ARTICLES

A Flowering of Memory
Walking Zora Neale Hurston's Cemetery Path
to our Mothers' Gardens

James Padilioni, Jr.

ABSTRACT: In June 1945, Zora Neale Hurston wrote to W. E. B. Du Bois to propose a plan to create a Black cemetery to house the remains of famous Black Americans in Florida. Hurston suggested Florida because the state's climate guaranteed the cemetery would be verdant year-round, and she included a landscaping plan of the flowers and trees she desired to furnish her memorial garden. As an initiate of New Orleans Hoodoo-Vodou, Hurston's ontology of spirit allowed for the presence of the ancestors to indwell the living form of flowers, trees, and other topographical features of the land. I contextualize Hurston's cemetery within an extended genealogy of Black necrogeography and the study of Black American deathscapes, examining the entangled relationship of Black gardening and Black burial practices as engendering a distinct ecology of root-working in which Black women gardeners propagate new forms of life in the very dust of our decomposition.

KEYWORDS: Black religion, deathscapes, diaspora, Hoodoo, Hurston, necrogeography, social death, Vodou

On 11 June 1945, Zora Neale Hurston wrote to W. E. B. Du Bois from aboard her houseboat in Daytona Beach, proposing a plan to construct a cemetery “in the lake country of Florida” to house the remains of “illustrious Negro dead” (1945: 1). She envisioned this cemetery as a fusion of Père Lachaise in Paris and the “world famous Bok Tower [Gardens],” a 250-acre bird sanctuary and conservation garden, established in Polk County, Florida, in 1929 (Dudley 2001, Schnur and Landon 2014). Beyond her home-state affinity for Florida, Hurston preferred to site a cemetery here because there were “thousands of acres” of “available” land in Florida’s lake country, the central region starting near the aptly named Lake County, extending southward through Orlando and across the Kissimmee Prairie to Lake Okeechobee. And with prices “as cheap as five to ten dollars an acre on lakes,” she hoped to “secure about one hundred acres for the site,” a tract of land sufficiently large enough to “prevent white encroachment” and “afford space for an artists’ colony if ever the need arose” (1945: 2). After explaining the economic
incentives for choosing Florida, Hurston next outlined the environmental factors favoring the state, noting that “the beauty” of Florida’s landscape “lends itself to decoration easier than any other part of the United States” (1945: 1). Such beauty was a mark of Florida’s rich biosphere, as a botanical ensemble of “Magnolias, bay, oaks, palms, pines, “camphor,” “hibiscus, crotons, oleanders and the like” rendered the landscape a “place of ravishing beauty” (1945: 1).

Florida was not only a picturesque locale in Hurston’s reckoning, but it also presented an ecological figure that embodied the potential for a flourishing Black community. In her autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston’s mythic narration of Florida’s history identified the “conglomerate” maroon community of the Black Seminoles as typifying the “great struggle” of Florida’s colonial history prior to American statehood (1991a: 2), who made of the swampy canopy of the Everglades a refuge for fugitive African slaves from Georgia and the Carolinas a defiant position from which to resist the antiblack logic of plantation slavery (Kai 2015). Following political Emancipation across the Atlantic Basin, Florida became a meeting ground for multiple waves of economic migrants hailing from both the Deep South of the United States and the Caribbean (Hurston 1991b), creating a demographic kaleidoscope of the diaspora across the Sunshine State, where Hurston observed “Africa by way of Cuba; Africa by way of the British West Indies; Africa by way of Haiti and Martinique; Africa by way of Central and South America” (1939: 6). Through their everyday folk practices, these various Africana communities transformed Florida from a mere topographical sandbar into a rich “culture delta” that had “accumulated” a “great mass of material” (1991c: 183). Hurston’s understanding of diaspora was not solely oriented around the historical destruction wrought by the Middle Passage, but Hurston saw Florida as an ongoing and open-ended “lush glade of the . . . imagination” (1991c: 1983) in which the seeds of Black culture formed an indigenizing force on the very landscape, keeping Florida’s “wombs of folk culture heavy with life” (1939: 6).

Hurston’s expansive and multiple way of imagining Florida relates with Kishi Ducre’s notion of the Black feminist spatial imagination, “the distinct cognitive spatial maps of their environments” created by predominantly poor, Black women (2018: 22). Owing to the “multiple oppressions borne at the intersections of race, class, and gender,” these spatial maps afford Black women “a means to survive the structural violence and environmental degradation of their communities” (2018: 22). Hurston imagined the sparsely populated Lakes Region of Florida was sufficiently ample to “prevent white encroach,” but she also envisioned such open space as a site of Black cultural conservation that would house a cemetery garden to hold the interred remains of Black communal ancestors set within a picturesque landscape, as well as an artists’ colony to provide a generative ground for Black folks to recreate themselves anew. As such, Hurston’s “watchfulness” (2018: 25) extended beyond the scope of the living human community to include ancestors, flora, landscape, and other dynamic natural processes such as hydrology. In Hurston’s plan for a Black Florida cemetery garden, we observe what M. Jacqui Alexander describes as ancestral memory that “refuses to be housed in any single place” or “encased in the physicality of body” (2005: 288), but manifests phenomenally as


