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Swamp Sublime

Ecology and Resistance in the American Plantation Zone

Land Becomes Sea

In the description of Georgia's sea islands that opens the second part of his *Travels* (1791), William Bartram imagines that the marshlands that connect the mainland to these islands are part of a swampy archipelago that extends from Virginia to Mississippi to Vera Cruz.¹ This vision of geographical continuity either anticipates Manifest Destiny or, on the contrary, presages the dissolution of the North American continent: "Whether this chain of sea-coast-islands is a step, or advance, which this part of our continent is now making on the Atlantic ocean," Bartram muses, "we must leave to future ages to determine." The advancing continent seems initially to confirm a present-day scholarly tendency to read the writings of eighteenth-century Anglo-European elites as contributing to the imperialistic project of continental expansion. But as Bartram moves deeper into his meditation, the continent begins to dissolve. He reminds the reader that the tide-filled marshes that join the continent to the islands "were formerly high swamps of firm land," and any southern planter could confirm that draining these coastal marshes would yield "strata of Cypress stumps and other trees."² Land becomes sea, and only fossils and fragments remain to testify to these marshes' terrestrial past, as the southern terrain that Bartram exhaustively details in more than four hundred pages moves toward annihilation.

My suggestion that Bartram's *Travels* is a watery meditation that threatens to dissolve into its own apocalyptic undertow departs from critical assessments that focus on the material history of the places through which Bartram moved or on his contribution to the ultimately imperialistic project of revolutionary nationalism, which required forgetting, or at least managing, Indian pasts and making nature into a well-regulated space ensuring

the good order of the nation-state.³ My reading of *Travels* resists the assumption that colonial and then national ventures were largely uncontested and hegemonic. With its watery future, the continent typifies the volatile tropical spaces that Bartram characteristically interprets cataclysmically.⁴ In the southern lowlands, the “ruins of costly buildings and highways . . . overgrown with forests” and “habitations . . . mouldering to earth” complement the “heaps of white, gnawed bones of the ancient buffaloe, elk and deer, indiscriminately mixed with those of men, half grown over with moss.”⁵ As these passages indicate, his account of the tropics shows that supposedly uncultivated land bears traces of human history and politics even as the region’s forests, vines, mosses, and sinks obscure this human history. Yet if Bartram’s tropics always have a history, they also reveal the impossibility of separating human agents and histories from the liquefactions of the natural world.

Although Bartram focuses on dissolutions, I believe that we need not read *Travels* abysally since it also yields an ecological conception of revolution that might recalibrate theorizations of resistance in the eighteenth-century plantation zone. I use the term *plantation zone* to designate a space that is tropical (or subtropical) and whose economy and political structures are shaped by the plantation form.⁶ The entanglements that proliferated in the plantation zone compromised taxonomies distinguishing the human from the animal from the vegetable from the atmospheric, revealing an assemblage of interpenetrating forces that I call an ecology.⁷ This ecological orientation departs from an eighteenth-century political and aesthetic tradition distinguishing persons—in particular white colonial subjects—from the objects and terrains they surveyed. In fact, Bartram’s increasingly ecological orientation compromised his ability to function as a citizen-subject of an emerging U.S. print culture. Focusing on Anglo-European travelers and on African resistance, I argue that instead of simply producing subjects who gained power through an abstract and abstracting print culture, the plantation zone witnessed the emergence of persons who gained agency by combining with ecological forces.⁸ This shift from subjectivity to personhood, which I locate in Bartram’s as well as later botanists’ and travelers’ work and then trace in Afro-American cultural productions, testifies to an organization of life that is not dependent on the separation of subjects from an object world. This is not to say that human agents in the plantation zone enjoyed an idyllic intersubjectivity with animals, plants, and objects. Rather, the point is that at precisely

the moment citizen-subjects were emerging in metropolitan centers, the plantation zone gave rise to an ecological practice closely linked to *maronage*, a process through which human agents found ways to interact with nonhuman forces and in so doing resisted the order of the plantation.

In *Travels*, Bartram intended not to chronicle the complex political history of the American tropics, to elegize loss, or to lose or find himself but rather to distinguish southern North America as a temperate region that contributed to the healthy “activity of the human faculties.”⁹ This project required a methodological commitment to framing the lowlands through the terminology used to describe eighteenth-century temperate regions. Accordingly, he records the terrain through which he passes in the nomenclature of Linnaean botany, always pausing to give a plant or animal a properly Latinate name, often spinning multiple-page lists of species that he finds in tropical hollows. Yet in spite of his effort to describe the southern lowlands as a temperate space, the tropical, the useless, and the cataclysmic continually set him off course.

He consistently describes this southern geography in terms that emphasize its tropical splendor. This tropicalization is underscored by the concatenation of Virginia, Mississippi, and Vera Cruz; by his attention to the region’s connections to unambiguously tropical spaces, including Cuba and the West Indies; and by his recurrent complaints about the region’s humidity. It is not enough to designate the terrains that fascinated him with the adjective *tropical*. Rather, Virginia, Mississippi, and Vera Cruz had all been colonies where heat-dependent crops—indigo, tobacco, sugar, coffee, and rice—were produced on lowland plantations fueled by slave labor. In short, the terrain depicted by *Travels* was characterized by a collocation of interpenetrating forces that was regional (tropical) and linked to a particular economic and political configuration (the plantation). In this tropical and subtropical plantation zone, animals, persons, plants, artifacts and their histories, and even land were penetrating, fusing with, transforming one another. The region’s heat-driven processes contributed to the growth of cash crops that sustained metropolises. But the proliferation of colonial regimes as well as the region’s lush vegetation slowed down, encroached on, and transformed all human agents in this ecology. Many colonials disappeared into the tropics, and Bartram himself all but vanished during the five-year botanical journey that served as the basis of *Travels*.

