Seminole may have benefitted from the industry moving into their area, but

simultaneously the "'drain-the-Everglades' mentality promoted by politicians and developers, forever altered the course of the 'River of Grass.' Even in the untamed wilderness of the Seminole, man's social and ecological pollution had dire effect," leaving the Seminole vulnerable in the face of ecological calamities, such as the deadly hurricane Hurston writes about ("Survival"). The appearance of the Seminole to the landscape of the Everglades of *Their Eyes* reminds us of the larger reverberations of this agricultural industry, that its plantations operate on land with a history, reinforcing the truth of the ecofeminist premise that the Plantationocene harms humans as well as nonhumans.

Despite the muck workers' initial dismissiveness toward the Seminole, the Seminoles' decision to move away from an impending hurricane is corroborated by the movement of the animals in the forest, and it is vindicated by some of the Bahaman workers following the Seminole while the White businessmen and other laborers stay behind. Hurston's narrator describes the tangible tingling of the region. Hurston writes:

> Some rabbits scurried through the quarters going east. Some possums slunk by and their route was definite. One or two at a time, then more. By the time people left the fields the procession was constant. Snakes, rattlesnakes began to cross the quarters. The men killed a few, but they could not be missed from the crawling horde. People stayed indoors until daylight. Several times during the night Janie heard the snort of big animals like deer. Once the muted voice of a

> panther. Going east and east. That night the palm and banana trees began that long distance talk with the rain. (155)

This horde of moving animals invokes the previous image of the convoy of migrant workers coming into the area, driven by the impossible choice to provide for themselves materially within a system that harms them. The paralleling of the animals attempting to move to safety in the face of a potentially anthropogenic weather event reinforces the ecofeminist premise that the oppressing of othered humans stems from the same impulse to oppress nature. In this passage we also are reminded that Janie had previously learned to listen to the wisdom of nature exhibited in this passage: "[Janie] knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind" (25). In other words, this passage suggests that Janie is beginning to realize that perhaps the Seminole are right; she hears the enchanting and terrifying conversation between the palm and banana trees and the rain. She has honed an ability to listen to plant wisdom—and the wisdom exemplified by the Seminole—that resurfaces in this passage.

Unfortunately, Tea Cake's commitment to the capitalist-patriarchy in the face of relevant IEKs is what leads to his downfall. While some folks have the sense to start moving east, Tea Cake rejects a co-worker's invitation to travel with him (156). Janie is conspicuously absent from this major family decision; Tea Cake patriarchally presides over the decision to stay and ride out the hurricane. Perhaps Janie would have shared with him what she heard the palm trees saying if he had asked her opinion. Even so, Tea Cake displays a rejection of the IEK of the Seminole: when Lias appeals

to the fact that "De crow gahn up" and that "De Indians gahn east, man. It's dangerous" (156), Tea Cake dismisses their wisdom saying, "Dey don't always know. Indians don't know much uh nothin', tuh tell de truth. Else dey's own dis country still. De white folks ain't gone anywhere. Dey oughta know it is' dangerous" (156). Tea Cake explicitly privileges White Western knowledge over Indigenous knowledge and construes the Seminole as unintelligent. Moreover, not only does Tea Cake appeal to the "white folks'" knowledge, but again invokes the capitalistic wage labor economy in his decision to stay, "You ain't seen de bossman go up, is yuh? Well all right now. Man, de money's too good on the muck," later reiterating to Lias that he'll lose a whole day of wages trying to get back to the muck (156). Tea Cake's unilateral decision to stay on the muck, without consulting Janie, combined with his rejection of the wisdom of the Seminole, as well as his inability to prioritize safety over wages, reveals the danger of the capitalist-patriarchy in the face of destructive ecological events in the Anthropocene.

Indeed, rejecting the wisdom of nature and IEKs in the Anthropocene is deadly for humans and nonhumans alike. The hurricane comes full force as Tea Cake and Janie huddle in their shack. Hurston personifies the hurricane: "A big burst of thunder and lightning that trampled over the house...And the lake got madder and madder with only its dikes between them and him" (158-159). "The wind came back with triple fury" (160), finally signifying to Tea Cake that they were in danger. The personification of the natural elements at this stage remind us that many IEKs uphold nonhuman animacy, an animacy rejected by Tea Cake until now, until he felt a real

threat. Janie and Tea Cake are caught in the water holding onto a floating cow when a dog presents itself. It tries to bite Janie but "Tea Cake rose out of the water at the cow's rump and seized the dog by the neck. But he was a powerful dog and Tea Cake was over-tired. So he didn't kill the dog with one stroke as he had intended...They fought and somehow he managed to bite Tea Cake high up on his cheek-bone" (166). After the excitement of the hurricane, we learn that the dog was rabid and infected Tea Cake. Tea Cake eventually dies as an indirect result of his infection when Janie kills him, defending herself from his rabid insanity. One could read this death as a form of judgement in which nature (the storm, rabies) judges Tea Cake for his mistreatment of Janie in a sort of ecofeminist justice. Tea Cake's arrogance and rejection of the wisdom of nature and the Seminole put himself and Janie in grave danger, ultimately resulting in their collective suffering as well as his own death.

2.8 Conclusion: Planting Seeds: Recursivity and a Conversation Between Women

When the reader comes to the end of the novel, she may have forgotten that the narrative is actually Janie's retelling of her story as opposed to a present unfolding of it. After Janie kills Tea Cake and is interrogated and exonerated regarding his death, readers are jarred back to the narrative present, reminded that Janie is actually sharing this story with her friend, Phoeby, while they sit on Janie's old back porch in Eatonville. This recursive narrative context invites us to consider the role of the past and memory in making sense of the present. *Their Eyes*, in its flashback retelling, is a

communal storying between Janie and Phoeby that reifies the value of this text as an opportunity to remember the lessons from the margin of the coalescing strands of Black women's literature, ecofeminist plant being, and IEKs well into the contemporary era.

In order to see how this novel is an act of human-human and human-plant communal remembering we must return to the beginning and explore the context of the narrative as a conversation between women. When the text opens, Janie is returning to Eatonville after burying Tea Cake, and the novel's context of Janie's return and recounting signals the significance of memory to Janie's story: "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget" (1). In other words, as Janie unfolds her story, we are meant to take it as an act of willful, intentional, and communal remembering. While other townspeople gossip behind Janie's back, unwilling to invite her memories into the safety of community, the story of Janie's marriages actually begins when a friend of hers, Phoeby, offers to hold space for Janie's story, but not without first providing a plant, a seed offering of "mulatto rice" (4). In contrast to the busybody townspeople, Phoeby considers Janie's material needs and brings dinner over to her. It is in this context of the humanity of sharing a meal that a sacred memory sharing begins between Phoeby and Janie, actualizing itself into the narrative of *Their Eyes*.

When Janie's belly is full enough to lean back and tell her story, Phoeby invokes Janie's story through "hungry listening;" it is not a diary entry or a monologue to no one (10). This co-creation of the story is evidenced by Janie telling Phoeby that

Phoeby can repeat anything she says because “dat’s just de same as me [telling the story] ‘cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf” (6). Janie relies on Phoeby in the act of remembering, reminding Phoeby of their long friendship and asking for her support and thoughts: “Phoeby, we been kissin’-friends for twenty years, so Ah depend on you for a good thought. And Ah’m talking to you from dat standpoint” (7). From here, the narrative launches into the first tree imagery, that Janie “saw her life like a great tree in leaf” (8). The fact that this narrative is the braided strands of Janie’s story of Black womanhood, ecofeminist plant being, and IEKs—braided with the aid of a willing, safe, Black woman to hold the other end of the braid—is wisdom to readers in the Anthropocene to both listen as a form of co-creation and to willfully remember that which is of value to the present.

Additionally, even “Phoeby’s hungry listening”—which instigates Janie’s story—reinforces the narrative agency of plants. Hurston writes that “Phoeby’s hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story” (10), and the satiation provided by the mulatto rice, suggests that Janie’s story exists as a co-emergence of telling and listening, hungering and feeding, giving and taking. In other words, it’s Janie’s story but Phoeby helps her tell it as a dialectical actor. In catalyzing Janie’s story, Phoeby and her rice offering parallels plants’ role in Janie’s story: they help her tell it. Janie’s story would not happen without many of the plant-actors we have just discussed: pear blossoms and whispering seeds and floating pollen and blooming sawgrass. In this way, plants co-construct Janie’s story, with Janie and Phoeby and the rice, as storied matter.

As the book starts with a retelling, these final pages return us to the opening even as the retelling concludes, evidencing the recursive nature of this novel. Janie's return to Eatonville occurs fittingly at sunset which is the cosmic ending of the day, upon the ending of Tea Cake's life, but by the time the novel ends it is sunrise; Janie begins her story at sunset, and given the length of her retelling, it would make sense that sunrise is near when Phoeby departs from Janie "cut[ting] the darkness in flight" (192). Now alone, after a long night of mourning and remembering Tea Cake, Janie has a sort of vision or memory of Tea Cake: "Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl" (193). Though subtle, this passage suggests that the light atop the pine trees is the sun rising, reinforced by Janie's vision of Tea Cake wearing the sun for a shawl; and "The kiss of [Tea Cake's] memory made pictures of love and light against the wall," suggesting that the risen sun is casting shadows of memory on the walls (193).

Moreover, the presence of the pine, an evergreen, suggests the ongoingness of this memory. As we come to the beginning (sunrise) at the novel's narrative conclusion, we see an ongoing cycle of life and death as seen in the natural world. In this way, *Their Eyes* is recursive, it folds back on itself. In the same way, our approach to the Anthropocene has to be recursive—moving forward yet reaching back into the past so as to learn from past and present knowledge systems that may serve our collective future. Not only does *Their Eyes* foreshadow other texts but also suggests that the contemporary is not only a forward-looking project but also must consider the

past as we navigate the present and future, as Kimmerer says, "If we allow traditions to die, relationships to fade, the land will suffer" (166).

In addition to the chronological framing of the novel, the recursivity and cyclical nature of *Their Eyes* is reinforced by the role of seeds in final pages. Seeds are both the beginning and end of plant life; dormant seeds contain all the genetic information necessary to grow into a new plant, and plants often release seeds at the expense of themselves as their own lives draw to an end. It is fitting, then, that seeds play an integral role in the end of the novel as well as how Janie remembers Tea Cake. As Janie decides to leave the muck and return to Eatonville, "she had given away everything in their little house except a package of garden seed that Tea Cake had brought to plant" (191). As these seeds are that which Tea Cake brought to their new home in the Everglades, they represent Tea Cake's potential as an ecofeminist husband—a potential that was not fully actualized in the narrative.

Reading the seeds as Tea Cake's potential for ecofeminist relationship is reinforced by the fact that Tea Cake never got to plant the seeds because "he had been waiting for the right time of the moon when his sickness overtook him" (191). Thus, the seeds now story Tea Cake's potential to Janie indefinitely, as she remembers him: "The seeds reminded Janie of Tea Cake more than anything else because he was always planting things. […] Now that she was home, she meant to plant them for remembrance" (191). As the story itself is the memory of Janie's life and marriages, these seeds are her memory of Tea Cake specifically. In her memories, Tea Cake is alive and well: "Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself

had finished feeling and thinking" (193). By planting these seeds, Janie intends to both remember and recreate the best parts of Tea Cake through their storied matter. Bealer suggests that because Tea Cake was unactualized in many ways, "[Janie's] mind is in fact the only place where such a love can endure" (323). Tea Cake is so immortalized that thoughts of him fill Janie's bedroom (191) even though they never lived in that home together. Bealer argues that "Janie...excises the unpleasant aspects of Tea Cake and only retains the version of her husband that reflects the pear-tree vision" (324). Ecologically speaking, death always brings new life. Janie's story is a cycle of growth "with dawn and doom in the branches" (8) that ends in the perfect balance of the horizon, for Tea Cake lives on in both her memories and her seeds.

Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a seed that germinated among contemporary novels of Black women's literature, one that exhibits the coalescence of plant being, ecofeminist human relationships, and IEKs in light of Black experiences of the Anthropocene. In its use of the pear tree as a key narrative agent to assess human relationships for their alignment with ecofeminist principles, *Their Eyes* signals the value of learning from and considering plant being as we try to respond to the conditions of the Anthropocene enacted by the capitalist-patriarchy. *Their Eyes* also exhibits an impulse to consider IEKs in the context of Black women's literature that we find in the later texts addressed in this project. By casting IEK as a wise foil to the logic of capitalist-patriarchy—despite the characters' sometimes unwilling complicity in that logic—this text reinforces that we should not only be seeking to learn from plants, but also those groups that have and continue to

incorporate plant wisdom into their worldviews. The folks who even at the last minute decide to follow the Seminole offer readers in the Anthropocene yet another invitation: it is never too late to humble ourselves and listen to the wisdom of nature and Indigenous people. May we now start that "long distance talk" across communities, species, and time as an act of humility. In its illustration of the coalescing strands of Black women's literature, ecofeminist plant being, and Indigenous ecological knowledges as well as its resurgence in the 1970s, *Their Eyes* is worthy of consideration among contemporary Black women's literature such as *Song of Solomon*, *Parable of the Sower*, and *Salvage the Bones*. As *Their Eyes* looks to the past to make sense of the present, readers in the Anthropocene can reach beyond the contemporary as we seek to co-create and refoliate an ecologically sustainable future.

Chapter 3

ARBOREAL BECOMING, COMMUNAL BECOMING: TREE TEACHERS IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

"Increase Your Footprint" by Rishi Kumar

"No. *You were never disconnected*. You can never be.
You are this Earth in form, in motion.

What you may be,
is a little forgetful.

Yes. You might have a bit of amnesia.
Forgotten that *when you reach your hands into Earth,*
she speaks to you.

She tells you of your role, your purpose.
She tells you that you are here as a listener, as a caretaker,
a magical weaver who ties and strengthens the bonds of all her spirit forms.

We all forget from time to time, and that's okay.
That is why we are here together.
So that from time to time, in our forgetfulness,
we may be reminded by those who remember.

It is now time to remember."

(Emphasis mine)

3.1 Introduction: Remembering Interdependence

The human/nature dichotomy plagues the environmental humanities. Propagated—often with good intention!—by wilderness narratives and conservationist mindsets, the human/nature dichotomy sees nature as something "over there," as fundamentally separate from humans. Deep ecologists, however, question this dichotomous way of thinking about humans' relationship to nature, suggesting, as

Rishi Kumar ("Farmer Rishi") does above, that it is actually ontologically impossible for humans to be disconnected from nature—we *are* nature. As Kumar writes, "No. You were never disconnected. You can never be. You are this Earth in form, in motion." Kumar's poetic essay entitled "Increase Your Footprint" seeks to challenge the overarching environmentalist rhetoric around humans decreasing their carbon footprint in an effort to mitigate environmental issues such as climate change. For Kumar, the current problem of humans' relationship to nature is not an ontological separation or disconnection, and it will therefore not be solved by further separation through decreased interaction as is implied by "decrease your footprint." Instead, Kumar characterizes this problem as a *forgetting*, a misremembering of the nature of that already present connection, that togetherness, that shared substance with nonhuman nature: "What you may be, is a little forgetful. Yes. You might have a bit of amnesia." Kumar rejects the idea that humans could ever be "separated" from nature because humans are nature; however, he suggests that humans have forgotten the interdependence inherent in our kinship with nonhuman nature. In this way, according to Kumar, Earth healing requires human remembering. *Song of Solomon* is the story of one man's ecofeminist journey to communally remembering his fundamental interdependence with both humans and nonhumans, and this remembering is catalyzed by the novel's plants and their agency, as well as his female family members.

While remembering is the forerunner of healing, Kumar encourages enactment of this remembering through engagement with a sensorial interaction with nonhuman nature: "…Forgotten that when you reach your hands into Earth, she speaks to you."

Kumar's deep ecological view of the Earth restores a sense of agency to the Earth's ability to not only communicate with humans, but also to teach humans how to remember better their shared creatureliness: "She tells you of your role, your purpose. She tells you that you are here as a listener, as a caretaker." Kumar's poem envisions a unified community of ecological actors in this remembering; first, he references how touching the Earth can stir remembering, but he also says, "from time to time, in our forgetfulness, we may be reminded by those who remember." As Milkman's character development shows, there is power in remembering, power that results in better relationships between humans and between humans and nonhumans even as we face troubling environmental conditions in the Anthropocene. In responding to the Anthropocene, it's important that we not attempt to materially or discursively separate and disconnect from nonhuman nature, but instead ground ourselves in that innate connection and remind others of it.

Synopsis

Song of Solomon traces the story of Macon "Milkman" Dead III, who shares his father's name but had a nickname bestowed on him when a neighbor saw Milkman's mother, Ruth, breastfeeding him far past the expected age of weaning. The Deads are a Black family in Michigan, and Macon senior is a harsh patriarch, both indifferent and aggressive towards his wife and daughters, but who seeks to raise his son in his image as a successful businessman in real estate. The overlapping nature of Macon's harsh business activities and mistreatment of the women in his house renders

this novel thematically ecofeminist. In contrast to the ecofeminism of Pilate, Macon exhibits his embrace of the capitalist-patriarchy when he pursues marriage to Ruth so as to bolster his own reputation and wealth, given her father was a wealthy and well-respected doctor, treating Ruth as akin to property.

Over the course of the novel, Milkman at times seems to be walking in his father's footsteps—both in his consumerism and womanizing—while other times he challenges his father and actively wishes to depart from his ways; however, readers see Milkman is enthralled with the promise that money and power can bring, regardless of how critical he is of his father. The key plot of the novel centers on Milkman's evolving relationship with his aunt Pilate (Macon's sister) and his intense pursuit of both Pilate's "inheritance" (which Milkman thinks is gold but is in reality a bag of bones) and his ancestral lineage across multiple towns and states. Ultimately, with the help of some frightening tulips, a backyard maple tree, and a sweetgum forest, Milkman journeys from a selfish and immature image of his father to a man concerned more with his surrounding community, exhibiting traits and qualities that align with ecofeminist values of care and interdependence ("Living Interconnections" 2).

Argument

Due to his upbringing and his father's influence, Milkman is on track to inherit his father's ways of being in the world, which are inherently capitalist-patriarchal. But Milkman's development into his father is arrested by his ultimate adoption of

ecofeminist values. I argue that Milkman could not have made his transformation to a man of ecofeminist sensibilities without the teachings and wisdom of plants. Milkman's journey away from the capitalist-patriarchy to ecofeminist values is contingent upon plants as storied matter, plants as teachers. In their agency, each of these phyto-characters challenge traditional literary-critical methods that relegate such plants to the realm of symbol; instead, Milkman's transformation would not be possible without key encounters with these specific and irreplaceable plant teachers. Plants story this narrative through their discursive and material power. By uncovering the narrative power of plants and their ecofeminist lessons, this chapter contributes to my larger goals of refoliation through acknowledgement of plant agency in *Song of Solomon*.

Moreover, these plants teach lessons specifically in the vein of ecofeminism. Each plant-teacher Milkman encounters instructs him on some aspect of his selfishness toward women in his community: the tulips teach him of his mistreatment of his mother, the maple stories Milkman's mistreatment of his sisters, and the sweetgum reveals to Milkman his mistreatment of Hagar and Pilate. In this way, these plants reveal to Milkman the nature of his toxic masculinity and invite him to refigure it into a masculinity that cares for the women in his life rather than abuses them. In order to do so, he must deny the call of the capitalist-patriarchy to see both women and nature as objects to be consumed by men. In this way, *Song of Solomon* reveals that plants—both real and imagined—are teachers humans can learn from in order to break

the legacy of harm against both women and nature, harms rooted in ideological constructs that reject the reality of human-plant enmeshment.

While I explore the lessons taught by the tulips of reverie, this chapter focuses on tree community in its discussion of the backyard maple and sweetgum forest. In these sections, I argue that tree community structure differs from the reigning social structure of the capitalist-patriarchy. In other words, tree agency and communication challenges Western notions of atomistic individualism (Turner), favoring a more molecular community organization consistent with an ecofeminist community ethic of care (Adams). Wohlleben claims that “Nutrient exchange and helping neighbors in times of need is the rule” (3), and that this process renders forests as superorganisms that are greater than the sum of their parts. Similarly, ecofeminism offers a foundational understanding of the self as being “a self that is interconnected with all life” (“Living Interconnections” 1). Seeing the self as interconnected with all other life invites humans to see nonhuman natural entities as “earth others,” according to Val Plumwood, in contrast to the objectifying force of the capitalist-patriarchy that sees both women and nature as objects to be consumed. In the face of ecofeminism’s and tree community’s similar refrain that the self is interdependent on others, we see how the logic of capitalist-patriarchy is both self- and community-destructive, even as it ostensibly serves the self. In contrast to capitalist-patriarchy logic, tree community is consistent with the ecofeminist community “ethic of care” as outlined by Carol Adams, so humans can look to trees as teachers of ecofeminist community principles.

I argue that by exploring tree epistemology in *Song of Solomon,* we see lessons these plants offer Milkman—lessons about the ecofeminist nature of self in community.

Finally, *Song of Solomon's* refoliation potential also resides in the final pages' invocation of ancestral plantsong and IEKs. What I call plantsong illustrates how *Song of Solomon* narrates the very remembering Kumar encourages in "Increase Your Footprint"—a remembering fostered by plants and occurring within ancestral plantsong—reifying the deep ecological tenet that humans and nature are irrevocably interconnected, both materially and discursively, even if we fail to acknowledge such connection. The contextual coalescence of plant wisdom and finding of Milkman's "Indian" grandmother invites us to read Milkman's entire journey as the storied matter of plant bodies enmeshed with his human kin. Additionally, Milkman's ancestral plantsong locates this text in the context of the Plantationocene, suggesting that Milkman's liberation from enacting the capitalist-patriarchal domination of women is simultaneously a liberation from the tentacles of the Plantationocene that reach into the contemporary, revealing the liberatory capacity of ecofeminism. Milkman's finding of his ancestry serves to release him from the capitalist-patriarchal expectations placed on him by Western ways of being and knowing. Indeed, the rejection of capitalist-patriarchy is reinforced by Milkman's attention to the IEKs that have always surrounded him but that he chose to ignore. Ultimately, the Afro-Indigenous history and remembering enacted by *Song of Solomon* invites readers of the Anthropocene to consider and remember these often-erased knowledges in our efforts to refoliate.

3.2 Seeds of Criticism: The Transformative Power of Plants

Milkman's character transformation over the course of the text is the subject of much of *Song of Solomon* criticism. Scholars such as Dorothy Lee and Michael Awkward refer to the text as having an "epic" quality, and Milkman's epic journey to his ancestry and new self has been a focus of scholarly engagement, even for those who argue that Morrison is satirizing myth, such as Gerry Brenner. In light of this epic journey, most scholars agree that Milkman does indeed transform over the course of the novel, but they often differ on the nature of the transformation, or what exactly it is that catalyzed it. For example, Joshua Bennett sees Milkman's movement though the narrative as illustrative of "the central conflict of the black masculine" (112). Others, such as Aoi Mori, accredit Milkman's transformation to a sense of identity found in a community of ancestors and Black history, which Milkman achieves in many ways by the end of the book, but these readings tend to leave out key scenes early in the text and focus on the back half of the narrative. I do agree with those, such as Grewal, that suggest there is a clear relationship between Milkman's relationship with Pilate and his transformation. In sum, these readings offer insightful analyses of some of the key aspects of Milkman's journey, but they evade the significance of the text's plant characters in catalyzing and consummating the transformation from start to finish. *Song of Solomon* possesses key phyto-characters such as flowers and trees that exert their agency on the human characters and the narrative as a whole, yet such characters

are often sidelined in analyses of the somewhat epic nature of the main character's journey to his ancestry.

By centering my reading on the text's plants and ecofeminist values, I hope to bolster extant ecocritical scholarship on *Song of Solomon*. Scholars such as Jessica Gama and Anissa Wardi agree that this novel is ecofeminist in its themes and concerns. Gama agrees that Milkman's end-state is ecofeminist in nature and sees ecofeminist "soul-fulfillment" as a foil to the capitalist-patriarchal fulfilment pursued by Macon, claiming that Morrison locates self-fulfillment "in recognition of the value of both [women and nature], and one's ancestry" (53). Further, Wardi offers an enrapturing plant-studies and material ecocritical analysis of *Song of Solomon* in which she argues that "through a discourse of nonindigenous flora, Morrison evokes slavery as a historical context for the characters' lives" (93). She largely focuses on the role of sugarcane as a plant product in the text, but she also addresses other phyto themes such as Milkman's grandfather's farm, Pilate's association with trees, Lena's velvet roses, and Ruth's gardening. Inversely, Menrinsky addresses the importance of Milkman's material enmeshment with the sweetgum forest and how it shifts Milkman's sense of self, but Menrinsky does not connect this transformation to an ecofeminist ethic of care. My reading deviates from Wardi's and Menrinsky's plant-studies readings that analyze plants in the novel so as to locate the narrative in a certain historical nexus (for Wardi, the context of American slavery, and for Menrinsky, the context of cultural environmentalism and nationalism in the 70s).

Instead, the plants I engage reveal the text's ability to encourage and infuse a deeper ethic of care into present and future ecological circumstances of the Anthropocene.

Moreover, a plant-centered reading participates in the larger Vegetal Turn discussed in the introduction. Animals play a prominent role in this text: flightless birds and the peacock's association with vanity and wealth, the ancestral Dead farmland with its livestock, the bobcat in the sweetgum forest, and the mammalian mimesis of the very name "Milkman." As animals play a prominent role in the text, they are the object of ecocritical approaches to *Song of Solomon,* yet there are minimal plant studies approaches. I do not mean to say that animal studies readings are unimportant or that we should move past them; I believe that, while animal studies as a discipline too often relies on the non-sentience of plants and can thus be fundamentally opposed to plant studies, we see the text using animals to teach similar lessons that the plants teach. In other words, plants and animals both have a place in teaching humans about the pitfalls of atomistic individualism and the danger of capitalist-patriarchy. For example, Bennett's animal-studies reading of *Song of Solomon* considers the role of animal actors as vectors of Black masculinity, that is, "how it *feels* to be a black man" (68, emphasis in original). By analyzing man-bird interactions in the text, Bennett elucidates the shortcomings and heaviness of a masculinity characterized by vanity, wealth, and social capital—masculinity as upheld by the capitalist-patriarchy. Considering work like Bennett's alongside mine reveals the ways in which animal studies and plant studies can work together to uncover the ecofeminist inflections of literary texts.

3.3 "What There Was Before Language": The Eco-Material Nature of Tree Community

In order to see how Milkman's journey is driven by textual plant teachers, we must first understand the agency of real plants in their material bodies, specifically that of trees, given that two of the three plant-teachers discussed here are trees. Contrary to capitalist-patriarchy's construal of nature as raw, inert, unintelligent matter, evolving research in the hard sciences and critical plant studies reveal a significant amount of plant agency, especially among tree community. While humans tend to think of trees as stoic and unalive beings, emergent science shows that trees exhibit sophisticated inter- and intra-species communication that is invisible to the naked human eye. For example, trees are able to share nutrients with other trees through fungus along root connections ("The Foundational" 95-96). In order to share nutrients, trees must alert one another to their nutrient dearth or excess through these fungal networks ("The Foundational" 96). Fungal root networks also convey chemical signals of warning and danger (Wohlleben 10). While it may not constitute what humans consider "language," trees indeed communicate with one another in an effort to protect each other and their shared community.

Trees communicate for the ultimate goal of group survival. While it is tempting to assume that nonhuman nature is merely competitive in nature, trees do exhibit a strong sense of care for other trees of their species as opposed to competition. In order for trees to survive, they desire a certain set of environmental conditions, specifically related to climate, and the forested microclimate cannot be achieved with

only one tree, according to Wohlleben: "together, many trees create an ecosystem that moderates extremes of heat and cold, stores a great deal of water, and generates a great deal of humidity" (4). Within this ideal climate, "trees can live to be very old" (Wohlleben 4), and older trees have a higher chance of successfully reproducing as well as contribute to the stabling of the ecosystem. Since trees survive better in groups, they care for other trees in their vicinity. For example, Wohlleben details an instance where, as a forester, he discovered a tree stump that was surviving without any remaining way to photosynthesize. He discovered that the stump was being nourished through nutrient exchange by neighboring trees of the same species, through the root networks detailed above (2). Providing nutrition to seemingly invaluable stumps reveals that, for trees, each tree "is valuable to the community" (Wohlleben 4). While community care entails the sharing of resources, trees also try not to take resources from other trees unnecessarily. For instance, Wohlleben explains that "the average tree grows its branches out until it encounters the branch tips of a neighboring tree of the same height. It doesn't grow any wider because the air and better light in this space are already taken" (5). In other words, the trees are careful to not "take anything away from each other" (Wohlleben 5). In order to secure group survival, trees care for the greater community by working together and sharing resources.

While trees contribute to the care of their species, they are particularly concerned about the care of their own offspring, signaling that trees may have something to teach humans about parenthood. Tree reproduction in general is another way trees show concern for their collective future. As Wohlleben points out, trees

produce exponentially more seeds than actually grow into adult trees. For instance, consider the number of acorns an oak releases in a given season; then consider that over the oak's lifetime it will release a similar amount of nuts every several years; then consider that "statistically speaking, each tree raises exactly one adult offspring to take its place" over the course of its entire lifetime (29). Wohlleben describes this phenomenon as the "tree lottery" given the chances of reproductive success with such numbers (29). The tree lottery reveals that trees exert significant effort in propagating new generations of their species, suggesting that trees' knowledge and communication serves collective survival over the long haul. When trees do become parents, Wohlleben contends that "mother" trees discipline their offspring to ensure their stronger future (32). One way they do this is by intentionally depriving the sapling of light. Though it might seem cruel, light deprivation early in the sprout's life allows it to grow more slowly, which contributes to stronger features such as more flexible trunks that can withstand high winds and better resistance to predatory fungi (33). Trees with these features subsequently live longer, continuing the legacy of their species. In fact, forest ecologist Dr. Suzanne Simard, who studies "maternal" tree instincts, has found that groups of trees often have one dominant "mother tree" that presides over the discipline of offspring by exerting their influence through aforementioned fungal-root networks ("The Whispering" 3).[15] Indeed, trees care for their offspring with much of the same intentionality that humans do.

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15 An article about Suzanne Simard's work written for the Smithsonian summarizes

3.4 "He Whispered to the Trees": Tree Wisdom in IEKs

While modern scientists are only recently discovering the mechanisms at play in tree reproduction and collective survival, Indigenous groups believed in what we now call "mast fruiting" long before scientists dubbed it so, suggesting that the field of IEK meaningfully contributes to discussions of tree sentience. Kimmerer discusses mast-fruiting—one of the most compelling instances of tree communication—in her chapter "The Council of Pecans" in *Braiding Sweetgrass*. "Mast fruiting" is when trees give off abundant seeds together to ensure stronger reproductive success, subsequently ensuring the survival of their own species far into the future (Kimmerer 15). One might assume that trees simply produce fruit and seeds every year, but this is not the case. Trees decide together when the best time is to put energy into fruiting and seeding (Wohlleben 20). Kimmerer elucidates that pecan trees' fruiting decisions are made communally within the pecan species as well as in conversation with local animal populations. She explains that if trees simply make seeds every year, the local seed eaters may eat them up every year, interfering with the highly sensitive tree lottery that Wohlleben describes. Instead, the mast-fruiting trees take years to store up enough sugar, then release a larger amount of seeds all at once that can sufficiently

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Simard's notion of the maternal or "hub" tree: "Mother trees are the biggest, oldest trees in the forest with the most fungal connections [...] Simard sees them in a nurturing, supportive, maternal role. With their deep roots, they draw up water and make it available to shallow-rooted seedlings. They help neighboring trees by sending them nutrients, and when the neighbors are struggling, mother trees detect their distress signals and increase the flow of nutrients accordingly" ("The Whispering" 3).

overwhelm the local animals who would eat some of the seeds (Kimmerer 15). Scientists have assumed that trees decide to fruit based on this simple “energetic equation,” as Kimmerer calls it, where the trees “make fruit only when [they] can afford it” (15). However, the simplicity of the energetic equation theory doesn’t explain why all the trees in an area mast-fruit at the same time, for the energetic equation may differ from tree to tree. Moreover, the prevailing theory doesn’t explain how one tree would know the status of the squirrel population, for instance. Instead, Kimmerer offers a theory that accounts for more than just energetic exchanges, suggesting that the trees sense the population cycles of the seed-predators as a large organism and decide collectively, through the aforementioned fungal root networks, to mast-fruit when predator population numbers are lower and thus more favorable to the tree lottery (16). Kimmerer concludes that collective wellbeing remains at the heart of the pecans’ precision: “By sating squirrels and people, the trees are ensuring their own survival” (16). Tree species most likely to win the tree lottery, thus ensuring future survival of their kind, work together with their fellow trees to produce enough seeds while also providing for other beings in their ecological community.

While Kimmerer offers a scientific explanation of mast-fruiting, there is also an explanation from the knowledge of her people, the Potawatomi: Kimmerer conveys that, “In the old time, our elders say, the trees talked to each other. They’d stand in their own council and craft a plan” (19). Much like the Potawatomi Council of Elders, the trees collectively shared their wisdom as they made decisions. But Kimmerer narrates a time when “The teachings of Pecans were not heard, or heeded” by her

people (18): when her people—already after a relocation to Kansas—were approached by the federal US government to again relocate to a “forever” home, the Elders agreed to the deal on the promise that the Potawatomi would never have to relocate again (17-18). All the Elders had to do was accept US citizenship and “surrender their allegiance to land held in common and agree to private property” (Kimmerer 18). Kimmerer paints a picture of the heavy-hearted Elders weighing their options, managing the division this created among families, all under the shade of the Pecan Grove (18). While the Pecans counseled the Potawatomi to “Stick together, act as one. [Since] Pecans have learned that there is strength in unity,” the Elders struck the deal with the US government, a decision that was devastating to the future generations of Potawatomi, for “Barely a generation after land was ‘guaranteed’ through the sacrifice of common land converted to private property, most of it was gone” (19). For the Potawatomi, the story of the Council of Pecans reveals more than just that trees communicate; it also shows that humans can learn collective survival strategies from these Elders, and that these teachings should be heeded for the benefit of future generations.

3.5 Milkman’s Inheritance: Macon’s Capitalist-Patriarchal Sensibilities and Commodification of Women

As a narrative, *Song of Solomon* is very concerned with traditional notions of heritage and lineage, notions that are inflected by the characters’ interaction with patriarchal social systems. The text, however, invites us to consider how toxic

patriarchy can be challenged through ecofeminism. We see this in Milkman's clear demonstration of his father's values while simultaneously denying he is following in his father's footsteps. We also see this in Pilate's rejection of the patriarchal social order in favor of a more tree-like and ecofeminist social sensibility. In a patriarchal social order, the role of the family is to pass on the name, inheritance, and values of the father to the next generation; to women who will go on to be incorporated into other male-headed households and men who will lead their own; however, *Song of Solomon* challenges this assumed social structure. Before I illustrate just how *Song of Solomon* challenges the value of capitalist-patriarchal inheritance, it is important first to discuss what Milkman "inherits" and learns from his father, as Milkman rejects his father's inheritance in favor of a more ecofeminist sensibility. Further, I contrast the "teachings" of Macon with not only the teachings of Pilate, but also with the teachings of the plants Milkman encounters, which together subvert Macon's values. Ultimately, Macon embodies and intends to pass onto Milkman his capitalist-patriarchal sensibility as illustrated through his mistreatment of women and nature.

Macon's misogyny is illustrated in every depicted relationship he has with women, from his wife and daughters, to his sister, and even his rental property tenant. This misogyny establishes Macon as the epitome of not only toxic patriarchy, but toxic capitalist-patriarchy. An early description portrays Macon's relationship to the female members of his nuclear family, a relationship characterized by fear-mongering, hatred, and control: "His hatred of his wife sparkled in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their

butter complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices" (10-11). Macon's blatant mistreatment characterizes his wife's days: "his wife, Ruth, began her days stunned into stillness by her husband's contempt and ended them wholly animated by it" (11). The text provides numerous examples of Macon's maltreatment of his wife and daughters, from emotional abuse with harsh language to physical abuse. For example, after Ruth makes an elaborate meal and takes time to make a lovely centerpiece, Macon's response is to criticize every part of the meal (12). Later in the novel, Macon slaps Ruth in front of his adult children, revealing his powerful and abusive dominance over his wife, and the need to display that dominance in front of others.

Moreover, Macon's criticism of his wife's homemaking is tied to his perception of her plant-mastery or lack thereof, revealing that plants story the dysfunction of the Dead family, that is, disfunction between husband and wife, father and daughter, and mother and son. While Macon fulfills the masculine role of mastering nature outside the home for the sake of profit and provision—the trees and plants on Honoré Island where he will build real estate—Macon expects Ruth to display domestic mastery of plants, in this case potatoes and flowers, in the form of her homemaking duties such as cooking and decorating. Ruth's childhood table was always adorned with a floral centerpiece, which for her father was "a touch that distinguished his own family from the people among whom they lived" (12). And "For Ruth it was the summation of the affectionate elegance with which she believed her childhood had been surrounded" so "When Macon married her and moved into

Doctor's house, she kept up the centerpiece-arranging" (12). On one occasion, Ruth puts considerable effort—inspired by a homemaking magazine—to create a centerpiece of driftwood and seaweed. It is when Ruth asks Macon if he likes her creation that he replies "Your chicken is red at the bone. And there is probably a potato dish that is supposed to have lumps in it. Mashed ain't the dish" (12). Around this wooden table, there should be communal enjoyment of plant abundance and nourishment—dinner tables are anchors of family bonding, after all—but for Ruth this table and its permanent centerpiece-induced watermark became a source of distress itself, "behav[ing] as though it were itself a plant and [had] flourished like a huge suede-grey flower that throbbed like a fever and sighed like the shift of sand dunes" (13).

As we see with Milkman and his corrupted masculinity, the plant bodies that comprise the family dinner table seem corrupted by Macon's selfishness that leads to Ruth's distress. It is Ruth's distress caused by her husband and the watermark, that drives her—daily after dinner is prepared and before Macon returns home—to the "balm" and "pleasure" of nursing the too-old Milkman in the study, where "a damp greenness lived there, made by the evergreen that pressed against the window and filtered the light" (13). The illuminated and grounded evergreen contrasts the pain and anxiety of the dark, tangled, unmoored driftwood and seaweed; Ruth pursues a materially-grounding experience in this room to prepare her for her husband's inevitable criticism of her culinary use of plants at dinner. While she can't ever satisfy Macon with her cooking, she can satisfy Milkman with her milk, moving away from

plants entirely and remaining in the perhaps more comfortable realm of the mammalian. In other words, Ruth tries to use plants in her attempt to negotiate her survival in the capitalist-patriarchy, but plants don't function well within such a construct since it is antithetical to plant being as well as the fact that it is constructed on an ideological platform in which plants are inert and non-agentic. Plants can teach community, but they can also teach failed community, as shown by the way plants story the dysfunction of the Dead family.

While patriarchy that condones emotional and physical abuse is problematic enough on its own, it's important to note that Macon's patriarchal instinct is both compounded and inflected by his capitalistic instincts. In fact, Macon explicitly married Ruth in order to access her father's property, revealing the extent to which he commodifies women for his own gain. Macon recounts that because he functioned as an inflexible landlord, he built up his property enough to dare to approach Ruth's father—"the most important Negro in the city" (21)—and ask his permission to court Ruth. Macon's reasons for pursuing Ruth further exemplify his selfish attitude and commodification of women; he only values Ruth for how he can use her. In this account, the reader continues to see Macon construe himself as a property owner; it is Macon's identifier of choice: "he was able to say [to Dr. Foster]…that he himself was certainly worthy of the doctor's consideration as a gentleman friend for Miss Foster since, at twenty-five, he was already a colored man of property" (23). From before he married her, Macon has objectified Ruth both as a woman and as a means to business ends.

Indeed, Macon's mistreatment of women intersects with his business interests, affirming the ecofeminist claim that patriarchy combined with capitalism is particularly destructive to human relationships. For example, the novel offers a scene in which Macon exhibits malevolence towards a female renter of one of his properties. The tenant, Mrs. Bains, visits Macon at his office to discuss her financial woes. Not only does Macon not invite her into his office, but he also doesn't even remember the woman, just "the circumstances at number three. His tenant's grandmother or aunt or something had moved in there and the rent was long overdue" (21). Macon reduces this woman to her house number; all she is to him is, in this case, unpaid rent, not a woman trying to feed her children. While Macon certainly has the financial viability to show mercy and compassion, he harshly reminds her how much she owes him in rent and the deadline for providing said funds (21). Macon actively builds his wealth through the subjugation and domination of women, exemplifying the way in which capitalism and patriarchy bolster one another.

In the same way Macon values women and tenants for how they can benefit him, he only values the natural environment insofar as it is useful. This is exemplified when the Dead family drives to Honoré Island and Macon discusses his real estate ventures: "There's a beach community out there, Lena. Your father wants to look at it…All of it's not white people's houses. Some of it's nothing. Just land. Way over on the other side. It could be a nice summer place for colored people. Beach houses. You understand what I mean?" (33). Gama exposits this passage, asserting that Macon "plans to buy forest land along the lake and clear it to build condos, therefore

objectifying nature through his capitalist mindset" (51). This passage demonstrates the relationship among the oppression of women and nature discussed by ecofeminists. Earlier in the description of their Sunday drive, the narrator explains that part of Macon's motivation for driving the car is to show off his wealth and his family (31). The patriarchal oppression that Macon employs in using and abusing his family is the same source of his use and abuse of the environment. Macon's sole endeavor is to own property, and he carries that out on the backs of women and the environment simultaneously.

At the beginning of the narrative, Milkman is on track to inherit not only his father's name and property, but also his mistreatment of women and his consumeristic materialism. Milkman exhibits his father's patriarchal entitlement and objectification of the women in his life. For example, his sister Lena tells Milkman, "You've been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us: how we cook your food; how we keep your house" (215). Lena notes that Milkman also objectified his sisters and mother by taking advantage of their domestic contribution: "You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee" (215). For his whole life, Milkman has functioned not as a contributing member of the household but as one whose birthright is to be served by the women he lives with, regardless of how they feel about it.