This essay considers the critical site of the Black cemetery garden as a cohabitation of bones, dust, vegetation, and, perhaps paradoxically, hope for flourishing life and sustainable futures. I first detail the study of necrogeography and place Hurston’s landscape plans within an extended genealogy of Black womanist funereal-gardening practices to demonstrate the ways in which
Hurston assumed a sacred vocation to care for the Black community by cultivating ancestral memory on and within the landscape. I next elaborate the relationship between Hurston’s Hoodoo-Vodou ontologies of spirit and ancestral presence with Black gardening methods to expand our conception of Rootworking. Black folk traditions of magical pharmacopeia and herbalism (Chireau 2003), to include a broader horticultural process of diaspora that propagates new forms of life in the very dust of our decomposition. Altogether, I argue that Black womanist cemetery gardens cultivate the fruit of hopefulness that bears seeds of potential for Black flourishing life and sustainable futures. While mainstream discourses of sustainability often frame the issue universally, a distinctly Black feminist and womanist notion of sustainability forms the center of everyday Black life (Frazier 2020). As Terrion Williamson remembers of her grandmother, gardening and other mundane activities such as “tending to her home, cooking, cleaning, and the like, were . . . acts of love that helped to sustain her as much as they did her family” (2017: 5; emphasis added). By practicing sustainability, Grandmother Williamson helped her family discover their “radical capacity . . . to live deeply righteous lives even in the midst of all that brings death close” (2017: 9).

In presenting this necrogeographic contemplation of Hurston’s cemetery gardens, I directly intervene in the late scholarly conversation surrounding the usage of social death as an analytic category of Black Studies (Sexton 2011). As a critique of Western modern, humanist-oriented political ontology, social death importantly indexes the sociogenic structure of gratuitous violence wielded against Black bodies and its concomitant erasure of Black personhood that forms a moribund horizon for the progressive prospects of Black political and civil society, and ultimately, liberation (Wilderson 2003, 2010). But social death as scholarly rhetoric fails to account for its own binary symbolic frame of the life/death couplet (Wynter 2003: 263) and thus maintains a Eurocentric perspective of analysis in which death is equated with negation, absence, and loss. Rather, I heed Charles H. Long’s prescient scholarly exhortation: “what has been forgotten in all of this talk about death is . . . the religious meaning of death . . . even the dead continue to signify” (1986: 147). This essay situates Hurston’s cemetery garden as a critical landscape of Black celebration and solemnification (Clifton 2012: 427; Williamson 2017: 9; Moten 2018: 200; Gray 2019). Black womanist understandings of life and death are not oppositional binaries, but death opens into expanded possibilities of being and becoming, affording the dead and other intermediary spirit beings a vital agency in Black communal life (Manigault-Bryant 2014; Wells-Oghoghomeh 2021). Thus, I hold up Hurston’s cemetery landscape plans as mapping what Jayna Brown describes as “alternative versions” of “black life and liveliness” that, though “claimed and created in the terror” of antiblackness “do not end with death, social or otherwise” (Brown 2021: 13, 1).

Black Necrogeography and Deathsapes: A Genealogy

The field of necrogeography tracks “the spatial agency of the dead both above and below ground” (Semple and Brookes 2020: 1) through analyzing the ways in which the physical location of a burial site “provides a discursive terrain for humans in narrating stories of place, connection, identity, and belonging, as well as otherness” (2020: 2). “Formalized depositions of the dead” such as burial and entombment enable the living to “embed their everyday practices in the landscape” through acts of commemoration (Semple and Brookes 2020: 10). The notion of the deathscape (Maddrell and Sidaway 2010) views human burial as a holistic phenomenon combining geologic, topographical, meteorological, botanical, and zoological realities with sociocultural, political economic, and spiritual considerations, as “cemeteries are enmeshed in a much wider world of
connections . . . which shape and become a culturally-constructed landscape that must be inter-

preted” according to “the varied experience of different ethnic and religious communities” (Nash 2018: 558). In her localized study of African-American burial practices, Christina Brooks finds Black cemeteries “are great repositories of cultural information” (2011: 177) as burial practices remained one of the few arenas of life where enslaved and later emancipated African Americans exercised some degree of community autonomy. “The intentionally-placed above-ground mate-

rial culture found throughout the cemetery as well as the overall cemetery landscape” provides researchers “an inimitable opportunity” to rediscover the Black community’s prevailing outlooks on life and death across the duration of the American experience (2011: 177, 176).