Sometimes Bartram experienced his entanglement in the lowlands as a pleasurable loss of self. To the dismay of his successful father, the royal

botanist John Bartram, William failed in every venture to which he turned his hand. This aptitude for failure might well have given him the impetus to disappear into tropical frontiers. It might also have been what made him so profoundly uncomfortable in eighteenth-century Philadelphia that he refused every invitation that would have brought him into the public. Although invited to work in one of Benjamin Franklin's print shops, he declined. Although elected a member of the prestigious American Philosophical Society, he apparently never attended a single meeting. Although included on the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania, he never taught a class. The significant point here is that Bartram's fascination with the tropics pulled him outside the emergent American public sphere. Eventually he did publish his *Travels*, but it was a slow production, and he had a tortured relation to his printed book.

In *Letters of the Republic* (1992), Michael Warner proposes that eighteenth-century print cultures and the publics resulting from them catalyzed the enlightenment revolutions that birthed the citizen-subject of modern nationalism.¹⁰ The forms of subjectivity that developed through print culture required that persons give up private identities for public identity; it also required that they give over their private bodies to a print culture that was intensely material insofar as it proliferated presses, type-faces, and print artifacts and was disembodied insofar as it idealized the abstraction of particular persons into larger and themselves abstract public bodies.¹¹ The aim of representative men like Benjamin Franklin was to produce themselves as exemplary citizen-subjects who existed primarily in print and in relation to others who also circulated in print.

If Franklin is Warner's exemplar of the citizen-subject, Bartram offers a good test case through which we can trace the emergence of a mode of agency and personhood that is not equivalent to subjectivity and developed outside the metropolitan centers associated with print culture. Instead of an inscrutable proto-Bartleby who chooses against choosing in order to register his ambivalence about print and publicity, Bartram was something of a proto-Chandos: a man so entwined with the tropical ecology that the projects of representation, communication, and publicity became excruciating.¹² His account of swamps and the transformation of people who lived in them reveals a mode of action that pulls away from the public sphere as well as the revolutionary nationalism and modes of subjectivity that have become associated with it.

Plantation spaces possessed those who traversed them. The heat that changed the orientation and movements of bodies, the diseases that the atmosphere was thought to carry, and the bites that the region's insects and venomous snakes inflicted, all compromised bodily and metaphysical integrity. Bodies so penetrated could not be so easily abstracted into the corpora sustained by print culture; their penetration revealed a deformation of the human body that stalled representational processes that imagined the human and political body as synonymous such that one could provide the template for the other. This penetration, deformation, and breaking emphasized that in the American tropics the human body, instead of giving itself over to print cultures, was also pulled into sprawling and overlapping biological, economic, and social systems.

There was perhaps no space more paradigmatically tropical and more threatening to colonials than the swamps in which Bartram spent a good part of five years. Although swamps were frequently part of a plantation's grounds and, as he notes, were most often used for rice cultivation, they also compromised the order and productivity of imperial ventures, from explorations to plantations. Often described as unnavigable terrains—Bartram called them “inextricable”—swamps stymied colonial armies and cartographers.¹³ Cabeza de Vaca's early account of the Spanish exploration of Florida emphasizes the “great difficulty and danger” of the wetlands, where Indians kept them under continual attack.¹⁴ Two centuries later, the members of William Byrd's surveying team imagined Virginia's Dismal Swamp as an alluring “terra incognita,” but this fantasy disappeared once they entered the swamp and found themselves lost, sunk, and sick.¹⁵ Byrd juxtaposes this account of his surveying team with an encounter between himself and a community of mulattoes who claimed to be free but who he suspects are escaped slaves. Significantly, swamps sheltered diasporic Africans who, in refusing slave status, repudiated the prevailing organization of Virginia's plantation economy.¹⁶ If swamps were intractable for Anglo-Europeans, colonials such as Cabeza de Vaca and Byrd regarded them as navigable terrain for Africans and American Indians.

The tropical swamps that sheltered runaways and maroons and that were folded with difficulty into colonial and then national taxonomies ranged across the tropics.¹⁷ These difficult to map and (in the Anglo-European imagination) Africanized spaces pulled colonials into a hum of

life and decay that compromised efforts to produce state, economic, and scientific order. Swamps also confounded Anglo-European efforts to mine American landscapes to produce commodities, to further science, and to fulfill conventional aesthetic categories—ranging from the picturesque to the sublime. Instead of making economic, objective, or aesthetic use of swamplands, Anglo-Europeans were repeatedly sucked into their dense networks.

