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Through a chronological and thematic study of twentieth and twenty-first century American literature, "Elements of Place: Southern Women Writers, Race, and Generational Environmental Knowledge" answers the following questions: how do Southern women writers represent elements of place? How is the natural world racialized, and how do African American writers portray Southern environments compared to White writers? I argue that because of the South's particularly violent racist history, Black Southern writers and their White contemporaries portray the natural world differently: the Black women writers I examine (Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Jesmyn Ward) focus on surviving natural disasters and racial oppression, whereas the White women with whom I engage (Flannery O'Connor and Janisse Ray) write more about environmental ethics and care. All these women write about the dissemination of environmental knowledge through three generations of Southern families.

Through an intersectional ecofeminist framework, I examine how socially constructed boundaries—particularly those of gender, race, and class—influence perceptions of the natural world and how literary portrayals of nature reveal social and ecological injustices. Southern women—and especially Southern Black women—have unique cultural experiences when compared to women from other regions. Studying Southern women's environmental writing allows for a more comprehensive understanding of environmental movements, including how contemporary Southern women writers process the ongoing climate emergency. We can better understand the complexities of environmental issues by including Southern women's voices, especially since environmental justice concerns often disproportionately affect women and other marginalized groups.

This project initiates new ways of thinking about Southern ecoliterary traditions, altering how we read Southern and environmental literature. By examining Southern women's environmental writing, readers better understand the nuance of how regionality affects environmental thinking, activism, and storytelling. My project offers a holistic approach to understanding the entanglements of Southern women, the natural world, race, class, and gender. While many important works critically analyze these topics, my research foregrounds specific elements of place, natural and built. Without analyzing an assemblage of elements of place, we obtain limited, often one-dimensional interpretations of women's relationships with the natural world. My analyses focus on specific elements of place to examine how social identity markers overlap and entangle, influencing Southern women's portrayals of nature and environments.

ELEMENTS OF PLACE: SOUTHERN WOMEN WRITERS, RACE, AND GENERATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL KNOWLEDGE

by

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION: MAY I INTRODUCE YOU TO SOUTHERN WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENTAL WRITING?

Southern Women's Environmental Writing

In 2024, we now know that environmental writing is important. We know that women's and gender studies is important. We know that the field of Southern studies is important. So why is no one studying the intersection of all three: Southern women's environmental writing? The ground is fertile, yet literary scholars have not planted many seeds.

I am drawn to Southern literary studies because of my own Southern identity and connection to place. Growing up barefoot on a plant farm in Georgia cultivated not only a love of nature but also a need to study and write about it. I was first introduced to ecofeminism through Annette Kolodny's work, riveted by the history and context of the "land-as-woman" or "land-*is*-woman" metaphor she analyzes in *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (150). That the foundation of the American "pastoral impulse" was "a yearning to know and to respond to the landscape as feminine" struck me in ways that have informed my scholarship and my everyday thinking about the natural world, the oppression of women, the connections between women and the environment (Kolodny 8). For the most part, Southern studies scholarship has neglected ecofeminism and ecocriticism. Why are these fields disparate? Why are there not more studies of ecofeminism and Southern literature's intersections?

The American literary canon has been slow to accept Southern writers who are not White men. In the last few decades, ecocriticism has successfully incorporated a much-needed global perspective, but the field has excluded Southern texts from the ecocritical canon. While an

ecofeminist canon is forming, scholarship needs to include Southern women writing about ecological concerns and Southern environments. The American South is rich with environmental literature, women who have written and are writing about the racialization and gendering of the natural world. The American literary canon should not overlook their portrayals of the South; we have much to learn from them.

Therefore, I am drawn to question, how do Southern women writers represent elements of place?[1] How is the natural world racialized, and how do African American writers portray Southern environments compared to White writers? What changes when we approach nature as a sociocultural construct? My project answers these questions through a chronological and thematic study of Southern women writers, race, and representations of elements of place. I argue that because of the South's particularly violent racist history, Black Southern writers and their White contemporaries portray the natural world differently: the Black women writers I study focus on surviving natural disasters and racial oppression, whereas the White women with whom I engage write more about environmental ethics and care. All these women write about how environmental knowledge is disseminated throughout generations of Southern families.

My introduction begins with a discussion of my argument and its limitations (temporal, geographical, racial, and genre limitations), followed by a rationale for this work. Next, I outline my project's contributions to the fields of critical race theory, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and Southern literature. In the Scholarship section, I introduce the primary scholars' work I extend throughout my project: work encompassing Southern studies, race and environment, and ecocriticism and ecofeminism. I preview my project's three major through-lines in the Project Threads section: elements of place, generational environmental knowledge, and generational

[1]See the section "My Project's Threads" below for a definition and discussion of *elements of place*.

trauma. Next, I include chapter summaries of my four chapters and my coda. Finally, I conclude this introduction with further significance of *elements of place*.

Argument and Limitations

"Elements of Place: Southern Women Writers, Race, and Generational Environmental Knowledge" combines my interest in ecofeminism and Southern studies by using an ecofeminist framework, which is inherently intersectional: "As an evolving praxis, ecofeminism grew out of many women's interconnected sense of self-identity—a deep recognition of interbeing that bridges socially constructed boundaries of class, race, species, sexuality, gender, age, ability, nation, and more" and a collective empathy "that brings both compassion and action to the task of alleviating conditions of eco-social injustice" (Gaard 68). I examine how socially constructed boundaries—particularly those of gender, race, and class—influence perceptions of the natural world and how literary portrayals of nature reveal social and ecological injustices.

My study examines Southern women writers' portrayals of the natural world in the twentieth century. While I would eventually like to extend my temporal scope to include the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for a wider analysis, for now, I focus on the twentieth century because of the drastic changes in American history and environmentalism during this time. Augmenting Kolodny's discussion, I compare Black and White women's experiences, layering considerations of race's impact on representations of place. As ecofeminism and ecocriticism are closely related, my dissertation also depends on ecocritical theory and analyses: "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" is necessary (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii).

As with most ecocritical projects, place plays an important role. I intentionally limit my focus to a particular Southern subregion: my argument benefits from a concentrated, coherent

discussion of the Deep South, allowing me to compare environmental literature from a few U.S. states. My project's primary texts are written about (and in) Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi. Like Zackary Vernon, "I am not interested in determining what states or landscapes count as southern, but rather for what purposes southern environments and southern environmentalisms may be evoked" (5). For example, where Floridian and Mississippian texts are concerned with natural disasters, Georgian literature focuses more on land use and class. These focused comparisons offer more insight into culture's effects on the natural world. However, these parameters further limit my project's scope; I can envision larger projects that analyze more Southern regions, move beyond the South to extend my argument to other American regions, and include Southern women writers who identify with other racial markers, paying particular attention to Indigenous women's writing.

My project intentionally limits comparisons of Black and White writers' portrayals of the natural world, accentuating slavery's lasting impacts on American citizens and land. I situate chapters within America's historical and environmental backdrop, illustrating how America's development affects literary perceptions of nature and vice versa. Incorporating authors' biographies is also essential; while most of my primary texts are fictional, these authors' racial, socioeconomic, and geographical backgrounds undeniably influence their works.

The authors I analyze have been studied in one or two of the critical disciplines that most interest me (critical race theory, ecofeminism, and Southern studies), but none have been studied in-depth through intersectional lenses that address all three fields concurrently. For example, African American literary scholarship and Southern studies have copiously examined Zora Neale Hurston's, Alice Walker's, and Jesmyn Ward's work, but ecofeminism has not (except for some brief mentions). Southern studies and Whiteness studies have analyzed Flannery O'Connor's

work, but very few scholars add ecofeminism to their analyses. Discourse about environmental conservation typically includes Janisse Ray's work, but Whiteness studies, ecofeminism, and Southern studies do not.

"Elements of Place: Southern Women Writers, Race, and Generational Environmental Knowledge" demonstrates that reading Southern women authors intersectionally is essential to both Southern studies and environmental studies. Because my analyses compare works by Black and White women, I consider how multiple social identities (race, gender, class) overlap. Intersectionality, as both theory and practice, "conceptualizes social identities as collective registers of power relations that are always unstable, interconnected, variable, and contradictory" (Martinez HoSang). The interconnectedness of social identities is what interests me most when I analyze Southern women's representations of place. Using an intersectional ecofeminist framework, I analyze different genres—novels, short fiction, and a memoir—to examine these multifaceted perspectives.[2] Rather than studying one genre, my project analyzes multiple to illuminate Southern women's multifaceted approaches to environmental writing. The field of nature writing has long prioritized nonfiction; the novels, short story, and memoir I examine prove that nature writing is more expansive.

Rationale

Southern women—and especially Southern Black women—have unique cultural experiences when compared to women from other regions. Studying Southern women's environmental writing allows for a more comprehensive understanding of environmental movements, including how contemporary Southern women writers process the ongoing climate emergency. We can better understand the complexities of environmental issues by including

[2]In a larger project, I would also extend these genre analyses to include poetry.

Southern women's voices, especially since environmental justice concerns often disproportionately affect women and other marginalized groups.

My project establishes difference between Black and White Southern women authors writing about the natural world. The Black authors I study establish an ecoliterary tradition distinct from the White women I examine: texts by and about Black women demonstrate that racism is part of human nature and therefore, Black characters often experience racialized violence in the natural world. Thus, it becomes imperative for these Southern Black women to write about survival and resilience. These Black authors also emphasize the importance of community more than the White authors I study. For example, in my coda, I examine how Jesmyn Ward's Black characters in *Salvage the Bones* create new kinships as they support each other in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

In this project, I want to initiate new ways of thinking about Southern ecoliterary traditions, altering how we read Southern and environmental literature. By examining Southern women's environmental writing, we better understand the nuance of how regionality affects environmental thinking, activism, and even storytelling. We know that literary works can effect social change; Southern women's environmental writing can propel environmental advocacy and activism. My intersectional analysis affords the opportunity for social change: gaining a more nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of social identities—namely race, class, and gender in this case—leads to increased empathy and a potential decline in environmental injustices. By understanding how cultural and geographical factors affect our perceptions of the natural world, we can more easily find environmental value in communities, especially those that aren't our own. Several of my primary texts suggest the value of nature in reclaiming identities and finding solace from generational trauma.

When we study Southern women's works about nature and place, we learn more about historical perspectives of the U.S. South and the field of environmentalism. Thus, comparing Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with Ward's 2011 *Salvage the Bones* demonstrates how the climate crisis has changed drastically in just seventy-four years, allowing us to understand the trajectory of how African American women writers process catastrophe through their literary works. We can read these texts—and others written by Southern women—as frameworks for how Southern women's environmental writing can help environmental justice causes in the 2020s and beyond.

Most importantly, perhaps, my project offers a more holistic approach to understanding the entanglements of Southern women, the natural world, race, class, and gender. Many important critical works have analyzed these topics; my project adds analyses of specific elements of place to the discourse. Without analyzing an assemblage of elements (natural and built), we get limited, often one-dimensional interpretations of women's relationships with the natural world. My analyses focus on specific elements of place to examine how social identity markers overlap and entangle, influencing Southern women's portrayals of nature and environments. The field of ecology teaches us that it is essential to understand living organisms *relationally* and *holistically*: you cannot pull apart a system and expect to understand the whole—or parts of the whole. In the literature I examine, everything is interconnected too: we cannot expect to understand women or the U.S. South or the natural world or race or class or gender without putting them in conversation with one another.

Contributions

Scholars from several disciplines inform my argument: critical race theory, ecocriticism/ecofeminism, and Southern literature. Of these critics' major works, none spotlight

Southern women's environmental writing prominently. The intersection of these fields provides ground for more holistic understandings of each of these disciplines. "Elements of Place: Southern Women Writers, Race, and Generational Environmental Knowledge" contributes to all three fields by closely examining the entanglements of race, gender, and class, demonstrating holistic analyses of the natural world.

By prioritizing several Southern Black women's voices, my project contributes to race and gender studies. Kimberly Ruffin writes that "artistic traditions are a key part of solving the problem at hand [environmental injustice] because they have been a prime place of ecological agency, particularly when micro- and macroaggressions have discouraged African Americans from natural associations in the physical environment. At the same time, literary critics have largely overlooked African American ecoliterary traditions" (10). Works by Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Jesmyn Ward demonstrate ecological agency, and by exploring how these authors engage the natural world, I foreground neglected African American ecoliterary traditions in race, gender, Southern, and environmental studies. While literary scholars frequently study these authors in analyses of race and occasionally in environmental scholarship, I layer my discussions of them with close analyses of elements of place.

We must open the environmental and the Southern literary canons to better represent voices that have impacted American literature and culture. Jay Watson notes a gap in Southern ecocriticism: "we need the combined conceptual resources of southern and environmental studies to unpack the thick layers of meaning that accrue when southerners write ecologically and environmental thinkers write about the South" (159). Taking Southern women's voices into consideration will only enhance Watson's call, strengthening both the environmental and Southern literary canons. In his introduction to *Ecocriticism and the Future of Southern Studies*,

Vernon writes that "ecocriticism is still relatively new and that it is a, if not *the,* burgeoning subfield for future generations of southern studies scholars" (7-8).[3] Luckily, the Southern ecocritical field has grown since the publication of Vernon's edited collection in 2019, yet no scholars have devoted their work to Southern *women* environmental writers.

Kolodny's seminal 1975 work *The Lay of the Land* made American ecofeminism possible. Many ecofeminists—such as Greta Gaard, Marti Kheel, Stacy Alaimo, Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood, Karen Warren, Vandana Shiva, Terry Tempest Williams, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and more—have contributed to the field since, but a book-length study of Southern women writers' representations of nature is lacking.[4] My research not only benefits environmental studies and Southern studies but ecofeminism as well, illuminating important connections between Black and White women's perceptions of place. There is no solidified ecofeminist canon because the field is still emerging; nevertheless, Southern women writers are necessary in such a canon. They have unique cultural experiences with environmental justice concerns due to the South's rich environmental and cultural history. These writers should be explicitly labeled Southern, emphasizing the importance of regional specificity. Studying the varied representations of Southern environments elucidates how race, gender, class, and place deeply affect Southern literature and culture.

Scholarship

Southern Studies

My understanding of the U.S. South, Southern identity, and Southern literature is most informed by the scholarship of Jay Watson, Zackary Vernon, Scott Romine, and Patricia Yaeger.

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[3]Published in 2019, *Ecocriticism and the Future of Southern Studies* was "the first book-length collection of scholarship that applies interdisciplinary environmental studies research to analyses of the US South" (Vernon 8).
[4]See the "Scholarship" section below for more details about ecofeminist scholarship.

Because my argument centers on the South, I must interrogate the phrase "the U.S. South." Like Vernon's, my project treats the South "both as an imaginary space and at times a real place" (5). My project refers to the South as a real place—including Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi, as these are the states my primary texts feature—and an imaginary space which literary critics have attempted to characterize for decades. As Richard Gray posits in the introduction to *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture*: "the South is an imagined community made up of a multiplicity of communities, similarly imagined" (xxiii).

I do not want to contribute to "the assumptions that have accumulated around ['the South'], the conceptual baggage generated by earlier generations of scholarship and popular belief that, arguably, has served to obscure as much as to clarify" (Romine and Greeson 2). Instead, I want to emphasize five women writers' perceptions of the natural world via their characters' experiences in the U.S. South. While many of my chapters include analyses of racism, classism, and sexism, I acknowledge that "Imagined Souths have been used to *contain* problems ranging from poverty and racial oppression to cultural backwardness and religious fanaticism" (Romine and Greeson 3). What I want to do instead is what Jennifer Rae Greeson and Scott Romine posit in their introduction to *Keywords for Southern Studies*: "Doing southern studies is thinking geographically, thinking historically, thinking relationally, thinking about power, thinking about justice, thinking back" (4). My project adds "thinking environmentally" to this list.

We will always associate Southern literature with the American South; the literary category cannot be separated from its geographical location or region. In "Where is Southern Literature," Romine argues, "A 'southern novel,' then, is not merely a novel set in the South, or a novel written by a southern person; 'southern' is, finally, irreducible to geographical criteria. But

at the same time, geographical criteria can never be removed from the equation… *Where* southern literature is—in the South, obviously—can never be dissociated fully from *what* it is" (27). In my thinking about Southern literature, then, I consider both the geographical criteria of my primary texts, along with everything else: the histories, relations, power structures, justice, environments that make these texts Southern (Greeson and Romine 4).

My core argument begs the question, what makes a writer "southern"? Suzanne W. Jones writes, "instead of worrying about who qualifies as a 'southern writer' or rigidly delimiting 'southern literature,' we might more fruitfully ask questions about who is writing about the U.S. South (no matter their birthplace or residence), what stories they are telling, what images they are conjuring up, and, most important, why" (158). Although all my primary authors happen to be born and raised in Southern states, I agree with Jones's point: my project's argument is more concerned with *how* these women shape narratives *about* both the South and the natural world. If Hurston, O'Connor, Walker, Ray, or Ward had chosen to set their texts in places other than the U.S. South, many of my analyses would differ. For my project, it matters that these texts unfold in the South.

While I agree with Jones that it is less important to rigidly define "Southern literature" or what makes a writer "Southern," I do find it useful to tease out trends in the field in the twenty-first century. Christopher Lloyd maps out the twenty-first-century Southern novel in three parts: first, it is "engaged in understanding the meanings and legacies of racism in the South and, more generally, the substance and texture of race itself" (313). Second, "the southern novel often explores the crossroads, meeting points, coordinates, and scales of place: the relationship between the global and local" (Lloyd 313). And third, "the contemporary southern novel examines the environment, whether southern, national, or international. Recent novels offer

substantive and insightful considerations of climate change and environmental catastrophe" (Lloyd 313). While Lloyd's parameters are specifically about the twenty-first-century Southern novel, I find his parameters match my own understanding of Southern literature in general—not only contemporary novels. All five of my primary texts engage with racism, explore place, and examine environments in some way. Not all contemporary Southern literature fits into Lloyd's framework, of course, which is what makes defining any period of Southern literature complicated.

My work is, of course, not the first to compare Black and White women writers. Patricia Yaeger's significant *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990* undergirds much of my own thinking about Southern women writers. While Yaeger sets out to break apart tropes about Southern women (imagined and real, such as "the belle or female 'miniature' as the prototypical southern female figure"), I am more interested in the ways Southern women write about race, class, and the natural world (Yaeger xi). Yaeger's was one of the first studies to compare Black and White Southern women writers, paving the way for my work. She clarifies: "By placing black and white writers side by side, I do not want to insist on a continuum but to shake up a narrow and male-defined southern 'tradition,' to construct a wide terrain from which to explore southern women's racial differences and their unevenly shared symbol and language systems, erected so boldly across differing topographies of power" (Yaeger xi). Writing in 2024, I feel it is no longer necessary to resist the male-defined southern tradition, as I believe Southern studies has escaped from those limited confines, thanks partly to Yaeger's work. Yaeger moves away from the "lustrous southern preoccupation with family… to examine the problem of neglect, of the throwaway" (xi). Again, because of her departure from these

Southern literary tropes, I can return to studying family structures. But I too am examining the problem of neglect, abuse, and trauma in concert with family and the natural world.

Race and Environment

Two Black feminist scholars have most shaped how I understand the entanglements of race, region, and African American literature: Kimberly N. Ruffin's *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* and Thadious M. Davis's "Expanding the Limits: The Intersection of Race and Region" and *Southscapes: Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature.* Ruffin employs only one Southern woman—Alice Walker—as a central figure in one chapter, but Ruffin does not emphasize Walker's Southern roots. That said, Ruffin's work has been instrumental to mine. She defines African Americans' experiences with environmental othering as an "'ecological burden-and-beauty paradox,' which pinpoints the dynamic influence of the natural and social order on African American experience and outlook" (Ruffin 2). Ruffin's theory is especially prevalent in my Hurston and Walker chapters since those sections analyze novels written by Black women. Rather than departing from Ruffin's important work, I apply her thinking about African American ecoliterary traditions to my analyses.

Davis's works (mentioned above) have deeply informed my thinking about race and Southern literature. She argues that "[p]lace as a powerful signifier of identity for a black person in the South cannot be overestimated" (T. Davis, *Southscapes* 341). *Southscapes* focuses on Richard Wright, Ernest Gaines, and Alice Walker; I extend Davis's work by adding more Southern women to the analysis. Because of Davis's call to focus on Walker's examination of racial, regional, and gender identities, my Walker chapter focuses on these threads in relation to elements of place. Using Davis's term from *Southscapes*, I contend that *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* exemplifies "a new spatial geography" of race and region by emphasizing

Black characters' dynamic relationships with the natural world, the South, and America (339). Davis calls for more critical examinations of Walker's works when she claims that the author has altered Southern studies as a whole; my Walker chapter answers this call by studying how region and particular elements of place influence complicated strands of identity in *Grange*.

bell hooks's *Belonging: A Culture of Place* has informed my thinking about African Americans' sense of belonging in the natural world. In my Walker chapter, I rely on hooks's and Davis's historical arguments about Black return migration to inform my analysis of Grange's reclamation of the South as his home (T. Davis, "Expanding the Limits" 6; hooks 60). Similarly, Trudier Harris argues that Black authors—regardless of where they were born or choose to live—are compelled to write about the South because of African Americans' deep historical connections to the region (2). Harris posits that Southern Black writers must negotiate "the beauty and the ugliness" of the South, an idea I apply to Walker's *Grange* to show the complex nature of the American South (15). That said, Harris's work does not focus explicitly on ecocritical or ecofeminist themes.

Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism

In addition to the ecofeminist scholars I have mentioned elsewhere, Karen L. Kilcup's *Fallen Forests: Emotion, Embodiment, and Ethics in American Women's Environmental Writing, 1781-1924* has significantly informed my work. *Fallen Forests* expands the environmental writing canon by examining "how women writers enlisted genre to promote social change and how their rhetorical strategies… engendered awareness of environmental concerns and sometimes propelled action" (3). The book's core questions paved the way for the questions I ask at the beginning of my introduction, propelling my project's arguments. Kilcup's

observation that "how we perceive *nature*… depends on the viewer's culture and experience, time period, and place" concisely defines the essence of my project (5-6).

My Hurston chapter relies on scholarship by Henry Louis Gates and Karla Rohová, alongside Ruffin and others. While Gates includes some ecocritical analysis of *Their Eyes* in *The Signifying Monkey*—inside and outside spaces as they affect Janie's development and mobility—I extend his argument to include the other elements of place I identify in Hurston's novel (184). I also take issue with how Gates imagines nature as a category or symbol. Rohová focuses on environmental racism and ecofeminism in *Their Eyes* by analyzing the novel's natural environments as actors in the text's plot (Rohová 32). But her analysis is limited in its approach to Janie's journey; I argue more specifically about Janie's mobility, her physical movements through Florida—that she must travel throughout the state and eventually return home to Eatonville to find fulfillment in herself—and about her evolving relationship with the natural world.

Scholars have focused on general environmental themes in O'Connor's work, yet all fall short when it comes to in-depth ecofeminist and material ecocritical analyses of "A View." Christine Flanagan discusses the destructive effects of othering nature, providing a sound starting point for ecofeminist analyses of O'Connor's short fiction ("From Earth to Eternity" 165). This chapter extends her argument by adding an analysis of O'Connor's elements of place as they affect the story's environmental themes. I also extend Katie Simon's argument when she highlights "issues of poverty, gender, migration, and race that are part of the southern environmental legacy" in "A View" (22). Timothy Vande Brake writes about O'Connor's environmentalism across her works, specifically her personification and characterization of the woods, yet he omits an analysis of the woods' agency (27). A material ecocritical analysis of "A

View" is essential in any discussion of the story's environmental themes.

Discussions about Southern environmental literature have excluded Janisse Ray's work, despite its far-reaching outcomes in the preservation of longleaf pine forests. My fifth chapter applies Gary Hawkins's term "Rough South" to Janisse Ray's works, expanded in Jean W. Cash and Keith Ronald Perry's edited collection *Rough South, Rural South: Region and Class in Recent Southern Literature* (xi). Hawkins's definition (and Cash and Perry's extension of it) accurately describes Ray's work, yet no one has explored Ray's work using this lens.

I apply some of Eli Clare's thinking in his memoir *Exile and Pride* to my analysis of Ray's text. Clare's work provides another perspective in a class-conscious conversation about the intersections of poverty, labor, and environmentalism. I also draw from Rob Nixon's argument in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*: nonfiction can be a powerful political tool, yet much nonfiction has been excluded from the environmental literature canon (25). Ray's nonfiction effectively demonstrates Nixon's point: in this case, blending the personal and the political breeds creative, successful activism.

Finally, I extend Nixon's arguments about slow and spectacular violence when I analyze Ward's *Salvage the Bones* in my coda. I apply Nixon's theories about slow violence to connect the anti-Blackness violence in *Salvage* with the spectacular violence wrought by Hurricane Katrina (2).

Project Threads

Elements of Place

Throughout my project, I use the phrase *elements of place* to refer to natural and built elements that consciously or subconsciously shape perceptions of place and belonging. These figures, I argue, are not only natural but can be human-made and have similar effects as

something natural might. Note that elements of place can be places themselves, but more often, these figures are related to the natural world and not strictly places. For example, in my Hurston chapter, I consider the woods, gates (i.e., gates in a human-made fence), and the horizon as significant elements of place. While the woods and the horizon are of course natural, gates are human made, yet gates have a similar effect on Hurston's protagonist as do the natural figures throughout the novel. I use *elements of place* to describe these nuanced affective figures, natural and built; phrases such as *nature* or *environments* are not specific enough for my analyses.

Elements of place featured in my O'Connor chapter include the woods, the protagonist's view of the woods (different from the woods themselves), the lawn, and rocks/stones. These figures in O'Connor's story affect more characters than just the protagonist; they alter the story's plot. Incarnations in Walker's *Grange* are expansive and multifaceted, including cotton fields, the woods, gardens, the clearing, Central Park, and lawns. These figures affect the three main characters—Grange, Copeland, and Ruth—differently, evolving throughout the novel's temporalities. Iterations in Ray's memoir include the junkyard, longleaf pine forests, the woods, and mental illnesses; again, these affect Janisse Ray, her father, and her grandfather in distinct ways. These four primary texts all utilize the woods as influential elements of place, but in varying ways, as I will explore in my four chapters. In my coda, I briefly highlight Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*'s incarnations: Hurricane Katrina, the pit, and Bois Sauvage all deeply affect the novel's characters. The pit and Bois Sauvage are both influential places in the novel, and while Hurricane Katrina is not a place, the storm influences the characters as much or more as the novel's settings.

Generational Environmental Knowledge

Generational environmental knowledge is another of my project's threads. While I did not plan for this commonality, all five of my primary texts include three generations of families. Because Hurston, O'Connor, Walker, Ray, and Ward each write about environmental themes and generations of families, my analyses necessarily include how environmental knowledge passes from generation to generation, along with how each family member utilizes (or doesn't utilize) that environmental knowledge.

My Hurston chapter follows the matriarchal Crawford family, whose environmental knowledge derives from escaping enslavement and oppression via the natural world. Nanny passes down this survival knowledge to her daughter Leafy; then, Nanny passes the same knowledge to her granddaughter Janie. My O'Connor chapter features the patriarchal Fortune-Pitts family; Pitts passes down environmental knowledge (through care of the natural world) to his daughter, yet Grandfather Fortune never learns environmental care. In my Walker chapter, environmental knowledge skips the middle generation: Grange passes down a love of the natural world to his granddaughter Ruth, skipping Brownfield, who grows to hate and abuse nature. Similarly, in my Ray chapter, Charlie teaches his granddaughter Janisse how to love and use the natural world ethically; this knowledge skips Franklin, who feared the outdoors. Environmental knowledge in my coda's primary text centers survival for the Batistes: the grandparents pass down their knowledge to their children who pass it down to Esch and her brothers. In my final analysis, perceptions of the natural world seem consistent through all three generations of the Batistes.

Generational Trauma

My analyses emphasize familial structures and the transfer of environmental knowledge, but importantly, I stress that family members pass down trauma from generation to generation in many of these texts. The African American families in my primary texts are especially vulnerable to generational distress due to the legacy of enslavement in the U.S. South. Slavery's lasting effects on families complicates these familial relationships with one another and their relationships to the natural world. Throughout my analyses of my five primary texts, I resist the problematic urge to generalize traumas. Per Jon Smith, "one great error of the past century's work in southern studies has surely been its tendency… to gloss over the differences not only among and within white, black, Native, Caribbean, Hispanic, and other experiences of trauma but also of the traumas themselves" (357). While four of my five analyses concern fictional characters, I avoid flattening distinctions between the burdens felt by individuals.

My thinking about generational trauma is informed by the work of Dominick LaCapra, Resmaa Menakem, Monnica T. Williams, and others.[5] While these scholars engage in some literary analysis in their respective works, analyzing Southern women's environmental writing is not their goal. Their work has guided mine, nonetheless. LaCapra's research on memory has illuminated analyses of my primary texts: "it is widely recognized but still worth emphasizing that memory, including traumatic memory, has a crucial role in the formation of individual and collective identities" (LaCapra 101-02). I argue that the burdens experienced by these five families—the Crawfords, Fortune-Pittses, Copelands, Rays, and Batistes—help shape the identities of these texts' characters, for better or worse.

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[5]See LaCapra, "Trauma, History, Memory, Identity: What Remains"; Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*; and Williams et al., "Assessing PTSD in Ethnic and Racial Minorities: Trauma and Racial Trauma."

Obviously, racialized trauma more deeply affects the Black families in my study: the Crawfords, Copelands, and Batistes. Unsurprisingly, psychological research has revealed that "racial trauma can result in significant psychological and physiological damage in people of color" (Williams et al. 181). Further, my analyses suggest that the Black characters I study experience more cultural upheaval when compared to White characters. Eyerman argues that for Black Americans, "the meaning and memory of slavery and the failure of emancipation… is the primal scene of cultural trauma" (Eyerman 98). Such a burden is imprinted on the Black characters I analyze; even if these characters were not enslaved, they remain encumbered with the memory of slavery. Resmaa Menakem argues that "the multiple forces—genes, history, culture, laws, and family—have created a long bloodline of trauma in African American bodies" (Menakem 11). This painful bloodline appears in my Hurston and Walker chapters, as well as in my coda. But we also see these Black characters passing down resilience to their children and grandchildren: "besides trauma, there is something else human beings routinely pass on from person to person and from generation to generation: resilience" (Menakem 50).

Black women's resilience in chapters two and four and in my coda is important to analyze: their strength helps these women forge positive, beautiful relationships with the natural world and their environments, even after they have survived devastating hurricanes (Hurston and Ward), burdensome legacies of enslavement (Hurston, Walker, and Ward), exploitation through sharecropping (Walker), and physical and sexual violence in the natural world (Hurston and Ward). These Black characters' resilience helps heal decades of pain associated with racial oppression and the natural world. That Hurston, Walker, and Ward feature strong Black women characters in their environmental texts suggests that Southern women writers contribute important voices in discussions of environmental racism and justice.

In my Hurston chapter, I examine how Nanny Crawford passes down trauma to her daughter Leafy and then to her granddaughter Janie. As a young woman, Nanny was enslaved, and as was common, her enslaver raped and impregnated her; Nanny escaped from enslavement with Leafy when the child was a baby. Leafy too was raped and impregnated by a White man in a position of power, and after giving birth to Janie, Leafy ran away. Carrying her grandmother's and mother's pain with her, Janie experiences violence from abusive husbands and through racialized and sexualized violence. By the novel's end, though, Hurston paints a hopeful future for Janie, demonstrating this Black woman's resilience.

In O'Connor's story, trauma is not racially inscribed as it is in *Their Eyes*. Mark Fortune was negatively affected by his mother's death; because he has not worked through his pain, he abuses his son-in-law Pitts, the land, and eventually his granddaughter. Pitts suffers the wrath of old Fortune, living on his father-in-law's land, unable to become a landowner himself. And Mary's father and her grandfather both verbally and physically abuse her; ultimately, her grandfather murders her. While these members of the Fortune-Pitts family do not pass down racialized trauma as in *Their Eyes*, they do suffer from each other's unresolved psychological issues. These burdens affect how they perceive and interact with the natural world too.

My Walker chapter examines Walker's generational progression of White abuse of Black labor: Grange's grandparents were enslaved; as an adult, Grange worked as a sharecropper before migrating North; in childhood and adulthood, Brownfield worked as a sharecropper; then, Brownfield serves prison time. Anti-Black racism affects the Copelands considerably, which leads to them mistreating each other: Grange traumatizes Brownfield by abandoning him, and Brownfield hurts Ruth by attempting to control her. As in *Their Eyes*, however, *Grange* ends with a hopeful future for Ruth—further emphasizing Black women's survival and resilience.

My Ray chapter features the real-life family the Rays; while racism does not affect the Ray family, classism and mental illness (which may result from their socioeconomic status) negatively influence their family. Charlie's mental illness and his family's poverty traumatize him, and both also harm his son Franklin; Franklin's instability inflicts suffering on Janisse, along with the loss of longleaf pine forests. While poverty is not exactly passed down from generation to generation in the same way that race-related trauma is, being poor still deeply affects all aspects of the Ray family's lives.[6]

My coda analyzes the generational trauma in the Batiste family—namely anti-Black racism and fear of natural disasters. While readers never meet Papa Joseph and Mother Lizbeth, we learn that the older generation chooses to stay in Bois Sauvage when destructive hurricanes hit. Poverty, racism, and Hurricane Camille cause suffering for Rose and Claude—the next generation. In addition, Rose's death during childbirth negatively affects Claude and their children. And in the following generation, Esch's burdens include Hurricane Katrina and the lore of past hurricanes, along with racism, sexism, and sexual assault. Generational trauma can take many forms; my analyses demonstrate how these intersections—of racism, classism, sexism—can affect families and result in violence.

Chapter Summaries

In my four chapters and coda, I explore five Southern American authors' portrayals of their characters' nuanced relationships with the natural world as influenced by their races, social classes, and genders to investigate nature's effects on Southern identities. Focusing on elements

[6]The "stickiness at the ends" social mobility theory applies here: "Americans raised at the bottom and top of the family income ladder are likely to remain there as adults" (Urahn et al. 2). Generational poverty is difficult to escape: "Sixty-six percent of those raised in the bottom of the wealth ladder remain on the bottom two rungs themselves" (Urahn et al. 2).

of place, generational environmental knowledge, and familial trauma, I closely analyze one environmental text in each chapter, moving chronologically based on their publication dates. Beginning with Hurston's 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and concluding with Ward's 2011 *Salvage the Bones*, I examine how these Black and White Southern women write about the natural world across seventy-four years during great environmental change.

"Dawn and doom was in the branches": Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

My Zora Neale Hurston chapter analyzes Hurston's protagonist's nuanced relationship with the natural world in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I interrogate the protagonist's perception of her status as a young African American woman, her evolving understanding of nature and home, her experience surviving a catastrophic hurricane, and her journey from confinement to freedom through mobility.

Janie Crawford represents the natural world's positive attributes; her idealized view of nature includes the symbolic pear tree, and bees and blooms throughout the novel represent her sexuality, womanhood, and power. Yet Janie's idyllic natural vision transforms when a hurricane hits in 1928, proving that nature also brings destruction and uncontrollable chaos. I include historical documentation about the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane, also known as the San Felipe Segundo hurricane, which Hurston fictionalized (Mitchell). When Janie and Tea Cake reach a bridge for shelter, "White people had preempted that point of elevation and there was no more room" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 164). I analyze the inequality the hurricane brings and Janie's subsequent evolving feelings about nature; though the hurricane harms everyone in the Everglades, Black folks are most affected. Janie's perceptions of nature reflect Hurston's position as an oppressed Southern Black woman in the late nineteenth and early- to mid-

twentieth centuries. Using Ruffin's "ecological burden-and-beauty paradox," I demonstrate how Janie reflects Hurston's nuanced attitudes toward nature (2).

"The trees were bathed in blood": Flannery O'Connor's "A View of the Woods"

While Hurston emphasizes environmental racism in *Their Eyes*, in my next chapter I argue that O'Connor foregrounds environmental and familial destruction in her 1957 story "A View of the Woods." Relying on an ecofeminist framework, I analyze how O'Connor interweaves the destruction of land with the abuse of women, followed by a material ecocritical analysis of the conclusion of her violent story.

Like Janie Crawford, nine-year-old protagonist Mary Fortune Pitts values her vision of the natural world. In this case, Mary prioritizes her view of "the lawn" over familial relationships: she "preferred the sight of the woods" to anything else (O'Connor, *Collected Works* 532; 539). Unlike Janie's perspective, Mary's perception of nature shifts not because of a natural disaster but a human: her grandfather murders her before he also dies. Although Mary's feelings about the natural world are not resolved as Janie's are, "A View of the Woods" exemplifies the parallel exploitation of women and land. While several foundational ecofeminist texts influence my third chapter—such as those by Marti Kheel, Annette Kolodny, and Stacy Alaimo—I extend their scholarship: there are no ecofeminist analyses of "A View of the Woods" (or of any O'Connor's texts).[7] This chapter argues that Hurston understands environmental racism as crucial to unpack in fiction, while O'Connor concentrates on environmental destruction; the latter is more concerned about the land than those working it.

[7]That is, until my article "'Marching across the water': A Material Ecofeminist Reading of 'A View of the Woods'" was published in *Women Studies* in 2022.

"Georgia would be home for him": Alice Walker's The *Third Life of Grange Copeland*

Growing up only a few miles from O'Connor's family farm, Alice Walker creates nuanced portrayals of environment and region, illuminating how race, class, labor, and land intertwine. *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* exemplifies "a new spatial geography" of race and region by emphasizing African American characters' nuanced relationships with the natural world, the South, and even America at large (T. Davis 339).

Walker's 1970 novel foregrounds home: the dream of leaving home, the return home, and the inability to make a home. Place, race, gender, and land are inextricable. In her 1987 afterword, Walker writes, "It is almost bitterly comic today, as we see our exploited, poisoned, depleted planet wobbling underneath our collective weight, to think that white supremacists have actually thought, and in places will think, that they can acquire peace and security in the world by dispossessing people of color" (317). Walker's characters' dispossession makes it exceedingly difficult to develop meaningful connections with the natural world, though she shows it is possible. Despite the Copelands' generational trauma from sharecropping and struggling to become landowners, Grange and his granddaughter Ruth learn to love the natural world and find solace within it. Their transformations are significant as they work to heal decades worth of pain associated with racial and class oppression and the natural world.

