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Magdalena Zapędowska

The Paratext and the Plantation: Technologies of Containment in Maria Gowen Brooks's *Zophiel*

Maria Gowen Brooks's *Zóphiël; or, The Bride of Seven* does not directly confront enslavement.

However, since the epic poem was composed on a coffee plantation in Cuba, enslavement surrounds and structures the text.¹ In the first edition of *Zophiel* (1825), which includes only Canto First and several shorter poems, enslavement erupts in a footnote. In the full 1833 edition, it is excised from the paratext but returns in the main text, mediated as the submarine palace of the Gnomes – an aquatic equivalent of the slave ship and the plantation. In the third Canto, the fallen angel Zophiel descends to the Gnomes' kingdom at the bottom of the Mediterranean. Their palace is a lavish labyrinthine structure, and the Gnomes themselves are melancholy semi-mortal beings cast into luxurious captivity by their immortal father. Unable to die, reproduce, or leave the palace, they think “death happier than a life like this” (Brooks 1833, 139). In this canto, *Zophiel* transposes the contradictions of Brooks's Cuban cafetal into a fantastic undersea environment.

Fanciful plotlines like these earned Brooks the reputation as “the most impassioned and most imaginative of all poetesses,” in Robert Southey's words (qtd. in Gruesz, “Cafetal” 82). Indeed, *Zophiel* is arguably the fullest expression of U.S. high romanticism. Written in the genre of the annotated orientalist epic popularized in Britain by Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer*

¹ Research for this essay was completed with the support of a Deutsch Fellowship in Women's History from the Library Company of Philadelphia. I am grateful to the LCP staff, Kirsten Silva Gruesz for her encouragement at an early stage of this project, and to RJ Boutelle, Nick Bromell, the participants in the C19 seminar on “Caribbean Circulation and Region,” and the editors of this special issue for their generous suggestions.

(1801) and *The Curse of Kehama* (1810) (Curran 133), it is loosely based on the apocryphal Book of Tobit and tells the story of the eponymous fallen angel courting a Hebrew maiden in Babylonian exile.

The story begins when the heroine, Eglá, who has been waiting for the bridegroom promised her in a childhood vision, reluctantly agrees to marry another man to please her parents. As the newly-wed Eglá awaits her groom in the bridal chamber, the angel Zophiel, who has fallen in love with her, woos her with precious gifts and kills the groom before he can reach Eglá's bed. Her father is accused of murder and the family must appear before the king of Media. The king is so captivated by Eglá that he wants to marry her. However, because of the first bridegroom's mysterious death, a courtier concerned about the king's life offers to have sex with Eglá the night before the marriage is performed. He enters her room and dies. After four other courtiers meet the same fate, Eglá and her parents are sent home. Meanwhile, Zophiel, who has been visiting Eglá in the remote grotto where she has been sequestered, wins her affections. He travels to the Gnomes' palace under the sea to procure an elixir that will grant her immortality. However, his return is interrupted by Lucifer, who accuses Zophiel of betrayal and forbids him the pleasure of Eglá's love. While Zophiel is away, Eglá finally meets her destined bridegroom and the couple are blessed by archangel Raphael. An anguished Zophiel escapes to the desert, where Raphael offers him hope of redemption.

Although *Zophiel* gained critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic, it failed to find a broad audience in the antebellum U.S. The poem's heightened sensuality and explicit eroticism violated the norms of female propriety, just as its heterodox treatment of angels challenged Protestant doctrine. The complete American edition, reprinted by the Boston firm Hilliard, Gray, & Co. in 1834 from the London edition of 1833, sold only 20 out of the 500 printed copies

(Gruesz, “Cafetal” 43). More surprisingly, Brooks and her ambitious orientalist epic have largely fallen through the gaps of the recovery of women’s poetry that brought to scholarly attention poets like Lydia Sigourney, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Sarah Piatt, and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Not quite a sentimental poetess carrying the “nightingale’s burden” of unnamed pain (Walker), nor an activist for progressive social causes, Brooks does not comfortably fit the critical paradigms for reading canonically minor nineteenth-century women’s verse (Larson 42).

Brooks wrote most of *Zophiel* at Cafetal San Patricio, a coffee plantation in the Matanzas region of Cuba, which she inherited after her brother William’s death in 1825. Like many other U.S. investors who saw the rising demand for coffee as an opportunity for profit, William bought land in Matanzas in 1817 and enslaved African laborers to establish and cultivate his cafetal (Gruesz, “Cafetal” 40-43).² At the time of his death, Maria was a financially struggling widow and mother. In assuming ownership of San Patricio, she became an enslaver, relying on the stolen labor of several hundred captive Africans for income and the leisure to write. Legal ownership of captive Africans and the profits from their labor allowed Brooks a degree of freedom she did not have as a married or widowed woman in Boston. However, unlike Southern women enslavers, the Massachusetts-born author could not easily find moral justification for slavery. The contradiction between its atrocities and the benefits it produced rendered enslavement all but unspeakable; as Kirsten Silva Gruesz points out, it is never directly addressed in Brooks’s poetry (“Cafetal” 39).

However, the pressure of this violent regime on Brooks’s imagination registers in *Zophiel* in highly mediated ways that we may describe as haunting, after Toni Morrison and Avery

² To honor the humanity of enslaved people and avoid language that perpetuates the value system of enslavers, I use the terminology suggested by Foreman et al.

Gordon. Calling for a reinterpretation of nineteenth-century Anglo-American literature for the “unspeakable things unspoken,” that is, an invisible African American presence, Morrison asks, “Are there ghosts in the machine? Active but unsummoned presences that can distort the workings of the machine and can also *make* it work?” (377-78). Similarly, Gordon writes that “haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities” (8). *Zophiel* occludes the “seething presence” of the enslaved, mediating it through elaborate imaginaries haunted by specters of colonial trade in captive Africans, the extractive labor on the plantation, and the threat of revolt.

