

“Buried in Guano”: Race, Labor, and Sustainability

Jennifer C. James *

1. What Guano is Made of

Alice Walker’s debut novel *Meridian* (1976) opens with an African-American photographer, Truman, searching for his former lover from the days of the Movement. Pulling his Volvo into the gas station of a tiny Mississippi town, he hears of a woman “staring down” a tank in the town square and realizes it must be Meridian (2). True to form, she has orchestrated a group of children to protest their exclusion from a free set-aside day for one of the town’s few entertainments. The attraction, a “mummified white woman” advertised as one of the “Twelve Human Wonders of the World,” scarcely seems worth fighting for. A flyer details her sordid tale: the woman, once a faithful wife, had begun to prostitute herself to satisfy a desire for “furs” and “washing machines” (5). Humiliated, her husband strangled her and then tossed her into a saltwater lake, but she washed ashore miraculously “preserved” years later. He decided to display her “dried up” and “blackened” remains in a final act of revenge and profit (5). If confronting a tank were a courageous act during the Movement, in this context, it appears an outsized gesture performed from habit rather than political exigency. Truman is further confused to learn that not all of the children are black, as the square’s “sweeper” explains: “[T]his is for the folks that work in that guano plant outside of town. *Po’* folks. . . . The folks who don’t have to work in that plant claim the folks that do smells so bad they can’t stand to be in the same place with ’em. But you know what guano is made out of.

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Whew” (4). When Truman counters that they are “too small to work in a plant,” the sweeper remarks that their parents do, and as such, their offspring stink by association: “[T]he smell of guano don’t wash off” (5).

“You know what guano is made of”: it is safe to venture that many twenty-first-century readers do not know what guano is, no less what it is made of. They may find themselves sharing Truman’s perplexity, wondering why guano—animal excrement used as fertilizer—merits such an elaborate scene in the novel, even if we frame the work ecocritically, as I have suggested elsewhere.¹ But Walker is not alone. Guano appears in other texts about race and land in the Americas, including the visionary landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted’s study of southern slave economy, *A Journey into the Seaboard States* (1856), and Martinican poet and playwright Aimé Césaire’s revision of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, *A Tempest* (1969). Though written more than a century apart, both works respond to guano’s emergence as an unlikely symbol of economic and earthly renewal within disparate mid-nineteenth-century “utopian” ideologies. These ideologies ranged from the brand of southern secessionist agrarianism Olmsted assails in his ethno-travelogue to an unusual articulation of French romantic socialism Césaire excoriates in his play. Césaire takes particular aim at Victor Hugo, who was among this philosophy’s adherents, through a series of allusions to *Les Misérables*’s exultation of manure (2). John Bellamy Foster has noted that the fertilizer phenomenon of the nineteenth century was rooted in a set of global ecological and economic crises created by wide-scale, market-driven agriculture and industrialism (375–83). In the case of the South, planters hoped that procuring sufficient supplies of bird guano, the richest natural guano, could reverse the effects of centuries of land-depleting agricultural practices that had left them dependent on extra-regional economies and threatened the viability of plantation slavery. In France, a group of anti-capitalist Romantic philosophers theorized that collecting and using animal and human guano could increase agricultural production to the point that hunger, labor exploitation, and the money exchange would fall away. Even Engels and Marx, who disapproved of romanticized, “unscientific” versions of European socialism, enthused earlier in their careers that advancements in “soil chemistry” incorporating natural and manufactured guano might stabilize soil fertility enough for self-subsistence outside of capitalism (Foster 375). Marx later lamented in the first volume of *Capital* (1867) that the “forced” and injudicious “manuring of English fields with guano” for large-scale, capitalist agriculture had only worsened matters (qtd. in Foster 380). In fact, the

heightened demand for authentic bird guano in the US and Europe meant it inevitably led what Marx famously called the “secret” life of a fetishized commodity, as the damaging histories of its production, human and non-human, were concealed in the magical commodity form (*Capital* 1:1.4). It sparked international trade wars, territorial conflicts, and violent labor struggles. The most bloody worker resistance occurred when black guano miners on the US Caribbean island of Navassa staged a revolt against their employers in 1889. The spectacular nature of that incident captured global attention and moved a secretive African-American benevolent organization, The Grand Order of the Galilean Fisherman, to issue a book further publicizing the plight of the workers, *The Navassa Island Riot. Illustrated* (1889).

After briefly fleshing out guano’s “secret” life in the Americas, I will follow its circulation across *Meridian*, *A Journey*, *The Navassa Island Riot*, and *A Tempest*. In taking these textual and tropological “turns” (1), to borrow from Hayden White, I will explore what may be at stake ecologically when a single product, especially one carrying a violent history, can be invested with miraculous powers of environmental redemption within ideologies as putatively antagonistic as capitalism and socialism. That guano was a (re)source of conflict is not remarkable in itself. The scramble for natural resources, from gold to the minerals used for cell phone batteries, has left a legacy of strife. What sets guano apart is its unique place as the first globally marketed “organic” product hailed expressly as a *natural* way to replenish land and sustain agricultural productivity. Importers included the breakdown of its content so that buyers could determine how much “organic matter” it contained; authentic guano was to be used in a pure and unprocessed form unlike the chemically fortified varieties with which it would immediately compete (Mathew 1). The stark contradiction embodied in guano’s commodity form—a potentially healing product harvested in a harmful way—offers a nineteenth-century object lesson for theorizing the contemporary sustainability industry.

Eco-materialists have long held that many for-profit businesses manufacturing “sustainable” products, such as “green” paper products, or claiming “sustainable” practices intentionally encourage unnecessary and destructive consumption. Marxist literary critic Leerom Medovoi maintains that while random acts of “sustainable capitalism” might satisfy consumers’ desire to be good environmental citizens, sustainability and capitalism remain fundamentally irreconcilable. Noting the title of Shell Oil’s 2001 handbook “people, planet, profit” as a particularly egregious instance in which a corporation has appropriated green discourse

to prolong its environmental recklessness he worries that eco-consumerism of any stripe may “substitute for some more profound ethical critique . . . and political transformation” (132). Retooling Freudian disavowal, the psychic splitting which occurs when humans turn away from those disturbing “facts” about ourselves that we have glimpsed but cannot face, Medovoi finds our relationship to sustainable capitalism equally defensive. The only way we can imagine a healthy planetary future with capitalism is if we willfully deny its “second contradiction”: its irrational tendency to harm the environments on which its own survival depends.² This is where the *disavowed* “dark subtext” of sustainability threatens to surface (131). “To sustain” can also mean to be the recipient of injury, as when one “sustains” a wound (131). But sustaining a wound is not the same as succumbing to one; it connotes that the harmed has endured the injury for a period of time and has survived it. As Medovoi explains capitalism has no intention of wantonly killing us all, as other decriers of neoliberalism might believe. More efficiently, it “seeks to gauge the kind and amount of life that must not be killed now so that . . . extraction can continue indefinitely into the future” (142). It needs us—at least some of us—to “tolerate” the escalating injury it will inflict as it continues to sustain *itself* (142). Thus, the very discourse of “sustainability,” with its disavowed subtext always trying to emerge, comes uncannily close to revealing capitalism’s own disavowal: it damages and then endeavors to cover that damage by marketing us a solution.