"Georgia's great unwashed democracy": Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*

Further suggesting my writers' proximities, Alice Walker and Janisse Ray grew up one hundred and fifty miles apart; their experiences with place are not dissimilar, though their racial identities recast how they portray nature. Where Walker elucidates slavery's lasting physical and psychological impacts on her characters—specifically via sharecropping—Ray demonstrates that White poverty is an environmental issue. Thus, this chapter analyzes entanglements of social

class, environmental justice, race, and Southern identity in Ray's 1999 memoir *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*. I highlight Ray's argument that even poor folks have an ethical obligation to protect the natural world when they are able. I also challenge some of Ray's authorial choices regarding her inherently privileged status as a White woman.

Growing up on a South Georgia junkyard shaped Ray's attachment to place, especially longleaf pine forests: "I carry the landscape inside like an ache. The story of who I am cannot be severed from the story of the flatwoods" (Ray 4). I explore Ray's passion for environmental conservation, her rightful anxieties about clear-cutting, and how social class impacts the author's love of Southern landscape, focusing particularly on environmental injustice (Clare 21). As a self-described "Cracker," Ray proves that while underprivileged folks have limited access to environmental protection, they can still practice and encourage conservation: "Most people worried about getting by, and when getting by meant using the land, we used it. When getting by meant ignoring the land, we ignored it" (165). Both Walker and Ray strive for environmental justice but for different reasons: Walker wants her characters to heal their generational trauma due to enslavement and sharecropping, while Ray advocates for environmental justice for poor folks especially. Influenced by dissimilar life experiences, both Walker and Ray ultimately want equity for those who are oppressed—humans and nonhumans.

Coda: Southern Women's Environmental Writing in the Twenty-First Century

To demonstrate the continuing resonance of this project's analytical focus, the coda analyzes one contemporary novel that exemplifies contemporary Southern ecofeminist literature. Mississippian Jesmyn Ward has personal, traumatic memories of Hurricane Katrina; her writing demonstrates that she and many people of color were affected differently than White survivors of the storm. Over the last few decades, Americans have become more aware of environmental

injustice, but Ward helps make clear the ways people of color still face negative impacts from environmental racism. Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) unravels complicated connections between Southern communities, natural disasters, racial legacies, family, and perceptions of home. By exploring America's collective memories, Ward explores racial identity within a contemporary Southern context.

That influential twenty-first century texts continuously reveal the nuanced relationships between Southern women and the natural world further solidifies my work's significance. Contemporary environmentalisms should incorporate the texts and arguments my project emphasizes. To fully understand ecocriticism and Southern literature's complexities, both fields need to collaborate more intentionally: ecocriticism needs to better incorporate Southern literature and vice versa. Fully understanding the nuances of the American South is impossible without considering the way Southern women represent elements of place.

Significance of "Elements of Place"

In addition to contributing to race and gender studies, ecofeminism, and Southern studies, my project demonstrates that there is still much work to be done in contemporary environmentalisms. We need more critical attention to the intersections of these essentially disparate fields. To understand the complexities of slavery's continued impacts on the U.S. South—and on Southern African Americans in particular—it is essential to study how folks from marginalized groups perceive the natural world. People of color have long been excluded from natural spaces in America, and if it is the goal of environmentalists to make the natural world more inclusive, amplifying the voices of folks of color is a good place to start. Women, and especially Black women, have suffered immense oppression in this country; one way to continue ensuring progress and stability in women's rights movements is to amplify women writers'

voices. “Elements of Place: Southern Women Writers, Race, and Generational Environmental Knowledge” emphasizes these underrepresented groups to make these spaces—in the physical outdoors and in scholarship—more accessible, equitable, and inclusive. By paying closer attention to the overlaps and entanglements in Southern studies, women’s and gender studies, critical race theory, and environmental writing, we can understand more fully and granularly how oppression affects humans and the natural world.

Applying the term *elements of place* might provide more context and nuance to the nature/culture binary. By recognizing human-made elements of place as having the potential to affect humans as natural elements might (positively and negatively), we can better understand how and why humans perceive nature the way they do. Acknowledging certain *elements of place* as affective and valuable may help us treat environments better. My project offers a holistic view of Southern women, the natural world, race, class, and gender. Understanding these threads as interconnected allows for richer analyses.

Underneath this project is my deep appreciation of nature—something I hope is clear in every chapter—and my deep desire to understand why and how the natural world continues to be exploited and abused. My next chapter begins in 1937 with the publication of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a text that has shaped Southern ecoliterary traditions. I analyze a young Black woman’s nuanced relationships with the natural world; Hurston sets the stage for Southern women writers who follow her. As in most of my primary texts, Hurston’s novel proves that despite oppression and other hardships, “nature [can be] the place of victory” (hooks 8).

CHAPTER II: "DAWN AND DOOM WAS IN THE BRANCHES": ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

> Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. (Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* 1)

> She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made. (Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* 11)

Framework

Hurston's striking opening paragraph of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937; hereafter *Their Eyes*) establishes the narrative structure that grounds Janie Crawford's circular journey through Florida. Some ships "sail forever on the horizon," searching for a dream just out of reach. For Hurston's young protagonist, the horizon represents a life bigger than what she's been dealt. Scholars have analyzed the horizon in *Their Eyes* at length; most agree that it represents Janie's search for happiness, which lasts from childhood through adulthood.[8] Janie seeks out the horizon throughout the novel, cementing it as a unifying extended metaphor. Less examined, however, are the gates, a central element of place in the novel that represents Janie's perceptions of home and place. To reach the horizon, Janie must first leave her grandmother's gate—traversing the boundary between childhood and womanhood, growth and self-actualization. When Janie enters through her Eatonville home's gate, returning alone yet fulfilled, her circular narrative is complete.

[8]For analyses of the horizon, see A. Davis, Gates, Jacobs.

Janie's journey helps her understand that humans have the ability to affect her relationship with the natural world and vice versa. Early in life, her negative marital experiences compromise her positive perception of nature, and the devastating hurricane she barely survives challenges her ecological understanding. In *Black on Earth*, Kimberly Ruffin defines African Americans' experiences with environmental othering as an "'ecological burden-and-beauty paradox,' which pinpoints the dynamic influence of the natural and social order on African American experience and outlook" (2). Janie grapples with her own ecological burden-and-beauty paradox; readers can track her growth and evolving relationship with the natural world throughout *Their Eyes*, as she is deeply connected to her place(s). As I will discuss, the hurricane causes Janie to rethink social hierarchies, and she becomes burdened by her ecological experience. Her appreciation of nature—the beauty of her ecological experience—keeps her optimistic, even after witnessing so much devastation and racist responses to that devastation. Nonetheless, near the end of Janie's journey (and the novel), she re-cultivates her positive association with nature. "The experience of ecological beauty," Ruffin reminds us, "results from individual and collective attitudes toward nature that undercut the experience of racism and its related evils" (3). While Hurston claimed she adamantly avoided writing a novel about race, we cannot read Hurston's most famous work without addressing how racialized lived experiences impact perceptions of the natural world and vice versa—how natural environments affect the experiences of characters of color.

In her 1942 memoir *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston wrote, "Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject" (171). She did not explicitly address "the Race Problem" in her popular writing, contrary to the way her contemporaries (namely Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Alain Locke) overtly addressed

racism in their works. In his 1937 review of *Their Eyes,* Wright concluded that "Miss Hurston can write; but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley. Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes" (25). He goes on to say that "her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits the phase of Negro life which is 'quaint,' the phrase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the 'superior' race" (Wright 25). *Their Eyes* does much more than Wright condemns Hurston for: that the novel complexly deals with environmental justice issues, emphasizing the interconnections between race and the natural world.

Hurston excluded much historical context in her writing, including the Ocoee Massacre of November 1920 and the 1931 Scottsboro trial—both of which she had to have been aware of. Biographer Robert Hemenway notes this lack of historical context in her autoethnographical collection: "Published the same year as the Scottsboro trial, *Mules and Men* has a disembodied quality about it, as if it came from a backwoods so far to the rear that American social history of the twentieth century had not touched its occupants" (220). But Hemenway gives Hurston more credit than her critics did:

> By leaving out "the problem," by emphasizing the art in the folkloric phenomenon, Hurston implicitly told whites: Contrary to your arrogant assumptions, you have not really affected us that much; we continue to practice our own culture, which as a matter of fact is more alive, more esthetically pleasing than your actions. She felt that black culture manifested an independent esthetic system that could be discussed without constant reference to white oppression. (221)

Hurston wrote more about "the Race Problem" and injustice after facing criticism: "I too yearn for universal justice, but how to bring it about is another thing. It is such a complicated thing, for justice, like beauty is in the eye of the beholder. There is universal agreement of the principle,

but the application brings on the fight" (*Dust Tracks* 228). She chose to write about race and racism differently than her counterparts. Hemenway continues, "*Dust Tracks* can be a discomfiting book, and it has probably harmed Hurston's reputation. Like much of her career, it often appears contradictory. Zora seems to be both an advocate for the universal, demonstrating that this black woman does not look at the world in racial terms, and the celebrant of a unique ethnic upbringing in an all-black village" (276). This chapter prioritizes *Their Eyes* over *Dust Tracks*; in her most famous novel, Hurston successfully weaves a complicated story of resisting oppression to become independent vis-à-vis the natural world. We should not read *Their Eyes* without spotlighting the interconnectedness of race and the environment.

One such way that Hurston writes about race and the environment is by emphasizing Janie's mobility, which is emblematic of how many Southern Black folks respond to environmental disasters. Janie's movements around Florida represent her growth; when she is unable to move or migrate, she cannot develop. Historically, late nineteenth and early twentieth century migration was "environmental as well as social"; not only were African Americans migrating from the South, escaping overtly violent racism and inequity, but also "natural disasters such as the Johnstown Flood of 1899 and the Mississippi Flood of 1927; the 1926 and 1928 Florida hurricanes; the boll weevil's decimation of cotton monocultures; and the droughts of the 1930s" informed decisions to migrate (Claborn 123–24). Several of these natural disasters heavily influence Hurston's work, particularly regarding mobility. While Janie's movement becomes a prevalent motif in *Their Eyes*, John Claborn emphasizes Hurston's "regional specificity, or rather, her ability to synthesize the local with mobility" (125). Claborn notes that in general, "problems of ecology, nature, and environments play a significant role in the development of early-twentieth-century African-American writing" (167). As we will see,

Hurston is deeply influenced by two natural disasters: the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane and the 1929 Bahamas Hurricane.

Most scholars writing ecocritically about *Their Eyes* focus on the novel's horizon and pear tree imagery, the environment of "the muck" (the Everglades), and the hurricane and its devastating effects. Henry Louis Gates includes some ecocritical analysis in *The Signifying Monkey* when he analyzes inside and outside spaces as they affect Janie's development and mobility. Aitor Ibarrola-Armendáriz analyzes the hurricane's psychological effects on the writer's characters in "What Hidden Attitudes do Hurricanes Unleash? Reconsidering Gender, Class, and Racial Issues in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." In "From 'Spy-Glass' to 'Horizon': Tracking the Anthropological Gaze in Zora Neale Hurston," Karen Jacobs focuses on the horizon and pear tree as anti-hierarchical structures. Matthew Wynn Sivils focuses on various symbolic trees in *Their Eyes* in "Reading Trees in Southern Literature." Rachel Stein's chapter on Hurston in *Shifting the Ground: American Women Writers' Revisions of Nature, Gender, and Race* focuses on Afro-Caribbean influences and Voodoo imagery in *Their Eyes*. None of these sources focus on the novel's gate symbolism or on its interconnections between race, class, gender, and the natural world.

Karla Rohová's "When Nature Triggers Trauma: Environmental Racism and Ecofeminism in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" is the closest to what I want to accomplish, as Rohová focuses on environmental racism and ecofeminism in the novel. The essay's goal is to identify "animality and subsequent natural trauma, as well as evaluat[e] these concepts in the historical, political and social context of environmental and institutional racism in the United States of America" (Rohová 32). Rohová's analysis is limited in its approach to Janie's journey: she focuses on Janie's journey from oppression to independence

without paying much attention to her physical/geographical journey through Florida or her shifting relationship with the natural world.

Though environmentalists or critics do not typically consider gates to be natural, I argue that Hurston uses gates—part of a built environment, i.e., a fence surrounding a home, another built environment—to represent Janie's understanding of home, place, and the natural world. Hurston's horizon and gates are prominent examples of elements of place—natural and built elements that consciously or subconsciously shape perceptions of place and belonging. I analyze Janie's movement through Florida and how her relationship with the natural world evolves, while examining Hurston's use of gates to signal Janie's growth. Of particular interest is how Janie perceives nature before, during, and after the hurricane.

Hurston's characterizations of nature reflect her own feelings toward the natural world: she was comforted by nature as a child, but her relationship changed after the 1928 and 1929 hurricanes. Nature helped young Zora hide from life's harsh realities: racism, classism, sexism. Alan Brown recalls how she depicted living in a place often considered severe by many residents:

> [P]eople living in Eatonville early in the twentieth century were molded by the harsh conditions they encountered… [Hurston] makes the point that people living in rural Florida had to become tough—that is, more animalistic—in order to surmount the same obstacles that the creatures of the swamp had to cope with every day. On the other hand, Hurston also argues in her autobiography that the natural beauty that surrounded her brought out the poetic impulse that lay dormant within her and inspired her to be an artist. (76)

This disparity—needing to survive the swamp yet valuing the beauty of the natural world—makes Hurston's work essential to my project. In this chapter, I examine Hurston's use of horizon metaphors before turning to place-themed analyses of *Their Eyes*. I emphasize the importance of place and mobility in *Their Eyes* by organizing the sections that follow based on

Janie's movement from West Florida to Jacksonville to the Everglades to West Palm Beach, then back to the Everglades and finally home to Eatonville.

Before examining Hurston's use of horizon metaphors, a summary of *Their Eyes*' plot is essential. The novel's protagonist Janie Crawford tells her life story upon returning home to Eatonville in her forties, making most of the novel a flashback. As a young girl, Janie lives with her grandmother, Nanny. The girl often daydreams outside and experiences her sexual awakening under a blooming pear tree. Nanny attempts to shelter Janie from the dangers of society—enslavement and oppression, rape, pregnancy—traumas that both Nanny and her daughter (Janie's mother) experienced. Nanny believes she can ensure Janie's safety by marrying her off to an older farmer who lives nearby in West Florida. Once Janie marries Logan Killicks, she quickly learns that Logan does not love her and instead only wants a domestic wife to take care of his home and farm. Nanny dies while Janie lives unhappily at Logan's. Janie often gazes past Logan's gate, dreaming of a loving marriage.

Janie meets and runs away with Jody (Joe) Starks, landing in Eatonville, an all-Black community where Joe builds up the town and becomes mayor. While at first Janie and Joe have a loving marriage, ultimately Joe treats her as his property and trophy wife, isolating her from the rest of town and abusing her. They remain married for twenty years until Joe dies of kidney failure. Because she inherits Joe's land and assets, Janie becomes financially independent after his death.

Next, Janie meets Vergible Woods, also known as "Tea Cake," a vagrant and gambler much younger than Janie. Despite her hesitation, the two fall in love and run away to Jacksonville to marry. Then, they move to the Everglades where they work on "the muck" doing physical labor. After two unhappy and abusive marriages, Janie has found the kind of love for

which she was searching. The 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane wreaks havoc on their idyllic life when it hits the Everglades, and Janie and Tea Cake choose to remain there rather than seek shelter elsewhere. In the aftermath of the devastating hurricane, Tea Cake saves Janie from drowning but is bitten by a rabid dog. He grows unpredictable and violent, even attempting to shoot Janie. In self-defense, Janie shoots Tea Cake and is tried for and charged with murder; an all-White jury acquits her. She mourns Tea Cake's death and returns home to Eatonville, facing gossip and judgment from the town's residents. *Their Eyes* concludes when Janie finishes telling her life's story, when she is finally free to live her life independently.

While Janie's relatives are not at the novel's center, Hurston provides details about the Crawford family that are crucial to my argument. Mentioned above, Janie is raised by her grandmother, Nanny, because her mother, Leafy, ran away after giving birth to Janie. As was commonplace, Nanny—formerly enslaved—was raped and impregnated by her enslaver. Nanny escaped from her slaveholder's plantation after she gave birth to Leafy. To Janie, she describes her escape: "In de black dark Ah wrapped mah baby de best Ah knowed how and made it to de swamp by de river. Ah knowed de place was full uh moccasins and other bitin' snakes, but Ah was more skeered uh whut was behind me" (*Their Eyes* 18). Nanny's abusive enslaver terrified her more than the venomous snakes in the swamp. Nanny demonstrates her environmental knowledge: because she knew the path to a swamp by the river, she was able to escape. Nanny uses the natural world to ensure her and her baby's survival: she wrapped her baby "in moss and fixed her good in a tree" (*Their Eyes* 18). Later, Nanny shares with Janie that Leafy was raped by her schoolteacher, continuing the cycle of sexual abuse against Black girls. While Leafy is legally free unlike her mother, she is still subject to race-based sexual violence. Nanny reports, "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" (*Their Eyes* 19). The man uses the woods to hide the child and commit a heinous crime, one that he would not have been legally punished for because of his race.

Nanny's and Leafy's relationships with the natural world are varied, but readers don't get more details about them. As a young child hearing these stories, Janie becomes aware of her family members' perceptions of nature, both positive and negative. And she is well aware of the physical and mental abuse to which her maternal family members have been subjected. *Their Eyes* depicts Janie's journey to break free of the generational trauma experienced due to the Crawford women's race, gender, and class.

The Horizon Past the Gate

Their Eyes opens with grand horizon imagery, establishing Hurston's unifying narrative motifs. Janie returns home, completing her cyclical journey, and Hurston emphasizes Janie's gate—an important part of her built environment. An enlightened forty-something woman, Janie brazenly walks past the judgmental porch sitters: "she kept walking straight on to her gate. The porch couldn't talk for looking" (*Their Eyes* 2). Janie's entrance into her own gate—of the house she left behind to pursue a life with Tea Cake—symbolizes her physical homecoming, but more so, her self-coming—her maturation and self-revelation. The gate also represents the security and comforts of home: "But nobody moved, nobody spoke, nobody even thought to swallow spit until after her gate slammed behind her" (*Their Eyes* 2). When Janie's best friend Pheoby Watson brings her dinner, Pheoby "didn't go in by the front gate and down the palm walk to the front door. She walked around the fence corner and went in the *intimate* gate," symbolizing the women's close kinship (*Their Eyes* 4; emphasis added). Janie apologizes for not bringing

anything home for Pheoby when she says, “Ah ain’t brought home a thing but mahself” (*Their Eyes* 4). Here, she is whole; she has traveled from horizon to horizon to find herself.

Janie’s Eatonville gate is not the only one Hurston includes early in the novel. Janie narrates her life’s experiences, and she “thought a while and decided that her conscious life had commenced at Nanny’s gate” (*Their Eyes* 10). Not yet the site of her sexual awakening, the gate represents the threshold that Janie will cross, moving beyond her childhood self-actualization. Her sexual revelation—instigated by the natural world, as I discuss below—generates questions: “She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her?” (*Their Eyes* 11). Janie physically identifies with the natural world: “glossy leaves” and “bursting buds” represent her body’s coming of age. That she wants “to struggle with life” means she needs to exit her grandmother’s gate—and therefore the security of home—to experience life’s opportunities. The “singing bees” represent love, sexuality, freedom.

And yet, Janie cannot find an answer to her question about them: “She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made” (*Their Eyes* 11). Limited from her fenced-in perspective, Janie must peek over the gate—the physical and metaphorical frontier of her past, present, and future—to see a glimpse of the rest of the world. The road can take her there. While the world exists outside her limited point of view, Janie “wait[s] for the world to be made,” meaning the world she will eventually experience. By crossing through Nanny’s gate—the first of Janie’s elements of place—the young girl will soon learn about marriage, sex, love, the natural world, and racism, classism, and sexism.

Hurston employs two unifying symbols throughout *Their Eyes*: the horizon and the pear tree, additional elements of place. Karen Jacobs calls these "anti-hierarchical structures" (341). Jacobs explains the horizon as "a transcendental image of freedom and possibility in the text," though it "is frequently cut across by the vertical figure of the road or highway which may promise to lead to the horizon and its possibilities but in fact points to the obstacles of hierarchy instead" (342). Feeling oppressed at her grandmother's, Janie views the horizon as a symbol of freedom and stability as well: the horizon is always there when she peers out over Nanny's gate. The "obstacles of hierarchy" Janie faces are racialized, gendered, and classed social hierarchies; these barriers alter her perceptions of love, home, womanhood, and the natural world. These hierarchies are mostly metaphorical but sometimes take the physical form, as we will see. Eager to overcome these impediments, Janie gazes beyond the gate at the horizon.

Hurston scholars have acknowledged the anthropologist's reliance on autobiographical elements in nearly all her publications—sometimes factual and sometimes not—and Janie's gate and horizon are no anomalies.[9] Hurston's memoir elucidates the ways she fuses the personal and fiction.[10] The author remembers her childhood:

> I had a stifled longing. I used to climb to the top of one of the huge Chinaberry trees which guarded our front gate, and look out over the world. The most interesting thing that I saw was the horizon. Every way I turned, it was there, and the same distance away. Our house then, was in the center of the world. It grew upon me that I ought to walk out to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like. (*Dust Tracks* 27)

Hurston as a child here sounds a lot like young Janie Crawford: climbing a tree that "guarded [their] front gate" indicates Hurston's closeness with nature and her desire to experience the world beyond her family's yard. She is intrigued by the horizon, a stabilizing image that

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[9]From 1925 to 1927, Hurston attended Barnard College, studying anthropology with Franz Boas (Boyd).
[10]Alice Walker calls Hurston's memoir "the most unfortunate thing Zora ever wrote" (qtd. in Hemenway xvii).

represents possibility. Hurston's yearning to reach the horizon carried her through her sometimes-devastating life.[11] For Hurston, the gate post too represents an important element of place, a stable return point: "I used to take a seat on top of the gate post and watch the world go by" (*Dust Tracks* 33). Sitting atop her family's gate post allowed the young author to daydream about the rest of the world, far from Eatonville, Florida. Hurston also escaped home by reading: "In a way this early reading gave me great anguish through all my childhood and adolescence. My soul was with the gods and my body in the village" (*Dust Tracks* 41). To alleviate that anguish, Hurston took to the woods, as her protagonist does.

Environment and elements of place figure prominently in Hurston's works, further highlighting connections between her experiences and her literature. Janie's character develops in ways that parallel the author's life experiences. Hurston reflects,

> I was only happy in the woods, and when the ecstatic Florida springtime came strolling from the sea, trance-glorifying the world with its aura. Then I hid out in the tall wild oats that waved like a glinty veil. I nibbled sweet oat stalks and listened to the wind soughing and sighing through the crowns of the lofty pines. I made particular friendship with one huge tree and always played about its roots. I named it 'the loving pine,' and my chums came to know it by that name. (*Dust Tracks* 41)

Hurston's diction reflects her positive feelings toward the natural world as a child: happiest in the woods, she experiences "the ecstatic Florida springtime," which cements her love of nature and place. She appreciates different aspects of the natural world: she samples "sweet oat stalks" and listens to "the wind soughing and sighing" through the trees, elements that other children might have overlooked. The natural world comforted Hurston and taught her more about herself. Her kinship with "the loving pine" demonstrates that her environment shaped her understanding

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[11]Well before Hurston began drafting *Their Eyes*, horizon imagery was featured in her early works. In her first story, "John Redding Goes to Sea," published in the 1921 *Stylus*, the protagonist's mother "believes that her son's dream of traveling to the horizon stems from a spell placed by a local witch who sprinkled 'traveling dust' on the child at birth" (Hemenway 65). Hurston recalls that her mother called Zora's wanderlust "travel dust," another indication that Hurston blended the personal and fiction (*Dust Tracks* 23).

of life. She writes her protagonist similarly: after Janie marries young, "she began to stand around the gate and expect things. What things? She didn't know exactly… She 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 had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed" (*Their Eyes* 25). The gate is Janie's border as Hurston highlights Janie's intimate knowledge of the natural world. Like Hurston's cherished friendship with the tree, Janie also listens to and understands nature.

Freshly married to Logan Killicks with high expectations, Janie spends time gazing toward the horizon, trying to learn from nature. Disappointed in her first marriage, one that "did not make love," she "hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off," foreshadowing her future lovers and experiences (*Their Eyes* 25). Searching for love and kinship that she has in the natural world, young Janie will eventually find Tea Cake, a man who will help her open the gate and cross the threshold, ultimately reaching the horizon. Janie's journey from the novel's start to finish is circular: she travels beyond Nanny's West Florida gate and ultimately returns to her own Eatonville gate, experiencing years of life, love, survival, and death. Previewing the novel's conclusion shows Janie's journey's end: "Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see" (*Their Eyes* 193). Finally, Janie reaches her horizon, an ability influenced by Tea Cake but enacted herself. Andrea Davis analyzes how Janie and other "diasporic Black women continually reset the boundaries of their horizons" when she concludes, "Janie's refusal to see her future through the 'life of men' with its too easy resignation and abdication of dreams, and her insistence on pulling her horizon in and draping it over her shoulders, nonetheless, registers hope

as a repeating, circulating, and obstinate practice of African diasporic women's survival in the Americas" (45–6). *Their Eyes*' conclusion illustrates Janie's hopeful fulfillment. Through Janie's most influential elements of place—gates and the horizon—she is fulfilled as Hurston was, evidenced by the author's reflection: "But already, I have touched the four corners of the horizon, for from hard searching it seems to me that tears and laughter, love and hate, make up the sum of life" (*Dust Tracks* 265).

West Florida

Early on, Hurston uses natural imagery and symbolism to emphasize Janie's idyllic perception of nature. Reminiscing about her younger self, Janie imagines 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" (*Their Eyes* 8). Janie's vision is Edenic as she imagines herself as "a great tree in leaf," or bearing new leaves. But her vision is not purely idyllic: she includes "things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone" as part of her realistic vision. Hurston's repetition of "things" emphasizes all that Janie will experience in her life—the good and the bad. Comparing Janie to a great budding tree with both "dawn and doom" in her branches evokes a connection between herself and her natural environment, utopian only for a brief phase. The frame narrative structure allows Janie's hindsight to bias her memories and perception; still, she understands her life's trajectory through the natural world.

For Janie, elements of place exist outside *and* inside, distinguishing two disparate parts of Janie's self. Her outside elements of place are more obvious: she dreams about her freedom, sexuality, and independence in natural images and metaphors (blooms, bees, the pear tree, the horizon). These outside images juxtapose inside images: elements and places that represent Janie's oppression, such as inside the homes of Nanny and her first two husbands, Logan and

Joe. Henry Louis Gates notes that Janie's "quest for self-knowledge" is "thematize[d] through an opposition between the inside and the outside of things" (184). This opposition is necessary for Janie's growth; she cannot become her full self until she comprehends and then escapes these oppressive inside spaces. Once she does, outside elements of place will help her become whole by the novel's end.

Hurston uses natural (outside) elements to describe Janie's sexual awakening, an extended metaphor that charts Janie's feelings about love, sexual intimacy, marriage, and life:

> It was a spring afternoon in West Florida. Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. (*Their Eyes* 10).

We should note the similarities here between Janie's "spring afternoon in West Florida" and Hurston's "ecstatic Florida springtime" (*Dust Tracks* 42). As a child, Hurston makes friends with "the loving pine," while Janie finds shelter under a "blossoming pear tree"—a flowering tree where the young girl feels safe to daydream. She only lies under the tree since "the first tiny bloom had opened," opening her eyes to an intriguing mystery: the flowering of spring and her own sexual awakening. Janie identifies with the tree's first open bloom. Hurston's descriptions are dual: the "barren brown stems" transforming into "glistening leaf-buds" represent the tree's growth and Janie's evolution from child to pre-teen. The "leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom" symbolize Janie's further growth from pre-teen to young woman. The tree, per Jacobs, is "a visionary figure of self-discovery and eroticism" (342). The final sentence—"It stirred her tremendously"—conveys what Janie has witnessed while under the pear tree: the arrival of spring and her own blossoming into womanhood. Janie is aroused by her newfound sexuality, an experience initiated by witnessing the natural world.

Janie's experiences with natural elements of place propel her from girlhood into adulthood. Janie hears "the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze" before she sees "a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom" (*Their Eyes* 11). In an orgasmic moment of comprehension, Janie watches as,

> 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! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (*Their Eyes* 11)

Janie initially experiences her womanhood when she witnesses the power and beauty of the natural world. She even exclaims, "Oh to be a pear tree—*any* tree in bloom!" before she laments her grandmother's wishes for her to marry (*Their Eyes* 11).

Janie's husband is the first of several men who will challenge her relationship with the natural world and with herself. Nanny adamantly pressures Janie into marrying Logan Killicks. Hurston writes, "The vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree," indicating that people have the power to affect Janie's perception of the natural world, that the social sphere affects the natural and vice versa (*Their Eyes* 14). Nanny's pear tree makes Janie feel secure: before she leaves home, "She was back and forth to the pear tree continuously wondering and thinking," further demonstrating her kinship with nature (*Their Eyes* 21). Janie's mobility here—her physical movement to and from the pear tree—allows her to contemplate her desires.

Like her evolving perception of nature, Janie's marriage and new home challenge her understanding of love. She describes her husband's property as "a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had ever been" (*Their Eyes* 21–2). Here, Hurston highlights Janie's thwarted growth: no longer imagining herself as an open blossom on a flowering pear tree, Janie feels like a dead tree, lonely in the woods with no visitors. Hurston uses simile to connect place to a natural image that evokes loneliness; additionally, Janie feels

trapped—feeling herself like a stump stuck in the woods. Again emphasizing Janie's mobility—or lack thereof—Hurston underscores how important her protagonist's migration is. Wanting more, Janie tells Nanny, "Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think" (*Their Eyes* 24). Every hopeful thought reminds her of the pear tree: the only thing that has "stirred her tremendously" (*Their Eyes* 10).

While waiting for her home life to improve, Janie forms a more explicit connection with nature: she understands "the words of the trees and the wind" (*Their Eyes* 25). Feeling isolated, Janie directly communicates with the natural world. She hears the falling seeds speaking to each other and hopes they will germinate easily; Hurston aligns her protagonist with the seeds—she is only just sprouting. She does not abandon her positive perceptions of the natural world; rather, strengthening her kinship with nature will guide Janie's growth. Disappointed in "the familiar people and things" that have "failed her," Janie looks into the distance, foreshadowing more "things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone" (*Their Eyes* 8).

Eatonville

Janie develops more when she meets Jody (Joe) Starks and leaves her first husband's gate. She tells Logan she will leave him, and Hurston writes, "What was she losing so much time for? A feeling of sudden newness and change came over her. Janie hurried out of the front gate and turned south" (*Their Eyes* 32). Representing the border between her disappointing first marriage and her eventual happiness, Janie must exit Logan's gate to enter Joe's in Eatonville—ultimately leading her to meet Tea Cake (via her back gate, as I will discuss shortly). These steps all guide Janie to fulfillment. While she quickly jumps into her second marriage, Janie is more hesitant with Joe because "he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon" (*Their Eyes* 29). Hurston eloquently demonstrates Janie's growth here; she

knows what she wants—and quickly realizes Joe is not that—but she sticks with him because he desires to make the world (and specifically Eatonville) a better place. Speaking "for far horizon," Joe represents a hopeful future, but it is not Janie's horizon that the narrator refers to here.

Janie's move to Eatonville signals her next phase. Growing from an innocent, hopeful child to living in an oppressive marriage, Janie has freed herself only to land in another domineering marriage. Initially, she is happier in Eatonville—the all-Black town where Joe becomes mayor. She has the space and time to daydream about her future: "From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom" (*Their Eyes* 32). Naively, Janie begins believing Joe is the bee for her bloom until she is again disappointed, feeling unsettled in her role as the mayor's trophy wife. Joe becomes possessive and dictatorial, as evidenced when he tells the townspeople, "She's uh woman and her place is in de home," despite Janie's desire to live freely outside the domestic sphere (*Their Eyes* 43). Movement is inaccessible to her here: Joe expects his wife at home, indoors, away from society and even from the natural world. The narrator reveals that "it must have been the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off of things" (*Their Eyes* 43). Hurston's extended metaphor remains intact during this phase: it is not Janie's bloom that is destroyed, but her sense of wonderment and hope.

Reflective of Eatonville, Janie realizes that "[t]he bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in. It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired. She wasn't petal-open anymore with him" (*Their Eyes* 71). Still clinging to her positive association with the natural world, Janie's petal closes—i.e., she can no longer maintain a passionate marriage. Janie's marital unhappiness grows with time, but she still relies on natural elements of place to survive. The narrator reiterates, Janie "had no more blossomy openings

dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be" (*Their Eyes* 72). Not only is she getting older (and the townspeople remind her regularly), but she loses her desire for sexuality and growth. Hurston utilizes this natural metaphor to illustrate her protagonist's connection with the natural world. Even when she is disappointed, unsettled, and lonely, Hurston reminds us: Janie's positive association with the natural world is all she has. With no grandmother, true friends, independence, sexual intimacy, or home of her own, she steadfastly leans on the natural world to survive—the "beauty" half of Ruffin's paradox.

Early in their marriage, the Starks' gate represents security and Janie's hopefulness about her second marriage. Over time, however, the gate symbolizes the broken boundary between man and wife, Janie and Eatonville, and Janie and her most authentic self—for which she is still searching. When Joe becomes ill, Hurston features their gate, now representing this broken boundary: "People who never had known what it was to enter the gate of the Mayor's yard unless it were to do some menial job now paraded in and out as his confidants" (*Their Eyes* 83). Janie now feels herself receding into the background.

To combat her loneliness and hopelessness, Janie dissociates, sending her true self to the natural world:

> Then one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes… This was the first time it happened, but after a while it got so common she ceased to be surprised. It was like a drug. In a way it was good because it reconciled her to things. She got so she received all things with the solidness of the earth which soaks up urine and perfume with the same indifference. (*Their Eyes* 77)

Despite Janie's lack of "blossomy openings," she fortifies her connection to the natural world (*Their Eyes* 71). Now, Janie is mature enough to survive her oppressive environment and maintain a hopeful future. Note Hurston's description of the earth: Janie imagines that the ground apathetically soaks up both the good and the bad. Janie connects with the earth,

absorbing most everything; she dissociates from her negative environment (i.e., urine) to survive—for another chance to smell the flowers (i.e., perfume). Learning to be indifferent like the earth foreshadows what Janie will learn about the natural world from the approaching hurricane.

Janie's indifference—her double-consciousness, her dissociation—becomes explicit when she reflects on her loveless marriage: "She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly knew how not to mix them" (*Their Eyes* 72). Janie's "ability to name her own division and move the parts simultaneously through contiguous spaces," is what finally affords her the ability to speak for and define herself "after decades of being defined almost exclusively by others" (Gates 204). Her dissociation enables her to know her full self—inside and out. Janie's association with inside and outside elements of place (both natural and built) affords her the opportunity to grow.

Joe's death makes Janie feel free for the first time in almost twenty years. After surveying her dead husband's face, she murmurs, "Dis sittin' in de rulin' chair is been hard on Jody" (*Their Eyes* 87). Thus, Janie takes her turn as her life's ruler. She looks in the mirror, finding that "[t]he young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there" (*Their Eyes* 87). Symbolizing her newfound freedom and revitalization, Janie literally lets her hair down, burns her head rags, and lets her hair swing freely. At Joe's funeral, Janie performs another dissociative act when "[s]he sent her face to Joe's funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world" (*Their Eyes* 88). Janie sends her physical body where society dictates she should be—at her husband's funeral. Saving face, Janie knows she must maintain relations with Eatonville's people, yet she is resolute in how she wants to live. When she sends her soul elsewhere to joyfully frolic, Hurston personifies spring to convey Janie's excitement

about her new life which is blooming with possibility. Janie claims, "'Tain't dat Ah worries over Joe's death, Pheoby. Ah jus' loves dis freedom" (*Their Eyes* 93). Her newfound freedom enables her to become a fuller version of herself without Joe's oppressive glare.

Janie's physical movement thus far mirrors her development from childhood to womanhood; West Florida represents her idyllic innocence under the pear tree, where she experiences her sexual awakening and begins her quest to find a love like the one she witnesses in the natural world. Janie first experiences oppression when she moves from Nanny's to Logan's; she finds Logan's property and house confining, often looking past the gate for some place better. Janie finds freedom in Eatonville, only to be confined in another repressive marriage. When Joe dies, Janie experiences another taste of freedom that she soaks in until she meets Vergible Woods—also known as Tea Cake, the young drifter whom Janie quickly falls for. As Gates posits, "Tea Cake not only embodies Janie's tree, he is the woods themselves, the delectable veritable woods, as his name connotes ('Vergible' being a vernacular term for 'veritable'). Vergible Tea Cake Woods is a sign of verity, one who speaks the truth, one genuine and real" (191). Soon, she will invite Tea Cake through her gate and into her life's next phase.

Jacksonville

Janie enjoys a few moments of freedom after Joe's death, and she becomes hopeful again as she spends more time with Tea Cake. She feels childlike, rejuvenated after her restraining marriage to Joe: "It was so crazy digging worms by lamp light and setting out for Lake Sabelia after midnight that she felt like a child breaking rules. That's what made Janie like it" (*Their Eyes* 102). Spending time in the natural world reinvigorates Janie. After marrying Logan too young, and twenty years of her repressive marriage to Joe, Janie's optimism was crushed. Here, however, we see her feeling child-like, her hands in the dirt. The Starks' gate makes an

appearance again here, except this time, it is not the front gate that townspeople paraded through: Janie "had to smuggle Tea Cake out by the back gate and that made it seem like some great secret she was keeping from the town" (*Their Eyes* 102). After Joe's death, Janie must reclaim her privacy and security in her Eatonville home. Tea Cake must enter and exit through her back gate—hidden from the town's judgmental eyes.

