

Siphon, or What Was the Plot? Revisiting Sylvia Wynter's "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation"

Our Terms

FIFTY YEARS ON, SYLVIA WYNTER'S questions about the West Indian novel and its relationship to history remain unsettled: "First let us define our terms. What, in our context, is the novel? What, in our context, is history? What *is* our context?"¹ So begins her essay "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," published in *Savacou* in 1971. With this line of questioning, Wynter strains against the theory of the novel. Ian Watt had pinned "the rise of the novel," in his 1957 book of the same name, to eighteenth-century England and to realism.² The now well-known argument rests, to quote one of Watt's critics, on the idea that "the novel was exclusively English."³ Critics of the novel have since refuted and qualified Watt's account: that, beyond English borders, we could just as easily write the novel's origins from "oriental tales"; that the "domestic" in domestic fiction is not only the nation but also the "private," feminized space of the home; and that even the domestic novel is colonial at its heart.⁴ For Wynter, there is no definite article (*the* novel) but rather the collective gesture of the third-person plural. But what of when that body ("we") struggles over the terms in which we imagine our novels, our history, and our context?

Wynter offers an analogy, a reasoning in which novel and history come into uneasy relation with plot and plantation. She argues that the plot of the West Indian novel shares a spirit with the provision grounds: those small plots of land that people of African descent cultivated in the shadow of the plantation.⁵ For Wynter, the West Indian novel and the provision grounds

ABSTRACT This essay revisits Sylvia Wynter's 1971 essay "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation" in relation to a quandary: the history of provision grounds not only as a resource but also as an initiation into property relations during and after West Indian slavery. In this light, the plot becomes a space of instruction in how to become a free subject through exchange. The essay draws out the plot's histories of dispossession, enclosure, and dispute. Ultimately, it offers another term, *siphon*, as the condition of the overlapping conjunctures of West Indian emancipation and the postcolonial. *REPRESENTATIONS* 162. © 2023 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 56-64. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2023.162.5.56>.

are spaces of use value, where one grows for one's own nourishment rather than for the market.⁶ She describes West Indian plots as in "ambivalent" relation to the market that generated the plantation and the novel form. She also offers the provision grounds as a place from which people of African descent mounted "guerilla resistance," tracking how the West Indian novel later develops in relation to the "clashes" of the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion and the labor rebellions of the 1930s.⁷ But "to provide," in the obsolete sense of "to prepare," also accords with the plans by which the West India colonies sought to prepare the emancipated for freedom.⁸

As I return to the scene of criticism—to ask, what was the plot?—I run into a quandary: the history of provision grounds not only as a resource but also as an initiation into property relations during and after slavery. Wynter is clear that "all of us" are part of "a structure of exchange."⁹ But the plot at times becomes a space of instruction—instruction in how to become what Wynter elsewhere calls Man2, *homo oeconomicus*, or economic rational man with the capacity for exchange.¹⁰ In what remains, I revisit the plot among "our terms," with an eye to the histories of dispossession, enclosure, and dispute therein. I "quarrel" with Wynter's essay, following Edward Baugh and David Scott on the predicament and possibility of dialogue with generations past.¹¹ And I offer another term, *siphon*, as the condition of the overlapping literary-historical conjunctures of West Indian emancipation and the postcolonial.

Quarrel

"Novel and History" began with a quarrel. In 1971, Wynter first presented the argument at the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) in Kingston, Jamaica. Norval Edwards highlights the reflections of poet-scholar Kamau Brathwaite on "the event as a moment of confrontation between the 'cultural gorillas/guerrillas' and the establishment."¹² Wynter developed the essay as she wrote her nine-hundred-page magnum opus *Black Metamorphosis*, a work that sought to track how "the cultural metamorphosis by which the multi-tribal African became the *native* of that area of experience that we term the New World."¹³ The fifth chapter, "Transplantation and Transformation of African Beliefs and Behavior," was a particular influence for the essay to come.¹⁴ It begins with an observation from a Jamaican planter, the Reverend John Taylor, that the enslaved had "great veneration" for the land. From this, Wynter concludes that they held "an ideology in which . . . the land could not be alienated as private property."¹⁵ To describe the process of what she calls Black "indigenization," Wynter must evacuate the land of its history of indigenous

dispossession.¹⁶ This dispossession and enclosure become the condition of possibility for the enslaved.¹⁷

