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## CHAPTER ONE

### Gendering Earth

#### *Excavating Plantation Soil*

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

—DAVID MONTGOMERY, *Dirt*

The greatest event of the twentieth century incontestably remains the disappearance of agricultural activity at the helm of human life. . . . Now living only indoors, immersed only in passing time and not out in the weather, our contemporaries, packed into cities, use neither shovel nor oar; worse yet, they've never even seen them.

—MICHEL SERRES, *The Natural Contract*

The recent scholarly turn to pinpointing an origin for the Anthropocene is caught up in the history of empire and modernity. Its allegories are primarily concerned with discourses of excavating the soil and the sediment of human history. While geologists search for the carbon and other isotopes that will mark a point at which humans trespassed a threshold point in their relation to the planet, they are coming up against humanities work that has already characterized these same moments of modernity in terms such as genocide, slavery, diaspora, and ecological imperialism. Thus, Anthropocene discourse has arrived belatedly to the scene of the violence of human history. In my effort to allegorize the Anthropocene, to place it in relation to particular contexts and histories, I seek to bring these discourses together so that they might mutually inform each other, demonstrating how Caribbean authors, who have long theorized and represented the rupture of modernity, might shed light on planetary challenges in an age of climate change. My definition of climate change, here as elsewhere, means a rupture

to an ecological system. Following work in postcolonial studies that does not accept the settler colonial logic of dividing the human from nonhuman nature, I use the term “ecology” in this chapter, and in the book as a whole, as always already including the human. This builds on a large body of work in Caribbean studies in particular that has foregrounded the ways in which ecological imperialism has troubled western constructions of “nature” and the human relationship to place.<sup>1</sup> In moving in scale from a planetary totality such as the Anthropocene to the figure of the postplantation island in the Caribbean, I pursue a series of allegories from Earth to earth (soil), particularly as constituted by transatlantic histories of modernity.

To parochialize the Anthropocene is to uncover its place-based allegories. This chapter argues that excavating the soil is a vital method of Anthropocene discourse and practice. In this sense the actual fragments of earth, which are material evidence of decay and the passing of time, reflect the story of the Earth writ large. One of the early origin stories of the Anthropocene (or the “Paleo-anthropocene”) is the rise of agriculture. In that narrative the human relationship to the soil was fundamentally altered, a process that unfolded over thousands of years that led to a stratigraphic signal of increased carbon as well as methane. This issue of enormous anthropogenic change to vast portions of the earth—a kind of early terraforming—has been brought forward into the more modern history of transatlantic empire. The geographers Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin argue that “the impacts of the meeting of Old and New World human populations—including the geologically unprecedented homogenization of Earth’s biota—may serve to mark the beginning of the Anthropocene.”<sup>2</sup> While the word “meeting” minimizes the violence of European colonization of the Americas, we might use this as a starting point to investigate this moment of globalization in which all of the world’s species, human and otherwise, were radically altered. Following Walter Benjamin’s approach in which we engage a simultaneous “constellation of past and present,” or, in other words, a “telescoping of the past through the present,”<sup>3</sup> we can read these multiscale allegories of Anthropocene history as a means of figuring a contemporaneous moment of crisis in the human relationship to both Earth and earth.

### Allegories of Plantation Islands

The Caribbean islands, newly positioned as originary spaces of the Anthropocene, are integral to the history of what Alfred Crosby has termed the “Columbian exchange” and ecological imperialism.<sup>4</sup> From the decimation

of Indigenous peoples of the region to the transplantation of Old World commodity crops such as sugarcane and coffee, European colonization radically changed the region, just as New World transplants such as tomatoes, chilies, maize, and potatoes permanently altered the diets of the majority of the people of the globe. Many have demonstrated that the food of the Americas, not to mention commodity crop labor, “undergirded Europe’s rise to world dominion between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.”<sup>5</sup> While the Anthropocene has been tied by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer to an originary “steam engine thesis,” humanities scholars would point out that it is undergirded by the history of transatlantic empire and slavery, the radical dislocation of humans from their ancestral soil, and a violent irruption of modernity that predates the industrialization of nineteenth-century Europe.<sup>6</sup> This history has catalyzed new terms to examine the origins of our planetary crisis. Jason W. Moore, borrowing from Andreas Malm, has developed a critique of what he calls the “Capitalocene,” explaining that “capitalism is a way of organizing nature as a whole . . . a nature in which human organizations (classes, empires, markets, etc.) not only make environments, but are simultaneously made by the historical flux and flow of the web of life.”<sup>7</sup> Since capitalism was constituted by transatlantic slavery and the plantation system, the term “Plantationocene” has recently been adopted to further specify the ways in which an economic and political system of empire is exacted on the earth.<sup>8</sup>

A critical engagement with narrative is vital to understanding the ways in which we represent ecological crises, and a fundamental contribution made by scholars in the environmental humanities.<sup>9</sup> Scholars have established that the allegorical mode was integral to representing the colonial violence of transatlantic empire and the plantation, particularly in the cartography of the island Americas.<sup>10</sup> Cartographic allegories materially extend “Old” World landscapes onto the “New,” in which American landscapes and peoples were assimilated, appropriated, and rendered familiar (and often lifeless).<sup>11</sup> Antonello Gerbi has shown that the novelty of Caribbean flora and fauna caused a radical shift in European conceptions of human and nonhuman difference, as well as shock about the deep history of the globe.<sup>12</sup> The island, with its terrestrial boundedness, became foundational to figuring a newly encountered world. As Richard H. Grove has explained, the tropical island became “in practical environmental as well as mental terms, an easily conceived allegory of a whole world. Contemporary observations of the ecological demise of islands were easily converted into premonitions

of environmental destruction on a more global scale.”<sup>13</sup> To Europeans, the island colony became a space of social and ecological experimentation and, due to the island’s boundedness and finite resources, the site of the earliest environmental conservation, underlining the close relationship between ecology and empire.<sup>14</sup> Despite Indigenous genocide, transatlantic slavery, environmental destruction, and species extinctions, colonial authors and armchair travelers continued to figure the Caribbean island in terms of Christian allegories of paradise; as Grove explains, “For this redemptive purpose the island was the ideal allegorical, practical and botanical symbol and desired place of abode.”<sup>15</sup>