Hurston's natural extended metaphor reappears when Tea Cake becomes more regular in Janie's life; the narrator reports that Tea Cake "could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (*Their Eyes* 106). However, Hurston indicates that Janie's relationship with Tea Cake won't be only blossoms and bees: "He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps" (*Their Eyes* 106). Hearkening back to Janie's perception of the ground soaking up both "urine and perfume with the same indifference," now Tea Cake offers Janie a glimpse into a new life, one that could break Janie's heart (*Their Eyes* 77). Hurston does not distinguish between the scents Tea Cake draws out of the ground, but her diction is telling: that Tea Cake *crushes* "scent out of the world" represents for Janie violence, instability, yet excitement (*Their Eyes* 106). Signaling another phase, Janie moves to Jacksonville, marrying Tea Cake (*Their Eyes* 116). Though their marriage isn't only "perfume," she will persist through the "urine" for Tea Cake.

The Everglades

If Jacksonville brings Janie passionate yet sometimes tumultuous love, the Everglades—Florida's wetlands—help Janie achieve genuine happiness. Claborn argues that "for Hurston the swamp is not only an ambivalent site of resistance and exploitation, but also a site for imagining multiethnic, interspecies, and ecological collectives" (16). The Everglades provide a seemingly anti-hierarchical place for work, play, and love in a new environment. Tea Cake decides he will

go “on de muck,” i.e., “down in de Everglades round Clewiston and Belle Glade where dey raise all dat cane and string-beans and tomatuhs” (*Their Eyes* 128). Claborn notes the significance of Hurston’s regional, folkloric word choice: “The vernacular expression ‘on de muck’ substitutes the colonial name ‘Everglades’ for a form of folk signification” (125). By replacing the colonial name with the folkloric one, Hurston signals that there is indeed a place where race, class, and gender do not define society (yet). When Janie joins Tea Cake in the swamp, she “abandon[s] traditional values for the uncertainties and the potential chaos of the uncultivated, untamed swamp, where love and death linger side by side” (Gates 193). The swamp’s chaos brings out the best of Janie.

Janie’s true self finally emerges “on de muck.” Hurston writes that when Tea Cake fell asleep, “Janie looked down on him and felt a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place” (*Their Eyes* 128). Although Tea Cake “crush[es] the scent out of the world,” he also provides Janie with a “self-crushing love,” reiterating the instability yet pleasure he brings to her (*Their Eyes* 106; 128). Janie is happiest here “on de muck,” exposed to a different environment: “To Janie’s strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything… Ground so rich that everything went wild” (*Their Eyes* 129). Janie is unfamiliar with this place, making her eyes and the place “strange.” Everything feels bigger on “the muck” because Janie realizes the potential for her life here: the bigness of the environment—the lake, beans, cane, weeds, everything—reflects how big her life or happiness can be. Hurston chooses to describe the ground as “rich” to emphasize a distinction between Janie and Tea Cake’s wealth/class and the fecundity of the soil—and further, the place itself. Hurston describes everyday life in the Everglades: “Work all day for money, fight all night for love. The rich black earth clinging to bodies and biting the skin like ants”

(*Their Eyes* 131). Nature figures as both positive and potentially harmful: the soil is fecund, the work is hard. The other workers judge Janie when she joins Tea Cake in the fields, first perceived as haughty because of her wealth. Though she had not worked physical labor before, Janie quickly earns her coworkers' favor: "But all day long the romping and playing they carried on behind the boss's back made her popular right away. It got the whole field to playing off and on" (*Their Eyes* 129). "Replacing the text's figures of flowering vegetation" in the first half of the novel, "figures of play are the dominant repeated figures in the second half" (Gates 194). A place for hard work and fun, the swamp represents Janie's Arcadia. Interestingly, Hurston stops including gates in this part of the novel, perhaps because Janie does not feel bound by societal expectations when she is in the Everglades.

The Everglades also presents the couple with opportunities for mobility. Claborn notes, "The restless and whimsical Tea Cake spends his days roaming the muck, where he enjoys a freedom of mobility rarely possessed by African-Americans in the South" (125). Janie benefits from the same mobility. Her life at Nanny's and then in two oppressive marriages did not enable her to move around: she was stuck under a pear tree, gazing at the horizon beyond Nanny's gate; stuck in the woods on Logan's property, only allowed to do domestic labor; stuck in Joe's town and store as a trophy wife. In all these places, Janie was stuck behind a gate. The swamp, however, represents Janie's opportunity to move freely in the natural world. When Tea Cake asks Janie if she is happy, she replies, "Ah lakes it. It's mo' nicer than settin' round dese quarters all day. Clerkin' in dat store wuz hard, but heah, we ain't got nothin' tuh do but do our work and come home and love" (*Their Eyes* 133). The Everglades make this movement possible. Another rural space, working the land in the Everglades strengthens Janie's bond with the natural world and with herself. Ruffin explains that for enslaved people, "connections to nonhuman nature

through work helped when coping with the lack of national belonging" (29). Further, "work in many forms… helped African Americans negotiate ecological belonging and compromised national citizenship" (Ruffin 31). While Janie is not enslaved, she has felt oppressed in many of her life's phases, and connecting with the land as she does in the Everglades helps strengthen her ecological bond and sense of belonging. There are no gates here to confine her.

And yet, nature itself challenges Janie's positive bond with the natural world. The couple learns a storm is approaching, but they choose to stay in the Everglades, clinging to their desire to make money "on de muck." Hurston ironically foreshadows the damage they will witness when she first describes their quarters in the Everglades: "only the dyke separated them from great, sprawling Okechobee" (*Their Eyes* 130). As they would soon find out, it is the lake's surge during the hurricane that will precipitate the most damage. Through the hurricane and human responses to it, Hurston challenges us to examine racial hierarchy as it connects to the natural world.

Janie and Tea Cake choose to find shelter in the Everglades (rather than evacuate) because of their respective understandings of racial hierarchy. For example, a Native Seminole tells them, "Going to high ground. Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming," despite clear blue skies (*Their Eyes* 155). Though the narrator mentions that the Native people have already gone east, intimating their superior knowledge of storm patterns (a potentially racist stereotype), Tea Cake turns down their friend Lias's offer to leave the Everglades: "Dey don't always know. Indians don't know nothin', tuh tell de truth. Else dey'd own dis country still. De white folks ain't gone nowhere. Dey oughta know if it's dangerous" (*Their Eyes* 156). Here, Tea Cake's internalized understanding of racial hierarchy and knowledge comes into play: if the White folks haven't left yet, then the Black folks will be fine staying. This perspective places White folks at the

hierarchy's top, Black people somewhere below them, and Native peoples at the bottom. Tea Cake perceives the Native communities as inferior, thereby adding rungs to the racist racial ladder. According to Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "the inability to credit the Seminoles' way" of understanding natural signs, "means disaster" (116). Further, DuPlessis calls Tea Cake's belief that the White man has the "ability not to let nature overwhelm them" a "gross misjudgment of natural and political powers" (116). Natural knowledge interweaves with the social.

While the Everglades first appear "as a truly utopian, anti-hierarchical space," ultimately, the storm alters Janie's beliefs about the place (Jacobs 347). No such space exists. Jacobs further analyzes the Everglades' hierarchy:

> The hurricane exposes the myriad fractures in this fantasy of what turns out to be an antediluvian world. The first and deepest of these fractures is racial, and is initiated by Tea Cake's low-rating of the Seminole's warnings of hurricane danger. By depending on the knowledge of the white bossman, Tea Cake reminds us that whites ultimately own the muck, thus bracketing and undermining his own authority. (347)

The Everglades are as hierarchical as Eatonville and Jacksonville. The storm flattens distinctions between urban and rural locales; despite their environmental differences, the same inescapable racial, gender, and class hierarchies remain rooted in the cities and the Everglades.

Amid the material destruction the hurricane brings, Janie and Tea Cake also learn the realities of environmental racism. Describing the storm and its effects on Lake Okeechobee, Hurston writes,

> It woke up Old Okechobee and the monster began to roll in his bed. Began to roll and complain like a peevish world on a grumble. The folks in the quarters and the people in the big houses further around the shore heard the big lake and wondered. The people felt uncomfortable but safe because there were the seawalls to chain the senseless monster in his bed. The folks let the people do the thinking. If the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn't worry. (*Their Eyes* 158)

The lake is monster-like, non-human and seemingly distinct from the natural world. Hurston personifies Lake Okeechobee as an irritable, grumbling monster rolling in his bed, one that can

be heard from all around. Here, a non-human entity interrupts Janie's idyllic perception of nature—the pear tree, blossoms, bees. Janie learns that the natural world is capable of chaos and destruction, antithesis to her Arcadia. The storm not only reveals the dangers of the natural world, but also race's role in environmental survival. "The folks in the quarters"—Black folks living nearby—and "the people in the big houses"—White people in larger houses—all hear the rolling lake, initially equalizing them (*Their Eyes* 158). Hurston indicates a stark contrast between the way Black "folks" and White "people" are affected: because of their understanding of racial hierarchy, Black characters believe Whites have superior knowledge. "The people felt uncomfortable but safe" because of the seawalls (supposedly) protecting their homes (*Their Eyes* 158). Representing these two races, Hurston uses "castles" and "cabins" to delineate their chances for survival: a castle will always protect its inhabitants better than a cabin, emphasizing the difference in these citizens' socioeconomic classes (*Their Eyes* 158).

No longer able to rely on the White people's supposed knowledge, Janie, Tea Cake, and their friend Motor Boat hunker down and question God, indicating that God dictates nature's uncontrollability. The narrator reports, "The time was past for asking the white folks what to look for through the door. Six eyes were questioning *God*" (*Their Eyes* 159). Janie's perception of the natural world shifts; she views nature through a different (and more realistic) lens. This shift opens Janie's eyes to how humans interact with the natural world, informing her of racism's role in nature.

During the hurricane, Hurston describes the hierarchical shift between humans and animals. Claborn writes that the "supposed divisions between human and animal, the living and the non-living, collapse into ecological collectives, before and throughout the storm, and

temporarily replace carefully regulated racial and class dichotomies" (129).[12] Janie and Tea Cake see "[a] baby rabbit, terror ridden, [which] squirmed through a hole in the floor… seeming to know that nobody wanted its flesh at such a time" (*Their Eyes* 159). When all beings are simply trying to survive, the normal pecking order adjusts. As Christina Sharpe observes, "weather [or, the storm] necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies" (106). These new ecologies last briefly but are worthy of examination. Tea Cake leaves to evaluate the scene and "he saw that the wind and water had given life to lots of things that folks think of as dead and given death to so much that had been living things" (*Their Eyes* 160). These new ecologies, necessitated by the storm, give agency to ecomaterials, forcing Tea Cake—and us—to rethink these natural and social hierarchies.

The storm unusually brings together people, animals, and ecomaterials: "They passed a dead man in a sitting position on a hummock, entirely surrounded by wild animals and snakes. Common danger made common friends. Nothing sought a conquest over the other" (*Their Eyes* 164). The hurricane threatens to damage all—poor and rich, Black and White, humans and nonhumans—yet social and natural hierarchies quickly reinstate after the hurricane. Jacobs argues, "the hurricane instigates a full-scale return of repressed hierarchical relations in the novel" (347). Thus, Janie experiences an environmental crisis: until the hurricane, only men have challenged her perception of the natural world; now she realizes she has less control over her life (and the natural world) than she imagined.

Post-hurricane, Janie and Tea Cake leave to seek shelter, when Janie becomes more aware of environmental inequity. When they arrive at the Six Mile Bend bridge, they notice that

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[12]This "collaps[ing] into ecological collectives" also happens during and after Hurricane Katrina in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), which I analyze in my coda.

"white people had preempted the point of elevation and there was no more room" (*Their Eyes* 164). Another example of environmental racism, the "superior race" has a higher chance of survival than Black characters, made literal by the elevated location. While the natural disaster could harm all—White people included—Janie realizes now that the racial and class hierarchy remains intact. Claborn contends, "While the ontological gaps among species collapse in the swamp to form an ecological collective, racial segregation is quickly restored in the aftermath of a hurricane" (112). The hurricane threatens to be an equalizing force, but environmental racism shows that not all people or beings are equal before, during, or after the storm. The hurricane, therefore, shifts Janie's perception of the Everglades from being an anti-hierarchical place to hierarchical—like the rest of society.

The 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane and the 1929 Bahamas Hurricane

Historical context about the 1929 Bahamas hurricane is important here, as it greatly influenced Hurston's life and writing. Hurston's anthropological work enabled her to travel the world. After she graduated from Barnard, Dr. Franz Boas advised her to "go south and collect Negro folk-lore" (*Dust Tracks* 141). Traveling for anthropological work in the late 1920s and early 1930s—namely to collect folktales for her autoethnographical collection *Mules and Men* (1935)—opened her eyes to New Orleans Hoodoo and later, Bahamian music and dance in Nassau. While in New Orleans from August to December 1928, Hurston missed the deadliest hurricane to hit Florida at that time: Neely claims that "Hurston wasn't at Lake Okeechobee, or even in Florida when the winds and surge took the lives of so many black men, women, and children," though she ultimately experienced a powerful hurricane in The Bahamas one year later. Hemenway reports that "in October [1929] she traveled to Nassau in the Bahamas to collect material… While there, she went through one of the worst hurricanes to hit either the

islands or Florida in many years, an experience that made her think she would never get back to the mainland, but a memory that would become fiction in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" (127).

It was during the 1929 Bahamas hurricane—also known as the Great Andros Island Hurricane—that Hurston became acquainted with nature's destruction: "I lived through that terrible five-day hurricane of 1929. It was horrible in its intensity and duration. I saw dead people washing around on the streets when it was over. You could smell the stench from dead animals as well. More than three hundred houses were blown down in the city of Nassau alone" (*Dust Tracks* 159). Personally surviving the 1929 Bahamas hurricane and also interviewing the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane's survivors, Hurston was deeply affected by these natural disasters (Hobson; Neely).[13] The 1929 Great Bahamas Hurricane killed 142 Bahamians, leaving 5,000 homeless in New Providence (Neely).

Historical context for the 1928 Okeechobee hurricane (the San Felipe Segundo Hurricane) is also beneficial here; this hurricane connects the Caribbean diaspora to Florida, making it particularly relevant to Hurston's personal life, anthropological work, and fiction. Originating in Barbados on September 10, 1928, crossing over Puerto Rico on September 13, and then shifting northwest to West Palm Beach, the hurricane destroyed many countries (Mitchell 348). Charles L. Mitchell describes the storm in *Monthly Weather Review*'s September 1928 issue, which includes weather reports, letters from those affected, warnings, and other historical documents. For example, Mitchell includes passages from a letter written by George S. Frith of Grand Turk: "No one but those who have passed through [a hurricane] can imagine what

[13]Hurston's interviews of the 1928 hurricane's survivors were published posthumously in *Every Tongue Got to Confess* (2001).

it is to witness one of these hurricanes" (348). The hurricane became more extreme as it passed from Puerto Rico to Lake Okeechobee, Florida, on the morning of September 16 (Mitchell 348).

As in *Their Eyes*, the lake surge caused the most damage. According to a Miami Weather Bureau report, "In the Lake Okeechobee region, the great loss of life and the damage to property were caused by the overflowing of the lake along the southeast shore, principally at Belle Glade, Pahokee, and South Bay. The small houses in these localities were washed away or inundated, and approximately 2,000 persons were drowned" (Mitchell 349). We should recall that Hurston fictionalizes this storm, describing Lake Okeechobee as a monster "roll[ing] in his bed… complain[ing] like a peevish world on a grumble. The folks in the quarters and the people in the big houses further around the shore heard the big lake and wondered" (*Their Eyes* 158). In actuality, the lake surge caused nine to fifteen feet of water, inundating surrounding areas (Neely). This flooding resulted in long-term devastation: "In addition to the immediate losses caused by the storm, practically the entire Everglades region south of Lake Okeechobee has been flooded, making it impossible for growers to prepare the land for the usual early winter crops. This condition represents one of the largest items in the list of losses resulting from the storm" (Mitchell 349). If the storm's immediate destruction of Okeechobee were not enough, the hurricane's lasting effects on farming were likewise detrimental.

Janie learns about environmental racism from witnessing White folks' (relatively) safer positions, and historical documents point to environmental injustice. Frank Schuster states that "he had warning in sufficient time to enable him to make many automobile trips in the vicinity of South Bay for the purpose of collecting the *white* residents and moving them to a large barge. With the assistance of other men, he saved the lives of 211 men, women, and children" (Mitchell 349; emphasis added). Omitted from this report are the area's non-White residents. The

Jacksonville Weather Bureau's director notes, "The history of this hurricane is a melancholy one, associated as it is with the tragic ending of nearly 2,000 lives on Lake Okeechobee, whose waters attained a height of 10 to 15 feet as they were forced southward and impinged on the shallow rim of the lake" (Mitchell 350). Melancholy indeed; what's worse is the omission of how people of color fared during and after the storm. The area's Black residents are excluded from these counts because they did not count, dead or alive. Bahamian meteorologist Wayne Neely describes the role Black (mostly Bahaman) migrant workers played before and after the 1928 hurricane: "In life, black migrant workers helped turn a South Florida swamp into a booming tropical mecca and one of the major agricultural areas of the United States. In death, they were pitched into an open trench and left to be ignored for three-quarters of a century, neglected and nearly forgotten for this time." Environmental racism rears its ugly head.

Hurston highlights more environmental injustice when she describes the cleanup in Palm Beach. Two White men tell Tea Cake that White and Black folks will be buried differently, which he questions: "Whut difference do it make 'bout de color? Dey all needs buryin' in uh hurry?" (*Their Eyes* 171). White supremacy features prominently as the men inform Tea Cake that coffins will only be made for deceased Whites. Claborn contends that "racial segregation is restored in the hurricane's aftermath, showing that cycles of environmental inequities complicate Hurston's vision" (16). Hurston includes these scenes to demonstrate that society will treat Black folks unfairly even after death, and that the natural world—as Black people were forced to experience it—can validate and enact racism.

Not only destructive to many Black Floridians, the 1928 hurricane wrought destruction on Bahamian and other non-White laborers. The treatment of victims in Hurston's novel parallels the historical treatment of White and Black bodies, as Neely confirms:

> The cleanup efforts in the state of Florida after the hurricane was assigned to blacks and the degrading and often challenging task of retrieving the dead bodies from the lake, swamps, and anywhere else they were found… The dead black storm victims were basically gathered up with little or no documentation and buried in mass graves or simply burned wherever they were found. The white storm victims, on the other hand, were also collected and were placed in a holding area for twelve to twenty-four hours. They had the advantage of having their families pay their last respects to them. Furthermore, they were given proper burials in marked graves in the local 'whites only' Woodlawn Cemetery.

Even after Black victims' deaths, white supremacist thought and action were rampant. Of the total number of Floridian deaths, Neely reports that about 75% were Black people, many of whom "were working on the railroads and as farm workers who were ill-served by the rudimentary emergency management of those segregated times." Neely estimates that three-quarters of deceased Black folks were "Bahamian farm and railway workers," which "would make the Great Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928 the deadliest hurricane to impact The Bahamas indirectly with such a massive death toll." Hurston's "ecological collectivity" (to borrow Claborn's term) in the Everglades unfortunately "breaks down in the aftermath of the hurricane, when Tea Cake and Janie reach the so-called city of refuge" (129).

West Palm Beach

Horrified by what they witness, Janie and Tea Cake make their way to West Palm Beach to find shelter. Hurston describes the hurricane's corporeal effects, demonstrating storms' intensity and unpredictability: "It was years later by their bodies. Winters and winters of hardship and suffering. The wheel kept turning round and round. Hope, hopelessness and despair. But the storm blew itself out as they approached the city of refuge" (*Their Eyes* 166). The storm ages Janie and Tea Cake by "years," though the hurricane itself does not last long. Hurston likely uses "the wheel" here to indicate an exhausting cycle of "hope, hopelessness and despair," but she may also mean that life must go on for those affected by the hurricane—

especially for those who need to get back to work in order to survive. "[T]he city of refuge," Palm Beach, represents the potential for survival and restoration but nothing more.

Along with highlighting the hurricane's effects on characters' bodies, Hurston also notes the storm's tangible material effects. Tea Cake leaves their shelter to help clean up when he "[s]aw the hand of horror on everything. Houses without roofs, and roofs without houses. Steel and stone all crushed and crumbled like wood. The mother of malice had trifled with men" (*Their Eyes* 169). Referencing nature as "the mother of malice," Hurston portrays the environment as beyond her characters' control, spiteful, something to fear. While the natural world is ungovernable, the storm makes Janie realize that nature is not distinct from humanity and vice versa—the environment and humanity are intertwined, for good or bad: "Corpses were not just found in wrecked houses. They were under houses, tangled in shrubbery, floating in water, hanging in trees, drifting under wreckage" (*Their Eyes* 170). Hurston's description of the storm's devastation illuminates the interconnectedness of ecomaterials: living and nonliving, human and nonhuman. Janie's newfound understanding that nature and humanity are not distinct entities signals her growth and maturation; she is now able to view the natural world realistically rather than idealistically as she did during childhood.

Back to the Everglades

After weeks of clean-up and recovery, Tea Cake begins showing signs of rabidity after he is bitten by a rabid dog during the storm. When he attempts to shoot Janie during a mental break, she must make the difficult decision to defend herself and relieve Tea Cake of his misery. Tea Cake leaves Janie with this thought before he dies: "Everytime Ah see uh patch uh roses uh somethin' over sportin' they selves makin' out they pretty, Ah tell 'em 'Ah want yuh tuh see mah Janie sometime.' You must let de flowers see yuh sometimes, heah, Janie?" (*Their Eyes*

181). Even in Janie's darkest moments—barely surviving the devastating hurricane, making the difficult choice to kill her true love, returning to Eatonville—Tea Cake represents a beacon of light, one that reminds Janie of the natural world's beauty and power. Tea Cake's death proves that Janie does not *need* Tea Cake, yet he has enriched her life in many ways—most importantly, allowing Janie to become her true independent self. Hurston reminds us that Tea Cake *is* the bee to Janie's blossom, even though Janie ultimately loses her Arcadia because of his death. Without the chaotic circumstances brought on by the hurricane, Tea Cake would not have been bit by the rabid dog. This devastating experience teaches Janie that nature is both nurturing and destructive.

Return to Eatonville

Rather than burying Tea Cake in the Everglades, Janie buries him in Palm Beach: "She knew he loved the Glades but it was too low for him to lie with water maybe washing over him with every heavy rain. Anyway, the Glades and its waters had killed him. She wanted him out of the way of storms" (*Their Eyes* 189). Janie wants to protect Tea Cake, something she could not do during life due to nature's uncontrollability. Since Tea Cake is dead, the Everglades no longer represent the pastoral ideal for Janie. Instead of settling unhappily there, Janie returns to Eatonville, completing her cyclical journey home. While Hurston doesn't include this detail, we can imagine Janie walking back through her gate at home in Eatonville, a free woman at last.

The novel's narrative structure mirrors Janie's movement: *Their Eyes* opens with Janie's narration and closes with her final reflections, paralleling Janie's moves from and to Eatonville. In the end, Eatonville no longer represents her oppressive second marriage, but instead, her growth, independence, and homecoming. Hurston demonstrates Janie's maturity through knowledge she shares with Pheoby: "Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore" (*Their Eyes* 191). This

profound sentiment shows that Janie no longer needs to rely on the pear tree metaphor. Instead, Janie is now able to acknowledge different kinds of love, love affected by people, place, and the natural world. Janie now understands the importance of place, demonstrated when she tells Pheoby, "you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there" (*Their Eyes* 192). Janie's journey through Florida has taught her an essential truth: truly knowing yourself means knowing your place. West Florida, Eatonville, Jacksonville, the Everglades, and West Palm Beach have illuminated for Janie what she was searching for since childhood: her authentic self.

Rather than dwelling on Tea Cake's death, Janie's return to Eatonville symbolizes Hurston's bildungsroman's successful end. Janie imagines Tea Cake "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" (*Their Eyes* 193). Still described using natural terms, now Tea Cake has transcended his corporeal form into the natural world. Janie finds peace now when she "pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see" (*Their Eyes* 193). Reveling in her womanhood and independence, never forgetting the love she shared with Tea Cake, Janie harnesses the horizon, signifying her hopeful future. Ephi Paul calls Janie's harnessing the horizon her "final moment of transcendence": "The horizon that she learns about from Joe, that helps her rediscover how to 'play' again with Tea Cake, has been transformed from the object of a longing gaze to a figurative 'fish-net' which an active subject can pull in" (Gates 213). Gates comments that Janie "has internalized her metaphors, and brought them home, across a threshold heretofore impenetrable. This self-willed, active, subjective synthesis is a remarkable trope of self-knowledge" (214). Janie need not rely on a man—or the natural world—to harness her horizon. Now, she can do it on her own.

Connections and Conclusions

Janie finds independence via her mobility and through her evolving perceptions of the natural world. After being enclosed behind multiple gates (Nanny's, Logan's, and Joe's)—built elements of place—in her life's early phases, Janie learns how to free herself from societal boundaries to find fulfillment. Through her positive *and* negative experiences with nature—her own burden-and-beauty paradox—she learns about her own multifaceted identity. She gains a true understanding of place. She understands race's effects on the natural world and vice versa, and that racial hierarchies exist everywhere. She experiences environmental racism. She witnesses first-hand the material and corporeal destruction a natural disaster can bring but then overcomes multiple environmental crises. She grows her ecological bond and forges a sense of belonging and community. She becomes part of an ecological collective. She learns that nature and humanity are intertwined, exemplifying how dangerous it is for humans to believe nature and culture are disparate entities.

Hurston sets the stakes high for her protagonist and for her readers when she demonstrates the dangerous consequences of not comprehending the interconnections between race, class, gender, and the natural world: people of color are left behind when they have been disproportionately affected by environmental harms. And hierarchies will further divide if humans do not treat other humans *and* the natural world with an ethics of care. On the other hand, Hurston shows us what good can come from grappling with these complicated strands: like Janie, we can find fulfillment, freedom, and belonging if we do the hard work of reckoning with humans' effects on the natural world and the natural world's effects on humanity.

Hurston also paints a compelling, hopeful picture: people of color can find solace in the natural world despite living through environmental injustice. She urges Black girls and women to

form their own positive associations with nature and the places they inhabit. The author's call is clear: take up space even when men, White folks, and nature tell you not to. Take up space in the natural world and find ways to forge your own paths. Be resilient. By illustrating Janie Crawford's growth from childhood through adulthood via her evolving perceptions of the natural world, Hurston encourages Black women to challenge their own relationships with nature and societal expectations about race, gender, and class. By doing so, they will continue establishing hope as "a repeating, circulating, and obstinate practice of African diasporic women's survival in the Americas" (A. Davis 46). As my fourth chapter shows, Alice Walker continues this tradition: *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*'s young Black protagonist Ruth nurtures her positive relationship with the natural world to forge her own hopeful future in a society that has attempted to strip her of that hope.

Hurston's nuanced portrayal of these interconnected strands points to how she viewed her own life: "like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches" (*Their Eyes* 8). Rather than focusing on only images of budding pear blooms and buzzing bees, and rather than solely dwelling on the violent hurricane, Hurston encourages us all to consider *both* the dawn and the doom in the branches. Doing so allows Janie to harness her horizon and find fulfillment. Chapter three reveals how Flannery O'Connor employs a young female protagonist in her haunting story "A View of the Woods" (1957) who also harnesses her own horizon—or at least attempts to do so.

CHAPTER III: "THE TREES WERE BATHED IN BLOOD": FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "A VIEW OF THE WOODS"

> Alice Walker on Flannery O'Connor:
> In fact, the only pleasant thing I recall from that year was a field we used to pass on our way into the town of Milledgeville. It was like a painting by someone who loved tranquility.
> What I liked about this field as a child was that in my life of nightmares… it represented beauty and unchanging peace.
> "Of course," I say to myself, as we turn off the main road two miles from my old house, "that's Flannery's field." (Walker, *In Search of* 45)

Indeed, How Racist was Flannery O'Connor?

If *Their Eyes Were Watching God* foregrounds human interactions with a *natural* disaster, then Flannery O'Connor's "A View of the Woods" (1957; hereafter "A View") spotlights how humans create and respond to an *environmental* disaster. I am using *natural* here to imply that humans did not cause the hurricane in Hurston's *Their Eyes*, whereas humans cause the *environmental* disaster in O'Connor's story, as I will discuss. While Zora Neale Hurston writes about mobility, racial hierarchies, and definitions of home in 1920s Florida, O'Connor explores technology and progress, abusive familial relations, and unethical land use in 1950s middle Georgia. Whereas Hurston foregrounds environmental racism in *Their Eyes*, O'Connor foregrounds environmental and familial destruction; O'Connor is more concerned about the land than the humans working it. Numerous scholars have compared O'Connor to Alice Walker—likely because of their geographical and temporal proximity. But, as Beauty Bragg identifies, O'Connor scholars have not put O'Connor's work in conversation with other Southern Black authors besides Alice Walker (57). There is much to be said, therefore, about the connections between O'Connor's and Zora Neale Hurston's works.

O'Connor's White middle-class status enables her to write about man-made environmental destruction while ignoring environmental racism's harsh realities. Before analyzing her elements of place in "A View," I must discuss the most contentious topic in O'Connor studies: the author's racism. Examples of racism in her personal correspondence appear in Paul Elie's *New Yorker* article, "How Racist Was Flannery O'Connor?" and in the 1988 collection *Habit of Being*, particularly in letters to Maryat Lee. In his biography, Brad Gooch includes nuanced discussions about O'Connor's "complex ambivalence" toward race matters (332). Scholars have recently debated the complex subject of O'Connor's racism more openly and thoroughly than before: Angela Alaimo O'Donnell's 2020 *Radical Ambivalence: Race in Flannery O'Connor*, the first book-length study of O'Connor and race, has made waves. O'Donnell addresses the author's ambivalence toward race relations; *Radical Ambivalence* sparked at least one truculent response.[14] Since the publication of *Radical Ambivalence*, scholars continue studying O'Connor's racism and how she writes about people of color.[15] Over the years, scholars have excused the author's racist attitudes, attributing her sometimes problematic attitudes to being a product of her time and place.[16] Others have claimed that we should separate her personal letters—in which she indeed writes racist remarks—from her fiction, a suggestion that blatantly ignores the writer and her complexities.

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[14]Paul Elie's "How Racist Was Flannery O'Connor?" disagrees with O'Donnell's nuanced argument of O'Connor's racism. Amy Alznauer offers a well-balanced, nuanced counterargument to Paul Elie's *New Yorker* essay in "On Flannery O'Connor and Race: A Response to Paul Elie" for *Bitter Southerner.*

[15]At the Flannery O'Connor and Families Symposium in Savannah, GA in June 2021, scholars debated O'Connor's racism during the panel "Flannery O'Connor and Race." See Black, Rowan Fannin, Fowler, Grogan, and West for recent approaches to O'Connor's works and race—though none mention "A View of the Woods."

[16]O'Donnell clears up this defense: "it might be argued, O'Connor was a person of her time and circumstance, and it may seem unfair to take her words out of their historical context and to judge her in accord with a more recent, more socially progressive perspective. This view, of course, ignores the value of truth-telling" (5).

I turn to scholars of color who have studied O'Connor using critical race theory and whiteness studies. O'Donnell defines critical whiteness studies as "a branch of critical race theory that examines the concept of whiteness, its origins, implications, and consequences for the culture in which it operates" (7). Further, "Critical whiteness studies highlights the ways in which society is structured and governed by ideas and assumptions about race and reveals a system of privilege and privation that rewards whites and punishes nonwhites" (7). O'Donnell explains that critical whiteness studies "helps to focus attention where O'Connor clearly wanted it to be, as evidenced in many of her stories: on the ways in which racism and a racist caste system shape (and misshape) white people, its inventors and perpetrators. In O'Connor's world, those who stand to gain the most from the system suffer from it in ways they are unaware of, and rooted within the system are the seeds of its destruction" (3). While critical whiteness studies is not my primary theoretical framework in this chapter, whiteness undergirds "A View"; O'Connor uses her white male characters to warn readers against the dangers of a racist, patriarchal caste system.

Alice Walker has famously shared her beliefs about O'Connor's racism and how she writes race. Walker lived "in a sharecropper shack eighteen miles away" from O'Connor's family farm, giving her a unique understanding of O'Connor (Gooch 243). In "Saving the Life May Be Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life," Walker considers the difference between literature written by Black and by White Americans: "it is not the difference between them that interests me, but, rather, the way black writers and white writers seem to me to be writing one immense story—the same story, for the most part—with different parts of this immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives" (5). Walker persuasively argues that O'Connor's racist characters provide a nuanced portrait of mid-twentieth century

Southern life—a portrait painted by a White woman, thus narrating the story from only one perspective (52). As chapter four discusses, Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* contributes a different perspective of a similar story: three generations of poor, Black folks working to survive in the twentieth century South.

O'Connor grappled with "the race issue" throughout her life. When her views on race had ameliorated some—though not fully—O'Connor told an interviewer, "I don't understand [Black people] the way I do white people. I don't feel capable of entering the mind of a Negro. In my stories they're seen from the outside" (Gooch 336). Biographer Brad Gooch calls this "a type of artistic racism" that "worked well for her" (336). Walker credits O'Connor for keeping distance "from the inner workings of her black characters" and thereby not perpetuating more stereotypes; further, Walker suggests that O'Connor allows her characters of color "to inhabit another landscape, another life, than the one she creates for them" (52).[17] The only Black character in "A View of the Woods" is the nameless "Negro boy" (O'Connor's narrator's term) who works at Tilman's store, a static character who engages in only one conversation (O'Connor, *Collected Works* 536). We can imagine the boy's life working for a presumably racist boss, dealing with presumably racist customers; but the story is not about the boy. Walker might suggest here that the boy "inhabit[s] another landscape" when he leaves work, and that it was not O'Connor's task to portray it.

Hilton Als writes that O'Connor's "black characters are not symbols defined in opposition to whiteness; they are the living people who were, physically at least, on the

[17]Gooch calls "A Place of Action," one of O'Connor's high school stories, "a stereotyped cast of characters" (103). It is unclear if Walker read this early story, but it is important to note the growth in O'Connor's works over time (while not excusing O'Connor's problematic views). Gooch concurs: O'Connor "learned from the failures of her high school and college stories with black central characters" and chose not to enter Black characters' minds in her adult writing (243).

periphery of O'Connor's own world… She didn't use them as vessels of sympathy or scorn; she simply—and complexly—drew from life" (113). Drawing from her own experiences, the author modeled African American characters on "the lives of the black tenant farmers… a few longtime African American workers at Andalusia [her family's farm], living in outlying shacks" (Gooch 224). Most of O'Connor's characters of color indeed live in her work's margins.

Walker declares it "so refreshing" that "essential O'Connor is not about race at all" (53). Walker pairs her surprisingly forgiving observations with an important reminder: the reality of O'Connor's life, in terms of race, is less forgiving. Walker writes that the Cline house (O'Connor's family's Milledgeville mansion) was,

> built by slaves who made the bricks by hand. O'Connor's biographers are always impressed by this fact, as if it adds the blessed sign of aristocracy, but whenever I read it I think that those slaves were some of my own relatives, toiling in the stifling middle-Georgia heat, to erect her grandfather's house, sweating and suffering the swarming mosquitoes as the house rose slowly, brick by brick. (47)

While O'Connor's fiction may represent only one side of the story, her lived experience shows two, one of which evokes environmental racism. When we read against the grain of her fiction, though, we find an author with an ecological vision, despite her shortcomings in writing race.

While O'Connor might not have consciously intended to write about race, her works are nonetheless studies in which whiteness is normative and centered; at worst, her works demonstrate an overt racism toward characters of color. Als concurs: "readings of this American master often overlook the originality and honesty of her portrayal of Southern whiteness. Or, rather, Southern whiteness as it is chafed under its biggest cultural influence—Southern blackness" (113). Rather than dwell on O'Connor's lack of dynamic African American characters in "A View," I analyze how her centering of whiteness affects the story's environmentalism.

Framework: Environmental (Man-Made) Disaster

Hurston likely felt the need to encompass examples of environmental racism when writing a novel that centers a natural disaster, despite her strong feelings against writing about race.[18] Comparing Hurston's and O'Connor's authorial intent and choices shows that O'Connor is privileged enough to focus on man-made environmental disasters. "A View" is significant for ecocritical study in ways different than *Their Eyes*. Both texts tackle important environmental issues in the early- to mid-twentieth century South Atlantic. O'Connor's interweaves the destruction of land with the abuse of women, which makes "A View" valuable to analyze ecocritically alongside *Their Eyes*. I will also analyze the conclusion of the story through a material ecocritical lens, arguing that O'Connor grants the woods with agency. O'Connor's material ecocritical choice to bestow agency to a nonhuman entity warns readers against the dangers of exploiting humans (women and girls in particular) and the natural world, as I will argue.

"A View" focuses on three generations: seventy-nine-year-old Mark Fortune, his son-in-law Pitts (no first name given), and Pitts' nine-year-old daughter Mary Fortune. As is typical for O'Connor, her characters' surnames are significant and ironic. Grandfather Fortune is focused only on making a fortune, yet his story ends with death instead of profit. The name Pitts signifies the man's (and his family's) unfortunate situation of living on Old Fortune's land without much of their own—they live in a depressed state, or "the pits." Mary Fortune Pitts gets the brunt of both surnames; O'Connor deliberately refers to her as Mary Fortune (two first names rather than a hyphenated surname), but for ease of reading, I'll refer to her as Mary. O'Connor refers to the

[18]Recall Hurston's oft-quoted opinion on writing "the race problem": "Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject" (*Dust Tracks* 171).

grandfather as Fortune and Old Fortune. And, of course, readers should not overlook that both main characters in this story—Mary Fortune (Pitts) and Mark Fortune—share Mary Flannery O'Connor's first two initials.

Old Fortune owns the land on which the family lives, yet he hates Pitts, Pitts' unnamed wife (Fortune's daughter), and most of their other children. Mary is his favorite grandchild—perhaps the only grandchild he loves. When Pitts regularly takes Mary into the woods to beat her, Fortune becomes enraged and attempts to defend and protect his granddaughter. The grandfather-granddaughter duo are allies until he tells Mary that he is planning to sell a tract of land that she is particularly attached to—the lot where her father grazes his cows. She becomes obsessed with losing her "view of the woods," which baffles Fortune (and readers) because the woods are the site of her abuse.