Genealogies of the Black American deathscape must necessarily return to the originating site of the plantation, a seemingly agrarian landscape of technologized death and gratuitous terror, operationalized (in a rational register) according to the political economic logic of capitaliza-

tion and (in an irrational register) the libidinal economic urges of white supremacist domina-

tion (Mbembe 2003: 21–22; McKittrick 2013: 3; Wilderson 2003: 230). But Sylvia Wynter has demonstrated the plantation was not a totalizing force on the land. Rather, its antiblack logic was disrupted by the plot system, a practice in which enslaved Africans kept small gardens where they raised their own foodstuffs in order to provision the body’s metabolic demands for micronutrients, to augment the deficient rations of protein and fat—mostly gristle and innards—supplied by the master (Covey and Eismach 2009: 96–98). Yet, however meager these small subsistence plots when compared to the larger cash-crop fields of the plantation, they nevertheless cultivated a “cultural guerilla resistance” to slavery and capital, as these gardens were held by all in common, owing to cosmogonic principles that held “the Earth was a goddess; [Africans] used the land to feed [themselves]; and to offer first fruits to the Earth” (Wynter 1971: 99). Beyond providing food, the plot also restored dignity to death, as “[the enslaved African’s] funeral was the mystical reunion with the earth” (1971: 99). Through subsequent use, these plots accrued an ancestral presence that radiated from the ground itself (DeLoughrey 2011: 72). The intermingling of gardens and graveyards became a deliberate feature of such plots, with Vince Brown observing of nineteenth-century Jamaica that “black people always buried the dead in their own gardens,” often using trees or shrubs as living grave markers in lieu of fabricated ones (2008: 247). Understanding Black funerals as “ritualized enactments of social life,” J. T. Roane finds garden-plot burials “refigur[ed] death and the outdoors as sites for recalling ancestry,” which, in turn, helped to map an “insurgent cartography” that extended the domain of Black social life away from the surveillance of the plantation into “the dark ecologies of the forest and over the region’s waterscapes” (2018: 243).

A “gendered and gendering space” (Roane 2018: 243) that pertained to the “feminine” realm of the domestic, Black women in the Jim Crow South “developed a unique set of perspectives on the environment by way of the gardens they grew” (Glave 2003: 395). Among these was upholding beauty as an organizing principle for generating and sustaining the Black community (2003: 403). In addition to utilitarian food crops such as okra, eggplant, collards, watermelon, yams, peas, beans, squash, and sweet potatoes, Dianne Glave demonstrates Black women “also dis-

played flowers . . . for everyone’s viewing and pleasure” (2003: 398). Beyond “beckoning neigh-

bors to take a closer look or visitors to chat in the yard’s fragrance and color,” these vivid displays generated folk propagation networks through which Black women furnished their gardens with flowers they “accepted as gifts[,] cultivated from cuttings . . . and cast-offs” (2003: 398, 397) or foraged directly from the wild (2003: 402). This was in variance to white American gardeners who “could more readily buy” their materials on the market (2003: 397).

The beauty aesthetics of Black women’s gardens “often” manifested as “colorful combina-

tions” (Glave 2003: 398) of seemingly “chaotic,” zig-zagging flower patches (2003: 401). But this
“chaos of plants” reflected an Africanist “interpretation of the natural ordering of the universe” that parcels the earth into topographic zones “of wilderness, settled spaces, and crossroads” (2003: 401). Such landscape designs converted Black gardens into walkable sermons by which “gardeners sought ethical, moral, and spiritual enlightenment” (2003: 401). Grey Gundaker also identifies this chaos beauty aesthetic as an Africanist orientation towards the nonlinear and fractal dimensions of reality, in contradistinction to the rationalized, gridded plane of an imagined Euclidian-Cartesian landscape (2016: 101–102). Elsewhere, Gundaker notes, “when African American yard work goes beyond acceptable [Euro-American] limits of decoration . . . it often contributes in some way to the extended network of activities that honor the dead, serve the ancestors, and locate the living in place” (1998a: 18). Black gardens beckon the dynamic movements of Spirit through chromatic constellations of flowering plants, shrubs, and trees, interspersed with human-fabricated “ordinary objects” featuring circular motifs and reflective, shiny elements, such as painted tires, hubcaps, and glass bottles (Gundaker 1998a: 5; Gundaker and McWillie 2005: 124). Gundaker’s notion of the “yard-graveyard” identifies the ways in which Black gardeners double the significance of such “places of remembrance” (1998a: 19) through temporal perspectives. On one hand, the graveyard forms the “threshold to the ancestral past,” while on the other, the garden yard, situated at the “home place” of nourishment, is the “threshold to the unborn future” (1998a: 18). The “yard-graveyard” makes the conditions of Black death meaningful by holding up botanical entities like seeds, seedlings, flowers, and fruit, that each “embody processes of transformation” humans may take as signs of hope (Gundaker and McWillie 2005: 160).

As an “otherwise” ecological practice “born of maroon imaginaries” (Hosbey and Roane, 2021: 72), Black womanist gardening traditions cultivate forms of political agency and empowerment (Reese 2019). The mythic memory of maroonage adds fugitive urgency to the contemporary labor carried out by Black women gardeners. Explaining her motivation, one member of a Detroit-based urban farm collective recalled, “when our ancestors were kidnapped and brought over here they stowed seeds that were native to their land . . . they were holding on to their culture. They were holding on to home” (White 2011: 20). This narrative dovetails with accounts told by “quilombo descendants of runaway slaves” in Brazil that feature “an African woman [who] initiated the cultivation of rice” in the Americas, not as a consequence of slavery’s commodification, but through her “deliberate effort to sequester rice grains in her hair” before boarding a slave ship (Carney 2013: 29). The mythos of botanical maroonage reconfigures the Middle Passage as a site of womanist agency, and commandeers our imagination of the slave ship from a vehicle of devastation into an insurgent “conveyance for transatlantic seed transfers” (Carney 2013: 29). Such accounts of human–plant collaborations during the Middle Passage, however legendary, draw our attention away from the sociocultural category of diaspora toward its botanical cognate diaspore, which describes any part of a plant or fungus—usually a seed or spore—that helps facilitate the plant’s dispersal throughout the environment, ultimately ensuring successful reproduction (Booth 1990).