As the authors of the volume *Caribbean Literature and the Environment* detail, ancient Greek and Christian allegories of paradise were transposed onto the Caribbean islands to render them as hyperbolic fecundity. For example, Nicolò Scillacio was convinced by travelers’ reports of the Caribbean to proclaim in his epistle of 1494 that one could plant any seed in Guadeloupe, “for the soil rejoices . . . and never reject[s] anything that you throw in it; it accepts nothing without giving it back much more abundantly and with great increase.”<sup>16</sup> This Edenic myth of fertility confused plant diversity with an extraordinary yield for food, suppressing the material realities of labor and leading colonists, armchair travelers, and many a current-day tourist to assume that one need not labor for sustenance in tropical climates.<sup>17</sup> Myths of soil and climate fecundity prevailed, even when, as early as 1769, monocrop agriculture had exhausted Barbadian soil to the extent that an attempt was made to import richer soil from Dutch Guiana.

The European allegory of the paradisiacal island took many forms and was visible in Caribbean cartographies, in poetry, and even in the naming practices of sugar plantations as “Eden” and “Hope,” a suppression of the violence of genocide, diaspora, and slavery. It also permeated British poetry about the region, in which eighteenth-century writers such as James Grainger could wax on in Georgic prose about the “the cultured soil” that “charms the eye” in his epic “The Sugar Cane: A Poem, in Four Books.”<sup>18</sup> This figuring of the Caribbean as a pastoral allegory is decidedly about the suppression of colonial modernity, the use of allegorical master narratives from Christian, classical Greek, and western European contexts to cover over the rupture of colonial violence. It is precisely this tension between “paradise and plantation,” to draw from Ian Gregory Strachan’s book title, that has informed a large body of work in Caribbean island writing.<sup>19</sup> Authors such as Jamaica Kincaid, Olive Senior, Lorna Goodison, Shani Mootoo, and Merle Collins

have turned to the allegory of the island garden and “excavated” the soil to explore the violent process of sedimentation and creolization.<sup>20</sup> While the complex diasporas of plants and peoples in the Caribbean problematize the notion of “natural” history and its segregation from human agency, this historical process is also tied to particular literary forms, especially allegory.

Since allegory signifies a rupture between the present and the past even as it attempts to place them in symbolic relation, it has become an important narrative mode for Caribbean writers concerned with historiography. This engagement with history is figured through constellations of the present, as Édouard Glissant argues in *Caribbean Discourse*:

The past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present. The duty of the writer is to explore this obsession, to show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present. This exploration is therefore related neither to a schematic chronology nor to a nostalgic lament. It leads to the identification of a painful notion of time and its full projection forward into the future, without the help of those plateaus in time from which the West has benefited, without the help of that collective density that is the primary value of an ancestral cultural heartland. That is what I call a prophetic vision of the past.<sup>21</sup>

While Benjamin’s “Angel of History” is the witness to the wreckage of the debris of the past as he is blown backward into the future, Glissant’s allegory of progress is constituted by an “obsession” with the past because it has not yet been excavated and narrated.<sup>22</sup> He contends that Caribbean history is characterized by “ruptures” and “brutal dislocation,” where “historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment.”<sup>23</sup> Here the soil is both material and a vital allegory for excavating the violence of the past. Not only is the narrative result a “tormented chronology of time” and space, but it suggests that the (subjugated) past, suppressed in dominant historiography, becomes “obsessively present.”<sup>24</sup> This history of empire, diaspora, and resettlement necessarily foregrounds the ways in which the violence of plantation societies ruptured continuous human relationships to place and thus to earth (soil) and Earth (planet). Here I want to tie this particular experience of rupture to allegory and its uses in one particular novel of speculative fiction by the Jamaican author, sociologist, and historian Erna Brodber, which allegorizes Caribbean historiography through the gendered figures of Earth, soil, plot, and plantation.

Published to commemorate the bicentennial of the British abolition of the slave trade, Brodber's novel *The Rainmaker's Mistake* (2007) stages a kind of "pilgrim's progress" as her multiple characters move from their understanding of the plantation as an island "paradise" to their awakening to a recognition of slavery, freedom, sustainable agriculture, reproductive futurity, and mortality. Like Anthropocene discourse, it is very much concerned with beginnings and uses allegorical narratives to uncover the various origin stories of the people's broken relationship to agriculture, to the soil, and to the Earth. One of her characters becomes an archeologist, literally exhuming the soil for traces of their genealogical past and their subterranean slave mothers. Like the larger genre of speculative fiction to which it belongs, the novel utilizes many of the characteristic elements of allegory—the story is staged like a quest, and there is ample semiotic play between the concepts of planting and transplantation, roots and rot, seed and semen. Brodber engages the allegories of empire that constituted the naming of enslaved plantation workers by including a cast of characters named Cupid, Essex, London, Jupiter, Venus, Queenie, and Little Congo. Like Anthropocene narratives, the novel is concerned with locating and memorializing the particular history of a rupture between humans and place, earth and Earth, "species" and planet. It is by locating this rupture that her characters feel they are able to enter history. The narrative they uncover, the "rainmaker's mistake," has ecological implications that unleash what Glissant has called a "prophetic vision of the past."

The historical entanglements and ruptures I have foreground here take on spatial effects. Brodber's allegory of Caribbean history is spatialized across different islands; the characters move from their plantation past to a subterranean realm where their entombed slave mothers are buried in the sediment of history. Other locations include the "Norm," the "Future" and the "Pluperfect," a temporalizing of space that the characters visit in their travels and travails to achieve "naturalness."<sup>25</sup> This quest for "naturalness," a place and time when the human was not figured outside of nonhuman nature, is both a concern of Anthropocene writing as well as a larger issue for thinking about how diaspora influences a people's relationship to land, and by extension, narrative. It is integral to Glissant's contention that the violence of plantation modernity alienated humans from nature, a point made all the more visible in the body of Caribbean literature that engages nonhuman nature through the narrative tropes of plants and transplantation and through the figure of the island garden as world.<sup>26</sup> I would like to add to this body

of work by engaging Brodber's excavation of an alternative history of roots that are located outside the plantation fields. *The Rainmaker's Mistake* thus imagines the sustaining roots of the slave provision grounds, allegorizing the concept of roots as it is imagined through one African transplant—the yam—and its acclimatization to Caribbean soil. Her novel provides a vital interrogation of Caribbean historiography, that “instinct and root impulse which returns the better West Indian writers back to the soil,” as George Lamming observed,<sup>27</sup> and complicates the recent turn to the Plantationocene which overlooks the more sustaining—and feminized—underground narratives of earth/Earth.