Fortune and his granddaughter's bond is severed when he sells the plot of land to a man who will build a gas station. Mary continually misbehaves in rebellion against this sale and the unnecessary destruction of land until her grandfather takes her into the woods and beats her. The two become increasingly violent, beating each other until Fortune fatally bashes the girl's head against a rock. The old man suffers a heart attack as he looks toward a bulldozer, hoping someone or something will save him from death or damnation.

In my Hurston chapter, I analyzed how three generations of Crawford women experienced trauma; Hurston focuses on generational trauma from issues related to gender, race, and class. As a reminder, Nanny (Janie's grandmother) was raped by her enslaver; after giving birth to Leafy, Nanny and her child escaped from the plantation. Leafy (Janie's mother) was also assaulted and impregnated by a White man (her schoolteacher), causing her to leave her mother and child. Janie, raised by her strong grandmother, works to break the cycle of oppression for

herself. Due to the time period of *Their Eyes*—women gaining more rights in addition to the abolition of slavery—and Janie's strength, she gains independence and confidence through her nuanced relationship with the natural world. O'Connor's "A View" tells a different story of three generations of a family, as O'Connor is more focused on issues related to gender rather than race or class. Mary's grandfather and father fight to possess the girl, creating an abusive environment for the child. Whereas progress in *Their Eyes* is positive—the abolition of slavery, no more marital ownership over women—progress in "A View" is portrayed as violent, as Mary aligns herself with the protection of the natural world. Generational trauma in Hurston is possible to overcome, whereas in O'Connor, two of the three generations of the Fortune-Pitts family die. When you destroy the environment, O'Connor says, it's not going to end well.

This chapter analyzes elements of place in "A View" to examine O'Connor's portrayal of environmentalism in the 1950s South. While Hurston foregrounds elements of place such as gates, the horizon, and perceptions of home, O'Connor prominently features the woods (natural), the lawn (built), rocks/stones (natural), and Mary's view of the woods (both natural and built). For the girl, the woods represent transcendence. "The lawn" serves as Mary's "view of the woods" but also a place for familial communal play, like Janie Crawford's Everglades. Mary becomes attached to the lawn—especially after her grandfather threatens to sell it. Additionally, the girl's view of the woods is comparable to Janie's horizon: these elements of place—the woods and the horizon—symbolize positive, regenerative futures for both characters.

Familial Possession: Land and Woman

Entanglements between family bonds and the possession of land create the narrative tension in "A View," one of O'Connor's most haunting stories.[19] The motherless Mark Fortune has no use for his own daughter; the grandfather only cares about what and who he can use and profit from. Mary may seem to be the anomaly, but the grandfather uses the girl—his namesake and doppelgänger—to control his detested son-in-law Pitts. As Mark Graybill argues, "Mary Fortune stands caught between two men, her grandfather and her father, who wage a battle over her body—which is to say, over the land" (11). This male desire to control Mary and the land evokes Annette Kolodny's "land-as-woman" archetype, which derives from "America's oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine" (4). Fortune and Pitts' fight over the possession of the girl, "a bold exercise of masculine power over the feminine," disrupts the harmony between humans and the natural world (Kolodny 22).

The two men's tension derives from attempts to possess both the land and Mary through physical abuse. Fortune's and Pitts' quest to possess the land and the child reveals O'Connor's stark criticism of andro- and anthropocentrism in the 1950s American South. Christine Flanagan argues that "A View" illustrates the author's warning against "the ethical and spiritual failures of a twenty-first century world that chooses to devalue our interdependence on the natural world" ("From Earth to Eternity" 170). A deeply religious person, O'Connor perceived the disconnections between humanity and nature as an affront to God. She does *not* oppose progress or change; rather, her "little morality play," in her own words, warns against the blatant

[19]Portions of this chapter are adapted from "'Marching across the Water': A Material Ecofeminist Reading of 'A View of the Woods'" in *Women's Studies* (2022).

destruction and disconnection from nature for progress's sake (*Habit of Being* 186). In true O'Connor fashion, the story's moral remains ambiguous.

Mary and her grandfather's divergent concerns about ethical land use ultimately triggers both characters' deaths. Flanagan argues that "a malevolent desire for domination… underlies every encounter [Fortune] has with both human and non-human nature. This domination begins as Mr. Fortune's ownership of land; from there, it progresses to disregard for the natural world; then, finally, it culminates in his utter disregard for his family" ("From Earth to Eternity" 165). The man's view of the natural world is that it should be controlled; Mary's view is that it should be enjoyed and protected.

Possession of the land and of Mary are at stake in the Fortune-Pitts family. Avis Hewitt claims that "Mary serves as somatext[;] she is the lay of the land in the story" (131). The men's desire to conquer both land and the young girl makes this story exceedingly relevant for ecofeminist analysis. Hewitt considers some of the story's ecofeminist elements, though she ultimately argues that Mary symbolizes Eden, a claim with which I disagree. While many O'Connor scholars have written about "A View" and analyzed its religious aspects, few have deeply analyzed ecofeminist aspects of the text.

More scholars have focused on general environmental themes in O'Connor's work. Flanagan discusses the destructive effects of othering nature. Katie Simon highlights "issues of poverty, gender, migration, and race that are part of the southern environmental legacy" in two of O'Connor's stories, including "A View" (22). Mark Graybill focuses on the story's divinity and nature. Timothy Vande Brake has also written about O'Connor's environmentalism: "O'Connor is greener than we have taken her to be. Her respect for nature grows directly out of her incarnational theology, which affirms the enduring goodness of God's creation despite human

ability to mar it" (27). While scholarship about O'Connor's environmentalism exists, there are no in-depth ecofeminist analyses of "A View." There are no material ecocritical analyses of this story; few scholars have acknowledged the woods' agency, a subject I examine toward the end of this chapter.

While some readers do not consider O'Connor an environmentalist, "A View" demonstrates her personal connection to the unnecessary destruction of land, aligning her more closely with young Mary than the child's grandfather. As Gooch notes, O'Connor noticed the modernization of her surrounding landscape in 1956 (279). Developments like the Georgia Power Company's Sinclair Dam and Milledgeville's annexation of land for a subdivision highlighted the area's transformation toward commercialization (Gooch 279). O'Connor's mother had also considered selling their sprawling property's timber rights, further demonstrating the environmental changes rapidly happening in O'Connor's world (Gooch 280). Simon writes, "Eminent domain allowed Georgia Power to seize property that would soon be submerged," which often targets communities of color for projects like highway construction (5). Simon prompts us to consider the racialized elements of this progress: she argues that this story goes beyond land ownership, revealing power dynamics and the vital role of land ownership in sustaining life (5). Considering the environmental historical context during which O'Connor lived and wrote allows readers to form connections between the author, her place—both temporal and spatial—and her fiction.

Historical Context: the Sinclair Dam

Just as Hurston's experiences with the 1928 and 1929 hurricanes influenced her writing, O'Connor too was affected by nearby environmental events. The Georgia Railway and Power Company first became involved with Oconee River power projects in 1926, the same year the

company became Georgia Power. Originally called the Furman Shoals project, planning and construction for what is now known as the Sinclair Dam Hydroelectric Plant began in 1929 (Price 10). Christopher Manganiello reports that in September 1929, Georgia Power's president "announced plans for a 3,000-foot-long and 90-foot-tall dam to create the state's largest artificial reservoir (12,000 acres of surface area) and to house the company's third-largest hydroelectric generation facility" (81–2). Highlighting what was lost rather than gained, Flanagan recalls that the "Sinclair Dam displace[d] 15,000 acres of forest and farmland along the Oconee River, submerging the landscape across three counties" ("Social Distortion" 18). It is this displaced landscape that O'Connor would write about in "A View." O'Connor's fictionalized displaced landscape is the field where Pitts grazes his cattle and where the children play, land that will be razed for a gas station. O'Connor was all too familiar with watching as vibrant natural spaces were developed for commercial profit.

Georgia Power ignored the country's economic realities after the stock market crash and instead "announced plans to spend $16 million on new projects in 1930 'to keep constantly in step with the progress of the state,' according to *Snap Shots* writers" (Manganiello 82). Georgia Power ceased construction in 1930 because of the Great Depression, restarting nearly twenty years later in 1949 (Manganiello 100). Once the Furman Shoals project was completed in 1953, it was renamed Sinclair Dam and Lake (Price 11). The generators' capacity was—and still is—45,000 kilowatts (Price 11; Georgia Power). Settling in November 1952 at Andalusia, the family farm, O'Connor witnessed the lake being filled (Flanagan, "Social Distortion" 25–6). Milledgeville's citizens "benefited from local tax payments" after Sinclair Dam was up and running in 1954; Manganiello notes that Georgia Power "did not dare suggest that protecting water supply and water quantity was necessary for future economic development," proving the

company's interest (and likely many citizens' interest) in economic gain rather than environmental protection (100). Considering the massive burst of industrialization and drastic environmental changes by the summer of 1956, it is easy to imagine a curmudgeonly O'Connor witnessing the environmental devastation from a rocking chair on Andalusia's front porch.

Technology and Progress

The phrase "environmental disaster" is subjective; for Mary, her grandfather's promise to sell "the lawn" represents not only environmental destruction but familial and personal devastation too. O'Connor's diction points to the personal (dis)connection the girl and her grandfather feel: the child calls the lot "*the* lawn," whereas her grandfather possessively calls it "*my* lawn" (*Collected Works* 532, 537; emphasis added). To analyze the story's elements of place, we must first examine Mary's and her grandfather's respective relationships with the natural world and technology/progress. In the story's opening scene, O'Connor positions the two oddly: while they observe construction on his property, Fortune sits atop his car's bumper "as if he were no more than a part of the automobile," while Mary sits on the hood, her bare feet on his shoulders (*Collected Works* 529). To some readers, their strange embodiment suggests a familial intimacy: Roos notes that Mary trusts her grandfather, her feet on his shoulders signifying that she's "touching her grandfather with what turns out to be her most vulnerable part, the feet her father has whipped" (168). Mary's feet are indeed vulnerable, but for another reason: the child's feet are her physical connection to the earth. Bruce Gentry acknowledges this fact indirectly when he ponders, "Perhaps she treats her feet and her woods as if they were people because on a couple of occasions in the story, she does at least achieve a bit of relief by allowing her feet to carry her out into the landscape" (16). Here, I do not read the duo's positioning as intimate, but rather, an ironic sign that their ethics will soon diverge: they are only close for the moment.

O'Connor establishes Fortune's connection to technology and progress through their embodiment. If O'Connor describes the old man as "a part of the automobile"—and therefore representative of technology—then what does this association mean for his granddaughter and her connection to the land, if technology/progress is actuated by that land's destruction? The story's opening paragraph offers a striking juxtaposition of nature and progress:

> The week before, Mary Fortune and the old man had spent every morning watching the machine that had lifted out dirt and threw it in a pile. The construction was going on by the new lakeside on one of the lots that the old man had sold… He and Mary Fortune drove down there every morning about ten o'clock and he parked his car, a battered mulberry-colored Cadillac, on the embankment that overlooked the spot where the work was going on. The red corrugated lake eased up to within fifty feet of the construction and was bordered on the side by a black line of woods which appeared at both ends of the view to walk across the water and continue along the edge of the fields. (*Collected Works* 525)

O'Connor immediately introduces the excavator, thoughtlessly excavating dirt to develop Fortune's recently sold lot. The construction becomes a spectacle the two witness every morning, but O'Connor's diction toward the end of the passage above indicates that this spectacle may be read as foreboding. The natural setting around the construction site is telling: the lake is red—the color of blood—as it "eased up" or edges toward the construction. The lake is "bordered… by a black line of woods," an ominous description for a tree line. The tree line here foreshadows Fortune's final moments as he searches for someone or something to save him, as I will analyze later. O'Connor personifies the woods—a natural element of place—as they appear "to walk across the water" through "the edge of the fields," another moment of foreshadowing. O'Connor's language here makes readers aware that this construction site is not simply a construction site.

To Fortune, the land's destruction by the machine represents two things: first, the potential for profit, and second, how he imagines his family wants him: "He knew they were waiting impatiently for the day when they could put him in a hole eight feet deep and cover him

up with dirt" (*Collected Works* 527). The only personal connection Fortune has with the land is its use: for profit and its potential to bury him someday. Flanagan notes that his "dis/connection from/to the land is straightforward: he owns, he sells, he profits" ("From Earth to Eternity" 164). Thus begins Fortune's disdain for the same nature which his prized granddaughter will protect. I am reminded of Georgia Power's desire "to keep constantly in step with the progress of the state," the same idea that heavily informs his desire for commercialization (Manganiello 182). "If a cow pasture can become lakefront property," Flanagan argues, "Mr. Fortune will profit from the displaced landscape. The creation of this new setting—one witnessed by O'Connor in Milledgeville—begins offstage, before the story's opening, in the hydroelectric power plant that has created a man-made lake" ("Social Distortion" 25). The construction site represents familial disconnection and foreshadows the environmental violence to come.

While initially it may seem that the duo's fixation on the construction machines derives from the same desire for progress, Mary does not laud what the technology symbolizes; rather, she is horrified by the machines because they are destroying the land. Gentry concurs: "Although Mr. Fortune blindly assumes that she likes the earthmover she intently watches at the beginning of the story, it makes sense to believe that she actually hates the earthmover, but that she feels forced to allow her grandfather to maintain his illusions" (15–6). Rather than focus on the machines' devastation of the land, however, O'Connor is more concerned with what Flanagan calls "the denial of violence that accompanies progress and profit" ("Social Distortion" 25). O'Connor criticizes those who ignore the violence inherent when the natural world is destroyed for the sake of progress. This "denial of violence that accompanies progress and profit" is a strikingly apt word choice when we consider Mary's denial of her father's abuse. Pitts only takes the girl into the woods to beat her when she is outspoken about her exasperation at her

grandfather's desire for progress and profit. Unfortunately, the violence initiated by progress directly affects Mary.

Incompatible Perceptions of the Natural World

Mary understands that nature is interconnected with humans, a view incompatible with her grandfather's. Their otherwise strong familial bond is ruptured by their antithetical beliefs about the natural world's protection. O'Connor shows their contradictory perceptions from the outset. As the girl walks close to the embankment, her grandfather commands, "I said don't walk so close to the edge… you fall off there and you won't live to see the day this place gets built up" (*Collected Works* 529). Shrouded in an aura of paternal care, Fortune must control the girl or else she will not survive—a threat ironically proven by the story's conclusion. In response to her grandfather, however, Mary "didn't move an inch," foreshadowing that Mary will defend herself by resisting his commands; indeed, she does not survive to see the progress (*Collected Works* 529). O'Connor's narrator continues, "He was always very careful to see that she avoided dangers. He would not allow her to sit in snakey places or put her hands on bushes that might hide hornets" (*Collected Works* 529). Sure—a child messing with snakes and hornets could be dangerous—but important to note here is how Fortune perceives the natural world: nature is *only* dangerous, something to be avoided. Even during Mary's play/leisure time, the man seeks to control her.

O'Connor illustrates nature's interconnectedness and Mary's understanding of it when describing the girl's view across "the lawn." Simultaneously natural and built (or, at least, affected by humans), the lawn becomes one of the most influential elements of place in the story. After Mary angrily leaves her grandfather after an argument,

> She stared across the lot where there was nothing but a profusion of pink and yellow and purple weeds, and on across the red road, to the sullen line of black pine woods fringed

> on top with green. Behind that line was a narrow gray-blue line of more distant woods and beyond that nothing but sky, entirely blank except for one or two threadbare clouds. She looked into this scene as if it were a person that she preferred to him. (*Collected Works* 537)

To Mary, even the weeds are beautiful in all their pink, yellow, and purple glory. The red road symbolizes the road to progress, red not only because it's likely made of Georgia clay, but also because the color foreshadows the impending bloodshed. O'Connor describes the tree line here again as black, this time adding "sullen" to convey the scene's mood: something bad looms. Beyond the woods farther away, the sky is "blank" except for a couple thin clouds. What Mary sees in this scene is beautiful yet ominous. She values the natural world "as if it were a person that she preferred" to her grandfather. Their relationship's fracture will not be mended unless Fortune compromises with Mary's desire to protect the yard.

While the girl views the natural world as interconnected, the man's view is limited and simple:

> Several times during the afternoon, he got up from his bed and looked out the window across the "lawn" to the line of woods she said they wouldn't be able to see any more. Every time he saw the same thing: woods – not a mountain, not a waterfall, not any kind of planted bush or flower, just woods. The sunlight was woven through them at that particular time of the afternoon so that every thin pine trunk stood out in all its nakedness. A pine trunk is a pine trunk, he said to himself, and anybody that wants to see one don't have to go far in this neighborhood. (*Collected Works* 538)

What appears to be a beautiful image—the sunlight weaving through naked pine trees—is simply trees to Fortune. The girl sees a "profusion of pink and yellow and purple weeds," which contrasts dramatically with her grandfather's view: "*just* woods" (*Collected Works* 537, 538; emphasis added). Simon argues that "it is imperative to identify Mark Fortune's narcissism with the broader narcissism of anthropocentric attitudes toward the environment that see nonhuman nature as a tool for human activities" (4). Anthropocentric indeed—the old man cannot imagine nature's intrinsic value.

Fortune does not understand that building a gas station will jeopardize the land's ecosystem. But he attempts to see Mary's view again:

> The third time he got up to look at the woods, it was almost six o'clock and the gaunt trunks appeared to be raised in a pool of red light that gushed from the almost hidden sun setting behind them. The old man stared for some time, as if for a prolonged instant he were caught up out of the rattle of everything that led to the future and were held there in the midst of an uncomfortable mystery that he had not apprehended before. He saw it, in his hallucination, as if someone were wounded behind the woods and the trees were bathed in blood. (*Collected Works* 538)

O'Connor customarily offers her sinful characters a redemptive opportunity; the natural world gives Fortune multiple chances.[20] The old man's first chance at redemption might begin with his seeing nature the way Mary does, which would help repair their kinship (along with other familial interpersonal relationships). It would also guide him to associate with the natural world more positively. Instead, what he sees is violent: the "uncomfortable mystery" he finds himself in represents his lack of environmental concern and empathy for his "beloved" granddaughter (and family). Of course, the "someone" bleeding behind the trees can be read as a crucified Christ figure, but through a material ecocritical lens, we can read this image as O'Connor granting the trees agency (as I analyze later). The violence illuminated by the sunset's red light on the trees foreshadows both characters' violent ends.

Desperate to escape his "uncomfortable mystery" and reconnect with his granddaughter, Fortune attempts to see Mary's view of the woods once more. However, his desire for commerce interrupts his near understanding: "He looked out the window at the moon shining over the woods across the road and listened for a while to the hum of crickets and treefrogs, and beneath

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[20]Rachel Watson discusses Richard Wright's and O'Connor's offers of redemption to "some of the worst candidates for salvation" in their fiction (165). Through those characters, Wright and O'Connor "ask readers to confront what it means to be worthy of the highest gifts: love, forgiveness, compassion, justice. In other words, in the fictional worlds of both Richard Wright and Flannery O'Connor, grace is purposefully not reserved for the nice guys" (R. Watson 165).

their racket, he could hear the throb of the future town of Fortune" (*Collected Works* 539). He is unable to find beauty in "the moon shining over the woods" and the crickets and tree frogs humming. Instead, he hears the natural sounds as a "racket" and chooses to focus instead on the imagined "throb of the future town of Fortune." His selfishness and inability to find value in the natural world (other than for profit) continue to cause rifts between him and his granddaughter. After one disagreement, the old man wakes up and Mary is not waiting for him in her usual spot on the bed. Instead, O'Connor writes, "It was apparent that this morning she preferred the sight of the woods" (*Collected Works* 539). The girl finds her view of the woods more comforting than her grandfather; this element of place brings her solace.

Environmental Vision

Mary's environmental vision is two-fold: she cherishes her literal view of the woods, and she also imagines a more sustainable future for her family and the land. In this section and beyond, I use the phrase "environmental vision" in two ways: first, the literal—the ability to *see* the natural world; and second, the visionary—what one hopes will happen to the natural world. Simon asks us to rethink the story's title, keeping in mind land ownership: "*Who gets to view the woods?*, this story asks, posing not only the question of whether and how to own the land, but how we are to view nature more generally. Or put differently, *What, exactly, is your view of the woods?*" (5). Later, she reassesses these questions: "*What is the view from the woods?* Or put differently, *What do the woods see?* The ambiguity of the story's title calls upon readers to reframe their own angles of vision and ask about nature's agency, nature's point of view" (Simon 9). As I discuss later, O'Connor prioritizes nature's point of view by the story's end.

Analogous to Janie's need to perceive the horizon in *Their Eyes*, Mary's survival requires she protect her view of the woods. The child's protection of the lawn is dual: she wishes to

protect her view and to preserve her and her siblings' place for play. When Mary complains about the potential loss of the lot, we should note the first-person plural pronouns: "*We* won't be able to see the woods across the road"… "*We* won't be able to see the view"… "*We* won't be able to see the woods from the porch" (*Collected Works* 532; emphasis added). Compared with her grandfather's many "I" statements about developing the lot, the child's concern is familial: "It's the lawn. My daddy grazes his calves there. We won't be able to see the woods any more" (*Collected Works* 541). The communal play space echoes Janie and Tea Cake's Everglades before the hurricane: a place where folks labor outside and then gather for "dancing, fighting, singing, crying, laughing" (Hurston, *Their Eyes* 131).

Fortune's environmental vision is absent: the old man remains unable to truly *see* (i.e., understand) his granddaughter's view of the woods. Vision is an important motif here, though scholars haven't analyzed it in-depth in "A View." The child and her grandfather watch the construction machines, and Mary's "pale eyes behind her spectacles followed the repeated motion of [the excavator] again and again and her face—a small replica of the old man's—never lost its look of complete absorption" (*Collected Works* 525). The girl's pale eyes suggest that she may experience an epiphany.[21] Meanwhile, O'Connor initially describes Fortune as having "very light blue eyes"—not pale—a stylistic choice foreshadowing that he will not experience an epiphany (*Collected Works* 526).

Mary's impending revelation happens because her environmental vision is strengthened, only after her grandfather threatens her view of the woods. During their climactic fight near the

[21]While no one has argued that pale eyes represent incoming epiphanies in O'Connor's fiction, many scholars have pointed out that O'Connor changes her characters' eye colors. No scholars have analyzed vision or eye color in "A View of the Woods." For analyses of O'Connor's characters' eyes and vision in her other fiction, see T. Brown, Freeman, Gardiner, Hardy, Meyer, and Sloan.

story's end, the child "removed her glasses and dropped them behind a small rock near the tree he had told her to get ready against" and then commands her grandfather to take off his glasses (*Collected Works* 544). This intentional removal of her glasses begs the question: is she gaining or losing vision here? While Mary literally/physically loses her eyesight, she gains vision, or knowledge: their conflicting opinions about the natural world are a barrier too wide to breach. The child's view of the woods is lost, but her environmental vision becomes clearer.

Fortune chooses to keep his glasses on during their fight but then he is "attacked not by one child but by a pack of small demons," and "[h]is glasses flew to the side" (*Collected Works* 545). As the child is "winning" the fight, O'Connor describes the two, Mary atop her grandfather: "Pale identical eye looked into pale identical eye" (*Collected Works* 545). Here, both characters' eyes are pale, meaning the old man can still have an epiphany or be redeemed. Rachel Watson analyzes O'Connor's protagonists: "the fatal sin that most often brings about their violent redemption is pride" (166). Without a doubt, Fortune's pride prohibits him from accepting the grace offered to him by the natural world. O'Connor's protagonists have "a tendency to subscribe to a sense of reality that squarely, and often hilariously, denies the truth staring them in the face," an especially apt description when applied to Mary and her grandfather's stare down during their fight (R. Watson 166). The truth—the girl's obsession with "the lawn"—stares him down: the girl simply wants to protect the land. The man's persistence catalyzes his violent (yet not transformative) redemptive moment.

Protecting and Destroying the Natural

Mary aims to protect the natural world, and she feels protected by it. When her father beats her in the woods, notably, she clings to a tree, grasping onto the natural world: Fortune "had watched from behind a boulder about a hundred feet away while the child clung to a pine

tree and Pitts, as methodically as if he were whacking a bush with a sling blade, beat her around the ankles with his belt" (*Collected Works* 530).[22] Pitts is machine-like while he physically abuses Mary. When he is done, he tragically leaves her there, and "she had slid down under the tree and taken both feet in her hands and rocked back and forth" (*Collected Works* 530). The girl remains near her protector: the tree. The traditional patriarchal protector of the Fortune-Pitts family is neither Mary's father nor her grandfather, but a tree.

While Pitts beats his daughter, Fortune hides behind a boulder, another symbolic form of non-human nature, a natural element of place. Afterward, the old man sits "on a small rock under the tree" (*Collected Works* 531). Though many do not consider non-living things as important elements of the natural world, material ecocriticism encourages acknowledging the affective power of non-living things. In *Material Ecocriticism*, Serpil Oppermann defines the field as "a new mode of description designated as 'storied matter,' or 'material expressions' constituting an agency with signs and meanings" (Iovino and Oppermann 21). Oppermann continues, "The idea that all material life experience is implicated in creative expressions contriving a creative ontology is a reworking of ecological postmodernism's emphasis on material processes intersecting with human systems, producing epistemic configurations of life, discourses, texts, and narratives" (Iovino and Oppermann 21). The early incorporation of rocks foreshadows both Fortune's and Mary's violent deaths. Later, he takes his granddaughter to the same spot in which Pitts beats her, and "[a] few stones protruded from the clay" (*Collected Works* 544). When Mary fights back, the narrator notes her "small rocklike fists" (*Collected Works* 545). Here, Mary

[22]Though not relevant to this project, I theorize that Pitts does not actually beat Mary. Each example of her abuse is told from Fortune's perspective, who—because he hates Pitts—becomes an unreliable narrator early in the story. I believe the old man imagines Pitts beating Mary because he desires to beat the girl himself, a fantasy actualized by the story's end.

represents a human and nonhuman hybrid; what distinguishes humans from nonhuman animals is our use of tools, yet Mary hands become tools themselves. Her tools—"rocklike," part of the natural world—help defend her against her enraged grandfather.

Acknowledging rocks' use only as tools would exclude an essential part of any ecomaterial analysis. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes, "Stone is primal matter, inhuman in its duration. Yet despite its incalculable temporality, the lithic is not some vast and alien outside" (2). Rather than imagining stones distinct from these characters, O'Connor does something more powerful: she acknowledges rocks' affective nature. Rocks are not only in the background of this story: they are characters, they alter the plot's trajectory. Rocks help Mary defend herself, but they ultimately facilitate her murder too.

Fortune hits his granddaughter's head on a rock three times, violently killing her (*Collected Works* 545). Finally, when he experiences what most readers believe is a heart attack, "He turned his head and looked behind him for a long time at the little motionless figure with *its* head on the rock" (*Collected Works* 546; emphasis added). The nonhuman language here renders Mary powerless in her death and because Fortune has othered and destroyed her. The parallel between Mary and the natural world thus becomes clearer: to destroy the natural world, we must other it first. Among many scholars, ecofeminist Marti Kheel argues that in the patriarchal Western world, the natural world is perceived as alien from culture and humanity. She writes, "Nature, which has been imaged as female, has been depicted as the 'other,' the raw material out of which culture and masculine self-identity are formed" (Kheel 2). Once Fortune realizes his and Mary's disputes are irreparable, he alienates the girl, the land's protector. Ultimately, the man destroys her.

The old man views his granddaughter as a Fortune, his closest family member, confidante, lookalike. But their views of the woods do not align, so he must other Mary Fortune Pitts. Minutes before her horrifying murder, "The old man looked up into his own image. It was triumphant and hostile. 'You been whipped,' it said, 'by me,' and then it added, bearing down on each word, 'and I'm PURE Pitts'" (*Collected Works* 545). Fortune's identification with his granddaughter is severed, and after he murders her, he claims, "There's not an ounce of Pitts in me" as he "continued to stare at his conquered image" (*Collected Works* 545). Even in death, his desire to possess Mary dominates all else. Fortune casts aside his granddaughter, showing humans' capability to destroy the natural world.

Material Ecofeminism and the Maternal

Reading O'Connor's violent, complex story through a material ecocritical lens teaches us about nonhuman nature's material agencies "as part of a wider environmentalist ethos that values ecosystems, biodiversity, and nonhuman life" (Alaimo 193). In the story's pivotal moments, O'Connor grants the woods agency to give the neglected Mary a voice. O'Connor's material ecocritical choice, then, invites nuanced interpretation, one that warns against the dangers of exploiting the natural world. Though many critics have analyzed the woods in "A View," few scholars have acknowledged the woods' agency.[23] O'Connor was no perfect environmentalist, yet this powerful story demonstrates her ecological thinking.

To further examine the material ecofeminist elements here, I will turn to the story's conclusion, after Fortune has killed his granddaughter and his heart attack ensues.[24] O'Connor

[23]For critical readings of O'Connor's personification and/or characterization of the woods, see Browning, Westarp, Achilles, and Vande Brake.

[24]O'Connor foreshadows the old man's heart attack throughout the story, but I interpret these instances as ironic: the old man may have heart problems, but it is *because* he lacks empathy for his granddaughter and the land. For example, in the passage, "His heart, whenever he knew the child had been beaten, felt as if it were slightly too large

writes, “Then he fell on his back and looked up helplessly along the bare trunks into the tops of the pines and his heart expanded once more with a convulsive motion. It expanded so fast that the old man felt as if he were being pulled after it through the woods, felt as if he were running as fast as he could with the ugly pines toward the lake” (*Collected Works* 546). Nearing death, Fortune experiences his ultimate redemptive opportunity, but it is the “ugly pines” that instead take action. He perceives the pines as being ugly simply because he is unable to find beauty or value in the natural world. Despite his ambivalence toward the woods, Fortune’s woods offer him redemption.

If the chance for redemption is offered by the woods, does that make the woods a Christ symbol? In a letter to “A” on 28 Dec. 1956, O’Connor grapples with the Christ figure in this story and “whether Pitts is or can be a Christ symbol” (*The Habit of Being* 189). She writes,

> I had that role cut out for the woods. Pitts is a pathetic figure by virtue of the fact that he beats his child to ease his feelings about Mr. Fortune. He is a Christian and a sinner, pathetic by virtue of his sins. And I don’t feel that a Christ figure can be pathetic by virtue of his sins. Pitts and Mary Fortune realize the value of the woods, and the woods, if anything, are the Christ symbol. They walk across the water, they are bathed in a red light, and they in the end escape the old man’s vision and march off over the hills. The name of the story is a view of the woods and the woods alone are pure enough to be a Christ symbol if anything is. (*The Habit of Being* 189–90)[25]

While we must consider O’Connor’s explanation of the woods as Christ symbol, I advocate for a different interpretation: O’Connor bestows agency onto the pines, and because Fortune does not

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for the space that was supposed to hold it,” Fortune isn’t feeling empathetic—he’s on the verge of having a heart attack (*Collected Works* 534). O’Connor describes several instances when Mary sits on her grandfather’s chest, drawing attention to his impending death. One such example: “she was sitting astride his chest ordering him to make haste…” (*Collected Works* 535).

[25]Two weeks after this letter, O’Connor writes again to “A”: “You have convinced me that the Christ symbol is Pitts if there at all. You are right. It’s got to be human” (*The Habit of Being* 196). It is important to note that O’Connor is grappling with these important topics as she was still drafting “A View,” and there was an alternative conclusion to the story that she ultimately omitted. Regardless of O’Connor’s speculation here, my point remains: a more nuanced interpretation of “A View” considers nonhuman agency.

see the inherent value of the woods as his granddaughter does, he misses his chance at redemption.

Fortune is unable to acknowledge the power of the trees, and he believes that escaping the woods will lead him to redemption, or perhaps Heaven, or at least survival/safety: "He perceived that there would be a little opening there, a little place where he could escape and leave the woods behind him. He could see it in the distance already, a little opening where the white sky was reflected in the water" (*Collected Works* 546). In his final moments, Fortune imagines "a little opening" that he could escape to or through and "leave the woods behind him." He is desperate to escape the woods because they have come to represent his granddaughter, the "conquered image" lying near him on a rock, dead because of his selfishness (*Collected Works* 545). If the white sky represents purity and the lake represents baptism, this is his last chance to redeem himself and become saved. By focusing on the "little opening" Fortune believes he will see in order to escape the woods, I complicate this moment as well: could this "little place" be read as yonic?[26] Though not a commonly used term, "yonic" is the counterpart to "phallic." *Yonic* (adj.) derives from *yoni* (noun, Sanskrit), "A figure or symbol of the female organ of generation as an object of veneration among the Hindus and others" (*OED*). Could he desire to make a return to his mother, the original Mary Fortune, who died during childbirth? (*Collected Works* 527). For the man, the "little opening where the white sky was reflected in the water" represents a return to the original landscape: his mother's body.

Mark Fortune grew up without a mother, which inherently alters his connections with women. Though the story lacks information about his wife, O'Connor writes that the old man has "no use" for his daughter, and he has a complicated relationship with his granddaughter

[26]The *OED* cites the first use of *yonic* by M. Macfie in *Relig. Parall.* in 1879 (27).

whom he eventually murders (*Collected Works* 526). Without a mother to help young Fortune cultivate positive relations with women, this lack of kinship may have also affected his (dis)connection to the natural world. In his final moments, as he runs toward the "little opening"—his mother's yoni/womb—he seeks the comfort of his mother and Mother Nature, but he's too late.

Not finding the maternal comfort he imagines, Fortune helplessly searches for mercy in his final moments. The trees, evoking their agency, march away from him: "On both sides of him he saw that the gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance" (*Collected Works* 546). The trees are "gaunt," haggard because of their suffering. On both sides of Fortune, the trees ominously "thickened into mysterious dark files" as they methodically walk away from the dying man. The trees' movement away from him indicates he has lost control over nature—or that he never had it to begin with. Vande Brake suggests that "like Mary, the trees prophetically implore Fortune to repent while there is still time. But like her too, the trees take only so much abuse" (28). Again, O'Connor draws attention to the woods' agency: O'Connor reinstates Mary's voice after death by giving the trees agency. These trees matter (and Mary mattered) even if they cannot speak for themselves, further aligning Mary with the trees. She is/they are voiceless but can nevertheless fight back.

Connections and Conclusions

Readers of O'Connor's brutal story are left wondering why Mary is so protective of her view of the woods, especially if she is abused there. Roos contends that the girl values her view because of transcendence: "In a world in which everything, including herself, seems subject to manipulation and use by others, the woods present experientially both the place of her suffering

and a realm that transcends that suffering. One can imagine her sitting there, watching the untouched and untransformed woods… as raising the hope that there is something beyond use, something that is permanent and unchanging" (178). Mary's fixation is also about her view—her environmental vision. If she can still *see* the woods from home, then the lawn has successfully been protected, meaning she has preserved it. To this extent, the view may be just as valuable as the woods themselves, indicating Mary's hope for a sustainable future.[27]

A complicated entanglement of family dynamics, trauma, attempted possession and protection of the land, and violence, "A View" signals O'Connor's environmental advocacy, her warning against man-made environmental disasters. Like the Everglades in *Their Eyes*, the lawn represents community, leisure, familial love, protection. Like Janie, Mary needed a place away from patriarchal society (i.e., she needed respite from her home, where her father and grandfather possess her). Mary's view of the woods, then, becomes bigger than a place for communal, familial play—it becomes a site for environmental protection and care. While Hurston must incorporate places like the Everglades to help her characters heal from generational (racist) trauma, O'Connor foregrounds material/environmental devastation.

While Janie experiences racist and classist violence, both Janie and Mary experience sexist generational trauma. Simply put, "A View" would have been a much different story had O'Connor written about Mary's maternal figures, but the author hardly features the girl's mother or grandmother. Though O'Connor does not focus much on Mary's race or class, the author highlights gendered trauma to comment on the patriarchal South as it relates to environmental

[27]I am not suggesting that O'Connor prioritizes *only* anthropocentrism, but that anthropocentrism is certainly featured in this story. The woods' agency matters, but so does Mary's view of the woods.

destruction and "progress." But even if she doesn't write explicitly about the Fortune family's whiteness, it remains at the heart of the text.

Perhaps O'Connor centers whiteness because of her own lived experience as a White woman. While she does not consider any experiences of people of color in this story, according to Alice Walker, she doesn't need to (*In Search of* 52). At first glance, the author only focuses on one broad perspective in this story: the White family's. But upon further study, O'Connor focuses on multiple perspectives, including that of the natural world. She considers the trees' point of view and gives them agency to tell another side of the story. Mary's goal is to protect the trees, but when she fails, O'Connor grants the woods with agency to restore the girl's voice. She is doing something revolutionary here: in paralleling the exploitation of women with the exploitation of the environment, she is calling attention to Western patriarchal society's gendered violence. O'Connor's privilege as a White woman enables her to write such a violent story, aimed at men like Old Fortune, who take all they want for selfish gain. While Hurston includes broad themes of environmental racism, white supremacy, feminism, and civil rights, O'Connor's privilege allows her to take a more pointed aim at the people and institutions that hurt vulnerable entities—young girls and the natural world.

Compared with *Their Eyes*'s conclusion, "A View" ends tragically rather than hopefully. For Hurston, protecting her Black woman protagonist's future is essential, as is providing that hopefulness for her Black readers. But for O'Connor—who is known for her exceedingly violent fiction—Mary (or any other character in "A View") does not have a hopeful future, or a future at all. O'Connor warns against a misogynistic patriarchal system that values profit over personhood and the natural world. By foregrounding varied elements of place throughout "A View," O'Connor's environmental vision becomes clear: we must value people and places over profit.

In my next chapter, I turn to Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) in which Walker features three generations of a poor Black family. So far, Hurston has taught us about resilience and Black womanhood through the Crawfords, and O'Connor has warned us about environmental destruction through the Fortune-Pitts family. Now, we turn to another novel about Black mobility. The titular Grange Copeland moves from the South to the North and then South again to find redemption and fulfillment. As we will see, Walker's novel remixes Hurston's themes of Black resilience and survival, incorporating even more gendered perceptions of the natural world. Hurston, O'Connor, and Walker all feature the woods as a prominent element of place in their respective texts; Walker complicates even further what the woods come to represent for these twentieth century Southern texts.