Perhaps no literary reflection figures the cosmic power of Black women gardeners quite like Alice Walker, whose essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” grew from her profound query: “how was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century?” (1983: 234). Walker followed this path of questioning until it led to her mother’s garden. Mother Walker, though belabored from her daily work in the sharecropping fields, nevertheless 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. (1983: 238)

While Mother Walker gardened to sustain her creative spirit (Walker 1983: 239), this was not an individualistic pursuit, for as “her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties,” her garden conjured a verdant oasis of Black community (1983: 241). Alice fondly remember[ed] 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. (1983: 241)

Mother Walker’s garden was her terrestrial site of apotheosis, an instantiation of the Biblical refrain “the kingdom of heaven is in you”, as it was “only” when she was “working in her flowers that she [was] radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator: hand and eye. . . . Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty” (1983: 241).

Caribbean-American writer Jamaica Kincaid also approaches gardening as “an exercise in memory, a way of remembering” set within a maternal register (1999: 8). When Mother Kincaid, a deft forager and propagator, “[found] something growing in the wild” that “pleased her,” she took a cutting of it (really just breaking off a shoot with her bare hands) or the seed (separating it from its pulpy substance and collecting it in her beautiful pink mouth) and brought it into her own garden and tended to it in a careless, everyday way, as if it were in the wild forest, or as if it were a garden in a regal palace. (2005: xii–xiii)

Mother Kincaid’s example of foraged propagation instilled in her daughter, Jamaica, this truism: “the garden is an invention, the garden is an awareness, a self-consciousness, an artifice” (2005: 188). Kincaid further contextualizes her mother’s gardening in light of Caribbean colonial history, identifying “August 3, 1492, the day Christopher Columbus set sail,” as the infamous date in which “the world of the garden changed [forever]” (2005: xvii). Kincaid thus figures the Biblical Garden of Eden and origin myths of diaspora:

The garden is a heap of disturbance and it might be that my particular history, the history I share with millions of people, begins with the violent removal from an Eden (the regions of Africa from which they came would have been Eden-like, especially encountering the horror, the Fall, which met them in that “New World”. (2005: 189)

Kincaid’s evocation of diasporic longing blurs together Africa, Eden, and notions of heaven/afterlife together when she notes, “your home, the place you are from, is always Eden, the place in which even imperfections were perfect and everything after that interrupted Paradise, your Paradise” (2005: 189).

Taken together, a distinctly Black womanist tradition of gardening has emerged in the diaspora that is, at once, a literal and figurative commingling of life and death. Arising from the subsistence plots of the plantation, Black gardening figures Black lifeforms—and afterlifeforms—as interdependent with the floral, faunal, and topographical features of their environment. As sites of spiritual sustenance and ancestral remembrance, Black women’s gardens generate a beautiful chaos of colorful flower patches and other decorative elements to beckon the dynamic move-
ments of Spirit in accordance with Africanist cosmogonic principles. Black women's gardening in the diaspora is a radical and fugitive practice that positions the Middle Passage as an ecological catastrophe, equally ensnaring Africans and plants together in relations of capital and captivity, and engendering forms of interspecies resistance to domination. Black women's creative power is most realized within the space of the garden, as it is here among the flowers that the presence of the ancestors is made to commingle with the processes of the growing cycle, forming material signs of hope that real transformation is possible.

Hurston's Hoodoo Ecologies of Spirit

The Black garden-as-deathscape is a recurring figure in the life and oeuvre of Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston employed gardening as a literary device to communicate Black women's creativity in the face of gendered sorrow, traits imparted to Missie May from “The Gilded Six-Bits” (Hurston 2014) and Janie Crawford in Their Eyes Were Watching God (Hurston 1937). Across her writing, Hurston, herself, reimagined the Garden of Eden, first through an “ecofeminist working-class” lens (Puente 2017: 132) in her short story “Sweat” (Hurston 2014), and again through her re-presentation of the Black folktales, “How God Made Butterflies,” embedded within the narrative of Mules and Men (Hurston 1934). These depictions positioned Eden as a site of interspecies cooperation in which an ensemble of Black women, flowers, snakes, and butterflies join forces against misogynoir, the specific mode of antiblack racist misogyny faced by Black women and femmes (Bailey and Trudy 2018). As Keith Cartwright describes, Hurston's ecological outlook combined “the konesans [consciousness] of both the Haitian femme-jardin (garden woman) and the Vodou mambo” (2013: 161), imbuing Hurston's “Afro-conservative, preservationist aesthetic” with a “spiritual authority” (2013: 164).