### Roots, Plots, and Provision Grounds

Caribbean historical production has mainly focused on the cultural economies of the plantation, turning to the racial terrors of forced agricultural labor to produce such important theories as “transculturation,” creolization, and “nation language.”<sup>28</sup> In the wake of this production, John Parry has countered that that Caribbean 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 of the plantation rather than local production.<sup>29</sup> This remapping has narrative effects. As Sylvia Wynter has argued, Caribbean history and literature can be understood in the socioeconomic divisions between the master's plantation, on the one hand, and the slaves' provision grounds, on the other.<sup>30</sup> Wynter's insights are relevant to how scholars excavate Caribbean history and the ground on which cultural archeology is conducted. In general terms, 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. Plantation monoculture drove the logic of the external markets and became the primary lens through which Caribbean historiography was initially written. Yet 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, figuring



as an important “root” allegory in Brodber’s novel. Moreover, this movement to rethink the material histories of the Caribbean outside the plantation system (or through its peripheries) points us to a more complex and lateral understanding of the earth/Earth than the terms “Plantationocene” or “Capitalocene” can provide.<sup>31</sup>

The recuperative power associated with the soil of the provision grounds is essential to addressing the rupture of plantation modernity and drives much of the narrative of *The Rainmaker’s Mistake*. The Latin *homo* derives from the term for living soil, *humus*; this etymological and ontological relationship between human presence in a particular place, ancestral roots in the soil, is of pressing concern in the Caribbean in terms of both the history of diaspora and in addressing contemporary crises in the islands—particularly flooding and soil erosion—in an era of globalization and climate change.<sup>32</sup> Reading the constellations of the past through the crises of the present, we can see that this narrative desire to recuperate a “natural” relationship to the soil reflects both the ruptures of colonial modernity and postindependence pressures in the Caribbean that have caused agricultural alienation and outmigration. In other words, a crisis in the relationship to the soil and to Earth might be positioned simultaneously as deriving from plantation slavery and diaspora, neoliberal displacement from agricultural practices, and threats of sea-level rise and other signs of climate change that disproportionately impact tropical islands.

The perceived split between the human and nature that Anthropocene discourse renders visible is deeply tied to empire. Glissant made this legible in his well-known argument that the history of diaspora and enslavement created a rupture in the Caribbean relationship to land, creating a division between nature and culture.<sup>33</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>34</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, including sugarcane, breadfruit, coffee, nutmeg, mango, and other staples of the region, have adapted and been 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>35</sup> This excavation of the provision grounds reflects the historical “plot” of cultural sustainability amid the terrors of plantation

capitalism, providing vital ground for the postemancipation period and unearthing a contemporary agricultural crisis.

Wynter explicates the process by which the European colonization of the Americas alienated humans from nonhuman 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 values.” She argues that key to the development of this plot system was the noncapitalist sensibility of Africans who associated the land with life (rather than with property), who understood cultivation in terms of food production, employed nonlinear models of time, and perceived death and burial as a “mystical reunion with the earth.”<sup>36</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>37</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>38</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>39</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 primary root vegetable.<sup>40</sup> So important was this staple to the provision grounds that they were often called *yam grounds*.<sup>41</sup> The yam was a preferred food of Africans and their descendants, a bread kind that was 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” is the synonym for yam and other starches such as plantain and taro (eddoes).<sup>42</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 enslaved gardeners who had to travel miles to work there; and they were essential to rooting Jamaican peasantry in the land, connecting each

generation through cultivation, labor, and foodways.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the yam has been an important trope in Caribbean literature, essential 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 yam's location in the provision grounds outside the plantation complex (often out of view), as well as its subsistence underground (where it stores nutrients for the community), underlines its significance as an invisible resource 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 an African past. Yet the symbolism of the yam is deeper as an allegory of transplanted culture, history, and even language itself.

Anthropocene scientists are concerned with excavating the sedimentation of human history, but the food systems of the post-1492 Americas in this reckoning system are visible only in their absence. In the Anthropocene search for fossils, the genocide of Indigenous peoples of the Americas and the destruction of their agricultural systems can be registered only through the *lack of carbon* in the stratigraphic register after conquest. This drop in atmospheric carbon signals their absence. We know from Michel-Rolph Trouillot about the silences of history, particularly as they are created by empire.<sup>44</sup> But rarely do we find evidence of their uncanny materiality echo across the centuries. This raises the question of the gaps in geological history, which may never register the labor of the millions of Africans transported to the plantation Americas but would register the spike in carbon from the deforestation that made the Plantationocene possible. Consequently, in the recent shift to the “geohumanities” and the turn to “geologics,” we must question the facile suturing of sedimentary fossils to human histories. The fossil record is an archive that demands a dialectical interpretation that allows for the incorporation of absence as much as presence.

