

# Yam, Roots, and Rot: Allegories of the Provision Grounds

**Elizabeth DeLoughrey**

The history of life is inextricably related to the history of soil.

—David Montgomery

The surest way to take possession of a place and secure it as one's own is to bury one's dead in it.

—Robert Pogue Harrison

Over three decades ago, Sylvia Wynter argued that models of Caribbean history and literature could be understood in the socioeconomic divisions between the master's plantation, on the one hand, and the slaves' provision grounds, on the other.<sup>1</sup> Although Wynter's insights on these spaces of history have been largely overlooked, they are relevant to how scholars excavate Caribbean history and the ground on which cultural archeology is conducted. Generally speaking, the plantation is understood to represent Euclidean grids of monoculture, defined as a European social hierarchy and as the commodity cultivation of nonsustainable crops such as sugar and tobacco for external markets. The provision grounds, with their diverse intercropping of indigenous and African cultivars, are understood as the often unseen—but no less integral—voluntary cultivation of subsistence foods such as yams, cassava, and sweet potatoes that represent edible staples and the economically viable roots of the internal markets. While plantation monoculture drove the logic of the external markets and became

1 Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," *Savacou*, no. 5 (June 1971): 95–102.

the primary lens through which Caribbean historiography was initially written, the diversity of crops grown in the provision grounds was integral to the diets of all social strata of Caribbean slave states and provides a broader ground for cultural archeology. In this essay, I explore Edouard Glissant's argument that the violence of plantation modernity alienated humans from nature, and how this might be complicated by turning to the production of the provision grounds, particularly the concept of *roots* as it is imagined through one African transplant—the yam—and its acclimatization to Caribbean soil. While the primary focus here is on Jamaica, this excavation of the provision grounds has implications for the cultural production of the region as a whole.

The historical and metaphysical connection between humans and the soil seems to be of vital significance to the recuperative power associated with the provision grounds, a relationship I trace by turning to Erna Brodber's allegorical novel *The Rainmaker's Mistake* (2007). As David Montgomery points out, the Latin *homo* derives from the Latin term for living soil, *humus*; this etymological and ontological relationship between human presence in a particular place, our roots in the soil, is of pressing concern in the Caribbean.<sup>2</sup> Glissant has argued that the history of diaspora and enslavement has created a rupture in the Caribbean relationship to landscape, creating a division between nature and culture in the cultural imagination.<sup>3</sup> In recuperating this relationship, he explains, "describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history. Landscape is a character in this process. Its deepest meanings need to be understood."<sup>4</sup> Since the etymological roots of *diaspora* derive from spore and seed, this provides an apt metaphor for the forced transplantation of peoples and plants and the ways in which countless crops, from sugar cane, breadfruit, coffee, nutmeg, mango, and other staples of the region, have adapted and naturalized. To recuperate this inquiry into the relationship between human and natural history is, in Glissant's terms, to produce a "language of landscape."<sup>5</sup> Thus plants and trees, organic figures for civilization and human transplantation, are vital to naturalizing culture and the nation through the grammar of *roots* and genealogical *branches*. This excavation of the provision grounds reflects the historical plot of cultural sustainability amid the terrors of plantation capitalism, vital ground for the post-emancipation period.

Wynter summarizes the process by which the European colonization of the neotropics alienated humans from nature, reducing humans to labor "and nature to land." This provided little space for alternatives except through the provision grounds, which, originally intended by the planters to reduce the plantation's operative costs, created a plot system that "like the novel form in literature" became "the focus of resistance to the market system and market

2 David Montgomery, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* (Berkeley: University of California, 2007), 27.

3 See also Wynter, "Novel and History," 99.

4 Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 105–6. See also Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley, introduction to DeLoughrey, Gosson, and Handley, eds., *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2005).

5 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 146.

values.” Key to the development of this plot system was the noncapitalist sensibility of Africans who associated the land with the earth (rather than with property), who understood cultivation in terms of food production, had nonlinear models of time, and perceived death and burial as a “mystical reunion with the earth.”<sup>6</sup> Wynter refers to the plot as “the roots of culture” and mentions only one food product of this alternative space. “Around the growing of yam, of food for survival,” she writes, the provision ground laborer “created on the plot a folk culture—the basis of a social order.”<sup>7</sup>

That Wynter locates the yam as the foundation—or more literally, the root—of a new social order is not surprising, given this tuber’s association with transplantation to the Caribbean across the middle passage by Africans.<sup>8</sup> As Barry Higman points out, during the height of the colonial plant trade no major efforts were made to transplant the roots and tubers that, while not especially pleasing to the eye, were key to sustaining the majority population of the globe.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, when we turn our attention from descriptions of the colonial botanical gardens to eighteenth-century accounts of the provision grounds, almost all mention the yam as a vital root vegetable.<sup>10</sup> So important was this staple to the provision grounds that they were often called *yam grounds*.<sup>11</sup> The yam was a preferred food of Africans and their descendents, a bread-kind more accessible and sustainable than the European cereal breads, the ingredients of which were imported at great cost from the temperate zones. Higman explains that the Jamaican term *food* refers to starchy roots and tubers, and the term *food-kind* now supplants *bread-kind* as the synonym for yam and other starches such as plantain and taro (eddoes).<sup>12</sup>

Yams were vital to the provision grounds because they fit well in the ecological niche of the food forest, they were less demanding on the soil than cereal crops, their long growth and low maintenance were beneficial to the slaves who had to travel miles to work there, and they were vital to rooting Jamaican peasantry in the land, connecting each generation through cultivation, labor, and foodways.<sup>13</sup> As such, the yam has been an important trope in Caribbean literature, integral to human sustenance and an important figure of roots culture, in which history might be reckoned through a genealogy of cultivation traced to African ancestors. The

6 Wynter, “Novel and History,” 99.

7 Ibid., 100, 99. See also Barry Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed: Plantation Maps and Plans of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2001), on conceptual systems and space. For a more recent discussion, see Anthony Bogues, “Writing Caribbean Intellectual History,” *Small Axe*, no. 26 (June 2008): 168–78.