Hurston was aware of the delicate relationship between plants and the spirit world, having learned Hoodoo botany during her time apprenticing with a swamper, “a root-and-conjure doctor who goes to the swamps and gathers his or her own herbs and roots” (1990: 223). Hurston recalled how Dr. Duke “took me to the woods with him many times in order that I might learn the herbs by sight and scent” (1990: 223). This was necessary ceremonial foraging knowledge to manage the Black commons (Roane 2018: 242), for “not only is it important to be able to identify the plant, but the swamper must know when and how to gather it” so as to prevent overcultivation and without disturbing the spirit forces and “snakes [that] guard . . . herbs and roots” (Hurston 1990: 223). In her personal life, Hurston “was crazy about” flowers, and earned the reputation of “a great gardener” among her Fort Pierce, Florida, neighbors on account of the azaleas, morning glories, and gardenias she raised in her humble block house garden (Walker 1983: 114). Thus, Hurston's “ethical orientation to the environment” (Davis 2006: 155) took shape through her layered experiences, both personal and professional, and her Hoodoo ontologies of spirit that anticipated the return of the ancestors in the living forms of flowering plants, trees, and other features of the landscape. With this overview of Hurston's Hoodoo botany, we can see the sacred logic at work in her cemetery garden plan.

Hurston intentionally designed her cemetery to showcase floral beauty. Since Florida remained “green the year round,” a garden cemetery situated there would ensure “visitors during the winter months would not see a desolate looking place” (1945: 1). Hurston described Florida-in-bloom as “a riot of color” (2020: 7) on account of its vibrant diversity of flowering plants, though her association should come as no great surprise for a former Spanish colony christened La Florida, Spanish for “flowery place” (Chapman 2015). Historically, Black Florida “graveyard flowers” stayed off the “desolation” of death by radiating spiritual calm across the landscape. As
the daughter of one Jacksonville gravedigger recalled of her 1920s youth, though she and her friends “were children,” they “weren’t frightened” to visit her father while he worked, because Memorial Cemetery had all kinds of flowers, statues, and angels. They had the pink oleanders and white oleanders. People called them grave yard flowers, beautiful flowers, bushy. We used to sit . . . we weren’t frightened of ghosts. . . . We would look at the angels and the flowers and just play in the cemetery. . . . My father was digging graves and we played. (Quoted in Brown 2018: 178)

Hurston expected to furnish her own graveyard flowers by “get[ting] thousands of cuttings of hibiscus, crotons, oleanders and the like for the mere asking” (1945: 1). Though stems, leaves, and flowers form iconic parts of a plant, seasoned gardeners will recognize the adage “healthy roots, healthy shoots” as a truism. Roots form the most important aspect of vascular plants (Tracheophyta), as they draw nutrients and water from the soil to support the plant’s metabolic life. Hurston explained to Du Bois that Florida’s southern latitude positioned the state as an ideal place where plants “could be made to grow” (1945: 1; emphasis added), revealing her understanding of plant propagation as a human technology of literally working with roots. More commonly, “working roots” was also “the Southern Negro’s term for folk-doctoring by herbs and prescriptions,” “a synonym for hoodoo,” since “all hoodoo doctors cure by roots” (1931: 317). The various Hoodoo formulae collected by Hurston reveal the ways in which Black folks discovered the conjural efficacy of roots through sustained botanical observations in the garden. Samson snake root was “powerful” because it had “four prongs” that corresponded with the “four corners to the world,” and a “tap root grow[ing] straight down . . . point[ing] to the center of the world” (1931: 396). The power of black snake root was its arrangement of roots “like a bunch of threads” that could both “bind together hearts and prosperity and . . . tangle up and hinder those you don’t want to succeed” (1931: 396).

Though the structure of antiblack violence instantiated by the Middle Passage is an undeniable feature of diasporic life, the figure of the “grafted root” (Levy 2001: 91) held sacred significance for Hurston, as she viewed Black culture as a regenerative and regenerating force of nature. The dynamic properties of roots, in all their botanical and magical applications, offer a most-important diasporic lesson: while rootedness is not a given of nature, neither is uprootedness. The plant that has been pulled up and cut off can also be made to root once more. Through the sacred arts of rootwork, Black folks figuratively learn how to “put [their] face directly in dirt,” confident they can breathe underground (Gumbs 2018: 68, 36).