Milkman's objectification extends beyond patriarchal household divisions of labor into a sexual objectification of women as well, as illustrated in his relationship with Hagar. Milkman and Hagar, who is Pilate's daughter and therefore Milkman's cousin, are lovers for several years: "After about three years or so of Hagar's on-again-off-again passion, her refusals dwindled until finally…they were nonexistent" (98). Milkman becomes bored with Hagar when she stops sexually engaging him in a certain way, indicating that Milkman uses Hagar for sex as opposed to cultivating with her a mutually interdependent relationship of subjects. When Hagar notices her age and that she should be settling down with a husband, Milkman complains, "Hagar was thirty-six and nervous. She placed duty squarely in the middle of their relationship; he tried to think of a way out" (98). Milkman feels no remorse about using Hagar for sex, knowing that he would probably never marry her because of their family relationship. When he finally breaks it off with her, he decides that "he would give her a nice piece of money" (98), revealing the transactional undertones of his relationship with her. Moreover, the text suggests that Milkman is responsible for Hagar's death. In order to woo Milkman again, Hagar takes a trip to the mall to doll herself up with makeup and clothing, but on the walk back it starts to rain and she catches a fever and dies. Milkman's subtle imposition of objectifying beauty standards on Hagar eventually leads to her death.

Indeed, Milkman also inherits his father's materialism, which harms his relationship with others beyond Hagar. Such materialism is displayed in Milkman's urge to steal Pilate's bag, at the expense of his relationship with her, because he

believes it contains gold (172). Milkman pursues the gold because his father insinuates that it will bring freedom, and Milkman agrees that freedom and wealth are equated. For example, when Macon says to Milkman, “You’ll be free. Money is freedom, [Milkman]. The only real freedom there is,” Milkman replies, “I know, Daddy, I know” (163). When Milkman goes to steal Pilate’s bag, he thinks the bag promises “the heart’s lone desire. Complete power, total freedom, and perfect justice” (185). Later in the novel, when Milkman makes it to Shalimar in search of Pilate’s gold, the text highlights his wealth—displayed by his flippant car buying and formal attire—as contrasted with that of the townsfolk. First, Milkman rolls up in a “three-piece beige suit” and a Buick, albeit a broken down one. After soliciting help from the manager of a general store, Milkman says, “If they can’t find [the car part] let me know right away. I may have to buy another car to get back home” (266). Milkman senses that the men in the Shalimar general store are offended by this display of wealth: “They looked with hatred at the city Negro who could buy a car as if it were a bottle of whiskey […] His manner, his clothes, were reminders that they had no crops of their own and no land to speak of either” (266). This interaction ends in a knife fight because of Milkman’s insensitivity to the folks of Shalimar. Milkman consistently values material wealth over human relationships, unable to see that his desires blind him to the way he objectifies others in his pursuit of freedom. As Lena says, “[Milkman is] exactly like [Macon]. Exactly” (215). From his treatment of the women in his life to his consumeristic tendencies, readers see that Milkman is on track to inherit the destructive legacy Macon intends to pass on to him.

3.6 Plant-like Being: Pilate's Textual Phytomorphism and Ecofeminist Values

In contrast to Macon's teachings, the text aligns the ecofeminist teachings of Milkman's aunt Pilate and the text's phyto-characters. Pilate embodies ecofeminism and tree-likeness in her simultaneous eschewal of the patriarchal social order and its capitalist counterpart as well as her embrace of an ecofeminist ethic of care towards women and nature. The text ultimately phytomorphizes Pilate—that is, construes her as both associated with trees and embodying and enacting tree characteristics—in such a way as to illustrate the connection between ecofeminist sensibilities and tree ways of being and knowing.

Pilate's phytomorphism is inflected by her ecofeminist sensibilities. For instance, Pilate's refusal to abide by socially-constructed female grooming expectations (as told by her brother Macon) signals her resistance to patriarchy: "Pilate continued to visit, her shoelaces undone, a knitted cap pulled down over her forehead, bringing her foolish earring and sickening smell into the kitchen" (19-20). Pilate's adornment choices reveal her nonconformity with the expectations placed on her gender, expectations that she be well kempt, dressed properly, and bathed. Macon criticizes Pilate's clothing choices, thereby objectifying her: "Why can't you dress like a woman?...What's that sailor's cap doing on your head? Don't you have stockings?" (20). Despite Macon's attempt to police her gender conformity, Pilate refuses to subject herself to male domination by adorning herself for men.

In addition to her refusal to dress “like a woman,” Pilate resists patriarchal social expectations—particularly those that expect households to have a male to “protect and provide”—in the heading of her all-female household. Pilate’s household also defies patriarchal social logic in the fact that Reba and Hagar do not take surnames at all, let alone the male surname Pilate bears (89). The narrator describes Hagar as “as strong and muscular as [Milkman]” (45) suggesting that, in terms of the division of labor at least, Hagar is as good as any man in her ability to contribute to the running of the household. And Pilate serves just fine as the household “protector,” a role traditionally reserved for a male: when Reba’s boyfriend becomes physically abusive to her in the yard, Pilate responds with cool confidence: “Pilate looked up from a fourth-grade geography book she was reading and closed it. Slowly, it seemed to Milkman, she walked over to a shelf that hung over the dry sink, put the geography book on it, and removed a knife. Slowly still, she walked out the front door” (93). Pilate gets ahold of the man and holds the knife close enough to his heart to cause him to bleed. Pilate proceeds to have a conversation with the man, explaining to him the love a mother has for her child, and even showing compassion when she says, “I’d hate to push [the knife] in more and have your mama feel like I do now” (95). The man backs down and leaves without harming Reba. Pilate uses her power to employ feminine ideals in the face of abuse. She remains calm, and she doesn’t let her ego dictate her response; rather, her love for her daughter and her desire to teach the man a lesson direct her actions, causing her to converse with him rather than simply kill him—which she likely could have done swiftly and easily. In this way, Pilate

embodies ecofeminism in her respect for all humans as interdependent and equal subjects of the same community. Moreover, Pilate's household does not have a male "provider"—instead, the women all contribute to a subsistence wine-making business. Pilate serves as the head of a household of women who view each other as interdependent parts of one whole; each member of the household serves the rest in a division of labor that is defined not by gender role, but by the needs of the community. Despite the lack of a male "head," Pilate's household does not appear to be lacking in strength, protection, material provision, or leadership.

Pilate simultaneously rejects the patriarchal social order as well as capitalist sensibilities as illustrated by her subsistence production and consumption, further aligning herself with ecofeminist values. "Subsistence" householding is an ecofeminist idea from Maria Mies that describes a tightly-woven mode of consumption and production in which the household locally sources as much labor and raw material as possible, resulting in less dependence on industrial-capitalistic modes of mass production or extractivism (297). Mies notes that, historically, women may desire a subsistence lifestyle in order to better preserve their relationship to nature and resources, while men are more likely to support wage-based, extractivist labor in the pursuit of technological "progress" (304). Pilate and Macon neatly reify this historical pattern. For example, in contrast to Macon's real-estate profiteering, Pilate's household provides for itself materially in subsistence ways in regards to her wine-making endeavors. Macon disapproves of Pilate's subsistence operation—"get a real job instead of running a wine house" (20)—revealing that Macon feels Pilate should

fit herself into the broader capitalist system rather than what Anna Tsing calls "pericapitalist": a space that is neither inside or outside of capitalism and that is economically precarious (65). Such precarity flies in the face of Macon's ultimate desire to "own yourself and other people too" (55). In other words, we see the difference between an industrialized capitalist-patriarchy, as exhibited by Macon, and a subsistence and embodied free market production of goods.

Pilate's business endeavor requires a profound and embodied knowledge of nature as well as the collaboration of humans and plants. The women must first know how to identify the berries over and against poisonous ones and when and where to gather the berries. The wine-making process is also slow compared to industrial food production processes; when Guitar asks, "When will this wine be ready?" Pilate responds, "This batch? Few weeks" (47). For Pilate, this wine-making is a collaboration between humans and berries and fermenting bacteria that results in the end product known for its smell and taste and material agency in the human body that makes it worth paying for. Even though Pilate has "never tasted" her wine, she knows of its agency: "Folks don't buy it for the taste. Buy it to get drunk" (49). The berry-stained fingers and lips of the women in Pilate's house serve as evidence of the material intermingling of the plants and humans in this collaboration. Moreover, in contrast to industrial production methods, Pilate's wine-making is communal for the humans involved; Reba and Hagar physically gather the berries themselves, bring them inside, and pick them off the branches, and Guitar and Milkman are invited to participate when they visit (43-45). Through an embodied and communal subsistence

production, the household not only materially provides for itself through an intimate knowledge of plants, but it simultaneously rejects both patriarchy and industrial capitalism.

In addition to subsistence production through wine-making, Pilate's household also exhibits subsistence consumption patterns. For example, Pilate's house "had no electricity because she would not pay for the service. Nor for gas" (27). Not only do these choices challenge Western capitalistic modes of consumption and convenience, but Pilate also replaces these modes of consumption with options that render her and her household more aligned with nature's slow processes. Instead of modern gas and electricity, Pilate opts for subsistence energy: "At night she and her daughter lit the house with candles and kerosene lamps; they warmed themselves and cooked with wood and coal, pumped kitchen water into a dry sink through a pipeline from a well and lived pretty much as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther down the road" (27). Many of these energy options can be independent of state/corporate-provided industrialized options: Candles can be made from scratch with foraged beeswax or rendered animal fat, wood can be collected from the property, and well water is as local as it gets. While Pilate's household does depend on some resources, such as kerosene, considered unsustainable, the ecological burden of the household is slight compared to average consumption habits. Ultimately, Pilate's household meets its material needs in collaboration with berries, with pines, with wood rather than over or against it in both production and consumption, and in its

relative sustainability, Pilate's household rejects dependence on an industrialized capitalist-patriarchal system.

Pilate's subsistence lifestyle is one way in which *Song of Solomon* occupies a Black shoal (King) of the convergence of Black studies and Indigenous studies, for many Indigenous groups exhibit subsistence lifestyles as well, both in the past and present. While there is not a monolithic Indigenous subsistence lifestyle, and certainly such lifestyles have evolved over time, there is a common thread in Indigenous ways of being that emphasizes self-aware dependence on land and other nonhumans for sustenance. I use the term "self-aware" because, as Gary Holthaus points out, all human societies are subsistence societies in that they depend on the land, other nonhumans, and their provision for sustenance, but modern Westerners have largely forgotten this fact (67). And Westerners subsist on different nonhumans than we might imagine when conjuring images of subsistence. As Holthaus expounds, "Without oil we are as apt to be hungry as an Inupiat village without whales and seals. Our culture is a subsistence culture unaware of itself" (67). In this way, Pilate's subsistence lifestyle both animates the liminal space of both Black and Indigenous ways of being with plants while also invoking Kumar's edification to remember our connection to Earth. As we remember our subsistence nature, we can better attune to sustainable rather than unsustainable ways of subsisting.

As Pilate's household functions by subsisting "with" nature rather than "against" nature, that is, sustainably, the text reinforces this material reality in its phytomorphization of the house itself, which foreshadows Pilate's phytomorphization.

For example, one day while Macon walks home from work, he takes a shortcut past Pilate's house. He describes what he sees, giving the reader a picture of Pilate's home: "Pilate lived in a narrow, single-story house whose basement seemed to be rising from rather than settling into the ground" (27). The image of Pilate's house, "narrow" and "rising from the ground" invokes the material-being of real pine trees, which tend to be tall with skinny trunks, rising up from the ground in an acutely vertical direction, with just a little bit of broadness of branches compared to, say, a more bushy or squat tree, such as a sumac. This may seem like an obvious point, but not all trees grown this way because not all trees have the same goals and purposes.

In light of my method to examine material realities exhibited by the text, there is much to consider in the text's simple statement of "rising from the ground" when one understands some key aspects of tree epistemology. For example, according to William Bryant Logan's essay "The Things Trees Know," each tree grows with an "inborn, complex pattern" that can differ from species to species (Logan 25). This complex ancestral programming dictates the way the tree "fill[s] out the pattern of stem, lateral, flower, and fruit" (27). Some trees branch in certain ways, others not at all. Trees differ in their trunk design and growth, as well. Pines are conifers, named for the canonical shape of their growth, and are among the oldest types of trees, having found ways to live and reproduce amidst the botanical competition of old, dense forests (Logan 31). Pines have survived this long by growing both tall and broadly, "straight up with lateral branches" that can catch even the scant light of winter and hold water efficiently in their needles (Logan 31). Pines are thus old, hardy trees, who

have made their way in the world through harsh winters and welcome summers for ages through their intelligent growth patterns adapted for their environment. The passage continues to reinforce my assertion that Pilate's house is a member of the tree community: "Her house sat eighty feet from the sidewalk and was backed by four huge pine trees" (27). When envisioning Pilate's house as a pine tree itself, the latter part of the passage suggests that her home is the fifth pine tree in the grove, a part of the forest. If the passage ended here, we might consider Pilate's home as a sort of metaphorical member of the pine grove; however, the text suggests that Pilate's home is quite materially intertwined with the pines, as the four pines are where "she got the needles she stuck into her mattress" (27).

The text not only phytomorphizes Pilate's house, but even her own person in the material integration of pine into herself through senses such as taste, smell, as well as her visual depictions and discursive associations. For example, the grove of pines makes its way into Pilate's material being as "she loved to chew pine needles and as a result, smelled even then like a forest," (27) a description that foreshadows Milkman's later intermingling with the sweetgum forest through applied sap on his wounds. Indeed, the whole house smells like pine, as Milkman points out twice in his time with Pilate, referring to it as a "piny-winy" smell (40).[16] Macon describes her as "sway[ing] like a willow" (30) while she stirred her wine pulp. Later, Milkman describes her as a

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16 Importantly, since pine trees willfully shed their needles every two years, Pilate's use of them does not harm the trees, adding to the household's sense of sustainability I discuss above.

“tall black tree” while she’s propped on the porch (39). Even Pilate’s mere name, perhaps surprisingly, reinforces her tree-likeness. While the name “Pilate” conjures up images of the trial of Jesus Christ, Morrison turns this expectation on its head by refiguring the name Pilate as resonant of tree community. Pilate’s name was chosen by her despondent and illiterate father; he searched through the Bible for a name that appealed to him, and he “chose a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome; saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees” (18). Pilate’s father’s interpretation of the name invokes real tree community which seeks to protect vulnerable trees even at the expense of stronger trees. When considering the earlier discussion of the community values of trees, Pilate’s name establishes her as one tree among many who contributes to the arboreal community as we would expect to see in real trees that protect one another. From wine making to pine chewing, and even to her cherished paper with her name written on it that she wears in her earring, with the paper being the pulpy storied matter of tree bodies, Pilate continually participates in plant assemblages—both material and discursive.

As Pilate clearly resists the capitalist-patriarchy social order, she also overtly embraces an ecofeminist social order akin to tree community. Pilate interacts with her community in such a way as to enact interdependent relationships of mutual subjectivity and self-sacrifice. We see a microcosm of this in the way Pilate cares for her household and in her hospitality and compassion, but it is also exemplified in the way she protects Milkman from the legal consequences of stealing—stealing from her,

at that. When Macon urges Milkman to steal an ostensibly valuable bag—the "green bag" that contains Pilate's "inheritance"—Milkman obliges, displaying his own propensity toward materialism over and above maintaining human relationships (172). We later find out that the bag contains human bones, but Macon and Milkman think it's full of gold. Milkman's materialism is displayed in his thoughts about the green bag: "Like Easter, [the bag] promised everything…Complete power, total freedom, and perfect justice" (185). It is greed—inherited from his father—that drives Milkman to steal Pilate's bag.

But instead of gaining gold through his thievery, Milkman gains a new appreciation of Pilate and a glimpse into her inner values. When Milkman and Guitar steal Pilate's green bag, they are caught by the police and confess she is the owner. The police call Pilate to the station, and she covers for the men by "verifying Milkman and Guitar's lie that they had ripped off the sack as a joke on an old lady" (206). Pilate bolsters the lie with an elaborate backstory that the bones were her husband's who "had been lynched in Mississippi fifteen years ago, and they wouldn't let her cut him down, and that she left town then and that when she went back the body dropped off the rope of its own accord, so she collected it and tried to bury it" (207). Pilate knowingly humiliates herself for the sake of her nephew and his friend who genuinely tried to steal something from her, even in front of her brother. Milkman greedily steals from Pilate, but when confronted with his crime, Pilate cares not about how she will be viewed in the eyes of the police, but only about getting her nephew and his friend off the hook. On the ride home from the police station, Pilate tells the true story

behind the bones to her brother and the boys, which belonged to a dead White man Macon and Pilate encountered in the woods long ago when they were children, whom Macon stabbed to death:

> Right after Reba was born [my father] came and told me outright: 'You can't just fly on off and leave a body,' he tole me. A human life is precious. You shouldn't fly off and leave it. So I knew right away what he meant cause he was right there when [Macon killed that man]. He meant that if you take a life, then you own it. You responsible for it. You can't get rid of nobody by killing them. They still there, and they yours now. So I had to go back for it. And I did find the cave. And there he was. Some wolves or something must have drug it cause it was right in the mouth of the cave, laying up, sitting up almost, on that very rock we slept on. I put [the remains] in my sack, piece by piece. Some cloth was still on him, but his bones was clean and dry. I've had it every since. Papa told me to, and he was right, you know. You can't take a life and walk off and leave it. Life is life. Precious. (208)

Pilate's account gives the reader a poignant glimpse into Pilate's ecofeminist beliefs and values. Pilate sees herself as interdependent with her community, having responsibility towards the people around her, both living and dead. Pilate felt the need to go back to the cave where this man was killed, and care for his bones as an act of respect. Her sense of responsibility arises from the value of all life, not just human life, and the value of community well-being. This passage displays the intersection of Pilate's sense of self within a community, a sense of self echoed by the mycorrhizal

networks of trees that share resources, protect one another from danger, and prioritize collective survival.

The incident with the green bag initiates Milkman's embrace of ecofeminist values. Milkman's mindset shifts as he reflects on the scene with the cops and realizes his shame and guilt before Pilate: "But nothing was like the shame he felt as he watched and listened to Pilate. Not just her Aunt Jemima act, but the fact that she was both adept at it and willing to do it—for him. For the one who had just left her house carrying what he believed was her inheritance" (209). For the first time in his life, Milkman feels responsible to a woman. He realizes his failure to respect Pilate despite her generous warmth and hospitality toward him: "[Pilate] had cooked him his first perfect egg, who had shown him the sky, the blue of it, which was like her mother's ribbons, so that from then on when he looked at it, it had no distance, no remoteness, but was intimate, familiar, like a room that he lived in, a place where he belonged" (209-210). Milkman realizes that Pilate is his home, more so than his father's household, which is built on greed and domination. In other words, Milkman begins to unlearn the teachings of the capitalist-patriarchy as taught by his own father.

By construing Pilate as both the epitome of ecofeminist relationships and a member of the tree community through phytomorphism, the *Song of Solomon* suggests that trees themselves have something to teach humans about interdependent ecofeminist relationships. The text's subsequent unfolding of Milkman's encounters with real plants as storied matter iteratively enacts, and eventually consummates, Milkman's complete rejection of his patriarchal upbringing and embrace of

ecofeminist community ethics. In this way, Milkman's phenomenological encounter with Pilate's values and lifestyle, insofar as they reflect ecofeminist and tree-like community ethics, initiates a process of transformation that reveals that, while masculinity can be corrupted by capitalist-patriarchy, it can also be recovered and remade for positive community outcomes, which will be discussed later. Following Milkman's encounter with Pilate, he has three subsequent experiences that all contribute to his unlearning of the capitalist-patriarchy he would inherit from his father.

Each of these three experiences revolve around a specific phyto-character in *Song of Solomon*: the tulips of reverie, the long-suffering maple, and arboreal becoming of the sweetgum forest. My foregrounding of these phyto-characters shows that while it is important *what* Milkman learns from these encounters—namely, the emptiness of capitalist-patriarchy and the fulfillment of ecofeminist community—it is more important *who* he learns from, namely, the plants, the storied matter. Each phyto-character vignette reveals the way in which the narrative pairs Milkman's phenomenological encounter with some teacher of the flora with Milkman's profound self-reflection about how he's harmed the people in his life, signaling that these plants' material agency contributes directly to Milkman's transformation.

3.7 Teachers of the Flora: The Tulips of Reverie

While Pilate's phytomorphism and ecofeminist values instigate Milkman's transformation, a haunting "dream" of tulips increases his awareness of his mother's suffering. The narrative unfolds the dream as Milkman tells it to his friend, Guitar. The readers quickly find out that it is not a dream, but something Milkman actually witnessed, though the recounting retains fantastical qualities. Milkman describes it as a dream to Guitar to distance himself from it—"because he didn't want to tell [Guitar] it had really happened, that he had really seen it" (104). The episode may best be described as a reverie, a waking dream that blends reality and imagination. Prior to describing the reverie, Guitar had accused Milkman of not being "a serious person," suggesting that "if things ever got tough, you'd melt" (104). Milkman defends himself by first claiming that "serious is just another word for miserable" and then asserting that his family, particularly his mother, is too serious, using his reverie as evidence for this claim. What Milkman learns from his reverie, specifically its tulips, begins to challenge the values of his father.

At first, the passage appears to be a recounting of Ruth unhappily planting tulips in the backyard—perhaps another attempt to display her domestic mastery of plants. But then the passage takes a turn toward violence, in which the tulips attack and rape Ruth, though she seems to—shockingly—see it as no more than a nuisance. As he begins to tell the story, Milkman notes Ruth's affect: "She had to get some bulbs in the ground before the fifteenth of December, she said. So there she was on her knees digging holes in the ground [...] She likes to plant flowers. She really likes it. But you should have seen her face. She looked like the unhappiest woman in the

world. The most miserable" (104). While Milkman believes Ruth likes to plant flowers, the earlier instance with the driftwood centerpiece may suggest otherwise, if she is just completing domestic tasks to allay her husband's contempt. Milkman describes that, all of a sudden, the "tulips began to grow out of the holes she had dug. First a solitary thin tube of green, then two leaves opened up from the stem—one on each side" (105). The tulips grow rapidly, eventually "smothering her, taking way her breath with their soft jagged lips (105). The reference to "soft jagged lips" "taking away her breath" invokes the image of a forced kiss. Moreover, the tulips are construed in a phallic way: "the tubes…were pressing up against each other and up against his mother's dress," the shafts and "bloody red heads" of the tulips "touched her back" and hastily consume her while she keeps trying to kick them away (105). The tulips' construal as phallic objects that forcefully exert themselves on Ruth invites us to read the tulips as sexually assaulting Ruth while Milkman looks passively on.

And yet, with such forceful action on the part of the tulips, "[Ruth] merely smiled and fought them off as though they were harmless butterflies" (105). Why does Ruth respond to being attacked, at first, as if it's a harmless nuisance, and only later decide to kick them away? The text doesn't give many answers, and scholars have yet to delve deeply into this passage, but I suggest that Ruth's seeming passivity is a function of her patriarchal conditioning, which has ultimately stolen her agency. Perhaps she is so conditioned to such treatment that she doesn't realize how harmful it is to her. On the other hand, perhaps she knows what harm comes to her when she opposes such advances, so she negotiates the best she can until it's overcome her. In

the same way Ruth creates the driftwood centerpiece, she plants the tulips to attempt to safely navigate the patriarchal expectations placed upon her; both instances may seem to display agency on Ruth's part when in reality she has no real choice in the matter. Ultimately, this passage is a troubling instance of Ruth's vulnerability in the face of patriarchal oppression.

From a material ecocritical perspective, we must consider the implications of tender flowers exerting such violence against Ruth. The way this passage construes tulips as masculine parallels a coded masculinity that humans have ascribed to tulips in their material history. While biologists interpret flowers as possessing both male-identified and female-identified parts for plant reproduction, symbolically, flowers tend to be associated with the feminine cultural construct (Pollan 205-206). Despite flowers' ongoing cultural association with femininity in the Western tradition as elucidated by Molly Engelhardt (345), Pollan claims that tulips uniquely exhibit a sort of floral masculinity, both in their historical reception (which I will address later) and their material being (210).[17] In other words, tulips can be coded masculine due to their unique reproduction behaviors, and representation of wealth and global power, an analysis of which will deepen our understanding of what is happening to Ruth and Macon in this passage.

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17 While Engelhardt surveys the Western tradition's casting of flowers as feminine, Engelhardt also shows that this tradition can be upended by feminist action; yet, Engelhardt does not go so far as to say that flowers can be "masculine," as Pollan argues regarding tulips.

As for their material being, tulips exhibit characteristics of the masculine cultural construct. For example, Pollan refers to tulips' sexual traits as "orderly and intelligible" and the opposite of feminine coded traits such as "mysterious" (206). Pollan further describes the tulip as "a linear, left-brained sort of flower, in no way occult, explicit and logical in its formal rules and arrangements" and "rational" (208). For those skeptical of the tulip's masculinity, Pollan offers this image: "watch next April how a tulip forces its head up out of the ground, how the head gradually colors as it rises. Dig down along the shaft, and you'll find its bulb, smooth, rounded, hard as a nut, a form for which the botanists offer a most graphic term: 'testiculate'" (210). Indeed, while all flowers possess both male and female sex organs, and while tulips may be associated with the feminine in some contexts, Pollan makes a convincing case for the coded masculinity of this flower, reinforcing that the tulips in Milkman's reverie could be exerting a masculine dominance over Ruth.

In addition to tulips' potential to embody the masculine cultural construct, considering the tulip reproductive system sheds light on how this toxic masculinity is reproduced and why Ruth seems to be a willing participant in this process. First, Milkman notes that Ruth willingly plants the tulips even though it seems like she's not even having fun (104). Then, as the reverie progresses and the tulips sprout up instantaneously and were "pressing up against [her] dress," Milkman is surprised when Ruth "didn't notice [the tulips] or turn around. She just kept digging" (105). Even as the tulips become violent, "she merely smiled and fought them off as though they were harmless as butterflies" (105). Milkman expects Ruth to realize she is in

danger, but she just goes on helping to reproduce the very thing harming her, an example of the way women may participate in and perpetuate the very patriarchy that harms them. Consider tulip reproduction: tulips only reproduce through their bulbs and must be "regularly replanted" (usually by humans), or else "the chain of genetic continuity can be broken in a generation" (Pollan 174). Unlike the average flowering plant, tulip reproduction is uniquely vulnerable to stagnation without human aid to the bulbs, which aligns with Ruth's compulsive need to get the bulbs in the ground on time. In this way, by compulsively planting the bulbs, Ruth contributes to the reproduction of toxic masculinity. To be clear, Ruth's participation in this process is not necessarily a willing participation, but a coerced participation; women must negotiate that perpetuating the patriarchy is both how they survive and how they are oppressed. In Ruth's case, I would assume her husband expects her to curate the property so as to bolster his sense of prosperity, and she may be criticized for her gardening (outdoor plant mastery) as she is for her cooking (culinary plant mastery). Even so, as Ruth handles the most masculine-coded part of the plant, the "testiculate" bulb, she is all the more aware of her subjugated, feminine state, as she compulsively yet apathetically aids in the reproduction of the very masculinity that harms her.

The dream can be interpreted this way. But, because tulips come from bulbs instead of seeds, "their offspring bear little resemblance to their parents" (Pollan 183). Even so, sometimes tulips mysteriously "revert to the form and color of their parent," when they usually express different colors (Pollan 212). So, on the one hand, if Ruth just stops planting bulbs, so will the reproduction of harmful toxic masculinity halt.

On the other hand, perhaps she hopes that these tulips will be different from their fathers, but there's always the chance of reversion. Ruth simultaneously mourns for the next generation, seeing Milkman as further propagation of capitalist-patriarchy, while also seeing no other way to survive except to continue upholding those structures, and ultimately hoping that her efforts result in some good she can bestow on her son that redeems him and puts him on a better path than his father. The phallic monstrosity of these tulips of reverie suggests a corruption of whatever might have been good or beautiful about these flowers, inviting us to see masculinity in this text as not inherently bad but as something that is both explicitly corrupted and possessing the potential for redemption. Uncovering tulips' coded masculinity lends itself to not only to reading this passage as a sexual assault, but it also suggests why Ruth exhibits a strange indifference to her attackers.

Moreover, when considering tulip material history and reception, we see that a material-ecocritical analysis of these plant beings invites us to consider not only the microcosm of the passage, but also the larger context of the Anthropocene that these plants occupy, as we will also see with the long-suffering maple in the next section. While tulips were first cultivated in Istanbul as early as the 11th century, tulips reached the Netherlands through the Dutch East India Company in the 1500s, eventually sparking what historians call "tulipmania" in the mid 1600s, which is also heralded as the Dutch empire's "Golden Age" (Pollan 145, 176). One major facet of tulipmania was natural scientists' attempts to understand tulip reproduction, which we've already discussed as unique and complex, and it was the Dutch who discovered that planting

tulip bulbs resulted in flowers the next season, whereas planting tulip from the "mother bulb's seed" wouldn't result in flowers for 7 to 12 years (Boissoneault). Horticulturalists were especially interested in how to achieve certain color patterns through different reproductive strategies (Gullino 39). Given this material history, and the fact that a large majority of those cultivating tulips in this period were men, according to Anna Pavord (160-161), we could summarize tulipmania, then, as a male attempt to control reproduction. In other words, tulipmania was only possible through the bypassing of nature's slow, maternal reproductive processes in favor of human intervention and exerting dominance over the flowers for faster gratification, signaling that this flower not only enacts masculinity itself but also reminds of economic attempts to control nature through masculine epistemology.

Even after the final chapter of tulipmania in the Netherlands, the tulip participated in major shifts in the world economy and its relationship to nature: "After the passing of their own tulipmania, [the Dutch] had become masters of large-scale bulb production" to the extent that the Turkish sultan imported millions of bulbs from Holland between 1703 and 1730, an ironic shift in power considering the Dutch imported their first tulips from the carefully cultivated gardens of the Turks (Pollan 180). In other words, tulip value declined from exotic status symbol to widely-available commodity the way many products of imperialism did between the 15th and 18th centuries, early harbingers of what would occur in the industrial revolution later in the 18th century—a revolution that contributes to the Anthropocene (Pollan 180). As summarized by M.L. Gullino, "People's interest in this flower no longer depended on

its beauty, but on the desire to yield economic benefits from it," causing a financial market crash (39). According to their material history, tulips occupy the intersection of imperialism and its attempts to dominate nature in order to build the wealth and status of men; the decidedly "capitalist" portion of the capitalist-patriarchy of ecofeminist analysis of oppression of nature. Ultimately, the fact that the flowers that attack Ruth are tulips is significant: they materially invoke not only masculine domination over female sexuality and reproduction in their masculine qualities, but also the fusing of such toxic patriarchy with the world market in the tulips' material history. Were scholars to simply consider tulips as mere representatives of that which literary flowers symbolize, we would miss the multifaceted ecofeminist significance of Milkman's reverie.

These imagined tulips continue to catalyze Milkman's redemption toward an ecofeminist ethic by awakening him to his latent passive animosity toward his own mother and implicit participation in the Anthropocene's capitalist-patriarchy. Indeed, while Milkman told Guitar this story so as to incriminate his mother's "seriousness" and misery, Guitar flips Milkman's expectations on their head and accuses Milkman of heartlessly watching his mother die. At the conclusion of Milkman's account, Guitar simply, emphatically asks, "Why didn't you go help her?" (105). Guitar criticizes Milkman's decision even though Guitar thinks it is a dream he is hearing. Milkman feels all the more guilty because he experiences "the dream" as reality, yet he remains aloof to his mother's suffering, mistaking it for enjoyment: "'But she liked it. She was having fun. She liked it.' 'Are you sure?' Guitar was smiling. 'Sure I'm

sure. It was my dream.' 'It was *your* mother too'" (105). This exchange with Guitar results in Milkman's further reflection on the treatment of others: "Maybe Guitar was right—partly. His life was pointless, aimless, and it was true that he didn't concern himself an awful lot about other people" (107). Milkman sees that he, as a masculine force himself, could have aided his mother as she struggled against the monstrously phallic tulips. Instead, he stands idly by while she is actively harmed. Thus, these tulips—albeit as corrupted forms of their beautiful selves—serve as teachers that facilitate Milkman's questioning his father's values, shaking Milkman from his passive acceptance of the toxic capitalist-patriarchy and the advantages it affords him.

3.8 Teachers of the Flora: The Long-Suffering Maple

If the tulips reveal Milkman's maladapted relationship with his mother, the Dead family's backyard maple teaches Milkman that his abuse of women is not only more extensive than he thought, but it also parallels an Anthropocentric abuse of nature. His sister Lena shows Milkman the maple tree in the yard: "'That little maple. Right there.' She pointed to a tiny maple tree about four feet high. 'The leaves should be turning red now. September is almost over. But they're not; they're just shriveling and falling down green'" (212). Milkman protests, telling Lena that this tree is not important, and blows her off by asking if she's been drinking. Lena goes on to tell him her theory for why the tree is suffering: "You peed on it [...] And on me" (213). While Lena claims that Milkman exerted a dehumanizing and offensive act toward her,

Milkman dismisses her, first asking if she's drunk and then asking to discuss this later; his dismissiveness of both the maple and Lena shows his lack of care for both women and nature and fits the definition of gaslighting.[18] First, Lena's claim that Milkman peed on her just as he peed on the tree is significant: From an ecofeminist perspective, Lena's claim signals an invitation to examine both the gendered and ecological implications of such an act, as well as their intersection. In other words, this passage offers readers yet another opportunity to consider the material interaction of something like urine and trees as storied matter in order to ascertain the implications of Milkman doing the same to a person. Since "going into the bushes" to pee is no problem, peeing on a human implicitly associates them with vegetativeness, which is a slanderous and offensive association. This passage inverts both of these assumptions by highlighting plants-as-agents and revealing the generative assemblage of nature and humans.

First, from a material perspective, there are nuances to keep in mind when ascertaining the effects of urinating on vegetation. Interestingly, urine has mineral properties that allow it to serve as a fertilizer, and often is used in subsistence and regenerative farming as such. But one must be careful in such use: when urine is applied directly to the plant itself, such as the bark of a tree, as opposed to the soil, it can burn the plant (Feineigle). Younger trees, such as Lena's sapling, are particularly

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[18] To manipulate (a person) by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity ("gaslight, v.").

susceptible to burning from urine. And, since urine applied in this way often proceeds from the male reproductive organ, we are invited to further consider the gender dynamics of this material interaction: the interaction of urine and soil versus the direct application of urine to plant bodies suggests that masculinity, and what proceeds from it, can be both good and harmful, depending on how and when it is applied. In this passage, Lena invites Milkman and the readers to consider: is his masculinity toxic, or fertilizing? Does it aid the community or harm it? Lena's line of questioning asks Milkman to consider the consequences of his actions both for her and for the maple. In conflating herself with the maple tree, both as recipients of Milkman's misused masculinity, Lena invokes the ecofeminist observation that female oppression mirrors ecological oppression, oppression that particularly results in material defoliation through the harming of plant bodies. By moving beyond a purely symbolic notion of what it means to pee on someone and considering the material agency of something like urine, this passage reveals the intersecting oppression of women and nature at the hands of the capitalist-patriarchy.

In addition to considering the material effect of urine, this passage invites us to consider the epistemology of trees, and in this case, the maple tree, and why this particular tree might be struggling based on its material properties and interaction with other agents in the text. Maples, in particular, have commercial uses and specific vulnerabilities that invite us to read this passage as much more than just a tiff between siblings, but as a microcosm of ecological ills intersecting with gender dynamics. According to the CABI Encyclopedia of Forest Trees, sugar maples are among the

most coveted hardwoods in North America, consumed usually for furniture, cabinets, tools, and flooring, due to their fine-grained wood that stains and finishes nicely. Additionally, some maples produce unique and therefore desirable wood-grain patterns known as “bird’s eye maple,” garnering particularly high prices (“Acer saccharum”). In addition to their desirable hardwood, maple sap is the origin of highly-sought-after maple syrup (“Acer saccharum”). Maples, as very suitable raw material as well as producers of desirable sap for syrup, sit at the intersection of ecology and economy, and their unique vulnerabilities situate them as more prone to defoliation with mistreatment, such as Milkman’s peeing on their sensitive roots. Indeed, maples are particularly sensitive in their roots: for example, they are sensitive to excess of water and sunlight while maturing, requiring maple caretakers to ensure the maples have shade and do not suffer flooding (“Acer saccharum”). One of their most formidable pests, Armillaria, harms by producing rot on maple roots, which leads to maple decline (“Acer saccharum”). Disturbances to maple roots in the agricultural setting, such as from equipment, can be fatal (“Acer saccharum”). Ultimately, the material history and uses of maples invites us to see this long-suffering maple as a victim of the capitalist-patriarchy.

In addition to the material-economic experience of the maple species, the maple suffers at the hands of the capitalist-patriarchy in the potential role of climate change in this passage. Put differently, there is more to the maple’s plight than the singular act of Milkman’s urination, which is just a microcosm of the work of the patriarchy; the tree may be victim to the mass effects of the capitalist-patriarchy,

namely climate change. Phenomenologically, Lena's estimation of the maple's suffering is tied to her seasonal knowledge. Focusing on Lena's seasonal awareness offers us generative ways of thinking about this passage: first, it reinforces the ecofeminist inflection of the passage, in which Lena is aware of and connected to nature's rhythms while Milkman is oblivious. Second, it invites us to consider the role of material seasonality factors—climate, temperature, day length—in the maple's plight. Normally, deciduous trees like maples change color at the gradual onset of colder temperatures. Instead, the backyard maple, as Lena observes, goes from green leaves to dropped leaves instead of changing gradually. Scientifically, according to Shixi Zhang et al of the Beijing Institute of Geographic Sciences, the normal green color of leaves is a result of chlorophyll, which is a form of nutrition that trees pull into their roots for storage during the winter (2). The process of moving the chlorophyll to the roots results in the remaining aspects of the leaf color becoming more pronounced, hence the autumnal hues of red, orange, yellow, and brown (Zhang et al 2). The removal of chlorophyll ultimately leads to the normal and healthy process of leaf shedding that allows the tree to survive the winter. While tree autumnal "senescence," or the changing color and shedding of leaves, is a complex process with many factors, scientists know that "long-term observational studies indicate leaf senescence is delayed by increasing temperature" (Zhang et al 1). For example, in 2018, Colorado experienced record high temperatures in October (80s-90s) that resulted in delayed color change, so when the cold finally hit, the trees quickly dropped their leaves while they were still green ("It's Fall"). In other words, in the

face of higher fall temperatures, the trees hold onto their nutritious chlorophyll as long as possible, but when the cold snap sets in, they quickly must release the leaves, fearing their energy stores are in jeopardy. Unfortunately, truncating the shedding process could prevent the tree from storing valuable chlorophyll it otherwise could have in a slower senescence process. Since it seems as if the long-suffering maple is a victim both of Milkman's misapplied urine and the changing climate fueled by the capitalist economy's "Great Acceleration," my reading highlights concerns that we as readers in the Anthropocene might bring to the text that shifts how we see Milkman's actions on a larger scale: Milkman's individual actions cause him to participate in a much bigger force that exerts itself in domination over both women and nature.

As the passage decries Milkman's mistreatment of the maple, it also aligns his abuse with how he's treated his sister, both by associating Lena with nature and then by overtly conflating her with the maple. First, the passage establishes Lena as possessing an ecofeminist ethic of care toward nature. Lena's relationship with the backyard maple evidences a connection to the plants around her: in order for Lena to understand the suffering of the maple, she would have had to track its autumnal activity for the four years she's cared for the tree. Lena's observations are born of her care for the tree, which stems from her sense of connection to it. Lena's connection to the tree represents a sort of refuge from the toxic patriarchy that oppressed her: Lena originally acquired the sapling on a family car trip when she was forced to take care of an immature Milkman who had to stop to urinate, and her recalling of this experience is rife with patriarchal undertones: "We were in the country and there was no place

else to go. So they made me take you. Mama wanted to, but Daddy wouldn't let her. And he wouldn't go himself [...] so they made me go. I was a girl too, but they made me go" (213). Macon treats Lena like a mature woman while Milkman is babied, and the youthful Lena realizes it's unfair but doesn't want to incur her father's wrath. Lena makes the best of the situation, observing the pretty landscape and taking some of it with her: "Some purple violets were growing all over the grass, and wild jonquil. I picked them and took some twigs from a tree. When I got home, I stuck them in the ground right down there" (213). In addition to picking the flowers to make the best of the highway bathroom break, Lena admits that her connection to flowers extended beyond this instance into a form of coping with her life more generally: "I always liked flowers, you know. I was the one who started making artificial roses. [...] It kept me...quiet" (213). Lena compares herself to an asylum inmate who weaves baskets, or else "they find out what's really wrong and do something" (213). Lena's coping mechanism mimics her mother's compulsive tulip planting. While it's really Macon's fault that Lena had to tend to a childish Milkman on the side of the road, we know that Milkman benefitted from this dynamic through the years even though it harmed Lena.

This longstanding connection to and care for the flora around her is what undergirds Lena's conflation of herself and the maple tree. When Lena originally tells Milkman "You peed on it," after he dismisses her she adds, "And on me" (213). Later after describing the maple's origin on the side of the road, Lena again conflates herself with the tree: "After you peed on me, I wanted to kill you" (213). Lena notes that when he originally peed on the flowers and tree, Milkman only killed the flowers, so

Lena forgave him because the tree survived. But Lena realizes surviving is different than thriving, both for herself and the tree. Thus, when Lena says, "I thought that because that tree was alive that it was all right. But I forgot there are all kinds of ways to pee on people" (214)—again conflating the tree with humans—she is suggesting that she herself is not all right. Her entire life has been to exist at the whim of her father and brother: "You've been doing it to us all your life" (214). Milkman is so disconnected from the processes of nature and his family community that he doesn't even notice the tree's suffering, nor his sisters'. Moreover, by conflating herself with the tree, Lena shows Milkman that his selfish impulses to harm nature and to harm women are in fact connected in their motivation and effects.