Histories of West Indian slavery have shown how, at times, the plot became coeval with market logics, even beyond the original intention of the planters to “maximize profits” by allowing the enslaved “to feed themselves.”¹⁸ Anthropologist Deborah Thomas’s *Exceptional Violence* (2012) uses the fractious history of the plot to anticipate Jamaican state formation and its disintegrations. Following historian Trevor Burnard, she reminds us that the provision grounds were the object of property disputes among the enslaved and free Black labor in Jamaica.¹⁹ More recently, the postcolonial garrison or ghetto is also the result of “carving up space” and the “distribution of scarce resources.”²⁰ In this light, the provision grounds or plots are spaces of not only ambivalence but also outright deprivation. In historian Randy Browne’s *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean* (2017), provision grounds beget dispute as well as daily bread. “In January 1825 on plantation Augsburg,” in the British Guianese region of Berbice, a manager deprived an “African field laborer” by the name of Baron of the use of his family provision grounds. After another man took up its use, Baron’s wife risked punishment as she confronted the manager.²¹ I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention Browne’s insistence that this event didn’t indicate “a major point of contention”: the typical disputes among enslaved peoples did not involve managers.²² And family land was but one among many kinds of land tenure in the British West Indies, which included informal practices like squatting.²³ But, taken together with Thomas’s observations about plots across the longue durée, it highlights the force of dispute in the plot system.

Emancipation only deepened the contradiction between plot and plantation, use and exchange values. I’ll add a brief story from the Colonial Office records about apprenticeship, a period of transition after emancipation during which the formerly enslaved continued to be bound to plantations. It is in this moment that the peasant values of provision and of use value have been compromised and replaced with industry. Two years after West Indian emancipation, in 1836, Howe Peter Browne, 2nd Marquess of Sligo and Governor of Jamaica, received a report lauding the increase in cultivation in Falmouth, the capital city of the Jamaican parish of Trelawny: “All the Apprentices grow yams, cocoas, and other vegetables *greatly to exceed domestic consumption.*”²⁴ While some of these goods may be stored or preserved, the emphasis (original to the memo) celebrates that many more will be for sale at market—and that, in line with the aims of apprenticeship, Black labor would learn to be free subjects through exchange. As indentured Indian laborers arrived to work the post-emancipation plantation, property relations—in particular, the land that some laborers received upon completion of their contracts—also helped to manufacture antipathy between Indian and Black labor.²⁵ While the market

was a place of strategy, I wish to identify idioms for the West Indian novel that don't rely on superlatives, the idea that "the land *could not* be alienated" or that the "relation to nature *would remain* that of the peasant *from time immemorial*" (emphases mine).²⁶

Siphon

One idiom I pose here is the siphon, a device that draws water from one source to another. *Siphon* lacks the homonymic wordplay of Wynter's double sense of plot, making its relationship to novelistic plot less through the metaphor of place and more through action. The device has two modes: the original feeding of the liquid into the tube and the flow that follows. It is an understated force on the West Indian plantation: more often figurative, with goods passing from port to port, or proprietors siphoning off funds from the plantation ledgers—already ill-gotten—for personal use.²⁷

On at least one occasion, though, the siphon is a solid, mechanical object. In his *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* (1834), Matthew Gregory Lewis recounts the process of refining sugar on his Jamaica plantation. He mentions "siphon" as an alternative term for the "cock-copper," a device used in the boiling house.²⁸ This siphon assists the change of state: hastening the removal of the cane juice, a liquid, from the vat and allowing the sugar to "granulate" or become solid. Carl Plasa is interested in how this description of "purification" is compromised "by its own 'impurities'": "the process provides an allegory for the making of the *Journal*, which consistently portrays Lewis's Cornwall estate . . . as a milieu from which two of slavery's 'grosser parts'—in the forms of sexual and racial violence—have been siphoned away."²⁹ This process is not a contradiction of the plantation but rather constitutes its very design. Though the flow is the process that defines the siphon, the siphon also draws attention back to the body. If plantation laborers (enslaved, indentured, and putatively free) operate the siphon, allowing the flow to run, they might also reappropriate it for their own uses.

