TOPOGRAPHIES OF VIOLENCE: MODERN SLAVERY AND NECROPOLITICS IN JAMES HANNAHAM'S *DELICIOUS FOODS*

TOPOGRAFIAS DA VIOLÊNCIA: ESCRAVIDÃO MODERNA E NECROPOLÍTICA EM SABOR AMARGO *DE JAMES HANNAHAM*

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Abstract: James Hannaham's second novel *Delicious Foods* weaves a palimpsest narrative that juxtaposes present-day farm labor with the historical legacy of slavery plantations by intertwining the contemporary struggles of exploited farm workers with the historical horrors of enslaved labor. As a result, the novel creates a powerful commentary on the enduring legacy of slavery in the United States and invites readers to envisage historical slavery outside the limitations of time and space. I argue that Hannaham achieves two important objectives in the novel: first, he innovates the neo-slave narrative genre by refusing to address historical slavery as a past event, but instead, the writer presents slavery as modern-day labor practices, and second, by addressing the similarities between modern-day farm labor with historical slavery Hannaham highlights necropolitical practices mostly deep-rooted in the American agribusiness sector.
Keywords: Necropolitics. Neo-Slave Narrative. Slavery. Farm Labor. Racism.

Resumo: O segundo romance de James Hannaham, *Sabor Amargo*, tece uma narrativa palimpsesta que justapõe o trabalho agrícola atual com o legado histórico das plantações escravistas, entrelaçando as lutas contemporâneas dos trabalhadores agrícolas explorados com os horrores históricos do trabalho escravizado. Como resultado, o romance cria um comentário poderoso sobre o legado duradouro da escravidão nos Estados Unidos e convida os leitores a imaginarem a escravidão histórica fora das limitações de tempo e espaço. Argumento que Hannaham atinge dois objetivos importantes no romance: primeiro, ele inova o gênero narrativa neo-escrava ao recusar abordar a escravidão histórica como um evento passado, mas em vez disso, o escritor apresenta a escravidão como práticas de trabalho modernas, e segundo, ao abordar as semelhanças entre o trabalho agrícola moderno e a escravidão histórica, Hannaham destaca práticas necropolíticas enraizadas principalmente no setor do agronegócio americano.
Palavras-chave: Necropolítica. Narrativa Neo-Escrava. Escravidão. Trabalho Agrícola. Racismo.

Slavery in the land of the free

> Slavery has been fruitful in giving itself names…and it will call itself by yet another name; and you and I and all of us had better wait and see what new form this old monster will assume, in what new skin this old snake will come forth next.
>
> Frederick Douglass, "The Need for Continuing Anti-Slavery Work" (1865).

In a 2012 news article from the Tampa Bay Times renowned journalist Ben Montgomery published the story of the harrowing ordeal experienced by African American LeRoy Smith who was able to escape from a type of modern-day plantation in Florida represented by the potato grower *Bulls-Hit* farm. Montgomery tells readers that Smith has filed a lawsuit against labor contractor Ronald Uzzle whom he claimed had enslaved him to *Bulls-Hit* farm after being lured with promises of a clean job with a decent paycheck. Smith reveals that what he actually met there was "[s]lavery. Abuse. Overwork. Deplorable,

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unsanitary conditions. Drugs," and moreover "[t]he only reason there's no shackles is because now they make the people submit to the cocaine. That's what they use to basically control the people" (MONTGOMERY, 2012). Additionally, Montgomery (2012) states the following about Smith's ordeal:

> Specifically, he found an overcrowded bunkhouse full of elderly, drug-addicted black men and one decrepit bathroom. Before he even arrived, the man in the driver's seat had loaned each of the 15 recruits in the van $10 for a bite to eat, on the condition they pay him back with 100 percent interest.

The *Bulls-Hit* grower hired Uzzle who had a very profitable scheme to recruit workers for the farm. He would ride in his van to Jacksonville, Florida, and target specifically African Americans "with a back strong enough for farm work and an addiction strong enough to stick around and work for nothing" (MONTGOMERY, 2012). Montgomery concludes that Smith "did not think slavery existed in modern America. He knows better now" (MONTGOMERY, 2012).