This dialogue reveals the way in which human stories and tree stories become intertwined as storied matter. Lena is not the tree, and the tree is not Lena, but Milkman peed on the tree, and thus peed on Lena. This is an instance similar to in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* where the pear tree is more materially prominent than the humans (namely Logan Killicks and Jody Starks) in the story, inverting the impulse to read the trees as symbolic and the humans as real: as Lena is intertwined with the tree's story, she is affected by Milkman's material treatment of the tree. While he is at first indignant, ironically missing what is so clear to Lena and the reader, post facto, Milkman describes this conversation with Lena, which also includes him bring brought into the maple's story, as "sobering" (211), suggesting that it had a significant effect on his viewpoint. In this way, the long-suffering backyard maple tree functions as another material-discursive lesson for Milkman: when you pee on trees,

as when you pee on people, they don’t thrive. Milkman continues learning just how toxic his participation in the capitalist-patriarchy has been to both the people and the natural beings around him. Milkman sees his father in himself and questions whether he has been forging his own path or actually just following Macon all the while, objectifying everyone around him.

3.9 Teachers of the Flora: Arboreal Becoming in the Sweetgum Forest

Milkman’s consummate phyto-encounter is with the agency of an animate forest and a particular sweetgum tree, and it solidifies his rejection of his father’s inheritance. Contextually, it’s important to note that Milkman’s forest adventures result directly from his travels to Danville and then Shalimar, which he undertakes to find his family’s legendary gold. Even though his motives are to get rich, he needs to find out more about his family beyond his father’s and Pilate’s generation in order to get clues as to where the gold is. At first, Milkman just wants the gold, evidencing his longstanding materialism still motivates his actions, but this evolves into the desire to know his heritage. Milkman’s longing for a connection to his ancestors indicates a dissatisfaction with the inheritance offered by his father—the inheritance of capitalist-patriarchy. While Milkman does gain some knowledge about his human ancestors, his most important lesson actually comes from the animate forest sweetgum, suggesting that the capitalist-patriarchy is best combatted by learning not only from human kin, but also the very plants around us.

The text establishes the forest as an animate being with a sense of agency that challenges Milkman's conceptions of nature. When he first arrives in Danville, Milkman is unaware of nature's animacy around him: "[Milkman] was oblivious to the universe of wood life that did live there in layers of ivy grown so thick he could have sunk his arm in it up to the elbow. Life that crawled, life that slunk and crept and never closed its eyes. Life that burrowed and scurried, and life so still it was indistinguishable from the ivy stem on which it lay. Birth, life, and death—each took place on the hidden side of a leaf" (219-220). The narrator elucidates for the reader the animacy of the landscape and the hidden significance thereof, inviting the reader to expect Milkman to soon be brought in on this enchanting secret as well. And so he is, over the course of the next several scenes and chapters in such a way as to teach him the emptiness of the legacy he is poised to inherit.

The text first establishes the forest's animacy as it contends with Milkman, suggesting that Milkman and the forest subconsciously view each other as enemies. For example, when Milkman first trekked through the woods prior to the hunting excursion, the forest first exerts its agency in an almost comical upending of Milkman's attachment to his material wealth: "His hat had been knocked off by the first branches of the old walnut trees, so he held it in his hand. His cuffless pants were darkened by the mile-long walk over moist leaves" (239). The very objects that represent Milkman's cultured identity are materially rejected by the forest, in the knocking off of the hat and the staining of the pants. Objects such as clothing are cultural markers of identity, but in the woods these objects are of little value.

Milkman's contention with the forest mimics his father's contention with the trees on Honoré Island that stood in the way of development. Milkman has never encountered trees and woods un-curated by men: "[Milkman] had no idea that simply walking through the trees, bushes, on untrammeled ground could be so hard. Woods always brought to his mind City Park, the tended woods on Honoré Island [...] where tiny convenient paths led you through" (250). Honoré Island was earlier described by Macon as "nothing. Just land" (33) which contrasts Milkman's encounter with the forest as an animate agent—much more than "nothing" or "just land" would indicate. The forest's agency over Milkman, especially as it easily tarnishes the objects of Milkman's material wealth, challenges the capitalist-patriarchal view that nature is inert, raw material only valuable for its contribution to wealth-building and human convenience.

While at first Milkman and the forest seem to contend with one another, Milkman eventually submits to its agency and connects with the forest in a profoundly material way. During the hunting excursion, when he becomes too fatigued to continue traversing through the woods—for he found himself "stepping over big stones," "dragging his feet and catching them in humped roots," and "push[ing] branches away from his face"—Milkman chooses to sit down (275). The moment Milkman connects his body with the sweetgum tree and the forest floor—"at the next tree, he sank down to the ground and put his head back on its bark" (275)—the text unfolds in such a way as to suggest there is no longer a contention between Milkman and the forest, but rather an explicit and generative ecomaterial intermingling of the

two. Indeed, such intermingling is grounded in contemporary science and what physically happens to the human body when it makes contact with the soil or trees uninhibited by artificial materials such as synthetic shoe soles, which is a form of contact also known as "Earthing" or "grounding."

Indigenous groups such as the Lakota have practiced grounding for centuries, as Chief Standing Bear recounts: "The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing, and healing. This is why the old Indian still sits upon the earth instead of propping himself up away from its life-giving forces" (192). The wisdom of Lakota elders reveals the power of grounding, and significant aspects of Lakota culture revolve around the power of the ground: "It was good for the skin to tough the earth and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred earth. Their tipis were built upon the earth and their altars were made of earth" (192). Moreover, Standing Bear's conception of grounding aligns with the transformation we will see in Milkman shortly, as the Lakota believe that "to sit or lie upon the ground is to be able to think more deeply and to feel more keenly; [one] can see more clearly into the mysteries of life and come closer in kinship to other lives about him" (192).

What the Lakota have known for centuries is now being affirmed within the paradigm of Western science. In Western scientific terms, because the Earth possesses a "vast supply of electrons" on its surface, contact with that charge stabilizes the electrical systems in the human body (Chevalier et al 1). A 2012 study summarizes that "Emerging scientific research supports the concept that the Earth's electrons induce multiple physiological changes of clinical significance, including reduced pain,

better sleep, a shift from sympathetic to parasympathetic tone in the autonomic nervous system (ANS), and a blood-thinning effect" as well as "regulating […] cortisol (stress hormone) secretion" (Chevalier et al 1). For functional and alternative physicians, Earthing has become a regular part of treating patients with inflammatory and mood disorders. Additionally, trees can also conduct the Earth's electrons, since "electrical impulses […] pass through the roots of trees" (Flannery vii), so Milkman's contact with both the soil and the tree offers these positive benefits, disintegrating the previously contentious relationship Milkman exhibited with the forest.

In addition to considering the material effects of sitting on the ground and touching the tree, the narrative gives us another opportunity to consider the materiality of this particular tree species: the sweetgum, especially as the material intermingling is reinforced when the text indicates Milkman physically applied the tree elements of "leaf juice," "tree sap," and "branches," to a wound on his face. We can surmise that while Milkman sits under one sweetgum, the surrounding forest may contain other sweetgums, so the "leaf juice," "tree sap," and "branches" are likely those of sweetgum. In other words, Milkman amalgamates aspects of the sweetgum into himself quite intimately through the application of these elements to an open wound, allowing the forest's materiality to permeate even his blood. In addition to being coveted hardwoods used in furniture and other production, like maples, sweetgums are known for their medicinal resin commercially called "storax," a byproduct coveted by the pharmaceutical and chemical industry (Lingbeck et al). While the sweetgum commercial industry began in the late 1800s, peaking in the mid-1900s as the trees

were used in war production, according to USDA Forest Service, Indigenous American groups used sweetgum resin medicinally for centuries (Turner et al 248). Thus, it's likely that the "tree sap" was indeed healing Milkman's wounds in this application (Lingbeck et al). Additionally, and subtly, the text invokes an example of an earlier but inverse example of this healing exchange of elements: when Milkman peed on the maple, he was doing something materially similar—releasing his bodily elements to intermingle with the maple—but instead of applying his urine in a productive way so as to serve the maple, he harmed it by peeing directly on it. Now, we see the sweetgum as a more perfect offering, not harming but healing and soothing as it integrates its therapeutic bodily elements into Milkman's body. Such giving on the part of the forest parallels the emergent science that suggests trees protect and prioritize their kin in forest settings. In sum, Milkman initiates a sort of forest-becoming through his material engagement with the sweetgum forest's elements. This continues to develop through the rest of the scene.

As this forest-Milkman intermingling continues, it catalyzes Milkman's reflections on his life choices, selfishness, and negative treatment of the women in his life, as the other phyto-encounters have. Milkman "began to wonder what he was doing sitting in the middle of a woods in Blue Ridge country. He had come here [...] to find anything he could that would either lead him to the gold or convince him that it no longer existed" (275). Milkman ultimately concludes that "ignorance…and vanity" (276) have driven his materialistic journey. Further, as he continues reflecting, Milkman gets caught up on a word he uses while considering his plight at Solomon's

General Store: "he had done nothing to deserve their contempt…It sounded old. *Deserve*. Old and tired and beaten to death. Deserve. Now it seemed to him that he was always saying or thinking that he didn't deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others" (276, emphasis in original). Milkman finally names his mistreatment of others as a result of this revelation about his entitlement, namely the abuse of his mother and Hagar, and begins to understand the malice Hagar in particular showed him: "surely Hagar, who knew him and whom he'd thrown away like a wad of chewing gum after the flavor was gone—she had a right to try to kill him" (277). In reflecting, Milkman realizes he's treated everyone he's encountered with a sense of entitlement.

Milkman's revelation is almost expected when considering the material effects of grounding as explicated in both IEKs and contemporary science. Indeed, Milkman is able to "think more deeply and to feel more keenly; [to] see more clearly into the mysteries of life and come closer in kinship to other lives about him" (Standing Bear 192). The positive physiological effects of the Earthing allow Milkman's cortisol to drop, his sympathetic nervous system ("fight or flight") to shift to parasympathetic ("rest and digest"), and he can actually take a moment to reflect on himself. The capitalistic impulses that have been driving Milkman since he was a boy are stressful and demand constant performance, but here in the forest, touching the ground, his body can consider more than just survival for a moment as the Earth's electrons act on his body to reduce inflammation and stress hormones. Rather than functioning as a mere symbol of awakening, this forest materially aids Milkman's ability to mentally

and emotionally process his selfishness and come to new conclusions about himself and how he's lived. Under this sweetgum tree, and with the help of the soil, Milkman's superiority complex and lifelong hubris start to dissipate.

Milkman's ecomaterial forest encounter initiates a generative loss of his sense of self—a sense of self previously mediated by family name and material possessions. Milkman reflects on the thoughts quoted above, "They were troublesome thoughts, but they wouldn't go away. Under the moon, on the ground, alone [...] his self—the cocoon that was his "personality"—gave way" (277). At first, this seems like a metaphorical identity shift, but the text suggests that Milkman begins to experience a sort of becoming-with the forest that is reinforced later as well: "He could barely see his own hand, and couldn't see his feet. He was only his breath, coming slower now, and his thoughts. The rest of him has disappeared" (277). These reflections are resonant of deep meditation. Indeed, Milkman's identity dissipation is not only metaphysical but also physical and material as his physical body seems subsumed by the forest. The material significance of Milkman's identity shift is reinforced by the role, or lack thereof, of Milkman's material objects of wealth in this moment: "There was nothing here to help him—not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes" (277). In fact, these symbols of wealth actually "hampered him...His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help out here" (277). In this way, Milkman comes around to what the forest knew all along, from the very moment it knocked his hat off his head and dirtied his suit pant cuffs. Moreover, to consider Earthing again, we now know that modern clothing hampers one's ability to access the

Earth's electrons. For example, "since the 1960s, we have increasingly worn insulating rubber or plastic soled shoes, instead of the traditional leather fashioned from hides," which better conduct the Earth's electrons (Chevalier et al). In other words, Milkman senses that these objects of wealth not only interfered with his human relationships, but also his Earth relationships. While Milkman previously found his identity in his material wealth and father's reputation, i.e. his place in the capitalist-patriarchy, the Shalimar forest materially contributes to Milkman's revelation of the emptiness of such an identity construction.

Moreover, Milkman looks to the primal forest for a new sense of identity now that his old one has been stripped from him, and this forest connection ultimately saves his life. Milkman realizes he is missing a relationship with nature that the men of Shalimar possess, particularly an ability to communicate with the forest, the dogs, and the trees: "What did Calvin see on the bark? On the ground? What was he saying? What did he hear that made him know something unexpected had happened some two miles—perhaps more—away, and that that something was a different kind of prey, a bobcat?" (277). The hunting group exhibits a sort of primal language, "what there was before language. Before things were written down. Language in the time when men and animals did talk to one another" (278) that Milkman wants to be privy to. He envies the knowledge that would come from such communication, not only with animals, but also trees: "It was more than tracks Calvin was looking for—he whispered to the trees, whispered to the ground, touched them as a blind man caresses a page of Braille, pulling meaning through his fingers" (278). The text again reinforces

the material value of physically touching trees since their communication with other nonhumans is located in their material exchanges.

Inspired by the primal communication between animate agents such as hunter, dog, forest, and trees, Milkman connects again with the sweet gum tree, culminating in a tree-to-human communication that saves his life and initiates his ecofeminist sensibilities: "Milkman rubbed the back of his head against the bark" and for the first time in his forest reflections, he thinks of Guitar" (278). But he continues connecting with the tree: "down either side of his thighs he felt the sweet gum's surface roots cradling him like the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather. Feeling both tense and relaxed, he sank his fingers into the grass. He tried to listen with his fingertips, to hear what, if anything, the earth had to say" (279). Morrison presciently invokes Simard's notion of the maternal tree—the singular tree in the forest, neither male nor female—that fulfills a role of nurturing for the other surrounding trees ("The Whispering" 3). The forest does communicate with its newly adopted kin, and it saves Milkman's life, for "it told him quickly that someone was standing behind him and he had just enough time to raise one hand to his neck and catch the wire that fastened around his throat" (279). After quite a scuffle, Milkman breaks free and rejoins the hunting party, finding safety from Guitar. There are a few significant aspects of this key passage: first, Milkman's communication with the tree is not metaphorical, but materially mediated through the means of tree communication that the text has continually highlighted—soil, roots, bark, skin. Second, the fact that this tree communicates directly with Milkman reinforces the role of trees and plants in this text

as teachers, and this tree and this forest function as teachers as did the tulips and maple. Third, the tree's physical interaction with Milkman suggests that the tree adopts Milkman as its offspring, which we know means the tree will go to great lengths to care for Milkman. In other words, the tree fulfils a parental need for Milkman. In fact, Morrison construes the tree roots as fulfilling both masculine and feminine parental roles—"maternal hands of a grandfather"—signaling interdependence rather than the hierarchal social structure of his father (279). In this way, the tree teaches Milkman that gender roles that benefit men and oppress women are a function of individualistic culture, not interdependent nature. The sweetgum tree welcomes Milkman as kin, serving him and offering him nourishment and protection as it would any other sweetgum sapling.

Milkman's forest encounter fundamentally changes him and confirms the arboreal becoming-with foreshadowed when Milkman was physically touching the sweetgum tree. Upon finding safety, Milkman "found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged to it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there—on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not walk with a limp" (281). This phytomorphism illustrates Milkman's new sense, his remembering, of his material belonging with the Earth, not unlike how Pilate's house grew among the pines. The reference to Milkman's limp invokes an earlier discussion of it in the text: as Bennett points out, Milkman's "affected walk was actually a source of pride and positive regard when he would attend parties or other public gatherings with his

peers" (83-84). In other words, Milkman's pride in his limp surfaces as a "yearning for the acknowledgement and care of his father" (Bennett 84). This is not to say that his limp is not a material experience of disability, but that his material experience is one inflected by the circumstances he finds himself in; it shows that his disability is "always already a social and environmental phenomenon and thus not so much an inherent trait as a mode of being in the world determined by one's direct surroundings, architecturally and otherwise" (Bennett 84). Ultimately, such a disability reading invites us to consider what the tree is really doing for Milkman in this moment in which he "no longer walk[s] with a limp" (281). On the one hand, we can read Milkman's altered gait as a sort of physical elongation that has occurred as a result of interacting with the tree, supporting a reading of Milkman's arboreal becoming as shown in his physical rootedness in such a way that elongates his body. In this way, the absence of Milkman's limp reinforces my claim that Earthing and the sweetgum had materially-mediated effects on Milkman's body and physiology, potentially reducing any inflammatory process responsible for the limp. One might wonder if such inflammatory processes could be arrested so quickly, and research shows that "Earthing facilitates a significant transfer of free electrons into the body, a transfer resulting in rapid, sometimes instant, physiological changes" (Menigoz et al 153). In fact, "Earthing typically reverses both acute and chronic inflammation, and does so rapidly" (Menigoz et al). The material fact of the forest's clinical healing properties again suggests that Milkman's forest encounter is not simply a symbolic transformation, but one that was aided by the forest's material agency.

While there is evidence for physical transformation here, based on Bennett's reading of Milkman's limp, there is a symbolic transformation occurring as well: Milkman no longer walks with a limp because he no longer needs to take pride in his gait as a way to earn his father's acknowledgement. In the tree adopting Milkman as kin, Milkman is now grounded, rooted in the Earth as a function of his identity rather than just his current physical circumstance. We are reminded of Pilate's plant-doings as Milkman also exhibits a material plant connection, ultimately indicating Milkman's embrace of Pilate's values and rejection of his father's inheritance as well as an implicit need for his approval. Milkman begins to see himself as a part of plant-community rather than a distant consumer of it. Milkman transforms into a member of the plant-community that embraces interdependence as a result of his physical connection through Earthing.

As I conclude my discussion of Milkman's three main plant teachers, I'd like to offer a summative note that considers the chronotope of these phyto-characters and how space-time inflects Milkman's transformation. Milkman's transformation follows the maturation trajectory of childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood in terms of moving from total egocentrism to the interdependence and humility brought by maturity in aging. This maturation trajectory is reinforced by the shifting chronotopes of each plant Milkman encounters. Milkman's proximity to each plant (space), as well as the plant's age (time) invite us to consider the role of such details in his own transformation. In other words, with each "lesson," Milkman gets closer to the body of each plant, and each plant is subsequently older than the last. Consider the tulips: as

far as proximity is concerned, Milkman is in the house while he watches his mother with the tulips. Moreover, further proximal distance is put between Milkman and the tulips in the construal of his experience as a reverie. The tulips are also very young in gestational age; they are planted as bulbs and sprout within the reverie-time. When Milkman encounters the maple tree, he is also in the house, but there is no distance conferred in a reverie-construal, and the tree is a few years old, which is relatively young in tree-time but much older than the tulips (flower-time is much shorter than tree-time, too). Additionally, while Milkman is in the house when Lena confronts him about the maple tree, Milkman previously exhibited closer material proximity when he originally peed on it. Finally, when Milkman encounters the sweetgum, he is as proximally close as is possible to get to a tree; not only does he touch it with his body, but he amalgamates the sap into his blood. This tree is also the oldest plant Milkman encounters; mature sweetgums can live hundreds of years. Compounded by the encounters with the tulips and maple, Milkman's experiences thus far transform him from an egotistical child into a well-balanced man who no longer finds his identity in his role in the capitalist-patriarchy, and the rest of the text unfolds the relational implications of this change.

3.10 Arboreal Becoming, Communal Becoming: Milkman's Ecofeminist Sensibilities

Milkman's transformation is first noted in his relationship with the Earth, as explored above, but his relationship with women also changes drastically, illustrated

by his relationship with Sweet and the transformed ways he thinks about his female family members, full of regret for his mistreatment. For example, Milkman displays his newfound values of interdependence by serving and cherishing a woman, Sweet, when previously he was only concerned about the lovemaking itself. Milkman and Sweet model a relationship of mutual subjectivity: “She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum powder on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back” (285). Further, Milkman performs household tasks he ostensibly has never done in his life: “He made up the bed [...] washed the dishes [...] scoured her tub” (285). Further, I think it no coincidence the similarity between the name “Sweet” and the “sweetgum” tree Milkman encountered in the forest. It is as if he and Sweet continue the tree-like community caring that he first learned from the sweetgum. Moreover, Milkman finds himself thinking of his mother, and for the first time in his life, Milkman exhibits the ability to imagine himself in someone else’s shoes, considering himself in her situation: “he hadn’t thought much of it when she’d told him, but now it seemed to him that such sexual deprivation would affect her, hurt her in precisely the same way it would affect and hurt him” (300). Milkman also thinks of Hagar and his mistreatment of her: “Why did he never sit her down and talk to her? Honestly. And what ugly thing was it he said to her the last time she tried to kill him? And God, how hollow her eyes had looked...He had used her” (300). Finally, Milkman regrets stealing from Pilate: “How could he have broken into that house—the only one he knew that achieved comfort without one article of comfort in it” (301). Interestingly, when Milkman reflects on his mistreatment of his mother or

Hagar, he doesn't seem to then also long for them as a result, but when he considers Pilate, he describes himself as "homesick for her" (300). Despite Pilate's lack of material wealth, Milkman considers her his home, showing his movement away from objectifying mindsets of the capitalist-patriarchy. Milkman now seems capable of engaging in mutually-interdependent relationships with women—relationships that follow tree community characteristics—as well as exhibiting compassion for those he previously mistreated.

Milkman's reflections on his mother and his treatment of Hagar and Pilate lead him to profound revelations about his own complicity in the capitalist-patriarchy through the inheritance of his father's ideals. Milkman remembers Macon, specifically for his materialism and as an old man "who acquired things and used people to acquire more things" (300). Milkman then realizes his own entrapment in such materialistic values due to his family identity: "As the son of Macon Dead the first, he paid homage to his own father's life and death by loving what that father had loved: property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life. He loved these things to excess because he loved his father to excess" (300). For the reader, these characterizations of Milkman are not surprising—we've seen it all along. But for Milkman, these are new revelations about not only the power of a toxic capitalist-patriarchy, but also his overt complicity in it. Milkman's ability to compassionately consider the people—particularly the women—in his life displays a marked transformation away from capitalist-patriarchy and toward an ecofeminist appreciation of his family.

Milkman now tenderly sees himself a part of Pilate's ecofeminist household—a development that flips the capitalist-patriarchy on its head. Milkman refers to Pilate's house as "the only one he knew that achieved comfort without one article of comfort in it. No soft worn-down chair, not a cushion or a pillow. No light switch, no water running free and clear…But peace was there, energy, singing, and now his own remembrances" (300-301). Milkman realizes that strong households are not built around exclusively male leadership or material possessions but the peace that comes with appreciating those you live with: "Milkman smiled, remembering Pilate. Hundreds of miles away, he was homesick for her, for her house, for the very people he had been hell-bent to leave" (301). While it's understandable that Milkman might be homesick for the comfort of Pilate's warm hearth on a surface level, when considering the contrasting inflection of the capitalist-patriarchy in Macon and Pilate's respective households, and the fact that households are the chosen unit of the patriarchal social order, we see Milkman outright reject not only his individual father, but the capitalist-patriarchy—and all its empty promises to men—entirely.

3.11 Conclusion: An Ancestral Plantsong for Plantationocene Remembering

By the end of the novel, Milkman sees himself as a part of Pilate's household, or, the lineage he inherits from her rather than his father. Moreover, the discovery of his "Indian grandmother," Sing, through the ancestral plantsong, fortifies his newfound place in Pilate's family. The final chapters of the book build momentum as Milkman

gathers individual clues about his grandmother until his great revelation when he hears the Shalimar children singing a folksong that contains the names of his ancestors. While scholars tend to emphasize the African culture in the song's allusion to the myth of the flying African (Gurleen Grewal, Susan Blake, Laura Dubek, Joshua Bennett), and the kaleidoscope of Milkman's ancestry as it relates to Pilate (Michael Awkward, Gerry Brenner) created in the titular Song of Solomon, the role of plants in the song warrants exploration. Ultimately, analysis of the few plants mentioned in the *Song of Solomon* highlights the Plantationocene context of the novel as well as the ability of plants to participate in human meaning-making as storied matter. It is in the Plantationocene context, as discussed in the introduction, that *Song of Solomon's* ancestral folksong must be considered.

Readings emphasizing the song's mimesis of the myth of the flying African implicitly tie the song to the plantation but fail to connect this allusion to the ecomateriality of the Plantationocene. Briefly, the myth features a witch doctor who helps a number of enslaved Black people "fly away" from the abusive plantation on which they work (Dubek 105). However, the plant characters not only underscore this plantation context but participate materially in human meaning-making of such an experience. When we are first introduced to the song, way back in the beginning of the novel when Robert Smith attempts to fly off Mercy Hospital's rooftop, he sings "O Sugarman done fly away, / Sugarman done gone, / Sugarman cut across the sky / Sugarman gone home" (7). The second time we encounter the song, it is Pilate singing as she is plucking berries for her winemaking, and the song evolves slightly: "O

Sugarman don't leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me / O Sugarman don't leave me here / Buckra's arms to yoke me" (49) and then the chorus of the song as sung by Robert Smith is repeated by Hagar. While we find out later that "Sugarman" is an evolution of "Solomon" (and every subsequent encounter with the song uses "Solomon" instead of "Sugarman") the reference to sugar immediately locates this song in the Plantationocene, the American South where sugar plantations reigned and Black people were enslaved to labor among the sugarcane. The reference to cotton in the second song version underscores the Plantationocene context of another crop commonly managed by enslaved Black people, but it also invokes the violence of the plantation as the cotton balls "choke" the singer. Moreover, Pilate sings the song as she "return[s] to plucking berries" (49). Singing while working suggests the song may be a work song, which highlights the interplay of the ecomaterial and human meaning in its singing. Work songs were commonly used in community work settings—both in enslaved labor and non-enslaved labor—to keep up morale, to keep time, and even to keep multiple people working on the same task in sync. In other words, worksongs mediated workers' engagement with each other as well as the ecomaterials at hand. Finally, Milkman starts to make sense of the song when he hears the Shalimar children singing "Reiner Belali Shalut" and remembers a location in the woods known as "Ryna's Gulch," effectively tying the song not just to Milkman's ancestors' place-based experiences, but his own experience in the sweetgum forest, storying the lessons of the sweetgum forest in the plantsong as well. The plantsong is form of intermingled

ecomateriality, human meaning-making, and intentional remembering for both Milkman and his ancestors who are all victims of the Plantationocene.

Given that Milkman's plantsong is really about his human ancestors, we might consider what it reveals about the role of plants-as-kin in the goal of ecofeminist liberation. While the reader sees the evolution of names as Sugarman to Solomon, based on how the names are presented in the text, we later find out that Solomon was the original name that evolved into Sugarman—a portmanteau of plant (sugar) and male human (man). The evolution from Solomon to Sugarman as a naming convention suggests a potential overlap in the human and plant experience. In the Plantationocene context, as people were enslaved to labor, so were the plants. In the conference roundtable discussion out of which the term Plantationocene emerged, Noboru Ishikawa quipped, "plantations are just slavery of plants," and Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing agreed in concert (Haraway et al 556). In other words, the plants of the plantations of the American South were abstracted and exploited for their bodies as well (Haraway et al 556). In this way, there is a material kinship among the enslaved people and the plants of the Plantationocene, an opportunity for interspecies compassion. This is not to say that Black people *are* plants or are *like* plants or that plants experienced exploitation to the *extent* that Black humans did; instead, from the perspective of critical plant studies and an ecofeminist ethic of care toward nonhumans, we can see that the Plantationocene enslaved and exploited the main crops used for the building of such plantations—sugar, cotton, tobacco, etc. Even so, the violence in the choking cotton balls as a metonymy for the violence of the

plantation itself complicates the possibility of compassion in the shared experience of enslaved humans and exploited plants, reminding us of the ways in which enslaved people were pitted against nonhuman nature and vice versa in their enslavement and labor, resulting in a dissociation from the natural world as discussed by James in "Ecomelancholia." Given the trajectory of the song from the violent plantations of Milkman's ancestors (his grandparents Jake and Sing escaped their enslavement) to his current desire as a Black man for flight and total freedom, we see a movement from the past to the present while still remembering the past. Ultimately, from the moment of Milkman's birth, to his relationship with Pilate, to the full revelation of his ancestry, to his own leap for flight in the novel's final sentence, the novel *Song of Solomon* has been a plantsong of and for human *and* plant liberation all along.

Milkman's plantsong revelation of his ancestry also highlights the role of underlying materiality in naming and storying the human experience, a revelation that teaches Milkman to look for the same kind of eco-material storying in other corners of his world, leading him to a type of IEK—which, for him, is an ancestral knowledge in terms of his "Indian grandmother," Sing. For instance, Milkman reinterprets the landscape of his home territory in light of the Indigenous people who used to inhabit it. While taking the bus home, Milkman notes that "Ohio, Indiana, Michigan were dressed up like the Indian warriors from whom their names came. Blood red and yellow, ocher and ice blue" (329). Milkman sees a material, visually-expressed connection between these states' current appearance and their past history, a form of remembering that continues through this passage. Milkman goes on to reflect on not

only the appearance of these landscapes but also their names: “He read the road signs with interest now, wondering what lay beneath the names. The Algonquins had named the territory he lived in Great Water, *michi gami*” (329). As Milkman takes interest in his own Indigenous heritage, he exhibits a sense of connection with the Indigenous history and knowledge of this particular place, re-interpreting the name “Michigan” in light of its original meaning *michi gami*, Great Water. Starting with the plantsong of Solomon, the text suggests that Milkman embraces his part-Indigenous heritage in the end of the book’s continual refrain as Milkman searches for information about his “Indian grandmother.” In other words, Milkman does not look to the future but embraces the past in a new way, a way that recognizes ecomaterialism’s power to reinterpret historical forms of meaning-making.

In these reflections, Milkman exhibits a form of remembering that is construed as a reconnection. In reconnecting with his ancestors’ names as places in Shalimar, as well as the meaning of the name Michigan, he considers broadly the names and memories these places hold: “How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country” (329). But then he connects back to himself and his name and heritage, seeing himself a small part of this greater whole: “Under the recorded names were other names, just as ‘Macon Dead,’ recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning. No wonder Pilate put hers in her ear. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do” (329). Milkman ultimately determines that

names have meaning, such as the name Michigan, even though he went his whole life not acknowledging this meaning. In other words, that which makes Michigan *michi gami* remains, even if Milkman doesn't acknowledge it. But now he does. In this way, Milkman enacts the sort of remembering Kumar illustrates in the epigraph: he was always connected to Great Water, to Sing, to the Earth, he just needed to remember, which he did after he "reach[ed] [his] hands into the Earth" among the sweetgum (Kumar).

In the same way, as humans of the Anthropocene turn to epistemologies that acknowledge plant sentience, it is not entirely a process of merely accepting modern science but rather returning to ancestral ways of being and knowing, such as those Kimmerer details *in concert* with modern revelations, such as the recent research on grounding engaged in this chapter. As Milkman needed to remember, we need to remember. *Song of Solomon* shows us that learning from nature and remembering the past are important parts of restoring our relationship with Earth, plants, and each other. This is part of the value of ecofeminism as well: it can work within differing cultures, including those considered "traditional," rather than requiring a form of industrial progress to replace all ancestral ways of being, for industrial capitalism contributes to the oppression of both women and nature; therefore, there is not an industrial-capitalist solution. Part of the work of the capitalist-patriarchy is the capture and erasure of knowledge, especially feminine knowledge, that cannot be commodified, and oral traditions such as that portrayed in the plant*Song of Solomon* challenge this cultural erasure. As explored previously, IEKs have acknowledged tree sentience for centuries,

suggesting that modern Western science is not the only way in which to examine, access, or evaluate the sentience of plants. Ecofeminism and IEKs invite us to relearn that the human condition is one of interdependence on humans and plants, both materially and discursively. This relearning and remembering is simultaneously refoliating: as humans learn their interdependence on Earth others such as plants, we will contribute to the ongoing cultivation and care of these on which we depend. This is not to say we should idealize the past or ignore its ills, rather we must—as Milkman does—embrace those parts of the past that transform us into better versions of our current selves and help us move forward, better, together. *It is time to remember*.

Interlude I: The Refuge of Hundred Fruit Farm

In the summer of 2020, I had the privilege to join a symphony of ecological actors to support the overall system of a small but lovely permaculture farm in my home county. As an intern at Hundred Fruit Farm, I learned how to implement and maintain real permaculture systems, which are agricultural practices developed by Indigenous people in which humans and nature collaborate for the benefit of the system as a whole, which includes plants, animals, soil, and climate. Hundred Fruit Farm is a small, 10-acre operation in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and it specializes in a large variety perennial fruit cultures—hopefully at least one hundred of them one day! Perennials do best with regular, but not disruptive, human care and attention; in other words, humans aid the system best when they bolster what the plants (or other ecological actors such as animals, soil, or bugs) are already trying to do or wanting as opposed to working against nature to produce more. Such tasks included tending and moving the sheep and chickens (the animals are pastured on rotation in the tree groves; the trees provide welcome shade for the animals while their manure fertilizes the trees' soil), mulching the tree bases for additional nutrients and weed prevention, pruning trees for continued health and vitality, maintaining and spreading compost, and harvesting fruit, vegetables, and herbs. I also enjoyed the adjacent tasks of catching loose sheep, hunting for mushrooms, assisting CSA customers, planting and tending the garden, and, of course, a whole lot of berry-eating! In essence, I got to participate in the continued refoliation of this small but blessed plot of land in my home county. Some of the gardening and permaculture concepts I learned during this

internship constitute key aspects of my reading of *Parable of the Sower*. These aspects of my reading in this chapter reflect concepts such as bolting[19] and companion planting as a practice of integrated pest management.

I learned about bolting from some unhappy daikon radishes in Hundred Fruit Farm's garden. I wish I had a picture, but I'll try to describe it: the 4X6 raised bed was filled with overgrown tall leaves that should have been more short and bushy. Because radishes are root vegetables, their roots stopped developing once the bolting process started, so the roots were merely the size of my finger when they should have been larger than carrots, while the green, leafy parts of the plants overtook the bed, shooting up and out to go to seed. In my own garden currently (July-August 2021), due to too little soil in the raised containers, my romaine lettuces are bolting (see Appendix figures 1-7). One can see how the plants refigure themselves bodily, growing taller while creating wideness at the top to increase chances of catching some ecological collaborator, such as the wind or animals Lauren reflects on in her own garden in *Parable of the Sower*.

As for companion planting and integrated pest management, according to Hundred Fruit Farm's practices, biodiversity is one of their chief lines of defense

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19 "Bolting" or the sudden upward growth of a plant for the purpose of dispersing seeds early due to unfavorable environmental conditions. Plants bolt in order to sacrifice the current plant, which has limited ability to survive already, in order to increase the chances of its seeds getting to fertile conditions.

against unwanted pests. Planting a variety of plants and trees on the property allows the ecosystem as a whole to resist being overrun by a single pest that comes for a mass-grown crop. Even so, Hundred Fruit Farm knows they cannot rid the property entirely of pests. This is a more hands-off approach that allow pests to eat some of the plants, knowing that they will not do as much ultimate damage as pesticides would. For example, when I asked the farmer, Adam, about bird houses in the orchard, he explained that allowing the birds to reside near the berries and fruit trees had an overall benefit in keeping the insect population down, and he considered the berries they ate as a sort of fee for ultimately keeping the insect pests in check. Other mechanical and technological pest management practices range from picking the bugs off a plant yourself (I picked many an aphid off of the asparagus!) to the careful use of bird species such as ducks and chickens to eat undesired bugs in the garden or orchard—the ducks and chickens complete the task happily.

In this way, my time on Hundred Fruit Farm, and the many plants, animals, and permaculture concepts I encountered, help story this analysis of *Parable of the Sower*.

Chapter 4

THE WAYS OF SEEDS: SYMBIOTIC REFUGE THROUGH PERMACULTURE COMMUNITY IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *PARABLE OF THE SOWER*

4.1 Introduction: The Pre-Plantationocene Oaks of California

Parable of the Sower is storied by many oaks and acorns, which makes sense based on where it takes place: California, a bastion of oak abundance. 90 oak species grow in the United States, and California boasts 19 of them (Anderson 13). Oaks are "majestic giants" that can have trunks up to 12 feet in diameter, grow to 150 feet, and can live for up to 600 years (Anderson 31). M. Kat Anderson paints a picture of California's oak abundance: "Foothill woodland covers more than three million acres in California (one half of all oak-covered lands) and is so abundant that some ecologists have elected it the 'state vegetation type'" (65). And the diversity of oaks is just as plentiful: California boasts oak species such as deciduous blue oak (Quercus douglasii), interior live oak (Q. wislizenii), valley oak (Q. lobata), coast live oak (Q. agrifolia), poison oak (Toxicodendron diversilobum), California black oak (Q. kelloggii), Oregon oak (Q. garryana) and more (Anderson 65). As oaks peppered the California landscape, so did their seeds—acorns—providing a rich and abundant resource to the Indigenous people in the region.

In fact, oaks and acorns materially and spiritually undergird the culture of many California Indigenous tribes. For tribes such as the Sierra Miwok, Foothill Yokuts, Paiute, Maidu, Western Mono, Gashowu Yokuts, Pomo, Kawaiisu, Yuki,

Tubatulabal and more, oaks, and acorns, materially story their culture. According to Anderson, oaks provided an abundance of resources to Indigenous people, including "medicine, dyes, utensils, games, toys, and construction materials" (286). For example, the Western Mono and Foothill Yokuts of Squaw Valley, as well as the Concow Maidu, used boiled oak bark's dark color as a dye (Anderson 286). The Yuki used oak bark as a treatment for digestive issues, and the Kawaiisu employed oaks in their home-building (Anderson 175). Ethnobotanist Barbara Bocek reports the Costanoan use of white oak bark for toothache remedy, white oak acorns for diarrhea remedy, and the white oak wood for making utensils (248). The Tolowa used tanoak saplings and acorns in the making of fishing nets, baskets, and medicines (Bowcutt 65). The Miwok in particular utilized oak widely as a material for snowshoes, armor, weapons, Earth lodge construction, and foot drums (Anderson 286). As for acorns, these oak seeds were a "foundational" food source for California's Indigenous people (Anderson 243). Edward Gifford, an anthropologist, contends that acorn eating was "the most characteristic feature of the domestic economy of the California Indians" (Anderson 285). Not only this, but oaks' acorn gifts also provided the materials for entertainment: "Acorn musical string toys, tops, and buzzers kept children entertained, and acorn dice games kept adults enthralled for hours" (Anderson 286). From constituting homes and medicines and dyes and shoes, to serving as entertainment and sustenance, oaks and acorns materially comprised much of Indigenous culture in the region now known as California.

The significance of acorns extends into Indigenous spirituality and religious culture as well. For example, according to Anderson, "The Sierra Miwok […] held a feast to express the hope that the acorn crop might be abundant" and "Gashowu Yokuts shamans conducted special crop-prophesying dances to tell what kind of seed, clover, and acorn crops would come" (56). Similarly, the Sinkyone had a five-night ceremony each fall to celebrate acorn season (Bowcutt 69). Or consider the role of acorns in a Pomo origin story in which the first people were instructed about what to eat by their creator, Marumda: "He looked for a spot where acorns had drifted in a pocket in the creek: 'These you will gather, and with them you will make mush!'" (Anderson 56). For Indigenous tribes such as the Sierra Miwok, Gashowu Yokuts, and the Pomo, acorns storied and sustained not only their material existence in the form of dye, wood, utensils, and food, but also sustained their spiritual and religious life by storying feasts, prophetic dances, and enduring origin tales. Among the Sinkyone, it was considered good luck to dream of tanoak trees (Bowcutt 67). Without oaks and their seeds, the Indigenous people of California likely would not have thrived to the extent that they did. Given their cultural significance and ability to provide subsistence, "acorns formed the basis of a California Indian acorn economy for thousands of years" (Bowcutt 65). Thus, it stands to reason that the Indigenous people of California knew something about oaks and acorns, which is true both in California's history as well as *Parable of the Sower*, given that the protagonist, Lauren, learns about "California Indians'" use of acorns through her father's books (59).

Synopsis

Parable of the Sower is considered a work of speculative fiction that follows Lauren Olamina's coming-of-age in an environmental dystopia taking place in the future of 2024-2027. Residing in the LA suburb of Robledo (the Spanish word for "oak"), Lauren's gated community is a refuge from the urban destruction and chaos over the fence, chaos caused by climate disruptions and their economic and social effects. Lauren's diary entries and religious writings constitute the text's narrative of her family's and community's attempt to sustain themselves with small gardens and a local economy until its ultimate undoing at the hands of drug-crazed "pyros"—people who take a drug that evokes the desire to see others burn.

While others see her as paranoid, Lauren's mind is always on survival from the beginning of the text, so she is prepared to flee when her community is attacked. Her preparations include reading and learning about "California Indians'" use of acorns, baking of acorn bread, and the gathering of seeds and medical supplies in a pack she hides in the back yard. As she moves toward the Pacific Northwest where water is allegedly more abundant, she gathers a rag-tag group of desperate nomads, trying to win them over to her religion, Earthseed, which she developed in concert with the garden plants who ultimately go on to story the Earthseed verses.

Lauren's journey is made all the more arduous by her "hyperempathy" syndrome—an occupational hazard in any apocalypse—that allows her to feel the acute pain of other people as well as animals. Facing many obstacles such as thieves,

wildfires, earthquakes, pyros, lack of money and water, and even losing some friends along the way, Lauren's Earthseed community makes it to safer land owned by one of the new group members and her eventual lover, Bankole. Unfortunately, upon arriving they realize that Bankole's family is dead and the land burned, a harbinger of the danger that still abounds in the region. Even so, they begin building a refoliating permaculture community called Acorn as a form of refuge. Butler's text shows the urgent necessity of collaboration with plants and learning from IEKs to refoliate symbiotic refuge in the post-apocalyptic, post-environmental collapse, too-near future of *Parable of the Sower*.