8 William Ed Grimé, *Ethno-botany of the Black Americans* (Algonac, MI: Reference, 1979), 23.

9 Barry Higman, *Jamaican Food: History, Biology, Culture* (Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2008), 58. A correction to Higman’s otherwise meticulous account: Joseph Banks did request transplantation of both the Tahitian plantain and yam because he felt they were superior to the West Indian varieties. See the 25 June 1791 letter to James Wiles, in Neil Chambers, ed., *The Letters of Sir Joseph Banks: A Selection, 1768–1820* (London: Imperial College Press, 2000), 135. See also Alan Frost, *Sir Joseph Banks and the Transfer of Plants to and from the South Pacific, 1786–1798* (Melbourne: Colony, 1993), 53. Alexander Anderson of the St. Vincent Botanical Garden commented that everyone demanded the breadfruit but the creoles preferred plantains and yam (60).

10 See Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbadoes, Nieves, St. Christophers, and Jamaica*, 2 vols. (London: For the author, 1707–25). See also Judith A. Carney and Richard N. Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa’s Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

11 Carney and Rosomoff, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, 113.

12 Higman, *Jamaican Food*, 55.

13 Ibid., 60.

yam's location in the provision grounds outside of the plantation complex (often out of view), as well as its subsistence underground (where it collects nutrients for the community), underlines its significance as an invisible resource, one that must be physically and imaginatively sought, cultivated, and excavated in terms of both time and space. Temporally, the yam is directly linked to the history of African transplantation, while spatially the root reflects a shift from plantation to provision grounds and ultimately to West Africa. Yet the symbolism of the yam is deeper as a trope of transplanted culture, history, and even language itself.

Kamau Brathwaite has theorized the relationship between transplantation and subterranean history, particularly in the semantic play between the words *yam*, *nam*, and *nyame*. The Jamaican term *nyam* derives from a number of West African languages for the word for "to eat," or *nyami*.<sup>14</sup> In poems such as "Nam(e)tracks," Brathwaite excavates "underground resources," what he terms the *nam* of his Barbadian motherland. He explains *nam* as a "secret-name, soul-source, connected with *nyam* (eat), *yam* (root food), *nyame* (name of god)."<sup>15</sup> The act of planting naturalizes the relationship between people and place. Thus the diasporic subject and his or her descendent "would plant his *yam* and with it *nyame:onyame:yam of god*. A little piece of Africa on mourning ground."<sup>16</sup> "*Nam* is the heart of our nation-language which," says Brathwaite, like the cultural distinction between the provision grounds and the plantation, "comes into conflict with the cultural imperial authority of Prospero."<sup>17</sup> Thus *yam/nam* is a signifier of subterranean cultural roots and the vehicle of articulation and reassemblage itself.<sup>18</sup>

Since Western capitalism turned earth into property and segregated humans from nature and thus nature from history, the use of organic metaphors of roots culture naturalizes a population in place. In the Caribbean the yam has signified the primary roots culture of West Africa, even though the tuber has both American and African origins. Glissant has warned against privileging a "totalitarian drive of a single, unique root—rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other."<sup>19</sup> Interestingly enough, the yam is not, botanically speaking, a root but rather a rhizome, suggesting a more lateral series of relationships.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *root* as an origin, the founder of a familial lineage, a source of sustenance, and a foundation. It also signifies the penis, highlighting how the seminal roots of diaspora often uphold a patriarchal model of colonial transplantation as well as patronymic claims on its descendents. Recent Caribbean scholarship has troubled many

14 Ibid., 73.

15 Kamau Brathwaite, *Mother Poem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121.

16 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "Afternoon of the Status Crow," lecture at the University of Bremen, June 1980; Savacou Working Paper no. 1, 1982, 14b.

17 Brathwaite, *Mother Poem*, 121.

18 In bell hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery* (Boston: South End, 1994), hooks defines *root* as "a life-sustaining symbol of black kinship and community . . . and diasporic connections" (13). Paule Marshall comments on African transplants such as the terms *yam* and *nyam* (to eat); see "Poets in the Kitchen," in *Reena and Other Stories* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1983), 21. On the yam as a prestige food in West Africa, see William Bascom, "Yoruba Food," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 21, no. 1 (1951): 41–53.

19 Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 14.

of the patriarchal and ethnically absolutist claims of roots culture in an effort to explore more rhizomatic, creole identities. This creates a productive tension between the semantics of *roots* and *rhizome*, a tension that fuels Brodber's novel as well as current thinking about how to position African roots as foundational in an era that speaks of the decentralizing, rhizomatic qualities of creolization. The yam thus provides a figurative model that is tied directly to Africa yet exceeds a singular root culture and emphasizes regeneration in the wake of violence.<sup>20</sup> For instance, Nalo Hopkinson writes,

One threat of Caribbean history is of peoples who were forced to chop away their native languages, customs, and beliefs in an attempt to make them into ciphers without memory. But language, custom and belief are growing things. Chop them up and, like yams, they just sprout whole new plants. To re-member is to reassemble the limbs of a story, to make it whole again. A sense of history gives these next few stories limbs—branches with which to grasp at and weave centuries' worth of dis-membered deeds.<sup>21</sup>

Here the yam is a vital organic metaphor in articulating the violence of transplantation and to foregrounding the imbrication of African roots, yam, and the soil. Encoding the violence of cultural fragmentation as well as potential for regrowth, the yam is a natural metaphor for African regeneration in a new soil, the root (of Africa) in a creolized, rhizomatic Caribbean.<sup>22</sup>

## Historical Roots: Plots and Provision Grounds

Historian John Parry has argued that the region's history should be "the story of yams, cassava and salt fish, no less than of sugar and tobacco," suggesting that models of Caribbean historiography have prioritized metropolitan frames rather than local production.<sup>23</sup> Wynter suggests we turn to those sites that served as vital repositories of indigenous and African beliefs and rebellion against plantation capitalism. There, Africans were able to maintain agricultural traditions with crops they imported across the Middle Passage, such as yams, ackee, gourds, and other staples. The provision grounds and internal markets contributed a vibrant, alternative economy to the monoculture of the plantocracy. Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan estimate that by the late eighteenth century, over ten thousand Jamaican slaves attended the Kingston market on a weekly basis. The success of the internal markets caused planters to complain that a fifth to a half of the currency in Jamaica and the Windward Islands was in slave hands.<sup>24</sup> In addition to being a stepping-stone toward liberation, the slave gardens were also a powerful site of creolization. Slaves grew "a staggering array of crops," blending European, African,

20 Higman, *Jamaican Food*, 58.

21 Nalo Hopkinson, *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction* (Montpelier, VT: Invisible Cities, 2001), 1.