James Hannaham's second novel *Delicious Foods* (2015) displays a remarkable similarity with Montgomery's news article as a large part of the plot takes place on a fictitious gigantic grower called Delicious Foods; one that could stand for the fictional version of *Bulls-Hit* farm. Most of the workers at Delicious Foods are African Americans and Latinos who had been hired under false promises and chosen specifically due to their addiction to crack cocaine. In a 2016 interview Hannaham explains to journalist Stephen Best that he had the motivation to write about the legacy of slavery in present-day United States after taking a graduate course on neo-slave narratives and reading John Bowe's *Nobodies: Modern American Slave Labor and the Dark Side of the New Global Economy* (2008). Hannaham informs us that:

> At that point I was pretty ignorant about how slavery could still exist. And so it really blew my mind. How could it be that the same thing is happening to the same people in the same place, yet everybody is talking about this thing as if it is a thing of the past, as if it's over and black people should get over it? It was really revelatory to realize that the legacy of slavery is very much like slavery. It hasn't gone away. It's just changed, morphed itself. Saying that slavery is over is like saying that drugs are over because they're illegal. There's actually more slavery now on the planet than there was when black people were enslaved in the United States. (BEST, 2016)

I argue that Hannaham eventually achieves two objectives in *Delicious Foods*: first, he innovates the neo-slave narrative genre by refusing to address slavery and the plantation as events of the past, but instead, transplants them to present-day U.S. For example, readers will certainly notice that although the novel's time frame is set in contemporary U.S., *Delicious Foods* shares innumerable narrative patterns and motifs which belong to neo-slave narratives

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such as the dislocation of Africans to work on slavery plantations, life in confinement, *partus sequitur ventrem*, the ruthless foreman, the big farmhouse, the life-threatening escape amid guards with hounds and, finally, the countless episodes of violence.

Second, by writing a book that is constantly reminding readers that slave labor persists in some parts of the U.S., Hannaham also explores the necropolitical nature of American agribusiness sector that in order to achieve maximum profits recruits people who live in the fringes of society such as drug-addicts, homeless persons, African Americans as well as a number of legal and illegal Latino immigrants and forces them to work at farms which resemble slavery plantations. In an essay on the topic of modern slavery written for the New Yorker, Bowe (2003) writes the following:

> Modern day slavery exists not because today's workers are immigrants or because some of them don't have papers but because agriculture has always managed to sidestep the labor rules that are imposed upon other industries. When the federal minimum-wage law was enacted, in 1938, farmworkers were excluded from its provisions, and remained so for nearly thirty years. Even today, farmworkers, unlike other hourly workers, are denied the right to overtime pay. In many states, they're excluded from workers' compensation and unemployment benefits. Farmworkers receive no medical insurance or sick leave and are denied the right to organize.

Bowe highlights how American agribusiness possesses historical connections to slavery by carrying some of its structural format to today's labor conditions. In other words, the type of labor restrictions imposed on farmworkers expose their vulnerability, probably due to their illegal situation, and mark them as slaves, i.e., as a subclass overlooked by labor regulations. In this manner, the agribusiness sector might be compared to slavery plantation especially because their workers are treated as slaves. As Eve Dunbar (2022, p. 64) comments, *Delicious Foods* exemplifies Bowe's argument as the novel "asks us to encounter the plantation anew, not as history but as the present".

Moreover, there is an important element in Hannaham's association of farm labor with slave work characterized by his focus on the invisibility of modern-day slavery. For instance, the gigantic grower Delicious Foods is located at an unknown place, far from urban centers, making the workers wonder if they are either in Louisiana or Florida. Obviously, the reason for Delicious Foods's location being so secretive stems from the fact that people from the outside should never realize that those hired to work at the farm are confined in a physical space under heavy mechanisms of coercion and, thus treated in a manner almost indistinguishable from slavery. In an interview to the online journal *superstition [review]* Hannaham talks about his political and humanitarian purposes to write about the legacy of

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slavery in today's world and how such a problem remains not only largely invisible, but also complex to be confronted by society world over. He comments that:

> [M]y statement is ultimately more humanitarian than strictly political, that slavery hasn't really disappeared, it has just morphed into something similar and largely illegal whose truth we don't want to face because it affects us in ways that we may have difficulty trying to change—do we know whether the clothes we're wearing have been sewn together by slaves? Would we still wear them if we knew? Did that shrimp we're eating come from a slave crew in Thailand? We often don't know. So, if it's political to say that it's fucked up that we don't know any of this, I suppose that is the statement I meant to make. (HAWKES, 2016)

The novel targets the American agricultural sector making the narrative a direct indictment to the American reading public who will eventually feel affected by coming to grips with the possible presence of slavery in their country. No doubt, it is quite difficult to recognize that the fruits and vegetables which are disposed of in supermarkets or dinner tables might come from a modern-day plantation in a nearby state near you and, therefore, the eating of these foods could ultimately turn consumers into accomplices. Thus, it seems that Hannaham's political statement is quite clear: general consumers have to be aware that they might be one of the causes of modern-day plantation labor.

I want to explore Hannaham's unconventional neo-slave novel by adding that Delicious Foods's physical space may also function as a metaphor to what Achille Mbembe defined as a "third place", that is, a place of exclusion and death historically sanctioned by dominant classes since colonial slavery to exercise their racialized forms of terror toward marginalized groups. In today's globalized capitalist world, Mbembe describes such a space as "an ever-present reality, though often largely invisible, not to say all-too-familiar and in the end banal" for society at large (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 21). Accordingly, Mbembe (2019, p. 34) comments that:

> We have, it is true, always lived in a world deeply marked by diverse forms of terror, that is to say, of squandering human life[…]Historically, one of the strategies of the dominant states has always consisted in spatializing and discharging that terror by confining its most extreme manifestations in some racially stigmatized third place—the plantation under slavery, the colony, the camp, the compound under apartheid, the ghetto or, as in the present-day United States, the prison.

Mbembe's argument asserts that necropolitics belongs to a historical process initiated during colonial slavery but that continues today "in some racially stigmatized third place" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 34) which in most cases remain invisible, or simply ignored, by the general public.

Besides, skin color represents the element that justifies necropolitics because in many democratic capitalist countries death and racism are intertwined as "racism is the driver of the

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necropolitical principle" and additionally, racism is justified by "a war of eradication, indefinite, absolute, that claims the right to cruelty, torture, and indefinite detention" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 38). Thus, modern capitalist necropolitical societies regard deaths of racially marginalized groups as "something to which nobody feels any obligation to respond. Nobody even bears the slightest feelings of responsibility or justice toward this sort of life or, rather, death" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 38). Therefore, the lingering practice of necropolitics that began in colonial slavery about which Mbembe asserts inaugurates necropolitical power as "slave life, in many ways, [was] a form of death-in-life" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 75) and the perpetuation of such deathly power to other contemporary third places, such as the type of farm labor practiced today in the American agribusiness sector so well described by Hannaham, will guide my analysis of *Delicious Foods*.

In what follows I will begin by providing a brief introduction to neo-slave narratives and by explaining how *Delicious Foods* innovates the genre by placing plantation slavery as an invisible modern-day work rather than belonging to a long forgotten past. Next, I will discuss how the novel illustrates the historical necropolitical nature of American agribusiness through three examples from it that connect plantation slavery with contemporary farm labor, namely: the Death Van, slave labor at Delicious Foods and Eddie's dismembered hands. In conclusion, I expect this analysis not only to contribute to the interpretation of the novel but also to underscore that Hannaham warns us that slave labor remains much present in the U.S. Ultimately, *Delicious Foods* juxtaposes slavery with present-day agribusiness as a means to highlight a necropolitical history and practice which, albeit ignored by a large part of the population, remain consistently active within the walls of large growers such as fictitious Delicious Foods.