Argument

This chapter explores the generative convergences of IEKs, permaculture, refoliation, ecofeminism, and symbiotic refuge. In the world of *Parable*, I posit that plant subjectivity, agency, and epistemology allow humans and plants to collaborate toward the shared goal of refoliation and resultant symbiotic refuge through permaculture and ecofeminist ethics. While Butler never uses the word "permaculture" in this novel, I argue that the essence of permaculture and even specific permaculture practices permeate the human-plant relationships Butler envisions. Examining *Parable of the Sower* in light of the ways in which plants aid humans in knowledge construction reveals the role of plants in responding to the Anthropocene: that humans and plants together can refoliate by co-creating knowledge, sustenance, and spirituality. In my contention that plant epistemology undergirds Earthseed's statutes,

this chapter sits at the intersection of ecocritical and religious-oriented analyses of this text. Just as acorns story Indigenous spirituality and culture, the Earthseed verses story plant-human "bolting," "companioning," and the "remaining through" of permaculture. In so doing, *Parable* invites consideration of the role of agriculture in refoliation endeavors via the text's engagement with "permaculture-theory." Lauren's ecofeminist plant-collaboration in her permaculture efforts offer a vision of ecological relationships characterized by symbiotic refuge. Ultimately, over the course of the novel, Lauren collaborates with plants as a means of both physical survival and spiritual actualization, rendering the text's plants as far more important to the narrative than inert pieces of the landscape or tools of human survival.

Answering the call to consider the role of agriculture in achieving refoliation, this chapter traces permaculture's promising intersections with the principles guiding my larger project. At base, contemporary permaculture is a modern refoliating movement; practitioners literally add perennial plants to the landscape, plants that sustain themselves well with one another and within complex and diverse ecosystems of animals, vegetables, and minerals. By highlighting permaculture in the context of *Parable of the Sower* and contending that permaculture principles and practices play a large role in Lauren Olamina's ability to survive *Parable's* climate apocalypse, this chapter simultaneously offers a fresh perspective on Butler's novel as well as illustrates the power of sustainable or regenerative agriculture methods to respond to Anthropogenic ills perpetuated by conventional Western agriculture, thus inviting consideration of an alternative to the current Western way of being and of knowing

plants. Though built on the text's existing ecocritical scholarship, my reading is a nuanced plant-studies reading in its focus on permaculture principles such as observing and mimicking nature; gardening concepts such as bolting and companion planting for biodiversity; and both scientific and Indigenous understandings of plant and seed ways of being and knowing. In this way, this chapter addresses the intersection of ecology and economy, such as capitalism and big agriculture, in its focus on alternative, sustainable agricultural methods.

Moreover, my engagement with permaculture seeks to invoke its longer history within Indigenous ways of being with and knowing nature, thus adding to permaculture scholarship that endeavors to return proper credit for these principles and practices to the Indigenous communities with which they originated, as well as contribute to my project's broader objective to highlight the marginalized experience of Indigenous groups. I join those scholars already attending to permaculture's Indigenous origins, emphasizing its scholarly value as a fresh theoretical lens that sits at the nexus of Afro-Indigenous theory, especially in the context of the critical reception and extant scholarship on *Parable of the Sower*. By offering a plant-studies approach that employs permaculture theory as foregrounded in IEKs, this chapter generatively adds to the ecocritical scholarship on this work of contemporary fiction. I see Lauren's permaculture sensibilities as an overlooked yet powerful aspect of this novel that sit at the intersection of the scholarship's most notable interpretive trends.

In order to elucidate the refoliating potential of *Parable of the Sower*, I offer close readings of Lauren's ancestral plant knowledge gleaned from the "California

Indians," (59) Lauren's embodiment of permaculture ethics, the knowledge of plant-being Lauren imbues into Earthseed, the role of fire in woodland renewal, and the symbiotic refuge that is Acorn. This chapter reveals that any attempt to comprehensively interpret the text's Earthseed verses must include a discussion of the ways in which plant ways of being and knowing directly aid Lauren's spiritual meaning-making.

In my reading of Acorn as a temporary but successful symbiotic refuge, this chapter challenges notions of utopia that are grounded in stasis and idealism, just as it challenges notions of environmentalism that are grounded exclusively in "place." Instead, I invite readers to see Acorn as a viable symbiotic refuge and a necessary step in the reproductive process of Earthseed, a perspective elucidated by considering plant ways of being and knowing such as bolting, as well as oaks' thriving with regular burning. Conversely, my reading challenges notions of *Parable* as only a dystopia in its assumption that symbiotic refuge can be pursued in the worst of environmental apocalypses. I thus invite consideration of an environmental ethic that seeks to respond to whatever ecological circumstances we find ourselves in, rather than trying to conserve some sort of ideal, static existence. I believe moving toward this kind of ethic is all the more important as the Anthropocene conditions continue building momentum and challenging the status-quo, inviting us not to fear and cynicism, but to new and better ways of being with Earth.

4.2 Seeds of Criticism: There are No Utopias, Only Refuges

Scholars examining *Parable of the Sower* have tended to focus on several key themes such as the urban/rural divide; the failures of late capitalism; religion and spirituality; and concepts of utopia. Scholars have also considered the genre of this work, suggesting a variety of conceptions such as speculative fiction/sci-fi, Afrofuturism, and climate fiction (cli-fi). Critically speaking, scholars have long examined this work through the lenses of race, gender, and class. This wide critical reception reveals the myriad concerns covered by this singular text. I suggest that my permaculture reading generatively speaks to many of these critical discussions, sitting at many of their intersections rather than branching off into completely new territory, while offering to the discussion a fresh plant-studies reading of the text, illustrating the ways in which critical plant studies—and ecocriticism more broadly—is relevant to multiple scholarly conversations. Most notably, this chapter elucidates intersections of the themes of environment and ecology with the themes of the urban/rural divide, dystopia/utopia, the failures of late capitalism, and spirituality/religion.

Ecocritical readings of *Parable* have centered on concepts related to my work such as anthropocentrism, human-nature symbiosis, and the literary role of nonhuman actants. For example, Melanie Marotta lays an important foundation for ecocritical *Parable* scholarship by elucidating the text's commitment to human-nature symbiosis (39) and rejection of anthropocentrism (42) while privileging the role of technology in an ecologically sustainable future (44). Susan Bernardo shares several foundational

assumptions with Marotta, namely that *Parable* illustrates ecological concepts such as symbiosis, but sees *Parable* as an inherently anthropocentric text ("Ecocritical Ideas" 94). Such readings offer an important foundation for building additional ecocritical scholarship on this text, but one lacuna in the scholarship is an ecomaterialist understanding of *Parable*'s plants.

In contrast to many ecocritical readings, I eschew a metaphorical reading of *Parable's* environs, opting instead for an ecomaterialist understanding of the text's natural agents, suggesting they are "storied matter" (Iovino and Oppermann 1). Scholars such as Bernardo suggest that Lauren receives key survival lessons from natural elements like water and animals ("Nature" 64-65). However, both Marotta and Bernardo, as well as most other ecocritics, render not a material understanding of these natural elements, but more of an associative or symbolic understanding of the role of water, fire, drought, and animals in the narrative ("Nature" 64-65). For example, Bernardo flirts with an ecomaterialist reading of Parable's water, suggesting that "Water as an essential to survival and as a link between people becomes one of the forces that cause change in the novel" (64). While Bernardo acknowledges the material agency of water as being a human survival need, she ultimately reads these elements as agentic because of what they are associated with rather than the power they have in their materiality, such as when she highlights the significance of certain narrative episodes because "the setting *involves* water and its importance" (65, emphasis mine). Bernardo stops short of an ecomaterial reading, which would take the argument beyond water's association, i.e. involvement, with textual elements, to

actually fleshing out the way water drives and stories the narrative as a material agent. Bernardo's reading of water comes close to an ecomaterial analysis, yet she does not address plants at all in this way. Indeed, my reading adds to extant ecocritical scholarship on Butler's *Parable* by specifically privileging the role of plant agency and plant knowledge and offering a reading centered on permaculture principles and in conversation with IEKs.

My reading also challenges utopianism as a particularly generative mode of analysis. In this thematic trend, scholars examine the text as a sort of contradiction that represents both dystopia and utopia. For example, Ellen Peel suggests that Parable "consists of a utopia within a dystopia" (53). Similarly, feminist scholars such as Heidi Hutner, Patricia Melzer, and Clara Escoda Agusti see Lauren as generating a feminist utopia in dialectic response to the dystopic patriarchy she endures. What these readings rightfully highlight is *Parable's* ability to imagine community formation amidst a decidedly dystopic future. But in my estimation, there are no utopias, only refuges. Utopianism unfortunately connotes an ideal outcome to be achieved, with all things being subject to the logic of the utopia, which fails to square with *Parable's* refrains of "God is change." And, utopia connotes a fixed endpoint, but *Parable* only offers us the/an ever-temporal yet remaining-through of symbiotic refuge through ecological destruction.

Many of the scholars concerned with the economic realities of *Parable* are acutely aware of the overlap of economic objectives and ecological destruction. For example, Jerry Phillips suggests that part of what makes *Parable* dystopian is the

neoliberal economic realities that result in the erasure of all communal relationships aside from those generated and maintained by market forces—the same market forces that ultimately destroy the environment (7). Similarly, Gregory Hampton examines the *Parable's* treatment of what he terms the "capital of the body" (56), and suggests that Lauren contends with economic objectification by "listen[ing] to the landscape" (62). Ecofeminism, as an ideology that reveals the intersection of economic realities and ecological oppression, provides a fruitful lens for considering these two overlapping trends of scholarship. Thus, my ecofeminist reading adds to the scholarship by suggesting that permaculture provides symbiotic refuge, which may serve to combat the ways in which capitalism oppresses both women and nature.

My reading of *Parable* also offers a different perspective on the religious elements at play in the text. Religious readings, such as Kimberly Ruffin's, Clarence Tweedy's, and Meredith Minister's, have tended to focus on the text's treatment of Lauren's desertion of her Christian upbringing, such as the ways in which Lauren refigures her Christian sensibilities into Earthseed in response to the harsh realities of her day and in a search for utopia. While these takes are insightful, most of the scholarship on the religious themes in *Parable,* however, completely overlooks the role of nature and plants in Lauren's development of Earthseed. For example, Kimberly Ruffin sees Butler participating in a larger movement of Black women authors in a form of "biblical re-writing" that serves to "extol[] an Afrofuturist black feminist biblical hermeneutics that strives to resolve conflict between scientific knowledge and religiosity" (91). For Ruffin, Earthseed has nothing to do with actual

seeds or plants or any ecological actant. Owing more to plant agency, Clarence Tweedy sees Acorn's oak trees functioning to consummate Earthseed into an actual, established religion, suggesting that, "After awhile, this ritual [of planting trees] becomes a staple of the community that binds followers to Lauren's religious movement, reminding them of what they have lost and of what they hope to achieve" (7). In Tweedy's reading, the trees are a sign—akin to the sign of baptism—purely symbolic inductions into a community where the real actors are humans. Tweedy suggests a metaphorical coalescence of Earthseed, Acorn, and community, "The community of Acorn is the fertile soil in which Earthseed is planted and from which the fruit of a new religious faith is born" (8). In this way, Tweedy sees plants storying Earthseed as metaphors, but not as storied matter. Most scholars acknowledge the metaphorical and discursive mentions of nature in Earthseed, but they fail to clearly connect Lauren's spiritual musings to her relationship with actual plants. My reading highlights the ways in which plants, as material agents, story and develop Lauren's religious sensibilities and spiritual epiphanies.

Finally, my plant-studies reading uniquely privileges the role of agriculture in the text, which is often only addressed in scholarship interested in the urban/rural binary. My plant-studies approach reveals the ways in which an urban/rural binary is not a particularly generative way to read this text. Readers might assume that a permaculture reading method would inherently privilege the "pastoral" given the relationship to agriculture more broadly, but permaculture is applicable to any context—a window box on a city high rise or a 100-acre farm. As a set of principles

based on mimicking nature, permaculture can be applied in every ecosystem. While permaculture resists reductive thinking, the urban/rural binary is often the only context in which agricultural concerns are addressed in scholarship on this text. For example, Joseph Blair Gamber contends that the ecological elements of *Parable of the Sower*, as well as the subsequent novel *Parable of the Talents*, suggest that Lauren is a naïve pastoralist seeking idyllic refuge from the city center in a way that problematically relies on a false urban/rural binary and objectified concept of wilderness (26). In other words, Gamber sees Lauren as playing into this binary in a way that unduly marginalizes the urban and perpetuates a Western neoliberal sensibility that privileges the racially-uniform suburbs and countryside. Contrary to Gamber, I suggest that Lauren's permaculture efforts towards symbiotic refuge and refoliation *transcend* this binary in its applicability in multiple contexts, elucidating the ways in which these concepts can address environmental concerns across geographies and ecosystems. Ultimately, my reading brings together IEKs, ecofeminism, and permaculture for a fresh material-ecocritical perspective on this text.

4.3 "Seed to Tree, Tree to Forest": Permaculture as a Refoliating Ecofeminist Praxis

Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, coiners of the term in 1970s Australia, describe permaculture as "Consciously designed landscapes which mimic the patterns and relationships found in nature, while yielding an abundance of food, fiber, and energy for provision of local needs" ("Essence" 1). Such landscapes are dependent on

the cultivation of perennial plants and animals—hence the portmanteau "permaculture." Importantly, though, the "permanence" assumed in the term "permaculture" is not to be overstated. Consider the etymology of the term "permanent": "per" meaning "through" and "manere" meaning "to remain" (Harper). The concept of "remaining through" maps onto the practical term "perennial" nicely; it's not that perennial plants exist in the same form through a whole year, it's that upon each new season they "come back" in their time and begin a growth cycle anew with limited intervention. This is in contrast to annuals, which need to be replanted each year manually. When it comes to plant ways of being, in the case of both perennials and annuals, temporality is somewhat inherent. In other words, permaculture as a term and as a concept highlights the paradoxical temporality and endurance of plants: trees, which are perennials, may live to be hundreds of years old, but their flowers only bloom for a few weeks. A tomato plant, an annual, will live and die in a season, but its seeds provide more exponential opportunities for tomatoes each year. Strawberries are perennials that will come back each year in the same place, but only for a few years in a row before they often meet their demise due to disease. Permaculture, as a system, seeks to understand the fluctuations inherent in plant being so as to *honor*, not *control* plant life cycles, as will be seen in the California Indigenous tribes' attention to oaks. Paradoxically, by honoring plants' inherent temporality, permaculture agriculture provides food in abundance season after season while stabilizing soil and sequestering carbon. In its emphasis on perennial plants, permaculture is also inherently refoliating, literally adding plants to the landscape.

While those implementing permaculture tend to be well-versed in the sustainable practices it utilizes, such as those I participated in at Hundred Fruit Farm, I'm most interested in the philosophy and approach behind this design system. In fact, permaculture is best thought of as a set of principles rather than a list of rules or top-down practices, considering that each ecosystem is different and will exhibit varied needs that make such lists of rules constricting ("Essence" 30). According to David Holmgren's short manifesto "The Essence of Permaculture," permaculture principles fall into two categories: ethical principles and design principles (30). Design principles such as "Apply self-regulation and accept feedback," "Use and value diversity," and "Use edges and value the marginal" both mimic and serve plant-being ("Essence" 30). These principles honor plant agency and plant ways of being by prioritizing plant needs as an extension of human needs, as opposed to modern agriculture, which tends to only consider human needs. As perennials come back each year with the same essence but a renewed form, so these principles come back in Lauren Olamina's sense of ethics. The ethical principles are simple and echo ecofeminist values: "earth care—rebuilding nature's capital; people care—nurture self, kin, and community; and fair share—set limits to consumption and reproduction while redistributing surplus" ("Essence" 8).

In both ethics and design, permaculture is an ecofeminist praxis that opposes the reigning Western approach to agriculture, including monocultures. Industrial agriculture's capitalist-patriarchal structure stems from a Western masculinist logic evident in its origination in twentieth-century war-time biologics; its top-down,

centralized, and impositional approach to power structures and ecosystem management; and its control of female reproduction in livestock (dairy, eggs, overall production through "breeding"), while also exhibiting a troubling marriage to capitalism through its chief focus on profit over the good of ecosystems and human, plant, and animal communities. More specifically, in its emphasis on perennials, permaculture contrasts the modern use of monocultures, which are large annual crops of one single species of plant or animal (most commonly corn, soy, wheat, chickens, and beef) that drain land of nutrients without returning anything to the soil, while attracting large swaths of pests and thus being dependent on toxic pesticides and engineered technology. In *Monocultures of the Mind*, prominent ecofeminist and agricultural activist Vandana Shiva elucidates the foundational assumptions of monoculture theory, which directly contrast permaculture theory. Shiva argues that one of the main tenets of monoculture-theory, "uniformity," which is in contrast to "diversity," is not only "patterns of land use, they are ways of thinking and ways of living" (6). Shiva highlights the intersection of philosophy and practice I seek to engage, suggesting that contrasting land use patterns stem from the roots of vastly different trees, and thus produce very different fruit. In contrast, monoculture-theory opposes nearly every permaculture design principle. Thus, while I do not intend to argue that permaculture is explicitly feminine in its logic, it nonetheless serves an ecofeminist praxis in its overt challenging of the reigning masculinist monoculture sensibilities. Ecofeminist praxis often generates alliances between women and nature against their common oppressor to aid in their common liberation (Gaard and Murphy

4). While it does not only ally women with nature—and women of color are coming to the forefront of the permaculture community—permaculture's liberation of human communities from patriarchal-capitalistic agriculture generally aids the liberation of women downstream.

Ultimately, permaculture achieves this liberation through the ethical and design principles which echo the ecofeminist ideology that may be summarized as what Adams calls the ecofeminist "ethic of care:" "Care is part of how we relate to the other, and that 'other' isn't just another so-called 'human being,' but is potentially any part of this planet." Adams' care is a form of situating ourselves in relationships to others, not unlike Lauren's "hyperempathy" syndrome. Permaculture radically re-situates the human relationship to nonhuman by rejecting the hierarchy of the Aristotelian Chain of Being (Laist 12) by facilitating collaboration with and consideration of the needs, desires, and concerns of all beings involved—soil, plants, and animals—rather than just humans. Permaculture's practice of favoring interdependent collaboration between humans and nature (which is recognized as animate and agentic rather than raw and inert), thus serves as an ecofeminist praxis to enact liberation of plants from the bondage of monoculture.

Permaculture not only radically re-situates human relationships to the nonhuman, it also powerfully counters the Anthropocene's condition of climate change through a literal refoliation of the landscape with carbon-sink perennials. According to Jack Kittredge, halting emission of greenhouse gases (GHG) into the atmosphere is not enough to abate the effects of climate change because the GHG

already present in the atmosphere will continue to wreak havoc (3). Kittredge instead suggests that carbon sequestration is the most promising way to neutralize the effects of GHG (4). Carbon sequestration refers to the (naturally-occurring) biological process of soil storing carbon drawn from the atmosphere through plants, which use carbon as part of the process of photosynthesis and then exude it as sugar for soil's supper (4-6). This process actually benefits soil, as soil microbes have a symbiotic relationship with plants centering on the carbon that the soil craves and the plants excrete (Kittredge 4-6). Further, according to the Rodale Institute, "Since mycorrhizal fungi need root-partners to survive, farming strategies that include perennial plantings, trees on edges, reduced tillage, and plants with long, fibrous root systems, encourage the long-term stabilization of soil carbon" (Moyer et al 17). Due to their root systems, "Perennial growing systems can restore more carbon than most other agricultural methods" (Kittredge 10), and would require less chemical fertilizer (Moyer et al 15). In contrast, monocultures are rarely found in nature and have trouble sustaining themselves without significant human and technological intervention. In fact, monocultures are not only rare in nature, they actually disrupt functioning ecosystems due to their scale, and their mass culling every fall directly contributes to the defoliation woes of the modern system. In contrast, "shifting both crop and pasture management globally to regenerative systems is a powerful combination that could drawdown more than 100% of annual CO2 emissions" (Moyer et al 10). Permaculture's ability to sequester carbon, sustain itself without significant chemical intervention, and consider the well-being of entire ecosystems of nonhumans allows it to simultaneously provide for the

needs of humans outside of the capitalist-patriarchal agricultural industry while serving the nonhuman nature that same industry oppresses. In other words, permaculture's paradoxically temporal and enduring refoliation, if brought to scale, would result in not only the building of a sustainable future and communities of symbiotic refuge, but also the overall benefit to the ecosystem through carbon sequestration. Systems such as permaculture allow humans to collaborate with plants and ecosystems for both basic human survival in the short term as well as whole-Earth flourishing in the long-term. Permaculture possesses liberatory capacity for both human and nonhuman communities.

4.4 Afroecology: Indigenous Farming Practices and the Black Permaculture Movement

If the fruit of permaculture is carbon sequestration, and the roots are its ethical and design principles, then we must acknowledge how the roots extend deeper into ancestral and Afro-Indigenous ways of being and knowing plants. Indeed, it's important to note that permaculture principles were not born in the 1970's when Mollison and Holmgren coined the term; these principles are ancient and originate most prominently in the agroecological practices of Indigenous people, as Holmgren notes in his 2011 essay "Weeds or wild nature: a permaculture perspective." The role of Indigenous ecological knowledge in the development of permaculture is a global

topic of discussion.[20] Despite the assumption that "the American landscape [at the time of European contact] was unworked" (Diekmann et al 46), Anderson shows how the Indigenous people of California intentionally and meticulously curated their land—through careful observation and mimicry of natural processes—in such a way that increased biodiversity while also providing sustainably for the needs of the people (1). Bowcutt summarizes: "What is clear is that Native peoples engaged in a kind of permaculture and agroforestry using native species" (72).

Indeed, the Indigenous people of California specifically practiced what we would call permaculture in their relationships with oaks. We saw above that the California Indigenous tribes may not have thrived in the same way without oaks and acorns; but we also see that without the Indigenous people, oaks would not exist in their abundance in the California region—their relationship is symbiotic. This is because, historically, the Indigenous people of California tended carefully to oak seeds, i.e. acorns, not only as foodstuffs but as the future of oaks in their region through what we now call permaculture methods. Permaculture methods used, for

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20 Anecdotally, there is a buzz in the permaculture community about the Indigenous origins of permaculture practices. For example, Leah Penniman describes the Afro-Indigenous roots of regenerative agriculture in *Farming While Black* (3). Other permaculture-specific writings such as Tracy Heim's essay for the National Farmers Union or Jasmine Koster's article for the Permaculture Research Institute acknowledge the Indigenous origins of permaculture ("The Indigenous Origins," "Ancient Origins"). More scholarly research should be devoted to clarifying and crystallizing the connections between permaculture and Indigenous agroecology, scholarship that mimics and builds on, for example, agroecologist Julia Wright's research which attempts to reinfuse permaculture with the Indigenous ecological knowledge and a spiritual dimension that originally undergirded the practices (3).

example, include controlled burns, or burning the underbrush in woodlands, which was and is a practice widely employed by many California Indigenous tribes to promote positive growing conditions according to the oak's ways of being (Bowcutt 72). For example, every fall the Yurok tribe would "burn patches of oak, hazel, and huckleberry brush to eliminate fungus and insect damage and improve the crop in the next year" (Anderson 279). Such burning may seem counterintuitive, but it benefits the oaks: "In the second year after burning there was usually a heavy increase in hazel nuts, acorns, and berries" (Anderson 279). The benefit is conferred due to the way that fire, "Even as it protected the existing large trees [...] promoted successful oak seedling and sapling recruitment" by providing conditions that encouraged seedling germination (Anderson 290). These burning practices also keep oaks from becoming crowded thus allowing them to develop better canopy structures that can produce more acorns (Anderson 179). Burning also decreases insect populations that prey on the fallen acorns, increasing their chances of germination (Anderson 49). Burning practices also allowed Indigenous tribes to create an environment that was otherwise favorable to coniferous species more favorable to their preferred oaks (Bowcutt 72). Since trees want their potential future generations to go forth in their seeds, these practices not only increased food stores for the tribes that burn, but also ensured the continued endurance of oaks in the region. Collaborating together to sustain future generations of each other, Indigenous people and oaks create for one another a symbiotic refuge.

Anderson describes the Indigenous people of California as displaying a "tempered use" of nature—a use that neither left nature completely to its own devices nor dominated nature in myopic search of man's comforts alone, which I see as akin to permaculture principles (2). Indeed, such "tempered use" in practice resonates with the permaculture principles listed above. For example, Diekmann et al explains that "In order to increase the quality, availability, and predictability of these materials [California Indians] manipulated ecosystems through burning, pruning, weeding, and other means" (47). Importantly, both Diekmann et al and Anderson highlight the vast nature knowledge required in suck tasks: "Management required knowledge of ecosystems and species and their responses to a variety of factors, such as season and rainfall, as well as their responses to various human disturbances" (Diekmann et al 47). Similarly, Anderson describes such practices as an "exhaustive exploration" of "the plant kingdom" and the "thorough testing" of "nature's responses to human harvesting and tending" that resulted in the Indigenous people "discover[ing] how to use nature in a way that provided them with a relatively secure existence while allowing for the maximum diversity of other species" (Anderson 2). In other words, the California Indigenous tribes in Anderson's study employed what we now call permaculture principles in their tempered use of the landscape to cultivate a sustainable existence that served both human and nonhuman.

What Anderson calls "tempered use" parallels Kimmerer's term of "mutual flourishing," which is Kimmerer's conception of ideal and just ecological relationships. Kimmerer employs the term "mutual flourishing" throughout her work

Braiding Sweetgrass, but she first uses it in her chapter "The Council of Pecans," in which trees teach her the lesson of mutual flourishing. In the context of "Council," Kimmerer describes pecan trees' fruiting process and how they rely on both communication from other pecan trees as well as feedback from local squirrel populations to "decide" when to fruit (16). In short, the pecan trees make their decision as a "concerted action…that transcends the individual trees," showing a capacity for "unity of purpose" previously thought to be beyond the capabilities of trees (19). Kimmerer suggests that the trees' consideration of other trees' needs and their collaboration with the squirrel populations exemplifies that "all flourishing is mutual;" that is, in order for one to flourish, the other must flourish as well (19). Kimmerer sees "mutual flourishing" at work in the Indigenous understanding of harvesting summer strawberries as a gift to be received, thus illustrating the potential of a "gift economy" and "reciprocity" as opposed to her European neighbors who cultivated (exploited) strawberries for a profit (24-25). We see Lauren Olamina engaging in this gift economy through the sharing of her resources and seeds. Mutual flourishing is also at work when Kimmerer chooses carefully which wild leek to pick for dinner, first asking permission and then harvesting according to the needs of the other surrounding plants and animals, a practice she refers to as "the honorable harvest" (178). I could go on about the ways Kimmerer elucidates Indigenous commitments to mutual flourishing, but my point is that this principle and its sub concepts (the gift economy, the honorable harvest, reciprocity) are both at the heart of Indigenous relationships to land as well as the impetus behind permaculture as shown

in the above-listed permaculture principles. As “tempered use” describes permaculture activities, “mutual flourishing” parallels permaculture’s motivations and thus provides a heuristic for which activities are ultimately beneficial.

Black permaculturists continue this legacy of pursuing mutual flourishing as they reclaim ancestral plant knowledge and land relationships from Plantationocene history. Indeed, from the early 2000s until now, members of the sustainable agriculture community are witnessing an increase of Black women permaculturists and farmers who are taking their place in a field that has been dominated by White men since the 1970s. For example, Kirtrina Baxter, founder of Soil Generation, details her experience of the permaculture community as a Black woman in a piece for Philadelphia’s Grid Magazine entitled “The Blacker the Berry: Finding My People.” Baxter describes an event with a prominent speaker in the permaculture community where she was the only Black person. Baxter reflects on this event, “From then on, my exploration proved that permaculture seemed to be a very white movement, despite its indigenous roots.” Leah Penniman conveys a similar experience in her book *Farming While Black* (2). While Baxter noticed the field gaining more Black and Brown voices, she laments that “others failed to recognize permaculture’s crucial role in combating white supremacy.” In an attempt to truly crystallize the liberatory praxis of permaculture, Baxter’s Soil Generation coined and defined “Afroecology”:

> Art, movement, practice and process of social and ecological transformation that involves the re-evaluation of our sacred relationships with land, water, air, seeds, and food; (re)recognizes humans as co-creators that are an aspect of the

> planet's life-support systems; values the Afro-Indigenous experience of reality and ways of knowing; visibilizes the importance of women and feminine energies as vital to our collective liberation; cherishes ancestral and communal forms of knowledge, experience and lifeways that began in Africa and continue throughout the Diaspora; and is rooted in the agrarian traditions, legacies and struggles of the Black experience in the Americas. ("Agroecology" 23)

Similarly to Soil Generation, Leah Penniman's Soul Fire Farm identifies itself as an Afro-Indigenous organization enacting what looks like Afroecology as a liberatory praxis. Prior to founding Soul Fire Farm, Penniman recounts the racialized view of farming she had: "When we as Black people are bombarded with messages that our only place of belonging on land is as slaves, performing dangerous and backbreaking menial labor, to learn of our true and noble history as farmers and ecological stewards is deeply healing" (3). So, Penniman decided to start Soul Fire Farm, which she describes as "a project committed to ending racism and injustice in the food system" (4) by using community-based agricultural methods.

Black permaculture organizations like Baxter's Soil Generation and Penniman's Soul Fire Farm combine the how-to of Afro-Indigenous permaculture with the politics of racial justice to build resilient communities highlighting the Afro-Indigenous intersections at work in the field of permaculture. Afroecology highlights many of the dangling threads this project hopes to braid together: in the context of the Anthropocene, as vulnerable communities experience climate and food injustice,

Afroecology empowers urban dwellers with Indigenous ecological knowledge and ecofeminist ways of being as a form of both racial and environmental justice. Afroecology is an Afro-Indigenous permaculture project to reclaim ancestral land and knowledge from the grip of the Plantationocene.

4.5 "We All Look Out for One Another": Permaculture Creates Symbiotic Refuge(s)

What Afro-Indigenous people have lost in plantationization and what Afro-Indigenous permaculturists hope to gain through Afroecology can be encapsulated in the term "symbiotic refuge." Kimmerer would use the term "mutual flourishing," but when considering nature of Anthropocene ills and dystopias like that of *Parable*, Kimmerer's word "flourishing" is a fraught term for me. As a scholar of the Anthropocene, I fear that flourishing is a worthy but idealistic goal that feels far off. It is my desire to add complexity and nuance to Kimmerer's formulation that results in my term "symbiotic refuge," which provides a stepping stone to mutual flourishing. Symbiotic refuge is a term I've created to describe an interdependent way of *surviving* the Anthropocene that underlines the nature of permaculture's paradoxical permanence and temporality. The term symbiotic refuge is inspired by Indigenous ways of knowing trees, such as oaks, just as Kimmerer's mutual flourishing is inspired by the "Council of Pecans."

"Symbiosis" is a term originally from the field of biology, rendering "symbiotic refuge" an interdisciplinary term that can speak to multiple fields.

Biologist Bill Freedman defines “symbiosis” as “refer[ring] to close interactions among members of different species over relatively long time periods…Symbioses are beneficial for one or both of the species involved.” Freedman even offers the example of plant-human relationships, as does this chapter, as an example of a symbiotic relationship, referencing that certain species of corn, bred over time for human tastes, cannot reproduce without human action. Freedman notes that symbiosis can refer to mutual or parasitic relationships between species, which is an important distinction: “Mutualism is a symbiosis between species in which both members benefit,” whereas parasitic relationships are characterized by an association “in which one organism obtains nourishment from a host, to the detriment of the host.” The distinction between mutualism and parasitism is important for my work here, as I define symbiotic refuge as refuge that meets the needs of multiple species, not just humans, as it is often argued that humans currently have a parasitic relationship with Earth and its resources. In a time when ecological conversations often lead to a sighed admission that “humans are the parasite,” symbiosis is an opportunity for humans to participate in refoliation. *Parable* offers us a glimpse of mutual symbiosis through permaculture-based human-plant collaboration. The nature of interspecies symbiosis results in a relationship that is of greater value than the sum of its parts. For scientists, symbiosis is a key part of the evolution and survival of all species, indicating that symbiosis has something to do with constructing long-term refuge (Freedman).

While my term “symbiosis” and Kimmerer’s “mutual” work in very similar ways, I seek to add nuance to her term “flourishing” by offering instead “refuge.” The

word “refuge” has a rich etymological history and is used in a variety of fields. The Oxford English Dictionary offers the broad definition of “A place of safety or security; a shelter, a sanctuary, a retreat.” The multiple inflections of these synonyms reveal that refuge goes beyond mere “shelter” which connotes temporary and perhaps even shoddy conditions of safety, whereas refuge is still temporal yet more enduring. The OED notes that ecologists use the term refuge in reference to “A place in which a natural population can survive when suitable habitats and resources become scarce” or “A protected area for wild animals.” In this way, refuge is a place, but not in a fixed sense; anywhere can be a refuge with the right conditions. Refuge thus homes in on the temporality of conditions of surviving and thriving, a temporality expressed in permaculture theory and a temporality worthy of embrace in the fluctuations of the Anthropocene.

More recently, scholars of the environmental humanities have used the term refuge specifically in discussions about the Anthropocene and the nature of what the Anthropocene is. Haraway, borrowing from Tsing and invoking the ecological definition of “refuge,” suggests that “the inflection point between the Holocene and the Anthropocene might be the wiping out of most of the refugia from which diverse species assemblages (with or without people) can be reconstituted after major events” (159). Some other “major events” Haraway cites are inherently defoliating efforts such as desertification and clear-cutting, either of which—or some other ecological

disaster—could be the unnamed event that catalyzes the setting of *Parable*.[21] It's not insignificant that *Parable* is thought of as belonging to the genre of "climate fiction," fitting a set of literary parameters that include climate apocalypse. The apocalyptic situation in *Parable* is clearly a result of humans' mistreatment of the environment and consumptive rather than reciprocal patterns of ecological engagement. Haraway continues, "Anna Tsing argues that the Holocene was the long period when refugia, places of refuge, still existed, even abounded, to sustain reworlding in rich cultural and biological diversity" (160). "Reworlding" is the reconstitution of supportive and interdependent ecologies, which, in my estimation, requires refoliation. Reworlding requires refoliation because all life, all worlds are entangled interdependently with plant bodies—as seen in the California Indigenous tribes' relationships with oaks and acorns. Humans and animals would not survive without plants for sustenance and shelter, soil microorganisms feed on plant waste, mycorrhizae networks symbiotically carry messages between tree roots, and even our very atmosphere is constituted by plant byproducts such as oxygen and relies on plants to consume carbon dioxide. Thus, symbiotic refuge requires refoliation through the active participation of multiple species based on each species' bio-individual ways of being and knowing. Plant epistemology, as applied in systems such as permaculture, can help us attain and construct symbiotic refuges through refoliation.

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[21] In a 2014 interview for *Democracy Now*, Butler alludes to global warming as part of the ecological crisis in *Parable*.

I do not intend to sound pessimistic, but rather realistic, in imagining a future where we must first take the necessary step toward surviving (symbiotic refuge) *and then* toward thriving (mutual flourishing), which does follow the plot of *Parable* as well. Thus, symbiotic refuge, which can be pursued through permaculture, operates as a stepping stone toward flourishing in a world where idealism may seem more elusive due to the realities of ecological destruction. Instead, symbiotic refuge focuses on creating refuge(s) *in spite of* unideal circumstances. This is not to say that symbiotic refuge cannot be long-term, but it is dynamic and can adapt and change with the conditions. Symbiotic refuge is, by nature, temporary and provisional, but it does provide. This is the context of the Anthropocene, and this is the context of *Parable*.

4.6 Lauren's Ecological Orientation: Ancestral Plant Knowledge and Hyperempathy

Ancestral Indigenous plant knowledges and reciprocal plant collaboration are foregrounded early in the narrative of *Parable*. For example, an early exchange with her father reveals Lauren's family's countercultural knowledge and use of acorns—which we now know are significant to the California context—foreshadowing an early ability of Lauren to learn from seeds. In this conversation, Lauren's father is frustrated with her for scaring her friend, Joanne, into thinking that "the world is coming to an end" (62), and Lauren remembers that she lent Joanne one of her father's books about Indigenous knowledges and uses of acorns. Lauren's father states, "Yes, I will have to have that [book] back, all right. You wouldn't have the acorn bread you like so much

without that one—not to mention a few other things we took for granted" (63-64). Lauren, confused about where her father is going with this asks, "Acorn bread…?" and her father responds, "Most of the people in this country don't eat acorns, you know. They have no tradition of eating them and don't know how to prepare them, and for some reason, they find the idea of eating them disgusting" (64). Since Lauren describes the book as being "about California plants and the ways Indians used them" (63), the text explicitly contrasts Lauren's cultural food context with the ways of Indigenous peoples in the contemporary region of California invoking the environmental history that opens this chapter. In this way, Butler foregrounds IEKs early in the text, suggesting that Lauren's permaculture sensibilities develop out of a knowledge of an Indigenous way of being with plants. The context in which Lauren lives differs from the way Indigenous people of California used plant beings such as acorns, yet her father possesses a type of knowledge beyond the limited thinking of their neighbors, a foundation Lauren builds on in her attempt to survive. The text even goes to far as to contrast Indigenous agricultural practices with the contemporary use of monocultures, which ostensibly were cheaper than acorns at one point in the narrative history: in the environmental context of *Parable*, "Bread made of wheat and other grains—corn, rye, oats" have become "too expensive" (64). The narrative foregrounds the role of agriculture in both the apocalyptic end to the status-quo and the building of refuge. Further, the implicit contrast of the agricultural productive power and sustainability of perennials (i.e. oaks) and annual monocultures (i.e. corn, rye, and oats) renders a permaculture reading based on IEKs extremely relevant. Thus,

Lauren's father goes against the grain and collaborates with perennial acorns for sustainable foodstuffs.

We know this is collaboration because Lauren's father's relationship with acorns is more reciprocal than the monocultured, consumption-oriented engagement with the annual grains he mentions. Lauren's father notes a time when "Some of our neighbors wanted to cut down all our big live oak trees and plant something *useful*. You wouldn't believe the time I had changing their minds" (64, emphasis mine). Lauren's neighbors' ways of engaging plants are so limited that they fail to see the value of acorns. But usefulness is a tricky word here: it implies that Lauren's neighbors simply wanted to consume plants, rather than collaborate with them. It's fair to say that acorns are "useful" to the Olaminas too, so what is the difference between the Olaminas' desire to "use" acorns and the neighbors desire to "use" the land for "useful" things? The Olaminas humbly respect oak trees and acorns for what they offer in their physical bodies. This point deserves a bit of attention: in considering plant epistemology, from the perspective of plants, it seems there are certain parts of themselves that they desire to release, and nuts, seeds, and fruit usually fall into this category, as the consumption of such plant offerings don't harm the larger plant and usually contribute to propagating the plant in other areas (Vileisis 213).
This use of acorns thus contrasts with the use of monocultured grains, in which the plant itself and often the local ecology is harmed in the harvesting process.

Thus, the Olaminas here demonstrate a refusal to engage plant beings with Western concepts of consumption and instead adopt a more ecofeminist ethic, or what

Kimmerer describes as Indigenous modes of reciprocity and responsibility (70-71). Considering that for many Black permaculturists their agricultural craft is their liberation from a legacy of forced agricultural labor as enslaved peoples as well as the current ills of big agriculture that wreak havoc on Black communities, the Olaminas' sovereignty over their food and trees is not only essential to their ongoing ability to survive but to survive with their sovereignty intact. Indigenous subsistence gathering, including the gathering of acorns, highlights the same issue of food sovereignty. Anderson shares the account of a Yurok man, Robert Spott, from a speech he made to the Commonwealth Club of California in 1926. Spott explains that his people "had a place where we used to go to gather acorns for our winter supply" but now, after centuries of European occupation, these places are inaccessible and have "keep out signs," according to Spott (Anderson 112). Spott laments, "All right. We go away. Then, again, we go down to where we used to fish. That is taken up by white man. What are we going to do? We cannot do anything" (Anderson 112). Preventing access to food, including culturally appropriate food, has long been a way of controlling marginalized peoples, both Black and Indigenous people. By conceding to the neighbors' collective desire for crops that tend to be monocultured such as corn, wheat, oats, and rye, the Olaminas' would betray their own sovereignty and their oak neighbors. The Olaminas' oak trees story their sovereignty and their legacy of survival for their children.

In fact, the Olaminas exhibit a way of interacting with oaks and acorns similar to the ways of some California Indian tribes such as the Pomo and Luiseño, who

exhibited a form of ownership counterintuitive to the Western property rights. Anderson explains that "California Indians embraced a different concept of ownership, one based on usufruct rights. Under this conception, if an area is used and tended, it becomes the domain of the gatherer" (133). Anderson offers a very different connotation of the word "use" than that of the Olaminas' neighbors, one that emphasizes care and responsibility instead of profit and exploitation. Anderson expounds, "throughout California, individuals or families repeatedly gathered from and cared for specific oak trees and groves, giving them usufruct rights to those resources" (133). But this is not to be confused with purely individual rights to trees, Anderson explains, "Under the usufruct system, each family had a combination of exclusive rights to certain resources and communal rights to other resources" (133). Within the communal rights to the oaks, Anderson explains how oaks were inherited by family units, much like the Olaminas: "Usufruct rights were often extended through ties of kinship and marriage. Extended families commonly frequented the same stands of different kinds of oaks for many generations, thus passing down to each successive generation valuable ethnobotanical knowledge and management techniques" (134). The inheritance of oaks reinforces that Lauren inherits her father's ancestral plant knowledge. Indeed, according to the Luiseño, "Certain acorn gathering places have belonged from time beyond memory of the living people, to their families" (Anderson 134). As a helpful distinction between individual and communal, Anderson offers the Pomo people's construal: "Like larger manzanitas, all the great oaks of the valley flat were privately owned; those of the hills were owned by the village as a whole" (134).

In other words, oaks were for everyone, as were their acorns, with those taking responsibility for particular oaks having chief access to their acorns.