These questions about the missing registers of history have been critical to the region's poets and historians. For instance, Kamau Brathwaite has theorized the relationship between transplantation and subterranean history, particularly in the semantic play between the words “yam” and *nyame*. The Jamaican term *nyam* derives from a number of West African languages for the word for “to eat.”<sup>45</sup> Brathwaite excavates “underground resources” and explains *nam* as a “secret-name, soul-source, connected with *nyam* (eat), *yam* (root food), *nyame* (name of god).”<sup>46</sup> If the act of planting naturalizes a relationship

between people and place, the diasporic subject and his or her descendent “would plant his *yam* and with it . . . [a] little piece of Africa on mourning ground.”<sup>47</sup> In this word play between “mourning,” and “mooring” Brathwaite foregrounds the relationship between land and loss. “*Nam* is the heart of our nation-language,” he declares, and it is thus an allegory of subterranean roots as well as the vehicle of articulation and reassemblage itself.<sup>48</sup> These narratives about recuperating a “mourning ground” are about the rupture of modernity created by the violence of empire. Since capitalism and empire turned earth/Earth into property and segregated humans from nonhuman nature, and thus nature from history, the use of organic metaphors of “roots culture” naturalizes—or, to draw from Glissant, sediments—a population in place.<sup>49</sup>

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 descendants. Caribbean scholarship has troubled many 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 speculative 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 the violence of modernity.<sup>50</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>51</sup>

Here the yam provides a vital allegory for articulating the violence of transplantation and to foregrounding the imbrication of African roots and the soil. Encoding the violence of cultural fragmentation, as well as potential for regrowth, the story of the yam becomes what Jenny Sharpe might call a

“counterallegory” to the plantation plot, a narrative of African regeneration in a new soil, a sustaining root in a creolized Caribbean.<sup>52</sup>

The discourses of the Plantationocene and Capitalocene may help raise questions of accountability for our Earth crisis, but they do not allow a “grounding” in the specificities of the soil. Caribbean scholars engaged here suggest that we turn to those sites that served as foundational repositories of Indigenous and African beliefs and rebellion against plantation capitalism. The sites need to be excavated not as the Edenic gardens of the early allegories of empire but, rather, as spaces entangled with the violence of modernity and in the networks of plantation capitalism. While Africans and their descendants were able to maintain agricultural traditions with crops they imported across the Middle Passage, such as yams, ackee, gourds, and other staples, these were also valuable commodities. The provision grounds supplied the internal markets of the Caribbean and contributed a vibrant, parallel economy to the monoculture of the plantocracy. Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan estimate that by the late eighteenth century, more than ten thousand Jamaican slaves attended the Kingston market weekly. The success of the internal markets caused planters to complain that one-fifth to one-half of the currency in Jamaica and the Windward Islands was in the hands of enslaved people.<sup>53</sup> In addition to being a stepping-stone toward liberation, the slave gardens were a powerful site of creolization. Enslaved subjects grew “a staggering array of crops,” blending European, African, and American cultigens that included cashews, bananas, calabashes, calalu, okra, oranges, and other fruit and spices.<sup>54</sup> Provision grounds were distinct from the small gardens that people 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 sugarcane.<sup>55</sup> In these distant plots, enslaved gardeners and their peasant successors cultivated root and tree crops, as well as grains and legumes, for communal use and market distribution. In these spaces, Brathwaite explains, on that “sacred plot of land where slaves wd plot,” they found “groundation.”<sup>56</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>57</sup> In islands where enslaved laborers 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 enslaved people 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 enslaved gardeners provided the majority of the region's sustenance and gained significant amounts of currency, autonomy, and even freedom.<sup>58</sup>

Recovering the "sacred plot of land where slaves wd plot," as Brathwaite terms it, foregrounds how space (a plot of land) produces narrative (employment).<sup>59</sup> Likewise, Wynter has argued that the antinomy 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, imbricated in the modernity of empire.<sup>60</sup>

Allegory is caught up in the master narratives of tradition and thus has a particular way of staging the disjunctive relationship to the past. It is particularly useful in engaging how the plantation elites inscribe what Wynter calls the "myth of history," representing external metropolitan forces.<sup>61</sup> This is part of a larger critique she has lobbied about the ways in which the post-Copernican world of nature was systematized to overrepresent rational "Man," a colonial construct that arose from a racialized civil and legal discourse that also "legitimated the subordination of the world" through the "systematic stigmatization of the Earth" as "'vile and base matter.'"<sup>62</sup> This "quarrel with history," to borrow from the cultural critic Edward Baugh, was a major debate in anglophone literary production in the wake of independence.<sup>63</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," a warning that we might liken to allegory itself.<sup>64</sup> The provision grounds, Wynter explains, provided the space for folk knowledge, orality, 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, Wynter argues, is the "root cause of our alienation and possibly our salvation."<sup>65</sup> It is this question of an *earthly* salvation that is an undercurrent in the allegory of the provision

grounds, a turn to the soil to figure alternative possibilities for the past and present.

This ambivalence about the form of the *plot* is a foundational (but overlooked) thread of Wynter's article and has important resonance with Harris's long-term critique of realist narrative and materialist approaches to history. In *History, Fable, and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas*, he argues that Marxist methods are limited because they are unable to draw on "unpredictable intuitive resources" that might liberate subjects and spaces from relations of property.<sup>66</sup> Thus, he argues that West Indian historians have relied too heavily on the plantocracy's model of history, reducing land and slave labor to economic relations.<sup>67</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>68</sup>

In reading these allegories of the soil we can better comprehend the symbolic exchange of much Anthropocene discourse. 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 that the "the soil of history" is a literary resource, rendering the earth "the living fossil of buried cultures."<sup>69</sup> Like the subterranean excavations of geologists (or archeologists in Brodber's novel), we find not dead matter but "living fossils," strata that we might read like a book about "buried cultures," paralleling an Anthropocene turn to theorizing the memory of the Earth and its chronicles of human history.<sup>70</sup>

While Brathwaite located language as arising from this "mourning ground," to Harris, the nonhuman world is also constitutive of language and therefore literary form. He writes, "When the human animal understands his [or her] genius, he [or she] 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>71</sup> Language and knowledge production is expressed in a phenomenological rooting of the human in an active landscape, a dialogue with nonhuman nature (and therefore space/time).<sup>72</sup> Harris 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. His

preferred genre of articulating the “density of place” is the allegorical novel, a form that has not been particularly visible in an anglophone region known for its social realist novels. Well before the debate between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad over whether allegory was the appropriate form for post-colonial literature or merely a colonial inheritance, Harris observed that “allegory is one of the ruling concepts which our civilization has imposed on many colonial peoples,” but one can approach this form “from the victimized side and renovate it . . . so that allegory is not a museum piece.”<sup>73</sup> It is this complicated relationship between place, history, and form that I would like to explore by turning to Brodber, whose work has long been influenced by 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.