In addition to propagation by rooting, Hurston’s cemetery plans involved foraging “the very woods of Florida” for “magnolias, bay, oaks, palms, pines,” and “camphor” (1945: 1). Her insistence that these trees were “all free for the taking” (1945: 1) is underscored by her fieldwork experience gathering folklore among the mostly Black, migrant, and convict workers she encountered across the state’s numerous turpentine camps, lumber mills, and citrus groves (Levy 2001: 89; Nicholls 2000: 47). Here, Hurston observed firsthand how Black humans and trees alike became ensnared by the antiblack and extractive relations of capital.2 Nevertheless, she viewed such human–arboreal labor regimes a “rich field for folklore” (Nicholls 2000: 50) that engendered a paradoxical celebration of Blackness right in the midst of its oppression, in the form of the tall tales told by the swamp gang on their way to and from worksites, or the bawdy songs sung in the juke joints following a long day of laboring in the fields. A “sign of spiritual wealth” (Levy 2001: 90), Black Florida’s tree lore shared a living essence with its human comrades, so that the rhythmic hollers arising from the turpentine camps possessed something of the “gummy,” monotonous tedium of draining pines, while citrus grove grooves captured the “bittersweet,” acerbic rhythms of agribusiness (Levy 2001: 89).
Hurston was also aware of the sacred politics engendered by Black human–tree relationships. In *Tell my Horse*, Hurston recounted a story she collected in Haiti describing a nineteenth-century apparition of a “virgin” that suddenly appeared within the trunk of a palm tree. When Haitian *Vodouisants* began venerating the tree, a Catholic priest attempted to chop it down, only to have his machete “bounce back and strike [him] on the head” with a mortal blow (Stein 1996: 471). Emboldened, the Haitians continued to gather at the miraculous palm until Church leadership felled the tree to erect a chapel in its place. As Rachel Stein observes, Hurston found this “battle” between Christian transcendence and the Vodou “sacralization of nature” compelling because “the tree . . . heals and re-affirms the black bodies so despised by the colonial order” (1996: 471).

The phenomenon Hurston described is most likely related to *pye repozwa*, Haitian Kreyol for “tree repose,” a practice in which certain trees may become the living repository for the *lwa*—the divinities of Vodou, ancestors, spirit guides, and other incorporeal beings (Tarter 2015: 95). *Repozwa* trees are found across a range of built and natural environments, including the courtyards of Vodou temples, agricultural fields, crossroads, sacred groves, ancestral burial lands (*demanbwe*), and as landmarks for important sites of pilgrimage (Tarter 2015: 95–96). Devotees often place offerings of food and drink at the base of *repozwa* trunks to libate the spirit realm (Tarter 2015: 96). While the spirits of Vodou may themselves choose particular trees and prefer certain tree species within which to roost, the elevation ceremony has developed to allow human *Vodouisants* the ability to raise and relocate spirits from one tree to another, a ritual technology with increasing importance in Haiti as late deforestation has contributed to the loss of many old growth trees (Tarter 2015: 97, 105–106). We can see the outlines of *pye repozwa* traditions in Hurston’s plan that her cemetery would feature “Ceremonies of tree-setting, of course” as well-known Black Americans “contribute[d] a tree or two” (1945: 1). Over time, these ceremonial trees would form landmarks for pilgrimage, as Hurston anticipated “the place would attract visitors from all over the world” (1945: 1). In this expansive Vodou-Hoodoo ecology, Hurston’s cemetery was a true sanctuary of trees, an arboreal mausoleum for the ancestors and other spirits of the land threatened with endangerment by the relentless encroach of Florida’s industries and the imposition of dominionist Christian theology that figure humans as the pinnacle of God’s creation (Marshall 2012).

Perhaps Hurston’s most ambitious plan involved her call for exhumation: “As far as possible, remove the bones of our dead celebrities to this spot” (1945: 1). She was adamant that visitors to the cemetery “ought . . . to see the tomb of Nat Turner. . . . Fred Douglass and all the rest” (1945: 2). It made no difference to Hurston if Nat Turner’s “bones [had] long since gone to dust,” as this natural decomposition “should not prevent his tomb being among us” (1945: 2). In Hurston’s cemetery, the dead would play an energetic role in sustaining Black life (Cartwright 2013: 174), as she knew well “the power of the dead to help or harm is common tenet” among the Black diaspora (Hurston 1931: 319). The chief means by which a conjurer worked with the dead was through “graveyard dust . . . goofer dust as it is oft en called” (1931: 397). Dust, in this Hoodoo intermingling of bones and soil substrate, demonstrates how a paradoxical embrace of death and decay can generate power. “Sprinkle graveyard dirt” was a potent ritual command deployed as apotropaic magic to ward against the violence and terrorism of white supremacy (1931: 325). To guarantee success in judicial proceedings, a Hoodoo doctor could shake goofer dust inside the suit their client would wear to court (1931: 388). When mixed with cayenne pepper, goofer dust could hide your tracks “if the white folks set bloodhounds on your trail” (1931: 396). While some conjurers preferred dirt collected from “the grave of a friend,” “dirt from sinners’ graves [was also] supposed to be very powerful,” as was dirt taken “from the graves of infants” (1931: 326, 397). That Hurston noted the likely fact that Nat Turner’s bones had “gone to dust” only
amplified Hurston’s rootworking hope that Turner’s grave would form a potent “rallying spot . . . for all that we want to accomplish and do” (1945: 2). We must wonder what exactly could Black folks “accomplish and do” if we could visit Nat Turner’s physical gravesite and solemnify it as the altar of our community intentions?3