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I view the guano commodity as an intriguing instance of this dynamic because it represents a near literalization of this cover story in both form and function. It could be expected that nineteenth-century capitalists, agrarianists, and imperialists (the usual suspects, in other words) would attempt to bury the problem of human and environmental exploitation within glorious images of guano-filled futures designed to sustain their enterprises. And yet, utopian “guano socialists” sought to bury the problem of racialized exploitation within idyllic futures of their own. Ultimately, I will consider what is at stake when we mine the even darker subtext of sustainability—the disavowed racial matter of the environmental unconscious.

2. A Brief History of Guano

Already bearing the imprint of imperialism, the word “guano” is an anglicized transliteration of the Spanish word “huano,” itself a Spanish version of “huanu,” a name the Quechua

Indians of South America bestowed upon droppings left by nesting seabirds in coastal regions. The feces composted over thousands of years into a powdery, yellow material dozens of feet deep, which the indigenous collected to fertilize lands and hillsides. In 1840, two Peruvian businessmen successfully petitioned their government for the right to mine and export a massive deposit located on the Chincha Islands off of the Peruvian coast. The “Age of Guano” had officially begun.³ Interest soared in Europe as farmers raved about its astounding results and traders hocked it wherever they could. A rich grade of guano made for hardier plants reduced the time between harvests, eased the cultivation of difficult crops, and revitalized overworked lands. And guano could accomplish all of this in smaller amounts than other fertilizers. “Guanopreneurs” set across the globe in search of other sources but none proved as effective. The US took notice, realizing that guano could serve its pursuits abroad by strengthening the nation’s agricultural base and domestic economy. Entering the existing market proved nearly impossible, however. The Peruvian government had nationalized its mines and offered exclusive contracts to British entities.⁴ These companies’ reliance on Chinese “coolie” labor—which they could literally work to death—kept production levels high enough to maintain this arrangement. In 1855, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* reprinted a widely circulated “eyewitness” account of coolie trafficking retitled “The New Slave Trade.” Deploying the familiar terrifying images defining abolitionist writing, it describes the suffering of the Chinese crammed aboard slavers where they were subjected to the “lash” until it “blackened” their skin (“New Trade” 1).

None of this kept US farmers from clamoring for guano. Out of options, the US Congress bowed to mounting pressure, and in 1856 passed the Guano Islands Act declaring that “any island, rock, or key not within the lawful jurisdiction of any other Government, and not occupied by the citizens of any other Government” on which the US or its citizens discovered guano deposits would become the legal possession of the US (qtd. in Skaggs 227–29). Any private entity mining them would be forced to sell the guano to the US; trading in foreign markets was expressly prohibited. Although the US would acquire some sixty Pacific and Caribbean islands under that law, in 1857 a guano-seeker “discovered” the largest deposits on Navassa, a tiny island situated between Haiti and Jamaica. He transferred it to an American mercantilist, E. O. Cooper and his son, E. K. Cooper, who then bought it from the US that same year. There was one small problem: Haiti claimed that Navassa was under its “lawful jurisdiction.” In a bold assertion of its rights to the island, the

Haitian Emperor Faustin Soulouque sent a flotilla to take Navassa in 1858. Haitian soldiers landed on the island and demanded that the mining operations cease.⁵ Cooper appealed to the US for the protection guaranteed him under the Act's provisions. After some hesitation, the US dispatched warships. The Haitians withdrew but without recognizing the US' legitimacy.⁶ The mining resumed on Navassa, more or less unimpeded for three decades, until 14 September 1889, the day a group of black US miners, fed up with the abysmal work conditions on the island, killed five of their white supervisors. How could we *not* know what guano is made of?

3. The Smell of Guano: *Meridian*

While the term “organic” did not carry the same connotations in the nineteenth century that it does now, it meant, imprecisely, that matter contained the stuff of “life.” Humans, animals, and plants could grow, metabolize, respire, and evolutionarily adapt.⁷ It was animated from within. The “life” in organic matter distinguished it from inorganic matter, such as the mineral or the stone, which much of Western science thought “inert” and therefore “dead.” The lingering belief in this distinction later influenced Freud's exploration of two antagonistic instincts, Eros, “perpetually attempting and achieving a renewal of life,” and death, which seeks to extinguish and destroy it (Freud 46). He theorized that if the creation of life itself can be traced to the first “animation” of inanimate, “inorganic” matter, as some had speculated (36–38), the “death instinct” could be the unrecognized drive to return to this original inorganic state. The conflicting drives toward animation and annihilation, life and death, have been in strife from “the beginning” (46).

The incongruity Freud constructs—that life springs from death—helps explain the work guano does at the very beginning of *Meridian*. The workers whose labor creates a commodity valued for renewing life are what Orlando Patterson so aptly named the socially dead.⁸ Put slightly differently, they are like guano itself, whose composition proceeds from matter in decomposition: animal dung in a decaying state. Accordingly, they reek. They emit the foul stench which warns us that something is disintegrating, that something blurring the distinction between life and death is near. To remain on the safe side of the living, maintaining the illusory borders between us and them, we must disavow that thing as “not us” in the same way we deny that our own expelled *merde* has come from inside of our bodies.⁹ For Walker's socially dead,

the living corpses that epitomize the abject subject, the malodorous evidence of degradation will not “wash off.” It clings to their skin, seeping into their bodies like a toxin. Class, then, is no longer a disembodied “status,” but a fixed genetic trait transmitted to the sons and daughters of the Southern poor. Walker was surely aware that “guano” had become a source of environmental poison throughout the region. From the start, those hoping to cash in on the mania had appropriated the marketable term “guano” for fertilizers bearing little or no relationship to the organic guano from seabirds.¹⁰ Walker’s workers labor in a *fish* guano factory where the remains of fish, its oils and its excrement, were refined into a product often bolstered with petroleum nitrogen. The runoff from guano plants had polluted local land and waterways that would not easily wash off.¹¹ When Truman later blasts her decision to take children to see a dead woman, Meridian coolly notes that the children were used to seeing “dead things wash up from the sea” (13). She also reveals why she “kicked open the door” of the circus wagon where the corpse was displayed: the children could see that the “wonder” was actually a “fake” doll “made of plastic” (7, 12). She is teaching them how to demystify capitalism, and as Walker intimates, the most important skill is learning how to discern a dead object from a living being. After all, the additives meant that guano could, and did, double as material for dynamite and bombs: the kind which blew up churches with children inside.