When he described lowland plants as “vegetating,” Bartram named the process by which a sentient force acts in an ecology that acts on and through it. Many colonial writers, including Bartram’s admirer François René de Chateaubriand, described how people, like plants, entered into vegetative states in the plantation zone.¹⁸ The entanglements occasioned by swamps complicated colonial efforts to make clear distinctions between human beings and the natural world. In the opening pages of *Travels*, plants manifest agency. Observing a Venus flytrap, Bartram asks, “Can we . . . hesitate a moment to confess, that vegetable beings are endued with the same sensible faculties or attributes, similar to those that dignify animal nature; they are organical, living, and self-moving bodies, for we see here . . . motion and volition.”¹⁹ The plants in Erasmus Darwin’s *The Botanic Garden* (1791) had sensations, but Bartram pushed this idea farther, insisting that “vegetable beings” also have “volition.” He maintains that animals, unlike plants, “have the powers of sound, and are locomotive,” but this distinction weakens in the next paragraph, when he describes plants’ power of “transplanting or colonising their tribes almost over the surface of the whole earth.”²⁰ Taxonomizing in the tropics proved a vexing endeavor because human beings are revealed to be entwined with vegetable life.

In the introduction to *Travels*, Bartram lavishly describes a spider’s killing and eating of its prey and contemplates the growth of a vine.²¹ The cessation of movement and imperviousness to chronometric time necessary for making such observations offers some sense of what eighteenth-century colonial writers meant when they gave the verb *vegetating* to people. More significantly, in the process of making these recordings, Bartram’s body becomes not simply a corollary for but also a part of the movements of the tropics. Recording the growth of a vine, Bartram slides toward the metaphysical:

[We see] climbers . . . invariably leaning, extending, and like the fingers of the human hand, reaching to catch hold of what is

nearest, just as if they had eyes to see with; and when their hold is fixed, to coil the tendril in a spiral form, by which artifice it becomes more elastic and effectual than if it had remained in a direct line, for every revolution of the coil adds a portion of strength; and thus collected, they are enabled to dilate and contract as occasion or necessity requires.²²

This meditation on the vine's capacity to join itself with "what is nearest" might at first seem a simple anthropomorphism: the extensions of vines resemble the extensions of hands, and plants, like hands, seek community. Anthropomorphism, however, domesticates the foreign by making it human; Bartram's "as if" suggests a movement that falls short of putting plants and people into correspondence.²³ This vine does not work in the way that human beings do: it works better.

In *Travels*, Bartram suggests that human lives are bound up in the lives of plants and, moreover, that those who would survive in the tropics must learn from plants how to move with the southern ecology. The tendril that pulls a person into its spiraling motions joins the human will to that of plants, producing a knowledge that changes human actions. These grasping vines' desire for conjunction and collectivity with other tropical forces depends on the stretching outward of parts. The gracefully collectivizing movements result in huge strength: "humoring the motion[s] of . . . limbs and twigs," the webby hold of the cirri ensures that they are not "liable to be torn off by sudden blasts of wind or other assaults."²⁴ No simple parasite that lives off another thing that is independent in itself, the vine joins what it encloses in its delicate hold. Agencied appendages moving outward, binding and combining—this is what enables life in the tropics.

The combinatory power endemic to the tropics also poses hazards. For one, Bartram fears being consumed by the region. The most obvious referent for this fear is tropical disease, and he does record a bout with an illness that permanently damaged his eyesight. Even more to the point, the combinings that proliferated in the plantation zone destroyed the integrity of structures, whether of bodies, vines, buildings, or histories. After praising the adaptive capacity of the wild pine, Bartram notes that the regions' trees become colonizing powers: "peach trees, figs, pomegranates, and other shrubs, grow out of the ruinous walls of former spacious and expensive buildings."²⁵ The transformative power of the tropics' vegetable life often allows for increased strength, but these transformations also profoundly

change human habitations, bodies, and patterns of thought, as I shall discuss in further detail in chapter 2.

Transformed by the tropics' ecology, Bartram was unable to mime the stance of objectivity that structured colonial subjects' scientific practices, and this compromised his ability to produce the useful knowledge that would redeem southern North America as a temperate zone. But if he veered from the project of compiling useful knowledge, his travels through the lowlands might still prove of aesthetic use. Given his laborious revisions of the manuscript as well as his turn to the rhetoric associated with the sublime, he clearly had aesthetic ambitions.

The eighteenth-century discourse of the sublime, most famously developed by Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), emphasized the philosophical significance of aesthetic pursuits. In Burke's account, experiencing the sublime required courting the useless, because "whenever strength is only useful . . . then it is never sublime."²⁶ But if theories of the sublime argued for the importance of the ostensibly useless, they also hewed closely to the expectation that the perceiving subject would remain distinct from the object world. Burke insists that sublime spectacles should give subjects only the idea of danger, for "when danger . . . press[es] too nearly," it is "incapable of giving any delight" and is, instead, "simply terrible."²⁷ In eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, the subject of sublime experience was required to remain distinct from sublime objects. Theories of the sublime thus confirmed the basic assumption of a dominant (but certainly not the only) strain of enlightenment naturalism: that the subject stand apart from the object world that he or she would master.²⁸