22 See Valérie Loichot's discussion of these legacies in francophone literature in "Between Breadfruit and Masala: Food Politics in Glissant's Martinique," *Callaloo* 30, no. 1 (2007): 124–37.

23 John Parry, "Plantation and Provision Ground: An Historical Sketch of the Introduction of Food Crops into Jamaica," *Revista de historia de América* 39 (1955): 1.

24 Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., introduction to *The Slaves' Economy: Independent Production by Slaves in the Americas* (London: Frank Cass, 1991), 12, 14.

and New World cultigens that included cashews, bananas, calabashes, calalu, okra, oranges, and other fruits and spices.<sup>25</sup> Provision grounds were distinct from the small gardens slaves and peasants grew in their “home ground” or yards; they reflected the less accessible and often mountainous land bequeathed from plantation owners because it was deemed unfit for sugar cane.<sup>26</sup> In these distant plots, slaves and their peasant successors cultivated root and tree crops as well as grains and legumes for communal use and market distribution. In these spaces, Kamau Brathwaite explains, on that “sacred plot of land where slaves wd plot,” they found “groundation.”<sup>27</sup>

Caribbean planters were largely dependent on the African and indigenous crops of the provision grounds, which were a vital component of the islands’ internal economies and were integral to the region’s transition to emancipation and independence.<sup>28</sup> In islands where slaves grew the majority of their own sustenance, such as Jamaica and St. Vincent, the planters were placed in a contradictory bind. By setting aside time and space for the slaves to cultivate root staples such as plantains, yams, taro, and corn, the planters saved money on food imports and discouraged runaways by providing an opportunity to cultivate a link to the soil and community. Yet they also inadvertently supported a vibrant internal market economy in which slaves provided the majority of the region’s sustenance and gained significant amounts of currency, autonomy, and even freedom.<sup>29</sup>

Recovering the “sacred plot of land where slaves wd plot,” as Brathwaite terms it, foregrounds how space (a plot of land) produces narrative (emplotment).<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Wynter has argued that the dichotomy between the plantation and provision grounds remains “the distinguishing characteristic” of Caribbean narrative. Building on the work of Eric Williams and Lucien Goldmann, Wynter demonstrates how the people transplanted to the Americas and the novel itself were simultaneously the creators and products of capitalism. Thus the novel (as form) and plantation societies are “twin children of the same parents”; the novel, like slave society, is both critique and product of the market economy.<sup>31</sup>

In terms of the narratives produced by each space, the plantation elites inscribe what Wynter calls the “myth of history,” representing external metropolitan forces.<sup>32</sup> This “quarrel with history,” to borrow from Edward Baugh, was a vital debate in anglophone literary

25 Ibid., 9. See also Parry, “Plantation and Provision Ground”; Dale Tomich, “Une Petite Guinée: Provision Ground and Plantation in Martinique, 1830–1848,” in Berlin and Morgan, *The Slaves’ Economy*, 68–69; and Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Toronto: Scholarly Book Services, 2002).

26 Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed*, 263.

27 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, “Caribbean Culture: Two Paradigms,” in Jürgen Martini, ed., *Missile and Capsule* (Bremen, Germany: Universität Bremen, 1983), 25, 52.

28 Hilary Beckles, “Provision Ground and Plantation Labour in Four Windward Islands,” in Berlin and Morgan, *The Slaves’ Economy*, 33.

29 See Sidney Mintz, “Caribbean Marketplaces and Caribbean History,” *Radical History Review* 27 (1983): 110–20. Other sources include Sidney Mintz and Douglas Hall, “The Origins of the Jamaican Internal Marketing System,” *Yale University Publications in Anthropology* 57 (1960): 3–26; and Verene Shepherd and Hilary Beckles, eds., *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2000).

30 On emplotment, see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

31 Wynter, “Novel and History,” 99, 95, 97.

32 Ibid., 101.

production at this time.<sup>33</sup> Wilson Harris and Brathwaite have shared Wynter's critique, warning that "the plantation model . . . is in itself a product of the plantation and runs the hazard of becoming as much tool as tomb of the system that it seeks to understand and transform."<sup>34</sup> The provision grounds, Wynter explains, provided the space for folk knowledge, orality, resistance to commodification, and African and indigenous continuities. The Caribbean response to the relationship between plantation and provision ground, which are also "twin children of the same parents," is characterized by "ambivalence"; moreover, this ambivalence is the "root cause of our alienation and possibly our salvation."<sup>35</sup>

This ambivalence about the form of the *plot* is a vital (but overlooked) thread of Wynter's article and has important resonance with Harris's long-term critique of both the realist narrative and materialist historicism. In *History, Fable, and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas*, Harris argues that materialist models are limited because they are unable to draw on "unpredictable intuitive resources" that might liberate subjects and spaces from relations of property.<sup>36</sup> Thus, West Indian historians have relied too heavily on the plantocracy's model of history, reducing land and slave labor to economic relations.<sup>37</sup> Harris poses a remarkable challenge to Caribbean historiography because he implicitly critiques the progressive narrative of liberation from slavery that has informed so many regional novels. He argues that as a narrative mode, "progressive realism erases the past. It consumes the present and it may well abort the future with its linear bias."<sup>38</sup>

Harris, like other Caribbean writers, excavates the local for a model of literary form that he feels more accurately reflects the complexity of Caribbean roots. He determines the "the soil of history" is a literary resource, rendering the earth as "the living fossil of buried cultures."<sup>39</sup> The landscape and the nonhuman world are constitutive of language and therefore literary form:

When the human animal understands his genius, he roots it in the creature, in the forest, in the trees[,] . . . in the language which we *are* and which we acquired, not only from our mother's lips but also from . . . the music of the earth as we pressed on it. . . . All those sounds are threaded into the language of the imagination.<sup>40</sup>

33 Wynter's essay was published in the 1971 issue of *Savacou*, followed by Kenneth Ramchand's "History and the Novel: A Literary Critic's Approach," expanding on the role of Morant Bay and revolution in general. Derek Walcott's "Muse of History" was first published in 1974 (in Orde Coombs, ed., *Is Massa Day Dead? Black Moods in the Caribbean* [New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1974], 1–27), and Edward Baugh's "The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History" was published shortly after (*Tapia*, 20 February 1977, 6–7; 27 February 1977, 6–7, 11).