4. The Ground again Guanoed: A Journey into the Seaboard States

Guano had contributed to the racial and class divisions in the Southern US well before the era in which *Meridian* is set. The mid-nineteenth century saw Southern planters and their investors beginning to fully register the economic consequences of a century of financially expedient but agriculturally careless farming practices which had rendered large swaths of land virtually useless. This was particularly true of the southeastern seaboard areas devoted to growing tobacco, where the soil had been stripped clean of nutrition.¹² The realization that abolition could bring the supply of slave labor to a halt exacerbated Southern economic anxiety. In 1849, *The North Star* and *The Liberator* re-circulated an article from the *Baltimore Patriot* ridiculing the Southern mantra that a “cart-load of good manure” would regenerate the region enough to become independent: “States rights and guano, liberty and lime—that it should come to this” (“Bombastes” 1). This is not to say that the *Patriot*’s alarm over secessionist sentiment was necessarily

anti-slavery. The North understood that agricultural productivity remained critical to a unified national economy, particularly as the US pursued expansionism. Richard A. Wines has explained that prior to the introduction of imported guano, Southerner farmers had participated in a North–South “recycling system” in which the growing problem of how to dispose of Northern urban waste from sewers and slaughterhouses was partially solved when some cities and private entities began selling it to the South in the form of fertilizer (7–21). Although Peruvian guano might have posed a threat to the exchange system Wines describes, a larger one loomed: the increased demand for guano veiled, in some instances, a demand for independence that could bring about *permanent* economic rupture. The reprint of “Bombastes” in these influential abolitionist organs is evidence that Douglass and Garrison saw Southern guano-mania for what it was: a materialization of pro-slavery ideology. When “A New York Merchant” later opined in *Douglass’ Paper* that the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law was like “guano” for slavery, it was because guano was *already* guano for slavery (“What Is Necessary” 3). Some historians have argued that soil exhaustion deserves more attention as a primary factor leading to the Civil War.

The Connecticut-born “gentleman farmer” and park designer Frederick Law Olmsted attempted to decipher Southern enthrallment with guano in *A Journey into the Seaboard States*, a work Marx found sound enough to cite when analyzing surplus labor in *Capital*.¹³ Published the same year that the Guano Act became law, *A Journey* is an expansion of a series of articles Olmsted filed in 1853–54 for *The New-York Daily Times* as he traveled the region recording observations about the land, economy, and race relations in the South.¹⁴ A free soil and free labor Northern Democrat (with socialist leanings) who held the editorship of *Putnam’s Monthly* for nearly a year,¹⁵ Olmsted’s anti-slavery feeling matured with his deepening familiarity with the institution and the slaveholding classes. During the Civil War, he applied to be the superintendent organizing freed blacks at Port Royal even as he remained stubbornly paternalistic. He limits most of his discussions of guano to the section devoted to Virginia, a state “wholly ruled by . . . slave-holders” (303) and where the “largest part of the labor required” is “performed by negroes” (209). He concluded after his return that a degenerate “aristocracy” uninterested in larger communal welfare, an enlarged democracy, or cultural pursuits had hindered Virginia’s progress. Leaning on a misconstrued isolationist version of Jeffersonian agrarianism, the most moneyed Virginians were intent on making themselves even more so through sticking to grubby accumulation and land-

hoarding instead of embracing the multitudinous bustle of democracy, rational industrialism, and the true spirit of capitalism: a free labor force (303). Olmsted expresses concern that within this asymmetrical economy, the guano commodity, although potentially useful, may inadvertently become a product disabling the poor: “[Guano,] where ignorantly or improvidently employed, with a thought only of immediate returns, . . . will probably lead to a still greater exhaustion of the soil, and lessen the real wealth of the poor farmer. Thus it would seem likely to better the wealthy and intelligent, and eventually injure the lower class” (303).

One of the horrors of capitalism, Marx warns, is that the land itself becomes a slave master. The laborer forced to work land for the “competition” of the market, for purposes beyond his own “subsistence” or his own “immediate means of life,” will ultimately become “a slave to it” (*Economic* 58, 59). The laborer should control the land, he suggests, but in the same manner he controls his arm: as a natural tool that extends from his own body. But under the rule of capital, the laborer now belongs wholly to the land, turned into an abusive and cruel overlord who crushes him into “idiocy” and “cretinism” (59). One of the horrors of slavery, Marcus Wood reminds us, lay in its ability to transform the entire objective world of the slave into an instrument of torture. Owners could wield any object, whether the land, a piece of ham, or a cotton gin, to terrorize the slave, who now existed in a spatially unbounded torture chamber.¹⁶ In *A Journey*, the horror is an un-free market: any *commodity*, whether land, guano, or the brutalized body of the slave, can morph into an instrument of economic torture for “lower-class” whites. Olmsted describes a conversation with an “advanced” planter who has successfully spread guano on land which “could not be profitably cultivated, and had been at waste for many years” (43). “For corn,” Olmsted explains, “it was not thought of much value; the greatest advantage had been the ground again guanoed . . . which is to remain, for mowing and pasture, as long as the ground will profitably sustain it. The labor of this farm was entirely performed by slaves” (42, 44). The planter rebuffs Olmsted’s inquiry into the number of slaves he owned with the defense that they were “better off” than “your free laboring classes at the North” (44). The repetition of both sound and sense in the turn of phrase Olmsted uses to paraphrase the farmer, “the ground again guanoed,” evokes the repeated “injury” the farmer will inflict on land, slave and the free white “as long as” profit can be “sustained.”

Olmsted later portrays a wealthy planter who confesses that “the present value of negroes” had indeed made some crops risky, but that he had not yet felt the need for guano. Instead, he grows

tobacco, unconcerned that it had extensively harmed the land. The planter explains that as long as Irish labor could be had cheaply enough to maintain profit, the soil was of little consequence: “Tobacco . . . was rapidly exhausting, but it returned more money, for the labor used upon it, than anything else; enough more, in his opinion, to pay for the wearing out of the land. If he was well-paid for it, he did not know why he should not wear out his land” (90). Olmsted again leads the reader to conclude that the planter will as readily “wear out” the white bodies the market conditions have forced upon him. His primary complaint is that he has done exactly that; the Irish simply tire too easily. For that reason, he prefers slaves, who were immune to the effects of hard labor: “[H]is negroes never worked so hard as to tire themselves—always were lively, and ready to go off on a frolic at night. He did not think they ever did half a fair day’s work. They could not be made to work hard” (91). This characterization is more complex than a stereotypical portrayal of black laziness. It contains a contradiction—a wish for workers who do not work—which demonstrates the way labor is made to disappear into commodities. The planter bestows the slaves with magically self-renewing powers which allow him to extract their labor without limit or guilt. They can never be overworked, nor can they ever work enough.

The visible “degradation” of blacks in body and in mind, Olmsted writes, sends free white immigrant laborers who had come to Virginia for work returning to the North in droves. Even “well compensated” white laborers were “unconsciously repelled” by a system giving rise to white aristocratic indolence and black abjection (211). He surmises that their inability to articulate the fear of devolving into something “worse than a nigger” expresses itself in disavowal: “[T]hey could give no better reason to me, for their course, than that they ‘didn’t like to work with them niggers’” (211). As Olmsted tells it, the white laborers see their future embodied in the slave and instinctively split.