### The Garden and Allegory

Allegory is polysemous and embedded in specific historical places and contexts, meaning that it does not travel easily across time. This is why it can be disorienting to read. It disrupts expectations of chronological sequencing and constructs coexisting parallel spaces and temporalities. Instead of characters, allegory employs personified concepts (such as truth, freedom and death) more than individualized human subjects.<sup>74</sup> Even though *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* was nominated for a Commonwealth Literature Prize in 2008, most reviews express confusion about the text, determining that the novel is “impossible to follow and yet beautiful to read.”<sup>75</sup> In keeping with allegorical form, *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* is not written in the realist language of individual subjectivity. In fact, the writing pushes beyond the materialist boundaries of the plantation context and historical realism. Published to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of the British Slave Trade Act of 1807, the novel has a gloss from Brodber on the back cover, explaining her interest in how postemancipation people of African descent interpreted their freedom. The present anniversary thus provides a constellation through which to reflect on the past. 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>76</sup>



In writing on the Anthropocene, Dipesh Chakrabarty points out that “freedom has been the most important motif of written accounts of human history of these past two hundred and fifty years,” but that concept of freedom has not been linked to human geological agency and the processes that led to our current climate crisis.<sup>77</sup> He makes an odd disjunction, because one might raise the question as to what the liberation of enslaved people from an island plantation economy would have to do with global warming, particularly when the Caribbean islands have produced a negligible amount of atmospheric methane and carbon compared with the rest of the world. Yet through allegory, a pedagogical form about the process of interpretation, Brodber stages the ways in which understanding the concept of freedom and the preplantation past leads to a dialectical—or perhaps tidalectical—engagement with “nature-history.”<sup>78</sup> By extension, this generates accountability in the human relationship to the Earth. I pursue this reading in accordance with the allegorical process by which her characters come to this understanding.

Allegory disrupts chronological modes of time and space; accordingly, it is not easy to wrest a summary from this opaque novel because Brodber does not provide a plot by which we would recognize the postemancipation Caribbean. Certainly, Harris’s allegorical work has influenced Brodber’s novel, as she is equally concerned with ethical ideals such as truth, history, freedom, and death and, to address them, inscribes “vessels” of history such as ships, planes, and women’s reproductive bodies.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, her characters also travel between past, present, and future, collapsing linear models of time and narration. Her work differs from Harris’s in that her rendering of history is about decay, figuring what Benjamin termed *Naturgeschichte* (nature-history), which “appears not in bud and bloom but” in “irresistible decay,” representing human subjection to entropy.<sup>80</sup>

The telos of individuation so favored by the social realist novel is challenged in that *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* is narrated by seven different characters who attempt to understand the plantation past and the concept of Freedom and embrace a mortality that is coded as “naturalness.” Her figuring of the human has challenged the audience; as Carolyn Cooper notes, one person shifts into another’s perspective, and in some cases characters acquire different allegorical names as their knowledge of their pasts develop.<sup>81</sup> Like all allegories, the novel does not locate itself in any easily identifiable place or nation, and rather than charting progress (toward emancipation, nationalism, sovereignty), the novel allegorizes the *desire for growth* and the processes

that bring growth into being rather than the temporal product. In that sense she depicts the human, à la Wýnter, as “a praxis” rather than product.<sup>82</sup> As a historical novel about emancipation, *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* uses allegory to pose an ontological alternative to the teleological plot of liberation.

Allegory is concerned with founding myths and their disjunctions. Accordingly, the text opens with the first-person narration of the child named Queenie, who describes the founding myth of a man whom we later discover is her slave master. Mr. Charlie, a man who is not labeled by race but is described as “reddened and hardened by the sun,” decides that he wants more than his plot of corn, plantains, and cassava. To shift from sustainable plots to plantation capitalism, he declares that he needs labor. Inspired by the “phallus-like dependents of each flower” of the African tulip tree, “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). 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 enslaved characters and thus makes his progenitor myth their history and ancestry. 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” (2). 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). Like the colonial myths of paradise, the plantation island is described as a “garden of Eden” (16).

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, and our allegoresis follows the learning process of the characters. 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 patronymic role of divine creator. The novel’s delay in explaining the form of these developed seeds reflects Queenie’s

own alienation from a language or narrative to articulate her origins. Consequently, it is from another source that we discover that she and her cohort are not humans but yams. This narrative 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). Confusingly, the yam narrative reflects an allegory of roots culture, but with a plantation master as progenitor. 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 a narrative of androgenesis: 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-ins for women’s reproductive roles, erasing the agency of women altogether except as a passive maternal “bosom” or receptive “sister.” This is not all that different, in narrative terms, from the colonial myth of fecund islands in which European men could plant a seed and “the soil rejoices . . . and never reject(s) anything that you throw in it; it accepts nothing without giving it back much more abundantly and with great increase.” Nor is it all that different from the masculinist “Age of Man” claimed by some theorists of the Anthropocene.

Brodber poses a challenge to the normative plot of emancipation history, employing allegory to collapse the spaces of the plantation (Mr. Charlie) and the provision grounds (the people of the yam), suggesting their mutual imbrication into ecological modernity. 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 allegoresis.<sup>83</sup> As many have noted, allegory is “other speaking” (from the Greek *allos*, other), a form of double talk that “inverts” meaning.<sup>84</sup> The word “allegory” derives from *agorevo*, speaking in the marketplace, a suggestive etymology when considering the form’s double talk in relation to creole, a codified language that developed to be impermeable to plantation masters. It also speaks to the Caribbean history of economic exchange, including the slave markets.<sup>85</sup>

Most significant to this novel's depiction of the ambivalence between plantation and provision ground, allegory encodes a "rift at its center," an aporia that cannot unify sign to signified, word to meaning, or present to past.<sup>86</sup>

Allegory's relationship to the past and its rupture with history has been a vital concern 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>87</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 bicentennial year in 2007 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>88</sup> It is by denaturalizing and gendering the narrative of roots, what Annie Paul calls an allegorical transition from "yamhood to personhood," that exposes this historical and semiotic rift.<sup>89</sup>

The garden is one of the most established allegorical symbols and, as explained, has been foundational to European narratives (and material practices) of island colonization.<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, Brodber uses the biblical allegory of a fall from (plantation) paradise, in which growing knowledge of racial mixing, freedom, heterosexual reproduction, and history constitute a rupture in narrative and in their relationship to their androcentric origin story. She depicts a prelapsarian narrative in which originally the community renders time in terms of "the number of yam seasons" (10) and sees the slave plantation as "the garden of Eden [where] every material need [is] met" (16).