Delicious Foods **as an evolution to the Neo-Slave Narrative genre**

The novel centers on two African American protagonists: destitute mother, prostitute and crack addict Darlene Ardison and her son Eddie who, for different reasons, end up being recruited to Delicious Foods. Darlene is lured by a beautifully dressed lady called Jackie standing close to a "navy blue minibus parked at the side of the road" in Houston and who looked like "some direct-marketing TV huckster, talking fast 'bout this place and this job that sounded real good" (HANNAHAM, p. 65). The offer was irresistible because according to Jackie the job consisted of "[t]hree-star accommodations…[o]lympic-size swimming pool…[r]ecreation activities. Competitive salary, Vacation" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 66) and

even health care. High on crack Darlene believes the lady "had a job they wanna give her, without no interview or nothing, hard work but good work, no more tryna sell her body and getting stabbed or having to watch no shame-loving Cajun get busy with no melon" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 66). Jackie does tell Darlene that her company's associates run an agricultural business "harvesting a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, and legumes" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 66) which makes Darlene nostalgic of her innocent childhood days working on her family's farm.

Twelve-year old Eddie's recruitment to Delicious Foods takes place after he had spent months in Houston living by himself and searching for Darlene around the city's underworld streets at night. Eventually, he comes across a drunkard bum called Tuckahoe Joe who assures him he knows exactly what happened to Darlene. He tells Eddie that Darlene was caught by the Death Van and that:

> They come around with this here van, okay, and I seen a mess of folks get in thisyer van, but don't none of em come back. Now they asked me to go, and I heard them saying they take folks off to do some wonderful job somewheres, but I said to myself, What kinda job it is you don't come back from? [...]Death, that's the only job a nigger don't never come home from. They prolly out there making some nigger-flesh dog food. Maybe I'm paranoid, or it's a exaggeration, but something's going on. (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 150)

Although a drunkard, Tuck's suspicions come quite close to truth concerning whom the Death Van is after. He adds that:

> They're picking on the people that's the most out of it, he said. That's what it seem to me. I don't know how you going to get them interested as just a little boy. They only after the worst of the hookers, the junkies, and the alkies, y'see, people rocked out they mind. Hey, maybe they selling Negro skeletons to Baylor for research. After that Tuskegee shit, anything could happen. (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 153)

However, none of his concerns prevents Eddie from insisting they should go find the van. After taking a ride and waiting for an hour at the spot where the van would normally stop, Eddie and Tuck finally meet Jackie who tells them she knows Darlene pretty well and repeats the same fake liturgy about Delicious Foods that she had told Darlene months before. Eddie jumps right into the van and together with Tuck they embark on a ride inside the Death Van headed to Delicious Foods. Thus, the Middle Passage from Houston's underworld to Delicious Foods's modern-day plantation inaugurates the many motifs associated with neo-slave narratives.

Hannaham stated that during the neo-slave narrative course in graduate school called "Cultural Tourism, Slavery Museums and the Modern Neo-Slavery Novel" (BEST, 2016) he read novels such as Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa*

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Rose (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) and Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* (1993). More recent examples of neo-slave novels are Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) and Ta-nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019). For sure, one recurrent feature of all these previous books is their time frame which is invariably set during the time of slavery in the U.S. However, Hannaham's unconventional neo-slave novel sets the time frame of *Delicious Foods* not during the slavery period, but instead, to present-day U.S. As a result, his narrative invites readers to think about slavery as spaces of enslavement which go beyond historic and geographic limitations as these spaces remain active not only in the U.S. but also almost all over the world[2]**.** Eventually, the novel stands for a cautionary tale warning readers about the presence of slavery today in the land of the free; even though one would hardly suspect such a racist labor practice to continue to exist in the U.S. Finally, Eve Dunbar (2016, p. 66) sums it all by asserting that "the neo-slave narrative is a genre capable of being renewed, a process that must take place through tracing and tracking enslavement outside of antebellum time".

In terms of the genealogy of the genre, neo-slave narratives first appeared in the U.S in the sixties and seventies later attracting the attention of scholars such as Bernard W. Bell (1987) and Ashraf H. A. Rushdy (1999), who debated over the use of the term neo-slave narrative to denominate what appeared to them as a new literary genre. Bell was the first scholar to study these texts and to be responsible for coining the term which for him would not have the hyphen. The scholar characterized neo-slave narratives as postmodern (re)readings of former slave narratives that dialogued with and against Western literary tradition as a large number of African American writers embraced postmodernism, but due to the legacy left by institutional racism, sexism, and lack of social justice, which fostered ambivalence towards their own society, "most modern and postmodern Afro-American novelists, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, [were] not inclined to neglect moral and social issues in their narratives" (BELL, 1987, p. 284).