Finally, while the oak trees provide food, sovereignty, and family heritage to the Olaminas, the trees' contribution to ecology is greater than the sum of their parts in that they provide habitats for a multitude of other nonhuman beings. Assuming Lauren's neighbors wanted to plant monocultures of some sort, removing the trees would be a great loss not only to the Olaminas, but also to the other nonhumans that depend on those trees. Kimmerer specifically notes reciprocity as a mode of engaging trees that offer portions of themselves, such as maples, and considering their offerings (maple syrup and sugar, shade, etc.) as gifts to be accepted with gratitude rather than products to be consumed. In turn, Kimmerer describes protecting the maples and planting daffodils near them, which maples like (71). Like maples, oaks have their own ways of collaborating with other nonhumans and offering themselves. For example, Diana Wells points out that "Most wild oak trees are planted by jays or squirrels, which relish the acorns but bury a lot for future use and then forget to retrieve some of them" (362). While squirrels contribute to oaks continued survival by planting their seeds, other collaborators survive thanks to the oaks: "Pigs like acorns, too, and get nice and fat on them. In medieval forests the right of 'pannage' was a right to graze pigs under the trees" (Wells 362). Anderson concurs that oaks served the other nonhumans in their environment: "Valley oaks also created a microclimate for many kinds of understory plants and fungi that only survived under the trees. Thus, these giants of the plant world were like arks supporting a great diversity of life" (31).

Wells and Anderson illustrate the way in which oak trees sit at the intersection of giving and receiving, consuming and producing, serving as symbiotic refuge for plants, fungi, squirrels, pigs, deer, as well as the California Indigenous tribes and the Olamina family. Anderson conveys the extent to which Indigenous people of California were committed to symbiotic refuge: “Some acorns were left on oak trees […] for ‘the birds and squirrels and other animals,’” according to a Maidu elder (55). In their commitment to oaks, we begin to get a sense for the Olamina family’s contribution to symbiotic refuge. By collaborating with acorns, using the part of the perennial oak tree that it offers freely to others, the Olaminas meet their own needs while meeting the needs of others.

4.7 Lauren’s Developing Plant Ethic: Learning the Ways of Seeds Through Hyperempathy

While ancestral plant knowledge is one way Lauren is oriented to the natural world, another is through her hyperempathy. Crucial to my reading of Lauren’s care for plants is the fact that Lauren suffers from a medical condition known as hyperempathy syndrome, and this syndrome orients her to the environment around her in unique way that affects her relationship to the natural world. In short, hyperempathy syndrome causes Lauren to take on the physical pain of those around her. We learn of Lauren’s hyperempathy when she is biking with a group from her town of Robledo and they must ride past people who are suffering physically: “Worse for me, they often have things wrong with them. They cut off each other’s ears, arms, legs…” (10).

Lauren can even suffer if she simply perceives another suffering, such as when her brother pretended to be hurt, using red ink to mimic blood, and she bled through her own skin (11). Lauren's hyperempathy causes her to be careful about how she treats others because if she harms them, she ultimately harms herself. Lauren explains the nature of this vulnerability with an example: "I didn't fight much when I was little because it hurt me so. I felt every blow that I struck, just as though I'd hit myself" (11). This reality of experience for Lauren maps onto the reality of ecological issues facing humans: if humans harm the Earth, we ultimately harm ourselves because of our Earth-dependence, which is a human vulnerability like Lauren's hyperempathy. Rebecca Evans contends this point in her entry "Hyperempathy" in *An Ecotopian Lexicon*. Evans writes, "Hyperempathy thus exemplifies an emotional orientation that may be necessary to catalyze action in the face of environmental and climate injustice" (117). While I don't see empathy as *necessary* to catalyze action, it is a skill that can be honed for good as well as a liability that can lead to harm (as seen in the case of Lauren Olamina). In other words, I hesitate to cast empathy as necessary, as the most crucial emotional posture given how vulnerable that makes Lauren. The reality of hyperempathy is that it may ultimately cause Lauren to avoid experiencing suffering at all costs, which is impossible to do. Even so, we can see how empathy positions Lauren to learn from nature and care for it as a part of her, which is valuable. Ultimately, Evans concludes that "Butler's *Parable* series thus asks us to understand empathy's role in crafting environmental outcomes" (118). Lauren's hyperempathy foregrounds her relationship to her environment, both human and nonhuman.

Reinforcing Evans' point, Lauren's hyperempathy is not limited to humans, which challenges hierarchal categories that render nonhumans insentient. While riding back from a shooting lesson, Lauren's group comes upon a pack of feral dogs, and her father shoots one that gets too close. Lauren thinks the dog is dead, but "it moved" (44). Lauren recounts the pain she felt at the sight of the suffering dog: "I saw its bloody wounds as it twisted. I bit my tongue as the pain I knew it must feel became my pain [...] I thought I would throw up. My belly hurt more and more until I felt skewered through the middle" (44). Lauren cannot bear it, so she chooses to end the dog's life, both to relieve the dog and herself, but it gets worse before it gets better: "With my right hand, I drew the Smith & Wesson, aimed, and shot the beautiful dog through its head. I felt the impact of the bullet as a hard, solid blow— something beyond pain. Then I felt the dog die. I saw it jerk, shudder, stretch its body long, then freeze. I saw it die. I felt it die" (45). Summarizing the event, Lauren seems incredulous when she says, "I had felt its pain as though it were a human being" (46). In this way, Lauren's ability to see herself and her vulnerabilities in animals requires her to carefully orient herself to her environment with a posture of care as she must do with other humans as well.

This incident with the dog raises questions about why Lauren can feel the pain of a dog but not of a plant. On the one hand, Lauren's ability to feel the pain of animals reinforces my point that her hyperempathy maps onto human relationships with the natural environment, but on the other, the fact that she does not explicitly experience hyperempathy with plants invites consideration of the perceived animal-

vegetal binary, or Butler's assumptions about it. In other words, Lauren's ability to feel the pain of the dying dog but not a suffering plant reinforces the reigning idea that plants do not feel pain.

And yet, the text does not actually reinforce the idea that plants are unintelligent beings lacking in sentience. We do know that plants feel pain, albeit through different mechanisms than animals that have a similar central nervous system across species. What I mean is that the pain response in animals with central nervous systems is a survival response. Put a different way, pain is a signal to the body that the body may be harmed or die if the pain continues, so when a body feels pain it may recoil or otherwise try to escape the pain. If we consider pain a survival strategy, Lauren's hyperempathy orients her to the survival mechanisms of others, illustrating the way in which this text foregrounds ways of surviving the Anthropocene. Evans ties Lauren's hyperempathy to surviving the Anthropocene as well: "Olamina's status as a hyperempath is not incidental to her ecological politics; instead, her unyielding goal of a just, sustainable, and adaptable society is a response to her hyperempathy" (117). Lauren does exhibit a form of hyperempathy toward plants; Lauren's orientation to plants is one of learning from, caring for, and collaborating with them, as she exhibits with acorns. And when it comes to plants specifically, ultimately its Lauren's ability to occupy the mind of plants as they attempt to survive, a latent form of hyperempathy, that characterizes her relationship with the plants she encounters.

Lauren's ability to empathize with plant-being leads her to her own developing plant ethic as well as her Earthseed revelation. While weeding in the garden, Lauren empathizes with the ways of plants:

> Well, today, I found the name, found it while I was weeding the back garden and thinking about the way plants seed themselves, windborne, animalborne, waterborne, far from their parent plants. They have no ability to travel great distances under their own power, and yet, they do travel. Even they don't have to just it in one place and be wiped out. There are islands thousands of miles from anywhere—the Hawaiian Islands, for example, and Easter Island—where plants seeded themselves and grew long before any humans arrived.
>
> Earthseed.
>
> I am Earthseed. Anyone can be. Someday, I think there will be a lot of us. And I think we'll have to seed ourselves farther and farther from this dying place (77-78)

This passage invites close attention to Lauren's epistemological ways of making meaning out of her experience, and it also serves as the beginning of Lauren's adoption of a permaculture process through the key principle of observing nature (Holmgren 10). The passage foregrounds that Lauren is in the physical and phenomenological space of the garden, dealing with and touching plant bodies—desirable and undesirable alike—and considering the plants' ways of being and knowing. It's important that Lauren is physically touching the plants, pulling weeds while the plants pull Earthseed from her as she considers the plants' ways of being.

Lauren observes an everyday biological function of plants in their efforts to reproduce: seeding.

Plant biologist Stefano Mancuso illustrates this process in a way that resonates with Lauren's description as he explains the very active way *Erodium cicutarium* (a flower from the geranium family) seeds itself: "*Erodium cicutarium* seeds [...] explode when they come off the parent plant, may be carried away by the fur of some passing animal, fall to the ground, move until they find a crack in the ground, and then, finally, slip into it" (30). This explosion, for Erodium, is both quite energy intensive on the part of the plant *and* reliant on collaborators in the vicinity, as Mancuso explains: "The seeds are grouped so as to accumulate mechanical energy as if they were a spring. This energy continues to increase until any disturbance in the balance, such as the slight touch of an insect, the passing of an animal, or even a gust of wind, causes the immediate release and explosion of the seeds" (34). The result is that Erodium seeds may be "catapulted as far as several feet away" (Mancuso 34). Mancuso explains that *Erodium* does this because "Like all plants, Erodium needs to disperse its seeds on as wide a surface as possible" and without the active movement away from the parent plant, which "has no interest in having all its babies around it," Erodium would not move far enough away to "prevent the growth of nearby rivals with which it would have to compete" (33). Mancuso's and Lauren's descriptions both highlight the activeness in this biological process. For Mancuso, this is evidenced in words like "explode" and "move" that describe the seeds' animacy. Lauren says of seeds that "Even they don't have to just it in one place and be wiped out" (77). Both

challenge the idea that plants are inert, passive beings. But most remarkably, Lauren's ability to anticipate the concepts of 21st-century scientists and philosophers highlights Butler's prescience on the matter of plant agency and intelligence.

Beyond biology, from a philosophical perspective, what Lauren ascertains in the garden is what Michael Marder calls the "*intentionality* of plants," which exhibits itself in two major ways: "[1] the capacities of the vegetal soul to seek nourishment and [2] to reproduce itself" (158, emphasis in original). Lauren' and Mancuso's references to wind, water, and animals echo Deleuze and Guatarri's comments on "The wisdom of plants: even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else—with the wind, an animal, human beings" (Marder 168). Her knowledge of plant "seeding" (reproduction) processes arises as she physically cares for the plants, and she realizes the ways in which plants collaborate with other beings, ranging from elements like wind and water to animals, invoking the image of a squirrel burying an acorn. The material agency and bodies of these plants story Lauren's perception of her circumstances, ultimately leading to both Earthseed and her own seeding and bolting.

Additionally, here in the garden, Lauren phytomorphizes herself. Indeed, as she considers plant reproduction, Lauren notes that plants don't need to remain in one place, and in fact their survival often depends on movement to new, more nourishing soil. Lauren realizes she, too, can move to new soil. Instead of personifying the plants by giving them human characteristics, Lauren sees herself in the image of plants, concluding, "I am Earthseed," which illustrates that she sees herself as a seed with the

agency to move (78). This garden epiphany—more so than any previous "head knowledge" of plants gained from books—catalyzes Lauren's ability to not only see herself amidst this host of potential collaborators, but also as a being who could employ plant ways of being and knowing for her own survival.

Indeed, while scholars such as Dubey, Bernardo, and Gamber consistently refer to this passage's seed references as "metaphors" (4, 5), I contend that these seeds are beyond metaphors; they are not solely occupying the text to represent an idea, but they are storied matter, textual agents that materially transform the direction of Lauren's mindset and narrative. Without the plant bodies in the garden, *Parable* could not continue the story. They catalyze the text by changing Lauren through her epiphany of what real plants do to survive. For example, Lauren observes the textual plants as collaborating with other beings to spread their seeds as a matter of natural course, but there is also a gardening term for plants moving to reproduce faster due to feeling vulnerable in unfavorable environmental conditions: bolting.

Bolting is when plants sense that their survival in the current environment is threatened and they "go to seed," meaning they prematurely start flowering with the intention of giving off seeds in an attempt to propagate themselves via their seeds in a more hospitable, distant environment. Bolting plants have a distinct look to them: instead of continuing to grow in a bushy manner, distributing nutrients carefully to the photosynthetic leafy-portions concerned with long-term sustenance, they appear to shoot straight up to the sun, directing all energy upwards to the flower and seed

portions.[22] It's effectively a hail-Mary sacrifice of the current plant for the future of the potential plants that could come from the seeds. Considering the imagined seeds in Lauren's garden alongside the being of real seeds, we see that Lauren's garden epiphany is generated by the agency of these plants, and the entire rest of the novel sits on this important scene, revealing the literary agency of the storied plant matter.

Ultimately, we can make clear connections from Lauren's garden musings to her actions in the rest of the text, revealing her process of knowledge production and learning from plants as well as the agency of these plants to affect the trajectory of the narrative. Almost immediately after the garden scene, Lauren packs a "grab and run pack," intuiting that her own bolt from her home is imminent (80). These passages direct us to read it as Lauren adopting plant knowledge and epistemology and phytomorphizing herself—rather than the other way around—because Lauren first observes the seeding and *then* considers her own situation. Indeed, Lauren continues to emulate a permaculture mindset, observing plants and even mimicking them.

While Lauren's permaculture mindset causes her to emulate plants in her own form of bolting, she also learns from plants by using her observations of them to begin building her own religion. The epistemological meaning-making Lauren unearths in the garden reaches its apex as she realizes the name of her belief system: Earthseed. Ultimately, Lauren's garden epiphany, in concert with her ancestral knowledge of

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22 I do not think it a coincidence that bolting plants appear to be rocketing into space, which resonates with the text's refrain that Earthseed is to "take root among the stars," which is actualized by space travel in *Parable of the Talents.*

acorns, is a seed that sprouts the rest of the narrative. She uses her knowledge of seeds to guide her decisions and spiritual meaning making, which is most evidenced by the writing of her Earthseed verses.

4.8 Earthseed Verses and Plant Ways of Being and Knowing: Seeding, Bolting and Biodiversity

Earthseed's statutes undoubtedly arise from the ways of seeds that Lauren observes in her garden, particularly their seeding activities, bolting strategies, and desire for biodiversity. For example, as she thinks about the future and plans her bolt, Lauren subtly tries to get a sense of whether or not her father would consider relocating if the unrest around them got really bad. Her father at first says he would find refuge somewhere around their current region until it was safe to "rebuild" and "fortify," "doing whatever [they] can to be safe" (82). Lauren senses that this is not good enough, that relocation to other soil through bolting is truly necessary for enduring refuge. She asks, "Would you ever think about leaving here, heading north to where water isn't such a problem and food is cheaper?" which her father answers with a simple "no," going on to explain his job situation as the most stable one could expect (82). The conversation continues, Lauren pressing her father on his reasoning until he firmly declares "This is my home" (82).

The Earthseed passage following this conversation seems to be Lauren's processing of what she just discussed with her father, a processing that takes place in the form of her Earthseed writing. It reads, "A tree / Cannot grow / In its parents'

shadows" (82). The image of a tree trying to grow in its parents' shadow invokes the imagery of plants seeding themselves, reminding us that bolting plants desire to spread their seeds far from the current inhospitable environment. One is reminded of the precarity of acorns trying to germinate in poor conditions, in the shadow of their parents' large canopy. This Earthseed verse illustrates what happens if the seeds aren't taken far enough: those seeds will simply vie for the same limited resources as the bigger, stronger, parent plant. The survival of both plants will be threatened by the competition, which goes contrary to the plant's actual desire to help its species survive long-term. Clearly, though, Lauren is not only thinking of the garden plants' seeding but also her own bolting. Here Lauren phytomorphizes herself again, seeing herself as a seed from a bolting plant that will not thrive in the shadow of her father, the parent plant. It is no coincidence, then, that Lauren does not leave Robledo until after her father's death; the text follows the trajectory of bolting as we see the parent plant sacrifice for the offspring's ability to find new soil. Thus, Lauren phenomenologically makes meaning out of what she witnesses the plants doing and thinking, and she adopts their ways as her own survival strategy, as illustrated by her Earthseed verse about trees growing in their parents' shadows.

Lauren writes other Earthseed verses that story plant seeding strategies. The refraining verse "The destiny of Earthseed / Is to take root among the stars" (84-85) invokes plant intentionality in both reproduction and seeking nourishment. An expression of the same ideas is found in a later verse which reads "We are Earthlife maturing, Earthlife preparing to fall away from the parent world. We are Earthlife

preparing to take root in new ground" (151), which clearly recalls the earlier passage's attention to plant seeding strategies as well as the verse above about trees growing in their parents' shadows. Earthseed, to be carried across the Earth and into the rest of the universe by a host of collaborators, will then "take root" in new "soil." Again, while many scholars see this language as merely metaphorical, I contend that Lauren's thought process relies on her actual experience of the plant epistemologies of seeding, rooting, fruiting, and propagating.

Other verses point to the permaculture value of biodiversity. Take, for example, the following verse: "Embrace diversity. / Unite— / Or be divided, / robbed, / ruled, / killed / By those who see you as prey. / Embrace diversity / Or be destroyed" (198). At first, due to the context in which this verse appears, readers might assume the verse is referencing the value of human diversity and collaboration alone; however, a look at plant epistemology suggests the concept of diversity-for-survival may be another thing Lauren learned from her plant allies who thrive on bio-diversity. This is not to say that human diversity of race, gender, class, etc. is not valuable—it is indeed incredibly valuable to Lauren's Earthseed community, for example. My point is more that the innate value of diversity is more likely something Lauren learned from plants, as the ideologies of the world she inhabits do not place value in human diversity, but plants exhibit value of diversity as a survival strategy. Marder notes that "Vegetal being revolves around non-identity, understood both as the plant's inseparability from the environment wherein it germinates and grows, and as its style of living devoid of a clearly delineated autonomous self" (162). In other words, plants

are non-individuals due to their consistent reliance on and relationship to their surrounding environment, which is why permaculturists seek to refoliate environments with a range of plant species that can work together to create refuge for one another.

This interdependence can be illustrated by once again considering real plants and the permaculture concepts of integrated pest management and companion planting. Consider that plants are prey to many other beings, including, but not limited to, humans, animals, and bugs (which we may call pests). Plants are most vulnerable to pests—particularly of the insect or microbial variety—when alone, malnourished, or diseased, much like humans. Since permaculturists avoid harmful pesticide use, they turn to practices known as integrated pest management to protect their plants in way that cares for the larger ecological web. One practice in integrated pest management is companion planting.

Companion planting, which is the practice of placing certain complementary plants together, can both prevent plants from being overrun by pests and increase the nourishment of the plants. Companion planting is practiced commonly by Indigenous tribes, such as the Cherokee, who celebrate the "Three Sisters:" corn, beans, and squash (Kimmerer 129). The Three Sisters are greater than the sum of their parts: beans fix nitrogen in the soil, which corn needs in large amounts, the corn functions as a pole for the bean vines to climb up, and the squash functions as a covercrop that protects the soil and prevents weed growth around all three plants (Chenault). In contemporary gardens implementing integrated pest management, nasturtiums, for example, are excellent companions for cruciferous vegetables because they repel

aphids, which are major predator of cabbage family plants ("Companion Planting" 10). Nasturtiums serve as cruciferous companions by repelling their chief predator, aphids, but anise, for example, serves cabbage-family plants by attracting predatory wasps, which eat aphids ("Companion Planting" 2, 10). Thus companion planting manages pests through means of either repelling the pests all together, or by inviting other bugs and animals that eat the pests by creating a welcoming environment for those pest-predators. We see that plants again are collaborators—with soil, other plants, and non-pest bugs—in their inherent being and in their efforts to survive.

With this knowledge of plant-being, we can read the above Earthseed verse, which refers to the danger of predators, as revealing a commitment to plant-like non-identity in an effort to preserve the collective group. Thus, this Earthseed verse calls for implementation of the plant survival strategy of non-identity amidst biodiversity, and Lauren seems to answer that call both in her curation of a diverse human community as she travels and in the final pages of the novel in her founding of a permaculture farm called "Acorn," both of which are undoubtedly a result of not only Lauren's intimate knowledge of but also her adoption of plant ways of being. Indeed, there is a direct link from Lauren's plant knowledge, to the development of Earthseed, to the curation of her community.

4.9 Lauren's Companion Planting: Gathering Seeds of Community and Planting them at Acorn

As Lauren begins her northward journey, she begins gathering seeds to companion plant a new Earthseed community. Upon the destruction of Robledo, Lauren begins the process of gathering a humanly diverse (in race, gender, age, ability, and class) community in which and with which to seek symbiotic refuge—the community that will become Earthseed and Acorn. In the days after her community is burned to the ground, Lauren finds two neighbors who also survived the attack, Zahra Moss and Harry Balter. Despite living as neighbors for years, the three don't know each other well (173). The text foreshadows a sense of the group being unexpected and diverse when it first introduces us to Harry and Zahra by describing them as "an unlikely pair" (164). Even so, Lauren leads them back to the garage outside the town walls she hid in the night before (166). A sense of symbiosis develops as Zahra and Lauren care for Harry while he recovers from the concussion he received while intervening during Zahra's attack (167). They develop a trust for one another and a sense of each other's skills and advantages, such as Harry's money and Zahra's ability to steal fruit, and they decide to continue together on Lauren's move north (172). A White man, two Black women, and Lauren deciding to present as a man, turns this "unlikely pair" into an unlikely trio characterized by diversity of race, gender, skill, and advantages while still trusting one another. Even just three people are better than one—they are able to protect one another from multiple threats over the course of their travel, such as when two men come too close to size up Zahra and Lauren pulls her

gun on them (183), and when Harry shoots an intruder that comes into the camp and Lauren knocks out the intruder's accomplice while he is attacking Harry (188). The trio feels somewhat safe stopping for water as "three is the smallest comfortable number at a water station. Two to watch and one to fill up" (202). When two thieves attempt to steal water from another young couple and their baby, Lauren and Harry are able to scare them off. Trust comes somewhat easy to these neighbors since childhood, but the group hesitates to assimilate any outsiders, fearing they may be predators in disguise.

Even so, Lauren's curated and diverse community continues to grow based on her own sense of who she can trust with the collective good. The family that got attacked at the water station seems to be staying close to Lauren, Harry and Zahra, resting at the same time and camping at the same time. The family feels safe near them and Lauren senses that "they look more like potential allies than potential dangers, but I'll keep an eye on them" (204). Despite protest from Zahra and Harry, Lauren decides to test the waters by inviting the couple into the fold, acknowledging that their mixed-race status makes them natural allies in this hostile environment. The man is hesitant to accept the invite and balks at such an absurd word—"ally"—and Lauren responds, "in a pinch, five is better than two" (208). The family finally joins them when Lauren protects their baby from a dog attack (209-210), and the group as a whole grows 100-fold by incorporating the diverse skills, potential, and knowledge of three more people to create a mobile, symbiotic refuge amongst one another. By the time the group reaches Acorn, they acquire eight more members—Bankole, Allie, Jill, a small orphan

named Justin, Emery and her daughter Tori, and Grayson and his daughter Doe—though they lose Jill along the way to an attack. Welcoming Bankole is perhaps among Lauren's better decisions, as it is his family land they decide to settle at the end of the narrative.

Importantly, Lauren curates a diverse community in a context where such alliances are unusual, representing a sort of challenge to the atomistic individualism in the culture of the text. A refrain over and over again in the text is that others can't be trusted, and the people Lauren helps are always surprised to be the beneficiaries of aid, such as when Travis balked at Lauren's first invite to join them. Or such as when the group picks up Allie and Jill; they shared that "the house fell on [them], and nobody helped [them] either, until [Lauren's group] came along" (237). Bankole chimes in, telling the young women, "You're very fortunate…people don't help each other out much out here" (237). Lauren conveys to Allie the stipulations for staying with Earthseed: "if you travel with us, and there's trouble, you stand by us, stand with us" (239), conveying a clear sense of mutual care and symbiotic refuge. As they travel, Lauren's group is a living embodiment of the earlier Earthseed verse: "Embrace diversity. / Unite— / Or be divided, / robbed, / ruled, / killed / By those who see you as prey. / Embrace diversity / Or be destroyed" (198), a verse written long before Lauren began forming this community but after her garden epiphany, revealing that Lauren's choices follow her knowledge of plant-thinking. Lauren's instincts around community formation are ecofeminist in nature, moving away from notions of community that center on the individual, to emulating phyto-community in its non-

identity amidst biodiversity. In contrast to traditional notions of organic community, Dubey stipulates that "The sole purpose that unifies this group of diverse people is their shared resolve to move toward a better future" (7), that is, a future of symbiotic refuge for all involved. In this way, Acorn is not only a diverse community that resists individualistic notions of community, but a refuge for the humans it sustains.

In addition to collaborating with humans on the journey, Lauren and her group collaborate with plants, finding refuge and sustenance in a diversity of plant species. Consider the variety of plants that story Lauren's survival journey: first, when Lauren briefly returns to the rubble of Robledo before moving north for good, she visits her family garden one last time. She "manage[s] to reach a couple of nearly-ripe peaches that other scavengers had missed" (161). She also collects "a few carrots, a couple of handfuls of sunflower seeds from flower heads that lay on the ground, and a few bean pods from vines Cory had planted" (161). She takes a few barely-beginning-to-ripen lemons, figs, and persimmons, as well as "a single ear of corn left on a downed stalk" (162). And this is just the beginning of her journey. Plants continue to provide sustenance on their trek, such as when Zahra steals a bounty of ripe peaches for Lauren and Harry (170) and when Lauren stocks up on nonperishables-- "oats, fruit, nuts, [and] bean flour" (174)—that they eat later. At times when provisions are sparse, Zahra teaches the others that "sucking on a plum or apricot pit makes you feel less thirsty" (179).

These instances also highlight the material intermingling at play in the plant sustenance provided. For example, to stave off thirst, Lauren, Harry, and Zahra

"walked along with seed in [their] mouths […] and [they] felt better" (180). Here we see the seeds providing something beyond sustenance, a form of comfort. Lauren's acorn bread also provides not only sustenance but also comfort on the road: "Then we cooked some of my acorn meal with nuts and fruit. It was wonderful […] Acorns are home-food" (180). Food is also a community-building force on the group's challenging journey; Lauren recounts when two new people joined their community, "I dug sweet pears out of my pack, and took one each to the woman and the girl. I had just bought them two days before, and I only had three left. Other people got the idea and began sharing what they could spare. Shelled walnuts, apples, a pomegranate, Valencia oranges, figs…" (283). Lauren shares plant food as a gift and a way of welcoming new people to their community. While perhaps it is expected, since food is an ongoing human need, *Parable* shows the beauty of collaborating with plants for sustenance and comfort in the context of community building.

Indeed, as their journey continues, the group collaborates with plants for material refuge in addition to nutrition, comfort, and community-building. For example, the group hides among bushes to eat instead of drawing attention to themselves by eating on the busy freeway, which could trigger someone to try to steal their food (178). They also use the refuge of the woods, such as "a tangle of trees and bushes" to rest at night (197) or a park with "pines, palms, and sycamores" to rest during the daytime while still having some privacy (215). At another point, their camp in the wooded interior is too close to a wildfire, so they move to a spot where "one of the huge freeway signs had fallen or been knocked down, and now lay on the ground,

propped up by a pair of dead sycamore trees" (199). Even these dead trees provide refuge for the traveling band. Another bit of dead tree, as it were, helps Lauren find potable water: "I salvaged a flat piece of wood from the building, went a few yards closer to the ocean, and began to dig into the sand [...] quite a lot of water had seeped into the hole" (205-206). In one episode when Lauren's group finds itself in the midst of a gunfight, the trees protect them from getting hit with stray bullets: "One of the trees we'd camped under was hit twice" (249). As the plant offerings of fruit and nuts provide nutrition, the woods, trees, and bushes materially support Lauren's community in finding refuge during their arduous journey.

The value of a biodiverse human-plant community is illustrated in the final pages of the book when the community members hotly discuss staying with one another on Bankole's land. While Grayson argues that it's not safe to stay and build because "someone burned this place down last time," Zahra argues that Bankole's family's vulnerability had to do with the constitution of the community in regards to division of labor: "[Bankole's family] couldn't have kept a good watch—a man and a woman and three kids. They would have worked hard all day, then slept all night. It would have been too hard on just two grown people to try to sit up and watch for half the night each" (320). Zahra's comments invite a queer reading of this family's vulnerability, suggesting that the typical nuclear family is not the ideal of community formation. In other words, the small and un-diverse family unit was an easier target because their energy was spread too thin from simply providing for themselves to mount defenses against attackers. But the community Lauren has gathered is diverse in

age, gender, skill, and knowledge, allowing them to robustly spend adequate energy providing for themselves, protecting themselves, and caring for the next generation. While there are couples and families in Lauren's group, their community goes beyond the nuclear family to care for one another as a larger band. Indeed, as Melzer rightly points out, "Butler emphasizes that the embracing of difference does not only enhance the quality of human interactions, but that it is an act of survival" (6). Over the course of the novel, Lauren emulates permaculture-theory as she observes the plants in her garden, processes that information and internalizes it through her Earthseed verse writing, and applies it in real-time as she gathers and plants her community together.

Lauren has gathered a diverse human community, and she intends, with that community, to collaborate with plants for their collective survival. "Acorn" is—materially and discursively—a permaculture community modeled on the ways of seeds Lauren has been observing since her childhood in the garden. The permaculture principles at work in this community abound from its inception. First, Acorn is based on the future confidence Lauren has in seeds, confidence she obtained through her close observation of the ways seeds reveal and enact plant desire, plant thinking, and plant intentionality. As the group discusses their chances of surviving on Bankole's land, Lauren confidently states, "But if we're willing to work, our chances are good here. I've got some seed in my pack. We can buy more" (321). Lauren suggests that refuge for the human requires the cultivation of plants, something that plants do indeed "want" for their seeds.

Further, it's clear from this passage and others that Lauren possesses a variety of seeds that will render her garden likely biodiverse. While Lauren's plans for these plants are for humans to consume them, her approach clearly embodies permaculture practices: "What we have to do at this point is more like gardening than farming. Everything will have to be done by hand—composting, watering, weeding, picking worms or slugs or whatever off the crops and killing them one by one if that's what it takes" (321). What Lauren describes here aligns with permaculture principles and practices. Instead of using modern defoliating agents, permaculture invites a blend of old-fashioned and progressive human participation and collaboration, using human labor to effectively care for the plants in a way that is evidently refoliating. Through such practices, permaculture gardening considers the long-term needs of the plants themselves, as well as the needs of the surrounding environment, rather than just how much "product" humans can get, and the humans must collaborate with each other and the plants to this end. Thus, Lauren's proposed future would literally refoliate Bankole's land to create symbiotic refuge for humans and plants as human and plant needs would be met in relationship with one another. Indeed, as Dubey insightfully notes, this community Lauren builds "presents community as process rather than settlement" (7). In this way, refuge is not a destination or place but a set of healthy relationships among humans and nonhumans.

Not all scholars see the final page's permaculture-like community as an ideal refuge for weathering the Anthropocene. For example, Dubey's article, which is concerned with the novel's treatment of urban community, suggests that "*Parable of*

the Sower frontally encounters contemporary urban crises and struggles against the impulse to project organic models of community as viable forms of refuge or resolution to the social and economic problems plaguing American cities" (12). In my estimation, it does us little good to place a moral value on *Parable's* representation of either city or the country. Instead, my permaculture reading invites consideration of how varied places can support symbiotic refuge, rather than declaring one place as having more refuge-potential than another. As for the myriad problems plaguing American cities, permaculture can provide solutions within the context of city ecosystems, like Soil Generation does, as much as it can aid the sustainable growing of berries on a suburban-rural property such as Hundred Fruit Farm. As a set of principles, permaculture is, as Dubey might appreciate, "emplace-able," in that its principles can be applied on a 12x12 inner city patio or on hundreds of acres far from any urban center. One could imagine that growing most of your own food on your city deck or in your own suburban backyard would certainly constitute an affront to the neoliberal capitalism that bolsters those very communities. All that being said, it's not the "place" of Acorn that makes it a viable refuge, but its adoption and mimicry of plant ways of being that ensures symbiotic refuge for the wider community—human and nonhuman alike.

Indeed, permaculture's inherent emplace-ability, i.e. its ability to be implemented in many different places, renders it a viable way forward in the ever-changing circumstances of the Anthropocene. This contrasts with readings that suggest Lauren is adopting some "primitive" or "regressive" way of being. For example, I

agree with Dubey that Acorn functions as an "alternative[] to contemporary capitalist cities organized as artifacts of consumption" but question that this comes about through conceiving of Acorn as "a modest agricultural order" or "primitive social orders" (Dubey 4). By using language such as "modest" and "primitive" to describe Acorn's community, Dubey interprets Lauren's resistance as meaningless. The term "primitive" in particular (often used pejoratively) suggests that Lauren's agricultural project is a return to the past, but I believe the text actually suggests that permaculture is the way of the future, not least due to the setting and date of the novel. In one sense, permaculture is "primitive" and "organic," but these qualities are due to its mimicry of natural phenomena, which have indeed existed long before humans, as well as permaculture's grounding in IEKs, which are not only in the past, but the present as well. At the same time, permaculture's characteristic emplace-ability renders it highly adaptable to the futuristic environs of both *Parable* and the Anthropocene.

Surviving the Anthropocene requires literal refoliation, but in a progressive way. Lauren literally refoliates Bankole's land, revealing the power of refoliation in efforts to survive the Anthropocene—efforts such as permaculture. When the group arrives to Bankole's land, there is a "huge, half-ruined garden," and while it was "clear-cut back in the 1980s or 1990s" the group can "plant more" trees (318) from the seeds Lauren brought: "oak, citrus, peach, pear, nectarine, almond, walnut" (322). Lauren also plans to "put in a winter garden" (318) including "peas, carrots, cabbage, broccoli, winter squash, onions, asparagus, herbs, several kinds of greens…" (322). Lauren's plans here align with permaculture design principles: a mix of annuals and

perennials with an attention to the long-term investment of carbon-sequestering plants like trees. It's important to note that this symbiotic refuge depends on an intimate collaboration with nature, not a full removal of humans from the landscape. We can see that Bankole's family's passing left the property to its own devices, which had varying effects on the plants. The garden cannot continue without human intervention, but the orchard seemed to keep producing. Even so, with attention, the orchard would thrive even more. While the "pristine wilderness" narrative is popular in environmental humanities circles, Butler shows us through Lauren's vision that surviving the Anthropocene requires humans to see themselves as interdependently entangled in plant lives and bodies.

4.10 "A Phoenix First Must Burn": The Acorn Community and What Remains Through Fire

The novel's final Acorn community invites us to consider again the relationship between acorns and fire. Just as Lauren's story would not happen without plants, it also would not happen without fire. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the Indigenous people of California used controlled burns of woodland areas to bolster the local oak populations. The fires in *Parable* do not read, on the surface, as so beneficial, and certainly not as controlled. In fact, they read more like the fires that have plagued California in the recent decades of the Anthropocene, fires which are a heightened threat due to climate-change-driven drought (Kant et al 553). But the material and symbiotic relationship between oaks and fire invites us to re-read these

textual fires. If we consider that oaks thrive and reproduce better with consistent fire exposure, the text's many fires actually story Acorn's ultimate, albeit temporary, success. Ultimately, the novel's fire(s) support Acorn's ability to take root in the soil.

Fire and fear of fire engulf the narrative. Because of the economic instability, people often set fires in homes and neighborhoods in an effort to garner supplies, as Lauren explains, "People are setting fires to do what our arsonist did last night—to get the neighbors of the arson victim to leave their own home unguarded" (143). Indeed, Robledo is the site of many fires while Lauren still lives there, such as when the Payne-Parrish house is set ablaze (144). Just as Lauren explains, those who set fire to the Payne-Parrish house used arson to bring the neighbors out of their homes so as to burglarize them more easily (146). Lauren's family had money, tools, and a sewing machine stolen, and in an economy like that of *Parable*, such loss is significant. In this way, fire is a genuine threat to communities like Robledo, especially real communities in the Anthropocene plagued by climate-change-induced drought.

But fear of fire is, in one sense, a result of not knowing fire and not using fire appropriately. The California Indigenous people successfully collaborated with fire for symbiotic refuge, but forgetting ancestral ways of caring for the land indeed leads to the unknown that germinates into fear. In this way, the people of Robledo rightfully fear the wrongful use of fire. In contrast to the Indigenous people of California, who used fire to serve oaks and thus future generations of both humans and trees, the pyros in *Parable* use fire in an uncontrolled manner and for the sake of themselves and their pleasure. Lauren explains what the pyro drug does to users' neurochemistry: "[the

drug] makes watching the leaping, changing patterns of fire a better, more intense, longer-lasting high than sex" (144). It is the fire of the pyros—a fire not set from self-control but self-indulgence—that destroys Robledo and instigates Lauren's move northward. Lauren recounts, "Last night, when I escaped from the neighborhood, it was burning. The houses, the trees, the people: Burning" (153). The pyro uses of fire for indulgence maps onto the ever-present threat of wildfires in California, a threat enhanced by climate change linked to human activity and indulgence. Ultimately, Robledo is destroyed by fire at the hands of pyros—yet Lauren survives, a resilient seed that seeks to root in scorched soil.

The fires along the northward journey serve to build up Lauren's Earthseed community, both through human-human collaboration and human-plant collaboration. For example, an instance noted above, where the sycamore trees serve as a lean-to shelter, is contextually motivated by the group trying to move away from an encroaching fire (196-197). The fire's threat provides an opportunity for the sycamore trees to offer refuge. Similarly, it is when a hijacking-gone-wrong results in a car fire and subsequent gunfight that a tree intercepts bullets that may have harmed someone in Lauren's group (249). In another instance, the community decides to avoid the city of San Francisco because "[pyro] addicts are running wild. Setting fires in areas that the earthquake didn't damage" (246). This navigation decision alters their course and their community. On this new leg of the journey, when the aforementioned hijacking-turned-gunfight occurs, Bankole rescues a small child whose mother is killed in the crossfire (252). This child, treated with compassion in an otherwise cutthroat society,

is brought into the Earthseed community and adopted by Allie, but it would not have been so without the fire's storying of Lauren's navigation decisions or the fire's storying of the child's mother's death (254). While *Parable*'s fires pose real threats to the survival of the community, they often serve to build the community's collaboration with plants and each other, just as controlled burns sometimes scorched the oaks but ultimately aided their ability to reproduce.

Despite the many fires Lauren encounters in the narrative, from those in Robledo to the fires on their trek, fire fails to physically or materially touch Lauren or her companions until the final episode of travel before arriving at Acorn. Lauren recounts, "At some point in the endless night, more smoke and ash than ever began to swirl around us, and I caught myself thinking that we might not make it. Without stopping, we wet shirts, scarves, whatever we had, and tied them around our noses and mouths" (308). The smoke and ash become so intense that the group needs to materially prevent themselves from breathing it in. But then the fire itself begins to touch the group: "The fire roared and thundered its way past us on the north, singeing our hair and clothing" (308). Though scared, Lauren realizes "There was nothing to do except keep going or burn" (309). Lauren personifies the fire, "it teased like a living, malevolent thing, intent on causing pain and terror […] yet it didn't eat us. It could have, but it didn't" (309). In other words, Lauren's Earthseed group is literally scorched by fire, but not destroyed. This material intermingling of the Earthseed group and the roaring fire coincides with the practice of controlled burning in oak woodlands; yes, the oaks are scorched, but not so badly that they are destroyed.

Instead, it is the vulnerable underbrush of dead leaves, grasses, and unwelcome insects that are scorched, leaving behind rich soil for the next round of acorns to germinate in and thrive. Just as fire readies the soil for seed germination, so this material intermingling of Earthseed and fire renders the seed of Lauren's community ready to germinate on the scorched soil.

Indeed, as fire chases the group on the final leg of their travelling, scorched earth also greets the community upon their arrival. As they reach the outskirts of the land, Lauren is imagining living there, "until we reached the hillside where Bankole's sister's house and outbuildings were supposed to be. There was no house. There were no buildings" (314). Instead, Lauren and her group find yet another vulnerable community decimated by fire. What they see is, "A broad black smear on the hillside; a few charred plants sticking up from the rubble, some leaning against others; and a tall brick chimney. Standing black and solitary like a tomb-stone in a picture of an old-style graveyard. A tombstone amid the bone and ashes" (314). Bankole's land reveals the tension presented by the material power of fire in this text; on the one hand, it has the power to destroy, but on the other, it builds up community and now renders Earthseed even stronger and more adaptable to the soil they find. In other words, Lauren and her community are a seed planted in the scorched soil of Bankole's land. Just as real acorns thrive in ash-laden soil, so too does Acorn thrive in wake of the narrative's many burns. Each of the fires this community encountered—both as individuals and as a group—made them stronger and more resilient, more prepared to take root in the scorched soil they bolted too.

Just as Lauren's community is an Acorn see planted in scorched soil, so the community commemorates those killed by fire by planting seeds in that same soil. In this way, the Acorn community's oaks serve not only the function to materially provide sustenance for the group, but also to discursively commemorate the life taken by fire. Lauren tells Bankole, "I would like to give them a grove of oak trees […] Trees are better than stone—life commemorating life" (326). After discussing with Bankole, Lauren concludes, "I have acorns enough for each of us to plant live oak trees to our dead—enough to plant one for Justin's mother, too (327). Tweedy suggests that "This ritual of planting trees in remembrance of the dead demonstrates Earthseed's transformation from being personal faith to a religion" (7). It is through this burial ritual in practice that Acorn is truly born: "So today we remembered the friends and the family members we've lost […] Then we buried our dead and we planted oak trees. Afterward, we sat together and talked and ate a meal and decided to call this place Acorn" (328). Tweedy comments on this ritual, suggesting that "the symbolism of the oak trees fuses the impermanence of Earthseed's doctrine of change with a religious permanence that will reach far beyond their life spans" (8). While I take issue with seeing the oaks as purely symbolic, Tweedy highlights the tension found in the concept of permanence and identifies what exactly it is that *remains through* this story: Acorn, community, symbiotic refuge. In other words, "The community of Acorn is the fertile soil in which Earthseed is planted and from which the fruit of a new religious faith is born" (Tweedy 8), and while Tweedy suggests this metaphorically, I take it literally. As the garden seeds story Lauren's resultant Earthseed verses and

spiritual development, the Acorn community's oaks materially story the consummation of this new religion while simultaneously honoring those who have died. Just as they story the California Indigenous tribal culture, oaks and acorns story the sustenance and culture, the material and discursive, the past and the future of Lauren's Acorn community and Earthseed religion.