34 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "Caribbean Man in Space and Time" *Savacou*, nos. 11–12 (September 1975): 4.

35 Wynter, "Novel and History," 99.

36 Wilson Harris, *History, Fable, and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas* (Georgetown: National History and Arts Council, 1970), 17.

37 Higman has traced a "golden age" constructed by Caribbean historians using these same criteria. See Barry Higman, *Writing West Indian Histories* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 155–61.

38 Wilson Harris, "The Fabric of the Imagination," in *The Radical Imagination: Lectures and Talks*, ed. Alan Riach and Mark Williams (Liège, Belgium: L3- Liège Language and Literature, 1992), 72.

39 Wilson Harris, *Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles, 1966–1981*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup, Denmark: Dangaroo, 1981), 90.

40 Harris, "The Fabric of the Imagination," 78.



The simultaneous process of language and knowledge production is expressed in a phenomenological rooting of the self in an active landscape, a dialogue with nature (and therefore space-time). Anticipating Glissant's critique of the "totalitarian drive of a single, unique root," Harris laments the "lack of imagination daring to probe the nature of roots of community beyond fixed or static boundaries" and observes how the "homogenous imperative" prevents the "imaginative daring" needed to see the "contrasting spaces" that make up the "heterogeneous roots of a community."<sup>41</sup> He poses a critique of a singular model of roots culture that does not incorporate creolization and complexity, that eschews the "contrasting spaces" of the plantation and the provision grounds, and that shrinks from "ambivalence" in both topic and form.

Harris's preferred genre of articulating the "density of place" is the allegorical novel, a form that is not particularly popular in an anglophone region that is known for social realist novels. Well before the debate between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad over whether allegory was the appropriate form for postcolonial literature or if it were merely a colonial inheritance, Harris observed that "allegory is one of the ruling concepts which our civilization has imposed on many colonial peoples" but that one can approach this form "from the victimized side and renovate it . . . so that allegory is not a museum piece."<sup>42</sup> It is this complicated relationship between place, history, and form that I'd like to explore by turning to Erna Brodber, the Jamaican novelist, sociologist, and historian whose work has long been influenced by Wilson Harris's theories of form. The gendered challenges she poses to the realist plot of liberation history are far reaching, demonstrating a critical ambivalence about the relationship between the plantation and provision grounds, and the mutual imbrication of their roots.

## Roots of the Yam: The Plot and Allegory

Although it was nominated for a Commonwealth Literature Prize (2008), most reviews of *The Rainmaker's Mistake* express confusion about the book, determining that the novel is "impossible to follow and yet beautiful to read."<sup>43</sup> Published to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the Slave Trade Act of 1807, the novel has a gloss from Brodber on the back

41 Harris, *Explorations*, 57.

42 Harris, *The Radical Imagination*, 21. On the vexed question of allegory and history, see Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187–228; Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in an Age of Multinational Capitalism," in Clayton Koelb and Virgil Lokke, eds., *The Current in Criticism: Essays on the Present and Future of Literary Theory* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1987); Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text*, no. 17 (Autumn 1987): 3–25; Madhava Prasad, "On the Question of a Theory of (Third World) Literature," *Social Text*, nos. 31–32 (Spring 1992): 57–83; Stephen Slemon, "Post-colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23, no. 1 (1988): 157–68; and Imre Szeman, "Who's Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100, no. 3 (2001): 803–27.

43 Mary Hanna, "Masterful Historical Discourse," *Gleaner*, 3 June 2007, <http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20070603/arts/arts3.html> (accessed 5 August 2010). Carolyn Cooper observes, "[The novel] does not have a main character. It doesn't even have a main narrator. . . . Why have one narrator when she could have seven? Some chapters have two narrators. And why the narrators should have one identity and one name when they can have two? . . . In Erna's emancipated world view, everything is possible." Quoted in Mel Cooke, "Erna Brodber Presents Her Freedom Song," *Gleaner*, 18 May 2007, <http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20070518/ent/ent1.html> (accessed 5 August 2010).



cover, explaining her interest in the ways in which post-emancipation slaves interpreted their freedom. Basing the temporal movement of the novel on the granting of freedom through the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, Brodber explains, “We watch the formerly enslaved as they try to handle freedom, and as they arrive at understandings concerning the issues and processes relating to their diaspora, settlement, and stunted growth.”<sup>44</sup>

It is not easy to wrest a summary from this opaque novel because Brodber does not provide a plot by which we would easily recognize the post-emancipation Caribbean. Certainly Harris’s allegorical work has influenced Brodber, but she differs in that her characters are more historicized and not emblematic of forms of ethical value.<sup>45</sup> In keeping with allegorical form, *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* is not written in the realist language of individual subjectivity and thus generally avoids categorical terms such as black or white, rich and poor, slave and master. In fact, even while these social hierarchies inform the novel, the writing encourages us push beyond the materialist boundaries of the plantation context and historical realism. The novel also makes a break from the social realist novel and its telos of individuation—instead, *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* is narrated by seven different characters. As Carolyn Cooper notes, one person shifts into another’s perspective, and in some cases characters acquire different names as their knowledge of their pasts develop.<sup>46</sup> In terms of space and narrative time, the novel does not locate itself in any easily identifiable place or nation, and rather than charting a novel of progress (toward emancipation, nationalism, sovereignty), the novel emphasizes the self-conscious *desire for growth* and the processes that bring growth into being rather than the temporal product. For a historical novel about emancipation, *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* poses an ontological alternative to the teleological plot of liberation.