To illustrate the most feverish exultations of guano—the ones taking the form of secessionist sentiment—Olmsted turns to the Honorable Willoughby Newton, a former Whig congressman from Virginia and a wealthy agriculturalist who seized every available occasion to evangelize about guano. The excerpt in *A Journey* is a “testimonial” from a pamphlet Peruvian sellers funded, called *A Treatise of Practical Information for Farmers; Containing Plain Directions How to Apply Peruvian Guano to the Various Crops and Soils of America* (1853): “I look upon the introduction of guano, and the success attending its application to our barren lands, in the light of a special interposition of Divine Providence, to save the northern neck of Virginia from reverting entirely into

its former state of wilderness and utter desolation. . . . I looked upon the possibility of renovating our soil . . . as utterly hopeless. . . . [I]f it had not been for guano, to revive our last hope, a few years more and the whole country must have been deserted by all who desired to increase their own wealth, or advance the cause of civilization by a proper cultivation of the earth" (Robinson 22).

Newton draws a picture of an agrarian paradise nearly lost: in misusing their bounty, the "chosen" Virginians had nearly forsaken God and Jefferson's vision of the state's agricultural autonomy along with it. The unspoken secessionist subtext animating this "testimonial" is that guano has saved them from "falling" into the dread world of global manufacture and commerce which will drag them into the filth of the Northern economy. Jefferson, we know, derived his theory of "cultivation" from John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, who believed that "God gave the world" to the "industrious and rational," and accordingly, that land belonged to those who have "mixed his labor with it" (qtd. in Dawson 9). Newton explains: "The negroes, wherever guano has been introduced, have been violently opposed to using it not alone from its disagreeable odor and effect upon the throat and nostrils while handling it in a dry state; because they could not be persuaded that such a small measure of stuff . . . could possibly produce any effect upon the crop. Their astonishment and consequent extravagant laudation of the effect produced, has often afforded us hours of amusement while listening to their recital of 'massa's big crop'" (qtd. in Robinson 20–21).

The "unbelieving" negroes, unable to grasp empiricism, are duly excluded from the bounty and position of their rational masters. If it occurs to Newton that their skepticism is another sort of recognition—that they would have to perform the additional work that increased crop productivity would engender—he does not let on. The fetishization of the guano commodity in this passage conceals the slaves' alienation from the labor in which they have little investment (its "massa's crop" after all). Guano also disguises that labor, as it muscles in and "produces" the crops itself. But there is scant room for reflection in Newton's eschatological empiricism, where science, Christianity, capitalism, and white supremacy congeal into a faith in guano, and where, in the final instance, guano is not an expression of faith in God or science, but in a second coming of slavery as its destruction approaches. Olmsted prophesies that "Free Trade in Labor" will triumph over the evil of agrarianism, ushering in "a revolution and reorganization of society. . . . Whether this process shall be spasmodic and bloody, or gradual and peaceful, will depend on the manner in which it is resisted. It may come this century, it may

come the next. The sooner the better” (Olmsted 304).¹⁷ A revolution would arrive soon, or perhaps late, transforming the nation into “a republic of suffering” in his now well-known words (qtd. in Faust xiii).

5. “Colored Men Buried in Guano”: *The Navassa Island Riot. Illustrated*

A year before the Civil War ended, E. K. Cooper decided to transfer his island to the Baltimore-based Navassa Phosphate Company, which continued to stream laborers to the island in spite of periods of financial distress. The wet climate of Navassa ensured that its guano would never match the Peruvian variety and the competition from chemical superphosphates had diminished the market for organic material. Nevertheless, the company plowed ahead, determined to remain viable. At first, relying on white convict labor contracted through the government of Maryland, the company recruited African Americans after the Civil War. Many of these men, whether free blacks or former slaves, had few prospects. Some claimed that labor agents for the Company had regaled them with stories of an island where they would pick fruit most of the days and have access to beautiful women (Alexander 28). Although a number were illiterate, each worker signed a binding 15-month contract. After a three-day voyage, they arrived on Navassa to scarce provisions and ceaseless work.¹⁸ The work itself was a nasty affair: tunneling, picking, blasting, and hauling petrified bird dung. The men were subjected to brutal, arbitrary punishments, including being placed in stocks and “trying”: tied up and hoisted by rope, with feet dangling barely above ground. With no regular form of transport, leaving was unlikely. Additionally, the high prices charged by the “company store,” the sole source of goods on the island, had pushed them into indebtedness, and their contracts stipulated that they could not be released until their bills were paid off. The little provisions offered were often rotten and some men were forced to go hungry (Alexander 31). By the day of the rebellion, the men had been discussing how to better their circumstances among themselves for months. After all, they were almost 140 in number, with only 12 bosses.

The uneasy atmosphere developing led the supervisors to carry pistols while they worked. After a confrontation in which an especially loathed supervisor threatened an infirm worker with a gun, some 100 of the miners gathered in front of another supervisor’s quarters to voice their grievances (Alexander 37).¹⁹ When their

demands were dismissed, a group—although how many is unclear—revolted. In a battle lasting the entire day, they attacked their supervisors with everything available: axes, hammers, stones, sticks, pistols, and even dynamite. When it was over, they had killed four and wounded a fifth who later died of his injuries. In the days following, news of the “Navassa Riot” ripped across the headlines of major mainstream US newspapers and the African-American press; the international coverage reached as far as Australia, with one paper sensationalizing it as “A Battle with West Indian Negroes.”

After the violence had ceased, the white survivors telegraphed the US for rescue. With no US vessel available, the British sent the brig *Romance*. However, the workers felt it was they who needed saving. Together, they created a letter asking for help from the American Consul in Jamaica, which was quickly circulated in the English-language press. Composed by one of the laborers who signed the letter as their “Spiritual Advisor,” it evinces awareness that this might be the only occasion they will have to tell their story publically before appearing in a court of law. They protest that they had acted in self-defense after being fired upon “promiscuously”:

We, the undersigned laborers for the Navassa Phosphate Company, were attacked by the bosses and managers with firearms because we refused to work after having been improperly treated. . . . During the affray two of the bosses were fatally injured. They then evacuated the armory, which we now have in possession, treating the remaining bosses with due courtesy, and with no further acts of violence on our part. We now await to hear from you, hoping you will send immediately relief, or a vessel to carry us back to the United States of America.

We remain yours, one hundred and thirty-six souls, all American citizens, awaiting your instant action. (“The Navassa Riot” 1)

In carefully crafted passive sentences (“bosses were fatally injured”), they evacuate their agency. Similarly, as if anticipating their trial before the court of public opinion, they adopt familiarizing terms to describe themselves. They are aggrieved “laborers” like others striking across the US, they are “souls” like other humans, and they are “citizens” requesting the assistance of their government, much like E. K. Cooper had done decades earlier.