The garden of Eden narrative is ruptured by knowledge of the racial violence that led to Caribbean creolization and by cognizance of colonial history. Consequently, two moments of rupture disintegrate the allegory of the yam and, by extension, the characters' sense of roots. The first is an allegory of racial difference: 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 is enigmatic about her origins (9). Immediately afterward, the community is summoned to Mr. Charlie's verandah, where he informs them it is 1834 and those younger than six are free; suddenly, historical time collapses and it is 1838 and everyone "is free." The formerly enslaved subjects smile and wait, wondering about Mr. Charlie's strange behavior over "this thing called 'free'" (11). Thus, the second rupture is constellated around the

figure of chronology (dates), the law, and freedom. 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). It is these ruins of empire—or, as Ann Laura Stoler terms it, "imperial debris"—that end up as integral to their quest to understand the past. The rest of the narrative recounts the community's banishment from their "Eden," their attempts to establish a sustainable island community and provision grounds, their lack of sexual knowledge, their inability to reproduce, their quest to learn their preplantation roots, and their attempts to understand the nature of mortality. Through the device of allegory, the characters are anachronistic—they live for more than two hundred years without aging, they are positioned outside of reproductive futurity, they do not comprehend death, and they are unable to access knowledge of their past.

Brodber's novel challenges the plot of the historical realist novel, depicting her slave characters as "retarded" in growth but "happy people" who have no concept of freedom. 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, reception of the novel is mixed not only because Queenie and her conarrators destabilize our assumptions about the individualist model of the realist novel, but also because the very plot of Caribbean history is destabilized by experiments in form—particularly through that most troubling of genres, allegory.

Brodber moves beyond the Plantationocene to merge the plots of the plantation and provision grounds; as a result, their narratives become an allegory of dominant models of Caribbean historicism. Initially, her slave characters 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 enslaved offspring like yams. This is a historical model of Edenic islands that arises from the plantation complex, 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 postemancipation subjects and a new formulation of narrative, which is about building sustainable provision 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 postemancipation era. It is an allegory of allegorical representation itself, insisting that we develop a historical consciousness along with her characters, who are repeatedly likened to the questors of other allegories such as the “knights of the round table” (70). This use of allegory is familiar to postcolonial texts that refuse to accept master narratives of the colonized as “History.” As Samuel Durrant points out, postcolonial allegories are not necessarily about historical events themselves. Rather, they are about our relation to the narration of these events.<sup>91</sup> Thus, Brodber produces an allegory of Caribbean history, a narrative that would speak directly to Hayden White’s well-known claim that history-making itself is allegorical.<sup>92</sup>

It is through a visceral relation with soil, roots, and rot that the characters are able to begin to enter historical time and embrace “naturalness.” 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 foundational to the community’s future.

Through the rotting corpse, Brodber’s novel suggests, à la Benjamin, that history is subject to nature and therefore to decay, an experience with mortality that is crucial to the community’s quest towards “naturalness.” While for Benjamin the emblematic form of this decay was the *facies hippocratica*, or death’s head, that catalyzes human mourning, Brodber turns this into a much more active, ejaculating corpse.<sup>93</sup> Woodville is nearly dead and hardly speaks, yet his “male organ [has] a life of its own” and at odd moments the community observes that “milk came out of this independent organ” (35). While the people do not recognize this discharge because they are outside of sexual desire and reproduction, its appearance “mark[s] a momentous change” in their community and they 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 essential

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 sexual puns of wood and re-membering, seed and 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, an altogether different "Age of Man."

### Gendering Earth: Roots and Rot in the Anthropocene

Allegory is known for its wordplay, and accordingly, Brodber engages a series of etymological and semantic connections between diaspora, seeds, and semen; planting and transplantation; memory, member, and dismembering; humus and human; and, as I explore in this final section, roots and rot. These relationships are essential to understanding Brodber's complex exploration of the violence of plantation modernity and its implications for naturalizing the relations between humans and place. 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. As Benjamin would have it, nature and history are petrified in allegorical representation through the figure of the corpse, of "irresistible decay." Moreover, "If nature has always been subject to the power of death, it is also true that it has always been allegorical."<sup>94</sup>

The term "root" derives from "rot," and in Brodber's novel the ability to excavate one's maternal origins or roots is dependent on the decay of the patronymic plot, symbolized by the bodies of Woodville and Mr. Charlie.<sup>95</sup> Benjamin argues that "the word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience," and it is this mortality that the community actively seeks to enter what they call "naturalness."<sup>96</sup> 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 (heterosexual) reproduction, they discover that Woodville is their progenitor, a "stud" used on the plantation. Brodber employs the word "root" in terms of the genealogies and foodways 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). 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). As is characteristic of allegory, he is called “The Enigma” (86). As an enigma, he condenses the symbolism of the community’s past, as well as the process of historicism itself. Hayden White has argued that the “manner of being-in-the-world that we call ‘historical’ is paradoxical and cannot be apprehended by human thought except in the form of an enigma. If this enigma cannot be resolved by pure reason and scientific explanation, it can be grasped in all its complexity and multilayeredness in symbolic thought and given a real, if only provisional comprehensibility in those true allegories of temporality that we call narrative histories.”<sup>97</sup>

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 discovered in Woodville’s old plot. Thus, unlike the singular corpse of Baroque allegory, Brodber guides our reading to multiple constellations of the past and gendered figures of nature-history.