If the sublime is a subjective experience evoked by spectacles that seem dangerous in their magnitude or power, swamps are quintessentially sublime spaces: they are vast geographies that defy measurement. Yet tropical swamps not only seemed dangerous, they were dangerous. Bartram suggests that human beings in the plantation zone are truly in peril, and here the possibility of the Anglo-European sublime vanishes: white men who move through swamps do not gain ground firm enough to sustain conceptualizations that will confirm that their (subjective) capacities for empiricism, reason, or aesthetic appreciation are greater than the threat of the swamps. In swamps, the subjective and objective converge, making clearly delimited human subjectivity impossible. This impossibility is especially evident when, attacked by alligators, mosquitoes, heat, and his

own exhaustion, Bartram admits that he is “deprived of every desire but that of ending my troubles as speedily as possible.”²⁹ His inability to produce a subjectivity that bounds sublime scenes is dramatically evident in this moment when he fantasizes ceasing to be, but it is most consistently evident in his sentences; even when he means to evoke order, they are swimming productions that seldom manage to frame a point. His turn to the sublime devolves into an impassioned fusion of human, animal, and vegetable life, and here the aesthetic project of colonialism is as deeply compromised as its scientific one.³⁰

Snakes, diseases, and vines might penetrate people’s bodies, and the lushness of vegetable life might possess their minds. However, the most visceral threat to white colonials in the plantation zone came from the diasporic Africans who were “compelled to labour in the swamps and lowlands.”³¹ Bartram understood that there was reason to fear the Africans, who were sometimes a majority population in the American tropics. In 1765, he persuaded his father to buy him property in the Florida wetlands and slaves to work this property so that he could start a rice and indigo plantation. Henry Laurens, a family friend, reported that Bartram was the only “human inhabitant within nine miles,” by which he meant the only white man, and he also suggested that Bartram’s miserable failure as a planter resulted from his difficulty in managing his slaves, whom Laurens described as inept and rebellious. Only two of his slaves could “handle an axe,” and one of these was “exceedingly insolent,” so much so as “to threaten his life.”³² Although Bartram takes pains to emphasize plantations’ idyllic good order, he also notes the brawn of male slaves as well as their skill with “gleaming axes.”³³

Swamps threatened colonials’ efforts to separate themselves from the natural world, but it was rebellious Africans who most clearly made swamps revolutionary. Toward the conclusion of *Travels*, the danger posed by Africans in plantation societies comes to the fore. After leaving a South Carolina plantation, Bartram was riding along sandy ridges, contemplating the cavitation of reefs and land, when he

observed a number of persons coming up a head, whom I soon perceived to be a party of Negroes. I had every reason to dread the consequence. . . . [and] had reason to apprehend this to be a predatory band of Negroes. . . . I was unarmed, alone, and my horse tired; thus situated every way in their power, I had no

alternative but to be resigned and prepare to meet them. . . . I mounted and rode briskly up; and though armed with clubs, axes and hoes, they opened to right and left and let me pass peaceably. Their chief informed me whom they belonged to, and said they were going to man a new quarter at the West end of the bay; I however kept a sharp eye about me, apprehending that this might possibly have been an advanced division, and their intentions were to ambuscade and surround me; but they kept on quietly.³⁴

Bartram emphasizes that he is powerless—“unarmed, alone” and “resigned”—before the “power” of Africans whom he fears might kill him. The power of these Africans comes from their alliance with the land: “axes and hoes” are as much weapons as clubs are. Moreover, the Africans have a chief—a term that Bartram occasionally uses to mean a political leader outside a specifically Indian context and that indicates the autonomy of this band of Africans. In the span of a clause, the possibility of African *marronage* disappears, as the chief names himself and his companions as belonging to a master. Nonetheless, the possibility returns with doubled force when Bartram then imagines that this group is an “advanced division” of a larger army of African militants who mean to “ambuscade” him.

In this passage, Bartram wavers, uncertain whether to cast these Africans as slaves or maroons. These two sorts of diasporic African identity were markedly different: slaves had a relation to a master, for whom they were required to labor; maroons refused this relation and vanished into the swamps or mountains, sometimes forming large and still-extant communities.³⁵ Although eighteenth-century Anglo-Europeans typically imagined that slaves were submissive, they saw maroons as militants. The distinction between the states of slavery and *marronage* shrinks in this passage. Bartram’s oscillating description of these Africans as slaves or maroons suggests that he thinks all slaves may refuse the weight of mastery. Moreover, Bartram expects that both slaves and maroons have a particularly proximate relation to tropical terrains, and he also expects that this proximity has military significance.

After this episode, Bartram vanishes Africans into the tropics’ background, but the African agency that surfaces and then disappears from *Travels* does not remain sublated. Sometime after completing *Travels*, Bartram wrote an antislavery tract on the back of one of his father’s plant catalogs (Figures 1 and 2). In this never published polemic, he states that only