CHAPTER IV: "GEORGIA WOULD BE HOME FOR HIM": ALICE WALKER'S *THE THIRD LIFE OF GRANGE COPELAND*

> For though [Grange] hated it as much as any place else, where he was born would always be home. Georgia would be home for him, every other place foreign. (Walker, *Grange* 188)

> [Brownfield] realized an extraordinary emotion. He loved the South. And he knew he loved it because he had never seriously considered leaving it. He felt he had a real understanding of it. Its ways did not mystify him in the least. It was a sweet, violent, peculiarly accommodating land. (Walker, *Grange* 213)

Framework

We have seen the ways an author's race affects their portrayals of the natural world: Hurston utilizes the Everglades as a restorative place for her characters to begin healing from racist trauma, while O'Connor focuses on unnecessary environmental devastation committed by greedy, possessive men. It is obvious that nature is racially inscribed, also perceived through lenses of class and gender. In this chapter, I focus on Alice Walker's first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970; hereafter *Grange*), further extrapolating how race, class, and gender intertwine to create a nuanced portrayal of environment and region. I argue that mobility features prominently in *Grange*, that the novel's protagonist is only able to become fulfilled because he has made the choice to move from the South to the North and back home to the South.

Just as Hurston's *Their Eyes* is structured around Janie Crawford's mobility throughout Florida, Walker's *Grange* tracks the titular character's mobility between U.S. regions. While scholarship exists about Grange's movements, what's lacking is an in-depth examination of Walker's interconnected portrayals of region, race, and the natural world. Thadious M. Davis calls attention to this lack: "Overlooked in the Walker criticism is her fictional examination of racial and regional identity, along with gender identity, and her portrayal of a contemporary need

to reinstate a black Southern experience into cultural and historical contexts despite the reality of pain that a truthful reinstatement necessarily bears" ("Expanding the Limits" 8). In this chapter, I analyze how gender, class, labor, and American history inscribe Walker's portrayals of racial and regional identity. Bearing in mind Davis's term "the regionality of the black self," I study how region and particular elements of place influence these complicated strands of identity (*Southscapes* 36).[28] Davis argues that "Walker is a central figure in constructing a new spatial geography and in reconfiguring the landscape of the South and, with it, the geographies of race and region" (*Southscapes* 339). I contend, then, that *Grange* exemplifies a new spatial geography of race and region by emphasizing Black characters' dynamic relationships with the natural world, the South, and even America at large.

Exemplifying Kimberly Ruffin's "ecological burden-and-beauty paradox," Walker creates characters who simultaneously *love* particular types of the natural world—i.e., the woods (owned by no one) and gardens (cultivated by women as safe havens)—and who *hate* and *fear* other parts of the environment—i.e., crop fields, owned by White men (Ruffin 2).[29] Literary scholar Trudier Harris writes about this tension as a "duality of attraction and repulsion" when "prominent black northern and southern writers,… join in expressing an appeal as well as an abiding caution about the South" (2). She elaborates on the "paradoxical nature of the southern

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[28]Davis situates her term "regionality of black self" within the context of Toni Morrison's work: "In a radio interview, [Morrison] called it the process of 'appropriating and reclaiming' to counter racial discourse, which she describes in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* as 'a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological "race" ever was'" (*Southscapes* 36; Morrison 63).

[29]Here's Ruffin on this paradox: "Incidents of environmental othering exemplify one-half of what I call an ecological paradox for African Americans. I define this as an 'ecological burden-and-beauty paradox,' which pinpoints the dynamic influence of the natural and social order on African American experience and outlook. For instance, an ecological burden is placed on those who are racialized negatively, and they therefore suffer economically and environmentally because of their degraded status. Simultaneously, however, the experience of ecological beauty results from individual and collective attitudes toward nature that undercut the experience of racism and its related evils" (2–3).

landscape—as a source of death and a source of beauty" (Harris 11). Walker writes this paradox into *Grange* to demonstrate Black Americans' potentially complicated relationships with the South and Southern landscape. As I argue, when Grange returns to the South, he reclaims his regional and racial identity. After experiencing generational racialized trauma, he successfully restores himself and cultivates a positive, loving home environment for his granddaughter.

Like both Hurston's *Their Eyes* and O'Connor's "A View," *Grange* follows three generations of a family. Strikingly, as O'Connor focuses on the grandfather-father-daughter dynamic of the Fortune-Pitts family (Mr. Mark Fortune, his son-in-law Pitts, and Pitts' daughter Mary Fortune Pitts) so too does Walker with the Copelands: the plot centers the lives of Grange Copeland, his son Brownfield, and Brownfield's daughter Ruth. Where O'Connor highlights familial tension and violence over the possession of land—Mary Fortune's view of the woods where she is abused and eventually murdered—Walker emphasizes the Copelands' lack of opportunity to own land because of their status as poor Black sharecroppers.[30] While Black land ownership was at an all-time high in the late nineteenth century, many Black families were only able to sharecrop on farms owned by White men. The men in O'Connor's story fight over the possession of young Mary, and we see similar tension toward the end of *Grange*: after Brownfield is released from jail for murdering Ruth's mother, he tries to win custody of his daughter from his father. The familial fight results in bloodshed like in "A View," but in Walker's narrative, the girl survives, incorporating feminist themes like Black resistance and survival, reminiscent of *Their Eyes*'s conclusion.

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[30]Kiana Knight writes, "Black landownership has historically been a means to challenge the economic oppression imposed by white supremacy. The rise of Jim Crow at the turn of the twentieth century presented African Americans with two options: move North or own farmland. Sharecropping or working as a day laborer on a white-owned farm created minimal opportunity for economic advancement as racist landowners sought to keep their workers in debt."

North and South

Grange begins, "Brownfield stood close to his mother in the yard, not taking his eyes off the back of the receding automobile" (3). If the excavator in "A View" represents the aggressive destruction of land for empty profit, the 1920 Buick in the opening scene of Walker's first novel symbolizes the Great Migration—progress migrating from the South to the seemingly idyllic North. The opening scene "engages one of the most powerful iconographic oppositions in the Afro-American narrative tradition—the play between North and South, freedom and slavery" (Mason 298). The novel's opening image sets the stage for one of its most important themes: mobility. Walker's fiction in general is "deeply preoccupied with the search for human liberation through open motion," and *Grange* is no different (Butler, "Making A Way" 68).

What sets *Grange* apart from other similarly structured African American texts is Grange Copeland's return home to the South after a stint in the North. Davis argues, "While anthropologists and sociologists may see the increasingly frequent pattern of black return migration as flight from the hardships of urban life, I would suggest that it is also a laying of claim to a culture and to a region that, though fraught with pain and difficulty, provides a major grounding for identity" ("Expanding the Limits" 6). bell hooks emphasizes this point: "many southern-born blacks long to return to the rich sub-cultures of our upbringing" (60). For Grange, return migration is necessary: grounding his identity at home on Southern soil makes him whole after decades of racialized trauma.

A Black Southern sharecropping family, the Copelands do not receive the same treatment as nearby White families (or even their relatives who live up north)—an example of environmental injustice. The novel, in Walker's words, "cover[s] several generations, and over half a century of growth and upheaval. It begins around 1900 and ends in the sixties" (*In Search*

of 255). *Grange* is the story of three generations, and, as the novel's title implies, there are three distinct parts of Grange's life. In the novel's brief first section, Grange lives in Baker County, Georgia, with his wife Margaret, their young son Brownfield, and Margaret's baby Star, whose father "might have been every one of its mother's many lovers" based on "its odd coloration" (*Grange* 23). Grange works in a White man's cotton fields and labors under an oppressive system, causing him to lose his humanity and become volatile, violent toward his family.

Further plot summary is necessary here. When Grange leaves his family and journeys north, the second phase of his life begins. But he always feels tension between home and not-home, between South and North. The novel "offers an extremely complex view of the open journey. Central to the novel is a powerful thematic tension between the characters' strong desire for a stable life centering around a 'home' and their equally potent inclinations toward radical change, the 'new life' brought about by open journeying" (Butler, "Making A Way" 70). Grange leaves his family, seeking freedom from sharecropping and the racist South, hoping for a radically different life. Because the narrative focuses on Brownfield during this time in his life, readers only learn about his experiences up north during flashbacks later. Walker chooses to focus on Brownfield during this section to emphasize the cyclicality of sharecropping: Brownfield's family struggles the same ways as Grange's, as I will discuss.

Sharecropping was an agricultural practice common in Georgia after the Civil War; a landowner would allow tenants to live on and use land in exchange for a share of the crop produced on the land. Sharecropping became another iteration of slavery: formerly enslaved folks were often forced into sharecropping due to a lack of resources and jobs post-Emancipation. Because of their economic situations, freedmen "were easy targets for exploitation by landlords and merchants alike; moreover, their options were entirely curtailed by

the vehement racism in the South, by legal restrictions and partiality, and by the postbellum financial institutions and resurgent plantation economies, which reentrenched a powerful white elite" (Riddle 53). While there were many poor White sharecroppers, history repeated itself as Black sharecroppers were especially exploited by landowners: "Historical documents from the late nineteenth century show that sharecroppers, especially black sharecroppers, were very closely supervised and had very little decision-making power over farming practices" (Ferleger 32). While formerly enslaved folks had a bit more agency than when they were enslaved, sharecropping tenants became further stuck in a system meant to keep them disenfranchised. Sharecropping maintained the "static, hopeless poverty and debt cycle" first introduced by slavery (Riddle 53).

Brownfield becomes trapped in sharecropping's cycle, the same cycle his father escaped. Grange returns to Georgia before the birth of Ruth, Brownfield and his wife Mem's third child. After years of abusing his family, Brownfield tragically murders Mem and serves a brief seven years in prison. Ruth moves in with her grandfather Grange, and the two form an inseparable bond as Grange teaches the young girl about the realities of being Black in a racist society. When Brownfield completes his prison sentence, he becomes extremely jealous of Grange and Ruth's relationship, especially since Grange was a violent (and then absent) father to Brownfield when he was Ruth's age. Brownfield takes Grange to court over Ruth's custody and wins, right before Grange shoots Brownfield in the courthouse. In the novel's final pages, the police fatally shoot Grange in his backyard while Ruth waits safely inside the home that now belongs to her. As in "A View," two of the three generations end up dead by the text's end.

The novel emphasizes the North/South dichotomy early on and connects place with race, class, and labor. Ten-year-old Brownfield's cousins, for example, "taunted him because he lived

in the country and never saw anything or went anywhere. They told him that his father worked for a cracker and that the cracker owned him" (*Grange* 4). A cycle of physical labor and debt traps the Copelands—a cycle not much different from enslavement—as they get further away from owning land or a home of their own. In turn, "a cracker" owns Brownfield too. Devastatingly, one of Brownfield's cousins says, "Brownfield's family would never amount to anything because they didn't have sense enough to leave Green County, Georgia," as if the place dictates their lives (*Grange* 11). And in a way, it does.

Place in *Grange* connects the narrative's strands: it all comes back to the South. The novel takes place mostly "in the vast cotton flats of southern Georgia," where Brownfield was born and chooses to stay his entire life (*Grange* 6). As a young man, Grange worked "planting, chopping, poisoning and picking in the cotton field… Brownfield had worked there too now, for four years, since he was six, in the company of other child workers" (*Grange* 8).[31] The Copelands' lifestyle as sharecroppers is grimly cyclical and perpetuates familial violence.

Walker's Sharecropping South

While it would be a misstep to claim that *Grange* is autobiographical, Walker's life certainly influenced parts of the novel. Born in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1944, Walker "entered a narrow world defined economically by sharecropping and legally by segregation" (T. Davis, *Southscapes* 341). Her parents Willie Lee and Minnie Lou Grant Walker were sharecroppers—which, for the family of ten, established a life of poverty—a typical situation for Black families in the South in the first half of the twentieth century (Chillar). Walker reflects on her birth: "the eighth child, unplanned, must have elicited more anxiety than joy. It hurts me to think that for

[31]"Poisoning" here likely refers to the use of pesticides to control insects on cotton plants. Later in the novel, Walker mentions "the tricky, dangerous and disgusting business of handmopping the cotton bushes with arsenic to keep off boll weevils" (*Grange* 71).

both my parents, poor people, my arrival represented more years of backbreaking and spirit-crushing toil" (*Living by the Word* 10). Walker elaborates on her parents' and grandparents' experiences sharecropping:

> I, too, was born poor, in an impoverished part of the world. I was born on what had been a plantation in the South, in Georgia. My parents and grandparents worked hard all their lives for barely enough food and shelter to sustain them. They were sharecroppers—landless peasants—the product of whose labor was routinely stolen from them. Their parents and grandparents were enslaved. (*Living by the Word* 177)

Knowing too well poverty's effects on the family structure, Walker uses her family's experiences with poverty, enslavement, and sharecropping to paint complex pictures of the South in her fiction. Sharecropping was supposed to benefit both White landowners and newly freed Black people, but it ended up being as restrictive as slavery; the negative effects of this system lasted for decades and were likely felt more strongly by African Americans since they knew they were supposed to be free (Harris 63). Experiencing firsthand the harsh material realities of sharecropping, Walker quickly developed a complicated understanding of the South.

Walker's portrayal of the South is anything but one-dimensional, evidenced by her characters' dynamic relationships with the region. Walker develops her "complex vision of the South" through characterizations of the novel's three main characters: Grange symbolizes the positive effects of reclaiming the South as one's home, Brownfield represents the physical and spiritual oppression of Black folks in the South, while Ruth embodies hope as she is able to leave the South and find a better life elsewhere (Butler, "Alice Walker's Vision" 196). Grange "returns to Georgia after an unsuccessful journey north to find the things he needs for his identity—a sense of place and a feeling of family and community" (Butler, "Alice Walker's Vision" 196). While I agree with Butler that Grange highlights some positive aspects of Southern Black life, I

disagree that Grange migrated north to find a "sense of place and feeling of family and community": escaping the South was a priority over seeking these things in the North.

That said, Butler's analysis of what Grange finds back home in the South rings true. In these narrative strands, the South enables enslavement (sharecropping), violent racism, harsh but necessary physical labor, the deterioration of family structures, familial abuse, poverty, and so on. But it also provides community, a sense of place and home, a feeling of belonging, fecund soil for gardening, etc. Grange's eventual return to the South highlights the importance of home and of these positive elements of Walker's South. If separated, the main characters' stories "do not express the author's whole vision of Southern life, [but] together they offer a series of interrelated perspectives which capture Walker's richly ambivalent vision of the South" (Butler, "Alice Walker's Vision" 196). This ambivalence makes *Grange* an essential text to examine in conversations about Southern, African American, environmental, and American literature, cementing Walker as indispensable in such discussions.

Harris argues that Black authors—regardless of where they were born or choose to live—are compelled to write about the South because of African Americans' deep historical connections to the region. She even contends that writing about "[t]he American South… becomes a rite of passage for African American writers" (Harris 2). Harris qualifies her claim and argues that while Black, Southern-born authors "tend to indict" the South more than non-Southerners, "it is left to the Margaret Walkers, Alice Walkers, Tina McElroy Ansas, and Natasha Tretheweys, all true Southerners, to balance the love with the hatred. These women, and writers who share their stances, are able to contain their fear sufficiently to show the beauty and the ugliness of southern American territory" (15). Indeed, Walker successfully illustrates both

the beauty and the ugliness of the South by weaving a violent yet beautifully striking narrative in *Grange*, one that effectively "balance[s] the love with the hatred."

Good vs. Bad Nature

Walker delineates negatively and positively figured nature throughout *Grange*: racism and classism impact the cotton fields, which are owned by White families and made profitable by Black folks' labor; therefore, cotton fields negatively affect Walker's characters. On the other hand, the woods—yet untouched by racist or classist systems—become positive natural spaces for the Copelands. For example, to escape the harsh reality of sharecropping as a child, Brownfield finds solace in the woods: "He played contentedly in the silent woods and in the clearing" near the house in which they live (*Grange* 14). The family's lifestyle brings out the worst in Grange, who abuses his wife Margaret and their children. For Margaret, the woods serve as a hiding place: Grange "threatened Margaret and she ran and hid in the woods with Brownfield huddled at her feet" (*Grange* 14). I argue that the woods—owned by no one—offer a place for play, solitude, and even resistance. bell hooks writes about how nature affords African Americans a peaceful place; here, hooks writes about the Kentucky backwoods, but her idea applies more generally:

> Nature was the foundation of our counterhegemonic black sub-culture. Nature was the place of victory. In the natural environment everything was likely to be shaped by the reality of mystery. There dominator culture (the system of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy) could not wield absolute power. For in that world nature was more powerful. Nothing and no one could completely control nature. (8)

The backwoods in Kentucky, as well as the woods in Baker County, Georgia, become a place to escape the dominator culture. Similarly, characters perceive the woods in *Grange* as they do the Everglades in *Their Eyes* and Mary's view of the woods in "A View": places for play, solitude, resistance.

The clearing near the Copelands' house becomes the site of Margaret and baby Star's deaths, which shifts Brownfield's connection with this space. Grange leaves the family to go North, and when he does not come back for several weeks, Margaret poisons herself and her baby: "the following week she and her poisoned baby went out into the dark of the clearing and in the morning Brownfield found them there. She was curled up in a lonely sort of way, away from her child, as if she had spent the last moments on her knees" (*Grange* 26). While this reinscription of the clearing in the woods challenges Brownfield's perception of nature, he continues to find beauty in the natural world. Following in his father's footsteps literally and metaphorically, he attempts to walk North, and on his journey, "rivers and creeks crisscrossed his route, and everything he saw in the woods delighted him" (*Grange* 33). Like Grange, Brownfield stops at the Dew Drop Inn where he meets Josie; unlike Grange, Brownfield never makes it past Baker, Georgia.[32]

At the inn, Brownfield also meets Mem, whom he marries soon after. He is surprised by the amount of time Mem spends in the woods: "she kept right on out of the house and out walking, just walking, in the woods… He had never known anybody to go walking, 'just walking,' in the woods" (*Grange* 58). Seemingly a good fit for Brownfield, Mem represents the beauty of the natural world, one that is yet unburdened by sharecropping as Brownfield's mother Margaret was. Their situation quickly changes when Mem and Brownfield move to "a plantation not far from where he was born… They talked of farming on shares for two years, or until

[32]Dynamic women characters in *Grange* are essential to the novel's plot, but Walker truncates their lives and stories. Josie, Margaret, and Mem all deserve in-depth analyses. Walker confirms the importance of these seemingly minor characters: "I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women. In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland,* ostensibly about a man and his son, it is the women and how they are treated that colors everything" (*In Search of* 250–51). While I don't have the time or space in this project, there needs to be further study about these women.

Brownfield could make enough money to take his bride northward," promising her, "[w]e ain't always going to be stuck down here, honey" (*Grange* 65). The beginning of Brownfield and Mem's marriage is passionate, loving, not yet scarred by the harsh realities of their lifestyle. The two even make love "in the woods after the first leaves fell," indicating that the natural world still represents beauty and love at this point in Brownfield's life (*Grange* 67).

After working in the cotton fields as an adult, however, Brownfield's attitude about the natural world changes. Walker's diction signals this shift when Mem brings him water while he works: "As the water, cooling, life-giving, ran down his chin and neck, so did her love run down, bathing him in cool fire and oblivion, bathing him in forgetfulness, as another link in the chain that held him to the land and to a responsibility for her and her children, was forged" (*Grange* 67). Walker compares the water to Mem's love: both are "life-giving." But the tone in this sentence quickly shifts from romantic to realistic, because not even Mem's love can conceal the reality of their situation. Walker's use of chain imagery here reminds readers that the family's situation is not much different from enslavement. While Brownfield and Mem's passion remains, he is chained to the land, to Mem, to their children—enslaved to the White landowners, effectively enslaving his wife and children too. As time will tell, Brownfield does not handle this responsibility well.

The cycle of sharecropping continues to rear its ugly head in Brownfield's life. When he teaches "his frail five-year-old daughter the tricky, dangerous and disgusting business of handmopping the cotton bushes with arsenic to keep off boll weevils," Brownfield heartbreakingly realizes "how his own life was becoming a repetition of his father's. He could not save his children from slavery; they did not even belong to him" (*Grange* 71; 72). Indoctrinating his young child in the dangerous work of sharecropping, Brownfield understands

now how easy it is for families to be destroyed by this labor. By teaching his young daughter to poison the cotton plants, he hopes to yield more crops; unfortunately, this means he poisons another generation of his family in the harmful system of sharecropping—literally and metaphorically. Brownfield's realization that his children "did not even belong to him" explicitly shows sharecropping's dehumanizing effects on the family structure.

Becoming more indebted and more depressed, Brownfield prays for help, "but like all prayers sent up from there, it turned into another mouth to feed, another body to enslave to pay his debts. He felt himself destined to become no more than overseer, on the white man's plantation, of his own children" (*Grange* 72). New life becomes merely additional bodies to enslave, pushing Brownfield further into debt. This thought—Brownfield becoming nothing more than the overseer of his children—further demonstrates the psychological trauma caused by sharecropping. Brownfield cannot free his children, so he feels he must oversee them, almost as their master. It is easy to understand Brownfield's despair, deriving from his realization that he is unable to own land because of his race and class—a dream only attainable to certain Americans. Brownfield "was never able to do more than exist on air; he was never able to build on it, and was never to have any land of his own" (*Grange* 73). Land ownership here represents moving beyond survival toward a happier, more fulfilling existence.

Brownfield loses the desire to run away from his family permanently as his father had. But his staying at home does not make him a good husband or father—he loses motivation; he is exhausted, trapped in a depressing cycle. Walker illustrates Brownfield's decline through his treatment of the natural world: "for fun he poured oil into streams to kill the fish and tickled his vanity by drowning cats" (*Grange* 78). Once a child who enjoyed playing in the clearing in the

woods, Brownfield's respect for the natural world has diminished because of his forced labor in the cotton fields. For the rest of the novel, Brownfield does not respect nature.

Walker uses natural terms to describe how Brownfield felt around his boss/owner: "he felt small and black and bug-like, and Captain Davis, with his sparse white hair, seemed a white giant that could step on him" (*Grange* 102). Walker emphasizes color here: Brownfield feels *black* while Captain Davis's hair is *white*; Davis seems like a *white* giant, lording over the small, bug-like Brownfield. Brownfield's status as a poor Black man positions him to feel like a bug, squashed at any moment by his White boss. Another negative perspective of the natural world—feeling bug-like—it is clear Brownfield has lost the ability to find solace in nature.

Mem's Gardens

Perhaps the most tragic character in *Grange*, Brownfield's wife Mem represents the positive side of the natural world, demonstrated by her love of gardening. She attempts to cultivate a beautiful outdoor space for her family and feel a sense of agency over just one thing in her life. Before analyzing Mem's connection to her gardens, some historical context on Black women's gardening will be useful. During slavery, "men were primarily responsible for cultivating the tiny household garden plots allotted to families by the slaveholder," while women "certainly must have assisted the men with the vegetable gardens planted primarily for family consumption. Some women tended flowers—feminine work in which they aesthetically enhanced and embellished their quarters with limited leisure time" (Glave 398–99). In African American couples post-Emancipation, gender roles shifted. For example, in Black sharecropping families, typically, "African American men produced cash crops to support their families after slavery was dismantled. Women expanded their roles by cultivating family vegetable patches, continuing to plant ornamental and flower gardens" (Glave 399). Despite many Black folks'

entrapment in an oppressive iteration of slavery, Black women began taking more ownership over their gardens beginning in the Reconstruction Era. Gardens became "vital places and spaces of survival, spirituality, subsistence, ornamentation, work, and leisure" (Glave 397). African Americans' gardening knowledge came from oral tradition rather than the print materials that Euro-Americans had more access to (Glave 397).

Similarly, Black gardens looked different from typical (White-cultivated) gardens of the time: because Black women did not have the resources to buy particular plants or flowers, "a mix of color and placement resulted in a lack of symmetry and formal design," appearing "chaotic" to most White people (Glave 398; 401). These Black outdoor spaces "simultaneously mimicked nature and rejected Euro-American control. Though the gardens appeared chaotic, the chaos of plants also created a diversity which reduced opportunities for weeds and pests to take hold" (Glave 401). During Reconstruction, gardens became spiritually regenerative spaces for Black women to have control over something of their own.

Alice Walker's mother Minnie Lou was an avid gardener, and Walker compares her mother with Mem from *Grange*:

> Like Mem,… my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens—and still does—with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees—until night came and it was too dark to see. (*In Search of* 241)

Walker's description reads as though Minnie Lou's gardens were not the symmetrical gardens typical of twentieth century horticultural norms, suggesting that Walker's mother planted what she could get her hands on. Walker writes further, "Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with

her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena… and on and on" (*In Search of* 241). These lovely descriptions suggest that Minnie Lou channeled her creativity into her gardens to escape the physical demand of sharecropping on someone else's land.

Regardless of their poverty, Minnie Lou seemed to make the best of her family's situation by spending time in her garden and cultivating a community around her flowers.

Walker describes her mother's gardening as being artful and community-building:

> And I remember people coming to my mother's yard to be given cuttings from her flowers; I hear again the praise showered on her because whatever rocky soil she landed on, she turned into a garden. A garden so brilliant with colors, so original in its design, so magnificent with life and creativity, that to this day people drive by our house in Georgia—perfect strangers and imperfect strangers—and ask to stand or walk among my mother's art. (Walker, *In Search of* 241)

Not only did Minnie Lou find a way to maintain her love of the natural world despite the hardships of sharecropping, but she also brought joy to many folks nearby through her creativity and artistry. Black women "were the creative sources of gardening in their communities from slavery to the early twentieth century. By using yards in different ways, women took possession of them. They manipulated and interpreted the spaces for sustenance, comfort, joy, and sometimes profit" (Glave 407). While Brownfield unfortunately cuts Mem's life short, Minnie Lou clearly inspired Walker's characterization of Mem. There are limited details about Mem's love of gardening in *Grange*; Walker chooses to demonstrate the character's love of gardening mostly through Mem's understanding of race and when Mem is forced to move away from her gardens.

Mem has a simplistic understanding of race and racism, which she does not fully develop since her life is cut short. Brownfield grows meaner and more abusive toward Mem and their children—just like his father: "He liked to sling the perfection of white women at [Mem]

because color was something she could not change and as his own colored skin annoyed him he meant for hers to humble her" (*Grange* 77). Here, the effects of their sharecropping lifestyle turn violent, and Brownfield's internalized racism and self-hatred affects Mem. Miraculously, "He did not make her ashamed of being black though, no matter what he said. She had a simple view of that part of life. Color was something the ground did to flowers, and that was an end to it" (*Grange* 77). Walker's stunning diction here presents a nuanced yet simple interpretation of race and the natural world: in Mem's optimistic (and, perhaps unrealistic) understanding of race, she clings to her positive association of color and flowers.

While Mem's understanding of race may seem simplistic, she *chooses* to think of her own skin color in terms of what the earth does to flowers. This idea is striking, one that I posit is her act of resistance. She lives a terribly oppressed life—sharecropping alongside her abusive husband, caring for children in an impoverished household. But Mem *chooses* to feel pride about her race rather than shame. Ultimately, her choice to feel pride about her Blackness points to the reason Brownfield murders her; he has felt ashamed of his race his entire life, but Mem refuses that shame on her own body. Because she won't join Brownfield in his self-loathing, Brownfield views his wife as a threat. Therefore, the idea that "color [is just] something the ground [does] to flowers" demonstrates Mem's resilience, self-care, and radical self-love (*Grange* 77).

The family moves "from one sharecropper's cabin to another," demonstrating the tenuousness of the family's necessary reliance on their White bosses/owners (*Grange* 77). The Copelands' movement from cabin to cabin, to be clear, is not the same type of mobility necessary for freedom. The sharecropper's cabin becomes "a charged metaphorical structure indicating the fundamental and irresistible entrapment of its occupants" (Mason 297). Further, "the living quarters of the black sharecropper become an emblem of his domination by Southern

agricultural capitalism, an indication of his continued slavery" (Mason 298). While the family is certainly entrapped in the sharecropper's cabin, Mem learns to adapt and find joy. Mem hated seeing her hard domestic work abandoned after every move—namely her gardens: "She hated leaving her flowers, which she always planted whenever she got her hands on flower seeds" (*Grange* 78). For Mem, gardens symbolize freedom, adding beauty to a horribly ugly situation.

The family's physically intense lifestyle takes away Mem's love—for flowers, her husband, and life in general: "Each time she was forced to live in a house that was enclosed in a pasture with cows and animals eager to eat her flowers before they were planted, she became like a woman walking through a dream, but a woman who had forgotten what it is to wake up" (*Grange* 78). Mem's disappointment in moving from sharecropper's cabin to sharecropper's cabin is conveyed here by her distaste for "animals eager to eat her flowers"—further demonstrating her love for her gardens. When she's forced to move to such locations, she feels trapped like a cow in a pasture. Mem "slogged along, ploddingly, like a cow herself, for the sake of the children. Her mildness became stupor; then her stupor became horror, desolation, and, at last, hatred" (*Grange* 78). Walker describes Mem as plodding along aimlessly "like a cow," further illustrating sharecropping's dehumanizing effects. Twice in the same paragraph, Walker compares Mem's life with a cow's—she's nothing but livestock, forced to move from one pasture to the next. Mem's emotional progression—mildness, stupor, horror, desolation, hatred—conveys the psychological trauma caused by sharecropping. It disintegrates familial bonds.

Having felt out of control for so long, Mem takes matters into her own hands and rents a house in town—a much-needed upgrade for the family. She exclaims, "This house has got sinks and a toilet inside the house and it's got 'lectric lights and even garden space for flowers and

greens" (*Grange* 113). Optimistic that her decisions will put the family in a better position to succeed, Mem remains excited about having a garden, something of her own to cultivate. Before they move, Mem even plans to dig up the already planted greens at their current sharecropper's cabin to take with them: "I planted these greens myself and worked them myself, and I be damn if I'm going to let some sad-headed old cracker that don't care if I starve scare me out of taking them!" (*Grange* 114). As the wife of a sharecropper, Mem has not been in the position to own anything, and here she confidently takes ownership of her greens and her garden, a positive element of place throughout *Grange*. When Mem refers to "some sad-headed old cracker" who doesn't care if she starves, she means two forms of starvation: literal starvation from food and metaphorical starvation of the soul.

Unfortunately, the cycle of violence continues in the Copeland home when Brownfield enacts his revenge upon Mem for making independent decisions. Brownfield moves the family back to a sharecropper's cabin, one where "dozens of sharecropping families had lived… and left their various odors of sweat, hogslop and discomfort deep in its rotting wood" (*Grange* 145). Here, humans and environment intermingle: previous sharecroppers' "sweat, hogslop and discomfort" ends up permanently part of the house's structure. The dehumanization of sharecropping will remain in the cabin's shabby walls forever. It is easy to imagine feeling trapped, isolated, depressed, and angry in a setting like this. Unhappy about another forced move, Mem attempts once more to make the house as livable as possible: "dispiritedly she threw a few flower seeds in the moist rich soil around the woodpile. Never again did she intend to plant flowers in boxes or beds" (*Grange* 149). Mem still clings to the hope of growing flowers—something beautiful in an ugly place—yet she compromises with herself and avoids additional

labor on a garden that will inevitably be left behind. She is dispirited but hopes the "moist rich soil" will bring her something beautiful.

Mem attempts to cultivate beauty in their lives, but to no avail: Brownfield is unable to find beauty in the natural world. At this point, he is as disconnected from his wife as he is from nature. Wrongly assuming her infidelity, Brownfield violently murders her. Ruth remembers her mother's death: "Mem lying faceless among a scattering of gravel in a pool of blood, in which were scattered around her head like a halo, a dozen bright yellow oranges that glistened on one side from the light" (*Grange* 161). Described as being angelic, Mem lies in a pool of her own blood. The oranges scattered around her were special gifts for her children. Brownfield's violence, exacerbated by the oppression of sharecropping, reaches a turning point, destroying the family for good.

Walker notes in the novel's 1987 afterword that Mem's murder "is unfortunately based on a real case" from her hometown of Eatonton, Georgia, where there was (and likely still is) "an incredible amount of violence" (*Grange* 315). The murdered woman was a Mrs. Walker unrelated to Alice's family.[33] Alice feels connected to Mrs. Walker's case; Alice's sister worked as a beautician for the funeral home, and she worked on Mrs. Walker postmortem. Alice's sister invited Alice to see Mrs. Walker in the funeral home, who "lay stretched on a white enamel table with her head on an iron pillow" (*Grange* 315). Mrs. Walker's daughter Kate was a classmate of Alice's, further connecting Alice with this unfortunate death. Additionally, Alice's grandmother's name was Kate, who was "also shot to death by a 'lover'" (*Grange* 316). Violence in the community ran deep, giving Walker firsthand experience and inspiration:

> Seeing the dead body of Mrs. Walker there on the enamel table, I realized that indeed, she might have been my own mother and that perhaps in relation to men she was also

[33]To avoid confusion in this section, I'll refer to Alice Walker by her first name.

> symbolic of all women, not only including my husband's grandmother and mother, who were as different from my own, I had thought, as possible, but also of me. That is why she is named Mem, in the novel, after the French *la même,* meaning "the same." (*Grange,* afterword 316)

Because of the author's connections to Mrs. Walker's murder, she is unfortunately quite familiar with violence perpetuated by folks trapped in racist systems.

Throughout her career, Walker includes many male characters who fit into these violent stereotypes, but she does not excuse her characters' inexcusable behaviors. Even though her characters are undoubtedly oppressed, "Walker nonetheless makes her characters responsible for their own humanity within that evil system. To do otherwise would make them animals" (Harris 9). As we will see, Grange takes responsibility for the violence he enacted in his first two "lives," redeeming himself when he takes custody of Ruth. Brownfield, on the other hand, takes no accountability for his actions.

Ruth's Nature

As Mem finds ways to resist feeling shame about her race, Brownfield and Mem's youngest child Ruth too must find ways to survive the abuse she experienced as a child. When Ruth is old enough to play outside, she plays innocently in the fields, finding joy in the natural world: "there was much in the straw field behind the house to occupy her. And she enjoyed the cool greenness of the ferns and water lilies that grew beside the crayfish-inhabited spring" (*Grange* 145). Taking after her father when he was a child, Ruth exemplifies the naïveté of a child yet untouched by the evils of racism and sharecropping. Even in the cotton fields, she is too innocent to understand what this natural space means for her family: "Ruth could play in the fields beside [Grange] all day during the summer, though she was not allowed to pick the cotton" (*Grange* 165). For her parents and grandparents, the cotton field represents bondage, extremely

exhausting physical labor, the road to survival. But for the young girl, the cotton field is a play place near her family, though this perception will inevitably change over time.

Ruth grows into a curious, intelligent dreamer, much like Janie Crawford in Hurston's *Their Eyes*. As my second chapter discussed, Janie holds on to visions of the horizon as a way to escape her fate in a sexist, racist society. Ruth similarly looks past her grandfather's land, dreaming of a future better than her relatives' lives: "[t]he time she did manage to spend atop [Grange's] truck was supremely happy. From that high perch she could see, it seemed to her, miles and miles across fields and forests and on into the sky. A sky which was benign and cloudless in those days" (*Grange* 165–66). Ruth looks beyond her current position, seeing the expansive natural world. However, she will not live in this idyllic daydream forever; Walker's choice to end the sentence with a description of the "benign and cloudless" sky "*in those days*" foreshadows that her hopefulness may not last, especially as she learns more about and experiences racism.

As Ruth's grandfather and stand-in father, Grange tries to balance teaching Ruth enough to survive in a racist and classist system without making her grow up too quickly. For example, "[h]e would never tell her that the land she stood on, which would be hers someday, was bought with blood and tears" (*Grange* 206). Because Ruth was a toddler when Brownfield was sharecropping, her understanding of the land and her family's (dis)connection to it is limited. She does not understand the reality of how Grange came to own his (and Josie's) land.[34] As Grange

[34]Robert James Butler explains how Grange came to own his farm: "Using the money he obtained in various devious ways in the North and the money he gets from Josie's sale of the Dew Drop Inn, he builds a farm" ("Alice Walker's Vision 201). Butler analyzes Grange's name as it relates to his land and his freedom: "As his name suggests, he is able to 'cope' with his 'land' so that he can build a 'grange' or farm which will nourish himself and others. This 'refuge' not only provides him with food from his garden and a livelihood from his sale of crops but, more importantly, gives him the independence and freedom he needs to assume meaningful roles which his earlier life lacked" (201).

becomes more introspective in his old age, he contemplates how to set up a good life for Ruth—one that will transcend simply surviving and allow Ruth to fulfill her dreams. In Grange's ruminations, he emphasizes place: "He spent evenings examining maps, wondering about the places in the world he would never see, and gradually what he was groping for became almost tangible… Assured, by his own life, that America would kill [Ruth's] innocence and eventually put out the two big eyes that searched for the seed of truth in everything, he must make her unhesitant to leave it" (*Grange* 272). Even though Grange was born in Georgia and would die in Georgia, he wants Ruth's story to be different. He hopes she will leave America in search of a more just place.

Despite Ruth's innocence and Grange's cynicism, the two share an affinity for the woods (as Brownfield did before becoming jaded by sharecropping). Once Ruth starts school, she and Grange "loved to walk home through the woods,… because the woods offered the privacy and quiet they both enjoyed" (*Grange* 235). Despite Grange's experience working on the land, he still finds solace in the woods. Walker notes that Ruth's peers even notice the girl's connection to the natural world: she "was often seen walking in the woods and talking to bushes and that was certainly odd," reminiscent of her mother's love of walking in the woods (*Grange* 242). Whether encouraged by her grandfather, passed down from her mother, or cultivated on her own, Ruth's love of nature represents hope: despite her family's unfavorable relationship with nature (influenced by white supremacy), Ruth can form a positive bond with the natural world.