Reviewing Bell's theory Rushdy published what has been so far the major work on neo-slave narratives and recognized the importance of Bell's definition, from whom he borrowed the term, but added a hyphen to it. For Rushdy neo-slave narratives should be understood not solely within a postmodern context, but also within a specific socio-political milieu of the sixties. For him, during this decade issues about race, identity, representation,

[2] Modern slavery and its anachronistic pervasiveness within the U.S. and in many other parts of the globe has been discussed in detail by Kevin Bales. See for example: *Disposable People* (1999) and *The Slave Next Door* (2009).

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and so forth, were central in the political debate of the country, hence providing a venue for a revisionism on the history of slavery by African American writers. Accordingly, neo-slave writers adopted what the scholar identified as "political intertextuality" (RUSHDY, 1999, p. 4), that is, an ideological text grounded in the political debate of the sixties which used the traditional format of nineteenth-century slave narratives to address contemporary issues. For Rushdy the sixties represented "the social logic" (RUSHDY, 1999, p. 3) of the genre because the decade represented its birth and evolvement in the public sphere. Finally, neo-slave narratives were contemporary texts "that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (RUSHDY, 1999, p. 3)[3].

On the other hand, more recently, Yogita Goyal (2019)[4] has expanded the understanding of the genre by asserting that the neo-slave narrative has become a global phenomenon insofar as it frames contemporary narratives "from human trafficking to illegal immigration, from conscription in war as a child soldier to forced marriage, from debt bondage to domestic servitude" (GOYAL, 2019, p. 2) which make use of tropes normally associated with eighteenth and nineteenth slave narratives. Goyal claims that writers from "India to Ireland, Nigeria to Uganda, Haiti to South Africa, Sri Lanka to Sierra Leone—are reviving the slave narrative" (GOYAL, 2019, p. 2): a clearly historical genre created for the single purpose of arguing for the abolition of slavery but that has been revived by African American writers who wish to maintain the historical legacy of slavery as a continuous national debate. Their goal is to evidence the indelible marks of historical slavery on contemporary American social structure. Similarly, Goyal eventually reaffirms the power of slavery and particularly the neo-slave narrative genre to move beyond the geographical limitations of the U.S. as it permeates contemporary global narratives of human dislocation, trafficking, and modern slavery. She makes the following significant questions to prove her assumption:

> What does it mean to view the life of a Sudanese refugee or "Lost Boy" through the black-white binary of Atlantic slavery? Or to narrate the experience of a child soldier in Sierra Leone or Liberia as the afterlife of slavery? Or to see the journey of a child sent to live with an urban family as a restavec in Haiti as a kind of Middle Passage? Why does Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* make an appearance not only in African American fiction by Charles Johnson, Alice Randall, and James McBride, but also in Colum McCann's *Transatlantic*, in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel about Nigeria's civil war, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and in Helen Oyeyemi's uncanny *Boy*, *Snow, Bird*?

[3] For more on new-slave narratives see: SPAULDING, Timothy A. *Re-forming the Past* (2005) and SMITH, Valerie. *Neo-Slave Narratives* (2007).
[4] Cf. MURPHY, Laura T. *The New Slave Narrative* (2019).

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Finally, my argument is that *Delicious Foods* also represents an innovation to the neo-slave narrative genre as Hannaham writes a palimpsest text in which contemporary farm labor is juxtaposed with plantation slavery. In fact, Hannaham makes use of an already recognized genre to explore its various possibilities so well emphasized by Goyal. Besides, by connecting the neo-slave narrative to modern-day slavery, Hannaham attests to two facts: first, slavery has not ended in American soil and second, the presence of modern-day slavery in the agribusiness sector reveals a necropolitical history which remains unswerving in the country. Thus, historical slavery is a scar which has not been healed yet and remains a historical trauma that still afflicts many people not only in the U.S., but also in many other parts of the world.