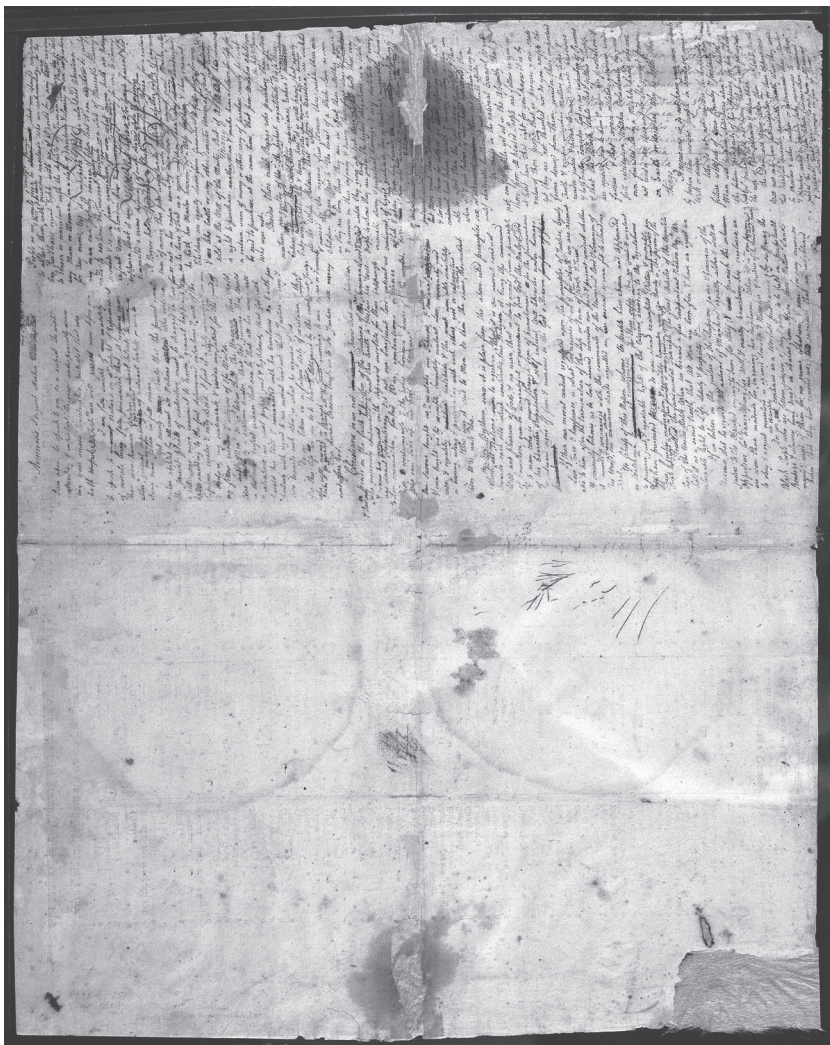


Figure 1. Anti-Slavery tract by William Bartram. Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

total abolition can stop a cataclysm in which the Africans “will be masters and . . . enslave or exterminate their masters and oppressors.”³⁶ Africans, he supposes, can produce an annihilation more immediate than the slow destruction of swamp or ocean. His argument in favor of abolition indicates that he imagines maroons as potent revolutionaries. If *Travels* testifies to an ecological cycle that consumes the history and subjectivity of white men, this unpublished tract suggests that Africans will somehow be able to use this ecology to destroy plantation societies unless state powers act first and abolish slavery.

In calling for a political and juridical solution (the abolition of slavery), Bartram comes close to taking on the mantle of citizen-subject. However, instead of presenting the tract to the public, he hid it among his father's effects. The artifact is emblematic of Bartram's disappearing subjectivity: it is written on the reverse of a catalogue that testifies to his father's legacy. Bartram's marks show through on the pages of his father's catalogue, but his resistance as well as the African resistance Bartram takes as his subject is contained by his father's colonial taxonomies. In a letter to a South Carolina friend, Bartram requests that his regards be conveyed to the “Black People,” for “these acknowledgement[s] at least, are due from me to them, although they are Negroes and Slaves.”³⁷ No doubt there are many reasons why a white man who owned slaves might imagine himself in debt to black persons. One of Bartram's debts, the one I discuss in the remainder of this chapter, is a glimmering awareness that an ecological relation between persons and place had political purchase. His account of the tropics chronicles the loss of the continent, of human memorials, of the subject, and of the recognizably political. Yet the immersion of persons in place was neither a drowning nor a glimpse of the end of time. Bartram may have gleaned that there was a positive, political content to this relation, but he was not able to offer it.³⁸

Revolutionary Natures

Nature was often vested with revolutionary significance in the late eighteenth century, as Ronald Paulson has argued.³⁹ The increasingly antirevolutionary Burke describes the French Revolution as an explosion of primal forces that produced overly natural people who, like “savages” or “Maroon slaves,” “rudely” stripped away “all the decent drapery of life” to reveal a barren terrain.⁴⁰ According to Burke, the revolutionary taste for the natural

culminated in a horrid literalism that cast persons and landscapes in the harsh light of reason: “In the groves of [the revolutionaries’] academy, at the end of every visto, you see nothing but the gallows.”⁴¹ The problem with revolution was not only that it was primitive but also that it produced a new scenery that could not be safely observed because it could annihilate an observer. To push Burke’s point, the practice and rhetoric of revolution breached the distinction between a social realm, which was the province of the human, and a natural realm, which was the province of primal forces, animals, and objects. Revolution brought about a too close association of the human and the natural, and this association deeply compromised a tradition in which nature was organized as a series of landscapes that were distinct from the human beings who valued them. Burke’s suggestion that groves became gallows invokes a future without landscape.

The pressure revolutionary rhetoric put on the assumption that persons were distinct from nature and its objects was particularly felt in plantation societies, not only because of the pull of vines and swamps but also because of the classification, by race slavery, of certain persons as objects. “Savages,” maroons, and naturalists were all aware that the distinction between persons and objects foundered in the tropics. This foundering, which Burke feared and Bartram chronicled, contributed to the shift from a landscape perspective to an ecological practice—from nature as an object of appreciation to nature as an assemblage of forces.