The text opens with the first-person narration of the child Queenie, who describes the founding myth of a man whom we later discover is her slave master: Mr. Charlie, a man “reddened and hardened by the sun,” who determines he wants more than his plot of corn, plantains, and cassava. Shifting from sustainable plots to plantation capitalism, he learns about the introduction of sugarcane and declares, “I need labour” (1). Observing the density of the vegetation around him he notices “the spathodia” (the African Tulip Tree) and the “phallus-like dependents of each flower.” At the vision of this vegetal phallus, a figure of African transplantation, “an idea popped into his head”:

Straightway he walked to the place where he did his “do’s”. Eyes glazed and into the future, he pulled his shirt out of his trousers, loosened the flap of his fly, knelt down and with his fingers roughened and hardened by tedious labour, he dug a hole in the ground and planted a wash of seed from his body. (1–2)

44 Erna Brodber, *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* (London: New Beacon, 2007), back cover. Hereafter cited in text.

45 On allegory and Harris’s influence on Brodber, see Heather Smyth, “Roots beyond Roots: Heteroglossia and Feminist Creolization in *Myal* and *Crossing the Mangrove*,” *Small Axe*, no. 12 (September 2002): 1–24.

46 Carolyn Cooper, quoted in Mel Cooke, “Erna Brodber Presents Her Freedom Song,” *Gleaner*, 18 May 2007, <http://www.jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20070518/ent/ent1.html> (accessed 5 August 2010).

Literalizing the definition of *root* as penis, and *diaspora* as the spreading of seed, this act is narrated as the originary creation story of the slaves. Queenie explains, “[This act] made us young and old, big and small, male and female, brothers and sisters, children of one father dug from an everlasting underground source.” Mr. Charlie tells this story to the children of the soil when they gather at his house at a yearly naming ceremony called “founder’s day.” They are instructed to repeat their origin narrative to their younger siblings, reiterating how everyone has been “cultivated by Mr Charlie, Our Father, Our Maker, our Preserver” (2).

This is a remarkable opening to a novel concerned with the myths of origin as they are rooted in the soil, depicting the literal planting of seed into a receptive, feminized, and passive earth. As readers, we are not immediately told about the form these seeds take in the soil. Queenie reiterates Mr. Charlie’s narrative: “That founder’s day is our day to celebrate his lifting us from beneath the earth and placing us on top of the earth to realize our creativity” (6). As progenitor, narrator of their origins, and midwife to their “unearthing,” Mr. Charlie takes on the role of father patriarch and divine creator. Yet the novel’s delay in narrating the form of these developed seeds reflects Queenie’s own alienation from a language in which to narrate her origins. Thus it is from another source that we discover that she, and her cohorts, are yams. This narrative of form comes from Woodville, the plantation overseer who describes to the children the different types of yams, the seven- and nine-month gestation periods, and the conformity of the “dark-brown” outside (7). Queenie remarks, “We don’t actually know yams for they are only grown in Mr Charlie’s backyard . . . and by the time we see them they are full-blown children” (7). In a complementary narrative of patriarchal origins—one presumably from Europe, the other from Africa—Queenie explains,

What Mr Charlie planted on that first day, Woodville tell us, developed under the ground into yams which Mr Charlie carefully releases from the bosom of the earth, removes to his nursery where they develop heads with eyes, ears, a mouth, and so on, until they are ready to be passed on to the big sisters for further growing. (8)

The slave community is provided with dual masculine parentage: the European father/creator provides the originary seed (a genealogy ritualized through founder’s day) and the African ancestor provides the plot and the form. In these origin stories of *husbanding* the land, the soil and earth become the stand-in for women’s reproductive roles, erasing the agency of women altogether except as a passive maternal “bosom” or receptive “sister.”

Brodber poses a challenge to the normative plot of emancipation history, employing allegory to condense the spaces of the plantation (Mr. Charlie) and the provision grounds (the people of the yam), suggesting their mutual imbrication. As a genre, allegory has been noted for its episodic structure, its summoning of ancestors into a dialogue, and the way it frames meaning through ritual and initiation (evident in the seed planting and founder’s day). It is also notable for providing its own interpretive cues, directives from its characters that assist

in exegesis/allegoresis.<sup>47</sup> And while allegory seems two-dimensional to modern readers, it is the least transparent of narratives. As many critics have noted, allegory is “other speaking” (from the Greek *allos*, other), a form of double talk that “inverts” meaning.<sup>48</sup> As such, Brodber engages otherness at the level of form. Maureen Quilligan explains that *allegory* derives from *agorevo*, speaking in the marketplace, a suggestive etymology when considering the form’s double talk in relation to creole language and the Caribbean history of economic exchange.<sup>49</sup> Most significantly to this novel’s depiction of the ambivalence between plantation and provision ground, allegory encodes a “rift at its center” that cannot unify sign to signified, word to meaning, or present to past.<sup>50</sup>

This question about allegory’s relationship to the past and its rupture with history has been vital to theorists of the form. Stephen Slemon has argued that “awareness of the passage of time is at the heart of allegory,” because the genre is in a dialogue with narratives of history and tradition.<sup>51</sup> Deborah Madsen observes that “allegory has become a response to the sense of perpetual crisis instilled by modernity; the awareness of an unbridgeable chasm separating an incomprehensible past from an always confusing present moment.” Brodber’s use of allegory to commemorate the 2007 bicentennial year highlights the way that this form “flourishes at times of intense cultural disruption,” a rupture signified by Queenie’s attempt to excavate the roots of transplantation associated with the natural symbolism of the yam.<sup>52</sup> It is by denaturalizing and gendering the narrative of roots, what Annie Paul calls the transition from “yamhood to personhood,” that exposes this historical rift.<sup>53</sup>

In a community that renders time in terms of “the number of yam seasons” (10), that sees the slave plantation as “the garden of Eden [where] every material need [is] met” (16), there are two moments of rupture that complicate “the yam story” and by extension, their roots. Although she does not want to hear Woodville’s taxonomy of yams, Queenie observes that her colleague Sallywater “was yellow and we were all dark brown” and that her hair “looked like nothing seen on any other yam.” Woodville does not offer any information “about that variety” but starts to act strangely (9). Immediately afterward, the community is summoned to Mr. Charlie’s veranda where he informs them it is 1834 and those under six years are free; suddenly historical time collapses and it is 1838 and everyone “is free.” The former slaves smile and wait, wondering about Mr. Charlie’s strange behavior over “this thing called ‘free’”

47 See Maureen Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory: Defining the Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 28, 31; James J. Paxson, *The Poetics of Personification* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 11; and Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 3.