The Death Van as the reenactment of the slave ship

Jackie's van and the journey from Houston to Delicious Foods echoes back well-known episodes of the slave trade recurrently described in neo-slave narratives such as the buying or kidnapping of slaves in Africa and their removal from the continent on slave ships to European plantations in the colonies. As Darlene is deceived by Jackie, she enters the Death Van and notices "a bunch of dark shapes, three in the very backseat and one in the seat in front of that, passing round a little red light" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 69). Instead of shackles these new slaves are kidnapped mostly due to their dependence on crack cocaine, their social vulnerability and race. Darlene as well as the other black people inside the Death Van represent the live cargo on the slave ships of our contemporary era that along with immigrants are all deceived into working under heavily coercive circumstances on large growers around the world. Mbembe (2019, p. 165) explains that "[d]uring the times of Negro slave trading, capitalism operated by taking and consuming what could be called a biostock, at once human and vegetal" because the world was divided into two distinct shores: the profit driven Atlantic shore and its predatory need of slave labor from the African shore. On a similar vein, by targeting vulnerable African Americans and Latinos, Delicious Foods would maximize its predatory profits as these workers are similar to slaves insofar as they would not get paid, but instead, would get "negative pay" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 128). In other words, the more they worked, the more they would be indebted to the grower.

Although Jackie had said the farm was just an hour from Houston, Darlene notices that the journey was taking too long and that "a while later they turnt off Interstate Something and start down a state or a county route, one without no streetlamps nowhere, maybe without no

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number" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 71). This is the drive into the unknown that kept the passengers in a state of suspense and took them into the slavery past. Darlene realizes that "[t]his minibus trip had only one turn, it felt like, a left turn that had happened some time before, she couldn't remember how long ago" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 73). According to Shelley Ingram (2020, p. 26):

> That Hannaham so consciously incorporates into the novel the unknowing of the geographic space of Delicious Foods, a dislocation that seems almost unthinkable in our modern era, suggests a clear and direct connection between the displacement wrought by the Middle Passage and chattel slavery in the past and the conditions of addiction, capitalism, and white supremacy in the present.

The displacement of these people to a status where they could not perceive their geographic location is part of Delicious Foods's strategy to disorient their new workers. Darlene feels as if she is "falling into the past" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 71) and this, of course, refers to the country's slavery past.

Slave Labor at Delicious Foods

The Death Van finally arrives at its destination: a dilapidated farmhouse. The sense of disorientation makes Darlene wonder how far the drive had taken them, and she searches for a clue to where she is at. She wonders if she is still in Texas, or if she went "far as Louisiana or Mississippi or even the Florida Panhandle?" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 95). Besides, the nostalgic remembrances of her farm days are immediately destroyed by "a strong shit smell…so bad that it reached its whole hand up inside your nose, pinched the bottom of your brain, and twisted your tear ducts like a lemon peel going into a motherfucking cocktail" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 95). As everyone enters the building, "[t]he chicken-shit odor got ten times stronger" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 96) which makes Darlene realize they are not in a three-star hotel but, instead, in a chicken coop. Jackie tells them that their accommodations will be set in the no-chicken area, yet "[f]or a no-chicken area it sure had a shitload of feathers and pellets on the floor and you had to make damn sure you didn't slip on them pellets and fall on your ass" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 97). Darlene complains about the space and signals she doesn't want to work there. Then, Jackie informs her that she could leave at any time, but she should be reminded that she owes the farm six hundred dollars already "[f]ive hundred for the ride and a hundred for the first night" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 98).