Grange and the American Wilderness

Grange's perception of and opinion about American society and the natural world is more nuanced than Ruth's because of his age and experiences. After Brownfield murders Mem, Grange ponders, "his son was as dead as his son's murdered wife. If he had stopped long enough

to consider that his son still lived, his opinion would not have been much different: he would have said he was a member of the living dead, one of the many who had lost their souls in the American wilderness" (*Grange* 185). Walker's diction here is perplexing: does "the American wilderness" represent the natural world? Sharecropping? Being Black in America? I argue that "the American wilderness" here does not represent the historical association of wilderness (i.e., untouched nature), but African Americans' forced labor on land they did not own, followed by their complicated relationships with the natural world. In the quote above, the word "wilderness" implies an inhospitable region—either one that is uncultivated or one that's been neglected. Regardless, Grange's/Walker's idea that "many… had lost their souls in the American wilderness" strikingly portrays racism and labor in America. Vastly different from explorers', colonists', and early environmentalists' portrayals of "the American wilderness," Walker does anything but romanticize her Black characters' relationships with land.[35]

Walker uses "wilderness" again when describing what Ruth will eventually face in the world as an adult. Grange realizes that through his hatred of White people, "[h]e had lost his innocence, his naïveté, all the better qualities of himself. He had discovered, as Ruth must, that innocence and naïveté are worthless assets in a wilderness, as strong teeth and claws are not" (*Grange* 190). The phrase "a wilderness" here is different from "the American wilderness" appearing a few pages before—or is it? Through his experiences up north especially, Grange has learned that "strong teeth and claws" are necessary assets in the world, whereas innocence is worthless. It's the strong teeth and claws with which Grange equips Ruth.

Grange reflects on his time up north through flashbacks. His movement from South to North signals a transitory period, one that offers Grange more difficult experiences that he

[35]See Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* for numerous examples of these romanticizations of the natural world.

eventually grows from: “Grange is propelled out of the South, and into self-awareness, by the oppressive circumstances of his first life” (Hellenbrand 114). Grange is forced to mature in many ways when he leaves the South: “When he had gone through Baker County on his way North he was a baby in his knowledge of the world. Although he knew the world was hard. He had not even comprehended what he was running to. He was simply moving on to where people said it was better” (*Grange* 187). The North proved no better than the South; Grange realizes that racism is everywhere in America—that region does not negate white supremacy. Grange “loathed the thought of being dependent on a white person or persons again, [and] he would almost rather be blind than have to see, even occasionally, a white face. He had found that wherever he went whites were in control; they ruled New York as they did Georgia” (*Grange* 187). As we will see, Grange eventually returns to the South after his traumatic experiences in the North. For Walker, “distance from the South also affords characters the opportunity to question long-held beliefs about the region” (Rambsy 82). Not only does the journey north shift Grange’s perception about the South, but the distance itself offers Grange space to reflect on his beliefs and desires.

Grange struggles with teaching Ruth the evils of the world without revealing too much about his own experiences with racism; he is ashamed by some of his behaviors and does not want his past to affect his relationship with her. He also grapples with racism’s effect on place: “Now, as he sought to teach the ways of the world to his granddaughter and she resisted him, he was reminded of his own education in foreign parts of the world. For though he hated it as much as any place else, where he was born would always be home. Georgia would be home for him, every other place foreign” (*Grange* 188). Grange hates Georgia (and the South), but compared with his experiences up North, he is happy to settle in a familiar place. I am reminded of what

O'Connor said about regionalism in a 1955 interview: "I think that to know yourself is to know your region, and that it's also to know the world, and in a sense, paradoxically, it's also to be an exile from that world" (Elie). Grange learns more about himself and the South after spending time in New York, which teaches him more about the world than he could have learned in Georgia. But these experiences are not positive: he feels exiled and detached because of his time in both the South *and* the North. As a young man, Grange feels he does not have a home.

Grange in New York

Curious about Grange's experiences, Ruth pushes him to reveal stories about his life, though he chooses not to disclose much about "his years of violence and hardness" (*Grange* 190). In the summer of 1926, Grange "had worked, begged, stolen his way North, to New York… Unlike some unfortunate Southern migrants, he did not starve, though he was often close to it" (*Grange* 191). At this point, Walker shifts from Grange and Ruth's conversations and employs free indirect discourse as Grange remembers a particular incident in New York. In perhaps the novel's most haunting section, Walker begins narrating the story, "He had killed a woman with child on a day when he was in excruciating pain from hunger" (*Grange* 192). We learn by the end of Grange's story, however, that he "knew he would never tell [Ruth] of his past, of the pregnant woman," conveying his shame and unwillingness to strip Ruth's innocence (*Grange* 206). Perhaps this experience informed Grange's opinion of "the American wilderness."

Grange remembers a winter day in Central Park, after he had lived in New York for three and a half years (*Grange* 192). He watches as a White soldier places a shiny ring on a pregnant White woman's finger, followed quickly by the woman crying, "Why?" after she learns that the man already has a wife (*Grange* 194). The woman tries to throw the ring into the lake, and then the soldier offers her "a fat wad" of cash—more money than Grange had ever seen (*Grange*

195). After the soldier leaves, the woman cries alone on a bench: "Grange had watched the scene deteriorate from the peak of happiness to the bottom of despair. It was the first honestly human episode he had witnessed between white folks, when they were not putting on airs to misinform the help. His heart ached with pity for the young woman as well as for the soldier, whose face, those last seconds, had not been without its own misery" (*Grange* 195). Grange feels sympathy for the couple, potentially softening him to White folks, but the scene becomes worse only minutes later.

Walker conveys Grange's sympathy when he decides to "offer what help he could, for he feared [the woman] would harm herself with her crying and staying out so long in the freezing weather" (*Grange* 195). Leaving the ring and cash on the ground, the woman walks along the pond; Grange goes to the bench and picks up the ring and money—seven hundred dollars. Starving and freezing, Grange is overwhelmed by the amount of money in his hands. Rather than running with the money, Grange decides to follow the woman because "there had been something so poignant, so sad, and so infinitely pathetic about the scene he had witnessed that he found himself unable simply to disappear" (*Grange* 197). Also unable to part with such wealth during a time of need, Grange pockets four hundred dollars and tries to give back the rest, along with the ring. At first the woman claims the money is not hers, but after she realizes Grange has kept some of it, she says, "This ain't all of it… I want all of it! *You* ain't going to have any of it; before I let *you* sneak off with it I'll throw it all into the pond!" (*Grange* 199). The woman's comments immediately alter Grange's perception of her: "He hated her entire race while she stood before him, pregnant, having learned nothing from her own pain, helpless except before someone more weak than herself, enjoying a revenge that severed all possible bonds of sympathy between them" (*Grange* 199). In this moment, it is safe to assume that Grange expected the

woman to respond humanely; it's possible that Grange even hoped for *this* White person to change his mind about the entire race. But her hostile reaction, which becomes more vitriolic, drives an even bigger wedge between Grange and his oppressors.

Making the already tense situation worse, the woman calls Grange the n-word. He reacts with rage, lunges toward her, knocks her down, and then holds her by her shoulders and drags her back up to her feet (*Grange* 200). He finds himself unable to hit her, but "[h]e relived his old plantation frustrations as she stood there before him stoically calling him names" (*Grange* 200). Grange is retraumatized here, but Grange cannot bring himself to hurt the woman as she has hurt him. The woman loses her balance and falls "through the ice and into the pond" when Grange quickly (and surprisingly) attempts to save her (*Grange* 200–1). He remembers: once he laughed when his grandfather shared that he saved his "masters" and "mistresses" from a burning house; Grange realizes now "that to save and preserve life was an instinct, no matter whose life you were trying to save" (*Grange* 201). Despite being retraumatized by this woman's racist actions, Grange still attempts to save her from drowning in the frozen lake.

What happens next in Grange's story solidifies his hatred for White people for the rest of his life:

> He stretched out his arm and nearly touched her. She reached up and out with a small white hand that grabbed his hand but let go when she felt it was *his* hand. Grange drew back his dirty brown hand and looked at it. The woman struggled to climb the bank against the ice, but the ice snagged her clothes, and she stuck in the deep sucking mud near the steep shore. When she had given him back his hand and he had looked at it thoughtfully, he turned away, gathering the scattered money in a hurry. Finally she sank. She called him "nigger" with her last disgusted breath. (*Grange* 201)

Refusing Grange's help, the woman decides her own fate: she and her unborn child drown. We should recall how Walker begins narrating Grange's flashback: "He had killed a woman with child on a day when he was in excruciating pain from hunger" (*Grange* 192). Despite this

tragedy resulting from an act of overt racism, Grange believes he killed the woman and her baby, which explains why he does not disclose the story to his granddaughter.

The woman's death in Central Park forces Grange to deeply understand racism's negative impacts—in the North as well as the South. "Her contempt for him," Walker notes, "had been the last straw; never again would he care what happened to any of them" (*Grange* 201). Some may argue that it does not matter where this incident takes place—that virulent racism exists in every American region and that Grange's living in New York City doesn't influence what happens, that Grange's incident could have happened anywhere. I disagree: place affects this story tremendously. Grange goes to New York with high expectations, finding that city life is as rough as sharecropping in the rural South, though in different ways. That this incident happens in Manhattan exacerbates Grange's trauma, as does the story taking place in Central Park. A man-made park meant to provide a quiet, green space for New Yorkers to enjoy amid the hustle of the city, Central Park for Grange becomes the site of further racialized trauma. Walker sets this scene at the park for two reasons: first, it is a place that is not (supposed to be) segregated when other city spaces were segregated at the time, therefore ostensibly leveling the playing field for Grange and the White woman. Second, it is a natural-but-not-really-natural space. The park, separate from the city—where Grange begs, steals, assaults, and is assaulted—is meant to remain a separate sphere. But the racist woman's responses to Grange prove to him that not even the park is safe from racism. Grange believed that Central Park, distinct from White-owned plantations and cotton fields, could be a place in which to experience freedom and solace.

Historical context about Central Park may provide more insight into Walker's choice to set Grange's traumatic experience there. The now-843-acre park was once home to the Seneca Village community, where "1,300 African American, Irish, and German New Yorkers" lived in

the 1840s and "subsisted by selling their labor" (Fisher 28). Taken from its citizens by eminent domain, Seneca Village was demolished to build the park in 1857. Co-designers Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux wanted Central Park to become "a restorative refuge from the hustle and bustle of urban industrial life"—Olmsted and Vaux likely imagined the park would be a refuge for white-collar workers (Fisher 27). Olmsted's "plans substantially altered the natural contours of the land that became the park, thus creating an unnatural 'natural' space" (Fisher 27). When Central Park was first opened to the public in 1858, upper-class New Yorkers—who could afford to spend time away from work—enjoyed the space. Then, in the late nineteenth century, "unlike Olmsted and the city elite, who saw the park as the rural antipode of the city, working-class and immigrant New Yorkers transformed their park into a public space more like the rest of the city" (Fisher 29). Now, "[t]he park is a place where excluded groups converge and re-establish their identity and where complete strangers occasionally cross lines of race, class, ethnicity, generation, and neighborhood and create new subaltern forms of community" (Fisher 30). Despite the park's problematic beginnings, it has become a more accessible place for folks from all walks of life. That said, there have been numerous traumatic events in Central Park, affecting many marginalized folks.[36]

Grange's Central Park scene features a frozen lake, which also deserves more attention here. "The Lake"—its official name—"was the first landscape in Central Park to be opened to the public in winter 1858" ("The Lake"). Olmsted and Vaux designed the twenty-acre body of water to accomplish "the Park's primary purpose—providing a sense of wonder and escape from urban life" ("The Lake"). The frozen lake in Walker's novel ends up serving as the final barrier

[36]Several well-known examples include the Central Park Five Case (see "The Jogger and the Wolf Pack") and more recently, the Central Park Birdwatching Incident (see Nir).

between Grange and the White woman, potentially allowing Grange to save her life and move forward with his own. Had Walker written this scene differently, we could interpret the lake as a baptismal site—if the woman fell in, if Grange saved her, if she were redeemed of her racism. Instead, the lake becomes a sort of anti-baptism, wherein the woman's sins—her vile racism—are unredeemable.

Back Home in Baker County

After the Central Park incident, Grange preaches immense hatred on New York's streets. He realizes this lifestyle is unsustainable and that he needs to "find a sanctuary" away from White people and "make a life that need not acknowledge them, and be always prepared, with his life, to defend it, to protect it, to keep it from whites, inviolate" (*Grange* 205). Thus, Grange decides to return home to the South: "And so, he had come back to Baker County, because it was home" (*Grange* 205). Grange makes his home a refuge, a sanctuary from White folks. Though Grange hates the South, he would rather live where he knows exactly what to expect.

At the end of Grange's flashback, he considers what he will and will not share with Ruth: "he could only teach hate by inspiring it. And how could he spoil her innocence, kill the freshness of her look, becloud the brightness of her too inquisitive eyes?" (*Grange* 206). The old man considers his granddaughter before narrating his story of extreme violence and vitriol. Grange "fears that his revelation of the murder and the hate that both caused it and flowed from it would destroy Ruth's innocence and contaminate their love" (Hellenbrand 122). As the narrative returns to his third life—when he learns to love his granddaughter more than he ever loved his children or himself—it is clear that Grange has evolved. If he contaminated Ruth's love for him, he would be absolutely devastated. Ruth "was not to know until another time, that her grandfather, as she knew him, was a reborn man. She did not know fully, even after he was dead,

what cruelties and blood fostered his tolerance and his strength. And his love" (*Grange* 207). His tolerance, strength, and love had to be fostered over decades of living and working in a racist system, but because he takes responsibility for the damage he did in his first two lives, he is able to develop these positive qualities Ruth admires.

When Grange returns to Baker County, Georgia, Brownfield also lives there—in prison only a few miles away. Brownfield's punishment for his wife's murder is ten years imprisonment, where he is sentenced "to cut lawns and plant trees for jailers, judges, and prominent citizens of Baker County (though he was to be paroled after seven years)" (*Grange* 213). Working for White folks again, Brownfield is accustomed to this kind of labor. Now, however, Brownfield "realized an extraordinary emotion. He loved the South. And he knew he loved it because he had never seriously considered leaving it. He felt he had a real understanding of it. Its ways did not mystify him in the least. It was a sweet, violent, peculiarly accommodating land" (*Grange* 213). Juxtaposed with Grange's hatred of the South but acknowledgement that he can build a life there, protected from White people, Brownfield's sentiments about the South differ significantly. Working the land for most of his life, Brownfield grows to understand Southern land—perhaps his only redeeming quality by the novel's end. Walker's description—"a sweet, violent, peculiarly accommodating land"—represents both a positive and negative interpretation of the natural world. Sweet and accommodating yet violent, Southern land here is personified as an abusive parent: the land gives and it takes.

In prison, Brownfield has time to reflect on his life and his father's absence during his childhood. He is deeply angered by Ruth's living with Grange—not because Brownfield wants to raise his own daughter, but because Brownfield doesn't want Grange to be happy. Walker writes, "Brownfield brooded, while he worked—setting out dogwoods, magnolias and mimosas on

spacious well-tended lawns—on his father's audacity at taking his daughter" (*Grange* 214). While this excerpt demonstrates Brownfield's anger toward his father, it also conveys the difference between races and classes in Georgia at this time: as a prisoner, Brownfield works for affluent White folks, planting Southern flora in their well-kept yards—a symbol of the upper class. (And, interesting to note is that Brownfield's job while incarcerated is gardening, the only thing that brought joy to his wife, whom he murdered.) Like White landowners with sharecropping farms, the well-to-do White citizens of Baker County profit from Black folks' (free) labor. Here, Walker emphasizes a familial progression of White abuse of Black labor: Grange's grandparents were enslaved; as an adult, Grange worked as a sharecropper before migrating North; in childhood and adulthood, Brownfield worked as a sharecropper; now, Brownfield serves prison time while prominent White folks receive free yard work. Perhaps this environmental injustice is what Grange refers to when he talks about "the American wilderness"—a system designed to repress Black folks. We should note how the natural world features in this progression of enslavement: people in power use spaces like cotton fields, sharecropped land, and landscaped yards to abuse Black labor and maintain racial hegemony. "The American wilderness," then, to some African Americans, becomes necessary to survive. It is no wonder that Ruffin's "burden-and-beauty" paradox is still relevant.

Possession of Women, Not Land

Racist labor systems strip African Americans of ownership and agency, and Walker offers many examples of how Black men react to these rights being taken away (or, not offered in the first place). Mem's murder is perhaps the most violent example: Brownfield—in debt and forced to work in White men's fields—feels he has no agency over his life and therefore takes Mem's life to feel a sense of control (*Grange* 161). Similarly, even early in Grange's life, he

attempted to possess women; he remembers telling his first wife Margaret, "If I can never own nothing,… I will have women" (*Grange* 228). Like the central conflict in O'Connor's "A View," men's possession of women becomes a substitute for owning land: recall Pitts' and Fortune's fight over Mary, who only wanted to protect the land. The parallel between these two texts is fascinating—a girl's father and grandfather fight over her because they cannot own land (or anything else). In *Grange*, Grange and Brownfield are working against an added racial layer when compared to the male characters in O'Connor's story.

After Brownfield's release from prison, he tries to convince Ruth to come live with him. Brownfield's strategy is aggressive and violent—his *modus operandi*—and it proves ineffective. He stalks his daughter, saying to her, "You belongs to me, just like my chickens or my hogs" (*Grange* 279). Equating Ruth to livestock, Brownfield remains under the impression that he *deserves* to possess his daughter since the possibility of owning land (or anything) had been stripped from him. He feels he deserves to parent (or own) Ruth, despite his lifetime of proving he is an unfit father.

When Brownfield takes Grange to court over Ruth's custody, the men battle over the possession of the young girl. But Grange truly wants what's best for Ruth, whereas Brownfield longs for petty revenge against his father. Brownfield desires to possess Ruth because he wants ownership—over anything—especially after being released from prison, where he has been further disenfranchised. When Grange and Ruth walk into the courthouse, Grange takes the girl by the elbow and says, "Don't you worry,… I wouldn't be worth nothing if I couldn't take care of my own. And I want you to always remember—you is my own" (*Grange* 306). Walker continues, "Grange kissed her on the top of her hair, lightly, and they walked together into the

house of justice" (*Grange* 306). Walker's portrayal of ownership becomes more complicated here, as Grange speaks of possessing Ruth in a loving way. Intent matters.

Brownfield has an advantage during the custody case: he knows the presiding judge, as he was one of the recipients of Brownfield's prison labor. "Judge Harry," as the Black men in town called him, "was not a bad man, as bad men in the South go… He had, however, meted out unjust sentences and had been the beneficiary of much yard labor and housework which the city paid for and which he was able to secure from his position on the bench" (*Grange* 307). Walker highlights just how flawed the justice system is, made worse when Brownfield wins the custody case because of his relationship with the judge. After his decision, the judge "was smiling in that way Southern white men smile when they control everything—birth, life and death" (*Grange* 308). And the judge did control the outcome, one that benefitted Brownfield: sixteen-year-old Ruth was to live with her father.

Immediately after the hearing, Brownfield grabs Ruth and Grange reacts swiftly: "Underneath his flared tail coat Grange had carried his blue steel Colt .45. With it he had shot down his son" (*Grange* 309). Walker spends no time elaborating on Brownfield's death, implying that the more important lives here are Grange's and Ruth's. The pair flee the scene, and Ruth hides out in their home while Grange runs through the woods, strategically leading the police away from his granddaughter. "Suddenly," Walker writes, "the air rang with the rush of bullets and a few minutes later, just as suddenly, everything was still" (*Grange* 310). Grange was "sitting there dying outside the cabin that had been Ruth's 'house,' with the sun across his knees, and his back against a tree" (*Grange* 310). The natural world and the comforts of home surround Grange during his final moments. He sits against Ruth's cabin—a place for outside play that Grange grew to love—with the sun shining on his knees and the support of a tree. Grange's final

moments demonstrate that regardless of his nuanced relationship with nature—sharecropping, the incident in Central Park, etc.—he is still able to understand the natural world's inherent value.

Demonstrating his final act of love, Grange sacrifices himself so that Ruth can live freely without Brownfield's oppression. Unlike Grange and Brownfield's entrapment via sharecropping, Ruth "is not trapped by the past. Rather, with her father and grandfather dead, Ruth is left alone to face the future" (Hellenbrand 125). Because Grange has established Ruth's financial security, including gifting her his land, she can now choose her destiny: will she stay on the farm and cultivate her own lifestyle there? Will she follow in Grange's footsteps and go North, only to return home to the South? Will she travel the world? To Walker, I don't think it matters; what's important here is that Ruth has the agency to live her life freely.

The final sentence of *Grange* is heartbreaking: "'Oh, you poor thing, you poor thing,' [Grange] murmured finally, desolate, but also for the sound of a human voice, bending over to the ground and then rearing back, rocking himself in his own arms to a final sleep" (*Grange* 311). Grange's life journey is complete: the old man rocks himself to sleep as a parent would rock their baby—a nod to the cyclicality of life and death. Grange's evolution conveys the necessity of selfless love. This moment encapsulates the primary difference between Grange's and Brownfield's philosophies: Brownfield lives his life selfishly and cares deeply about how White folks treat him; in Grange's third and final act, the old man learns to love selflessly. Grange grows to love Ruth in a way that is not possessive but caring, a love that is centered on security, not ownership. Even if Grange hates White people, he refuses to live his life based on others, which is what allows him to kill Brownfield in order to liberate Ruth. Walker elaborates on this difference between father and son:

> I believe in change: change personal, and change in society… So Grange Copeland was *expected* to change. He was fortunate enough to be touched by love of something beyond himself. Brownfield did not change, because he was not prepared to give his life for anything, or *to* anything. He was the kind of man who could never understand Jesus (or Che or King or Malcolm or Medgar) except as the white man's tool. He could find nothing of value within himself and he did not have the courage to imagine a life without the existence of white people to act as a foil. To become what he hated was his inevitable destiny. (*In Search of* 252–53)

After he won the court case, Brownfield's final grabbing at Ruth demonstrates that he remains a static character, becoming what he hated: a man obsessed with ownership over another human being, not much different from the White folks he was enslaved to in each phase of his life. Brownfield dies a selfish, loveless man. On the other hand, Grange's rocking himself to eternal sleep demonstrates that he is finally fulfilled; by loving Ruth and giving her the freedom he dreamed of, Grange can rest easy.

Walker's South

In *Their Eyes*, mobility is an essential part of Janie Crawford's journey to independence and self-love. Moving throughout Florida (and ultimately returning home to Eatonville) completes Janie's pilgrimage to womanhood and freedom. In *Grange*, mobility too symbolizes freedom in all three generations of Copelands. While some readers may believe that Grange's leaving his family behind to migrate North is not the most morally sound decision, he must leave the South to understand white supremacy's complexities. His choice to return to Georgia and settle there demonstrates his need to root in a familiar place where he can reflect on his life's mistakes and redeem himself by taking accountability for his actions. Brownfield, on the other hand, lacks the ability to be mobile: from sharecropping White men's fields, to being imprisoned for his violent actions, to being killed by his father, Brownfield never experienced mobility. He was powerless, unable to hold himself accountable for his poor decisions. Ruth's grandfather

offers her a clean slate: she has the agency to decide what happens in her life, especially now that her abusive father is dead. Ruth has the opportunity for mobility.

Before Grange's death, Ruth worries about what she will do with her life. Grange responds, "We got this farm. We can stay here till kingdom come" (*Grange* 249). Ruth "looked at Grange's patch of cotton that was so lovely under the moon. There was a garden and chickens and pigs. The life would be perfect for a recluse" (*Grange* 249). To Ruth, Grange's cotton patch is "so lovely"; Walker is sure to note they have a garden and other resources like chickens and pigs. Ruth could have a great life there on the farm, able to garden and raise livestock. But Ruth adamantly replies to her grandfather, "I'm not going to be a hermit,… I want to get away from here someday. Meaning no offense to your farm, of course. You know, I think maybe I'll go North" (*Grange* 249). Ruth's power to choose to go North would have been impossible without Grange's influence on her life—financial and otherwise. Walker bestows the freedom of choice upon Ruth because it is what she needs to survive a racist, sexist society.

At *Grange*'s conclusion, Walker implies that Ruth will survive the racist and sexist systems in which she was born. Black women writers—especially Walker—emphasize "survival *whole*… over the violence, the white supremacy, the institutionalized racism, and the legacies of slavery. Wherever one finds one's self on southern soil, these women writers posit, the possibility exists for transcendence" (Harris 15). Ruth's opportunity to move away from the South will allow her to survive, but she will not necessarily flee the South. Instead, along with her freedom of choice, the South affords her the opportunity to not just survive but thrive. Because of her deep-seated familial ties to Southern soil, Ruth might find joy in remaining rooted on her grandfather's land in Georgia. Like Janie's promising future in *Their Eyes*,

Walker's hopefulness for Ruth reaffirms "hope as a repeating, circulating, and obstinate practice of African diasporic women's survival in the Americas" (A. Davis 46).

Connections and Conclusions

By focusing on three generations of a poor Black Southern family, Walker draws out the entanglements of race, region, and place. Her characters' relationships with certain elements of place are complicated and shift over time. Most obvious, Grange and Brownfield perceive the cotton fields negatively because of White folks' exploitation of Black sharecroppers. But later, Ruth innocently plays on those same cotton fields as a child, demonstrating that negatively perceived places are figured as such based on the lived experiences that happen there. Initially a positive element of place, the clearing in the woods near Grange's sharecropper's cabin—where Brownfield played as a child—later becomes negatively charged when Margaret and her baby die there. Mem perceives gardens positively, as they symbolize Black resistance and survival.

Perhaps the most prevalent element of place throughout *Grange* is the woods, experienced as positive by almost all characters in different phases of their lives. The woods serve as a play place for young Brownfield, a hiding place for Margaret, a place for Mem's long walks, privacy and solace for Grange and Ruth, and finally, a hiding spot for Grange during the novel's conclusion. Historically—especially before and immediately following Emancipation—the woods for some Black folks did not carry *any* positive attributes. For Walker's characters, though, the woods become the site of play, respite, and peace from a society entrenched in racism, sexism, and classism. The final element of place in the novel—Central Park—is of course perceived as extremely negative because of Grange's experience with the racist White woman. Walker's iterations further demonstrate that the natural world can be complicated for

Black people. But Walker's portrayal of these elements demonstrates that in general, the natural world can provide solace and growth for Black folks if they are able to seek it out.

The cyclicality of sharecropping breeds violence and the disintegration of familial bonds, as evidenced by Brownfield and Grange's complicated relationship and Brownfield and Ruth's nonexistent relationship. These crumbling family structures aren't the end of the story for Walker, though, because of Grange and Ruth's strong, healthy connection. *Grange* demonstrates that Black folks can heal their generational trauma with hard work. Grange's love for Ruth leads to her own independence and wisdom, and her optimistic future. If Ruth symbolizes hope for young Black women, then Grange symbolizes reclamation. His return to and reclamation of the South as his chosen home is also hopeful. Brownfield, on the other hand, represents America's oppression of Black men. While Grange was able to work on himself and mend his relationship with his granddaughter, Brownfield becomes trapped in systems of oppression—sharecropping and incarceration, both modern iterations of enslavement.

As in "A View," the possession of land and girls/women is an important theme in *Grange*. Pitts and Fortune own land and become greedy to own even more as they attempt to possess young Mary Fortune. However, in *Grange*, Brownfield is unable to own land and desires to possess his daughter instead. Grange buys his own farmland and thus does not feel the need to "own" Ruth. Walker warns us about the potential desire for Black men to take control over women/girls when they have no ownership over anything else in their lives. Again, Walker believes that Black people can mend their generational racialized trauma through positive associations with the natural world.

Grange's ability to move from the South to explore more of the world, and then his ability to move back home to the South affords him the opportunity for growth and maturation.

We see what happens to Black characters when they cannot move freely in the world: Brownfield's life ends up much different from Grange's because of his inability to move. Mobility is essential for agency. Grange's mobility isn't the only one Walker includes in the novel; while Ruth's future is not yet written by *Grange*'s conclusion, it is her ability to move from the South that makes her future a hopeful one. Janie Crawford's mobility in *Their Eyes* is what ultimately frees her from oppressive marriages, abuse, racism, and sexism. While we don't know where Ruth chooses to live after the deaths of her father and grandfather, what matters is that she has a choice. Walker carries on Hurston's tradition of affording her Black female protagonist with the opportunity for mobility.

Because Ruth is free to stay at or move from her grandfather's farm in Georgia, Walker grants her the possibility of transcendence. She needs to transcend the Copelands' generational trauma and the societal expectations placed upon her as a young Black woman. Mobility allows her transcendence, like Janie in *Their Eyes*. In O'Connor's story, Mary does not yet require the same mobility as a young White girl, but her ability for mobility is stripped from her anyway. Whereas O'Connor's protagonist needs to transcend familial abuse, Ruth and Janie need to leave behind generational racialized trauma.

Walker's works—especially *Grange*, as I have argued—are essential to Southern Studies because of how Walker infuses Southern landscapes with critiques of racism, classism, and sexism. Davis argues that Walker's works have altered Southern Studies as a whole: "The work of Alice Walker from the 1970s and 1980s, in particular, informs a range of texts in a number of disciplines that have changed how we conceive of and practice Southern Studies, and so embedded and naturalized is her positionality in the process that we have lost track of the larger significance of her contribution to our work" (*Southscapes* 338). Walker's Souths deserve more

critical attention, especially in terms of environments and natural elements. *Grange* simply would not be the same narrative had it been set in a region other than the South.

In my next chapter, I turn to Janisse Ray, who also tells the story of three generations of one family: her grandfather, her father, and herself. In her 1999 memoir *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ray focuses on her family and their junkyard in Baxley, Georgia. While her story is not as concerned with race as Walker's, she does foreground poor individuals and their varying relationships with the natural world. Ray's portrayal of the South is more attuned to traditionally defined ecology than Hurston's, O'Connor's, and Walker's—namely, Ray focuses on the loss of longleaf pine forests.

CHAPTER V: "GEORGIA'S GREAT UNWASHED DEMOCRACY": JANISSE RAY'S *ECOLOGY OF A CRACKER CHILDHOOD*

> Passing through my homeland it was easy to see that Crackers, although fiercely rooted in the land and willing to defend it to death, hadn't had the means, the education, or the ease to care particularly about its natural communities. Our relationship with the land wasn't one of give and return. The land itself has been the victim of social dilemmas—racial injustice, lack of education, and dire poverty. It was overtilled; eroded; cut; littered; polluted; treated as a commodity, sometimes the only one, and not as a living thing. Most people worried about getting by, and when getting by meant using the land, we used it. When getting by meant ignoring the land, we ignored it. (Ray, *Ecology* 164–65)

Rough South

In *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Alice Walker emphasizes the destructive nature of oppressive labor—specifically sharecropping—on one Black family. *Grange* follows three generations of Southerners (as all my chapters' texts do) and so too does Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999; hereafter *Ecology*). Ray writes mostly about her grandfather, Charlie Ray, his son/her father Franklin, and herself throughout her memoir, though she features some other family members too. Labor in Ray's memoir looks much different from in *Grange*, but labor remains an important subject of the book; while Ray's ancestors were not forced into sharecropping contracts like many Georgians in the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, her relatives—the Crackers—had to participate in deforestation in order to survive.

In my project thus far, I have analyzed a novel (1937), a short story (1957), and another novel (1970). Now, I will examine a memoir published at the end of the twentieth century. Because the environmental literature field has grown dramatically in the last half of the twentieth century into the twenty-first century, more women writers have been published and accepted into

the canon. Southern White women writers from lower-class backgrounds, such as Dorothy Allison, Kaye Gibbons, Lee Smith, and Barbara Kingsolver, are now being widely read and acknowledged. At the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, these women were and are writing fiction that certainly has environmental elements. Unlike these other authors, Janisse Ray is excluded from collections like *Rough South, Rural South: Region and Class in Recent Southern Literature*—a collection devoted to contemporary Southern writers from lower-class backgrounds—because she writes nonfiction, not fiction.

It is essential to study Ray's works to demonstrate the ways Southern women writers can directly affect environmental justice efforts. I am interested in how nonfiction carries a "robust adaptability, imaginative and political, as well as… [an] information-carrying capacity and… [an] aura of the real" (Nixon 25). Rob Nixon draws attention to nonfiction's exclusion from environmental literature: "a tenacious tendency remains to marginalize nonfiction, to treat it as at best supplementary to 'real literature' like the novel or poetry rather than taking seriously its adaptive rhetorical capacity, the chameleon powers that make it such an indispensable resource for creative activism" (25). Ray's nonfiction effectively demonstrates creative activism in her approach to blending the personal with the political. Further, Nixon writes, "The most effective memoirists, not least environmental ones, find ways to draw on the form's intimate energies while also offering the reader a social depth of field" (26). *Ecology* successfully does both: Ray's memoir is a beautiful amalgamation of the author's personal history—familial, environmental, Southern—and an energizing approach to environmental justice efforts.

Ray's work has been mostly excluded from discussions about Southern environmental literature, despite its far-reaching outcomes. *Ecology*'s focus on lower class Southern White folks provides ample space for analyses of race, class, Southern identity, environmentalism, and

more. “Rough South,” a term coined by documentary filmmaker Gary Hawkins, refers to “a distinctive group of southern writers whose careers began in the last third of the twentieth century” (Cash and Perry xi). Erik Bledsoe further defines the Rough South as “the world of the redneck or white trash” (Cash and Perry 9). These definitions accurately describe Ray’s work, yet no one has explored *Ecology* by using this term. Bledsoe continues: “In the class-race-gender triumvirate of much contemporary criticism, class is still the poor cousin who is often ignored while its higher-profile relatives are wined and dined by academics” (Cash and Perry 9). I will apply the term Rough South to Ray’s *Ecology*, focusing on social class and its impacts on environmental justice efforts.

The memoir’s full title, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, begs further examination, as it includes a term that can be derogatory. Ray uses “Cracker” when referring to her ancestors, Scots-Irish immigrants who settled in Georgia in the early nineteenth century. Bledsoe notes, “Part of the difficulty of discussing southern literature from the perspective of class arises from the slippery nature of class distinctions in southern white society. The terms *redneck, white trash, cracker,* and *poor white* have all been used to describe certain white southerners, but exact categories are difficult to define” (Cash and Perry 10). Despite these slippery categories, Ray pridefully reclaims “Cracker” to connect with both her Southern heritage and the particular environment from which her people came. In this chapter, I analyze the entanglements of social class, environmental justice, race, and Southern identity in *Ecology*. I explore the historical and environmental contexts of South Georgia’s disappearing longleaf pine forests. Then, I examine Ray’s family history before analyzing her class-conscious representation of environmental justice. Finally, I interrogate her understanding of Southernness and race—and where she falls short in acknowledging her white privilege.

Born in Baxley, Georgia, in 1962, Janisse Ray made waves in nature writing and environmentalism when she published *Ecology* in 1999. The memoir features alternating short chapters: half focus on her family and her upbringing, and half are devoted to the longleaf pine forests that were once native to South Georgia. The book's structure illuminates how Ray's identity is equally entangled with her family's influence, the importance of place, and her love of (and lament for) longleaf pines—"the tree that grows in the upland flatwoods of the coastal plains" (Ray 14). Throughout *Ecology*, Ray focuses on the ecological changes in South Georgia during the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the impact of those changes on her community. She reflects on her childhood, including her relationships with her father and grandfather, and her interactions with the natural world, as she comes to understand the interdependence of humans and the environment. Throughout the book, Ray weaves together personal anecdotes, observations of the landscape, and discussions of environmental issues to provide a unique and powerful perspective on the impact of human activity on the natural world.

Ray incorporates several elements of place throughout *Ecology*, which she calls "wildernesses." As a reminder, I define elements of place as natural and built elements that consciously or subconsciously shape perceptions of place and belonging. Like all my primary texts thus far, Ray's work focuses on the woods and her characters' (family members') perceptions of and connections with the natural world. Her grandfather's and her father's understanding of the woods varies drastically, yet she gains some environmental knowledge from her grandfather. Ray focuses on the junkyard she grew up on, calling it a "wilderness" because of its logical chaos, which I discuss later. This element of place affects her because it is how she comes to understand her socioeconomic status as a child. Most abstractly, Ray portrays

mental illness as a wilderness, another element of place that affects her family's connections with place and the natural world.

Summary: *Ecology*

A chronological summary of relevant chapters will be useful here. Early in *Ecology*, Ray establishes her intimate connections to her ancestors, her more direct family members, the longleaf pines native to South Georgia, and the Altamaha River. Ray acknowledges that her hometown is not aesthetically pleasing or traditionally beautiful, yet she argues that it is ecologically important despite its ugliness. In the chapter "Shame," she details growing up on a junkyard and the shame that she and her siblings felt: "Away from home we were ashamed of the junkyard" (Ray 29). But Ray acknowledges the beauty of growing up on a junkyard and the uses of trash: "The junkyard, then, was all we knew. We knew nobody else lived like we did, but we didn't know how they lived. We knew they were wasteful and threw perfectly good things in the garbage, which ended up at our house. We thought that meant they were better than we were" (29). She also grapples with her Southern identity in "Shame," detailing her experiences leaving Baxley for college, and the difficult but necessary process of returning home and regaining her sense of Southern pride.

In the chapter "Iron Man," Ray reminisces about her grandfather Charlie, who suffered from mental health issues and often retreated into the woods "for safety and comfort and for shelter and food," leaving his family behind—including Janisse's father Franklin—for weeks at a time (40). In the next section, I analyze Charlie's connection to the natural world. Charlie's abandonment of his family and his love of the woods created in his son Franklin a weariness of the natural world. Charlie also passes down mental illnesses to his son. Ray forges parallels between mental illness and place in "Junkyard" when providing more details about her father's

struggles: Franklin "was in a place none of us could reach; not even all of us collectively could pull him back. His body was at home, he'd lost his mind—for the first time I knew the two of them to be separable" (Ray 78).

In *Ecology*'s next chapter, "Crackers," Ray provides a history of her ancestors, including an etymology of the term "Cracker." She calls the Crackers' legacy one of "ruination" (Ray 87). Ray begins detailing the ecological losses after deforestation in "Longleaf Clan": "as Southern forests are logged, these species of flora and fauna, in ways as varied as their curious adaptations to life in the southeastern plains, suffer. All face loss of place" (142). In the chapter entitled "Poverty," Ray details her experiences growing up poor, as she focuses on her community's use of the land. She describes an ethical paradox: "it was easy to see that Crackers, although fiercely rooted in the land and willing to defend it to death, hadn't had the means, the education, or the ease to care particularly about its natural communities" (Ray 165).