48 See Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory*, 26–27; Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964), 2.

49 Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory*, 26.

50 See Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 12.

51 Stephen Slemon, “Post-colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 22, no. 1 (1988): 158.

52 Deborah L. Madsen, *Rereading Allegory: A Narrative Approach to Genre* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1994), 109, 136.

53 See Annie Paul, “Black Rain: Annie Paul on *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*, by Erna Brodber,” *Caribbean Review of Books* 15 (February 2008), para. 14, <http://caribbeanreviewofbooks.com/crb-archive/15-february-2008/black-rain/> (accessed 5 August 2010).

(11). While Queenie narrates the community's love of Mr. Charlie, Woodville's cynical laughter induces a tornado that "laughed the great house off its base" leaving "nothing now but a dung heap that looked as if it had been there since the beginning of time" (13). The rest of the narrative recounts the community's banishment from their "Eden," their attempts to establish a sustainable island community, their lack of sexual knowledge, their inability to reproduce, their quest to learn their roots, and their attempts to understand the nature of mortality.

Brodber's novel challenges the plot of the historical realist novel, depicting the slaves as "retarded" in growth but "happy people" who have no concept of freedom. She expands the measurement of human time so that the community lives for another two hundred years, and depicts Mr. Charlie not as a tyrant but as "a real father . . . who would walk by any time and sit with [them], listening as [their] elders, usually the brothers, told stories" (15). This is profoundly disconcerting for any reader expecting the normative (often masculine) models of resistance to the plot of the plantation, who might expect a slave rebellion to bring on emancipation rather than white patriarchal benevolence, and who might anticipate that any narrative of the children of the yam would uphold a (maternal) African root. Moreover, we would certainly expect that an enslaved community would have an immediate response to their freedom. Thus the mixed reception of the novel is not only because Queenie and her conarrators destabilize our assumptions about the individualist model of the novel, but rather the very plot of Caribbean history is destabilized by experiments in form—particularly through that most troubling of genres, allegory.

Brodber's use of allegory allows the plots of the plantation and provision grounds to merge into one another in ways that rehearse dominant models of Caribbean historicism. Initially slaves seem to work happily in the sugar fields and a white planter claims their ontological origin by planting his semen in Caribbean soil and harvesting his slave offspring like yams, a historical model that arises from the plantation, the "myth of history," as Wynter might call it. Only the removal of the plantation father, made possible by the juridical plot of the 1838 Emancipation Act, creates a new plot for post-emancipation subjects and a new formulation of narrative, which is about building sustainable grounds and a new "language of landscape," in the words of Glissant. In a complex layering of emplotment, Brodber's allegorical model rehearses the historiography of the post-emancipation era. It is an allegory of allegorical representation itself, insisting that we develop a historical consciousness along with her characters, who are likened to the questors of other allegories such as the "knights of the round table" (70).

After emancipation, Queenie and her colleagues establish their own island community, develop autonomy outside of the plantation, and import dirt from a place they call "the past," which is integral to the growth of the community and their sustaining crops of bananas, pineapples, coconuts, and plantains. In this liberated space of the provision grounds, nourished by the literal soil of their history, they seek their ancestral roots and the plot to narrate their origins. Eventually they recover their suppressed African history through Woodville, who is

washed up on their beach and is depicted as a rotting log whose knowledge of the past is vital to the community's future.

Before I turn to this broader narrative of the temporality of rot and decay, I must mention that while Woodville is nearly dead and hardly speaks, his "male organ [has] a life of its own" and at odd moments "milk came out of this independent organ" (35). While the people do not recognize this discharge because they are oblivious to the cycles of reproduction, its appearance "marked a momentous change" in their community and they finally begin to develop (42). They begin to consult with their elders about the strange nick marks on their necks, which they discover were surgically arranged by Mr. Charlie and Woodville to "fix people so that they would not want to pleasure each other with their bodies" (55). Thus, while Mr. Charlie's planting "a wash of seed from his body" is understood as vital to the reproductive fertility of the soil, Woodville's persistent ejaculation functions as a sign of desire as well as a clue to re-membering their history. Brodber's use of allegory encourages these puns of wood and re-membering, an alternative symbolism for roots and seed/semen. Woodville, who provides few verbal cues to their heritage, displays with his literal seed (and root) an alternative patriarchal narrative to the paternal origin story of Mr. Charlie's yams.

## Mother Earth: Roots and Rot

In this long list of etymological and semantic connections between diaspora, seeds and semen, planting and transplantation, members and dismembering, humus and human, I must unpack one last set of related terms—roots and rot—that are vital to understanding Brodber's complex theory of how to naturalize the relationship between a diasporic population and the land in ways that resonate with a Glissantian "language of landscape." While roots are a generative metaphor for cultural origins, decay is the material way in which we know history has passed and thus is key to the articulation of time and nature itself. The term *root* derives from *rot*, and in Brodber's novel the ability to excavate one's maternal origins or roots is dependent upon the decay of the patronymic plot, symbolized by the bodies of Woodville and Mr. Charlie.<sup>54</sup> Walter Benjamin locates decay as the telos in allegories of (Jewish) diaspora narratives, signaling the rotting of the gods (historicism) in an era of symbolic change.<sup>55</sup> This is "to impose schematic order on the historical process, on the rotting of the classical gods."<sup>56</sup> In Brodber's work this is symbolized by the rotting root, Woodville, whose slow decay over the course of the novel functions as a cipher the community and reader must interpret. As the community learns about sexual desire and human reproduction, they discover that Woodville is their progenitor, a "stud" used on the plantation. Brodber employs the word *root* in terms

54 *Root* derives from the Old English for "rot." Charles Morrow Wilson, *Roots: Miracles Below* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1967), 2.

55 See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1985).

56 Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 76.

of African heritage, as well as the symbol of the phallus, a visceral rather than verbal clue to their roots culture and the larger histories of diaspora, cultivation, and regeneration.