Delicious Foods farm follows the plantation logic in terms of its devaluing the workers' humanity and, simultaneously, regarding them as just another commodity. For instance, Jackie takes everyone to their bunk beds and Darlene sees "people of all kinda

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brown colors tossing around in them beds without no sheets, looking like a box of chocolates that had fell on the floor and got smashed and then put back into the smashed box" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 97). At Delicious Foods the workers were not regarded as citizens with rights, but as commodities, like slaves, similar to the chickens, chocolates, or the watermelons that Darlene and her workmates would have to pick up the next morning. Mbembe emphasizes an intrinsic racial component within slavery because the black bodies taken from Africa to European plantations had a new beginning in which "life came to be shaped according to an essentially racial principle" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 10), that is, one that defined the black body as being "of combustible energy, a sort of double of nature that could, through work, be transformed into an available reserve or stock" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 10). After completing the Middle Passage inside the Death Van, the black bodies from Houston encounter the plantation as well as their human degradation and commodification at Delicious Foods.

After just two hours of sleep all the workers had to wake up and start their labor. Darlene gets out of the chicken house and takes a good look at the premises. She realizes that for 360 degrees:

> the view stayed 'bout the same. Bunch of shiny-ass, frilly leaves of corn be fluttering out to the horizon, like the invisible hand of God ruffling em, and they get small in the distance and morph into a emerald glop. Beyond that was some teeny-tiny gray trees and a long chain of them electrical Godzilla towers in the far far distance where the world start to curve, a crazy distance couldn't nobody imagine running away to. (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 104)

The farm is in the middle of nowhere and built in a manner to discourage any attempt to escape from it. Months later the workers would wonder what types of danger lay ahead of those who tried to run away from Delicious, such as:

> Alligators, crocodiles, black bears, quicksand, swamps full of mosquitoes everybody said was the size of birds, wild gun-toting rednecks who went by the old ways, hungry wolf-dogs, voodoo priests who need human flesh for they ritual sacrifices, humongous tree frogs and poison insects, poison ivy, poison oak, hogweed. TT once insisted, all serious, that the Devil out there, the actual one. He kept saying, The Devil. (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 139)

According to Mbembe any historical consideration of modern terror must address slavery plantation because such a third place represents one of the first "repressed topographies of cruelty" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 92) which remains in existence today in penal colonies and "camps for foreigners" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 102) such as detention centers for illegal immigrants, refugee camps, etc. Hannaham adds another third place to Mbembe's list represented by the gigantic farms operated by the agricultural sector and their reproduction of

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slavery plantation. Thus, the workers/slaves at Delicious Foods experiment what Mbembe designates as a triple loss: "loss of a home, loss of rights over one's body, and loss of political status" (MBEMBE, 2018, p. 74). In other words, the very structure of the plantation system and its consequences are reproduced at Delicious Foods insofar as its workers live in a state of exception under "absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether)" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 75).

Eddie's dismembered hands

Slave labor at Delicious Foods is controlled by the ruthless overseer How and the sexual predator and farm's owner Sextus Fusilier. Together these two typical neo-slave narrative characters strengthen the representation of the farm as an anachronistic microcosm of slavery plantation as well as its necropolitical history. By the end of the book, a traumatic scene takes place involving Eddie, his mother Darlene, How and Sextus. It all begins after How spots Darlene talking to two journalists, Jarvis, and Frankie, at a remote place on the farm. How intercepts the conversation and threatens both journalists with a gun. They fled the scene in their car leaving Darlene behind to suffer the load of How's anger and violence. The beating starts in the open field and ends in the barn. There, in a sadistic manner, How summons Eddie to finish the job. This was not the first time How had asked Eddie to beat up someone dear to him, but this time, once inside the barn, Eddie moves closer to the person on the floor and under "all the bruises and lacerations, and behind the swollen eyes, he recognized his mother" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 252). How orders Eddie to continue the beating because he had some errands to do such as "going to get a bag of pork rinds" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 253), so he needed Eddie "to keep it going for a while" (HANNHAM, 2015, p. 253). Eddie suspects that "How, or even Sextus, had some kind of test in mind—of [his] ruthlessness, his loyalty to the company, his willingness to follow orders" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 253) and "wondered how close they thought he was to the kind of monster who would perform this task without hesitation" (HANNHAM, 2015, p. 253).