While Acorn will eventually be destroyed in Butler's sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, Acorn's short-lived existence offers an invitation to symbiotic refuge in the temporary potential of permaculture. How does my permaculture reading of bolting, seeding, and plant-survival square with this destruction in *Parable of the Talents*? Gamber claims that Acorn's dissolution proves it was simply a naïve pastoral dream on Lauren's part (26). After a helpful discussion of the text's naming conventions, Robledo meaning "oak" and Acorn being the oak seed, Gamber uses this as evidence to conclude that Acorn is just a futile attempt to replicate the already inherently problematic community of Robledo, and thus Acorn meets the same inevitable fate (35-36). Gamber critiques the Robledo community as problematic mostly due to its evasion of the urban setting's value in its idealization of the rural pastoral (33). Gamber's reading relies on a notion of the "pastoral" as inherently naïve and unavailable to Black Americans due to the history of plantation slavery in which enslaved African Americans were forced to labor with nature, not unlike James's critique of the pastoral in "Ecomelancholia." While it's right to critique the pastoral notion, I'm not persuaded that Butler's Acorn is aligned with the pastoral ideal as Gamber assumes, which leads his analysis to anthropocentric conclusions. For

example, Gamber does not consider how healing for the land and Earth Lauren's efforts are. From a permaculture perspective, just a few years of Acorn's operation could have bolstered and supported innumerable nonhuman animal, plant, and insect species, rebuilt microbial populations to rejuvenate soil, and sequestered significant amounts of carbon into the roots of the trees and plants she cultivated. Not to mention that as long as Acorn was "self-sufficient," its members were sustainably providing for themselves as opposed to partaking of neoliberal modes of production and consumption—all of which required hard work for all human members of the community. These are not "pastoral ideals" that Acorn is achieving but actual material provision and support for both the humans and the ecosystem. Whether these provisions happen in an urban or rural setting is not particularly relevant, as seen in the Earth-serving activities of Black permaculturists. What's relevant is that these provisions serve both humans and nature rather than functioning like the capitalist-patriarchy's form of agriculture. By assuming Acorn's "success" to be evidenced by its maintenance as a human community, Gamber's reading devolves into an anthropocentrism that can't see any value to Acorn beyond-the-human.

But if we step back and consider the longer narrative of bolting, some of the events of *Talents* make more sense. Bolting is a plant survival strategy, full-stop. To anthropomorphize it, plants don't bolt from shacks to move into mansions; it's not luxurious; they bolt to whatever new soil they can find. Bolting doesn't automatically ensure the seeds get to the best soil. Thus, bolting may be considered successful for a plant if the seed simply gets to another location. After that, it's an interplay between

seed, soil, moisture, sun, and even birds, for the plant to germinate. In this way, the community is a success in one sense because the humans are sustained for a time, but this is still a somewhat anthropocentric reading. In contrast to anthropocentric notions of success above, I ask what it means for a plant to be successful. Marder would probably say that successful plants find nourishment and reproduce (158). In light of this, Acorn is a success in plant terms: the plants Acorn established there, especially the perennials, may thrive long after the humans must leave.

Acorn is a seed still planted in a troubled environment, so it must ultimately bolt (reproduce) again in *Sower*'s sequel. Here we also see perhaps another angle on the meaning of the text's title as well as its final lines, which invokes the biblical "Parable of the Sower:"

> A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty (Matthew 13:3-8, ESV).

After he tells the parable, Jesus explains to the disciples that the seeds refer to the "word of God" and the four "soils" as different souls, illustrating that people will respond to hearing the word of God differently, and that many will ultimately not believe (Matthew 13:18-23). Each seed sown experiences a different environment and

level of "rootedness" and "fruitfulness:" the first seeds don't even germinate or begin to create roots before they are eaten by birds (Matthew 13:4). The second seeds survived the hungry birds and germinated, but the plants were weak because they could not take deep root in the rocky soil (Matthew 13:5). Obviously these first two seeds ultimately failed to produce fruit as well, since fruiting is a downstream process of rooting for plants and necessary for reproduction. The third seed seems to sufficiently take root, but it did so in a hostile environment and thus was "choked out," which Jesus claims renders the plant "unfruitful" as well (Matthew 13:22). But the seed that falls on good soil will both take root and produce fruit. Acorn falls into the category of the third seed—it took root in a hostile environment but had to bolt again before it could really produce fruit due to that hostile environment. But this does not mean Acorn was not successful in its role to help Earthseed "take root among the stars"—language that deeply resonates with the above parable. We've known for the whole novel that Earthseed's destiny was not to take root on Bankole's land, but that was a necessary step to the continued survival of the movement, the symbiotic refuge on the way to mutual flourishing. Despite Acorn's ultimate demise, it did produce seeds that continued to be carried to space, where Earthseed found its destiny. Thus, if we trade Gamber's anthropocentric perspective for permaculture's phytocentric perspective, we see that Lauren's bolting was ultimately successful in getting the seeds to better ground, even though the journey wasn't linear or without obstacle.

Ultimately, symbiotic refuge doesn't have to be permanent to be successful. In the Anthropocene, we may have to continually re-refuge as ecological conditions shift.

Symbiotic refuge is a process, a set of relationships, rather than a final destination; it's a way to weather the storm of the Anthropocene. Symbiotic refuge is more about *how* we refuge than *where*; *who* we refuge with rather than for *how long*. We learn this from those annual plants Lauren tended in her garden, planted among diverse companions to make their short lives as robust as possible, but bolting when necessary to protect their future kin. Even these ephemeral plants sequester carbon, protect their companions, and provide food and shelter for all manner of nonhumans (consider the bird's nest in a bush of garden peas on Hundred Fruit Farm in Figure 8 in the appendix). Permanence was never Lauren's goal, and Acorn got her to where she wanted to ultimately go. Perhaps permanence, as it is commonly understood to mean is the enemy, not the ally, of surviving the Anthropocene—continuing to assume that things can and should stay as they are will only make the conditions more challenging to adapt to. Instead, let us ask what remains through the fire to adapt to the conditions at hand as we pursue collective survival and refuge. As Lauren says, "All successful life is adaptable" (124).

4.11 Conclusion: Reclaiming Permaculture for Refoliation

By the end of the novel, Lauren collaborates with plants in order to recover an environmental ethic that capitalist patriarchy erased. Lauren follows a trajectory from the beginning of the narrative where she first encounters plant-thinking and develops her own ability to mimic plants, evidencing a move to permaculture thinking.

Comparing Lauren's trajectory with Holmgren's principles of permaculture (italicized) is illuminating: as Lauren *observes and interacts* with (10) the ways of seeds, she then collects those seeds in an effort to *catch and store energy* (11). She *accepts negative feedback* (Holmgren 14), that she can no longer survive in her home town, and rather than remain segregated *she integrates* (21) with a *diverse* (25) and *marginalized* group of humans to facilitate *survival on the edges* (26).

While the Indigenous people of California and Lauren Olamina display a tempered use of the region's resources, their European successors did not. Consider the current landscape of oaks in California at the time of Anderson's publishing in 2005: "Today 90 percent of the former valley oak savanna habitat is gone—converted to farms and orchards and, more recently, housing developments" (Anderson 179). What was once commonplace, to see "extensive groves" of oaks, is no more (Anderson 179). Current (mis)management of federal lands contributes to the decline of thriving oak populations. Anderson explains that "The multiple-use concept that guides management of federal lands supports many categories of land use—including livestock grazing, timber production, recreation, wilderness, and mining […] [yet they often] are often incompatible with traditional gathering" (320). In other words, where Indigenous tribes are no longer managing the landscape and woodlands, oaks are declining. For oaks to thrive, they need careful permaculture management practices such as controlled burns which protect acorns from pests, a practice Indigenous people provided for centuries, but Anderson explains that, now, "Acorns are also consistently attacked by insect pests before they are able to germinate" (179), preventing the

growth of new oaks. And due to their symbiotic relationships, the slow decline of oaks and acorns in California has mapped onto the slow decline of the region's Indigenous people.

Moreover, prioritization of American recreational habits and perceived economic needs prevents Indigenous tribes from accessing their culturally appropriate food sources, leading to poor health outcomes: "Where hiking and equestrian trails cut through gathering sites, Indians cannot practice traditional gathering with any privacy" (328), according to Anderson. Anderson shares the account of a Mono/Dumma woman, Norma Turner Behill: "We had our own special areas where we picked acorn. But they're developing in all of our places. We used to go up to the other side of Alder Springs on the way to Mountain Rest School and up there by Cressman's. It's all Southern California Edison Company land now. That was the last place where my grandma Ellen picked" (321). Jay Johnson of the Southern Sierra Miwok/Mono Lake Paiute shares a similar experience to Behill, "It concerns me that I'm seeing a lot of our food sources disappear. We've removed a lot of black oaks in the Valley [Yosemite] in the last few years—nice big ones. The status of the oaks is poor today compared to when I was growing up. The impacts are from overwatering lawns, construction, sewer lines, and people" (Anderson 321). Since "traditional foods such as acorns [...] contribute to the health and longevity of indigenous peoples," when Indigenous people lack access to culturally appropriate food, their health can suffer, but "a return to traditional diets might help indigenous people [...] combat diabetes" as "some of the healthiest and longest-lived Native Americans today eat acorns

regularly" (Anderson 327). The Anthropocene has come to California: lands once abounding with oaks have been defoliated to the detriment of not only the oaks themselves but the people who have depended on them for millennia.

The very defoliation of the California oaks is not only a harbinger but a direct cause of the climate crisis that sets the stage for Butler's novel. Indeed, the defoliation of oaks not only harms woodlands and Indigenous people in California; it also has global effects related to climate change. The mass decline of these trees from the landscape directly contributes to the detrimental climactic shifts that catalyze *Parable of the Sower*. One can see how the simultaneous decline of Indigenous people of California and oaks constitutes a "wiping out of the refugia" (Haraway 159).

But we do not need to feel powerless or hopeless in the face of such harms; Lauren Olamina doesn't; even as her father says, "It's better to teach people than to scare them" (65). The exciting reality of carbon sequestration suggests that one way to reverse climate change is to literally refoliate the landscape with carbon-sink perennials (such as oaks!) through alternative agricultural systems such as permaculture. Since permaculture utilizes the practices that most effectively sequester carbon in an agricultural context, it is a very effective way to respond to climate change, the literary context of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (Kittredge 10-13). In this way, plants are our allies in the larger goal of surviving the Anthropocene, because such survival depends on refoliation. But in order for carbon sequestration to be productive, humans will have to first learn from plants and then change their ways

to effectively collaborate with plants, establishing an interspecies symbiotic refuge like that of the Indigenous people of California and Lauren's Acorn community.

And Lauren is not the only one. As the history of California oaks and Indigenous tribes turns into environmental future in *Parable of the Sower*, stories of Black women permaculturists recovering ancestral plant knowledge call us back to the hopeful environmental present. Soil Generation and Soul Fire Farm in particular highlight permaculture's potential to respond to injustice, liberate Black women and their communities, foster urban resilience, and reclaim ancestral IEKs. And these potentialities are in addition to permaculture's positive environmental impact through refoliation. Black women are finding permaculture a welcome ally of refoliation and liberation for themselves and their communities, a phenomenon that *Parable of the Sower*'s plants story in conjunction with its main character, Lauren Olamina. *Parable of the Sower* elucidates, inspires, and encourages the coalescing themes of ecofeminist liberation, IEKs, and refoliation found in the stories of Black women permaculturists like Baxter, Barfield, Thompson, and Mitchell. In this way—not unlike Zora Neale Hurston's before-her-time ecofeminism or Toni Morrison's foretelling of the benefits of grounding and Earth contact—Octavia Butler presciently illustrates powerful avenues of simultaneous Black female liberation and Earth stewardship.

In considering our own context, *Parable*, as a work of climate fiction, reminds us of the significant role that plants play in multiple potential climactic futures. And, as a work of feminist Afrofuturism, *Parable* foregrounds the presence of Black women and IEKs in the co-creation of a sustainable future. Plants are humans' allies,

but we need to cultivate them and provide them residence among us, and create space for all people to do the same together. Lauren, both practically as a gardener and as a spiritual leader, reminds us to not only make plants our allies, but also to refigure human ways of being and knowing into ones more like plants', so as to contribute to symbiotic refuge. Because of the monocultures of the mind that Shiva critiques, agricultural theory and practice have seldom intersected with literary studies. But taking plants on their own terms—as storied matter—reveals that the literary agency of plants parallels the agricultural agency of plants, just as the literary dismissal of plants parallels the agricultural exploitation of plants. Taking plants on their own terms, as agents with significant capacities, is not just relevant in the realm of the literary but also the realm of agriculture. *Parable* shows us that permaculture works to enact symbiotic refuge, but it requires the hard work of humans to reorient themselves to the needs of nonhuman beings, even amidst their own endeavor to survive. Desiring to survive is not an inherently bad thing; desiring to survive at the expense of all others is the Anthropocene's human problem. With permaculture, we have the tools to support human nourishment and survival while also caring for the nonhumans with whom we share this Earth.

Interlude II: Meeting Mimosas

When people hear the word "mimosa" they often think of a brunch cocktail of orange juice and champagne. In writing my next chapter on *Salvage the Bones*, I learned that mimosas are far more than a sweet cocktail, but are delicate plants named for their ability to close up upon even subtle touch to their leaves. When writing this chapter, I looked up photos and videos of these plants, learning that there are small plant varieties and tree varieties, such as the mimosa tree in *Salvage*, and the tree varieties have flowers that look like wispy pink balls, almost like makeup brushes. This research first introduced me to the delicate mimosa.

In the middle of June 2022, I finished writing a first draft of this chapter, and in celebration, I packed my things and got in the car to head south. I was visiting my dear friend, Erin, in Virginia. We've been good friends for over a decade, but her move to 7 hours away has challenged our ability to stay in touch. But I am up for the challenge: every 4-6 months or so I make the drive to visit her two-acre refuge in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.

It was my last night with her and her family. We had just finished eating dinner, but the sun still had a while before going to bed (it was around the solstice, after all). We decided to take a walk around the property to help digest our feast and allow Erin's daughters to get out the energy only children have. Everything was in full bloom under the waning strawberry moon. The girls dragged me by the hand toward the neighbor's horse pasture with excitement.

As we rounded the barn, I looked up and saw puffs of pink sprinkled on a pair of low trees with thin trunks. “Are those mimosas?!” I exclaimed. Alice and Eleanor ran with me to the calling pink puffs. We examined the tree with childlike wonder: gently feeling the soft silky strands of the flowers and fingering the fern-like leaves. I sighed, “It must not be a mimosa. Its leaves are not closing upon touch.” I was disappointed—it had all the markers of a mimosa but did not seem to act like one. Even so, I collected a few of the flowers and tore a bit of the fern-like leaves from the tree, thanking it for sharing its body and joy with us.

We continued to the neighbor’s pasture, entertaining the questions of children’s curiosity and catching our breath at the top of the hill. We petted the horses until Alice screamed and ran away because a bug landed on her. In the excitement of it all, we quickly returned home, and I nearly forgot about my mini mimosa harvest.

When I got into the light of the kitchen, I looked at my plants and noticed: the fern leaves had closed up completely. It WAS a mimosa! It was just not as sensitive as I expected. Erin and her husband, Adam, came back out with me in the fading light to collect more flowers and leaves. We pressed them between paper and safely placed the paper in the pages of a book so that their dry bodies might later bring joy and good memories, marking the end of this visit with dear friends.

As I drove home to the Northeast, I realized there were mimosa trees everywhere: lining the side of the highway, bordering people’s yards and property, in the landscaping of businesses, pink puffs and delicate leaves led me home. I didn’t see them when I initially traversed these roads, but now that I knew what to look for, it felt

like they were everywhere, and it felt like the most felicitous cosmic gift that they were in bloom. The farther I got from the foothills of Appalachia, the fewer mimosas I saw. While the mimosas I met seemed to like the warm climate of the South, there are a few I noticed in my hometown: two on Route 1 near the blinking traffic light, a couple on my walking route in the manor, a few more edging I-95. I've made this trip to Virginia many times over the years, but my trip in the summer of 2022 will always be storied by the mimosas I met in Appomattox. And each summer, even in Langhorne, I will look for their blooms and greet them, remembering the joy of that night in June with my dear friends, and remembering the lessons they teach in *Salvage the Bones*.

Chapter 5

REFUGE UNMADE: STAYING, SALVAGING, AND MANAGED RETREAT IN JESMYN WARD'S *SALVAGE THE BONES*

5.1 Introduction: Afro-Indigenous and Environmental History of the Gulf

Isle de Jean Charles, about 90 miles south of New Orleans, is home to Indigenous people who—over the past several centuries—have been pushed to the coast by European colonial settlers taking up residence further inland (Ellis 4). These Europeans created cotton plantations on the land, highlighting the being-next-to of the Indigenous and African American experience of the colonization of Louisiana: the same land taken from the Indigenous people was then cultivated by enslaved African Americans. In addition to their displacement, tribes such as the Chitimacha have had to resist their people being sold into slavery by the French settlers of Louisiana since the 1700s (Ellis 76). Enduring through displacement and slave raiders, tribes such as the Houma, bands of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw, the Point-au-Chien, and their descendants have taken refuge among the coastal provisions of fish, shellfish, and alligators as farming is no longer possible due to encroachment of saltwater (Ellis 1). Despite this adaptation, their coastal livelihood is threatened with each inch of sea level rise and every storm that encounters the coast (Huetteman). In fact, Isle de Jean Charles has lost about 98% of its land mass due to coastal erosion, reducing its acreage from 22,000 to 320 since 1955, according to journalists Faheid and

Livingstone. They also report (as of 2021) that scientists estimate Isle de Jean Charles will completely disappear within 50 years (Faheid and Livingstone).

Indeed, the plantationization of the region started in the 1700s extends into the present, over and against the wisdom of the Indigenous people cultivating the region, driving a devastating loss of land mass. According to Faheid and Livingstone, "Landmass washed into the sea after oil and gas companies cut canals and built pipelines that destroyed freshwater wetlands. Levees and dams constructed on the Mississippi River obstructed the natural flow of water and sediment needed to build wetlands that protect coastal areas from storm surges and erosion" ("To Flee"). Elizabeth Rush, a journalist reporting on the erosion of Isle de Jean Charles, points out the ways the building of canals, pipelines, levees, and dams go against Indigenous wisdom of the local tribes: "Pre-Columbian Native American societies understood that a healthy river goes through cycles of flood and drought, and they shaped their civilizations around the Mississippi's ebb and flow. Their villages were sited not on the banks but nearby, and most weren't permanent settlements but camps that could be relocated if the waters rose" (48). The Indigenous wisdom of the Houma, bands of Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw, the Point-au-Chien, and their descendants has been rejected in favor of the European plantationization endeavor to alter nature for maximum control and profit, to the detriment of not only the Indigenous coastal communities in the region, but everyone who calls the Gulf home and must endure stronger storm surges as a result of industrial intervention into the landscape. In the long term, these tribes routinely wonder how long they can sustain their refuge on

coastlines that are quite literally disappearing. But in the short term, when storms like Hurricane Katrina make landfall in this region, these Indigenous people are among the most vulnerable, not unlike the poor, Black residents of these regions: unable to leave or secure meaningful evacuation, they must endure the storm with little resources and virtually no help from government institutions.

Hurricane Katrina invaded this timeline of the Gulf's environmental history on August 29th, 2005, centuries after the Indigenous people of this region have inhabited their land and the tenth day of the story of *Salvage the Bones*. And hurricane Katrina was not your average hurricane. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Katrina was "one of the most powerful Atlantic storms on record, with winds in excess of 170 miles" ("Hurricane Katrina"). In fact, professor of civil engineering Brian Wolshon points out that "The hurricane season of 2005 will go down in the record books. It included 14 hurricanes (a new record), three of which were among the most powerful and costly in the 154-year history of record keeping in the Atlantic Basin" ("Evacuation Planning"). Such an increase of extreme weather events is widely considered characteristic of the Anthropocene's changing climate (Mancuso 154). Put a different way, as Nancy Tuana points out, there is a speculated cause and effect between Anthropocene causes of climate change and an increase in weather events such as Hurricane Katrina. Tuana suggests that "Katrina came into being because of a concatenation of phenomena—low pressure areas, warm ocean waters, and perhaps swirling in that classic cyclone pattern are the phenomena of deforestation and industrialization" (192). Tuana more directly ties Katrina's coalescence to the

assemblage of human-made influences contributing to climate change: “Katrina swirled into a Category Five hurricane thanks to surface waters in the Gulf of Mexico that were two degrees warmer than normal for the time of year” (193). In this way, *Salvage the Bones* envisions one family’s response to a specific weather event—hurricane Katrina—but such weather events are characteristic of the changing conditions of the Anthropocene and the European-American plantationization of the region.

Media coverage would have one believe that Katrina only affected New Orleans, but as Jim Coby points out, “While national news media inundated viewers with images of the devastation of the urban New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, very often these coverages dedicated significantly less, or indeed, no coverage to the myriad rural coastal communities equally devastated” (83). Such contextual factors are what drove Jesmyn Ward to write *Salvage the Bones*. In an interview, when asked about her motivation behind the work, Ward stated that—in addition to living through the storm herself—“[She] wrote about the storm because [she] was dissatisfied with the way it had receded from the public consciousness” (263). What’s more, Ward “was also angry at the people who blamed survivors for staying and for choosing to return to the Mississippi Gulf Coast after the storm” (263). In other words, Ward wanted readers to consider the contextual factors incapsulated in the decision people made to stay and subsequently salvage their homes and communities in the face and aftermath of Katrina. The survivors who chose to stay and salvage included African American families like Ward’s as well as the aforementioned

Indigenous tribes who call the coast home. In an interview about the effects of climate change on her coastal community, Theresa Dardar (Pointe-au-Chien) laments, “My poor people. They have nothing left. They’re salvaging a few things” (Cleaver). While fictional, the Batiste family of *Salvage the Bones* represents those families that did not evacuate their region in the face of Katrina. Beyond the fictional Batiste family, there are real and vulnerable Black and Indigenous people still living in these regions despite the continued threat of stronger and stronger hurricanes. Hurricane Katrina raised the question: why don’t people evacuate? Further, if people cannot or will not evacuate, how do societies create more just ways of weathering such events in the future?

Synopsis

The novel opens with the family dog, China, giving birth out in a shed on the Batiste family property known as “the Pit,” located in the fictional town of Bois Sauvage. The story follows Esch and her brothers Skeetah, Randall, and Junior, as well as their widower father, Daddy, in the ten days leading up to Hurricane Katrina. While Daddy frantically tries to prepare for a heavy storm, urging his children to help him collect water and board up windows with salvaged plywood, the siblings are often wrapped up in the things of adolescence—basketball games, hangouts in the woods, friend group rivalries, and China. China and her puppies drive many key plot points. While the siblings, and the novel, are especially enraptured with China, the novel also stories the surrounding region and its wild woods filled with oaks and pines as well as

other plant-characters such as mimosa trees. The family is also clearly wrapped up in an attempt to provide for themselves in the face of extreme poverty. In the midst of this family's daily and somewhat mundane activities, hurricane Katrina looms. When the hurricane hits, the family is as ready as they can be to ride it out at their home; they never considered leaving. Thanks to the help of a fortuitously positioned oak and the teachings of the pines and mimosas, the Batiste family remains together through the swell—all except China, who is carried away but presumed alive by the siblings. After the storm, the Batiste family relies on friends and neighbors for refuge and food and medicine, but Skeetah cannot help but look for China. The novel ends with the siblings sitting together at their home expectantly awaiting China's return. Despite their decision to stay through the storm, the Batiste family survives and salvages hope from the devastation—as they have always done.

Argument

While this story begins and ends with China, this chapter asks us to consider the plants that populate and narrate this tale. I posit that the location of Bois Sauvage (meaning wild/savage wood) both materially and discursively stories the range of tree agency at play in the novel. While the novel is populated with trees that have been converted into lumber, by drawing on discussions of subsistence as ecologically beneficial, I argue that the Batiste family uses this salvaged wood to create their own form of symbiotic refuge in the Pit. In contrast to the myriad references to plywood, the novel is also storied by the surrounding woods of oaks and pines by facilitating

important plot points, as well as the singular oak that aids the family in surviving the hurricane. While it is tempting to read the novel's woods and trees as mere settings or landscapes—especially in highlighting their inherent rootedness—I argue that the novel's attention to the trees after the hurricane challenges this easy assumption. The trees of Bois Sauvage *are* Bois Sauvage, and when these trees are maimed by the storm—whether they lost leaves or limbs or are reduced to stumps or uprooted entirely—we see that they are victims of this weather event just as the humans and their wooden dwellings are. Ultimately, Bois Sauvage is refuge for the Batiste family, refuge made primarily of wood and in the woods, but this refuge is not permanent. In this way, *Salvage the Bones* invites us to consider how Anthropocene dwellers can respond to refuge unmade. This chapter contends that learning from plants in the Anthropocene invites us to learn how plants stay and salvage in the face of unmade refuge.

In foregrounding the agency of the novel's plants, my reading suggests that this novel depicts both the potentialities and limits of plant staying strategies in the face of extreme events. While the bolting of *Parable of the Sower's* Lauren Olamina is indeed a plant seeding strategy, *Salvage the Bones* reveals that bolting is simply one plant-adaptation on a spectrum of many, including staying in place and using what is available to adapt to the immediate environment. Through discussions of plants' evolutionary characteristic of rootedness and staying put, I show that the Batistes mimic plant being in their decision to stay through the storm, and that this decision indicates a potential strategy for weathering the storms of the Anthropocene. Since

plants cannot move, they must also salvage, as they are only able to use resources directly in their environment even if they are not ideal, another regular practice of the Batistes. However, in contrast to the plants, the Batistes are lacking resources in their staying; plants have adapted staying strategies over their long existence, but the Batiste family does not have the same coherent and enduring community as plants due to systemic injustices. In this way, this novel also reveals the limits of staying, especially as a long-term survival adaptation for humans: the Batistes may have made it through Katrina, but would they make it through Gustav, Ike, Ida? Without systemic change, the Batistes—and the real Black and Indigenous residents of the Gulf coast—are continually vulnerable to Anthropocene weather events. While bolting has limits due to relying on a sort of impulsivity, and staying has limits due to its reliance on strong community structure, this chapter posits managed retreat as a potential climate adaptation that allows people to move to and stay in better conditions while still respecting their cultural values and needs.

In its discussion of managed retreat, especially in the bioregion of the Gulf coast, *Salvage the Bones* occupies a nexus of Afro-Indigenous history that stretches from at least the 1700s to the present. By considering the ways in which Gulf coast Black and Indigenous people have both stayed and salvaged their own unmade refuges in community this chapter suggests that the Batiste family is not only embracing plant-wisdom, but also Indigenous wisdom. While Anthropocene dwellers can learn more just ways of living together from plants and Black and Indigenous people, staying and salvaging as well as managed retreat are not neutral decisions but often a last resort in

unfavorable or dangerous conditions that result from the parallel histories of colonialism and oppression experienced by these being-next-to ethnic groups. Thus, my reading of *Salvage the Bones* sits at the nexus of Afro-Indigenous theory that considers both the convergences and divergences of the experiences of Black and Indigenous people in American history, especially in the face of changing environmental conditions. By considering managed retreat as a viable response to unmade refuge, this chapter pushes beyond the short-term narrative of *Salvage the Bones* to consider ways to justly and systemically support vulnerable Black and Indigenous people in the Gulf region.

In order to develop this argument, I will first illustrate how plant-being is inherently characterized by plant-staying and plant-salvaging. To show that we can learn staying and salvaging from plants, I will unpack a discussion of prominent environmental humanists who consider staying and salvaging—broadly construed—as viable responses to changing Anthropocene conditions. Then, after summarizing the current ecocriticism on *Salvage the Bones*, I will offer my readings of the novel's staying plants and a concurrent reading of the Batiste family's decision to stay through Katrina. I will show how the Batistes successfully salvage both before and after the hurricane hits, particularly how they salvage in ways that plants do, such as decentralized community reliance. Finally, I complicate this notion of staying and salvaging with the real history of the Indigenous people of the Gulf region, offering managed retreat as a response that is inflected with the notion of staying but allows people to retreat to safer regions. My reading highlights the ways in which plants story

the novel at large as well as the text's specific narration of staying and salvaging in the face of changing conditions and unmade refuge. Ultimately, the plants of Bois Sauvage teach the Batistes to stay and salvage in community and with hope, and yet changing environmental conditions urge us to go beyond the 10 days of *Salvage the Bones* to creating systems of support for these groups in the Gulf region for centuries of hurricane seasons to come.

5.2 Seeds of Criticism: From Animal Studies to Plant Studies

When Jesmyn Ward first published *Salvage the Bones* in 2011, the cover featured an illustration of the text's main canine character, China. But when it was republished in 2012, the new cover featured an illustration of the text's main tree character, the oak between the Batiste house and Mother Lizabeth's house. While only a year apart, these evolving cover depictions bring to mind a critical shift occurring in the environmental humanities while locating *Salvage the Bones* within that critical shift, the shift known as the Vegetal Turn.

Despite its recency, *Salvage the Bones* is a commonly considered text in the field of animal studies, with little attention directed towards the text's plants.[23] Christopher Lloyd's work on *Salvage the Bones* employs animal studies readings to undergird an argument about the disposability of Black human bodies. Joshua Bennett,

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23 For example, the recent publication *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals in Literature* (2021) features a chapter on *Salvage the Bones.*

on the other hand, grants much more material agency to the text's main animal character, China, in his animal studies reading. Bennett suggests that China functions as the "head of the human household" which challenges human notions of kinship (143). In this way, my reading builds on Bennett's in showing how plants, like animals, can teach alternative-to-the-human ways of being in community. In addition to the focus on China, extant ecocritical scholarship on *Salvage the Bones* is lacking in in-depth analysis of the novel's plants. Scholars like Cameron Williams Crawford and Joanna Wilson-Scott consider the text's plants cursorily while exploring wider themes related to class and environment, respectively. In this way, even with solid ecocritical analyses on this text, there remains a lacuna in the scholarship in regards to reading plants as storied matter.

Additionally, while there is much work done on the text's overarching relationship with the concepts of "salvaging" and "staying" no analyses tie these concepts to plant being. For example, Alvin Henry sees the novel's "salvaging" as only pertaining to the salvaging of memory as opposed to having a material inflection. In contrast, those who consider the materiality of salvaging do so by attending to issues of class pervading this text, such as Christopher Clark, Brian Railsback, and Arin Keeble, who offer insightful readings connecting the Batistes' intersectional identities of Black and poor with the overarching politics of deciding not to evacuate, i.e. stay. Similarly, Abigail Manzella and Jane Elliot discuss in depth the historical context of non-evacuation and analyze the aspects of race, gender, and class at play in the Batiste family's staying. These analytical discussions of non-evacuation offer a

foundation for thinking about what it means to salvage when refuge is unmade. But I build on these arguments by considering intelligent plant-being as a teacher in the midst of these circumstances. While it's clear that the Batiste family's decision to stay in the face of Katrina is one made amidst a nexus of uncontrollable factors, my reading of staying as plant-being invites us to see the Batistes' decision as an agentic choice that mimics plant-being in a generative way. Ultimately, in championing a plant studies reading of this text, while also connecting the overarching textual theme of "salvaging" to plant-being, this chapter participates in the larger discussion of the Vegetal Turn, inviting consideration of the generative possibilities when we look to plants as teachers, possibilities such as more sustainable use of resources and more just human community through both staying and salvaging.

5.3 "Before a Hurricane, the Animals That Can, Leave": Plant Being is Plant Staying is Plant Salvaging

Throughout this project, I have been arguing that plants are inherently sentient, intelligent, and active beings. I have shown that pear blossoms call to humans and illustrate interdependence in relationships in *Their Eyes Were Watching God;* I have shown that trees communicate and share resources underground through fungal root networks, teaching humans about community in *Song of Solomon*; I have shown that plants bolt (go to seed) as a survival strategy to protect and propagate future generations in *Parable of the Sower*. One of the reasons why it can be difficult to categorize these abilities as "intelligence" or "sentience" in plants is because such

capacities exist in the context of their rootedness: blossoms call to pollinators with color and scent because they cannot go to the pollinators themselves; fungal root networks are ways of communicating without moving from rootedness; bolting is a plant's effort to overcome its stationary position in a troubled environment. While plants are indeed all these things—sentient, active, intelligent, intentional—their versions of these traits evolved out of their generally stationary nature, their "staying." If this staying begets intelligent ways of interacting with the environment, humans may have something to learn from plant staying as another plant-adaptation strategy in the face of changing conditions.

Plants' adaptations that revolve around their stationary nature are often discussed as opposite to animal adaptations to move, but this casting fails to acknowledge that staying and moving are simply adaptations on a spectrum of adaptations that all creatures can exhibit to some degree. Plant biologist Stefano Mancuso explains the phenomenon of plant- "immobility" from an evolutionary perspective: "Between four hundred million and one billion years ago, unlike animals, which had to move around to find their food, plants took an evolutionarily opposite direction: they remained in place" (x). In fact, because of plants' immobility, "Many of the survival solutions developed by plants are the exact opposite of those developed by the animal world" and Mancuso gives the binary examples of "animals are fast, plants are slow; animals consume, plants produce; animals make CO2, plants use CO2" (x-xi). While Mancuso's language depends on a strong binary between plant and animal, I do not wish to oversimplify such differences in animal and plant

evolutionary adaptation; as we will see in *Salvage* later, animals sometimes choose not to move in the face of danger. The movement of animals as an adaptation is a general observation, not their only option at all times, and vice versa: the staying of plants is a general observation, as we see in their ability to "bolt" under certain circumstances, which depends on movement, along with their abilities to extend their roots underground and to distribute seeds and pollen.

Ultimately, my point is that the adaptation to stay—an adaptation made by all kinds of creatures, from plants to animals to humans—is a viable response to vulnerability rendered by changing external conditions. Additionally, staying is a response humans can observe in and learn from plants specifically, while also improving it for human communities in terms of equity, safety, resilience, and survival. In other words, the decision to "stay" or "go" is not a concrete binary, just as the animal-plant binary rests on shaky ground. For example, Lauren Olamina's family had chosen to stay in Robledo for a long time, providing for themselves and their neighbors. While Lauren decided to bolt—which is indeed a plant behavior—she also decided to stay at Acorn. Similarly, the Batistes choose to stay on their property but move from their house to the other house when the flood waters rise. In other words, Lauren's going included a good bit of staying, and the Batistes' staying included some decisions to go as well. And, the Batistes may have to relocate entirely if the next hurricane renders the Pit uninhabitable. While humans can indeed learn how to adapt to changing conditions through staying, retreating from danger is also an appropriate response when possible. Indeed, those who could leave the regions of Katrina's worst

damage may have made the right choice for themselves given the circumstances. Leaving may be the preferred option over staying, but staying is often overlooked in favor of the urge to move. In this way, in the face of changing climactic conditions, staying and going are actions on a spectrum of possible responses.

That being said, plant staying is indeed part of plants' nature, and it has caused them to develop survival strategies contingent on being stationary, strategies that are quite sophisticated regarding the use and conservation of resources. For example, "[plants] are able to perceive their surroundings with a greater sensitivity than animals do" because their ability to sense danger in their surroundings is more life-or-death when they cannot remove themselves from danger (Mancuso xi). Plants' sophisticated ability to ascertain threats in their environment allows them to "actively compete for the limited resource in the soil and atmosphere; […] evaluate their circumstances with precision; […] perform sophisticated cost-benefit analyses; and, finally, […] define and then take appropriate adaptive actions in response to environmental stimuli," including unfavorable ecological conditions (Mancuso xi). Through their systems of sensation, Mancuso explains that plants rely exclusively on the sun for energy and effectively adapt to resist predators and minimize their vulnerability resulting from rootedness (x). Plants also "detect and monitor concurrently and continuously at least fifteen different chemical and physical parameters in the soil" so as to obtain nourishment (Mancuso xii). Plants do many of these activities through what Mancuso calls "passive movement" which salvages energy from the external environment rather than using precious internal resources (Mancuso 25). As an example of this energy

conservation, Mancuso explains that "many plant organisms exploit the difference in humidity between day and night to perform quite complicated actions" rather than using all of their own energy to complete an action during less ideal conditions (25). In getting resources from the soil, atmosphere, and sun—rather than travelling for food and sustenance or using all of their own energy—plants are effectively and efficiently using what is available to them in the environment of their immediate vicinity, even if it is not completely ideal, they find ways to adapt to the surrounding conditions and offerings. In this way, plant-being is plant-staying is plant-salvaging.

And plants are good at this staying and salvaging adaptation, highlighting their wisdom in these decisions. The evolutionary decision to stay put has worked out well for plants, as Mancuso explains, "today there is no environment on our planet that is not colonized by plants, and their share of the total number of living beings is prodigious [...] That is, at least 80 percent of the weight of all that lives on Earth consists of plants" (72). In other words, while it may be a challenge for humans to understand plant ways of being borne of immobility, ultimately, we would do well to ascertain the value of staying put as a survival strategy, since it has been so successful for plants.

Moreover, plant staying is dependent on plants' decentralized and communal nature. Mancuso explains that, unlike animals, plant-being is not contingent on a central nervous system that governs the rest of the body through commands from the brain (xi). The central control model of animals makes us vulnerable to predation because "organs are points of weakness," as Mancuso explains, "If a plant had a brain,

two lungs, a live, two kidneys, and so on, it would be destined to succumb to predators—even tiny ones—because an attack on any one of its vital organs would impair the plant's functions" (72). But, because animals can more easily move away from danger, this central nervous system model works for them—except for when they can't move. In this way, plants' adaptation to immobility renders them, at times, more resilient than animals in instances when animals cannot adapt by moving. Since plants cannot easily move from danger, they instead exhibit a "modular, diffused construction that is the epitome of modernity: a cooperative, shared structure without any command centers" (Mancuso xi). What does this "modular, diffused construction" mean for plant-being? It means "plants breathe with their whole body, see with their whole body, feel with their whole body, and evaluate with their whole body" effectively "Spreading each function over the entire organism" (Mancuso 73). This modular, diffused construction renders plants able to survive predation even to the point that "they can even withstand removal of much of their body without losing functionality" (Mancuso 73). Given that the centralized human institutions did little to mitigate the disaster of Katrina, leaving residents to fend completely for themselves, we have something to learn from plants about the value of decentralized systems of communal care, lessons such as those from permaculture that teach the wisdom of interdependence in changing environmental conditions.

An example from Wohlleben reminds us of plants' prioritizing of communal care. As discussed previously, trees have developed extensive communication networks with their roots and pheromones to share resources or to alert other trees to

danger. Since trees cannot move to gather food like animals do, they share nutrients among root networks when necessary. Wohlleben details a striking moment when he realized a felled tree stump was still being fed by neighboring trees, likely for hundreds of years. Since he knew that "living cells must have food in the form of sugar," he knew the tree was being nourished, but "without leaves—and therefore photosynthesis," which seemed impossible (Wohlleben 2). Given that "scientists investigating similar situations have discovered that assistance may either be delivered remotely by fungal networks at the root tips—which facilitate nutrient exchange between trees—or the roots themselves may be interconnected," Wohlleben deduced that "the surrounding beeches were pumping sugar to the stump to keep it alive" (2). These sugar-sharing trees bring to mind the lack of community care and mutual support that left many families like the Batistes vulnerable in the face of Katrina.

In addition to sharing nutrients, trees also use intelligent communication strategies to protect one another from danger, communication strategies such as pheromones and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and danger such as herbivores that would eat the plants. Robert A. Raguso and André Kessler explain that "Volatile mediation of antagonistic plant– herbivore interactions depends on the association of VOC emissions with traits that impact herbivore performance (resistance) and, in consequence, plant performance (defense)" (28). For example, Wohlleben details a study where scientists tracked giraffes as they grazed on acacia trees in the African savannah. They found that upon being bitten into, the acacias diverted toxic substances to their leaves to deter the giraffes. One might assume that the giraffes

would simply move on to the next tree, since those leaves hadn't been poisoned. On the contrary, the scientists noticed that the giraffes only started grazing again *hundreds of yards* later, bypassing a number of other trees on the way. The scientists determined that the acacia trees' pheromones not only communicated with the giraffes (signaling that the trees' leaves were "toxic"), but also with the other surrounding trees, "signal[ing] to neighboring trees of the same species that a crisis was at hand" which allowed the other acacias to also divert "toxins into their leaves to prepare themselves," causing the giraffes to move on from them (Wohlleben 7). In summary, according to Raguso Kessler, "VOCs emitted by plants drive antagonistic interactions with herbivores and pathogens, mutualistic interactions with pollinators, mycorrhizal fungi, and rhizobia, and often play crucial roles when an organism deceives or exploits another in the scramble for costly resources" (27). Ultimately, trees can communicate with one another and share resources through fungal root networks as well as use VOCs and pheromones to defend themselves against predators, all as functions of surviving their immobility.

Staying—as plants do, in decentralized community—is another way humans could emulate plant-being for collective survival. Mancuso sees the value in mimicking plant-staying, suggesting that plants offer a model worth emulating since their systems are "much more durable and innovative than that of animals," given that centralized systems are more vulnerable to sudden changes (xi). Moreover, because animals can move and escape, they "do not solve problems, they simply avoid them more efficiently," which would be an apt way of describing how humans and human

institutions have responded to changing environmental conditions thus far (Mancuso 75). Plants, on the other hand, in their staying, have had to prioritize finding "an effective solution to the problem, something that will allow [plants] to survive despite the heat, the cold, or the appearance of predators" (Mancuso 75). To this end, "a decentralized, diffused structure is far preferable. [...] this allows for more innovative responses and, being literally rooted, enables a much more refined understanding of the environment" (76). Mancuso expounds, suggesting that plants' refined understanding of their environment renders them "able to flawlessly resist repeated catastrophic events without losing functionality and adapt very quickly to huge environmental changes" (Mancuso (xi-xii). Wouldn't it be wonderful if, as we continue to negotiate the conditions of the Anthropocene, humans could feel the potential ability to "flawlessly resist repeated catastrophic events without losing functionality and adapt very quickly to huge environmental changes"? A shift toward this end requires a cultural commitment to community care in the face of events like Katrina. Such a commitment would result in the care of more humans and more nonhumans toward a future of regeneration, but it requires us to learn a thing or two from plants about staying, weathering, and salvaging in communal collaboration through changing environmental conditions, despite the natural human impulse to escape the very Anthropocene humans created.