Although Woodville spends most of his time lying silently in bed, he is associated with tremendous power and is perhaps the most illustrated character of the novel. Members of the community describe him as “an old log” (30), a “rotting tree trunk” (69), a “bag of sawdust” (71), and “The Enigma” (86). He is an “old dried up banana tree, its fruit reaped, decapitated, its trunk disconnected from the earth, lying immobile, rotting,” and yet still “powerful” (42). All of the metaphors used to describe him are associated with trees and their death. This encodes a different temporality of the novel that is measured by human endeavor but not necessarily in human time. When the community realizes that even those who appear to be children among them are well over one hundred years old, they attempt to naturalize this fact by asserting that “only the earth and the large trees . . . are so old” (65). As such, Brodber utilizes a “language of landscape,” employing allegory to deconstruct linear and anthropocentric narratives of time.

Woodville’s presence as the living dead, an ejaculating corpse whose purpose is to teach them the natural cycles of regeneration and decay, suggests that he is vital to their quest to face this challenge “to be perpetually young or to grow” (57) and to embrace this “painful issue of growth” (105). Brodber’s allegory encourages readers to move beyond Woodville’s seed (roots) to excavate the history of the soil (earth), just as we learn to question Mr. Charlie and his seeding of the presumably passive earth. In her dual role as medical doctor and archeologist, a student of the body and the soil, Queenie is vital to helping the community (and readers) interpret what is uncovered after Woodville directs them to “move Charlie dirt” (36). Having been the first to witness Sallywater’s death and the practice of “burying her deep in the ground” (61), Queenie is the best prepared to interpret the earth mounds they discover in Woodville’s old plot. She comes to realize one marks the place of a “woman named Jubbah” (75).<sup>57</sup> Borrowing from Paule Marshall, Brodber has written elsewhere of the importance of “Juba’s head” as a sign of the feminized cultural transfer from Africa to the New World, and this is our first clue as to how the plot of the patriarchal root, the yam story, has suppressed the sign of both woman and earth.<sup>58</sup> As such, this allegorical novel foregrounds the earth and woman as the primary but invisible cultural progenitors who must be excavated by the community/reader. The fact that this excavation happens at a grave site emphasizes the imbrication of roots and rot, history and decay. Robert Pogue Harrison writes,

The grave marks a site in the landscape where time cannot merely pass through, or pass over. Time must now gather around the *sema* [sign/grave marker] and mortalize itself. It is this mortalization of time that gives place its articulated boundaries, distinguishing it from the infinity of homogeneous space. As the sign of human mortality, the grave domesticates the inhuman

57 Brodber draws names significant to Thomas Thistlewood’s diary. See Douglas Hall, ed., *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750–1786* (Kingston: The Press University of the West Indies, 1998).

58 See Erna Brodber, *The Continent of Black Consciousness: On the History of the African Diaspora from Slavery to the Present Day* (London: New Beacon, 2003).

transcendence of space and marks human time off from the timelessness of the gods and the eternal returns of nature.<sup>59</sup>

As people of the yam, Queenie and her cohorts have already learned that “what is under the ground is sacred” (28), but they have not yet entered or recognized the natural cycles of birth and decay. One character, who visits the future, teaches them about funerals: “A real non-breathing human body in a box. . . . They put markers on these mounds too. They call them graves. A whole collection of them is called a cemetery” (116). The community, upon hearing the news, asks, “Are we to become stiff and be put into a hole in the earth; why, we were raised from it, how go back?” (121). This “mortalization of time,” as Harrison puts it, is key to the post-emancipation community’s ability to engage with the natural world, in creating a “language of landscape” to find their own means of planting their ancestors in the soil and to articulate the connection between roots and rot. This in turn is part of the larger cycle about which they are instructed: “Nature changes. You are part of nature. It is natural to change” (66). Here the community naturalizes itself in the soil through burial, which, as Harrison observes, “domesticates the inhuman transcendence of space.”

In their excavations of “Charlie dirt” they find two additional mounds, marked “Phibbah” and “Princess” (75), names likened to living members of the community (78). Associating the earth with Charlie’s originary plot, some characters interpret the soil as sacred yam mounds, people who “had not yet been unearthed” (79). Yet this plot gives way to another root, of a feminized earth and maternal body, symbolized by a grave containing a mother with an infant child (115). Literalizing the effort to excavate the subterranean root, Queenie and her cohorts discover a subterranean cave in Mr. Charlie’s plot in which these unfortunate women were kept, an alternative foundation for their roots. Sealed in the women’s chamber they also discover Mr. Charlie’s corpse (114), the rotting god so vital to Benjamin’s thesis of allegory and historical decay. Thus the excavation of history leads to subterranean ancestors and roots, rendering human time as a feminized genealogy rather than the timelessness of Mr. Charlie’s Eden.

The community members must dig below the patriarchal narratives of both Mr. Charlie and Woodville in order to recognize their submerged mother/earth; only then will they recognize the vital role these women played in the community’s propagation and survival. The cave, a maternal symbol and figure for Platonic allegory, is also a foundation for subterranean human development and provides a new plot for the post-emancipation community. Consequently they are “publicly forced to question the yam story and to think of death and its lifelessness” (109). In grasping the implications of this new model of time, Brodber’s community can be likened to Wynter’s description of the plot of the provision grounds, one that foregrounds earth over property, sustainable food cultivation over plantation monoculture, and perceives

59 Robert Pogue Harrison, “Hic Jacet,” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 3 (2001): 398.



death and burial as a “mystical reunion with the earth.” It also shifts from the teleological plot of liberation toward the dissolution of the subject, a narrative of decay and return.

After the excavation of the community’s three mothers, and the recognition of Woodville’s relationship with these women, the yam story becomes “dwindling past myth” (126). The people bring the grave markers to Woodville, who dies, smiling, “already sawdust, waiting to increase [their] soil” (ibid.), returning to space marked by the novel as maternal. Following directives from Woodville, the community retrieves its memory through hypnosis, where they are told an allegory of diaspora, of the foolishness of men who insist on movement away from the maternal, of the “depletion of Mother’s nation,” and how they lost their way and forgot their past. In this gendered narrative of diaspora, they learn it was Tayeb (Woodville) the rainmaker who made the fatal mistake of the book’s title: he called forward so much water that the “Mother’s body [was] swept away by the tide of [his] rains”—“He had committed matricide” (140).