My belief that the possibility of landscape was weakened in the eighteenth-century plantation zone and gave rise to an ecological perspective is not common among critics who write on this subject. Édouard Glissant, for one, argues that the landscape writing that flourished in the eighteenth-century tropics indicates a “propensity to blot out the shudders of life, that is, the turbulent realities of the Plantation, beneath the conventional splendor of scenery.”⁴² White colonialists who attended to landscape, he suggests, contributed to a deeply obfuscating representational structure that hid the region’s perpetual unrest.

Glissant is surely right to point out that rhapsodic accounts of tropical landscapes contributed to the production of white colonial subjectivities, and he is also right to point out that Africans were often elided from or carefully managed in colonial encomiums to landscape. However, Bartram’s failure to produce himself as a subject separate from the southern lowlands, his failure to prioritize Linnaean taxonomies over other ventures, and his failure to fully dismiss the violence that emerged from

swamps requires an elaboration of Glissant's analysis.⁴³ First, Bartram's failures indicate that Africans and the turbulence of the plantation zone did sometimes break into Anglo-European representations of tropical scenery and, when they did, confounded efforts to hold apart fantasies of tropical scenery and the realities of entanglement and brutal fragmentation. Second, this break in the landscape tradition reveals a genealogy of diasporic resistance. Glissant proposes that slaves and maroons did not typically occupy themselves by representing landscape, which is certainly true as most Africans in the diaspora had little if any access to the eighteenth-century print culture that enabled representational projects. Nor did Africans have much incentive to contribute to a landscape tradition that covered over the brutality of life on plantations.

However, Anglo-European texts like Bartram's indicate that diasporic Africans were hardly indifferent to tropical ecologies. Drawing on these texts as evidence is suspect: they are often the same works that attempt to produce a tropical splendor that covers over the brutality of the plantation zone. Yet Anglo-Europeans believed that Africans were better able to manipulate this ecology than they were. In historical fact and in these Anglo-Europeans' accounts, the Africans who were brutally and problematically allied with tropical terrains used the knowledge they had gained from this ecology in pragmatic and literal ways. The tropics in which plantations were typically located by the close of the eighteenth century did not offer an abstract nature that could be made into symbols for revolution; rather, their ecology contributed to revolution.⁴⁴

Those who lived in the colonies—white Creoles, slaves, maroons, and Indians—all realized that knowledge of ecology was not only necessary for survival but also had military significance. Emilia Viotti da Costa writes, "Long before the Americans and French had risen in the name of freedom, slaves had struggled for their freedom in the colonies of the new world."⁴⁵ Viotti da Costa's suggestion that African struggles for freedom inspired Anglo-European revolutions is no doubt accurate. But Africans fighting for freedom provided more than ideological currency for eighteenth-century revolutionaries. They were a military precedent, aphorized centuries later by Che Guevara's dictum that revolutionary action requires "a perfect knowledge of the ground."⁴⁶ To be sure, Anglo-European writers' association of African rebellion with tropical ecologies often cast Africans as primitives in an effort to minimize the military acumen of slaves and maroons. For instance, historians have sometimes

suggested that the slave and mulatto victory in Saint-Domingue can be attributed to Africans' greater immunity to yellow fever, thus implying that they were simply vectors for a disease that acted through them and were not themselves agents in the devastation of France's colonial empire.⁴⁷

Despite such efforts to minimize the significance of Africans' knowledge of the ground, white Creoles were well aware that slaves and maroons used the ecology of the tropics to their advantage in the perpetual warfare that developed from race slavery. In 1769, Edward Bancroft wrote a natural history of Guiana in which he noted that the cassava root produces a "speedy and fatal poison" that "by the inattention of the Slaves" was "frequently drank by the sheep, hogs, and poultry on the Plantations."⁴⁸ Although he dismisses this destruction as the result of simple inattention, Bancroft also notes slaves' uses of plants and understands that this botanical knowledge was applied to sabotaging the order of colonial plantations: for instance, "the female Slaves who intend to procure abortion" used the orco plant to "lubricat[e] the uterine passages."⁴⁹

Although travel writers, slaves, and maroons paid attention to the utility of tropical vegetation, they also recognized that the tropics were more than a collection of inert things to be ground into poisons or otherwise instrumentalized. As Bartram's meditation on vines makes clear, the tropical ecology was an animate force whose combinatory power could provide strength, and was imagined to do just that for African agents, but could also consume—and was imagined to do just that to Anglo-European agents. In *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796), John Stedman claims that the "trembling" surface of lowland swamps frequently gave way to "Chasm[s]" in which a man "must in[e]vitably perish, if not extricated by immediate help."⁵⁰ These precarious surfaces required that troops walk with great care and in single file. And while Bartram may have been able to make his way through lowland swamps, Stedman repeatedly notes such passage was decidedly disadvantageous for a large colonial army. He also believes that African militants understood how tropical forces could be synthesized with human movements. For instance, he praises Surinamese maroons' tactic of embedding infrastructures in swampy terrain that European troops considered an unnavigable morass.⁵¹ Knowing that in some places swamps had firm bottoms, maroons placed felled logs underwater, to mark paths that could be traversed swiftly. Wim Hoogbergen writes that after struggling to find a

way through Surinam's swamps, Colonel Louis Henri Fourgeoud found a "floating bridge of tree trunks hidden between the bushes." Fourgeoud decided that this passageway was "so narrow that they could not possibly use it," for it would require that his troops pass slowly and in single file, thus making them vulnerable because "the path was constantly kept under fire by the Maroons."⁵²