The twentieth-century West Indian novel reveals how form and history remain a question of infrastructure, even as "our terms" shift. Another look at Wynter's reading of V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), in which a descendant of "coolie" labor comes of age, calls into question the idea that the novel showcases only the failure to be provided:

to realize his being, Biswas must alienate himself from an impossible community, distorted by phantasmagoric circumstance, to shelter in a jerry built house; and a Prefect car. The individual, dreamt of in the liberal market economy, as being now

totally sovereign and free, is shipwrecked by the later developments of this structure which prohibits his fulfilment; and leaves him huddled in a house, escaping from civilization; a Robinson Crusoe clinging to his island for survival through escape from the outside world.³⁰

Biswas is born “under the wrong sign” and living through a series of unfortunate events. At one point, “he couldn’t wait any longer” for a shelter or “nothing would arrest his descent into the void.”³¹ Biswas encounters a self-trained architect and contractor, Mr. Maclean, who uses a switch to sketch a plan for the shelter in dry-season dust. In call and response, the design takes shape: not studied and solitary but rather dialogic, near-instantaneous, ephemeral. What appears at first simply “jerry built” is an example of making do with ingenuity and the simplest tools. They pick branches from a “bandon,” an enclosure left to grow wild, for rafters; “the pitch [was] free, from a neglected part of the road where asphalt was laid on”; and they source galvanized metal for the roof from a “factory [that] had been pulled down.”³² Though Mr. Maclean does not build an ideal shelter, he does siphon. The composite parts of the house are not only drawn from the fantasy of “the land” but also sloughed off from the waning plantation and industry.

From the late twentieth century on, structural adjustment, dependence on multinational investment, and climate catastrophe have wedged the Caribbean between “the long emancipation” and the “tragedy” of the post-colonial.³³ This moment is not the “clash” that Wynter anticipates. Instead, it calls for siphoning, as the descendants of the enslaved and indentured are cast out from the plantation to uphold the international division of labor in new markets. In the place of *homo oeconomicus*, siphoning creates another subject or protagonist, the hustler or scammer—the architect of informal and illicit economies in the Caribbean and throughout the global South.³⁴ In the novels of Jamaican American writer Nicole Dennis-Benn, *Here Comes the Sun* (2016) and *Patsy* (2019), the siphon’s flow is one of eros, stressing the need for our terms to recognize the domestic and sexual labor that subtends the market.³⁵

Patsy begins with frustration, the lack of satisfaction that comes of grappling with the market and one’s objects of desire. The titular character seeks a US tourist visa—which she intends to overstay in hopes of making a life with her childhood friend, Cicely. Not the immigrant plot of self-sacrifice, this is a narrative of “self-regard.”³⁶ As she prepares for the “land of opportunity,” Patsy artfully conceals a taste of home from scanners and customs officers’ hands alike: “cans of Horlicks, Milo, frozen beef patties from Tastees, banana chips, fried escoveitch fish, with lots of onions dipped in vinegar, ackee, frozen and wrapped carefully in newspaper and plastic to keep

it insulated, Shirley biscuits, star apples (Cicely's favorite), and Appleton rum."³⁷ A labor of love and exhaustion animates this paratactic movement: preventing leaks, fitting the items' soft and hard edges together, careful not to exceed the weight limit. In the spaces between the smuggled goods is yearning.

But this labor doesn't pay off. Patsy finds only backbreaking, under-the-table work, her subordination made all too literal as she lives in the basement of Cicely's home. Upon her arrival, she is heartbroken to learn that Cicely has had a "green card marriage" and a child, neither revealed in their long correspondence. Of her logic Cicely says: "In dis country, yuh can't be too picky, yuh hear? If yuh want to be legal, yuh have to marry a man."³⁸ I want to linger on the insistence of the Jamaican Creole "yuh hear" or "hear," a terminal adjunct (in linguistics, an optional element of a sentence) that invites the listener to "agree, accept, or take serious notice" of what precedes it.³⁹ The phrase works here as a kind of linguistic siphon, in which the invitation to "take serious notice" is not an invitation at all but rather an extraction of the desired attention.⁴⁰ Cicely bids Patsy not only to hear but also to heed her advice, or else to learn the aphorism *who cyaan hear mus' feel*. When home no longer suffices, and the "land of opportunity" is not what it seems, stability might come only through suspending one's desires.