The initial sight of the men, who arrived in Baltimore handcuffed, barefoot, and nearly naked, startled African Americans

into action (Alexander 41). They gained advocates from black civic and religious organizations, including T. Thomas Fortune's Afro American League, which assured its coverage in his paper, *The New York Age*. Most influential were The Grand Order of Galilean Fishermen and The Mutual Brotherhood of Liberty, a Baltimore Civil Rights organization which counted among its leaders the Reverend William Alexander, the publisher of the first incarnation of the Baltimore *Afro-American*, and the Reverend Harvey Johnson, the head of a politically active Baptist church. The Reverend Thomas I. Hall, the current spiritual leader of the Order, was also a member of the Brotherhood.²⁰

In five trials beginning in November 1889 and lasting over a year, five of the "ringleaders" were tried for murder and others for manslaughter and rioting. Each of the five faced execution if found guilty. In December, the Order published *The Navassa Island Riot. Illustrated*. Its title refers to an earlier work the Belgium-born US mining engineer Eugene Gaussoin produced about the island, *The Island of Navassa: Illustrated from Sketches* (1866), in addition to the prospectus he produced for Navassa Phosphate, *Memoir on the Island of Navassa (West Indies)* (1866). He reports positively on an "almost inexhaustible" supply of guano and rock phosphate that the company could mine there. "Dung and bone" and other "animal matter in putrefaction" such as extinct "land turtles" had lain in "undisturbed decomposition" for ages, forming "a vast mass of organic detritus" (19). In the sole autobiographical passage in *Memoir*, he recalls a walk: "Many times in passing over the celebrated battle field of Waterloo during the summer months, more than thirty years after the bloody conflict, I had occasion to remark vast clusters of luxuriant wheat, rising high above the common level, showing by its height, its vivid color . . . the places where large accumulations of humans or other bones deeply buried beneath the soil, did supply year after year by their successive decomposition . . . [nutrients] sucked by the plants" (26).

Gaussoin evaluates the bodies in the same even tenor he writes of extinct turtles or the vegetation already decimated from previous Navassa mining. Far from an idiosyncratic rumination, his recollection reflects the disconcerting fact that farmers in mid-nineteenth-century Europe had "raided Napoleonic battlefields such as Waterloo and Austerlitz" looking for human remains to fertilize the exhausted lands Marx describes in *Capital* (Foster 376). The reflection is a reminder that Gaussoin was writing while the Civil War, a conflict grounded in agricultural production, was a fresh memory. Untold numbers of dead, both military and civilian, had been buried anonymously, or not buried at all, but left to

become part of the earth without notice or name. The problem of how to assimilate massive death, which Drew Gilpin Faust suggests gnawed at all affected by the war, was probably on his mind.²¹ Employing metaphors such as “acres of death” allowed witnesses to naturalize the unnatural scale of death into a regenerative, redemptive sacrifice (190–91). Gaussoin similarly makes killing fields into fields of magnificent golden wheat.

Faced with the possible hangings of African-American men 22 years later, the members of the Order were strategizing about how to save the living. *Navassa Island Riot* begins with a black and white drawing of the island entitled simply “ISLAND OF NAVASSA.” A sea stretches the length of the image, with the island in deeper relief. The water extends beyond the edges of the island, giving an impression of its smallness. The most distinct features of Navassa, as depicted here, are manmade: the mining house and workman’s quarters erected on the isle’s shore. A tiny flag waves in the air. The image, though roughly sketched, calls upon the innumerable images of the West coasts of Africa with slave prisons drawn as if they were a natural part of the landscape. Iconography operates most effectively through triggering memory and establishing continuity. Gaussoin leads readers across the graves of Waterloo to Antietam; *Navassa Island Riot* plunges its readers into the sea.²²

After a subsequent prefatory chapter spent mapping the island for its readership and an explanation of the case, the bulk of the volume is a verbatim reproduction of the prosecution’s instructions to the all-white jury about how to determine the fate of the first defendant, George S. Key, who had been convicted of murder shortly before its publication. The definition of murder the prosecution constructs offers insight into the task confronting the accused’s supporters: “[T]he felonious, wilful [sic] killing of a human, with malice aforethought. Malice has been defined to be that condition of a man when he is totally devoid of social feeling” (8). Sketches of the miners with their names appear interspersed throughout the instructions. They emerge mid-sentence and between the hyphens in words; a sketch of a defendant with his nickname, “Edward Smith, alias ‘Devil,’” surfaces within the explanation of “malice.” The effect jars: the faces of the men challenge the dehumanizing legal language imprisoning them in a visual disruption of the court, an optic objection to objectification. This animating art works against capitalism’s attempt to “naturalize” the miners into decomposing detritus—the sacrifice the socially dead make for living—endeavoring, instead, to restore them to the world of “social feeling.” The Order had from its antebellum founding tasked itself with attending to the dead and

grieving; they believed that all blacks should receive proper burials rather than being dumped in mass or unmarked graves. Perhaps they wanted to keep the miners from meeting the end rumored of other guano workers: that they had been buried alive in the stuff, “embalmed” in guano, permanently preserved in the matter that had killed them (“Falling” 1; “Embalmed” 4).

Three of the men, Key, Henry B. Jones, and Edward Smith, were found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to hang. In a second wave of support, local, national, and international labor organizations who had been engaging in their own often violent struggles with industry issued statements of solidarity.²³ In the two years which followed, the Brotherhood and the Order convinced citizens from across the nation to sign petitions for clemency. On 1 April 1891, several prominent members of the Brotherhood presented the petitions to President Benjamin Harrison in person. Harrison ordered the executions stayed until the US District Attorney General of Maryland, J. T. Ensor, could review the facts of the case. In a stunning reversal only six weeks later, Harrison commuted their sentences based upon the Attorney’s recommendation.²⁴ As a decision made at a time when blacks’ civil status was rapidly eroding, the President’s reasoning stands out for its remarkable affirmation of the rights of black citizens and labor. He explained his thinking at some length in his 1891 State of the Union Address:

In September, 1889, a revolt took place among these laborers, resulting in the killing of some of the agents of the company, caused, as the laborers claimed, by cruel treatment. . . . There appeared on the trial, and otherwise came to me, such evidences of the bad treatment of the men that, in consideration of this and of the fact that the men had no access to any public officer or tribunal for protection or the redress of their wrongs, I commuted the death sentences that had been passed by the court upon three of them. In April last my attention was again called to this island, and to the unregulated condition of things there, by a letter from a colored laborer, who complained that he was wrongfully detained upon the island by the phosphate company after the expiration of his contract of service. A naval vessel was sent to examine into the case of this man. . . . It is inexcusable that American laborers should be left within our own jurisdiction without access to any Government officer or tribunal for their protection and the redress of their wrongs.

(102)

The men were spared death and remanded to their prior punishment: life with hard labor. But was this so materially different from their lives prior to imprisonment, or for some, their lives as slaves before that?

6. No Guano Comparable: *A Tempest*

For Angela Davis, the answer would be “no.” She contends that the rise and racialization of convict labor and leasing in the postbellum era must be reframed as a continuation of the structural controls and extraction intrinsic to US slavery, and moreover, that the mass incarceration of African Americans in privatized prisons is further extension of those institutions: “The prison has become a black hole into which the detritus of contemporary capitalism is deposited” (16). Her choice of words puns on language from Victor Hugo’s novelistic exploration of imprisonment, *Les Misérables* (1862). Locked away for stealing a loaf of bread, Jean Valjean’s escape takes him through the sewers, the *cloaca maxima* of Paris, a route which becomes a historical detour tracing the system’s evolution. The sewer, the narrator concludes, is “a mistake” (85). Not the sewers themselves, precisely, but “political economy[’s]” (86) inability to see value in the waste flowing beneath the city: “Science, after having long groped about, now knows that the most fecundating and the most efficacious of fertilizers is human manure. . . . There is no guano comparable in fertility with the detritus of a capital. A great city is the most mighty of dung-makers. Certain success would attend the experiment of employing the city to manure the plain. If our gold is manure, our manure, on the other hand, is gold. . . . What is done with this golden manure? It is swept into the abyss” (83–84).