But escape is not always possible, especially in vulnerable communities like the Batistes of Bois Sauvage. While institutions can improve hurricane response to better support these communities in either their staying or going, staying is just one

possibility on a spectrum of survival adaptations and, it is an adaptation plants know and execute well, suggesting we can learn from their wisdom in the face of changing environmental conditions. In cases where staying is the best option, environmental humanists can look to plants as teachers of this ancient practice to help us stay more skillfully through unmade refuge and make the option to stay one that is better supported through community networks.

5.4 "Maybe the Small Don't Run": Responding to Unmade Refuge by Staying, Weathering, and Salvaging

Salvage the Bones offers a lens into one instance of catastrophic destruction of refuge due to an event enhanced by the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene itself is a cosmic undoing of the refuges built by humans and nonhumans over the past millennia, resulting in disconcerting changes in environmental conditions. As one viable response to the changing environmental conditions of the Anthropocene, environmental humanists have considered "staying." The word stay can function as both a noun and a verb. The word's root is "*stā-, Proto-Indo-European root meaning 'to stand, set down, make or be firm,' with derivatives meaning 'place or thing that is standing'" ("stay"). The verb form of the word stay is easily observed in plant-being, given its clear meaning "to remain in place" ("stay, v.1."). Given that the word means to both remain in place and to be firm in that remaining, we can see staying as an act of strength as opposed to a vulnerability, which aligns with Mancuso's estimations of plant-staying as generating strong survival strategies on the part of plants. While we

can easily see how plants enact the verb form of the word stay, the noun form of stay reveals the way in which plant bodies have aided in the storying the meaning of the word: originally used to describe an object that "propped" or "supported" another, stay's root word in ~1500s French refers to a "*piece of wood* used as a support" or in the proto-Germanic, "a stick" ("stay," emphasis mine). Similarly, "stay" as a noun also referred to a stay used on a ship, that is, a "strong rope which supports a ship's mast," and these ropes were traditionally constructed from plant fibers such as hemp, according to the Historic Naval Ships Association ("stay"). Ultimately, staying means to remain firmly in place, and it is a word both enacted by plants as a verb and storied by plants as a noun.

Prominent environmental humanist Donna Haraway has invoked the concept of staying in her recent work *Staying with the Trouble*. Haraway's concept of staying with the trouble is a response to a particular way in which the environmental humanities have tended to envision the future of the planet: "In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future" (1). Haraway criticizes the impulse to center safety or the ideal of the status quo in an effort to respond to the Anthropocene, rejecting this posture as hopeless, "that the game is over, it's too late, there's no sense trying to make anything any better, or at least no sense having any active trust in each other in working and playing for a resurgent world"

(3). Haraway finds it curious, even oxymoronic that people “actually working and playing for multispecies flourishing with tenacious energy and skill” would do so “while expressing an explicit ‘game over’ attitude that can and does discourage others” (3). Even so, for Haraway, hope is not necessarily any more productive than cynicism, and she instead offers the imperative to “make kin,” which aligns well with my project’s call to learn from plants (103).

Other environmental humanists echo Haraway’s concerns with such rhetoric. For example, Kimmerer specifically criticizes fear-based ways of thinking about current and changing environmental conditions. Kimmerer bemoans that “we are deluged by information regarding our destruction of the world and hear almost nothing about how to nurture it” (327). Kimmerer acknowledges that there is, indeed, much to fear, but in the face of such fearsome futures, Kimmerer asks, “What could such a vision create other than woe and tears?” (327). Kimmerer contends that such a vision also results in an impotent environmentalism characterized by “dire predictions and powerless feelings” (327). Such powerlessness leads to inaction when action is precisely what is needed: “Our natural inclination to do right by the world is stifled, breeding despair when it should be inspiring action” and “despair is paralysis. It robs us of agency” (327-328). In other words, Kimmerer suggests that fear-based rhetoric produces frozen responses that do little to actually help shift the conditions to ecological balance, and it renders humans feeling powerless to effect any legitimate change. Drawing inspiration from those like Kimmerer and psychologist Rick Hanson, Chara Armon agrees that fear and despair harm rather than help our ability to respond

to changing conditions. In “Red Brain, Green Brain,” Armon draws on Hanson’s terms “red brain” and “green brain” from his book *Hardwiring Happiness*, exploring how eco-anxiety, while understandable, is not ultimately aiding us in enacting viable and generative responses to changing conditions. Armon points out that “Eco-anxiety holds us in fear and prevents healing action.” In contrast to the freeze-response of eco-anxiety, Armon has observed that humans “accomplish our greatest feats from a foundation of inspiration, not fear.” Armon offers the example of Wangari Maathai, who founded the Green Belt Movement, which effectively “reforested [her] country while providing employment to rural women.” Moreover, Maathai exhibits the generative confluence of staying and hoping together: Maathai invested in her community—both the humans and nonhumans—by planting trees and refoliating her region, illustrating the value plants’ rootedness brings to collective refoliation efforts. Armon offers an alternative to eco-anxiety that she calls “eco-inspiration,” partially based on the neuroscience of happiness, inspiration, and the “green brain” in the work of Rick Hanson: “‘Green brain’ is not only the brain state that leads to happiness, fulfillment, and thriving for an individual—it’s also the state of calm, creative response to the world that can enable us to look at the environmental devastation we’re currently experiencing and firmly decide to change it.” Armon’s use of the word “firm” resonates with the etymology of the word staying above—“to stand firm.” Ultimately, in contrast to the “game over” and hopeless attitude Haraway, Kimmerer, Armon, and others critique, staying is characterized by embracing and adapting to change with a sense of hope in response to the changing environmental conditions of

the Anthropocene. In this way, staying is ultimately an act of hope. And yet, this hope must be bolstered so that it is not a desperate or naïve but a resourced hope, one that activates Rick Hanson's "green brain" or the creative, problem-solving brain, as opposed to the "red brain" of panic and desperation.

While scholars have addressed the overall question of hope, my project invites consideration of how plants themselves can teach us to stand firm in the face of changing conditions. Do plants with all their roots in one place say "game over" when the temperature shifts too hot? Indeed, as we see with plants in responding innovatively and wisely to changing conditions, adaptation requires an inherent present-ness, a staying with the current conditions and understanding them rather than only ever occupying past or future visions. As Haraway writes, "staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (1). This creative adaptation we see in plants links to Hanson's "green brain," which functions at a level that is solutions-oriented. Staying with a sense of hope and creativity, as plants do, is a more viable and generative response to changing environmental conditions than cynicism.

But the hope and creativity I describe here must also be realistic about the challenging nature of the changing conditions, which include weather conditions such as hurricanes. Another angle on staying in the environmental humanities is one offered by Astrida Neimanis and Jennifer Mae Hamilton: weathering. According to Neimanis

and Hamilton, weathering "names a practice or a tactic: to weather means to pay attention to how bodies and places respond to weather-worlds which they are also making" (81). Weathering highlights that, while weather is constantly shifting and moving, it affects bodies differently, especially based on bodily vulnerabilities that may be related to the ability to stay or leave amidst the weather. The tactic Niemanis and Hamilton propose is two-fold: their version of weathering requires first paying attention and then responding, which echoes both Haraway's call to be present and mimics the ways plants respond to changing conditions while staying. Since weather-worlds are in constant formation, weathering is not limited to responding to a particular weather event in a particular way (i.e. staying or going); instead, "to weather responsively means to consider how we might weather differently—better—and act in ways that can move towards such change" (Niemanis and Hamilton 81). While weathering requires a realistic assessment of the challenges we face, it also provides a way of thinking about how to continually weather better rather than succumbing to a fatalistic mentality. Moreover, weathering asks us to consider how different bodies weather differently—as we see in Katrina and other hurricanes of its caliber, some communities fare better than others. This reality of weathering invites larger-scale solutions that systemically help human community weather better together, whether by staying in place or making calculated moves to safety.

Just as weathering can be a form of staying, salvaging is also an act employed in the context of staying. The etymology of salvaging reveals a root concept of "saving," which we see in the etymological relationship between salvage and

salvation. In fact, the word salvage originally (c. 1600s) referred to a "payment for saving a ship from wreck or capture" which then evolved into the meaning "the saving of property from danger" or in the mid 1800s to the more contemporary understanding of salvage as "recycling of waste material" as used beginning in World War I ("salvage"). In the contemporary understanding of the word, salvaging is an act employed in the absence of power to acquire from elsewhere. The image of a salvage yard comes to mind: a lifeless pile of metal scrap and car parts that appears useless to those who may easily stop by a commercial auto mechanic to have their car serviced. Salvagers use what is already present, perhaps a part from a vehicle that remains in good working order while the vehicle itself functions as a car part graveyard. In this way, salvaging is associated with poverty—those who must salvage do so because they cannot consume new products at the cost determined by the market. I use the example of car parts, but many people experiencing poverty salvage all manner of materials in an effort to survive: wood, metal, household wares, and fabric being a few examples. An example from *Salvage the Bones* is when Skeetah rips up linoleum floor from Mother Lizabeth's house to provide flooring in China's shed-turned-maternity ward (59). Skeetah's lack of resources to move and purchase new flooring catalyzes his use of what is already available to him. Moreover, Esch reveres Skeetah's ability to salvage when she says "[his planning] is what makes him so good with dogs, with China, I think, the way he can take rotten boards and make them a kennel, make a squirrel a barbecue, make ripped tile a floor" (75). Here we see Esch note the creativity and innovation that salvaging requires. Salvaging, as we see with plant

immobility leading to resource conservation in the previous section, is often a downstream effect of staying, whether that staying is a choice or a requirement imposed by poverty.

While I do not intend to glorify the poverty that catalyzes many acts of salvaging, it's important to note that salvaging can be an act that better serves the nonhuman environment by preventing consumption of new products and thereby interrupting the cycle of industrial extraction and by preventing non-biodegradable waste from going to landfill. For example, salvaging an old house and remodeling it is generally more environmentally friendly than tearing it down and building a new one. This is because using as much as possible from the old house prevents builders from having to acquire all new products such as lumber, which would contribute more to tree plantations or deforestation. Salvaging also occurs when parts of a building slated for demolition are transferred for use in other buildings. In addition to interrupting the cycle of extractive production, salvaging also interrupts the usual processes of waste disposal, as denoted but its etymological history ("recycling of waste material"). Salvaging thus brings value to marginalized objects considered to have no value based on their designation as waste.

In sum, as environmental humanists seek to respond to the Anthropocene conditions, the reigning rhetoric of escape, waste, and cynicism leads to paralysis and continued defoliation. In contrast, *Salvage the Bones* offers a generative coalescence of concepts of staying, salvaging, and hoping as seen in plant-wisdom. And this is reflected in Ward's own words about the title of the book. When asked how she came

up with the title, she reports that the main concepts at play are hopeful resilience through salvaging and communal survival:

> The word salvage is phonetically close to savage. At home, among the young, there is honor in that term. It says that come hell or high water, Katrina or oil spill, hunger or heat, you are strong, you are fierce, and you possess hope. When you stand on a beach after a hurricane, and the asphalt ripped from the earth, gas stations and homes and grocery stores disappeared, oak trees uprooted, without any of the comforts of civilization—no electricity, no running water, no government safety net—and all you have are your hands, your feet, your head, and your resolve to fight, you do the only thing you can: survive. (Ward 264)

In Ward's own words, *Salvage the Bones* is about how to respond to unmade refuge. The institutions in which humans have found refuge—"grocery stores," "electricity," "running water," "government safety net[s]"—are destabilizing as the Anthropocene marches on. As such institutions destabilize and refuge is unmade, humans will best survive with resilience and strength, as seen in the Batiste family in *Salvage the Bones*.

5.5 "Left to Seed Another Year": Staying Plants in Bois Sauvage

Despite the abounding animal studies readings of this text, if you look carefully, *Salvage the Bones* mentions trees 164 times and makes mention of a

plethora of plant species: saw palmetto, switchgrass, swamp myrtle, Spanish moss, wisteria, kudzu, marsh grass, azalea, crape myrtle, bougainvillea, and magnolias. Many of these plants are only mentioned briefly and serve to materially convey the regional context of this story. Even so, according to Mancuso, all these plants possess the wisdom of staying as all plants are inherently immobile in some way. For example, switchgrass tolerates sandy coastal soils, an adaptation to the Gulf coast that gives it staying power in the region. Similarly, according to Gary Gragg, swamp myrtle "can thrive in myriad conditions that would lay waste to most trees in the first season." Even the unrooted Spanish moss is adapted to the moist and humid climate of Bois Sauvage (Larson et al). In this way, as the plants that make up the Gulf coast of Mississippi, they all exhibit adaptation to the conditions in a way that parallels the Batiste family's generational adaptation to the Pit. However, some of the plants that are mentioned the most, such as pine, oaks, and mimosas, have evolved particularly profound adaptations to their immobility. In other words, the plant beings that most constitute Bois Sauvage and story *Salvage* are those that teach the wisdom of staying to the narrative's willing student, Esch. *Salvage the Bones* illuminates the species-specific wisdom of staying oaks, pines, and mimosas, as well as how Esch gleans this wisdom due to her deep connection with the woods of the Pit.

Like many of the other protagonists in this project, Esch exhibits a relationship with the nonhuman environment around her that positions her to learn from it. Coby argues that "Esch's elaborate descriptions [of the woods] evince a familiarity with Bois Sauvage's woods that signals her affinity for and regularity of being within the

woods" (89). Moreover, this familiarity is materially mediated through the intermingling of Esch and the woods, such as when she vomits in the woods (48) or when she recounts, "I sink to my knees, lean forward, and bury my face in the pine straw, breaking in the baked sap of the fallen leaves, feeling the sweat dripping" (67), or when she eats the squirrel and conceives of herself as becoming one with the squirrels of the woods: "I bite and I am eating acorns and leaping with fear to the small dark holes in the heart of old oak trees" (49). Such depictions echo Milkman's intermingling with the sweetgum forest in *Song of Solomon*. Similarly to Milkman, Esch interacts with the forest such that regular material exchanges occur between her and the woods, which ultimately function as a refuge and provider. Coby agrees: "In short, the woods exude potentiality; whether by witnessing the myriad creatures that also inhabit the landscapes or by recreationally ingesting the products of the forest, Ward's characters express intimate connections with the 'natural' spaces surrounding their homes" (89). Esch's connection with the woods is materially mediated by her senses of observation but also results in her learning from nonhumans. For example, Esch observes the ways of the forest animals such that she understands "Before a hurricane, the animals that can, leave. Birds fly north out of the storm, and everything else roams as far away from the winds and rain as possible" (45). Based on this description, Esch is attuned to a real phenomenon. Ultimately, Esch's connection to the woods of Bois Sauvage is materially mediated and positions the woods and its inhabitants as models of wisdom.

Indeed, Esch's studiousness has attuned her to, in particular, the ways of oaks, and we have several textual examples of Esch noting oaks' staying power. For example, when running through the woods with Skeetah, Esch observes "the oaks stand apart from the piney clusters: solemn, immovable" (66). Here Esch is noting the strength and stability of the oaks of the Pit's woods. But at other times, Esch ties the oaks' strength specifically to their ability to withstand hurricanes. When she is hunting the squirrel with Skeetah, she notes the oaks' role as squirrel homes: "These are their solid houses; they will withstand a storm, if she comes" (46). Later, when Esch is metaphorically using oaks to describe Shaliyah's relationship with Manny, she says "[Shaliyah] is calm and self-possessed as a housecat; it is the way that all girls who only know one boy move. Centered as if the love that boy feels for them anchors them deep as a tree's roots, holds them still as the oaks, which don't uproot in hurricane wind" (119). While Esch is using the oaks' strength as a metaphor here, in context Shaliyah is literally sitting "under [an] oak," suggesting that this oak participates in storying Esch's analysis of Shaliyah. And, Esch notes that it's oaks' rootedness—a feature of plant immobility—that allows them to withstand the high winds of hurricanes. Ultimately, the text is highlighting that Esch sees oaks as strong and stable—indeed a characteristic of real oaks—and able to stay through even the harshest conditions of hurricanes, foreshadowing the oak that will help the family survive when the hurricane actually hits.

In addition to oaks, the text's oft-mentioned pines also exhibit the wisdom of staying, particularly in the activity of some pine seeds. Pines are mentioned more than

any other plant-being in this story, evidencing Esch's attention to them and observation of their ways. As is true with all trees, pines are concerned with making sure their seeds go far from the parent plant so that the rooted parent plant and the new sapling do not have to compete for resources while staying in one place. Pines have adapted a seeding strategy in line with this desire, as explained by Mancuso: on rainy days, pinecones will be "firmly closed to prevent the seeds escaping" (26). It seems counterintuitive, but the seeds don't want to be dispersed from the cone while the conditions are moist and humid, or they may germinate too close to the parent plant (Mancuso 26-27). Thus, the pinecone will "open its woody scales in a dry environment and close them again when the humidity in the air is high" (26). In a drier environment, the seeds will have the opportunity to move farther from the parent plant before germinating (Mancuso 27). One can deduce, then, that pine trees in a hurricane will have their seed pods firmly closed. While some seeds prefer to move on the winds and waters of hurricanes, like the sawgrass in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, pines sense the moisture of hurricanes and board up the proverbial windows of their seed pods. In addition to illustrating the high intelligence of pines—such a moisture-sensing mechanism must be highly calibrated to the surrounding environment—the activity of pinecones reveals that the best strategy is to stay put until conditions change for increased chances of survival. Given Esch's attunement to the pines of Bois Sauvage, she may be fully aware of this phenomenon and learn the power of staying from the pines.

In the same way Esch learns from the oaks and pines, she gleans wisdom from the mimosa trees. While it can be easy to overlook the few mentions of the mimosa tree, considering the material-ecocritical activity of mimosa leaves further shows how the plants that constitute this text are those that have especially adapted to staying. The mimosas of Bois Sauvage appear twice in the narrative, once when Esch is describing the park towards the center of Bois Sauvage (117) and another time when the friend group is at that park fighting their dogs (169, 176). Due to their presence at the county park, the mimosas appear at times when Esch is away from the safety of the woods of the Pit, associating the mimosas with vulnerability. For instance, the second appearance of mimosas is more clearly associated with Esch's vulnerability: the dog fight that transpires is catalyzed by Skeetah's attempt to defend Esch's honor in regards to Manny's treatment of her. When they all show up for the dog fight, the subtext is that Esch's honor is on the line.[24] In other words, the mimosas' textual association with Esch's vulnerability makes sense based on what mimosas teach about responding to vulnerability: the mimosa is considered a sensitive plant, "plants that respond to certain stimuli in an immediately obvious way" (Mancuso 6-7). Mimosas are considered sensitive because their leaves, which look like ferns, "gently close[] […] when subjected to some external stimulus," even a gentle human touch (Mancuso 7). Again, because plants cannot move, they must adapt these survival mechanisms

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24 My reading here aligns with Ward's comments on the role of dogfighting in the text. Ward says, "My brother and a lot of the men in my community owned pit bulls as well: sometimes they fought them for honor, never for money" (Ward 265).

while staying in place, and such adaptations reveal the intelligence and ability of plants. Like the pinecones, the mimosa boards up its proverbial windows in the face of stimuli that it senses as threatening to its bodily survival. Esch learns from the mimosas that it is a viable survival strategy to stay put and turn inward when external conditions become threatening.

In addition to the ways agentic trees and plants materially story the Pit, Esch uses plants to discursively story her experiences or make sense of things she is witnessing. For example, when observing Skeetah's dog, China, Esch often uses floral metaphors to describe her: China is described as "stand[ing] rigid as a pine" (1), as "blooming" when she gives birth (4), and as "graceful as the spider lilies that grow out on the bayou, bending out over the water" (210). Esch also describes one of China's puppies as "appear[ing] like the heart of a bloom. It is as still as a flower's stigma" (18). Similarly, Esch also uses floral and tree metaphors when conveying memories of her mother. Like China's blooming, Esch describes the birth of her brother Junior: "Junior came out purple and blue as a hydrangea: Mama's last flower. She touched Junior just like that when Daddy held him over her: lightly with her fingertips, like she was afraid she'd knock the pollen from him, spoil the bloom" (2). In this way, Esch makes sense of motherhood by construing it in floral terms, highlighting the discursive power of plants in this story.

Importantly, the metaphorical language Esch uses to make sense of her experience often has material grounding in the plants that reside in the Pit, resulting in phytomorphism, much like the phytomorphism of earlier protagonists in this project

such as Janie Crawford and Lauren Olamina. For example, when Esch remembers foraging for eggs with Mama, she "can't remember exactly how [she] followed mama because her skin was dark as the reaching oak trees […] I could hardly see her, and she moved and it looked like the woods move, like a wind was running past the trees" (22). Oaks are among the most oft-recurring trees in the story, with 50 mentions throughout the text. Esch construes her mother as like the oak trees (rather than the other way around), as materially intermingled with the oaks and woods of the Pit, signaling the oak trees as having both material and semiotic power in the world of the text. Esch also uses plant metaphors to describe Manny in a few instances, such as when she describes his skin as the "color of fresh cut wood at the heart of a pine tree" (6). Even more than oaks, pines are the most abundant trees in the Pit, with 63 mentions. Esch also describes Manny's face as "a magnolia flower tossing in the wind" (202). Magnolias are the third most abundant tree in the story, mentioned five times throughout the text, and they are also the state tree of Mississippi, highlighting their influence in the wider region. Finally, Esch invokes the image of burning pine needles in the trash heap when she realizes she is pregnant: "I am pregnant. […] The terrible truth of what I am flares like a dry fall fire in my stomach, eating all the fallen pine needles. There is something there" (36).

While it is tempting to read these mentions of oaks, pines, and magnolias as mere literary devices, the text itself rejects such a reading given the abundant material presence of these trees in the world of the text. Esch's reference to burning pine needles especially highlights this as she previously explained the role of the pine

needles in covering the scent of burning trash—there is a direct correlation to Esch's material experience of the pine needles and her metaphorical use of the pine needles in making sense of her pregnancy. Thus, these phytomorphisms illustrate Esch's propensity to make sense of her human experience by storying it with the real plants around her. In this way, we see Esch has a relationship with the plants around her, one in which she learns from the plants and collaborates with them to make sense of her world.

The woods of *Salvage the Bones* highlight the discursive power of plants to teach humans survival strategies, but such learning requires an association with plants through phytomorphism that humans sometimes find uncomfortable; yet, Esch's intimate relationship with and reliance on the Pit's woods allows her to phytomorphize herself with relative ease. After the first occurrence of mimosa in the text, Esch continues describing the untamed vegetation around the county park: "Maintenance workers, usually county convicts in green-and-white striped jumpsuits, come out once a year and halfheartedly try to trim back the encroaching wood, move the grass set to bloom, the pine seedlings. The wild things of Bois Sauvage ignore them; we are left to seed another year" (117). Esch identifies her and her people among "the wild things," i.e. plants, given that they are "set to seed another year." In this way, Esch phytomorphizes herself, identifying with the plant survival mechanism of seeding, which is a precursor to rooting and staying. But Esch's phytomorphism also reveals the extreme precarity of the Batiste family: even if they make it through this hurricane, they might not make it through the next, especially if the larger human institutions, as

represented by the maintenance men, ignore their precarity. Despite her vulnerability, Esch is learning and preparing to take cover and take refuge in Bois Sauvage— like the oaks, pinecones, and mimosa leaves—as the conditions escalate to threaten her and her family's survival.

5.6 "Oaks […] Don't Uproot in Hurricane Wind": Staying through Katrina

While the plants that story the narrative teach the wisdom of staying, the text reminds us that this is an adaptation strategy on a spectrum that many creatures can engage. As discussed above, Esch's relationship with the woods allows her to observe and ascertain the activities of wood dwellers such as animals, which allows her to identify the real phenomenon that "Before a hurricane, the animals that can, leave. Birds fly north out of the storm, and everything else roams as far away from the winds and rain as possible" (45). Esch continues to develop her knowledge and understanding of this phenomenon as the text unfolds and she continues experiencing the woods of the Pit: "There are no chattering squirrels, no haunted rabbits, no wading turtles in the woods. I don't know where they have gone, but there are none here. When I look up into the sky, the gray of it shaking as I run, I see birds in great flocks that would darken the sun if we could see it through the thickening clouds. They are all flying away, all flying north" (206-207). These observations highlight the animal tendency toward movement and escape. What Esch knew to be true in theory, that the animals leave as a hurricane approaches, becomes reality on the tenth day of the novel,

the day before Katrina hits. Esch continues, "I watch them until they vanish past the trees, and then there is only us, the woods, the leaves rattling underfoot" (207). In this moment, Esch identifies herself again with the trees and woods instead of the fleeing animals, foreshadowing the plant-staying the Batistes' mimic.

But Esch also observes animals exhibiting the adaptation to stay, particularly in collaboration with other staying plants:

> But now I think that other animals, like the squirrels and the rabbits, don't do that at all. Maybe the small don't run. Maybe the small pause *on their branches, the pine-lined earth*, nose up, catch that coming storm air that would smell like salt to them, like salt and clean burning fire, and they prepare like us. The squirrels pack feathers, *pack pine straw*, pack shed fur and *acorns from the oaks in the bowels of their trees*, line them so that they are *buried deep in the trunks*, so safe they can hardly hear the storm cracking around them. The rabbits stand in profile, shank to shank, smell that storm smell that hits them all at once like a loud sound, and they *tunnel down through the red clay and the sand*, *down* until the earth turns black and cold, *down* past all the *roots*, until they have dug great halls so deep that they sit right above the underground reservoirs we tap into with our wells, and during the hurricane, they hear water lapping above and below while they sit safe in the hand of the earth." (215-216, emphasis mine)

This passage underscores the ways in which animals can stay as well as collaborate with plants in their staying, challenging the plant-animal dichotomy while highlighting

the unique challenges animals (including humans) face when unable to move. Note the italicized portions: these words and phrases either indicate the plant bodies that materially shelter and facilitate the animal's staying or indicate ways that the animals are mimicking plant-being. The squirrels, collaborating with plants to materially constitute their refuge, "pack pine straw" and pack "acorns [...] in the bowels of their trees [...] buried deep in the trunks." The rabbits, on the other hand, mimic the plant characteristic of rooting, as indicated by the phrases "tunnel down" "down past all the roots" to seek refuge below the surface of the ground. When the typical animal survival strategy of escape is not available or would render these animals more vulnerable, they choose to build refuge with plants and undertake the survival strategies plants have adapted as a result of their immobility. And, Esch again identifies herself and her family with "the small"—those that must stay, that cannot run. The text confirms this adopting of plant-staying; after this long passage where Esch concludes "maybe the small don't run," the text immediately moves to describing that that "Last night, we laid sleeping pallets in the living room, whose windows we'd lined with mismatched wood" (216). In this way, Esch identifies herself vulnerable and among the animals who have no other choice to stay and collaborate with plants to do so.

Esch considers the concept of evacuation and escape in the context of the animals of the woods, but the text further establishes evacuation as operating within structures of Western and White ways of being, in addition to animal ways of being. For example, when Esch and Randall go through the woods to their White neighbors'

house to steal "supplies," Esch notes that the people are not there: "There is no blue truck, no white man and woman, no chasing dog" (207). The absence of the vehicle and dog echoes the fact that many people did not evacuate because they did not possess a reliable vehicle, or they could not bring their pet where they were going ("Hurricane Katrina" 4). Clearly these White neighbors could do both. Moreover, the text affirms the White people's evacuation as aligned with animalistic urges by conveying that the cows want to leave but can't: "I can hear the cows, big and stupid, shuffling in the barn, letting out little lowing complaints, knocking the walls as if they are looking for escape" (207). In this way, Esch's neighbors reduce the cows to plant-status, requiring them to stay and weather the storm, while they themselves evacuate to safety while taking the family pet, reifying the animal-plant binary that characterizes Western ways of categorizing nature. Indeed, the government institutions also operate this way, reinforcing animalistic ways of being in the mandatory evacuation: "*Mandatory evacuation. Hurricane making landfall tomorrow. If you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible. You have been warned.* And *these could be the consequences of your actions.* There is a list. And I do not know if he says this, but this is what it feels like: *You can die"* (217, emphasis in original). In this way, the text aligns the actions of the government and the Batistes' White neighbors with the animals who run away, thus juxtaposing plant wisdom with Western ways of being with and knowing nature, which are based on human animality rather than plant-being. When Esch receives the mandatory evacuation phone call, she's already decided that "the small don't run"

(215) because she learned it from the plants—the pines, the oaks, the mimosas, the woods. Moreover, Esch realizes she is on her own, "left to seed another year," forgotten by the very institutions meant to support vulnerable human communities who may not weather this storm very well.

In the face of mandatory and unsupported evacuation, the Batistes take refuge on their property, aligning themselves with plant wisdom instead of Western wisdom. The Batistes collectively fortify their Pit refuge: they cover the windows (187), fill and bring in jugs of water (188), fill the gas tank of Daddy's truck (188), cook the food in the fridge (189), move Daddy's truck to a better location (190), and go to the grocery store for more food (191). Moreover, Skeetah construes this refuge as one provided by the surrounding woods: "We ain't even on the bay. We back far enough up in the trees to be all right. All these Batistes been living up here all these years through all these hurricanes and they been all right" (220). Skeetah takes comfort in the refuge of the woods as well as the generational staying power his family has experienced on this plot of land.

Despite their best efforts, their refuge is quickly unmade by the floodwaters of Katrina. While the family is huddled in their home, it begins flooding: "'It's water. It's coming in the house,' Skeetah says. […] 'It's coming up through the floor'" (226). The family simply waits but the water continues rising to the point that Esch says "The water is up to the middle of my calf" (227). Out in the yard, "there is a lake growing" and "the water has picked [Daddy's truck] up" so it now floats in the yard (227). Readers are reminded of the history of the Pit and how the commercial excavation

conducted by Esch's grandfather as a source of income rendered it vulnerable to these very floodwaters. The water rises so high—"tonguing its way up [Esch's] thighs"—that the family retreats to the attic, another refuge created thanks to wooden tree bodies, another refuge that doesn't last long: the water lifts the house off the foundation, causing it to tilt, and the water breaches the attic (229). The siblings express that they don't want to be like the fourteen people who drowned in an attic during Hurricane Camille (229), so Randall uses the blunt end of a chainsaw to hit a hole in the attic; they all escape onto the roof—China and her puppies included—into the howling winds of Katrina (230). The family is clearly vulnerable to the conditions of the hurricane: "It is terrible. It is the flailing wind that lashes like an extension cord used as a beating belt. It is the rain, which stings like stones, which drives into our eyes and bids them shut. It is the water, swirling and gathering and spreading on all sides" (230). This portion of the narrative and the passages that follow are heart-wrenching depictions of human suffering in the face of climate catastrophe and socioeconomic vulnerability. In this way, this text explores both the potentialities and limits of staying. While readers can appreciate the Batistes' adaptation to such circumstances, ideally such adaptation would not be necessary in the first place. Yet, there is beauty in the Batiste's continued collaboration with nature to endure their circumstances. Despite these conditions that unmake the Batiste refuge, they adapt and find a way to survive, with the help of an oak.

As they're on the roof, Skeetah realizes that the other house on the property, Mother Lizbeth's (MaMa's) house, is on a hill, while their house (whose roof they are

on) is in a bit of a depression on the land; however, the only way to get to Mother Lizbeth's house is to traverse the oak that "touches [their] house and stretches to MaMa's house. [The tree] rises like a jungle gym over the seething water" (231). So, Skeetah declares, "We're going to climb the tree!" (231).

Indeed, in order to stay through the storm and floodwaters of Katrina, the Batistes look to the staying power of the strong oak for aid, the oak whose roots "don't uproot in hurricane wind" (119). Esch describes their jungle gym climbing: "Randall leaps, lands on the same close branch with his stomach, his arms iron again, binding Junior to him. Both Skeetah and Randall […] us[e] the limbs to pull themselves and their burdens until they reach water, when they kick their feet, scoot back up the branch, and leap for the next whipping limb" (232). This depiction of the material interaction of the Batistes and the oak tree reads like a human-plant conflict: "[the tree] is an animal, alive, struggling against the water, trying to shove us off its back" (233). While the text suggests that the Batistes collaborated with the tree to get to safety, the novel's depiction of the tree as animal invokes the animal urge to move and leave in the hurricane. This depiction casts the tree as desperate with no other options but to stay put in its rootedness, but it knows it's in danger and perhaps would flee if it could. In its desperation, the tree rejects a wholly collaborative moment, illuminating the pressure such events put on human-plant collaboration potentials. This tension between the Batistes and the tree highlights the narrative's interest in complicating the staying-going spectrum. Ultimately, the waters take China, Skeetah's beloved dog, and threaten to take Esch, whom Skeetah sacrifices China to save when Daddy pushes

Esch to the next branch. Even so, all of the Batistes, except for China, make it to Mother Lizbeth's house alive. Without this oak, the family never would have been able to do so.

In sum, the plants that story Bois Sauvage—pines, oaks, and mimosas—also story Esh's learning of the power of staying. In other words, the plants that populate the region of Bois Sauvage are the same plants that teach Esch how to collaboratively stay as a form of survival. As this section shows, the Batistes choose to stay through the hurricane in the same way the plants around them do. And this staying is not without suffering; as recounted above, the Batiste family very well could have lost their lives to this storm, whereas the plants from whom Esch learned to say may be relatively unscathed by the flood, such as the tree, though we will see how other trees of Bois Sauvage do not fare so well. Ultimately, the extent of human vulnerability in the face of changing environment conditions all the more necessitates communal collaboration to better face weather events like Katrina. *Salvage the Bones* contends that adapting to unfavorable conditions requires human to human collaboration in community as well as human-plant collaboration through salvaging.

5.7 Refuge though Salvaging in Bois Sauvage

One of the most striking lines of *Salvage the Bones* is "Bodies tell stories" (83). This line embodies the focus of material ecocriticism, to uncover how nonhuman bodies participate in story- and meaning-making. While many animal bodies story this

narrative—Esch's body and the baby she grows in her, Daddy's body and his injuries, Skeetah's body curled around China's body in mans'-best-friend love—few have paid attention to the tree and plant bodies that story *Salvage the Bones*. The place of the Pit is characterized by plants' bodies providing material refuge through salvaging for the humans that live there and materially undergirding the narrative far beyond just providing a landscape or setting. Ultimately, staying requires collaboration with plants' materiality through salvaging. Staying facilitates salvaging, and salvaging supports staying. This human-plant material collaboration through staying and salvaging undergirds the storying of the Batistes' experience in *Salvage the Bones*, which is Esch's tale of survival; as the Batistes physically piece their world together through salvaging, it's those material connections with plant bodies that allow Esch to story her narrative. Even before the hurricane hits, the Batistes are well acquainted with salvaging and collaborating with plant bodies for refuge.

The Pit itself is a clearing in the woods cleared and developed by Esch's maternal grandfather, and it has a history of being considered only as raw, inert matter. Esch explains the history of her ancestral land: "My mama's mother, Mother Lizbeth, and her daddy, Papa Joseph, originally owned all this land, around fifteen acres in all. It was Papa Joseph nicknamed it all the Pit" (14). We don't know exactly when Papa Joseph nicknamed their land the Pit, but it likely had something to do with the digging he let occur: "Papa Joseph […] let the white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses, let them excavate the side of a hill in a clearing near the back of the property where he used to plant corn for feed" (14). Here we see

the Plantationocene reaching into the twenty-first century in the commodification of the land for further commercial development, and it ultimately creates instability in the Pit. Esch explains, “Papa Joseph let them take all the dirt they wanted until their digging had created a cliff over a dry lake in the backyard” (14). The instability caused by the excavation affected the water flow in the Pit: “the small stream diverted and pooled into the dry lake, making it into a pond, and then Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond itself would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp, so he stopped selling the earth for money” (14). By commodifying the land for money, Papa Joseph risked the stability of the Pit for future generations to come; however, when he stopped selling the earth, the Pit refoliated itself with plants: “the fields Papa Joseph used to plant around the Pit are overgrown with shrubs, with saw palmetto, with pine trees reaching up like the bristles on a brush” (14). Now the Pit serves as a refuge for the current generation of plants and humans, despite its history of its mineral, geological, and plant occupants being treated as simply raw material for commercial development.

While the Pit serves as ancestral refuge, the dramatic altering of the landscape through excavation has made it susceptible to flooding. This susceptibility maps onto the vulnerability of the Gulf region, vulnerability that was not properly addressed and tended by government institutions, making Katrina all the more dangerous for residents of the regions it hit (Coby 87). In this way, while the land of the Pit was seen as raw, inert matter, we see the agency of this matter in its absence; were the Pit in its

original state prior to excavation, the floodwaters of Katrina may not have been so dire for the Batiste family.

The way the text's plant bodies serve as raw materials highlights their value and agency in this story of salvaging. Salvaging is a meeting of human and nonhuman agents, a piecing together of materials that ultimately assembles a form of refuge. The Batiste family is intimately acquainted with salvaging in general: given their socioeconomic status, they must use whatever is already available to survive—salvaging is inherent to living in the Pit. In fact, some descriptions of the Pit depict it recognizably as a salvage yard: "the detritus in the yard: refrigerators rusted so they look like deviled eggs sprinkled with paprika, pieces of engines, a washing machine so old it has an arm that swished the clothes around and looks like a handheld cake mixer" (89). Another description of the detritus occurs when Daddy's truck "rolls over branches, discarded plastic garbage cans, detached fenders" (126). The Batiste family also salvages in the form of foraging, including collecting chicken eggs (197).

The surrounding woods offer the family a form of refuge in providing foraged sustenance when it is otherwise inconsistent. For example, when there "wasn't enough meat to steal," Skeetah tells Esch he plans to hunt a squirrel. Esch listens to the ways of the woods as Skeetah fixes his aim on a squirrel: "A branch creaks. The tops of the pines rub together as the wind comes again, but the oaks do now move. The squirrels like the oaks best, run along their black, hard branches highway overpasses" (46). When Skeetah fires his shot with the rifle, "The shot rings off a pine, making a solid thunk that sounds like a punch" (47). Skeetah fires again and finally shoots the

squirrel, causing it to “los[e] its grip, cur[l] into a ball, and rol[l] down the trunk, leaving a ribbon of red” (47). While the siblings obtain an animal for food in this passage, it is the forest that provides it. Consider how integral the woods are to this provision: the oaks host the squirrels by providing shelter and acorns for food, and the pine and oak branches expose the squirrel to Skeetah’s firearm sights. The squirrel even intermingles with the oak tree body when it leaves a trail of blood, a blood sacrifice for the siblings from the oak. The woods surrounding the pit aid the family in salvaging and surviving despite their limited resources.

But the Batistes especially salvage plant bodies. For example, Esch’s brother Randall, a rising basketball star, had a “homemade basketball goal, a rim he’d stolen from the county park and screwed into the trunk of a dead pine tree” (5). Even though the Batistes use tree bodies in the form of wood, it is salvaging rather than exploiting; the pine tree was already dead. Moreover, given Randall’s socioeconomic status, his pursuit of basketball is a material need as it may be able to give him a scholarship to college one day. Another instance of plant salvaging is when the family burns trash in the Pit, and “when the pine needles from the surrounding trees fall in and catch fire, it smells okay” (15). In this way, the pine needles in their material bodies intermingle with Esch’s bodily sense of smell to overcome the smell of burning trash; the pine needles make an otherwise nauseating process more palatable for this impoverished family, while also reminding us of the lack of systemic community support; this family does not have or cannot afford regular trash pickup. Similarly, to save money on energy bills for washing clothes, the family dries their clothes on a clothesline.

Esch explains that the chicken coop "used to have Mama's clothesline tied to it with the other end fixed to a pine tree. After mama died, Daddy moved the clothesline to a closer tree" (108). The clothesline here illustrates the role of tree bodies in the Batistes' salvaging: the living pine tree collaborates with the "dead" tree bodies of the wooden coop to support a line that, when the wind blows, saves the family precious money on energy. Ultimately, the family would not survive without salvaging the materials around them, including plant bodies, exemplifying that salvaging is an ecomaterial act of collaboration for survival and resilience in the face of socioeconomic and ecological injustices.

The family particularly salvages tree bodies to aid them in staying through the hurricane, mostly in the form of plywood. From the early pages of the text, Daddy is preoccupied with gathering plywood from around the property to board up windows: "He pulled a saw, brown with disuse, from his truck bed. 'I know we got some plywood around here'" (10). While the siblings are preoccupied with China, Daddy eventually finds the wood he is looking for: "Daddy guns the tractor; he is pulling plywood in stacks across the clearing, gathering wood from all the corners of the Pit for the storm" (40). Meanwhile Junior is "pulling planks of plywood across the yard" and making piles (42). Similarly, Daddy employs Skeetah and Esch in gathering plywood from Mother Lizbeth's falling-down house: "'You see them pieces of plywood up there? Them two that don't look too rotten?' Skeetah nods. […] 'I need you to take this hammer and pry them up off the wall and throw them down'" (62). Daddy also begrudgingly dismantles portions of their chicken coop for more wood

(124). The Batistes' poverty is highlighted by their inability to simply go out and buy the best plywood for boarding windows; instead, they must salvage that which is already around the Pit, in the yard or in their grandparents' house. Even with their salvaging, they can't fully protect their home as the boards are not able to completely cover the windows (188). This is in contrast to the White family's home through the woods, whose plywood boarded windows are "more secure. They are not a patch-up of boards of different sizes like our house; there is no glass left peeking through the cracks, only plywood closed smooth and tight as eyelids" (208). The tree bodies in the form of plywood story both the poverty of the Pit and the refuge the Batistes' attempt to create in the face of Katrina.