When Patsy seeks to mend her relationship with the child she's left behind, Tru, she packs again. Like many Caribbean immigrants abroad, she ships a barrel of consumer goods home. As with the goods for Cicely, Patsy's gesture is a failed one. She misapprehends Tru, the barrel filled with cosmetics and dresses for the gender-nonconforming child she no longer knows.⁴¹ Patsy did not "hear" their pleas years before: "Ah don't want pretty t'ings! You lied to me! Yuh tell me I could come!"⁴² The flow is refused, backs up.

Sometimes the siphon is closer to home. In *Here Comes the Sun*, Margot is a resort manager who moonlights as a sex worker. There are no delicate metaphors to be found here; the heavy gates of the resort mark relations of servitude inside and of lack outside. The tourism industry is an inheritor of the plantation, in which "paradise" is the draw for North American and British tourists.⁴³ Margot tiptoes around the boundary of the privatized beach and hotel and her North Coast community of River Bank, that she might achieve "paradise" for herself and for her family, too. She also travels the boundary between her on-the-clock hours and her "real work," which begins "after hours when everyone has bid their goodbyes."⁴⁴ Gesture is the bridge between these two conceptions of labor time and between geographies: "Of course they know she's in business, because she makes sure to slip them a wink on the first day of her arrival."⁴⁵ Margot rejects other kinds of gendered work: the life of a higgler—in which women like her mother sell

produce, clothing, or “cheap souvenirs”—or the free zone, the low-wage factories that, free of duties and tariffs, are the hallmark of neoliberal global South economies.⁴⁶ And, rarely meeting the eyes of her clients or her neighbors, she saves all her sweetness for her lover, Verdene.⁴⁷ Having drawn resources and sentiment, hers and others’, Margot is eventually lost to the resort. Overseeing the exploitation of younger women as well as the displacement of River Bank’s residents for its expansion, she reminds us that siphoning is not necessarily a noble strategy.

To siphon is a reorientation of Wynter’s “ambivalence,” which suggests objection but also resignation to the order of things. It shifts a sense of formal plot from “action-transpiring-in-time” to a pulling downward or subterfuge.⁴⁸ It is a term of value, a verb that acknowledges the political-economic doing or strategy of Caribbean working people. Yet the siphon’s failure is just within reach: the device fails when the height of the tube exceeds that which would allow the flow to continue. If the tension between plot and plantation will often see the proverbial string drawn toward the plantation complex, then to siphon might be to draw the tension instead in the direction of the “slave-turned-peasant,” if only for a moment.⁴⁹ It is a term by which the projects of emancipation, the postcolonial, and our criticism—none of them complete—might continue to move.

Notes

My title riffs on my colleague Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?* (2011) and his efforts to revisit literary field and periodization. Thank you to Sonya Posmentier, Yogita Goyal, Poulomi Saha, Nijah Cunningham, Kalyan Nadiminti, Deborah Thomas, Nejat Kedir, and Inderpal Grewal for conversations and opportunities to present this provocation over the years.

1. Sylvia Wynter, “Novel and History, Plot and Plantation,” *Savacou* 5 (June 1971): 95.
2. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley, 1957).
3. Philip Stewart, “The Rise of I,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 13, no. 2 (2001): 163.
4. Srinivas Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago, 2012), 20–26; Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York, 1987). For the colonial circuits that make possible the English novel, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 243–61, and Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC, 2015), 73–99.
5. Wynter, “Novel and History,” 99.
6. *Ibid.*, 100.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Sonya Posmentier defines “provision” in *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature* (Baltimore, 2017) as “an action of material and