Hurston felt “strongly” that her plan “should be done” (1945: 2). Her urgency to build a garden of memory resulted from her conviction “that the lack of such a tangible thing allows our people to forget, and their spirits evaporate” (1945: 2). Her description of the cemetery as a “tangible” location of memory is significant, as it indicates her materialist understanding of Spirit (Long 1991: 15). In this environmental syllogism of memory, if forgetting the ancestors is akin to evaporation of spirit, then remembering the ancestors is a form of spiritual condensation, human conditions made concrete through the dynamic properties of water. The physical analog processes of evaporation and condensation form two sequences of the water cycle, which describes both the continuous movement of water through the earth and the atmosphere, as well as the various transitions of water between liquid, solid, and gaseous states (NOAA 2019). When the sun sufficiently warms liquid water on the surface of the earth, the water evaporates into water vapor, measured as the percentage of humidity in the air. As water vapor rises into the atmosphere, it cools in temperature until it condenses into clouds that become so saturated with water that it eventually falls back to the earth as precipitation. Water vapor may also condense on surface contact when air temperature drops to the dew point of saturation, which often occurs on cool nights, causing drops of dew to appear on blades of grass in the morning. Plants, too, participate in the hydrologic cycle by taking up ground water through their root systems before eventually transpiring it into the atmosphere as water vapor—and the sequence recycles ad infinitum. In Hurston’s spiritual hydrology, a densely vegetated cemetery in the Lakes Region of Florida—a state notorious for its humidity—would conjure an energetic, however muggy, field of ancestral condensation.

Any ethical contemporary discussion of Florida humidity, however speculative, must consider the very real “potential for widespread exposure” to dangerous combinations of heat and humidity vulnerable populations will face over the course of the twenty-first century that will “approach and in some cases exceed postulated theoretical limits of human tolerance” (Coffel et al. 2018). For low-lying coastal sandbars like Florida, higher heat and humidity will also lead to a greater frequency of extreme precipitation events bringing flash floods and increased probability for landfalling higher-intensity tropical cyclones (Day et al. 2021: 5–6; Malmstadt et al. 2009: 114). But here we must remember that Hurston was also “the Rain-bringer,” a sacred christening she received following her New Orleans Hoodoo-Vodou initiation in which her initiating priest “painted the lightning symbol down my back from my right shoulder to my left hip. This was to be my sign forever. The Great One was to speak to me in storms” (1990: 200). Thus, despite these predictions of turbulent weather ahead, or perhaps, precisely because of them, Hurston’s sacred understanding of rain “gift[s] us with openings to a Gulf [Coast] sublime” (Cartwright 2013: 160) that reveals the tragic reality of those oppressed folks who are “periodically swamped (and rendered visible)—” however paradoxically—“by the powers of Atlantic storm” (2013: 162).

Following Cartwright’s reading of Hurston as the Rain-bringer (2013: 160), we can further interpret Hurston’s rhetorical usage of condensation alongside the political hydrology of Frederick Douglass (her other desired ancestral exhumation), who argued in his 1852 “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” speech that “at a time like this”— in the face of unyielding white supremacy—“it is not the gentle shower [that is needed], but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, the earthquake” (1999: 196). Again, Douglass called on the power of water as a radical poetic figure in his 1857 West India Emancipation address:
If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.

(1999: 367)

The “awful roar” of the ocean sounded out an apocalyptic hope for Minnie Fulkès, a formerly enslaved woman from the Virginia Tidewater interviewed by the Works Progress Administration in 1937, who lamented “Lord, Lord, I hate white people and de flood waters gwine drown some mo” (quoted in Roane and Hosbey 2019). J. T. Roane and Justin Hosbey analyze Minnie Fulkès’ antiracist longing for climatic destruction as showcasing “the imaginative engagement with heterodox forms” Black ecological thought takes. While mainstream discourses of climate change foreground prevention of crisis (Hillman et al. 2008), we are left to speculate with Hurston, Douglass, and Fulkès about what transformations may result from meteorological confrontations with reality that contain the potential to rouse the “atrophy of the [white] imagination” and “afford” “America . . . the religious possibility for the experience of the mysterium tremendum [tremendous mystery] . . . of the holy.” (Long 1986: 149, 151).

Finding Zora: Conclusion

Hurston extended this dynamic materialist ecology to her own sense of self, writing in her autobiography: “the stuff of my being is matter, ever changing, ever moving, but never lost” (1991a: 202–203). “Untethered from the anthropocentric idea of species exceptionalism” (Brown 2021: 111), Hurston held no romantic illusions about embalming her body in human form, but she found peace of mind in the prospect that her flesh and bones would eventually “disintegrate into infinity to perhaps become a part of the whirling rubble of space” (Hurston 1991a: 202). There is, nonetheless, a tragically painful irony to read Hurston’s plaintive wish for her cemetery when we consider that, within sixteen years of its writing, Hurston died in poverty and was herself buried in an unmarked grave: “let no Negro celebrity, no matter what financial condition they might be in at death, lie in inconspicuous forgetfulness. We must assume the responsibility of their graves being known and honored” (1945: 1–2). But Du Bois took no interest in Hurston’s plan, stating his objection plainly: “I regret to say I have not the enthusiasm for Florida that you have, naturally. I do know of its magnificent weather and vegetation, but in other matters more spiritual it is not so rich” (1945: 1; emphasis added). Du Bois imagined Florida through a modernist gaze that “bracketed” spiritual transcendence away from the immanent world of nature (Latour 1993: 34). In his refusal to assist Hurston, Du Bois seemed unaware that Florida’s spiritual value—like that of the entire Earth—was found precisely in its delicate ecological web of interdependent intimacies that relate humans with the full communion of climate, the land, plants, animals, fungi, spirits, and the ancestors. Hurston had a vision, but Du Bois could not see it; perhaps such immanent realities of the Hoodoo landscape are veiled to the uninitiated eye that lacks second sight.4