The tropics' animate vegetation and shifting ground were by necessity home and battlefield for its stateless agents and facilitated guerilla operations against colonial powers. The belief that Africans and Indians were particularly able to manipulate the zone registers in the engraving *March thro' a Swamp or Marsh in Terra-Firma*, which William Blake produced in the early 1790s as an illustration for Stedman's *Narrative* (Figure 3). In the engraving's right foreground, a cypress tree's limbs rise into looping vines, themselves draped with Spanish moss; in the left foreground, a black ranger chest-deep in a swamp leads white troops forward. But the soldiers do not look to their guide. Arms akimbo, eyes moving in every direction, they hold their guns above their heads—a positioning that creates a series of strong diagonal lines that stand out sharply against the softer diagonal lines of the rain of the background. An Anglo-European figure in front points outside of the frame of the engraving. Directionless, the soldiers' confused movements are discordant with those of the rain, the trees, and their fellows.

But the suggestion that Anglo-Europeans are disaggregated by the plantation zone is only part of the story offered by Blake's engraving. In the far left of the background's driving rain, African maroons align their bodies with the delicate curves of palm trees, from which they attack these troops. One maroon unloads a fusillade that falls in the same lines as the rain. Toward the back of the middle ground, white troops point their guns skyward to stop this attack, but they aim away from the maroons above them, failing to find targets. The same swampy terrain that enmires Blake's white troops accommodates his African figures, one of whom walks imperviously through the quagmire, cargo balanced on head. Africans are represented as having a special relation to and knowledge of the tropics, and maroon warfare is represented as an extension of this ecology: the sway of a tree fulfills the sway of a body, and a shower of rain yields a shower of bullets. Blake's engraving crystallizes the colonial fear that detached subjectivity was impossible in plantation spaces, where white men struggled against an ecology that was often militarized.



March thro' a swamp or Marsh, in Terra-firma.

London, Published Decr. 2^d. 1794. by J. Johnson, 4th Paul's Church-Yard.
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Figure 3. March thro' a Swamp or Marsh in Terra-Firma, engraving by William Blake, 1794. Note the upper far left corner where maroons in the palm trees shoot down on English troops. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

Blake's attention to the deftness with which Africans navigated the plantation zone underscores a point that Stedman and Bartram also understood: Anglo-European colonists, unfamiliar with this ecology, were at a significant disadvantage against the Africans, Indians, and poor whites who were forced to labor there and who used the knowledge and skills they had gained from this labor to disrupt the order of the plantation. The relation of persons to place in the tropics was not inherently racialized. Diasporic Africans, Indians, poor whites, and colonial naturalists all found ways of working with this ecology and not in simple opposition to it. Given these agents' disparate but sometimes overlapping goals, a variety of resistant practices could emerge from the zone. But although the relation of persons to place was not necessarily racial, eighteenth-century Anglo-Europeans generally did see it as shaped by a racial logic: Africans knew that swamps could be made into motile, invisible infrastructures, knew which plants offered up poisons and which offered food, and knew the hollows and dark spots that provided shelter and concealment.

Representations that bound Africans to swamps worked to delegitimize ecological knowledge by making it into a sign of primitivism. These representations of Africans also reveal the persistent belief that the relation of persons to place differed in the plantation zone from what it was in Britain, on the Continent, and in the northern American colonies. Attending to Anglo-Europeans' representations of Africans in the southern lowlands is precisely what enables us to trace a shift from a landscape-focused concept of nature to an ecological one.⁵³ If American plantations evinced a mode of being in which bodies were fragmented and human consciousness was enmeshed with plants, histories, economies, and mythologies, it was diasporic Africans who were associated with this mode. These representations make clear that Anglo-Europeans viewed Africans as revolutionary agents despite and because of their fragmentation by the brutalities of the diaspora. In Anglo-European travelers' accounts, the strength that Africans gained from their ability to move with ecology was not simply a biological fact or a Faulknerian testimony to endurance. Rather, the portents of annihilation that break open Bartram's meditations on landscape and the murderous intent that amasses in the background of Blake's engraving reveal the awareness that those who could manipulate ecology possessed a transformative power associated then and now with revolution.

As my turn to revolution suggests, the relation of persons to place bears on conceptualizations of political resistance in eighteenth-century

plantation societies. Recent accounts of revolution in the tropics, including Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* (1995), Susan Buck-Morss's "Hegel and Haiti" (2000), and Sibylle Fischer's *Modernity Disavowed* (2004), devote significant attention to the Haitian Revolution and the modernities it produced.⁵⁴ These theorists all emphasize that the creation of a free black republic dedicated to opposing racism and imperialism radically challenged the political and philosophical assumptions that grounded contemporary revolutionary states. Conceptualizing ecological resistance makes clear the extent to which resistance in the tropics (not just in Saint-Domingue) challenged the politics and philosophy associated with revolution. To develop this point, it is worth briefly turning to Buck-Morss, who also proposes that resistance in the tropics allows for a new understanding of revolution. What she gains by her argument, however, is a partially redeemed Western metaphysics as well as a revolutionary event purged of the contradictions and false universalisms that plagued the political philosophy of the age of revolution. This gain differs from that of an ecological account, which departs from the dialectic between subject and object that often grounds theorizations of revolution.