In reflecting back on Tayeb’s story of the yam people, the community determines it was “Laughable. Pitiabile.” It was a narrative for “retarded people” but one that “worked. It kept [them] happy” (143). As Brodber has written extensively about the importance of the yam to the African diaspora, it’s interesting that she has chosen to displace the yam as ordinary root and focuses our attention on the figure of the maternal, on the earth, on dirt.<sup>60</sup> This essay has sought to foreground Brodber’s inscription of a Glissantian “language of landscape,” a way of demonstrating the mutual imbrication between plantation and provision ground and how the post-emancipation community must establish their own plot. It must excavate the seeds and soil of its history to recover what Brathwaite would call its “submerged mothers.”<sup>61</sup> In excavating its roots (and seed/seed), the community uncovers rotting patriarchs, the plot of matricide, and an unrecoverable maternal body. A new, more hopeful plot emerges that demonstrates that excavations of history can lead diasporic communities “into naturalness” (146), which is to say sexuality and mortality. In realizing their desire for “naturalness,” the community defines becoming human as to be “preserved not so much for labour,” as Mr. Charlie would have it, “as for life” (147). The shift from labor to life thus signals a movement away from the plot of plantation capitalism, and perhaps even from the plot of the provision grounds as well.

Since Brodber’s novel stages a quest in which the community is given one origin narrative or root only to be replaced by another (Mr. Charlie, Woodville, the yam, the subterranean mothers), I want to conclude by uncovering another submerged presence that is vital to this excavation process: earth. Dirt is ubiquitous in the novel, appearing on the first page under Mr. Charlie’s fingernails and later as a sign of the yam mounds that produce people as well as the burial mounds of their mothers. Earth becomes one of the community’s first imports to their new island after emancipation, enabling a “vigorous movement between [their] present and the past” (21). When Woodville laughs the plantation house out of existence, nothing

60 Erna Brodber, “Afro-Jamaican Women at the Turn of the Century,” *Social and Economic Studies* 35, vol. 3 (1986): 23–50.

61 Edward Kamau Brathwaite, “Submerged Mothers,” *Jamaica Journal* 9, nos. 2–3 (1975): 48–49.

is left but “a dung heap that looked as if it had been there since the beginning of time” (13). Since their “mother’s body” has been swept away, earth becomes a lost object that signals the community’s permanent diaspora from its homeland. It is only recognizing their relationship with earth/dirt that will enable “naturalness.” I mentioned earlier that allegory appears at moments of crisis—it uses historical figures to reflect on the present. Brodber upholds the metaphysical conflation of people with the soil, of the maternal with the earth, yet since her use of allegory suggests that some roots may deflect from other figures of origin, we might also read the novel’s focus on earth (and its loss) as a signal of a contemporary crisis of soil depletion and the erosion of our greatest resource. Following Glissant and Harris, we may interpret the novel’s excavation of roots as an engagement with the historiography of emancipation as well as the representation of nonhuman others, an upholding of heterogeneous roots, foregrounding our reliance on living fossil, living history, and even fossil fuels.

According to geologist David Montgomery, soil is our “most underappreciated, least valued, and yet essential natural resource.”<sup>62</sup> Increased hurricanes, industrial soil fertilization practices, desertification, and flooding associated with climate change all contribute to more soil erosion than regeneration. “Considered globally,” Montgomery reveals, “we are slowly running out of dirt”—as much as seventy-five billion metric tons per year.<sup>63</sup> Soils of the tropics are especially impacted by this global problem of erosion because, contrary to the myth of fecundity, they are often nutrient poor, depending on vegetation for the recycling of minerals. Given the threats to Jamaica’s agricultural industry over the past few decades, such as IMF lending policies, NAFTA trading blocs, pressures of globalization and outmigration, cadmium and other forms of soil pollution from mining, as well as continual soil erosion from increased hurricanes, we might read Brodber’s novel as responding to a historic and current crisis in sustainability, if we define sustainability in social as well as environmental terms. As such, the “Mother’s body” is being “swept away” by more than “Tayeb’s rains.”

Yet this uncovering of the “Mother’s body” is also about its otherness. One of the symptoms of modernity is that we have become increasingly dependent upon soil even as we are increasingly detached from place. The alienation from the soil of one’s ancestors as well as “uncertainty as to one’s posthumous abode,” causes a shift in the relation to the earth:

Most of us have no idea where the food we eat comes from. . . .

Uncertainty about the provenance of one’s food and the destination of one’s corpse relate to one another not accidentally but essentially. We have suffered endless hardships and indignities in the name of our obligations to the dead and the land. Haven’t we paid our dues several times over? Don’t we have the right to settle, once and for all, our debts with the dead, with the earth, even with God, if it comes to that? This remains to be seen. A genuine modernity or post-neolithic freedom would consist in a genuine settlement of this sort, but we are not genuinely modern, and for the most part we have presumed to settle our debts merely by disowning them.

<sup>62</sup> Montgomery, *Dirt*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 174.

Certainly no amount of emancipation, be it through mechanized food production, technological innovation, or genetic engineering, can absolve us from the “substance” of our humanity.<sup>64</sup>

Although Harrison does not take into account how forced migration alters one’s relationship to the soil, he raises an important question about the historic obligation of humans to the land. Thus the indignity of forced agricultural labor may not necessarily encourage a desire for a “language of landscape” but its opposite—a desire for alienation from the land as a kind of freedom from obligation. While some of Brodber’s characters disappear into the urban worlds of “The Future,” the novel as a whole does not quite resolve these questions about the community members’ obligations to each other, their ancestors, the plot of historical narrative, and the earth. Perhaps the “language of landscape” is a plot that reflects modern alienation from the earth and our desire to recuperate it imaginatively, even as we destroy it.

The allegorical aesthetic of *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* encourages us to actively engage and intellectualize how “naturalness, twinned to mortality” must be “accompanied by hope, and duly tempered by responsibility” (150). Although “allegory elicits continual interpretation as its primary aesthetic effect,” it remains unclear how the mutual obligations between humans and between humans and the soil will produce a more stable ground of sustainability.<sup>65</sup> For now we rely on that dose of hope and responsibility, a plot to access that utopian place where Brodber asks us to join her, “in the free” (150).

64 Harrison, “Hic Jacet,” 404.

65 Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 4.