- spiritual sustenance that is always under way” (69). But “to provide,” in the obsolete sense of “to prepare,” also accords with the plans by which the West India colonies sought to prepare the emancipated for freedom. See *OED Online*, s.v. “provide, v.,” and Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832–1938* (Baltimore, 1992).
9. Wynter, “Novel and History,” 100.
 10. Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 257–337.
 11. See Edward Baugh, “The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 16, no. 2 (July 2012 [1977]): 60–74, and David Scott, “The Temporality of Generations: Dialogue, Tradition, Criticism,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 2 (2014): 157–81.
 12. Norval Edwards, “‘Talking about a Little Culture’: Sylvia Wynter’s Early Essays,” *Journal of West Indian Literature* 10, no. 1/2 (2001): 28.
 13. Sylvia Wynter, “Black Metamorphosis,” 1.
 14. Aaron Kamugisha, “‘That Area of Experience That We Term the New World’: Introducing Sylvia Wynter’s ‘Black Metamorphosis,’” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 20, no. 1 (March 2016): 42.
 15. Wynter, “Black Metamorphosis,” 48.
 16. *Ibid.*, 63. David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 4, no. 2 (September 2000): 198.
 17. Shanya Cordis offers a model of relation for parsing the intertwined legacies of indigenous dispossession, slavery, and indenture in “Forging Relational Difference: Racial Gendered Violence and Dispossession in Guyana,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 23, no. 3 (November 2019): 18–33.
 18. Wynter, “Novel and History,” 99.
 19. Deborah A. Thomas, *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (Durham, NC, 2011), 49–50.
 20. *Ibid.*, 51.
 21. Randy M. Browne, *Surviving Slavery in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, 2017), 171–72.
 22. *Ibid.*, 172.
 23. See, for example, Jean Besson and Janet Henshall Momsen, eds., *Caribbean Land and Development Revisited* (New York, 2007).
 24. Letter from J. A. Dillon to the Marquess of Sligo, 9 March 1836, CO 137/215 (Jamaica, March–May 1836), in *Despatches*, vol. 7, *Apprentices*, fol. 101, The National Archives, Kew, UK.
 25. Lomarsh Roopnarine, “The Other Side of Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Land-ownership, Remittances and Remigration 1838–1920,” *Journal of Caribbean History* 42, no. 2 (2008): 213–14.
 26. Wynter, “Black Metamorphosis,” 52. For examples of maneuvering within the market, see Shauna J. Sweeney, “Market Marronage: Fugitive Women and the Internal Marketing System in Jamaica, 1781–1834,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2019): 197–222.
 27. For an example of financial siphoning on the plantation, see S. D. Smith, *Slavery, Family, and Gentry Capitalism in the British Atlantic: The World of the Lascelles, 1648–1834* (Cambridge, 2006), 60–62.
 28. Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Journal of a West-India Proprietor: Kept During a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (London, 1834), 87.

29. Carl Plasa, *Slaves to Sweetness: British and Caribbean Literatures of Sugar* (Liverpool, 2011), 53.
30. Wynter, "Novel and History," 97.
31. V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (London, 1992 [1961]), 237.
32. *Ibid.*, 261, 262, 258. *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*, ed. Richard Allsopp and Jeannette Allsopp (Kingston, 2003), s.v. "bandon, n."
33. See Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* (Durham, NC, 2021); David Scott, "The Tragic Vision in Postcolonial Time," *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (October 2014): 799–808; and Bedour Alagraa, "The Interminable Catastrophe," *offshoot*, 1 March 2021, <https://offshootjournal.org/the-interminable-catastrophe/>.
34. See Jovan Scott Lewis, *Scammer's Yard: The Crime of Black Repair in Jamaica* (Minneapolis, 2020).
35. As Nijah Cunningham shows us in his essay "The Resistance of the Lost Body," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 20, no. 1 (March 2016), the lost body in "Novel and History" is that of the enslaved "woman": "the condition of possibility for the preservation of this 'obstinately peasant' status is the sexual economy of plantation slavery and the implicit naturalization of socially reproductive labor as the intrinsic capacities of the 'woman' provided to the slave" (128).
36. Kaiama L. Glover, *A Regarded Self: Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being* (Durham, NC, 2021). On vexed motherhood in *Patsy*, see Janelle Rodrigues, "'Promises Are Merely Sweet Lies': Mandatory Motherhood and Migration in Nicole Dennis-Benn's *Patsy*," *Caribbean Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (January 2021): 267–82.
37. Nicole Dennis-Benn, *Patsy* (New York, 2019), 68.
38. *Ibid.*, 123.
39. Frederic G. Cassidy and Robert Brock Le Page, *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (Kingston, 2002), 222.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Dennis-Benn, *Patsy*, 412.
42. *Ibid.*, 60.
43. On paradise and its discontents in *Here Comes the Sun*, see Jennifer Lynn Donahue, "Consuming the Caribbean: Tourism, Sex Tourism, and Land Development in Nicole Dennis-Benn's *Here Comes the Sun*," *ARIEL* 50, nos. 2–3 (April 2019): 59–81.
44. Nicole Dennis-Benn, *Here Comes the Sun* (New York, 2016), 9.
45. *Ibid.*, 10.
46. *Ibid.*, 24.
47. *Ibid.*, 45–46.
48. Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago, 2019), 38.
49. Wynter, "Novel and History," 100.