Buck-Morss criticizes an Enlightenment philosophy that proliferated metaphors of slavery while failing to account for literal, historical slavery. However, she argues that Hegel was not blind to historical slavery. Rather, he was aware of the Haitian Revolution and drew on it when developing his master-slave dialectic. By Buck-Morss's argument, these slaves' self-emancipation inspired Hegel's belief that

freedom cannot be granted to slaves from above. The self-liberation of the slave is required through a "trial by death" . . . the goal of *this* liberation, *out* of slavery, cannot be subjugation of the master in turn, which would be merely to repeat the master's "existential impasse," but, rather, elimination of the institution of slavery altogether.⁵⁵

In Buck-Morss's argument, the tropical rebellion that has been sublated by Western political philosophy points to a way outside of the "existential impasses" and toward a democratic community not founded on the struggle between lord and bondperson. Slaves in the tropics offer the only successful model of revolution, for they show the possibility of a collective

that is not founded on vertically organized relations and thus make revolutionary liberty into a truly universal value.

Although powerfully and admirably reparative, Buck-Morss's reading raises a series of problems. First, it puts Afro-American resistance in the service of what is essentially an Anglo-European metaphysical tradition. Second, it passes over the eighteenth-century revolutionary tradition's addiction to hierarchy, an addiction that partly explains the preponderance of metaphors of slavery in the political writings of the time, which often motivated Anglo-European scientific and aesthetic projects and plagued eighteenth-century democratic revolutions.⁵⁶ Third and most significant, Buck-Morss's analysis assumes that the quintessential actor of tropical revolution is a slave become subject: "slaves . . . achieve self-consciousness by demonstrating that they are not things, not objects, but *subjects* who transform material nature."⁵⁷ This reading returns us to Warner's print-culture thesis, for here again the end point of eighteenth-century revolution is the production of subjects, and, as Buck-Morss makes clear, the work of subjects is to transform the object material of nature. To be sure, the production of citizen-subjects was a preoccupation in centers of revolution from Cap François to Philadelphia to Paris. But, as we have seen, the tropics also yielded a practice that ended the political fantasy that subjects remained distinct from an object world that was simply acted on.

My point is not that Buck-Morss is wrong but that there is more to be gained by an ecological account of resistance. Glissant's theory of relation elaborates on that advantage.⁵⁸ Written two hundred years after Bartram wrote his *Travels*, Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1990) is also a meditation on land's turning to sea. *Poetics* opens into the "ochre" terrain of an African continent that yields to the abysses of the diaspora. But if the focus is aqueous, Glissant never entirely yields the terrestrial; he conceives the spaces joined by the African diaspora as a "land-sea."⁵⁹ An alluvial trope in which solidities become fluidities that still maintain a residue of materiality, the land-sea returns in his concluding chapter, which begins on a beach. The "devastated mangrove" swamps that lie behind the beach and "tie" it to the island inspire a new vision: the beach is "quivering," in fact "burning," and then gives way to swamp and sea.⁶⁰

The close of Glissant's *Poetics* recalls Bartram's arrangement of land, swamp, and sea. In both, the first is becoming the last. But for Glissant a swamp does not presage apocalypse: it is an animate force that "resists"

and, in doing so, reveals depths that “allow us to take off like *marrons*.”⁶¹ By Glissant’s analysis, swamps offer occasion for twentieth- and twenty-first-century *marronage* that has broad political and philosophical significance. Swamps are “depths [that] navigate a path beneath the sea in the west and the ocean in the east,” and this path promises that “though we are separated, each in our own Plantation, the now green balls and chains have rolled beneath from one island to the next, weaving shared rivers that we shall open up when it is our time and where we shall take our boats.”⁶² Remnants of slavery weave land into rivers but do not bind the tropics to the slave past, because the future Glissant offers is that of *marronage*, and maroons are ecological actors who cannot be bound by the history and artifacts of slavery. In what follows, I will trace how this conception of *marronage* impinged upon early Americans’ experiences and imaginations of their bodies and personhood.

Before pressing farther, it is important to make clear what might be gained by moving from the drowned subjectivity of Bartram’s swamps to Glissant’s “we,” which holds together human beings, terraqueous powers, and artifacts. Most obviously, looking to tropical ecologies offers ways to build stories about places and actors that archives documenting the citizen-subjects of print culture cannot. Moreover, conceiving of human agency as a collaborative force that requires joining with planetary flows contributes to a theory of revolution in which death—of the subject or the moment—need not be understood as the limit of any agent or event. This shift from thinking of the plantation zone as a space of endings allows us to abandon the elegiac orientation that crippled Bartram, and it avoids the agon of dialectical approaches that tend to reinscribe some center and, in so doing, restage the deprivation of margins where possibility is always attenuated. To be sure, eighteenth-century Anglo-Europeans saw swamps as monstrosities that stalled the subject-making work of the sublime. But the swamping of the sublime gives way to an aesthetics that suffuses persons through places to open the way for a reimagining of the terrain of the political.