Queenie comes to realize that one marks the place of a “woman named Jubah” (75).<sup>98</sup> Brodber has written elsewhere of the importance of “Juba’s head” as a sign of the feminized cultural transfer from Africa to the Americas, 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>99</sup> Thus, this allegorical novel foregrounds the earth and woman as the primary but invisible cultural progenitors who must be excavated by the community/reader, turning this into a larger allegory about the sign of woman and gendered reproduction narratives. 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 transcendence of space and marks human time off from the timelessness of the gods and the eternal returns of nature.<sup>100</sup>

As people of the yam, Queenie and her cohorts have already learned that “what is under the ground is sacred” (28) because they see these as birth mounds; they have not yet entered history, which would lead to death and decay. One character, who visits a place called “the Future,” teaches the astonished community 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, on 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 postemancipation community’s ability to render nature-history, to find their own means of planting their ancestors in the soil and to articulate their shared connection to roots and rot. This, in turn, is part of a planetary temporality 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 earthly burial, which, as Harrison observes, “domesticates the inhuman transcendence of space” and catalyzes their entrance into history. Consequently regional access to history is rendered through an embodied engagement with localized place rather than through colonial narrative “monuments” and “battles,” as Derek Walcott has written.<sup>101</sup>

In their excavations of “Charlie dirt” they find two additional mounds, marked “Phibbah” and “Princess” (75), allegorical names likened to living members of the community (78). Associating the earth with Charlie’s ordinary 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).<sup>102</sup> 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. Consequently, the excavation of history leads to subterranean ancestors and roots, rendering human time in relation to the violent biopolitics of sexual labor and reproduction as integral to the plantation economy.<sup>103</sup> This incorporates a feminized and maternal genealogy rather than the anachronism of Mr. Charlie's Eden.

In allegorical terms, the community members must dig below the patriarchal narratives of both Mr. Charlie and Woodville to recover their submerged mother/earth; only then can their corpses signal their imbrication in nature-history and in reproductive futurity. The cave, that well-known feminized figure of Platonic allegory, is also a foundation for subterranean human development and provides a new plot for the postemancipation community. Consequently, they are "publicly forced to question the yam story and to think of death and its lifelessness" (109), and to engage the corpse(s) that signal history as ruins. In grasping the implications of this new model of time, Brodber's community turns to the plot of the provision grounds, which foregrounds earth over property and, as they develop their own agricultural system, sustainable food cultivation over plantation monoculture. It seems that Brodber does not follow Wynter in representing death and burial as a "mystical reunion with the earth," because the former's emphasis on plantation violence and a Glissantian "prophetic vision of the past" calls into question any narratives of transcendence. Her novel shifts from the teleological plot of liberation (freedom) toward the dissolution of the subject, a narrative of decay that is figured as "naturalness." Like Benjamin's allegories, "seen from the perspective of death, life is the production of corpses" and the accumulation of ruins.<sup>104</sup>

When the community excavates the three mothers, they understand Woodville's relationship with these women; he is described as a "stud" who "seeds" these female "vessels." The stories are "dismembered," and, as in Benjamin's theory, human corpses are rendered as thinglike—yet not so that they can enter allegory, as he would have it, but so that the plantation's biopolitics of reproduction are rendered as part of historical allegoresis. Accordingly, the yam story becomes "dwindling past myth" (126). Woodville then dies, "already sawdust, waiting to increase [their] soil" (126). The novel could have easily concluded there, making this an allegory of how humans enter "nature" and "naturalness," and thereby decay and history, demonstrating a narrative healing of the nature-culture rupture created by plantation modernity.

However, Brodber's work expands beyond the Anthropocene's "Age of Man" and the Benjaminian "plot" of nature-history. Benjamin's theory of Baroque allegory—and, by extension, nature and history—is androcentric; the vast majority of corpses in his study of the *Trauerspiel* are men, their sons, and soldiers.<sup>105</sup> In Brodber's contemporary allegory about the legacies of colonial violence, we see far more active figures of both woman and non-human nature. In Benjamin, the figure of nature is reduced to death and decay, a plot that is evident in Brodber's allegory of the slave community's postlapsarian "fall" into knowledge and freedom from the patronymic plot. But a new plot is uncovered by the community—this one not from a rotting corpse but, rather, from their own memories. In a bizarre plot twist, Queenie begins to use hypnosis to excavate their suppressed memories, a state they liken to death (131). Through that process they uncover an allegory of diaspora, of the foolishness of men who insist on movement away from the maternal, and about the "depletion of Mother's nation." In sum, they lost their way and forgot their past. In this gendered narrative of diaspora, they learn that Tayeb (Woodville) was the rainmaker who made the fatal mistake of the book's title: he called forward so much water that "Mother's body [was] swept away by the tide of [his] rains." It becomes a story of a new familial relationship to history, shifting away from the patronymic plot, generating a sense of accountability in their recognition that "he had committed matricide" (140).

In reflecting back on Tayeb's story of the yam people, the community determines it was "Laughable. Pitable." Yet it was a narrative that "worked. It kept [them] happy" (143). As Brodber has written extensively about the importance of the yam to the African diaspora, it is interesting that she has chosen to displace the yam as originary root and focus our attention on the figure of the maternal, on the earth/Earth.<sup>106</sup> This chapter has sought to foreground Brodber's allegory of the mutual imbrication between the plots of the plantation (Plantationocene) and provision grounds and how engaging these historiographies leads to a formal shift away from the realist novel in ways that suggest the postemancipation community must establish their own plot. In an obvious sense, the allegory's didactic function is to suggest one must excavate the seeds and soil of community history to recover what Brathwaite would call its "submerged mothers."<sup>107</sup> A new, more hopeful plot emerges that demonstrates that excavations of history can lead diasporic communities "into naturalness" (146), which in this speculative novel means both reproductive futurity and mortality. 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.

A large body of Anthropocene scholarship focuses on excavating the source of the originary split between the human (as species) and nonhuman nature. Consequently, it is an allegory of reading earth (soil) for Earth (planet). In a similar vein, Brodber’s novel stages a quest in which the community is given one origin narrative, only to be repeatedly replaced by another (Mr. Charlie, Woodville, the yam, the subterranean mothers). Yet the last “plot” of the novel uncovers what is foundational to the allegory of excavation: earth. Soil 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 serve 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) and sustaining their crops and survival. And, of course, earth or soil itself is a figure of both microbial life and sedimentary decay.