Throughout *Ecology*, Ray devotes chapters to particular family members—her grandfather Charlie, her grandmothers Clyo and Beulah, and her mother Lee Ada. She organizes her other chapters based on the species of animals that have been most affected by deforestation in southern Georgia—the indigo snake, the Bachman's sparrow, the flatwoods salamander. In "The Kindest Cut," Ray grapples with the ethics of logging in a poor community. "Second Coming" argues that junkyards are a wilderness, and Ray establishes her goal to restore the lost ecologies in Baxley: "I have a dream for my homeland. I dream we can bring back the longleaf pine forests, along with the sandhills and the savannas, starting now and that we can bring back all the herbs and trees and wild animals" (270). The afterword, entitled "Promised Land," is a call-to-action that urges Southerners to fight against further environmental loss in the South.

Ray's Wildernesses

Throughout *Ecology*, Ray describes her nuanced perceptions of wildernesses—or elements of place—including the junkyard where she grew up, along with her father's and grandfather's mental illnesses.[37] Janisse's parents raise her and her siblings on a junkyard, where she has a unique childhood playing among broken-down cars and parts—a place most consider waste or trash or junk—the Rough South. Ray writes about the similarities between junkyards and wilderness:

> A junkyard is wilderness. Both are devotees of decay. The nature of both is random order, the odd occurrence and juxtaposition of miscellany, backed by a semblance of method. Walk through a junkyard and you'll see some of the schemes a wilderness takes—Fords in one section, Dodges in another, or older models farthest from the house—so a brief logic of ecology can be found. (268–69)

Interestingly, Ray draws parallels between junkyards and what we consider traditional wilderness—i.e., natural spaces with little to no human interference. She humorously describes both spaces as being random yet organized: in a junkyard, broken down cars are grouped by make, and older cars are "farthest from the house." Ray calls this "a brief logic of ecology," an interesting phrase to apply to a natural wilderness also. Of course there is logic in nature: plants that need sunlight do not grow where there is none; nature is organized chaos. By connecting junkyards with the natural world, Ray does something that other nature writers and environmentalists had not done before: she highlights a junkyard's ecology, drawing attention to a previously forgotten environment.

We can also analyze Ray's comparison of a junkyard wilderness and a "natural" wilderness alongside Alice Walker's portrayal of wilderness. In *Grange*, the titular character thinks about "the many… who had lost their souls in the American wilderness" (Walker 185). In

[37]When discussing Ray family members, I'll refer to the author by her first name to avoid confusion.

chapter four, I argue that Walker did not use "the American wilderness" to reference a "natural" wilderness, but instead, she emphasized African Americans' complex relationships with the natural world because of their labor in oppressive systems like enslavement and sharecropping. Walker's wilderness realistically represents her characters' relationships with the natural world, as she avoids romanticizing her Black characters' (dis)connections to/from land. Ray's use of wilderness here reads more positively. The "random order, the odd occurrence and juxtaposition of miscellany, backed by a semblance of method" of both forms of wilderness—"natural" and junkyards—sound comforting to Ray (268). While Walker portrays "the American wilderness" as a place or ideology that forces (Black) people to "los[e] their souls," Ray's wildernesses—in all their chaotic yet ordered glory—make her feel at home.

Ray focuses several of *Ecology*'s early chapters on her grandfather Charlie, who suffered from undiagnosed mental illnesses, likely "manic depressive, bipolar, an imbalance defined by flamboyant highs and pitch-black lows" (41). Ray notes the generational trauma of mental illness: "The disorder has run through my father's side of the family for at least three generations that I know of" (41). She speculates that the illness was "caused by a combination of genetic predisposition and stressful environment" (Ray 41). Comparing the Rays' and Copelands' generational trauma reveals similarities. While the Copelands' trauma stems from a racist labor system and from working as sharecroppers on land other people own, the Rays' trauma comes from predisposed, untreated mental illnesses and stressful environments. In both families, environments shape family experiences across decades (centuries?). Harsh environments also affect three generations of families Hurston's *Their Eyes* and in O'Connor's "A View."

Charlie has such an affinity for the woods that he often disappears from his family for weeks at a time, surviving on his own in the forest and abandoning his wife Clyo and their eight

young children. Ray heard from family members that "as a father, Charlie was poor at providing" (40). Franklin—Janisse's father, Charlie's son—surmises, "Probably he shouldn't have married or had children… He wasn't that kind of man" (Ray 40). Charlie was incredibly violent and took to the woods to deal with his own mental illness and struggles with familial life. One benefit of Charlie's retreats in the woods, however, was his environmental knowledge, which he later taught his grandchildren. Ray remembers, "Because [Charlie] withdrew often to the woods for safety and comfort and for shelter and food, he knew them like nobody I've ever known. All his life he never gave his heart so fully as to those peaceful wildland refuges that accepted without question any and all of their kind. He was more comfortable in woods than on any street in any town" (40). Charlie found refuge in the woods, where he sought after "safety," "comfort," "shelter," and "food"—things he was not finding at home. He redefines "home" as his environmental knowledge allowed him to live as he wanted in the woods, away from the pressures of raising a big family on little income. Ray grants the "peaceful wildland refuges" with agency as they accept "their kind," including her grandfather.[38] Ray's diction here indicates that she saw the wilderness in her grandfather and vice versa.

Charlie leaves his family for good when he moved to Florida, just as Grange leaves his family behind but to migrate North (Ray 55). He returns occasionally when his grandchildren were young, and Janisse continued learning from him: "For portions of my childhood, Charlie returned to live in Appling County, although really he was as absent in his grandchildren's lives as he had been in his children's. He fascinated me, since I had nothing to forgive" (Ray 55). Unlike her father, Janisse was able to forge a bond with Charlie—as Ruth does with her

[38]O'Connor also grants the woods with agency in "A View," a noteworthy parallel between the two White authors of my primary texts.

grandfather Grange. She remembers, “He was full of jokes and folk songs and hunting stories, his bottom lip tamped with snuff, accompanied by an old dog or two that traveled on the seat beside him” (Ray 56). Ray’s memories of her grandfather are only positive, as she wasn’t traumatized by his abandonment as her father was. While mental illness causes generational trauma in the Ray family, time healed the potential wound between Janisse and Charlie, especially as he taught her to appreciate and understand the natural world. His gift of environmental knowledge is lasting: “Grandpa Charlie had a profound effect on me, and often I understand, when I’m in the woods, that I am looking for his secret copse of huckleberries… What is left of this mythic terra incognita is a map I cannot follow. I have not stopped trying to go back” (Ray 64). Charlie’s love of the woods inspired in Janisse a desire to explore, love, and protect the same woods into which he often escaped.

Comparing characters in *Grange* and *Ecology* may help us draw out connections between generations of these families (albeit one fictional and one real). As a reminder, Ruth and Janisse are the granddaughters of their respective families, their fathers Brownfield and Franklin are the middle generation, and grandfathers Grange and Charlie are the eldest. It is easy to compare Charlie’s love of the woods with Grange’s, as both men escape their familial obligations and spend time in the woods. Charlie’s mental illnesses are in part responsible for his need (or desire) to neglect his family for weeks at a time, but he comes back from his adventures in the South Georgian woods each time rejuvenated and with resources for his family. When Grange chooses to leave behind his wife Margaret and their two children, he travels through South Georgia, finding solace in the woods, as they are owned by no one—as opposed to the White men’s fields in which he has worked his whole life. In this comparison, Charlie and Grange are not much different: they both find comfort in the woods before settling down. Grange makes a new life for

himself and takes on the responsibility of providing for his granddaughter Ruth, while Charlie comes back to Georgia to visit, also providing for his granddaughter, though in a different way.

Unfortunately, Charlie's violent behavior toward his children (and the fact that he loves the woods more than his children) eventually cultivates a hatred for and fear of the natural world in Franklin. When Janisse asks her father if Charlie ever took him to the woods, Franklin replies, "One time,… and that was enough for me never to want to go again" (Ray 96). Franklin was around five years old when Charlie took his children coon hunting; Franklin remembers, "We followed him for hours in the dark. We got tired and hungry and wanted to go home. He made out like we were lost and something might attack and kill us, all such as that. He had us all crying" (Ray 97). Franklin explains that Charlie forced his kids into such situations in the woods because "he got a kick out of it… he liked to play tricks" (Ray 97). Because of his upbringing, Franklin is unable to establish a positive relationship with the natural world. Traumatized in the woods by his mentally unstable father, Franklin struggles to understand how his father regularly finds refuge in the wilderness. Different "characters" perceive elements of place differently—Franklin fears the woods whereas Charlie seeks solace in them.

In a comparison of the Rays and the Copelands, Franklin and Brownfield—the middle generation—have similar relationships with nature. Brownfield hates the natural world just as Franklin does, but for different reasons. While Franklin does not have a positive relationship with nature due to his father's overbearing influence, Brownfield cultivates a negative relationship with nature because of his experiences while sharecropping. Born to sharecropping parents, Brownfield does not have other opportunities for work when he comes of age. He is born poor and Black in a racist American South, thus forced into a cycle of debt and oppressive labor. As my Walker chapter explores, young Brownfield loved spending time in the natural

world, but his involvement in sharecropping altered his relationship with nature. As a reminder, Brownfield "poured oil into streams to kill the fish and tickled his vanity by drowning cats," demonstrating his disrespect for the natural world (Walker, *Grange* 78). Franklin's relationship with the natural world is not as extreme as Brownfield's; Franklin spent his time fixing machines in his junkyard. Ray compares her father and grandfather: "Although my grandfather took to wilderness to find solace to ease his wracked mind, my father turned to machines, and somewhere, between the two of them, the thread of nature was lost" (96). Like Grange and Brownfield's relationship, the strained father/son relationship coupled with environmental factors in *Ecology* led to Franklin's negative relationship with the natural world.

When Ray comes of age, she deeply loves and respects the natural world, prompting her to examine her family members' varying relationships with environments. She reflects, "So much for a long line of outdoorspeople. So much for the woods. What my grandfather planted in my father was a crazy fear and mistrust of being lost in a wilderness alone. If there ever was a wilderness misunderstood, insanity is it" (Ray 97). Hearkening back to her earlier connection between wilderness and mental illness, Ray argues that insanity itself is a wilderness. She could be referring to either her father's or her grandfather's "insanity"—or mental illness in general. Either way, Ray portrays wilderness negatively here. Ray then adds herself back into the equation of her family and their relationships with the natural world: "I search for vital knowledge of the land that my father could not teach me, as he was not taught, and guidance to know and honor it, as he was not guided, as if this will shield me from the errancies of the mind, or bring me back from that dark territory should I happen to wander there. I search as if there were a peace to be found" (97). Ray discusses environmental knowledge as a possible solution to

"the errancies of the mind" or "that dark territory"—mental illness. She makes readers question what can be passed down genetically: a love of nature? Mental illness? Both?

Charlie and Franklin suffer from similar (if not the same) mental illnesses, highlighting the potential generational trauma of genetic illnesses. While this type of generational trauma differs greatly from the Copelands' in *Grange*, it affects the Ray family no less. Ray grapples with what wilderness means to her as she processes her grandfather's, her father's, and her own relationship with the natural world. Mental illness, to Ray, is a wilderness in the same way the woods and the junkyard are: she is comforted by the ordered chaos of it all, even if she fears the possibility that she may experience "that dark territory" someday. These wildernesses—the junkyard, the woods, and mental illness—are Ray's elements of place; they each affect family members' relationship with place and the natural world.

Historical Context: Low-Class Pine-Landers

Before further analyzing Ray's rhetoric in her memoir, a history of her people—the Crackers—is essential. By 1767, Scots-Irish immigrants from Northern Ireland had begun migrating to Georgia from the Carolinas (Presley 102–3). The group was known as "a set of Vagabonds often as bad or worse than the Indians themselves," according to officials of the thirteenth colony (Presley 102). "In time," per Delma Presley, "every corner of the state felt the presence of that hardy group of humanity called Crackers" (104). The Scots-Irish immigrants were poor White woodsmen who did not own slaves. In 1773, after land between the Savannah and Ogeechee rivers was stolen from the Natives who lived there, "the floodgates were opened for thousands of eager frontiersmen who gained homesteads either by legal purchase or by illegal seizure" (Presley 103). To describe the Cracker, Presley recalls the following phrases from historical reports: "an unbeloved invader," "an outsider," "a herdsman," "a squatter," "a hunter,"

and “an Indian fighter” (105). Further, the immigrants “were a restless, land-hungry, and hardy folk” (Presley 105).

The Crackers were also called “pine-landers,” which helps explain Ray’s deep connection to the longleaf pine forests in Georgia’s history (Presley 106; 111). Per Presley, the name “Cracker” comes from the Scottish verb “crack,” which means “to talk boastingly” (113). When the immigrants began developing land in Georgia, their Scottish nickname stuck, even though the connotation of “Cracker” changed over time: “A number of travellers, as noted earlier, defined them as ‘ruffians,’ ‘gougers,’ ‘poor white trash,’ ‘pine-lander,’ and so on. They were Georgia’s great unwashed democracy” (Presley 113). Concluding her article more positively, Presley argues that “we should define Georgia’s Cracker simply as a *proud pioneer*” (114). One can feel this sense of pride throughout Ray’s writing.

The Crackers’ history is one of migration, scavenging, conquering and developing land, making do with what they have. The Cracker “pushed westward across the Savannah, the Ogeechee, the Oconee, the Ocmulgee, the Flint—all the way to the state’s distant boundary at the Chattahoochee River. The Cracker matched the wilderness with his own wild courage and imagination… Struggle and hope were his original lot” (Presley 114). This description rings true for Ray and her family: Charlie, Franklin, and Janisse are each courageous and imaginative in their own ways. Janisse’s courage and imagination shine throughout *Ecology* and her other works, especially when she laments the longleaf pine forests’ demise.

Ray begins her memoir by describing the connection between her people and the importance of place, a subject she writes about in all her work:

> I was born from people who were born from people who were born from people who were born here. The Crackers crossed the wide Altamaha into what had been Creek territory and settled the vast, fire-loving uplands of the coastal plains of southeast

> Georgia, surrounded by a singing forest of tall and widely spaced pines whose history they did not know, whose stories were untold. (Ray 4)

Ray begins *Ecology* intertextually: she leans on Biblical phrasing to immediately establish her deep-seated connection to family and place. Nearly all generations of her family were born in South Georgia. Defining her people as "Crackers," Ray emphasizes her family's sense of place and history in that place. The "vast, fire-loving uplands of the coastal plains of southwest Georgia" her relatives settled are "fire-loving," Ray later explains, because of the pines' reliance on wildfires.

In her chapter "Built by Fire," Ray details the origin story of longleaf pines by using folkloric and storytelling elements reminiscent of Native American creation stories. To grasp the ecology of these forests, it's important to understand how these pines need fire to thrive. A summary of Ray's explanation will be useful here: "A couple of million years ago a pine fell in love with a place that belonged to lightning." The pines settled "in the coastal plains of the southeastern United States" where water was plentiful and thunderstorms were frequent (Ray 35). Ray personifies the lightning and the pine tree as she writes their dialogue. For many years, the two argue about who reigned over this place first and who deserves to remain: "the lightning would fling as many as forty million bolts a year at the tree" (Ray 36). When the pine grows older, the lightning finally strikes hard enough to light the tree's needles on fire. As the tree dies, it throws out many pinecones, and the wind scatters its seeds for miles around. The lightning did not give up for decades, burning the place down regularly to burn up all the pine's seeds. Over time, young trees learned to lay low and mimic grass to survive the fire. The young pines learned patience as "they waited until the lightning went to sleep in the rainy springs and suddenly cast themselves upward" (Ray 37). Other tree species even tried to grow, but "not knowing the secret history of longleaf's adaptation, they burned" (Ray 37). The trees made themselves highly

flammable to drive wildfires through the forest quickly "in order to leave older trees unharmed" (Ray 37). Finally, the war between the longleaf and the lightning ended as they "began to depend on each other and other plants," which "evolved to survive and welcome fire as well" (Ray 38). Animals and insects in the area also learned to adapt. Ray concludes her story: "Longleaf became known as the pine that fire built" (38). Fire-loving indeed.

The longleaf pine forests affect Ray's sense of place, even if she did not know them like her predecessors did. She imagines the beautiful setting her ancestors witnessed when they arrived in southeast Georgia: they were "surrounded by a singing forest of tall and widely spaced pines whose history they did not know, whose stories were untold" (4). The pines are singing: they are thriving, flourishing in an environment perfectly adapted to them. They are "tall and widely spaced," much different from the pine forests Ray visits in her childhood in the 1960s and 1970s and later in life. Her relatives did not know the history of these pines, as their stories were not told yet—which indicates that their stories would eventually be told. Unfortunately, Ray implies here that the pines' stories will be told because they will not exist in perpetuity as her ancestors might have assumed. Early in her memoir, she emphasizes the important connections between family, place, and the natural world—specifically longleaf pines—to lay the groundwork for what is to come: her lament for longleaf pines and their ecosystems.

Though Ray did not cross the Altamaha River with her ancestors, she describes a unique sense of embodiment—the recollection of her family arriving to settle in the coastal plains is forever inscribed in and on her body: "The memory of what they entered is scrawled on my bones, so that I carry the landscape inside like an ache. The story of who I am cannot be severed from the story of the flatwoods" (4). Ray's family history has been passed down orally from generation to generation, and those memories are "scrawled on [her] bones" as if carelessly

etched into her body. Generational knowledge appears differently here than it does in Walker's *Grange*. While Ray's family history/geography is etched in her bones, the characters in *Grange* feel more generational trauma in terms of their place: Grange passes down to Brownfield the same life from which Grange wanted to escape. The Copelands' connections to South Georgia are more out of necessity than choice: they do not have the resources or ability to leave and create a new life for themselves. While the Rays do not have an abundance of resources either, they find beauty where they are, and they are able to make a living for themselves throughout centuries—as hunters, loggers, junkyard owners.

When compared with *Ecology*, generational trauma and environmental knowledge appear differently in *Their Eyes* and in "A View." Janie Crawford's generational trauma is passed down from her grandmother and her mother, caused by the institution of slavery and its legacy of the abuse of Black women. Environmental knowledge skips a generation in the Crawford family (since Janie did not know her mother); Janie's grandmother Nanny passed down her knowledge of the woods to Janie. In "A View," familial abuse causes generational trauma. Mary Fortune Pitts learns about environmental care from her father but is still physically abused by him. The child is unable to protect the land and is ultimately killed. Hurston and O'Connor do not explicitly mention mental illnesses in their texts, likely because of their publication dates: 1937 and 1957, respectively; mental illness had been destigmatized significantly by *Ecology*'s publication date in 1999.

Ray's connection to her family history and their place isn't all positive: "The memory of what [the Crackers] entered is scrawled on my bones, so that I carry the landscape inside like an ache" (4). Her prose is eloquent, striking, even haunting: she carries this place while longing for it. She has never seen the same landscape she remembers—one teeming with indigo snakes,

Bachman's sparrows, and flatwoods salamanders—and she will not see this lively ecosystem during her lifetime, yet she still carries it with her. "Like an ache" indicates that it is a hurtful memory she carries with her because, by the time she was born, the memory of this landscape is just that—only a memory. Ray indicates that her identity "cannot be severed from the story of the flatwoods" (4). Her own story is so connected to the pine forests that she cannot separate the two. She also describes the landscape as having agency: "the landscape that I was born to, that owns my body: the uplands and lowlands of southern Georgia" (Ray 13). Her body, owned by the landscape, feels a deep connection to this place.

The chapter "Forest Beloved" further demonstrates Ray's connection to longleaf pines, passed down through generations of pine-landers who settled in South Georgia centuries before Ray's birth. Again, Ray grapples with the idea of generational knowledge: "Maybe a vision of the original longleaf pine flatwoods has been endowed to me through genes, because I seem to remember their endlessness" (65). Ray feels that her genetics have gifted her with the ability to see the longleaf pines that the first Crackers saw as they settled in Georgia—through genetics rather than only oral tradition. She recalls how endless the flatwoods once were: "I seem to recollect when these coastal plains were one big, brown-and-tan, daybreak-to-dark longleaf forest" (Ray 65). Her imagery is striking: she remembers the plains as one large, endless forest. Her memory of the longleaf pines only improves with time, different from how memory typically works: "It was a monotony one learned to love, for this is a place that, like a friend, offers multiplied loyalty with the passing years" (Ray 65). While the plains may seem to lack variety to outsiders, Ray makes it sound easy to love them because of their increasing loyalty over the years; she personifies the forest as a faithful friend. Her relationship with the forest is even intimate: "A forest never tells its secrets but reveals them slowly over time, and a longleaf

forest is full of secrets. I know a few of them" (Ray 65). She feels close to the longleaf forest, as it slowly reveals its secrets to her. By using intimate rhetoric to describe her relationship with the longleaf pines, she primes readers to care for these forests, potentially guiding readers to aid in conservation efforts by *Ecology*'s end.

Ray describes a visit to an old-growth forest, where "long-lived" pines are over five hundred years old: "The trunk is your spine, the nerve centers reaching into other worlds, below ground and above. You stand and press your body into the ancestral and enduring, arms wide, and your fingers do not touch. You wonder how big the unseen gap" (65; 68–9). Using second-person point of view, she directly addresses the reader: "the trunk [of this old tree] is *your* spine," making it easier for readers to understand the grandiose nature of old-growth pines. She notes the otherworldliness of these pines as their nerves, or roots, transcend the boundaries of the forest floor. Relying on second-person perspective helps readers imagine just how "ancestral and enduring" an old-growth pine is: "your fingers do not touch. You wonder how big the unseen gap." She appeals to the reader's sense of touch to illustrate an old-growth pine's magnificence, its monumental stature. She revels in the history of the once-great longleaf pine forest.

Longleaf pines were nearly eradicated during Ray's lifetime, yet she still feels a deep connection to them, a sense of kinship, perhaps gifted to her through genes. Her connection is deeper than it seems; she laments for the pines not only because she is a person who values the importance of place and ecosystems, but also because her family's history is directly tied to deforestation.[39] She reports that the Crackers, settling in South Georgia in the early 1800s, turned

[39]According to Ray's family tree—included after *Ecology*'s conclusion—Janisse's great-great-great-great grandfather Daniel Johnson was cited as a resident in the first census of Appling, Georgia, in 1820. Johnson's daughter married Wilson Baxley, for whom the town Baxley was named. Ray's inclusion of her family tree in the memoir showcases how long her people have been in Baxley, connected in many ways to the longleaf pines (and logging) (Ray 275).

to logging to make a living. As the railroad industry boomed, her ancestors necessarily logged longleaf pine forests to sell lumber (Ray 84). This deforestation nearly wiped out the pine forests.

Environmental Context: Timber in Georgia

Historical context about longleaf pine forests will help emphasize the importance of these Southeastern U.S. ecosystems and Ray's family particularly: "Forests have been important to Georgians since General Oglethorpe landed in 1733 on the shoreline of what is now Savannah… The state was then covered with forests of pines and hardwoods" (Georgia Forestry Commission). Longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris Mill.*) "was once one of the most ecologically important tree species in the Southern United States" (Oswalt et al. 1). The longleaf pine forest's ecosystem may appear to be simple upon first glance; "this simplified picture, however, belies the remarkable botanical diversity within the longleaf pine ecosystem" (Oswalt et al. 2). Some longleaf pine forests contain more than 40 vascular plant species in one square meter, i.e., 170 vascular plant species per 1,000 square meters (Oswalt et al. 2). Not only do longleaf pine forests rank "among the most diverse in North America," but they also "became one of the most extensive ecosystems in North America… occupying about 92 million acres in the Southeastern United States" (Oswalt et al. 2; 4). Diverse and vast, longleaf pine forests offered the space and resources for early American settlers to thrive in the South. Once the Crackers arrived in this region, they found enough space "to continue their farming and herding economy" (Ray 81). Clans of immigrants "felled one-hundred-foot trees to construct crude heart-pine cabins" throughout the Southeast (Ray 83).

What were once prolific, diverse ecosystems in the South became visions of human activity and destruction starting in the nineteenth century: "The cumulative impacts of three

centuries of changing land use resulted in the dramatic decline of longleaf pine forests, and they have become one of the most endangered ecosystems in the United States" (Oswalt et al. 5). Timber quickly became a profitable business in Georgia, as shown on the 1870 census: annual timber value rose from $2.4 million to more than $4 million in a single decade (Georgia Forestry Commission). The timber industry practically took over longleaf pine forests all over the Southeast: "Timber extraction peaked in 1907, when 1.4 billion cubic feet were removed… By 1930, nearly all old-growth longleaf pine was harvested and lumber companies migrated west" (Oswalt et al. 6). Ray notes that the Crackers "cut timber from their lands and rafted it down the Altamaha River to Darien" to make a living (84). Having no understanding of conservation, settlers cleared forests, cultivated the cleared areas, and then left for freshly cleared lands, causing immense deforestation (Georgia Forestry Commission). The Crackers—and certainly members of Ray's family—cleared forests, sold pines to the timber industry, and moved on to more productive land.

When the Crackers "entered Appling County, it was part of a rich wilderness stocked with fish and game, and it lay at their disposal. They had no thoughts of a future—in America, as there had not been in Britain, a great frontier lay beyond" (Ray 85–6). Ray writes about a man traveling from Brunswick to Eastman, who described this region in an 1858 letter: "far beyond the range of human vision, was a continued pine land carpeted with green spread out in panoramic beauty. Grove after grove of majestic trees of fleecy foliage, with now and then a pine larger and taller than the rest, standing like a grand old patriarch of the forest, who had for ages in silence stood with uninterrupted vision guarded this wide expanse of younger growth" (86). When the traveler returned in 1885—only 27 years later—he wrote, "Gone! An invasion of a terrible army of axemen, like so many huge locusts, has swept over the whole face of the land,

leaving nought of former grandeur but treeless stumps to mark the track of their tramp" (Ray 87).[40] Mourning the loss of a once beautiful vision of "majestic trees of fleecy foliage," the traveler was shocked to find what remained. About her ancestors' participation in deforestation, Ray writes, "More than anything else, what happened to the long-leaf country speaks for us. These are my people; our legacy is ruination" (87). "Ruination" here is ambiguous, meaning either the action of ruining something *or* being ruined—or both. Ray's word choice reflects the Crackers' nuanced history as they were connected to the longleaf pines: they actively destroyed pine forests (to survive), but they too were being ruined, as their lifestyle would not sustain them.

Further historical and environmental context will be useful here. Forest historians approximate that "longleaf covered 85 of 156 million acres in its southeastern range. By 1930, virtually all the virgin longleaf pine had been felled. Now, at the end of the twentieth century, about two million acres of longleaf remain. Most is first- and second-growth, hard-hit by logging, turpentining, grazing, and the suppression of fire" (Ray 14). Further, "In a 1995 National Biological Service assessment of biological loss, ecologist Reed Noss classified the longleaf-wiregrass community as 'critically endangered.' Ninety-eight percent of the presettlement longleaf pine barrens in the southeastern coastal plains were lost by 1986, he said. Natural stands—meaning not planted—have been reduced by about 99 percent. Apocalyptic" (Ray 15). It is easy to imagine the loss felt by Ray and preceding generations of her family.

The 1999 publication of *Ecology* sparked tangible change in conservation efforts of longleaf pines, and while centuries of destruction of longleaf pine forests cannot be undone, the future looks hopeful. Reports from 2012 suggest that "a combination of developments provides

[40]Ray notes that the traveler was "identified only as R. J. M. in his letter to the *Brunswick Advertiser and Appeal*" (86).

new hope that the negative trend for longleaf pine forests can be reversed. Public policy has changed to more strongly support implementation of cooperative efforts for achieving the restoration and sustainable management of longleaf pine forests" (Oswalt et al. 8). Further, "Interest in longleaf pine reforestation on private lands has surged recently because of financial incentives to private landowners provided by the Federal Government" (Oswalt et al. 8). Ray's primary concern in writing *Ecology* was to highlight the urgency in protecting these beautiful, ecologically essential forests, and it seems that she was successful. Ray's use of intimate language when describing old-growth forests helps shed light on how just one person can find and nourish a connection with pines; she writes, "I drink old-growth forest in like water. This is the homeland that built us. Here I was shoulder to shoulder with history—my history" (69). Ray portrays the forests as a nourishing, life-giving resource. Here, she uses first-person plural pronouns when describing the forests as "the homeland that built us," meaning her family (and possibly her readers). By connecting her familial (and individual) history with old-growth forests, Ray's plea to protect the pines rings loud and clear. The longleaf pine forests are her family.

Ray on Environmental Justice

Throughout her memoir, Ray sheds light on the nuanced relationship between poor folks and land use. About Crackers, she writes, "Most people worried about getting by, and when getting by meant using the land, we used it. When getting by meant ignoring the land, we ignored it" (Ray 165). Important to note here is the Crackers' agency: they *chose* to use the land when they needed to survive, and they *chose* to ignore the land when they needed to ignore it. Typically, in contemporary America, among many other places, access to environmental education and funds to support environmental concerns are not distributed equally, thereby

making it more difficult for folks of marginalized communities to act ecologically. Ray condemns unethical logging practices but acknowledges that her ancestors had no other opportunity to support themselves after immigrating. Ray writes, further, "Accustomed to poverty, we [her kin] made use of assets at hand, and we did not think much of prosperity" (87). They did what was necessary to survive.

In "The Kindest Cut," a short chapter about logging, Ray writes about the ethics of logging as she focuses on one ecological forester: "There is a way to have your cake and eat it too; a way to log yet preserve a forest. Leon Neel knows how" (251). Ray explains single-tree selection, also known as uneven-aged management: "Leon's silviculture selects by hand individual trees to be harvested and leaves multigenerational or multi-species growth, in a handsome, functioning grove. It is an innovative alternative to clear-cutting, proving endangered species can exist in a working landscape" (251). Uneven-aged management in forestry is "a system of management that periodically selects individual trees or small groups of trees for harvest. In general, the concept of uneven-age management entails the sustained yield of forest products while maintaining continuous forest cover. In North America, interest in uneven-age management grew in the second half of the twentieth century after most of the old-growth forests had been harvested" (Schuler 149). By calling attention to Leon's practices, Ray argues that in the logging industry, there remain ecological and ethical practices that can still profit loggers. Over time, members of the Ray family have become more aware of ecological concerns; surely Ray's children have at least an appreciation of conservation and preservation. If not, at least logging became less a part of the Rays' family history over time.

Disability scholar and environmentalist Eli Clare also writes about the relationship between lower-class folks and environmentalism in *Exile and Pride*. Clare's work provides

another voice to a class-conscious conversation about how poverty, lack of education, and fewer resources affects conservation and labor. Growing up in Port Orford, Oregon—a small logging and fishing community—caused Clare to feel a strong tension between his sense of place/home and the ethics of logging. He writes about the disconnect between his politics and his life experiences: "I am the socialist with anarchist leanings who believes the big private timber corporations, like Weyerhaeuser and Georgia-Pacific, are corrupt, and the government agencies, like the US Forest Service, that control public land are complicit. I am the adult who still loves the smell of wood chips, the roar of a lumber mill, who knows out-of-work loggers and dying logging towns" (Clare 21–2). Clare demonstrates that it is human to feel both things at once, that logging is detrimental to the environment *and* a source of income, especially for those in lower-income communities. Ray's words about land use bear repeating: "when getting by meant using the land, we used it. When getting by meant ignoring the land, we ignored it" (165). Clare emphasizes his sense of place by describing the smells and sounds of his hometown, followed by his many relationships with loggers. Like Clare, Ray too draws attention to this tension felt by environmentally conscious folks from similar backgrounds.

As Ray does when she remembers Crackers' involvement in deforestation, Clare acknowledges the history of clearcutting: "this is what white people have done to North America for 500 years—laid the land bare in the name of profit and progress" (28). Clare is at once an environmental activist who wants to protect forests *and* a person who remains grateful to the logging industry for providing jobs to folks in his lower-income community. Describing the tug he feels between environmental conservation and survival, Clare sheds light on a core issue in environmental justice: how are poor folks supposed to take care of the environment if the only lucrative jobs available are those that destroy it? Ray grapples with this question too. During the

timber boom in the late 1800s and early 1900s, Ray's father's people came to Georgia, and Ray's great-grandfather (known as "Pun") "worked as a lumber checker in the 1900s at a big saw mill in Lumber City. In his job he eyed thousands of cut longleafs and sent them to the blades" (Ray 101). Ray reflects, "I want to think that my great-grandfather Pun felt some love for land and trees—after all, they had been his livelihood and his life" (102). Ray's father Franklin worked for Pun when he was a child, and Franklin remembers, "Grandpa walked the woods a lot… but not for enjoyment. Much of the land he surveyed in preparation for logging" (Ray 102). Disappointed in her great-grandfather's lack of environmental care, Ray writes, "Sometimes there is no leaving, no looking westward for another promised land… We have to set to the task of repairing the damage done by and to us" (103). While she acknowledges that her relatives did what they needed to for survival, she is nonetheless disappointed. Clare and Ray share their complex feelings toward this environmental paradox: poor folks must find ways to survive—even if it means harming the environment—but those with more resources and opportunities must take responsibility for mending that damage.

Ray on Southernness and Race

Important early in Ray's memoir is her Southernness and how she connects with (and sometimes attempts to shed) her Southern identity: "It didn't take many years to realize I was a Southerner, a slow, dumb, redneck hick, a hayseed, inbred and racist, come from poverty, condemned to poverty: descendant of Oglethorpe's debtor prisoners. Descendant of people who pulled from the Union, fought their patria, and lost" (Ray 30). Using a powerful rhetorical strategy, Ray includes several potentially harmful terms that are typically attributed to Southerners. Her word choice aligns with the definition of the Rough South—"the world of the redneck or white trash" (Cash and Perry 9). While several of these phrases are objectively true—

she is indeed a Southerner (she self-identifies as a Southerner, was born in the South, and currently lives in the South), and she did come from poverty—the others are more loaded and subjective. Here, Ray draws readers' attention to their own potential preconceived notions about Southernness. By using these phrases, whether ironically or not, she dispels the idea that to be from the South is to be "a slow, dumb, redneck hick, a hayseed, inbred and racist" (30). She is not claiming these phrases as self-identifiers, but rather emphasizing potentially dangerous stereotypes about Southerners. By mentioning that she is a "descendent of Oglethorpe's debtor prisoners," Ray draws attention to the fact that many poor White folks were indentured, another point of comparison with the Copelands in *Grange*. Again, these families' histories are different because of many reasons—most obviously their different races—but both families at one point were unfree.

Throughout *Ecology*, Ray battles with her Southernness, a feeling that many folks born and/or raised in the South grapple with. She remembers, "When I went off to college I struggled bitterly to lose my identity with the junkyard, and my Southernness, starting with the accent. Away from Baxley no one knew my past, and I could accelerate my native tongue or desert its vernacular until I was free. Or thought I was" (Ray 31). Her Southern identity and connection to the junkyard cause tension when she leaves her hometown. After leaving Baxley, did Ray want to "desert [her] vernacular" because she was judged for her accent, which connects her in some ways to the South's history of enslavement? Or was Ray simply experiencing growing pains that many young adults feel when they move from their hometown?

Grange Copeland too leaves Georgia and attempts to shed his Southernness, and he too eventually returns home to South Georgia. While Ray tries to lose her Southern accent, Grange migrates north in hopes of finding a less racist place to settle. After his traumatizing experiences

in New York City, Grange returns to the South a wiser man—one who makes a restorative, safe place for himself in South Georgia. Ray too returns to South Georgia after college to reclaim her Southern identity. For different reasons, both Ray and Grange must shed their Southernness to eventually reclaim it. Mobility and choice are especially important at this point in Ray's life, like in *Their Eyes*: Janie Crawford chooses to leave Eatonville (but not the South) and grows from her move. Ultimately, she returns home as well. These protagonists—Janie, Grange, and Ray—all make the decision to return to their respective homes after they have been granted the agency to leave home.

While Ray makes powerful rhetorical moves in much of *Ecology*, she falls short in her discussions of race. She fails to acknowledge her white privilege, therefore problematizing some of her own rhetoric. Following closely after the passage about deserting her Southern accent, she declares pride for her heritage: "Turning back to embrace the past has been a long, slow lesson not only in self-esteem but in patriotism—pride in homeland, heritage. It has taken a decade to whip the shame, to mispronounce words and shun grammar when mispronunciation and misspeaking are part of my dialect, to own the bad blood. What I come from has made me who I am" (Ray 32–3). Ray *should* feel a sense of pride about her past, where she comes from, and the hard work she did to reclaim an important part of herself. Actively choosing to "mispronounce words and shun grammar" as an homage to her home is a beautiful act of reclamation. When she writes that it has taken her a decade "to own the bad blood," what does she mean? The blood of her ancestors, who logged forests for survival/profit? The blood of the South, where millions of African Americans were enslaved?

While there is nothing inherently problematic with feeling pride for one's homeland, heritage, or country—or with being raised in the South—Ray's language here foreshadows some

troubling rhetoric throughout *Ecology*, particularly in the book's afterword, as I will discuss. She writes that it has taken her ten years "to whip the shame"—a problematic word choice when one considers the South's violent history of enslavement and the physical, emotional, and mental abuse of Black folks. Ray should not be ashamed of her heritage, and it is an important feat to overcome the shame of her upbringing; but the precise language Ray uses in passages like these points to some shortcomings in her rhetoric—namely the failure to recognize her white privilege.

Ray acknowledges that her parents taught her and her brothers "that the color of a person's skin was not a measure of his or her heart," but this statement is the extent of her discussion of race relations in *Ecology* (108). Every text does not need to center race, race relations, or condemnations of racism, but her rhetorical choices invite a critical conversation about these subjects. Her lack of privilege in terms of her childhood social class does not erase the privilege she has because of her skin color. *Ecology*'s afterword—included in the original 1999 publication—leaves a bad taste in many readers' mouths, a disappointing conclusion to a beautiful, powerful memoir. Ray concludes the book with a call-to-action, calling on Southerners to protect the last pine forests still standing. She writes, "We Southerners are a people fighting again for our country, defending the last remaining stands of real forest. Although we love to frolic, the time has come to fight. We must fight" (272). Though the goal of this "fight" is to protect the natural world—an essential yet lofty objective—she nods toward the Civil War when she says, "We Southerners are a people fighting *again* for our country" (272; emphasis added). Implicit in her reminder of the war is her use of rhetorics of war; she fights to trigger the collective memory of her Southern readers, a rhetorical choice that is powerful. Relying on Southern history, she shifts the focus to saving the long-leaf pines, an element of the natural

world she longs to protect. If she had ended her memoir here, Ray's call-to-arms becomes an effective use of rhetorical appeals.