In “Looking for Zora,” Alice Walker narrated her discovery of Hurston’s unmarked grave in what she took for “an abandoned field” with “Nothing but bushes and weeds, some as tall as my waist” (1983: 104). But Walker’s rich ecological description gestures towards an alternative perspective from which we may read her narrative, one that moves the agency of the scene away from only human actors, and diffuses this agency across a robustly populated garden society capable of offering Hurston’s soul repose. Though Walker was nervous that “a snake could be lying six inches from my big toe and I wouldn’t see it,” she nonetheless “plunge[d] into the weeds” to find Zora’s resting place (1983: 104). As she traipsed across the graveyard, she heard
“things cracking and hissing in the grass,” and her feet became covered with “sand and ants” (1983: 104). But when Walker centered herself by “stand[ing] still a few seconds, looking at the weeds,” she noticed that “some of them [were] quite pretty, with tiny yellow flowers” (1983: 104). Growing “hopeless” in her search, Walker realized there was “only one thing to do:"

‘Zora!’ I yell, as loud as I can . . . ’Are you out here?’ . . . ‘Zora! . . . I’m here. Are you?’ . . . ‘Zora!’ . . . ‘I hope you don’t think I’m going to stand out here all day, with these snakes watching me and these ants having a field day. In fact, I’m going to call you just one or two more times.’ On a clump of dried grass, near a small bushy tree, my eye falls on one of the largest bugs I have ever seen. It is on its back, and is as large as three of my fingers. I walk toward it and yell ‘Zo-ra!’ and my foot sinks into a hole. I look down. I am standing in a sunken rectangle that is about six feet long and about three or four feet wide. (1983: 105)

Is it not possible that this ensemble of flying bugs, hissing snakes, and pretty yellow flowers were the ancestors keeping company with Hurston in the graveyard, guiding and goading Walker’s ramble through the weeds towards destiny? May we always remember, the path that leads to our mothers’ gardens meanders through a cemetery.

So when I look for you,
I find you among the trees.
I count the rings of your life
And watch you flower
And wane
And flower again. (Gabbin 2009: 332)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Derrais Carter for his archival generosity in pointing this letter my way. Written in memoriam of my brother, John Preston Padilioni Ibaye (1988–2017), from the sacred foothills of El Yunque National Forest, Puerto Rico.

JAMES PADILIONI, JR. is visiting assistant professor of religion and environmental studies at Swarthmore College. His research and teaching foreground African Diasporic ritual and performative cultures, ontologies of Blackness, Diasporic ancestral veneration traditions, and deep ecology studies. His forthcoming book, To Ask Infinity Some Questions: San Martín de Porres and the Black Hagiographic Mysteries of Florida (Fordham Univ. Press), centers the figure of San Martín de Porres (1579–1639), the first Catholic saint of African descent born in the Americas, and explores the ways Florida’s Black Diasporic communities invoke San Martín’s sensuous presence in their everyday endeavors to ask infinity some questions about the mysterious and sublime nature of Black being.

Email: jpadili1@swarthmore.edu

NOTES

1. Père Lachaise Cemetery, opened in 1804 in Paris, is the world’s first garden cemetery (see Etlin 1984). Dutch-American writer and philanthropist Edward W. Bok purchased over 250 acres of land near

2. Justin Dunnavant reports a remarkable genealogy of arboreal antiblackness from eighteenth-century St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, in which the Privy Council “ordered all trees large enough to fashion a dugout canoe, be cut down” in order to prevent fugitive Africans from absconding by canoe on the sea (Dunnavant 2021: 892).

3. Nat Turner was an enslaved Baptist preacher from Southampton, Virginia, who famously led an insurrection against slavery from 21 to 23 August 1831. Turner evaded authorities for six weeks before he was eventually captured on 30 October and executed by the state of Virginia on 11 November (for a full overview, see Breen 2016). The posthumous story of Nat Turner’s body is quite ghastly. John W. Cromwell reports that following Turner’s autopsy, his skin was turned into a purse, his flesh made into grease, “and his bones divided as trophies to be handed down as heirlooms” (1920: 218). Numerous unconfirmed accounts as to the whereabouts of Nat Turner’s skull surfaced over the years until finally it was returned to Turner’s living descendants in 2016 (see Fornal 2016; Greenberg 2003: 19–22).

4. Ironically, Du Bois’ sociological description of African-Americans as formulation of Black people as “a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight” signified on Black conjure lore in which the seventh child born in a family or those born with a caul over their face were held to possess the faculty of double vision, the ability to see beyond the realm of matter (Du Bois 2003: 5; for conjure lore on double vision, see Gundaker 1998bd: 22–26).

**REFERENCES**