Although Hugo slyly asserts that he is not relying on metaphor, he does: the sewers are the city’s “intestines,” “conscience,” and “excrement,” a rich symbol for human conditions under oppressively economic structures. Dana Simmons notes that Hugo’s musings on the sewers were inspired by the French “Romantic socialist” Pierre Leroux, a printer whose repulsion to industrial capitalism led him to adapt the science of natural circulation (that is, rain) into a political theory of *circulus*. In a manifesto published a year after *Les Misérables* appeared, Leroux proclaimed: “MAKE BREAD WITH HUMAN EXCREMENT,” for “MAN IS THE REPRODUCER OF HIS OWN SUBSTINENCE” (73). To state his theory in simplifying terms, the consumption of food produces human waste naturally; and just as naturally, human waste can be used to produce the food we need to live, make more food, and ultimately make more excrement.

This “perpetual recycling process” will give rise to a perfect and closed economic system which will end the need for wages. Human beings, animals, and the natural world will become a single large organism much like the mechanics of the human body whose varied organs perform in concert. Almost no labor, beyond that expended to make food, will be required. Those do not wish to work will still be afforded sustenance. Accumulation and commodity exchange will fade away, and the need for surplus labor along with it. Technology will no longer dominate man, but will be harnessed in ways which aid in this endeavor.²⁵ In the final evolution, humans are at last released from the unnatural exploitation they suffer under capitalism. As Hugo’s narrator exclaims, “[T]he human and animal manure which the world wastes . . . would suffice to nourish the world” (84). But unlike his more idealistic friend Leroux, Hugo did not completely relinquish gold for guano.

Aimé Césaire’s *A Tempest* appeared after Algerian Independence and the student uprisings of Paris 1968 had shaken the French metropole’s political foundations. Césaire molds Shakespeare’s Caliban into Caliban X, a racially conscious slave/colonial subject/alienated laborer on the verge of revolt. As many Césaire scholars have noted, this recasting perfectly befits the writer’s advocacy of *négritude* and Marxism. His searing indictment of imperialist ideology, *Discourses of Colonialism* (1955), delivers an extended meditation on Western ideas of “progress” that the colonized have been trained to accept as superior. The metropole attempts to “dazzle” the colonized with “facts,” “statistics,” “mileages of roads, canals, and railroad tracks . . . the tonnage of cotton or cocoa that has been exported” (43). Césaire measures the cost of that “achievement”: “I am talking about natural economies that have been disrupted . . . about food crops destroyed, malnutrition permanently introduced, agriculture oriented solely toward the benefit of the metropolitan countries; about the looting of products, the looting of raw materials” (43). In a detail largely overlooked, the island that Caliban X claims as his “inheritance” teems with guano, the very material which, according to the theory of *circulus*, can make all manner of exploitation disappear. Césaire, a student of Haitian history and of French intellectual traditions, would have been well-acquainted with Haiti’s continued claims to Navassa in the 1960s, quite familiar with Hugo’s rhapsodizing about guano 100 years previously. Within the play’s intentionally surreal, deterritorialized, and detemporalized colonial ecology represented in the “island,” guano lays the groundwork for the play’s material realism, reminding the reader what the utopian futures of the metropolitan are really made of.

In the original *Tempest*, Prospero's magic on the "uninhabited" island is never verified. Shakespeare constructs his scenes so that no one in the play or audience is privy to his books, nor witnesses him perform the acts leading to his restoration. What he does permit his audience to see leaves us with doubt about the sources of Prospero's "power." The acts are carried out through his unfree servant, the spirit Ariel, even if Prospero credits himself for them, nor do they ever happen without Ariel present. In *A Tempest*, Césaire has Prospero admit as much, telling Miranda that together, he and Ariel whipped up the storm to prevent his enemies from taking his new "possessions" from him: "I couldn't let them get away with that, and since I was able to stop them, I did so, with the help of Ariel. We brewed up the storm you have just witnessed" (15). Prospero's "white magic" is black labor.

This scene recalls the utopian vision the newly shipwrecked councilor Gonzalo paints in Act II of *The Tempest*—a world without law, labor, exchange, or sin. Here, Gonzalo is reveling in nature's seeming abundance, losing himself in the erotically charged imagery of the fully enchanted imperialist, when he is abruptly cut short by his friend Sebastian, who worries that the land is too "wild and uncultivated" to be tamed (II.2.4). A solution quickly comes to Gonzalo: he remarks that he has "read somewhere that guano is excellent compost for sterile ground." Sebastian, not knowing what guano is made of, asks him to explain. He does: "Guano is the name for bird droppings that build up over centuries, and it is by far the best fertilizer known. You dig it out of caves" (28–29). Antonio then attempts to interject perspective:

Antonio: Let me understand: your guano cave contains a river of dried bird shit.

Gonzalo: To pick up on your image, all we need to do is channel that river, use it to irrigate the fields[. . .]and everything will bloom.

Sebastian: But we'll still need manpower to farm it. Is the island even inhabited? (29)

Gonzalo acknowledges the dilemma; "That's the problem, of course" (27). He decides they must determine whether this "wonderful" island contains "wonderful people" and "creatures" who can be managed (27–28). Césaire has found the figure of the laborer gone missing from French romantic socialism. He is on the "uninhabited" island of Navassa digging a river of bird shit.

In having Gonzalo “pick up” and extend Antonio’s already metaphorical imagery, Césaire picks up on Hugo’s imagery of the sewers: “[T]hose fetid drippings of subterranean mire, which the pavements hide from you,—do you know what they are? They are the meadow in flower, the green grass, wild thyme, thyme and sage” (84). The Paris bourgeoisie represses the underworld of the sewers so completely that it bears no relation to the world of industry and capital above. The connection is evident: the Caribbean economic and environmental “dumping ground” vitalizes a French metropole “above” that would rather keep the evidence of devastation hidden behind postcard images of “magic islands” (11). Caliban X charges that Prospero can strut about the globe like a “conqueror” and “pollute” the earth only because his science teaches him it is “dead” (18). Césaire imagines that the flow of spillage into the Caribbean will in time be reversed, as “every decadent class finds itself turned into a receptacle into which there flow all the dirty waters of history” (*Discourse* 64). Yet as he emphasizes in *Discourse*, to isolate the bourgeoisie, or those in the service of a clearly delineated imperialist project, is, like the sewer, a mistake. The philosophers and humanists are “likewise” implicated: “[G]oitrous academicians, wreathed in dollars and stupidity, ethnographers who go in for metaphysics, presumptuous Belgian theologians, chattering intellectuals born stinking out of the thigh of Nietzsche, the paternalists, the embracers, the corrupters, the back-slappers, the lovers of exoticism, the dividers, the agrarian sociologists . . . all those who, performing their functions in the sordid division of labor for the defense of Western bourgeois society, try in diverse ways and by infamous diversions to split up the forces of Progress” (*Discourse* 54). This exchange between Gonzalo and Antonio suggests just how quickly utopian ideologies can work on the political imagination; Antonio comes away thoroughly convinced, happily chanting lines from Baudelaire’s “Parfum Exotique” from *Fleurs du Mal* (29).²⁶ Césaire’s intended readership would have recognized the poem and its conceit: the intoxicating smell of the speaker’s lover’s body has transported him to a thoroughly tropicalized vision of the Americas, described in lines Césaire omits: “A lazy isle to which nature has given / Singular trees, savory fruits” (Baudelaire 81). The unresolved matter hanging in the air is whether perfume, or even poetry about perfume, will be enough to cover up a stench as noxious as guano. “Dying societies utter their swan songs,” he drily notes, “with their heads buried in the dung-hill” (*Discourse* 64).