How returns with Sextus and seeing that Eddie had not beaten his own mother, they decided to punish Eddie as well. They wind a cable around "the kid's wrists tightly enough that after a few minutes it cut off his circulation. Eddie felt his hands swell and tingle— first they felt like gloves, later like someone else's hands" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 258). Eventually, when trying to free himself from the cable, Eddie realizes that the only way to freedom "would be for him to leave his hands behind" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 267). Thus,

the traumatic escape from the chains of slavery to qualified freedom outside Delicious Foods represents the grim perception that no one is left unscathed during the journey in the slave ship/death van during the Middle Passage from Africa/Houston to the slave plantations/Delicious Foods of the New World/U.S. Moreover, the wounds of slavery in the novel are open as late as the 1990s revealing a necropolitical history that continues to testify to the pains of unhealed scars. According to Nadine Flagel (2012, p. 232) "the scars of slavery is a common trope for describing the violence of slavery and its impact on the cultural, psychological, and social climate of the present day of the writer" and "scars are authenticating reminders of the materiality of history".

Even though Eddie manages to escape Delicious Foods without his hands and, miraculously, to have a successful financial career much later at his repair shop in St. Clouds, Minnesota, as the "Handyman Without Hands" (HANNAHAM, 2015, p. 25), not only is he wounded, but he is also disfigured. In this manner, Eddie will always carry an open scar to the present; his amputated hands are thus not a mere reminder of the traumas when working at Delicious, but the injury is the trauma itself which is remembered while it heals, which hurts while it heals (if it heals at all). Therefore, Hannaham underscores that a close encounter with modern-day slavery leaves one with a perineal trauma and that complete wholeness of self is unavailable. Accordingly, he explains that:

> [T]his was a book that I felt could not adequately address the things I wanted to address if I didn't address dismemberment as the horrific endgame of discrimination. It's not just a metaphor. It's real: the idea that one group starts to feel so powerful over another that they feel like they can literally dismember the other person's body. (BEST, 2016)

Although the novel begins in *media res* describing a handless Eddie in search of help from his aunt, Bethella, so that readers will be anticipated with his traumatic escape and later financial success, nonetheless, the violent scene describing the process of dismemberment comes still as a shock to us, the spectators, indicating that slavery continues to be an unresolved trauma. Mbembe explains that in necropolitical societies, politics should be considered as a form of war and thus "the question needs to be asked about the place that is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular when it is wounded or slain). How are these aspects inscribed in the order of power?" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 77). Hannaham's answer is that necropolitics, or the right to kill, has been transplanted out of colonial slavery to modern-day farm labor demonstrating to readers newer and almost invisible topographies of violence.

The afterlives of slavery

Mbembe explains that modern democratic countries construct their mythos of freedom and equality by hiding their most nefarious practices of violence within spaces of confinement such as prisons and the refugee camp. The existence of such necropolitical third spaces have direct ties with colonial slavery because "[d]emocracy, the plantation, and the colonial empire are objectively all part of the same historical matrix" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 34) and, besides, this original and structuring fact determines how we understand the violence of the contemporary global order. In his view, today's necropolitical third spaces mix two rationales: one of neutralization marked by torture and one of exile marked by indefinite confinement. Thus, the confinement of prisoners, refugees or farm workers reproduce the same logics of plantation slavery due to its uses of necropolitical methods in terms of an "inversion between life and death, as if life was merely death's medium" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 49) and possessed no importance. Moreover, "racism is the driver of the necropolitical principle" because it functions on one hand as "a generalized cheapening of the price of life and, on the other, a habituation to loss" (MBEMBE, 2019, p. 49).

I have argued that Hannaham's *Delicious Foods* can be interpreted through the lens of Mbembe's concept of third places insofar as readers will be constantly reminded of slavery and its haunting presence in American agribusiness today as they explore the narrative. For one, it is practically impossible not to interpret Delicious Foods's gigantic farm and the way its workers are hired and employed as a continuation of persistent necropolitical practices which reenact the horrors of the slave trade and slave labor. Eventually, Hannaham writes a cautionary narrative intended to reveal that slavery has not yet ended and that it could also be much closer to home than one would imagine. In so doing, the novel innovates the neo-slave narrative genre by bringing historical slavery from the past to the present at the same time that it highlights its close ties to present-day American farm labor.

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