Although many would claim that “cli-fi” climate fiction is not relevant to Caribbean literary production, the key rupture in this novel is about the destruction of earth/Earth. The mistake made by the titular rainmaker was that Tayeb tried to “prove that we knew how to do great things” and thus called forward a rain that overwhelmed the planet, sweeping away “mother’s body” (140). The rains “came and came; swept the green out to sea and left white marl, for pulverizing into noxious dust,” creating a “river cutting the earth” that caused “grasslessness, treelessness” (137). This is more than an allegory of diaspora from “mother Africa.” It stages a plot of environmental crisis, what Brodber calls a “genosucide” (140), and, given its global scale, a constellation of the Anthropocene. Rather than using the term “*species* suicide,” which has become common in the Anthropocene’s focus on the apocalyptic scale of mass extinctions, Brodber employs “genus” to invoke a larger, broader scale than race, nation, or species.<sup>108</sup>

Since their “mother’s body” has been swept away, the figure of Earth—and its synecdoche soil—become lost objects that signal the community’s rupture from place. Brodber’s allegory concludes with the need to recognize the disjunctive relationship with earth/Earth and the rupture caused by an “Age of Man.” I mentioned earlier that allegory appears at moments of crisis—it uses historical figures to reflect on constellations of the present.

Brodber upholds the metaphysical conflation of people with the soil, of the maternal with the earth. Since allegory generates disjunctions with the past and signals aporia between figures and their articulation, we might also read the novel's focus on earth (and its erosion) as a sign of a contemporary crisis of soil depletion in the Anthropocene, the loss 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. Reading this novel in relation to the turn to agriculture as an origin story for the Anthropocene/Plantationocene, we can see the telescoping between a planetary Earth as a figure of crisis and its localized effects in the human relation to soil as origin (root), resource (sustenance), and destination (rot).

According to the geologist David Montgomery, soil is our "most underappreciated, least valued, and yet essential natural resource."<sup>109</sup> In the Caribbean and elsewhere, increased hurricanes, industrial soil fertilization, and flooding associated with sea-level rise 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>110</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. Drawing from Benjamin, we can more plainly recognize the crises of the past through the constellations of the present.

Brodber's research has been deeply involved in the relationship between Jamaican rural communities, their histories, and the soil. She is therefore clearly aware of the long-term threats to Jamaica's agricultural industry over the past few decades, such as the International Monetary Fund's lending policies, North America Free Trade Agreement trading blocs, pressures of globalization and outmigration, and cadmium and other forms of soil pollution from mining that have taken an enormous toll on Jamaican ecologies. Moreover, the destruction of mangroves due to increasing (state-sponsored) tourism, the selling of conservation land to developers, deforestation, and the expansion of enormous resorts on vulnerable coastlines have become national concerns thanks to a small but growing environmental movement.<sup>111</sup> Writing near the twentieth anniversary of the devastating Hurricane Gilbert (1988) and in the wake of Hurricane Ivan (2006), Brodber was certainly aware of the continual soil erosion from increasing numbers of hurricanes

and threats to island sustainability. Therefore, we might read Brodber's novel as responding to a historical *and* current crisis of the Anthropocene, a narrative in which she posits humans—and human exceptionalism—as accountable in this degradation of an Earth that is depicted as progenitor, our “mother's body.”

One of the signs of twenty-first-century modernity is that humans are no less dependent on the soil even as we are increasingly detached from place. Thus, the epigraph that frames this chapter from Michel Serres calls attention to “the disappearance of agricultural activity at the helm of human life,” which has become a major challenge to Jamaica, causing tremendous urban poverty. Serres points to what is lost in the urban experience of living indoors, a separation from the experience of weather (temps) and time (temps). This is a future Brodber's characters want to avoid, as they fear a future of “sitting at desks,” acquiring “soft limbs,” and being attuned to “electric light” (139). It is this engagement with both the futurity of the human and the planet enabled by a “prophetic vision of the past” that brings forward the recognition of modernity, as well as alterity.

Speaking about the “human” writ large, Harrison suggests that the contemporary 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/Earth:

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. . . . 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>112</sup>

In writing about the human at the scale of a “species,” Harrison does not take into account how forced migration and slavery alter a community's relationship to the soil; nor does he consider a specifically Indigenous viewpoint of ethical obligation to the more-than-human world. Yet he raises an important question about the historical obligation of humans to the Earth that is foundational to both Brodber's novel and the planetary crisis signaled by the Anthropocene. Thus, the indignity of forced agricultural labor may encourage not necessarily a desire for a “language of landscape” but its

opposite—a desire for alienation from the land as a kind of freedom from obligation. This poses a vital counternarrative to the pastoral nostalgia Serres demonstrates in the epigraph to this chapter. 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 one another, their ancestors, the plot of historical narrative, and the earth/Earth. In this allegory of ecological modernity, Brodber constructs a plot that reflects the long process of alienation from the earth/Earth and a desire to recuperate it imaginatively, even as we destroy it.

The allegorical aesthetics of *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* encourage us to actively engage and intellectualize how “naturalness, twinned to mortality” must be “accompanied by hope, and duly tempered by responsibility” (150). To reflect back on Chakrabarty’s query about the relation between the plotting of human freedom and the planet’s ecological crisis, we might consider a poignant question raised by one of Brodber’s characters: “Can Massa’s blood atone for our disrespect for our own mother?” (146). This is a question left unanswered by both Chakrabarty and the novel. On the one hand, the “sex typing” of the planet as female raises a quagmire of issues that have been engaged in feminist thought. To some extent, Brodber does uphold an allegory in which masculine figures are associated with time and women with space, a narrative that is also apparent in current scholarly discourse of what some feminists refer to as the “Manthropocene.” But her use of a genealogical relationship to the Earth, imagined in networks of kinship and obligation, is also in keeping with Indigenous forms of planetary thinking that are foundational to geontological thinking.

This allegory of obligation to the earth/Earth problematizes universalizing discourses of the Anthropocene, such as Serres’s admonition that we must “never forget the place from which you depart, but leave it behind and join the universal. Love the bond that unites your plot of earth with the Earth, the bond that makes kin and stranger resemble each other.”<sup>113</sup> Brodber suggests that we can never “leave it behind,” but through an allegorical telescoping between earth and Earth, she provides a means by which we might recognize their disjunctive relation. 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>114</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).