Still, there is more at stake in his refiguring Caliban X as a guano worker than pulling him from rivers of “Prospero’s shit” or

Hugo's sewers (*A Tempest* 53). Hugo's early novel about the 1791 slave revolts in Saint-Domingue, *Bug-Jargal* (1826), turns on a noble, Europeanized black who rescues a French military officer from the island's slaughter. Throughout, Hugo ridicules the insurgent slaves as illiterates ruled by "superstitious" spiritual practices. The fictionalized version of Georges Biassou, one of the two most important leaders of slave forces, is depicted as a man motivated by blood-lust and revenge rather than any authentic feeling or philosophy about self-determination and freedom. Hugo's contempt for Biassou (or who he represents) becomes evident in a conversation in which Hugo plays Biassou's disinterest in science for comic effect. In this section, an educated French colonial citizen is brought before Biassou's tribunal to plea for his head. He first informs Biassou that he understands economics and theories of government to no avail. He then explains that he knows how to organize the "interior economy" of a military. Biassou is unmoved. When he adds that he has "special knowledge as to the increase of cattle," Biassou says he will go to Jamaica to plunder stock. When he suggests he knows effective ways of "making pitch and working coal mines," Biassou replies that he would prefer to "burn a few leagues of forest" (70–71). Any traditional African or indigenous knowledge about living with the land, "harmonious and viable, *economies*," is inconceivable in Hugo's Saint-Domingue, for the French would fail to view it as science (*Discourse* 43).

Although a supporter of France's 1848 abolition of slavery, there is little evidence that Hugo ever came to terms with the role black revolutions played in weakening the institution in the Americas. This takes us circuitously to the beginning of *Discourse*, where Césaire takes aim at the "pseudo-humanist" and notoriously racist French nationalist Ernest Renan. Renan theorized in *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (1871) that it was the responsibility of "superior races" to "regenerate . . . degenerate races" (qtd. in *Discourse* 38). Renan continues, "Nature has made a race of workers . . . tillers of the soil, the Negro; treat him with kindness and humanity, and all will be as it should; a race of masters and soldiers, the European race. Reduce this noble race to working in the *ergastulum* like Negroes and Chinese, and they rebel. In Europe, every rebel is, more or less, a soldier who has missed his calling" (qtd. in *Discourse* 38). The hard work of rebellion and resistance is not labor but misspent exertion. Nor is it regenerative. In Renan's two revisions of *The Tempest*, entitled *Caliban: A Philosophical Drama Continuing "The Tempest" of William Shakespeare* (1878) and *L'eau de Jouvence: suite de Caliban* (1881), the riotous Caliban from the first will, by the

second, fully assume his proper place within the social order and, in Renan's disciplining fantasy, will enforce that order as a part of the police. I do not wish to conflate Hugo and Renan, or to claim that Césaire does. Rather, Césaire suggests that any ideal which makes labor magically disappear—whether guano mining, soldiering, kicking down doors of circus wagons, or driving out the French empire—is to make histories of self-determination vanish along with it. “And the martyrs?” Césaire writes, “They have evaporated!” (62). Caliban indeed warns of what will happen if he is not recognized: “The day I begin to feel that everything's lost, just let me get a hold of a few barrels of your infernal powder and as you fly around up there you'll see this island, my inheritance, my work, all blown to smithereens . . . and, I trust, Prospero and me with it” (28).

If pushed far enough, he will become a martyr, harnessing dung-filled dynamite to explode the epistemologies of empire, and all will be destroyed with him.

7. Conclusion: Beyond Guanotopias

It is easy to comprehend why “guanotopias,” economies built on the exploitation of humans and other parts of the natural world, would seek to disavow histories of damage. The spaces submerged in these denials—whether mineshaft, island, prison, or plantation—are better swept “into the abyss.” In 1902, *The Farmer's Review* reported that a “syndicate composed of New York and Baltimore capitalists” was making a last-ditch effort to profit from Navassa. They proposed converting the once deathly island into a “winter health resort. The climate is said to have worked wonders for consumptives” (“Summer Outings” 15). Nothing came of the plan. Perhaps such blatant attempts to create capitalist guanotopias through the wonders of consumerism make it comparatively difficult to see how *left* guanotopias, those made of sweet-smelling socialism like Hugo's, operate by disavowals of their own. Verena Conley explains that Paris 1968 moved French metropolitan intellectuals to sketch out structuralist visions of the ecology as another “system” or “network” to be, in her words, “thought” (4–7). Recall that *Discourse* and *A Tempest* accuse French metropolitan intellectuals of being “comfortable” with inaccurate theories pertaining to colonialism because they (and their concepts) are ontologically detached: “the *idea* of the dependency complex . . . the *idea* of ‘tropicality’” (*Discourse* 62). “L'écologie” was another “idea.” Césaire's compatriot, the writer Edouard Glissant, expressed distrust of its practicality in the glossary he appended to

Caribbean Discourse: “ecology (environment: ‘national park’). A recent fashion inherited like others. Will it become ‘functional’? The organizing bodies are all in Paris” (265).

He claims that French Antilleans recognized the “interdependence” of humans and the earth and that the earth could not withstand human excesses indefinitely. The absurdity of a “national park” (*Poetics* 146) in Martinique is a failure of translation and “relation” (155), namely, the metropole’s stubborn adherence to cultural monolingualism and to recognize a connection to a territory outside of itself. As this example suggests, the impulse to deploy “universal” or “cosmopolitan” ecological frameworks to solve and interpret planetary destruction is understandable, even laudable in many instances. However, they efface the experiential and circumstantial particulars attending “difference.”

This repressive will to sameness creates the ecological unconscious filled with those disavowals which, if allowed to surface, will trouble totalizing ideologies positing any single program for imagining a collective ecological future. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant implies that unlike intellectuals in advanced capitalist countries, those of “poor countries” cannot afford disdain toward the world of commerce. To survive, these nations must learn how to produce in self-sustaining ways without being consumed in the commercial world. This entails accepting the fact of economic interdependence while maintaining psychological “distance” from globalism’s most deleterious effects (*Poetics* 148–49). He and several other Francophone intellectuals outlined a plan for development they published as “Manifeste pour un projet global.” The proposal, Andre Prieto explains, was “to transform the entire French-Caribbean” agricultural economy into a “terre biologique” (244).²⁷ The region would cultivate organic food “aimed at an international luxury market” while creating a sustainable food supply for the region’s own consumption. The profits could be used for environmental clean-up, “economic self-sufficiency, administrative autonomy and eventually political independence” (245). While I concur with eco-Marxists such as Medovoi and the many others doing the hard work of anti-capitalist resistance, the “Manifeste” forces us to question how practical those positions remain when faced with those self-determining but financially ravaged nations who might consider “sustainable capitalism” (for instance, ecotourism) a logical route to economic redemption. Is the *critique* of capitalism the only thing we are seeking to sustain? If we do not sustain that critique, will there be anything else?