Ray's language becomes more complicated (and overtly problematic) in the afterword's final paragraph: "In new rebellion we stand together, black and white, urbanite and farmer, workers all, in keeping Dixie" (272). The image of different workers—"black and white, urbanite and farmer"— standing together to protect the remaining longleaf pine forests seems well-intentioned, yet it erases historical cultural nuance. Sarah Robertson argues, "The idea that nature can erode the racial and class distinctions that have for so long permeated southern society may lead the reader to dismiss her text as a utopian vision with no historical or socio-economic grounding. Indeed, in blurring the lines between 'urbanite and farmer,' Ray de-historicizes labor, a process that seems to counter her simultaneous attempts to extol her father's labor" (172). In a book that prioritizes highlighting diverse ecosystems, labor, and the ways poverty affects environmentalism and vice versa, she effectively challenges her own arguments with the rhetoric she employs in her afterword. Her call for a united South "forgoes the diversity that shapes the text itself. In effect, Ray's own words undermine her belief that southern categorizations between black and white or between affluence and poverty can be easily overcome" (Robertson 175). Ray's intention in her call to unite these different kinds of laborers seems positive, as her goal of protecting longleaf pines is commendable, but she ultimately destabilizes her own goal.

The rhetorical effect of Ray's argument further shifts when she adds "in keeping Dixie" at the end of the sentence. "Dixie," a once-popular name for the former Confederate States, is negatively charged for many folks in the South and elsewhere, with historic associations connecting to Southern pride and the support of protecting the institution of slavery within the Confederate States. Calling on "black and white, urbanite and farmer, workers all" to maintain

Dixie is an uncomfortable choice at best, overtly problematic at worst. Did Ray assume her readership would be made of only White readers? How might Black readers feel reading that a White environmentalist calls on Black folks to fight for "keeping Dixie"?

Ray continues, "We are a patient people who for generations have not been ousted from this land, and we are willing to fight for the birthright of our children's children and their children's children, to be of a place, in all ways, for all time" (272). Ray's use of the first-person plural is a bold choice—one that is effective in many rhetorical situations. One could argue that this word choice has the propensity to unify the folks to whom she refers. But generalizing here is a questionable rhetorical strategy: Ray speaks for everyone (in Baxley? in the South? those who want to fight for the pines?) when she claims she is part of "a patient people who for generations have not been ousted from this land" (272). Yet only one hundred years before Ray's birth, Black folks *were* being ousted from their land, against their will, violently forced from their families. She continues to confidently use "we" when she claims that "we" will fight for the next generations' birthrights "to be of a place, in all ways, for all time" (Ray 272). Again, Ray's emphasis on the importance of place and home is well-intentioned, but one cannot help but think of formerly enslaved people who were not afforded the same privilege of fighting for their children's birthright to live in a particular place. Using "we" here further erases the understandable desire for Southern Black folks to migrate elsewhere to escape the violent racism of the South, especially after Emancipation (as fictionalized in *Grange*).

Finally, Ray evokes a harmful rhetorical move to end her call: "When we say the South will rise again we can mean that we will allow the cutover forests to return to their former grandeur and pine plantations to grow wild" (272). Even if (yet again) Ray's intentions here are noble—allowing cutover forests to grow wild would be an overwhelmingly positive step forward

for Southern ecologies—recalling the phrase "the South will rise again" is potentially harmful in many ways. Her rhetorical choice reminds readers of Confederate enthusiasts who believe the South is a superior region and that Southerners should feel pride for their heritage despite its violent past. The origin of "the South will rise again" was likely from Georgia Senator Alfred Iverson when, on January 28, 1861, he came to Washington, D.C. to say goodbye to his colleagues and to the United States of America. A secessionist, Iverson never claimed that Georgia's withdrawal from the Union was constitutional, like some of his fellow legislators: he admitted it was a revolution (Goodheart). In his farewell address, Iverson heatedly declared, "You may whip us, but we will not stay whipped. *We will rise again and again* to vindicate our right to liberty, and throw off your oppressive and accursed yoke" (Goodheart; emphasis added). Now, Confederate apologists and White supremacists alike continue to use "the South will rise again" as their rallying cry.

Ray's choice to utilize the phrase "[w]hen we say the South will rise again…" thus detracts from her argument (272). Julie Drew claims that in Ray's enthusiasm and "efforts to motivate and inspire," she instead makes "a grave misjudgment, both ethically and practically" (140). By using this phrase, "Ray attempts to alter its meaning, referring instead to a regrowth of the region's wild pine forests. But this phrase cannot but conjure a rebel-flag-waving, defiant South unwilling to condemn its own past as an agrarian society built on the backs of African slaves. She should know better" (Drew 140). Ray's rhetorical choice erases the experiences of millions of Southern Black folks who were and continue to be harmed by this phrase and its historical (and current) implications. Ray implies further that other Southerners already use this phrase casually—"[w]hen we say the South will rise again"—even though many Southerners (and others) resist using this phrase altogether. By choosing to speak for all Southerners—a

logical fallacy in its own right—Ray unfortunately diminishes the efficacy of her otherwise persuasive argument to protect the longleaf pine forests of the South.

Ray addresses some of these criticisms in "Writing with Intent," an interview by Sidney Dobrin and Christopher Keller. When asked why she would use this controversial rhetorical strategy in her book's final call-to-action, Ray acknowledges a misstep on her part: "Probably it was mere ignorance on my part. My two faults are, first, that I was not thinking about non-native Southerners and, second, that I took the liberty of putting my views in terms of the universal. I used the word we, which is, honestly, just a fighting strategy, and not a fair one, you know, because it is pretty subtle" (Dobrin and Keller 126). Her response acknowledges the unfairness of using "we." However, Ray continues to misapprehend how her words may have affected—or continue to affect—Black folks. What about native Black Southerners who may feel differently than she does about phrases such as "the South will rise again"? Historically, environmentalism has been largely White, slow to welcome people of color who have been doing important conservation and sustainability work for generations. When Ray states that she wasn't "thinking about non-native Southerners" without acknowledging people of color, she unwittingly maintains the tradition of excluding certain folks from environmental conversations. Uplifting the voices of people of color doing this work simply would have been more effective—in her afterword and in her interview.

Overall, Ray's publication of *Ecology* inspired more public knowledge of and interest in protecting Southern longleaf pines. Is it possible to overlook an author's shortcomings to acknowledge the good they have done? Absolutely. Ray's first publication, *Ecology* was wildly successful, garnering the Southeastern Booksellers Award for Nonfiction (1999), an American Book Award (2000), the Southern Environmental Law Center Award for Outstanding Writing

(2000), and a Southern Book Critics Circle Award (2000) (*Georgia Writers Hall of Fame*). While Ray's accomplishments in environmental conservation and nature writing should not and do not excuse her from scrutiny, her work has engendered overwhelmingly positive, tangible outcomes.

Connections and Conclusions

Scholarly conversations about environmental literature, Southern literature, and the Rough South should include Janisse Ray. She fits the mold: her career "began in the last third of the twentieth century," she writes about "the world of the redneck or white trash" in *Ecology*, and she focuses on class—an identity marker often ignored (Cash and Perry xi). In *Ecology*, Ray writes one story of the Rough South: a poor family makes do with what they have. The Ray family's socioeconomic status does not always afford them the privilege to be ecologically minded. The family's ancestors, Crackers who immigrated to South Georgia through untouched old-growth longleaf pine forests, did what they needed: they participated in deforestation to make lives for themselves post-immigration. Ray's grandfather Charlie took to the woods for refuge, using what he needed and appreciating the value of the natural world. Her father Franklin fearfully avoided the woods. And she leaned on the generational environmental knowledge passed down from her grandfather to enact tangible change in the conservation of longleaf pines. The Rays' status as poor White folks living on a junkyard does not preclude them from being ecologically minded; it only serves as a barrier. Nonetheless, Ray's focus on the Rough South demonstrates a need for more stories like hers, more nuance in the environmental writing field.

Ray's perception of and portrayal of elements of place are of course different from my three other primary texts, partly because of *Ecology*'s genre and Ray's social class and race. She imagines her elements of place—natural and built elements that consciously or subconsciously

shape perceptions of place and belonging—as "wildernesses." The junkyard she grew up on, she argues, is like a wilderness: it is chaotic yet logical. More abstract than Hurston's, O'Connor's, or Walker's elements of place, Ray considers mental illness as a wilderness and element of place since mental illness affects generations of her family's perceptions of the natural world. The longleaf pines are an essential element of place in Ray's memoir—the most important in the book.

Perceptions of the woods throughout *Ecology* shed light on generational trauma and environmental knowledge in the Ray family. Charlie perceives the woods as a refuge—a place where he can go to abandon his family and society's harsh realities. Franklin fears the woods and instead spends his time in the junkyard fixing machines. Janisse loves and protects the woods. The entanglement of these elements of place—the junkyard, mental illness, longleaf pine forests, and the woods in general—deeply affect Ray's life and her portrayal of it.

Ray focuses on elements of place throughout her memoir to shed light on generational trauma and generational knowledge about the natural world. As we have seen in all my chapters, characters (and real people) have complicated, nuanced relationships with different elements of place. Mental illness—a "wilderness" per Ray—directly caused generational trauma to Charlie's children. But the same wilderness helped pass down environmental knowledge to Ray, even if it skipped a generation. Charlie's environmental knowledge directly influenced Janisse's care for and protection of the longleaf pines, in addition to her guilt from her ancestors' deforestation long before she was born.

While I do not want to make the claim that we can read Ruffin's burden-and-beauty complex into *Ecology*—because such a theory is reserved for African Americans who have experienced trauma because of the institution of slavery—I want to emphasize that

entanglements of race and class deeply affect Ray's characters' connections with the environment. Generational trauma and environmental knowledge are intrinsically linked in all the texts my chapters foreground.

CHAPTER VI: CODA: SOUTHERN WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENTAL WRITING IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

> I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered. Her chariot was a storm so great and black the Greeks would say it was harnessed to dragons. She was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes. She left us a dark Gulf and salt-burned land. She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes. (Ward, *Salvage the Bones* 255)

Where Do We Go from Here?: Southern Women's Environmental Writing Moving Forward

I bookend "Elements of Place: Southern Women Writers, Race, and Generational Environmental Knowledge" with analyses of two record-breaking hurricanes: one in 1928 in Florida (which also affected Puerto Rico and the Bahamas) in the twentieth century and one in 2005 in Mississippi and Louisiana in the twenty-first century.[41] In the time between these two hurricanes—seventy-seven years—much has changed, including the frequency of record-breaking hurricanes like the Okeechobee Hurricane and Hurricane Katrina. It goes without saying: the more the climate changes due to human activity, the more "natural" disasters occur. Thus, climate change becomes an added element of place in twenty-first century literature, affecting every person's relationship with and perception of the natural world—consciously or subconsciously.

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[41] Abigail G. H. Manzella compares these two hurricanes: "The historical Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928 and its description in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*… acts as the most direct literary and historical 'precedent' of Hurricane Katrina seventy-seven years later, with even the number of dead, marked at 1,836 for years, uncannily close to the 1,833 estimated for the later storm" (195–96).

I have analyzed four texts published in the twentieth century by Southern women writers, spanning from 1937 to 1999. These texts reflect authors' personal perceptions of the natural world, as evidenced by three generations of families—fictional and real. Identity markers such as gender, race, and class clearly affect authors' and characters' relationships with the natural world, and so does generational trauma and familial environmental knowledge. Do elements of place show up differently (than in these earlier texts) written by Southern women writing in 2000 and beyond? Aside from the increasing influence of climate change, I don't think so.

While my chapters closely analyze only sixty-two years of environmental literature written by Southern women writers, my thinking doesn't end here. Fortunately, the environmental literature canon has begun accepting more women and more writers of color, and the field will continue to grow over this next century. Janisse Ray continues publishing work with environmental themes, including *Wild Spectacle: Seeking Wonders in a World Beyond Humans* (2021). Twenty-two years after the publication of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ray writes more about her experiences in the natural world, now with a heavier emphasis on climate change. She continues her environmental justice efforts in *Wild Spectacle*, other publications, and through activism.

Other women writing fiction and nonfiction about the South and the natural world in the twenty-first century include Natasha Trethewey (*Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast*), Margaret Renkl (*Late Migrations: A Natural History of Love and Loss*), Lauren Groff (*Florida*), Rose Mclarney (a poet and essayist, yet to publish a collection of essays), Aimee Nezhukumatathil (*World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments*), Sarah Gerard (*Sunshine State*), Karen Russel (*Swamplandia!*), Toni Jensen (*Carry: A Memoir of Survival on Stolen Land*), Holly Goddard Jones (*Antipodes*),

Barbara Kingsolver (*Flight Behavior* and *Demon Copperhead*), and many others. While my project concludes with an analysis of just one contemporary novel written by a Southern woman, it would be valuable and fruitful to extend my argument to include more twenty-first century Southern women writers, including poets who write about the intersections of race, class, and the natural world in the South.

Another contemporary Southern woman writing about place who immediately comes to mind is Jesmyn Ward, a highly awarded Black woman from DeLisle, Mississippi. Two of Ward's novels—*Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017)—garnered National Book Awards. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how my project's argument applies to contemporary texts and explore the future of Southern women's environmental writing.

Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*

What does a massively destructive hurricane do to the family that tries so hard to forget the past and that resists thinking about the future? What happens to this family when they live in a place and time in which this magnitude of hurricane is inevitable? In *Salvage the Bones* (hereafter *Salvage*), Jesmyn Ward answers these questions vis-à-vis the experience of the Batistes—a poor Black family living in fictional Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, off the coast near Biloxi. Ward paints a hauntingly beautiful story through the eyes of Esch, the only daughter in a family of five. Seven years after the death of their mother, fifteen-year-old Esch and her three brothers (Randall, Skeetah, and Junior) do what they can to survive their harsh living conditions, without much help from their grieving, alcohol-dependent father. Like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "A View of the Woods," *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Ward's novel features a young woman/girl protagonist and her relationship with a parent (her father Claude), along with influences from her grandparents (who have

passed). As we will see, Ward emphasizes the importance of family and generational environmental knowledge as my other four primary texts do.

Salvage unfolds in twelve chapters, each spanning one day, as the family prepares for and ultimately lives through Hurricane Katrina. Influenced by her experience surviving Katrina in her Mississippi hometown, Ward's portrayal of the hurricane preparations—and the actual hurricane—is evocative, to say the least. Early in the novel, Ward writes, "It's summer, and when it's summer, there's always a hurricane coming or leaving here. Each pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach, where they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses before running over the bayou" (4). Early on, Ward reminds us of the legacy of enslavement in this place: it is everywhere, even in 2005. Henry Ivry contends:

> When Esch thinks about the slave galleys on the coast, she is tapping into the wake described by Christine Sharpe where Black people exist in the "continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (Sharpe 13). To exist in this wake is to be forced to confront wide swaths of time to come to grips with anti-Blackness. Indeed, as Sharpe has it, anti-Black violence becomes "the atmospheric condition of time and place" (Sharpe 106). (Ivry 155)

In this way, anti-Blackness becomes part of the environment of Bois Sauvage, only exacerbated by Hurricane Katrina. As we will see, the lack of aid provided to the Batiste family and Bois Sauvage results from America's anti-Blackness. Can we consider anti-Black racism as an element of place? Because racism is systemic, especially in 2011 when Ward published *Salvage*, can we consider anti-Blackness as a *built* element of place? We see this incarnation in chapters two and four, too: racism is overt in both Hurston's and Walker's novels—it becomes a tangible part of environments. (Consider: Janie's experiences with racism in every Florida town she visits/lives, except the Everglades; racial discrimination after the Okeechobee Hurricane; the

Copelands' experiences with the oppressive system of sharecropping in South Georgia; the prison industrial system in *Grange*; Grange's incident with the racist woman in Central Park.)

Hurricane Katrina—and all hurricanes mentioned as lore throughout *Salvage*—is an impactful element of place that shapes the Batiste family's perceptions of place and belonging. As a reminder, I include natural and built features in my definition of elements of place. Because Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster *and* in some ways a man-made environmental disaster, Ward's novel is ripe for my analysis.[42] *Salvage*'s elements of place seem more nuanced, challenging our understanding of what is natural and what is built.

Salvage exposes how America perpetuates slow violence toward poor communities of color, particularly in the South, and even more particularly in the Gulf Coast. The hurricane in the novel helps exemplify this point. Nixon defines slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Ward uses Hurricane Katrina to call attention to the ways communities of color are particularly in danger of experiencing slow and spectacular violence during natural disasters. Slow violence seeps through the pages of *Salvage* in the form of institutionalized racism—before, during, and after Katrina. Ward layers the novel's anti-Blackness and the hurricane's reverberations to create an impactful element of place that will affect this region and these characters for decades.

After the real-life Hurricane Katrina, the American government failed to provide aid to the communities affected most. America's inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina reveals contemporary racism. Freedman reports that the storm caused $260 billion in damages and destroyed over 300,000 homes (164). The hurricane caused the deaths of 1,836 people and

[42]See "Why Hurricane Katrina was Not a Natural Disaster" (Lemann).

displaced 770,000 residents, leaving 700 unaccounted for, predominantly poor and Black (Freedman 164). Rather than catastrophizing, Ward demonstrates how impoverished Black communities work together to pick each other up when they cannot rely on the government (or anyone else) for support. As in *Their Eyes* and *Grange*, these Black characters' resilience provides a hopeful ending. The conclusion of *Salvage* shows us that through the devastating hurricane, the Batiste family ends up growing closer as they pick up the pieces of their lives. But Ward's underlying message about environmental injustice remains: it is people of color and poor folks who are left behind during and after natural disasters. Anti-Black racism "masks the long-term vulnerability of Black populations in the Gulf within the highly visible horror of the storm" (Leader-Picone 78).

Contrasted with slow violence, spectacular violence is "immediate and explosive, [which] erupt[s] into instant, concentrated visibility" (Dawson and Nixon). In *Salvage*, then, slow violence takes the form of institutionalized racism—i.e., generational trauma, lack of resources and aid, environmental racism, etc.—while the destructive hurricane wreaks spectacular violence. In what follows, I'll provide some examples of slow violence in the novel to demonstrate how Ward foregrounds both slow and spectacular violence, emphasizing just how devastating natural disasters are for poor communities of color.[43] *Salvage* provides rich ground for analyses of race, class, gender, and the natural world; examining the novel's representations of slow violence offers opportunities to better understand environmental injustice.

[43]For the sake of time, I won't focus on examples of spectacular violence in the novel, though there are many—mostly in the hurricane chapter.

Slow Violence and Elements of Place

The element of place with which the Batistes are most intimately associated is, of course, their home. Early in the novel, Ward paints a chilling picture of the family's living situation. Their run-down home is a trailer among a junkyard. The family lives on land purchased by Papa Joseph and Mother Lizbeth, the children's grandparents who have passed. While Ward provides few details about these folks, their legacy lives on like a ghost throughout the novel. Esch reports, "Since it's just us and Daddy here now with China [Skeetah's dog], the chickens, and a pig when Daddy can afford one, 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" (Ward 14). Rather than maintain Joseph and Lizbeth's land, the Batistes have let the natural world overtake it. Their immediate surroundings reflect the state of this family's lives: they are struggling and in disarray.

The grandparents' decaying house helps illustrate the family's living conditions: the living Batistes (Claude and his four children) lack the resources to clean up the house and sell it, so instead, they scavenge what they need from the dilapidated house. Ward writes, "The house is a drying animal skeleton, everything inside that was evidence of living salvaged over the years" (58). The opposite of generational wealth, the Batistes lack time and resources to profit from their family's old home or land. The Batistes seem to get by before the storm, but their home doesn't stand a chance against the Category 5 hurricane. The Batistes' property, which they call "the pit," exemplifies signs of slow violence.

The pit is an element of place that deeply influences the Batistes: it is both natural and built, the family's toxic dumping site but also a place where the children play. Esch tells us, "We dump our garbage in a shallow ditch next to the pit, and we burn it… When there's good rain in

the summer, the pit fills to the brim and we swim in it" (Ward 15). The Batistes have "adapted" the pit "as a site of social engagement, but also a place where waste is dumped" (Clark 344). This element of place provides the four Batiste children and their friends with a place to escape the harsh realities of their lives. The family's home "literalizes the inequities and asymmetries of the Mississippi landscape in which the entire narrative takes place, where the topsoil itself becomes a living palimpsest" (Ivry 151). The pit's soil writes and rewrites the history of the Batiste family—and many families like them.

While the pit is the Batiste family's most immediate home, their community of Bois Sauvage is also worthy of closer analysis. Bois Sauvage, translated from French to "savage woods" or "wild woods," is a small, segregated town near the Mississippi coast. The community's name "signals both its marginalization from the nation and the attitude of the rest of the nation towards the area and its residents": it is not the place that's savage, but the people who live there (Leader-Picone 64). Or, perhaps to outsiders, the place itself is wild too: Bois Sauvage "also reflects the doubleness of natural realms and their subsequent qualities. The flipside of a nurturing Mother Nature is a darker, more dangerous proposition, whereby the natural is capable of taking away as well as providing resources" (Clark 344). The pit takes care of the Batiste children by providing a refuge, a place for play outside of the bounds of a segregated, racist society, yet toxic waste lies beneath the water's surface. This nuanced perception of "Mother Nature"—that she gives and takes away—is made most obvious after Hurricane Katrina hits.

The Batistes live near a White family's farm (from which the children occasionally steal supplies), and Ward describes how the White family responds to the impending hurricane, which contrasts greatly with the Batistes' preparations. The White family board up their windows,

move their livestock into the barn, and leave for higher ground. Esch notices that compared to the Batistes' boarded up house, "the boards of the [White family's] house are more even, more secure. They are not a patch-up of boards of different sizes like our house" (Ward 208). The White family is more prepared to protect their home because they have the means to buy proper wood for their windows, unlike the Batistes, who must scavenge for essentials even before the storm, such as food and medicine. The White family's cows even end up in a safer position than the Batiste children during the hurricane (Ward 207). The White family leaves town before the hurricane hits Bois Sauvage, and they do not check on the Batistes or offer their support, or their home/barn as a refuge. Nor do they check on the family after their home is destroyed. Slow violence shows up regularly throughout *Salvage* in the form of lack or absence: the Black community receives no support from other communities, no governmental aid.

Ward nods to the history of segregation as it relates to natural disasters, demonstrating how environmental concerns directly affect social justice efforts. Esch thinks back to one of her teachers who told her students that their elementary school was "the black school for the district before the schools were desegregated in 1969, after the last big hurricane" (Ward 140). After Hurricane Camille hit in August of 1969, however, the folks who were fighting to outlaw segregation were "too tired of finding their relatives' uprooted bodies" to continue their activism (Ward 140). Ward relies on environmental history and turns stories of past hurricanes into lore throughout the novel; these past natural disasters become stories to children in schools and in families. These stories also provide more context about how environmental justice concerns directly affect social justice efforts—in this case, fighting for integration before Hurricane Camille. How could these children's parents and/or grandparents fight for equal rights when they are fighting to stay alive and provide for their families in the wake of a catastrophic hurricane?

Clark calls attention to "the (literally) uprooting power of natural disasters in the region, in addition to the importance of geographical areas that act as sites of social bonding" (348). These environmental justice concerns also bring together communities. Ward's fictionalized history of Bois Sauvage represents histories of real towns and further elucidates how slow violence impacts marginalized communities.

Mobility and Choice

Like many folks in communities of color in the Gulf and elsewhere, the Batistes lack the resources to move further inland to escape the path of inevitable hurricanes. Additionally, Bois Sauvage and the pit have been the Batistes' home for generations; their familial ties to this particular place are strong. Mobility in *Salvage* contrasts with my chapters' four primary texts. As a reminder, in Hurston's *Their Eyes*, Janie Crawford needs to move freely in order to grow, though she and Tea Cake choose to stay in The Everglades when the Okeechobee Hurricane hits. Mary Fortune Pitts loses her mobility in O'Connor's "A View," emphasizing the dangers of exploiting land and women. In Walker's *Grange*, Grange must move away from the South but then reclaim the South as his home; Brownfield lacks the opportunity for mobility and therefore cannot become independent or grow; and Ruth's hopeful future comes directly from her chance to move freely. Janisse Ray's opportunities to move around and explore grant her the opportunity to reclaim the South as her home and identity in *Ecology.* The Black protagonists featured in chapters two and four—Janie Crawford and Grange and Ruth Copeland—all migrate when possible. It is the *choice* to move freely that becomes most important for these characters' positive development.

Conversely, Ward's characters are "mobility poor": they are unable to move (Manzella 195). Ward's novel begs the question, do the Batistes choose to stay because of their familial ties

to the land and their home, or do they have no choice but to stay because of their socioeconomic status? The Batistes' decision to stay in Bois Sauvage during the hurricane represents their own freedom to continue living in the place of their choice, but concurrently, their lack of access to move further inland underscores and perpetuates their oppression. I am not suggesting that this family (or any families) should be forced to move from their homes; Manzella emphasizes "the continued significance of choice in relationship to movement, reminding us that the inability to move can be just as detrimental as being forced to move. The history of slavery remains always at the periphery of this family's reaction to their environment" (192). But we must remember: it is not a positive thing that the Batistes remain oppressed and "mobility poor" because of their lack of resources. These are not mutually exclusive: they choose to stay, *and* they could not afford to leave.

Before Katrina makes landfall, Skeetah argues for the family to stay in their home: "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" (Ward 220). Ward emphasizes the Batistes' generational knowledge: if their predecessors survived hurricanes here, they can survive hurricanes here. Underneath Skeetah's pride, I think, is a result of slow violence keeping the family in Bois Sauvage, hardly making enough money to buy food yet determined to survive a Category 5 hurricane. Because two of my primary texts feature record-breaking hurricanes, it is necessary to compare these families' environmental knowledge. As a refresher, in *Their Eyes*, environmental knowledge derives from Nanny's escape from enslavement and subsequent survival in the natural world; she passes down this knowledge to her daughter and then granddaughter. An important distinction in this comparison between environmental knowledge in *Their Eyes* and in *Salvage* is that Janie Crawford had no knowledge

of how to survive a hurricane, likely because the Okeechobee Hurricane in 1928 was the first record-breaking hurricane to affect Florida, meaning Janie's grandmother—the arbiter of environmental knowledge in the Crawford family—had no knowledge of hurricane survival. Conversely, in *Salvage*, the Batiste children know much about how to prepare for and survive a record-breaking hurricane; their parents Claude and Rose survived Hurricane Camille and others. We can almost certainly attribute the difference in the two families' hurricane survival knowledge to the chronology of these novels: with Hurston's novel published in 1937 and Ward's in 2011 (and with the real-life Okeechobee Hurricane occurring in 1928 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005), there has been a drastic uptick in record-breaking storms due to climate change. Ward and her characters have had more practice gathering information about these deadly storms.

The day before Katrina hits Bois Sauvage, Claude (the father) says, "FEMA and Red Cross always come through with food. We got that much. We make do with what we got… Always have. And will" (Ward 195). As readers, we know that FEMA and Red Cross failed—in numerous catastrophic ways—to help those in need (Edwards). Using a bit of dramatic irony, Ward calls attention to the extreme vulnerability of communities of color who were left behind in the years-long aftermath of Katrina. Leader-Picone writes, "The effects of both the storm and its aftermath were not felt equally by Black and white, rich and poor; instead, they were structured and reproduced by existing hierarchies" (63).[44] As in *Their Eyes*, the storm itself does

[44]See Bullard and Wright, *The Wrong Complexion for Protection: How the Government Response to Disaster Endangers African American Communities*.

not discriminate, but racial hierarchies return immediately after the hurricane hits. Anti-Blackness becomes an element of place—part of the environment—in Mississippi and Louisiana.

The Culmination of Slow and Spectacular Violence

We really start to see the amalgamation of slow and spectacular violence after the hurricane, in Ward's twelfth and final chapter. The hurricane is "an animal, alive, struggling against the water, trying to shove us off its back," which gives a glimpse into Ward's depictions of spectacular violence (Ward 233). Esch narrates, "We were a pile of wet, cold branches, human debris in the middle of all of the rest of it" (Ward 237). This word choice is exceptionally provoking—Ward's diction points to the many times Black Americans have been treated as discarded matter. The storm flattens distinctions between humans, the natural world, and inanimate objects. Something similar happens in *Their Eyes* when Janie and Tea Cake struggle to stay alive during the Okeechobee Hurricane; they notice that "supposed divisions between human and animal, the living and the non-living, collapse into ecological collectives, before and throughout the storm, and temporarily replace carefully regulated racial and class dichotomies" (Claborn 129). "In the middle of all of the rest of it," the Batistes become almost indistinguishable from the natural world (Ward 237). As in *Their Eyes*, these racial and class dichotomies return in Bois Sauvage immediately after the storm.

The storm has altered Bois Sauvage's geography, emphasizing the fragility of environments. Once the storm is over, the family goes into town, finding vast destruction. Ward writes, "People stand in clusters at what used to be intersections, the street signs vanished, all they own in a plastic bag at their feet, waiting for someone to pick them up. No one is coming" (250). The very geography of the town has been changed. Esch knows at this point that their community cannot rely on anyone but each other. FEMA is not coming; the Red Cross is not

coming. Immediately after such spectacular violence, slow violence returns in the form of a lack of support or supplies.

The environment in *Salvage* is inextricable from anti-Black racism. The family ventures farther away from Bois Sauvage to scavenge for food in nearby St. Catherine. The rich White town was hit even harder than Bois Sauvage: "The gas station, the yacht club, and all the old white-columned homes that faced the beach, that made us feel small and dirty and poorer than ever when we came here with Daddy,… are gone. Not ravaged, not rubble, but completely gone" (Ward 252–53). Ward indicates that Katrina did not discriminate: the hurricane destroyed poor and rich neighborhoods. But the implied difference is that the folks in St. Catherine had the means to evacuate, seeking shelter further inland, and their homes were likely fully insured. Folks in Bois Sauvage, on the other hand, chose to stay (or, perhaps, had no choice but to stay) in their already dilapidated homes, responsible for repairing damage on their own dime. "At every pass," Ivry argues, "Ward is aware of the ways that race and the environment are inextricable from one another" (144). Natural disasters do not discriminate, but America does. *Salvage* importantly contributes to my analysis of Southern women's environmental writing because of Ward's nuanced and ethical approach to the ways racism affects Black folks' perceptions of the natural world.

Ward demonstrates the cyclical nature of slow violence on communities of color by using Hurricane Katrina as her vehicle. We see spectacular violence strike the Gulf Coast during the hurricane, but slow and spectacular violence merge after the storm—a deadly combination. Poor communities of color receive no governmental aid, no financial support, and these communities must support themselves and begin again from the ground up. Ward emphasizes that institutionalized racism is cyclical: without the disposable income to move inland, and because

of valuable connections to family and place, people of color stay. They stay where they are most vulnerable, when the next hurricane hits and the cycle continues. Robert Jackson writes, "What could be more Southern than disaster? From earliest European contact to Katrina, one way to tell the story of what is now the US South is as a series of disasters—natural, man-made, and otherwise" (555). *Salvage the Bones* tells the story of a violent disaster's effects on a forgotten south and how both slow and spectacular violence devastate a poor, Black community. Yet, there is something positive in Ward's conclusion: poor communities of color support each other when no one else does.

A Hopeful Future and the Power of Storytelling

Salvage does not catastrophize the climate emergency; instead, Ward points us toward something many Southern Black women writers have incorporated into their works, including Hurston and Walker: Black communities are resilient when they lean on each other to survive. As the Batistes walk along the beach, processing the damage wrought by the hurricane, Esch finds shards of glass from liquor bottles. She thinks, "I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered" (Ward 255). Esch acknowledges the power of storytelling, even after her family has experienced vast destruction. The pregnant teenager plans to create a mobile of sorts for herself (and, maybe eventually for her child), as she hangs shards of glass above her bed to remember the storm. Wrapped up in the memory of Katrina is what Esch has learned about motherhood: it is complicated and sometimes violent. Within this context, community becomes even more essential.

The hurricane has challenged the Batistes to confront the realities of their new lives. An especially influential element of place, Katrina forces the family to start anew. Esch and her

family feel like newborn babies as they are left with nothing. Ward continues, Katrina "was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes" (255). The repeated imagery of new life appears here to remind us that Esch will soon be a mother, yet she herself feels like a newborn baby, a newly birthed puppy, a recently hatched baby snake. And now she will become a first-time mother while picking up the pieces of her life.

Sparing their lives yet leaving them with nothing, the hurricane has taught Esch about the dark side of the natural world—the side that is uncontrollable, violent, terrifying: "She left us a dark Gulf and salt-burned land. She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage" (Ward 255). The family is left to start anew. Ward's repetition—"She left us… she left us… she left us"—represents all the difficult, tiresome work the family will need to do to pick up the pieces of their lives. Not only will they need to repair their home, salvage their property, scavenge for food and other supplies, but they will also need to grapple with the anti-Blackness that plagues their town/state/region/country.

Esch has finally experienced the destruction of the natural world firsthand after hearing stories about past hurricanes from her grandparents and parents. She thinks, "Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes" (Ward 255). Esch (and Ward) calls attention to the fact that Katrina is not the last hurricane to devastate this region, that hurricanes of this scale are now inevitable. The Batistes and similar families have lived in crisis most of their lives and will continue to live in crisis forever because of anti-Blackness. The family must remember how to survive in the "continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding" (Sharpe 13). For the Batistes and other poor Black families in this Southern region, living in the wake means that surviving racism

is just as difficult as surviving record-breaking natural disasters. Ivry contends, "But Ward's work moves past the stale coagulation of the crisis realist tradition, understanding that crisis for Black people in the Mississippi Delta is a continual condition of being" (142).

Beyond the inevitability of future crises, Esch provides a hopeful image for the future: connected to her mother and grandmother through their stories of past hurricanes, Esch acknowledges the importance of storytelling and remembering. Esch scavenges "what remains to create something new in the form of a story, like the history told by female southern writers before her" (Clark 356). Katrina leaves this community in shambles; they must learn to survive like newborn babies while Esch grows new life inside her womb. The Batistes and citizens of Bois Sauvage will pick up the pieces together: "In the face of abandonment and left to waste, the characters of *Salvage the Bones* band together in solidarity, challenging the expected outcome of black bodies left to perish in the South" (Clark 356–57). They will not be left behind as so many were after the Okeechobee Hurricane, Katrina, and numerous other storms.

As we've seen with Ruth Copeland in *Grange*, we are uncertain of Esch's future, but I think it is safe to assume that Esch and her future child will choose to stay in Bois Sauvage, continuing the Batiste family tradition of living on the pit and scavenging to survive. Again, it is the *choice* to stay or to move that is most important. The conclusion of *Salvage* suggests that regardless of whether Esch and her child stay in Bois Sauvage, they will endure. Their resilience will help them survive: "Ward celebrates the incredible resourcefulness and savageness of southern African Americans. Salvaging restores, in part, the loss of knowledge generated and transmitted by othermothers swept into the post-Katrina diaspora" (Ivry 83). While Southern towns are demolished, stories and Black resilience remain.

Ward's elements of place in *Salvage*—namely the pit, Bois Sauvage, and Hurricane Katrina—demonstrate that contemporary Southern writers continue to grapple with their nuanced perceptions of the natural world, as affected by their own racial identities and socioeconomic classes. Relying on generational environmental knowledge, Esch Batiste and her brothers successfully learn to scavenge to survive in a racist society that resists supporting impoverished people of color. *Salvage* exemplifies a contemporary Southern text that draws our attention to environmental justice concerns and more. By focusing on the intersections of race, class, and the natural world, we can gain a deeper understanding of how racial oppression affects perceptions of the natural world and vice versa.

Holistic Analyses of Southern Women's Environmental Writing: Ecologies of Interconnection

"Elements of Place: Southern Women Writers, Race, and Generational Environmental Knowledge" importantly takes a holistic approach to analyzing Southern women's environmental writing. Rather than focusing solely on place or on particular natural elements, my project analyzes elements of place, considering natural *and* built elements as essential in understanding how these Southern women portray the natural world in nuanced and layered approaches. Without analyzing a full spectrum of elements of place in these literary works, we can only understand limited parts of Southern women's relationships with nature.

Approaching these Southern texts holistically is essential; we can only understand the interconnectedness of social identities, region, and the natural world by analyzing the entire picture, the whole constellation. Therefore, without an intersectional ecofeminist and ecological approach to works by Southern women, we are unable to fully grasp depictions of the South, race, class, gender, or the natural world. If our goal is to minimize the effects of the climate

emergency and to treat each other with more kindness and empathy, then we must put these strands in conversation with one another.

At many points while writing this project, I have reminisced about my earliest connections with Southern soil. My love of nature begins as a child, running barefoot through my father's plant nursery every summer. I persuaded my father's employees to drink "tea" with me while they were potting groundcover or perennial seeds. In a gorgeous plastic tea set, I made my new friends "Tepamatunamus Tea"—a delicious blend of dirt they'd pretend to drink with me. It was a kindness to provide them with such a refreshment as they toiled under the Georgia sun.

When teatime was over, my baby brother and I would count tadpoles in a small brook, excited to see the tiny creatures' growth every day. We'd run down to Hurricane Creek, at the western edge of our home, jumping and splashing, surprised not to see fish in the cloudy water. After we'd stood as still as two tiny humans can, the fish would come. Even if I held a fishing pole, I never hoped to catch anything. I was (and still am) afraid of hurting the fish. On our best days, we'd find arrowheads left behind by the Cherokees who were forcefully removed from their land. My favorite relics were colored pink like salmon.

I think back to those days—"drinking" Tepamatunamus Tea, counting tadpoles, playing in dirt piles, "catching" fish in the creek, finding lucky arrowheads—and I remember how all of this started: my questions about how to appreciate the land and all its inhabitants. I only wish everyone could know the feeling of warm, prickly grass while rolling down a hill; the sweet taste of honeysuckle in the dusky morning before the school bus arrives; the shock of frigid, earthy tasting hose water. The feeling of dirt stuck under fingernails.

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