While many of the tree bodies we encounter in the text are "dead" or "raw" in the form of Randall's dead pine or Daddy's plywood, the woods surrounding the Pit are very much alive. For example, Esch ascertains the agency of the pines in the woods: "Away from the Pit, the pine trees reach skyward, their green-needled tops stand perfectly still. Once in a while, they shiver in the breeze that moves across their tops. They seem to nod to something that I cannot hear, and I wonder if it is the hum of José out in the Gulf, singing to himself" (66). Here, Esch ascribes agency to the pine trees in their ability to communicate with the coming hurricane. Esch does this again later when walking through the woods: "all I can hear is the pine trees shushing each other, the oak bristling, the magnolia leaves hard and wide so that they sound like paper plates clattering when the wind hits them this wind snapping before Katrina somewhere out there in the Gulf, coming like the quiet voice of someone talking

before they walk through the doorway of a room" (159). By suggesting the trees can communicate with the hurricane, these two passages echo Hurston's line that "the palm and banana trees began that long distance talk with the rain" (155). While *Salvage the Bones* is storied by tree bodies we would consider dead in the form of wood, Bois Sauvage is constituted by alive, agentic trees as well.

In fact, study of the term Bois Sauvage illustrates the nature of the refuge the Batistes have constructed with the help of the plants in the region, a refuge in both the wildness of the woods and the material use of tree bodies through salvaging. Coby points out that the literal French translation of Bois Sauvage is "savage woods" (88). While "savage" is a word that has been used pejoratively, especially in reference to Indigenous people, Ward herself intends a positive association with the word "savage" that inspired the title, *Salvage the Bones*, and celebrates the resourcefulness of those bearing the descriptor: "At home, among the young, there is honor in that term, [savage]" (264). Ward explains that where she is from, "savage" connotes the ability to survive, to be resilient, to have hope: "[savage] says that come hell or high water, Katrina or oil spill, hunger or heat, you are strong, you are fierce, and you possess hope" (264). In this way, Ward's intention for the word savage in this text maps onto this chapter's invitation to salvage with hope in the face of the Anthropocene. Scholars such as Coby build on Ward's positive connotation of the word savage by highlighting the way in which the Batistes' home inverts a negative connotation of the word "savage" as well. In the Pit of Bois Sauvage, Coby argues that "Ward creates a place that is equal parts destructive and life-giving" (88). Coby evidences the Pit's life-

giving with the birth of the four Batiste children, but I evidence it with the refuge provided by the Pit in the form of both “wild woods” and “raw” materials such as wood.

Indeed, a deeper look at the words “bois” and “sauvage” reveals this twofold nature of the Pit’s provision. The simple translation of “savage wood” or “wild wood” misses the extent of tree agency this term represents. While “bois” is easily translated into “woods,” the etymology of “sauvage” as denoted by the term “savage” inherently ties it to not just wildness in general, but the wildness of plants specifically. According to the OED, early uses of the term savage meant “Of country, land, or landscape: uncultivated, wild; rugged, forbidding, inhospitable. Also: of or belonging to such a landscape” or “Of a plant or tree: wild, uncultivated” (“savage”). Taken on their face, the meanings of “bois” and “sauvage” could simply reinforce the wildness of the pit; however, “bois” can also refer to wood *as a material*. While savage’s etymology consistently invokes the concept of wildness in relation to plants, the use of the term “bois” to refer to wood as a raw material highlights the way in which Bois Sauvage provides plant bodies not just as so-called wild refuge but also as salvageable material to be used in the construction of refuge. Ultimately, the fitting name of Bois Sauvage illustrates the twofold agency of tree bodies in constructing the Batiste refuge.

And it is this plant-dependent refuge that is unmade by Katrina. For example, as the family leaps from branch to branch during the storm, the text conveys the extent of this unmade refuge in the material bodies of the Pit: “We follow [Skeetah] through the whipping branches, the undulating water […] Through the clothesline that knots

the branches like a fishing net. Through our clothes, swept from the flooded house. Through the plywood, ripped from the windows" (233). The material elements of the Batiste refuge are laid waste by Katrina: their clothesline, their clothes, and the very plywood they used to board up the windows are blown about like dandelion seeds. Reaching Mother Lizbeth's house reinforces the twofold nature of tree agency in Bois Sauvage: while the oak is a living tree that aids the family to the house, Mother Lizbeth's house is a refuge constructed by tree bodies. When they reach the house, Esch describes their panicked struggle: "we are all struggling, grabbing at walls, at broken cabinets, at wood, until Randall stretches his way up to the open ceiling and hauls himself and Junior into the half-eaten attic" (236). The whole family collectively salvages this home made from tree bodies, noted by the reference to wood. In other words, as Daddy salvaged plywood and Skeetah salvaged linoleum floor from this house, when those refuges are unmade, the family adapts in the moment with the innovative idea to salvage this house as another temporary refuge. The family stays there until the hurricane and flooding subsides. It is not until after the hurricane subsides in intensity that the family ascertains the extent to which their refuge in the Pit has been unmade.

The Batistes routinely collaborate with plant matter to build their refuge in the living woods of Bois Sauvage. Despite their continued efforts to salvage the plants and other materials around them, their refuge is still vulnerable to unmaking at the hands of Katrina. As the plant bodies of Bois Sauvage tell the story of this constructed refuge, they also tell the story of this refuge unmade.

5.8 "Bodies Tell Stories": Salvaging Unmade Refuge in Community

Tree bodies story the humans' relationship to the hurricane from the beginning of the text and reinforce the extent of the unmade refuge. When the siblings are talking with their friend group about the reports of the hurricane, and Manny says, "If anything hit us this summer, it's going to blow down a few branches. News don't know what they talking about" (6). Manny uses the hypothetical extent of tree damage as a metric to calculate and communicate what he thinks will be the strength of the hurricane. In other words, how the hurricane will affect the surrounding trees is used to estimate how the humans in the region will be affected, and clearly Manny is not worried. But the description Manny offers is far from what the trees of Bois Sauvage actually experience.

Indeed, Esch looks to the trees to ascertain the conditions around her, reinforcing that she has done so all throughout the text. Even in past hurricanes, the trees told the story. Esch recounts that in hurricane Camille, "The battery-operated radio told us nothing practical, but the yard did: the trees bending until almost breaking, arcing like fishing line [...] outside the wind pulled, branch by root, until it uprooted a tree ten feet from the house" (217). In the same way, Esch looks to the trees to tell the story of Katrina as it's unfolding: in response to the heavy winds, Esch notes that "Trees reach out their arms and beat their limbs against the house" (220). When she looks outside, she sees "the pines, the thin trees bending with the storm, bending almost to breaking. Even the oaks are losing leaves and branches in the gray

light, the beating rain" (222). The family also sees a "lot of trees on the road," indicating they've been downed or uprooted by the storm (226). Esch watches as "a tree, plucked from its branches, hopped across the yard and landed against Daddy's truck with a crunch" (238). When the hurricane subsides, Esch solemnly surveys the damage, noting that "the trees I had known, the oaks in the bend, the stand of the pines on the long stretch, the magnolia at the four-way, were all broken, all crumbled" (242). The very plants with whom Esch has co-constructed her story, the plants from whom Esch has learned staying—the oaks, the pines, the magnolias—they are no longer standing. While Esch ascertains plant-staying as a strong survival strategy, Katrina challenges the strength of the staying pines and oaks that populate the Pit, and this dance of the trees and wind and water stories the strength of the storm and the extent of their refuge unmade.

When the hurricane finally comes and goes, its damage is largely storied in the changes in the trees in the greater area of Bois Sauvage, just as Manny foreshadowed, albeit erroneously. When the family feels it's safe to leave the Pit, they venture to the center of Bois Sauvage to seek temporary shelter. They witness that "a tree smashed into Mudda Ma'am and Tilda's house," a number of "felled trees," and that Big Henry's house "was encircled by six of the trees that had stood in the yard but now fenced in the house like a green gate" (242). They walk through "the milling crowd, the crumbled trees" and Esch sees Manny "sitting in the back of a white pickup […] surrounded by the tops of ripped trees" (243). Later in the evening, crews of people who had salvaged their vehicles "were clearing the streets of trees" (245). Little Junior

asks, “Where are the trees?” and Esch narrates her answers, “In Bois, some stand still: a few young saplings, hardy oak trees low enough to the ground to avoid the worst of the storm, but stripped of all their leaves and half their branches, as naked as if it is the dead of winter. Here in St. Catherine, they have been mown down, and there is too much sky” (249). Here we not only see the way that the trees story the destruction, but also the feeling of unfamiliarity that comes with their absence in the line “there is too much sky.” Esch describes the scene: “The stumps of the trees are raw and ragged, and everything has been ripped in half. Closer to the beach, so close I can glimpse it if I squint and look toward the horizon, are oak trees. Some that stood in the park stand still; others have been ripped from the earth, their naked crowns facing the ocean. Those that remain look dead” (252). In response to this scene, Esch asks, “What could be salvaged?” (252). Esch realizes the main source of her refuge is no longer, making her wonder what could be salvaged if not the trees of Bois Sauvage. These downed tree bodies tell the story of Katrina, as do the Batistes’ battered bodies. Esch again phytomorphizes her and her family, counting them among the plants affected by the hurricane: “We were a pile of wet, cold branches, human debris in the middle of all the rest of it” (237). The bodies of the downed trees and the traumatized Batistes story the damage of Katrina.

The extent of the unmade refuge is also conveyed by the hurricane’s damage to wooden structures the people of Bois Sauvage created. As they walk through the town, the siblings witness a “pile of wood that must have been the carport” (242), a “house [that] has landed on another, wood on brick, and settled” (251), as well as several piles

of “mangled wood” where there should be entire houses (251, 252). Even the elementary school is gone (251). Ultimately, the unmade refuge in the Pit and Bois Sauvage illustrates that we can find refuge in plants and with plants, but it might not be enough. Our co-constructed refuges may not be able to withstand the coming storms. Even the strongest and oldest of oaks may not make it. Plants are our allies because of our shared bodily vulnerabilities, but in those vulnerabilities, neither plants nor humans are immortal; ecological events caused by humans can unmake the very refuge we build to weather such storms. The question becomes, in the face of unmade refuge, what do we do? *Salvage the Bones* continues to reiterate: stay, salvage, hope, and do so communally, as Esch says, “[Katrina] left us to salvage” (255).

Salvage the Bones insists that community is vital to weathering the storms of the Anthropocene and salvaging together. Even as soon as the hurricane ended, the Batistes were cared for by community who also stayed in Bois Sauvage. When the battered Batistes arrive at Big Henry’s house, Marquise says, “[Big Henry and I] were just about to walk up there and see about y’all” and in concert, “Big Henry nodded, swung the machete he had in his hand, the blade dark and sharp,” with Marquise justifying Big Henry’s possession of the machete by saying “In case we had to cut through to get to y’all” (242). Readers can see the friendship in this interaction: Big Henry and Marquise were prepared to cut through the woods, branches, and downed trees littering the Pit to check on their friends. This brief reference reminds of the way the family and the oak tree are depicted as in conflict during the hurricane; such an event continues to put pressure on human-plant alliances. Big Henry is worried about

Skeetah, and Esch tells him Skeetah is out looking for China, and finishes her story of their experience of the flood by saying "We need a place to stay" (243). Big Henry, with no hesitation, says "It's just me and my mama […] Plenty of room. Come on" (243). When they arrive at Big Henry's house, Esch describes his mom, Ms. Bernadine, and her hospitality, recounting that she tended Daddy's wounds, made them sandwiches, gave Daddy a fan to cool off, and gave them water for baths (244, 255, 256). Esch doesn't only receive hospitality: when out driving with Big Henry looking for Skeetah, they are approached by a woman asking for food, and Esch hands her some of their Top Ramen (250). In the face of unmade refuge, the community of Bois Sauvage relies on each other as they salvage together.

Similarly, when it comes to rebuilding their home, the Batistes do so together, as a family. When the family returns to the Pit, all they see is damage and unmade refuge: "Skeetah's made a clearing in what used to be the yard but is now a tangle of tree branches and wood and car and wire and garbage. Our house looks like it has been painted in mud, slathered dark. It looks tilted wrong by the water" (255). Additionally, "The screen door was gone. The inside of the house was wet and muddy as Daddy's truck. The food we'd gotten had been washed from the shelves" (240-241). Coby comments on the scene of the damaged house: "Given the havoc wreaked by the storm, and the abysmal wreckage in front of them, it would be appropriate for the family to comment about the irreparability of the situation or contemplate survival strategies, such as other areas to which they could move" (89). Coby estimates that the Batistes have two options in front of them: "Here we see a cataclysmic opportunity—

the opportunity exists for the family to deracinate themselves from Bois Sauvage and the Pit, but, also, the opportunity to remain and rebuild," and ultimately, they choose to remain (89). Esch's brothers are committed to staying. When Randall surveys the damage, he confidently declares "We can fix it," as Coby points out. Skeetah, waiting for China, says "I'm not going nowhere," and he has boundless hope she will indeed return: "'If she come back, Skeet..' […] Ain't no *if*" (257, emphasis in original). And the story ends with the siblings waiting, together, for China. For the Batiste family, as Coby elucidates, "There is no desire to relocate, or to abandon their homestead. There is only the desire to rebuild. As instances of destructive weather so often create new opportunities, here we see the opportunity that follows the destruction: the opportunity to retreat or rebuild. The Batiste family emphatically decides to remain" (89). Coby chalks their decision up to "the importance of this rural space to [the Batiste family] and of the Mississippi Gulf Coast to the Hurricane Katrina narrative" (89).

While I agree that the space of the Pit is meaningful to the Batistes and encourages their staying and salvaging, it also is what the plants would do: adapt, rebuild, stay, salvage. However, it is realistically the only choice they have, so the Batiste family sets to work salvaging their unmade refuge in the Pit, and they do so as a family, as a community, and with the hope that their rebuilding will grant them refuge again. And sadly, without systemic change, the Batistes may have to do this many times over each time a storm threatens their safety, reinforcing the need for ongoing improvement of community collaboration and resource provision in the face of such events. In other words, the Batistes should not have to solely rely on other

victims of the same hurricane to help them salvage; it would be more ideal to have broader institutional support at the outset, especially in the face of repeated storms like Katrina. While we can acknowledge the Batistes' resilience in one sense, without systemic change, the Batistes remain vulnerable to natural disasters resulting from climate injustice. *Salvage the Bones* invites us to consider both the limits and the potentialities of staying, ultimately challenging humans to develop better ways of supporting staying and rebuilding.

5.9 "Singing like the New Orleans Indians:" Afro-Indigenous History and Managed Retreat in the Gulf Region

The community mindset to salvage together continues the history of communal salvaging in the region, a history that includes the Indigenous people who occupied the Gulf region. With one brief reference, *Salvage the Bones* joins the other texts in this project by locating itself within the Indigenous history of the US when Esch says, "[The puppy's] mewl is loud, makes itself heard among the crickets; and he is the loudest Mardi Gras dancing Indian, wearing a white headdress, shouting and dancing through the pitted streets of the sunken city. I want him because he comes out of China chanting and singing like the New Orleans Indians, like the Indians that gave me my hair" (12). Briefly, Mardi Gras Indians are Black groups (some of whom claim Indigenous descent as well) in the carnival that represent, celebrate, and honor the alliance between Indigenous groups and African Americans in the fight for freedom from slavery; their performances "reflect ritual influences from both Indian America

and West Africa" but are regionally inflected by the Gulf coast Creole culture, too (Jackson 235). This reference suggests that Indigenous people seemingly recede over the course of this project's texts: in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, actual Seminole are characters and a key part of the narrative as well as my plant studies reading. In *Song of Solomon*, we realize that Milkman's entire journey is undertaken to find his Indigenous ancestor, a real person, but we never get to meet her in the flesh, and the novel ends with the primarily discursive presence of Indigenous names in Michigan. In *Parable of the Sower*, the California Indians are present in their ancestral knowledge captured in the books Lauren reads, the acorn bread she makes and the thriving oaks her family subsists on; but as real people they are depicted only in the past. Finally, here in *Salvage the Bones*, Indigenous people are only referenced—in the form of a simile—as distant relatives of the Batistes and as Mardi Gras costumes and actors as a metaphor for a newly-birthed puppy. Despite the shared vulnerability of the Batistes and their Indigenous neighbors in their Gulf region, the Indigenous presence in this text is ethereal. *Salvage the Bones*'s lack of material Indigenous presence—including Indigenous survival strategies and community coherence unavailable to the Batistes—mirrors the way Indigenous people are at risk of being erased from the Vegetal Turn and a collaborative re-storying of the Anthropocene in concert with the lessons of IEKs.

At the same time, this one reference is like a hidden wardrobe that opens readers to an entire reality worth exploring. In other words, the text's brief mention to the Mardi Gras Indians not only suggests that Indigenous history is everywhere we

care to look, but also highlights the being-next-to of Afro-Indigenous history that undergirds this particular story and locates the Batiste family—and their staying—in that history as descendants of Indigenous people. Joyce Marie Jackson explains that the alliance between Indigenous and African peoples in the Gulf goes back to at least the 1700s, when Spanish and French colonized the region (236), "displac[ing] thousands of Indigenous people and transform[ing] their territories into cotton plantations" (Ellis 4). And these plantations needed workers; as stated above, the Indigenous people aided the African Americans "in resisting European enslavement" while often being captured and enslaved themselves (Jackson 236). This allied history, according to Jackson, lead to intermarriage among West Africans and Indigenous people in the Gulf region, resulting in the mixed heritage and shared history celebrated by the Mardi Gras Indians (236). Indeed, according to Ricardo Guthrie, "Afro-Creoles in New Orleans—masking as Black Indians—were recipients of triple heritages: African, Indian and 'American' cultures" (560). Guthrie goes on to explain how the experience of syncretic cultures through "triple consciousness" (a nod to W.E.B. DuBois's "double consciousness" resulted the embracing of a contradictory identity: "South African musicians assumed a triple consciousness, allowing them to avoid arbitrary binaries between traditional and modern cultures belonging to both exiles and 'inxiles'—those who remained in the home country" (560). Guthrie's reference to exiles and "inxiles" reminds us of the multifaceted nature of staying and going, both in the short term and long term and both by choice and by requirement—the staying experienced by both African American and Indigenous people. In other words, the

Batiste family's contention with the choice to stay through Katrina is yet another moment in their ancestral history where they must adapt to the terrain on which they live, whether it's where they want to be or not, whether it's home or not.

This Afro-Indigenous history as told by the Mardi Gras Indians meets the ecological present in the shared vulnerability of Black and Indigenous people still inhabiting the Gulf coast region, people who have stayed through much hardship caused by environmental injustice. Salvaging in community has become more difficult as Isle de Jean Charles witnesses a declining population each year due to changes to the landscape of the coast and peoples' increased vulnerability to hurricanes. Faheid and Livingstone chronicle the agonizing effects of Isle de Jean Charles' encounters with recent hurricanes: "At its height, Isle de Jean Charles had 78 homes and 400 residents. […] After Hurricane Lili in 2002, there were 68 homes left. After hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, that number had shrunk to 54. And after hurricanes Gustav and Ike in 2008, 25 homes remained" ("To Flee"). In addition to those being forced out by the effects of hurricane, Rush reports that 90% of residents moved inland in the last 40 years of their own volition due to changing conditions (43). These numbers are not simply representative of fewer humans in the region; they illustrate the crumbling community. For example, Rush recounts the story of Chris Brunet's (Choctaw) experience of Hurricane Lili, in which he had to make extensive repairs on his home: "'I had to take out all the walls. I've been repairing them little by little, but the going's slow […] When more people lived on the island I would have been able to call on some of them and get help with this here'" (50). This disintegration of community

makes it even more difficult to weather storms and rebuild for those who remain. Rush reflects on this reality of community provision: "The more people there are, the more robustly this organism can organize and reconstitute itself. With more people on the island, post-storm recovery is fast; with more people on the island, gas lines are repaired. With more people on the island, you don't have to drive so far to get what you need" (61). In other words, not only can community help rebuild together, but when there is overall a higher population, industries and institutions are more likely to serve that community well. For these reasons and more, such as the continued reality of rebuilding which is financially and emotionally costly, "leaving Jean Charles became the best option in a set of only bad options" (Rush 44). Due to the changing conditions on the coast, Isle de Jean Charles has fewer residents year after year.

Despite the declining community relationships and other obstacles faced by residents, some residents of Isle de Jean Charles choose to stay. For instance, the aforementioned Brunet has chosen to stay in his home on Isle de Jean Charles, according to Rush. Brunet's grandfather built the home with strong Douglas fir planks, but Brunet has had to lift the home twice as a result of hurricanes Lili and Katrina (53). Brunet stays with a sort of anxious indifference, an uncertainty about leaving that results in an experience of the epithet "to not choose is to choose." But other residents are openly passionate about their decision to stay, such as Edison Dardar. Dardar's father and grandfather reportedly spent all of their years of life on Isle de Jean Charles, and Dardar has no desire to interrupt that pattern; like his paternal ancestors, he "plan[s] on dying right here, on the island" (Rush 62). Dardar tells rush that he "get[s]

mad when people leave" (61). He continues to stay and salvage in collaboration with plants and nature by cultivating persimmon trees, growing a garden in some salvaged bathtubs (which bypasses the salt in the groundwater and soil), and harvesting shrimp from the inlet, though he cannot get nearly as much shrimp as his family relied on through the decades, it is enough to sustain his small family (Rush 61-63). Dardar's lifestyle of salvaging reminds us of the Batistes' way of life.

Both the Batistes' and Dardar's version of staying and salvaging reminds us how important plants and nature are to continued human existence, yet Rush reports on how the plant-life on Isle de Jean Charles suffers due to erosion, making the region less and less inhabitable for those who depend on plants. While the Douglas fir planks of Brunet's home are holding their structure, the family oak tree is now but a rampike—a deadened trunk with no branches—bringing to mind the question of what would have happened to the Batistes if their ancestral oak tree met the same fate in the winds of Katrina before they could get to MaMa's house (Rush 54). Rush notes that a forest of Cypress trees near the Brunet home is now unrecognizable as such (54). There is no pasture left to support grazing cattle (Rush 55). Where families use to cultivate gardens are now fallow plots, unable to support growth due to salt in soil (Rush 55). When Brunet was growing up, his family was self-sufficient on the plant provisions "eating blackberries, oranges, pears, and cantaloupes all grown in the garden alongside his home" (53), but changing conditions resulting from coastal erosion, such as salt in the groundwater, have rendered him dependent on the capitalistic economy and commercial grocery stores with products such as

“government-subsidized grains and vegetables grown by agricultural giants” (55-56). In other words, the very means by which the Brunet and Dardar families have stayed and salvaged are rapidly disappearing. Moreover, Rush notes the profound bleakness of this new reality: “The disappearance of coastal land is causing human beings who were once self-sufficient, whose impact on the planet was slight, to use fossil fuels to procure the food they once were able to grow at home. Every time the islanders drive to Houma [for groceries] they are, in some small way, accelerating the disappearance of this ecosystem” (56). Caught in a in a vicious feedback loop of erosion, destruction, and salvage, the people of Isle de Jean Charles are running out of ways to safely stay on their ancestral coast.

As coastal erosion, saltwater encroachment, and stronger hurricanes threaten the livelihood of coastal Indigenous communities, there have been attempts to replicate their community in a safer region. The chief of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw tribe, Albert Naquin, has spent the better part of the last two decades “trying to organize the remaining islanders to relocate as a group and to get the Army Corps of Engineers to pay for it” (Rush 51). His project was met with resistance from people like Brunet and Dardar. In addition to the high costs of this project, Naquin considers the lack of unity among the islanders to relocate to be the reason his relocation plan fell through (52). Naquin eventually secured funding for a serious relocation initiative: In 2016, Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) granted $48 million for the express purpose of resettling “current and former residents of Isle de Jean Charles, designating them the first federally funded climate migrants in the continental

United States" (Faheid and Livingstone). The state of Louisiana describes the project as a "structured and voluntary retreat from the island" to safer regions inland that consists of developing "The New Isle, a planned community about 40 miles north of Isle de Jean Charles that will include more than 500 homes, walking trails, a community center, commercial and retail space and other amenities designed in conjunction with island residents" ("The Story"). If this sounds like paradise, that's just marketing; even the director of the project, Pat Forbes, admits, "I don't want to create any illusion that we think we're creating a better place to live [...] All we're doing is giving a second-best option, which is a safer place to live, that to the extent possible helps them start to revitalize their community" (Faheid and Livingstone). Forbes's comment reminds us that while we can learn staying from plants and adapt to changing conditions, it is a second-best option to being able to stay with robust resources or not have to be put in danger at all. Moreover, there is no discussion of what happens when the inland regions become coastal and subject to the same erosion as the current coastline. Even so, the process of community planning has, according to Brunet, productively included the island residents and accounted for their concerns in ways that are promising (Rush 200). In fact, the resettlement project has been so successful, they've even gotten Chris Brunet on board; yet he still struggles with the tension of staying versus going and feeling like leaving is the second-best option. Brunet concedes, "I'm not celebrating, but I'm going" (Rush 205).

While *Salvage the Bones* and the stories of Indigenous Gulf coast tribes portray the strength and resilience of the Batiste family and these groups, it also

highlights the limits of staying as an adaptation, especially a long-term adaptation. In the face of coastal erosion, for example, staying will eventually be an impossibility. Perhaps a more just response to the seeming dichotomy to "stay" or "evacuate" is "managed retreat," which is akin to the structured relocation cited above. Environmental humanists on the policy side of climate adaptation have offered managed retreat as a viable response to rising sea levels that threaten coastal communities. A.R. Siders defines managed retreat as retreat that is "strategic— i.e., if it is designed and executed in ways that promote broader societal goals" (1). Siders envisions managed retreat as more just and sustainable than broad calls for relocation that fail to consider the value judgements made in who can relocate, to where they can relocate, and how they relocate (1). Managed retreat, according to Siders, attempts to negotiate the inevitable loss with an honest loss-opportunity analysis approach (4). The resettlement program of Isle de Jean Charles is an example of managed retreat in which the government gathers information from current residents, builds a new community, and subsidizes families to move to the new location. In this way, even managed retreat reveals that the key to managing the changing conditions of the Anthropocene is found in adapting to new conditions, adaptations that humans can learn from plants and their staying.

In contrast to Brunet, Dardar still refuses to move with the relocation effort, evidencing the tensions in how people interact with managed retreat, especially regarding losses incurred. In front of his home, Dardar has a sign that reads, ""ISLAND iS NOT FOR SALE. IF YOU Don't like THE ISLAND STAY OFF.

Don’t GiVE uP FigHT For YOUR RighTS. It’s WORTH SaViNG. Edison Jr” (Rush 59). What does this sign mean? Rush explains: “Edison is opposed to [Naquin’s] relocation strategy. He fears that if the islanders all agree to leave, the land will be sold off to the highest bidder” (62). Rush reports a conversation had between Dardar and a HUD representative, in which Dardar says, “‘I have no interest in moving into a poorly made house fifty miles inland […] If you want me to move, why don’t you let me find my place, where I want? I could build in my son’s yard in Bourg’” (207-208). The HUD representative’s reply makes Dardar feel threatened, “‘In order to be part of the resettlement you have to move in with the rest of the community;” she also says, “When the relocation is complete, the road to the island won’t be repaired after a storm’” (208). Dardar understandably feels coerced by the fact that the resettlement project is his only choice—especially with a history of his ancestors being forced to move—so he stays (219). Rush reflects on the tension of managed retreat in Dardar’s situation: “On the one hand, I want to believe that learning to retreat is simple enough, with concrete steps and consistent outcomes […] And yet, on the other hand, I respect the connection Edison feels with Jean Charles. He doesn’t simply live on the island; he knows that who he is, his very sense of self, is linked to the land where his entire life has taken place” (220). Even the most organized, cost-effective, and just managed retreat plan cannot replace Dardar’s connection to his ancestral home.

In this way, we need to recognize both the profound grief and profound sovereignty present in both the decision to stay and to go, as represented by Dardar and Brunet respectively, and as I’ve shown in the Batiste family experience. Rush

reflects on this paradoxical sense of sovereignty and desperation: "[Brunet and Dardar] both have the ability to read their surroundings and respond; they align the stories they tell with the decisions they make, even when those decisions differ dramatically. Stay or go? Retreat or remain? In the face of so much change, both Chris and Edison are retaining their control" (220). In both staying and going, vulnerable people will need to continually adapt to new conditions as the Anthropocene marches on. Rush adds that even if residents like Brunet and Dardar cannot retain control of their physical circumstances, they at least retain sovereignty "over the words they use to make sense of their experience in it," ultimately causing Rush to conclude that this sense of sovereignty "strikes [her] as an adaptive technique that humans alone might have" (221). In other words, perhaps the most important thing is not ultimately staying or going, managed retreat or symbiotic refuge—these are all viable options. Rather, the most important things are that these choices can be made with support and that the people experiencing such things get to tell their own stories about it.

And yet, the very act of managed retreat often forgets about the plants left in a region, inviting us to consider if the stories of the plants of the Gulf region are being told. As alluded to above, plants are also victims of the coastal erosion in the Gulf. Researchers at the Gulf Coast Geospatial Center claim that "Coastal marshes provide essential ecosystem services related to biodiversity, water quality, and protection from erosion" (Anderson et al 1850). Wildlife ecologist Robert Chabreck explains that the conditions of the marshy coasts of the Gulf region evolved over thousands of years into a delicate ecosystem of plants, animals, saltwater, and freshwater (67). And yet,

this ecosystem can be irrevocably altered in a punctuated period of time due to human activities such as canal- and levee-building as well as Anthropocene events such as hurricanes and sea level rise (Chabrek 67-75). Anderson et al corroborate the delicate nature of this crucial ecosystem: “Very subtle changes in elevation on the order of centimeters to decimeters can drastically alter daily hydroperiods, ultimately affecting plant species com-position and spatial distribution” (1851). In other words, such changes to the ecosystem challenge coastal plants to adapt. One way they must adapt is to changing levels of salinity in water and soil sources: “Vegetation in interior marshes not destroyed by inundation will be killed by increased water salinity. Saltwater will also encroach into river valleys and forested wetlands will be adversely affected. Trees and woody shrubs adapted to freshwater environments will die” (Chabreck 102). While managed retreat may provide a way to remove humans from harm’s way in the Gulf, it leaves the ecosystem and remaining plants to fend for themselves as the Anthropocene irrevocably changes the coastline.

While the idea of managed retreat is rife with tension, especially when it becomes necessary due to injustice or is unavailable to certain communities, it can be a viable “third option” between the binaristic conception of staying or going. Managed retreat is a way to adapt to changing conditions through planned and supported movement toward safety. The key here is planned and supportive: one of the gravest injustices of Katrina was the lack of productive and supportive government response, resulting not only in enhanced vulnerability but loss of life. Managed retreat offers a collaboration between government institutions and local communities to devise

culturally-appropriate plans for relocation to safety. It would be better if relocation were not necessary at all, but in the Anthropocene, adaptation must sometimes go beyond either spontaneous bolting or long-term staying and salvaging to thoughtful and managed retreat.

5.10 Conclusion: Stay, Weather, and Salvage, in Community, and with Hope.

Salvage the Bones invites us to consider the value of staying with our current trouble. Moreover, *Salvage the Bones* explores the limits of staying, inviting consideration of more nuanced forms of staying such as managed retreat. In *Salvage the Bones*, the trouble is great and Anthropocene-inflected: a poor family attempts to make it through one of the deadliest hurricanes in history. But this family already knows how to salvage; it is the way of Bois Sauvage and the refuge of the Pit. As opposed to the animalistic urge to run, hide, or fight, the intelligent plants that story *Salvage the Bones*—the pines, oaks, and mimosas—teach us and the Batistes to stay, weather, and salvage through adapting to the changing conditions around us, even when our refuges are unmade and need to be made again. Moreover, plants teach us to improve our staying with more just forms of community collaboration and resource distribution, so that families like the Batistes may not be so vulnerable in the first place.

Perhaps the Anthropocene will be a series of unmade and remade refuge over and over, but this is the work we have before us, that we adapt and learn better ways to

stay and remake refuge. Insofar as it depends on us, our efforts to stay well should be supported by more robust and just access to resources, skills, and strategies—including collective forms of support—for enduring changing environmental conditions. And this work, as *Salvage the Bones* shows, is best done in community, with hope, and by the wisdom of the plants that have survived on this planet for millennia; doing it any other way—either alone as individuals or motivated by fear or only by Western ways of being—will not result in the innovative regeneration we need to meet the changing conditions of the Anthropocene and beyond. *Salvage the Bones* inspires Anthropocene dwellers to respond to unmade refuge with the wisdom of plant-being and IEKs: stay, weather, and salvage, in community, and with hope.

Coda: Learning from Loss, Growing from Death

My sister-in-law, Allie, recently gave me a plant for a housewarming gift. I have received many plants as gifts: a neighbor, Ana-Rita gave me a succulent and a cactus when I moved out of one apartment. When I moved into the new house, we made friends with the neighbor next door, Troy. And upon our moving out again only a year later, he gave us a pothos as a parting gift. These plants are among my favorite in my home, despite marking some negative experiences: they mark the loss of a place to call home, the loss of close relationships with these neighbors who looked out for me and cared for me, the emotional dysregulation of constantly moving. But they also mark joy: memories of outdoor barbecues with Ana-Rita, or Troy always beating us to shoveling the sidewalk—the joy of good neighbors to ground you in a place. And now, the rubber plant Allie gave me is in my dining room. I've always wanted a rubber plant, though I never explicitly told her. She took a cutting from her own plant and repotted it. Now, among my succulents and pothos, there is a new plant to mark the goodness of this unfolding chapter of buying a home. These plants simultaneously story what "home" and "joy" and "loss" mean to me.

Such plants not only *represent* losses of neighbors or the sorrow of moving once again, they *are* losses: Ana-Rita and Troy are now without the plants because I am with them; they incurred a loss to give me a gift. Even the rubber plant: although it represents almost entirely a sense of joy and excitement, Allie had to cut her own plant to propagate one for me, which is a small loss on her part that leads to abundance for

me. Loss is not the end for them, whether they represent loss or parts of their bodies are lost; their ability for rebirth and growth shows us that such loss is not final.

While each of the novels in this project envision ecofeminist human-plant relationships and refoliation potential, they are also imbued with deep losses. For instance, *In Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie loses all of her husbands, with Tea Cake's death being the most tragic. She also loses her mother and grandmother. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman loses his father's respect as well as, more heart-wrenchingly, two women in his life, Hagar and Pilate. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren must leave behind her childhood community to pursue long-term survival. Her father's death catalyzes her need to move, and she loses more family and community members along the way. Finally, in *Salvage the Bones*, the wake of hurricane Katrina included loss of not only material shelter, but also a cherished, albeit nonhuman, member of the Batiste family—however long China took to return to the Pit, if at all. While my project seeks to infuse hope into the state of the Anthropocene by re-foliating, the reality of our current circumstances is that more loss will inevitably occur.

In this way, the project of refoliation may appear naïve. It may seem to ignore the scale of what's been lost. Thus, refoliation is not a simple answer to defoliation; some of what has been lost is irrevocable. Kimmerer explains in *Braiding Sweetgrass* how forests that are clear cut cannot simply be replaced by planting new trees, as forests are far more than a grove of trees, but are complex ecosystems with delicate balances nearly impossible to recreate at the whim of humans. Forests and much more have been lost to the Anthropocene: animal species, soil fertility, clean air, corals,

human health. This is a problem of refoliation; it is a seemingly insurmountable task, especially for humans. It seems at times that human-driven defoliation has taken more than we can give back. But does this mean refoliation is pointless? By no means! What it does mean, though, is that we must negotiate with Anthropocene losses as we seek to clean up the rubble. How can our good efforts at refoliation be nourished by the acceptance of loss while also improve human systems to prevent loss wherever possible? How do we pursue healing, albeit incompletely in a certain time-frame? What is the value of reflecting on these losses as we seek to move forward with a sense of lack and grief?

Loss is something that invites us to consider the value of what we had, which is a generative exercise for us Anthropocene dwellers. Why? Considering the value of what we had invites us to more earnestly value what we do have currently. Valuing the Earth and its inhabitants enough to change Anthropocene ways is the starting point of healing. Loss is thus a recursive experience, moving us from the present feelings of lack, to the past feelings of value, and the current feelings of yearning. How do we simultaneously accept loss as heart-wrenching and worthy of lament while productively channeling its subsequent calls to value and yearn?

In this final installment of my discursive refoliation efforts, I turn again to plants and the project's four primary texts to consider what lessons they and their plant teachers may have to offer Anthropocene Earth-dwellers about loss. Ecologically speaking, loss is a part of growth cycles. When we look to nature, we see the flux of seasonality and that loss precedes growth and rebirth; in nature, loss and potential

closely coexist. What could it mean to consider these literary losses, as well as the losses of the Anthropocene, as new beginnings rather than endings, beginnings that invite humans to better serve each other and the Earth? Or even more circular, as points in a cycle? Cycle-thinking is one more "lesson" we can take from the plant-teachers who have populated this project.

I look to plants to consider the role of loss in their ways of being. While it is true that, as Kimmerer explains, we cannot simply "re-plant" old growth forests after clear-cutting, or reverse sheer extinction, plants do have something to teach about recalibrating our understanding of loss. As in the example of the propagated rubber plant above—one cannot propagate a new plant unless a cutting is taken from a previous one. We see something similar with pruning: cutting plants and trees at strategic parts of their body redirects energy for particular growth patterns that can serve both the plant and the humans who rely on the plants, i.e. making a fruit tree bear more fruit. And again we see this in the concept of thinning seedlings: gardeners will plant more seeds in a bed than it can support, wait until all the plants germinate, and then thin them out so each plant has enough room to grow. While it is sad to rip out tiny seedlings, there are ways to do it to reduce total loss of life, their death makes room for the other seedlings to prosper; without thinning, no plants in the bed would have enough resources. The Indigenous people of California burned the oak forests so the acorns would have welcome soil. In this way, plants show us that loss can be the beginning of abundance—cuttings turn into exponentially more plants, pruning results in exponentially more fruit, thinned seedlings allow exponentially more prosperity for

the plants that remain, scorched earth creates the conditions for more oaks. While such losses are worthy of grief, they also allow for new growth.

That being said, plants also complicate our understanding of loss: it is a commonly held assumption, for example, that seeds must "die" in order to germinate, but this is a misconception; viable seeds are considered "dormant" until they germinate, though they certainly are no longer in the form of seeds once they germinate. Similarly, there is an assumption that trees die in the winter, evidenced by their loss of leaves. It's more accurate, though, to say that the trees themselves are going dormant, while the leaves will experience biodegradation as opposed to "death." Oppermann offers a generative understanding of loss in ecology through her concept of *compost poiesis*, which addresses the complicated nature of "death" in ecology (136). According to Oppermann, composting or biodegradation is more of an "unmaking" than a death, that is, a ceasing to exist (136). What could it mean to compost the Anthropocene? To unmake it? Instead of viewing losses of the Anthropocene as deaths or endings, in what ways can such unmaking precede new making?

Another word for composting is to "decompose" which highlights the semiotic aspects at play as well, the way in which storied matter can be unmade, unstoried. Indeed, we see in the four stories of this project the ways in which the text's characters experience unmaking, as alluded to above. And yet, the unmaking precedes important making: Janie Crawford and her matriarchs experience much loss and pain, culminating in Janie's loss of her grandmother as well as all three of her husbands. But

most poignantly, without the death of Jody Starks, Janie never would have met Tea Cake, the love of her life. Milkman's loss of his father's respect is exactly what he needs to lose in order to embrace Pilate's ecofeminist sensibilities. While he loses Hagar and Pilate, he gains a sense of self as interdependent with community. Lauren Olamina loses her father, her brother, and other members of Robledo and Earthseed, but such trial by fire reveals the fecund soil of Acorn in which she and her new community can germinate. The Batiste family's Pit refuge is unmade by Katrina, and they lose China in the swell, but without such loss, they would not know the deep community of both family and friends. The Batistes choose to salvage what is left of their unmade refuge.

Indeed, these texts exhibit loss, but the plants in this project also teach us many valuable lessons: the pear tree of *Their Eyes* calls to Janie and teaches her the beautiful interdependence and intersubjectivity of pollination; the sawgrass of the Everglades teaches her the value of attuning to the environment as well as attuning to those who attune to the environment, in this case, the Seminole; the beans of the muck teach us the consequences of the capitalist-patriarchy. Janie's seeds that Tea Cake gives her teach her to hope and remember. *Their Eyes* itself, as it seeded itself in 1937 but germinated in the fecund soil of 1970s ecofeminism, teaches us to awake and be stirred. *Song of Solomon's* teachers of the flora offer myriad lessons in phytobeing. The tulips and the backyard maple reveal the extent of the capitalist-patriarchy's power over Milkman and his misogyny towards his mother and sisters. Yet the sweetgum in the forest lovingly grounds Milkman, teaching him to abandon his

patriarchal identity in favor of an arboreal becoming in which Milkman can see himself as an interdependent member of community among humans and nonhumans alike. *Parable of the Sower's* seeds teach Lauren Olamina how to bolt, how to companion plant, how to germinate out of the parent's shadows. Lauren learns the value of biodiversity in challenging conditions, and she must be scorched as the oaks are scorched so the acorns can germinate. Ultimately, these seeds teach Lauren permaculture farming concepts, which can be implemented in the Anthropocene for more just food futures and symbiotic refuge. Finally, the pines, oaks, and mimosas of *Salvage the Bones* teach the Batiste family how to stay and salvage through the unmaking of refuge by Hurricane Katrina, while also inviting us to consider better ways to support such communities in the face of changing environmental conditions.

As we, human residents of the Anthropocene attempt to recalibrate the direction of our relationship to Earth amidst changing environmental conditions, let's remember plants and their wisdom, their wisdom to seed and germinate and stir and pollinate, to ground and connect and become together, to bolt with companions, and to stay and salvage—even through unmade refuge. May we emulate and support plants in their unfailing aims to refoliate this place we call Earth.

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Appendix

A.1 MILKMAN'S ANCESTRAL PLANTSONG

"Jake the only son of Solomon
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Whirled about and touched the sun
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Left that baby in a white man's house
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Heddy took him to a red man's house
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Black lady fell down on the ground
Come booba yalle booba tambee
Threw her body all around
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut
Yaruba Medina Muhammet too.
Nestor Kalina Saraka cake.
Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!

O Solomon don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Solomon don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me

Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone
Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home" (*Song of Solomon* 303).