Notes

1. See “Ecomelancholia: Slavery, War, and Black Ecological Imaginings,” *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-first Century* (2011), eds. Stephanie LeMenager, Teresa Shewry, and Ken Hiltner, 163–78.
2. In the groundbreaking essay, “The Second Contradiction of Capitalism,” a pioneering Marxist ecological critic James O’Connor supplements the “first” contradiction, overproduction, with environmental decimation. See *Natural Causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism* (1998), chapter 8.
3. For discussions of the history of guano, I have relied primarily on Jimmy M. Skaggs, *The Great Guano Rush Entrepreneurs and American Overseas Expansion* (1994); W. M. Mathew, *The House of Gibbs and the Peruvian Guano Monopoly* (1981); David Hollet, *More Precious than Gold: The Story of the Peruvian Guano Trade* (2008); and my own primary documentary research. My colleague James A. Miller and I are working on a project currently entitled *A Cultural History of the Navassa Island Riot: A Documentary Reader*. The riot and its aftermath was covered in every major periodical of the period, including *The Boston Globe*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Cleveland Press*, *The Washington Bee*, *The New York Age*, *The Jamaican Gleaner*, *The Times of London*, and even smaller regional US papers. The hundreds of articles in themselves are evidence of how significant this event was to the US nation’s still-unsettled ideas about race and citizenship in the post-War, pre-Plessy era. In 1891, a black activist minister, the Reverend William Alexander, published a pamphlet about one of the organization’s assisting the men, *The Mutual Brotherhood of Liberty, or Our Day in Court. Including the Navassa Case* (1891). This invaluable resource was not available to Skaggs.
4. See W. M. Mathew, *The House of Gibbs and the Peruvian Guano Monopoly* (1981).
5. See Skaggs, 100–101.
6. Haiti still claims Navassa as its territory. For more on the expansionist implications of the Act and the Navassa trial, see Skaggs. E. J. Waring, an African-American attorney from Baltimore, would argue before the Supreme Court in 1889 that the US had no legal claims and therefore the case against the defendant Henry B. Jones could not be tried rightfully within the US. In a landmark case, the US decided against Jones. See *Jones v. United States*, no. 137 US 202 (1890). Frederick Douglass was the minister to Haiti during this period, arriving in Haiti only weeks after the turmoil. For a fuller discussion of the riot within the context of US expansionism, see Christina Duffy Burnett, “The Edges of Empire and the Limits of Sovereignty: American Guano Islands,” *American Quarterly* 57.3 (Sept. 2005): 779–803, which draws heavily from Skaggs’s *The Great Guano Rush*.
7. For a playful discussion of how some nineteenth-century philosophers and scientists conceptualized “life,” see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (2010), 53–81.
8. See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), 39–45.

9. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), trans. Leon S. Roudiez, 3–6 and 108–12.
10. See Skaggs, 141, and Wines, 83–93.
11. A good work on this is Marshall Sittig, *Fertilizer Industry: Processes, Pollution Control and Energy Conservation* (1979).
12. See Wines, 128–43.
13. Olmsted was the superintendent of Central Park at this time. With his future partner Calvert Vaux, he designed public parks in Boston, Cambridge, and Buffalo, as well as oversaw Central Park's redesign later in the century. See Charles E. Beveridge and Charles Capen McLaughlin, *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted* (2007), for a definitive account of his career. For a take on Olmsted's appearance in *Capital*, see Michael Perelman, "Marx and Resource Scarcity," *The Greening of Marxism*, (1996), ed. Ted Benton, 64–80. My own reading of Marx leads me to believe that other ideas about American slavery in *Capital* and his later work about the Civil War suggest that *A Journey* influenced both texts more extensively than Marx notes. It is worth noting that in 1855, Engels, who would publish on European armies in *Putnam's*, encouraged Marx to write Olmsted to find a venue for Marx's writing on militarism.
14. Arthur Schlesinger's introduction to *Cotton Kingdom* and Beveridge and McLaughlin's introduction to *Papers*, Vol. II, 1–37, detail the production history of *Journey*. Volumes II and IV offer a more reliable and nuanced interpretation of his views of slavery than Schlesinger's.
15. In an 1853 letter to Charles Loring Brace, Olmsted declared that he needed to be "more of a Democrat than I have been—a Socialist Democrat." See *Papers*, Vol. II, 17. It is worth noting that in an 1857 letter to Marx, Engels encouraged Marx to write Olmsted about Engels's work: "Haven't you heard anything from Olmsted about *Putnam's*?" This correspondence, found in *Marx and Engels, Works* (1929), can be found on Marxist.org. 8 Nov. 2011 <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/letters/57_04_22.htm>. Additionally, Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* appeared in *Putnam's*, while Olmsted edited the magazine.
16. See Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory* (2000), particularly chapter 5: "Representing pain and describing torture."
17. Marx's emphasis that the struggle over free labor was a partial cause of the war in his Civil War writing bears the imprint of Olmsted's thinking.
18. See John Cashman, "'Slaves Under our Flag': The Navassa Island Riot of 1889," *The Maryland Historian* 24.2 (1993): 1–21.
19. Taken from the Maryland Attorney General's statement included in Alexander, *The Brotherhood of Liberty* (1891). Importantly, this account conflicts with claims that the miners violently retaliated after a supervisor kicked a worker. Rush, Skaggs, and others have repeated this factual error.

20. Thomas I. Hall's rare published speech, "An Oration: Reasons Why We Are Galilean Fishermen" (1886), delivered at Harper's Ferry, notes that the Fishermen were co-founded by a free black husband and wife in 1856 in Baltimore. It is one of only a handful of surviving documents related to the Fishermen.
21. There is some evidence to suggest that Gaussoin was the son of a Belgian who joined Napoleon's army.
22. In "Fishermen," Hall states that the Fishermen adopted the symbol of the fish for its buoyancy and fecundity and speaks at some length about ichthyology. See note 20. As I have not yet located the original Gaussoin plates, I am uncertain whether this image of Navassa refers to any in his work.
23. According to reports in the *Baltimore Sun*, this included the Jewish Federation of Trades, the newly reconstituted International Workingmen's Association, and the Housesmiths, among others.
24. See Alexander, 37–41.
25. Bruno Latour's work in *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (2004) appears deeply indebted to these theories. As Dana Simmons points out, these ideas were circulating through French mining schools and polytechnics, to which Latour is an intellectual heir.
26. Richard Miller's translation adds a line, "and creatures in it," to the two from Baudelaire's poem (different from the two I include). These lines are not in Césaire's original French version, nor are they in the Baudelaire poem.
27. According to Prieto, it was first published in the Caribbean weekly *Antilla* (n.d.) then picked up by *Le Monde* in 2000.

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