Scholars have discussed Brooks’s poetry in terms of the highly cultivated authorial personae in her shorter poetry and fiction (Gruesz, “Cafetal,” “Poe Circle”), and, in *Zophiel*, her rewriting of *Paradise Lost* (Packer 64-68) and use of the annotated epic genre (Larson). Building on this work, and especially on Gruesz’s foundational discussion of Brooks’s relationship to Cuba, I examine *Zophiel* through the framework of Caribbean and print culture studies to tease out how Brooks uses the material form of the printed page and the imaginative forms afforded by the genre of orientalist fantasy to grapple with her position as a woman enslaver in Cuba in the late 1820s and early 1830s. Reading *Zophiel* symptomatically as, above all, a Caribbean colonial fantasy in Édouard Glissant’s sense of the term (70) reveals specters of enslavement mediated through the print layout and the lavish fantastical imagery, and further occluded by the highly aestheticized language with intricate sonic patterning. As scholars like Stephanie Camp and Theresa Singleton have demonstrated, containment of enslaved people was a crucial feature of the plantation system. In subsequent editions of *Zophiel*, Brooks invents increasingly elaborate technologies of containment to distance herself from enslaving and mitigate the threat of a violent revolt of the enslaved like those erupting on other Cuban plantations.

Representing the Cafetal

Travelers to Cuba often contrasted the inhumane conditions of enslaved labor on the ingenios, or sugar plantations, with the lighter work on the beautifully laid out cafetales (Gruesz, “Cafetal” 48-50). Mary Gardner Lowell, a Bostonian who visited Cuba in 1831-1832, observed in her diary that enslaved laborers “on the sugar estate... are worked unmercifully and most cruelly treated. I believe it is much more difficult upon a sugar than upon a coffee plantation not to overwork the negroes, there is so much to be done when the sugar is making” (89). Lowell’s syntax centers the needs of enslavers and the intense demands of the sugar-making process, reducing those enslaved to the grammatical object of the impersonal construction, “it is difficult... not to overwork [them].” In a chilling segue, she mentions an enslaved man who had recently died by suicide and another who was killed in a scalding accident. Lowell contrasts this oppressive environment with a coffee plantation, where the enslaved “seem tolerably happy & I should think were not over worked” (89). In reality, as we know, coffee production required hard physical labor and painstaking precision. On a new estate, enslaved laborers’ work started with developing the plantation: felling trees, removing underbrush, plowing fields, building the structures for coffee production, the enslaver’s and overseer’s houses, and their own housing (Van Norman 22-25). When the plantation was established, they performed the agricultural work: they planted seeds, transplanted seedlings, weeded the coffee grove, pruned the bushes, harvested and processed the berries, and sorted and packed the beans (Van Norman 45-49).

Lowell’s assumption of easy labor determines her perception of enslaved cafetal workers. Upon visiting the sorting room, she observes: “I found the women seated each side a long table busily employed in performing the operation, they sing all the time the same tune by which they

dance.... It is very monotonous, but I like to hear it, as it has a happy contented sound” (94). Lowell’s interpretation of the song as “contented” protects her from affective dissonance, reasserting the plantation vectors of power in which the Africans are “tolerably happy” to fulfill their assigned roles. Assuming the transparency of the women’s affect, Lowell is not equipped to recognize their singing as a form of survival. In their analyses of the logic of the plantation, Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick draw attention to the creative, resistant, sustaining practices enslaved people developed within the oppressive plantation economy. The song in the sorting room reclaims a space that is publicly visible to enslavers but whose opacity enslavers cannot penetrate. It disturbs the forced labor of sorting beans and the discipline of arranging enslaved Africans in a space designed for production and surveillance.³

To erase the physical and emotional violence inherent in enslavement, visitors to cafetales often excised the presence of captive Africans altogether. Instead, they enthusiastically catalogued the pleasing variety of plantings: “Among the coffee... the plantain is suffered to grow, for the purpose of giving bread to the negroes,” wrote Rufus Anderson (4). “Here and there, also, the orange and citron trees lift their golden fruit above the surface; and far above all the rest, the privileged palm waves its beautiful summit” (4). Lowell subjected every landscape to aesthetic judgment: “Mr Sage’s house is beautifully located upon a hill commanding a very picturesque view of the estate & surrounding country” (76). Her expectations of high visual pleasure led her to complain about palm trees with bulging trunks: “I had heard so much of the exceeding beauty of the Palm that I must confess myself rather disappointed, particularly in

³ On enslaved people’s subversive uses of space and cultivating of pleasure in the plantation South, see Camp, esp. 60-92.

those which grow without cultivation in the woods and which are frequently irregular in their surface & have a bulge halfway up the trunk which is a great blemish” (80).⁴

Edouard Glissant exposes such aestheticized descriptions of Caribbean landscape as fantasies that aim to justify slavery by “blotting out the turbulent realities of the Plantation, beneath the conventional splendor of scenery” (70). *Zophiel* is even further removed from these realities. In Glissant’s terms, the poem is a Caribbean colonial fantasy taken to the extreme, populated by supernatural creatures and set in the historically and geographically distant ancient Babylon that boasts the lush tropical vegetation of Cuba. The Romantic epic genre, and specifically its subgenre of orientalist fantasy, allows Brooks to disavow the material realities of the plantation and relegate enslavement to a haunting. Although the *café* returns in the paratext, it is reduced to an idyllic landscape. In a footnote to Canto First, Brooks writes: “In this island the woods which are naturally so interwoven with vines as to be impervious to a human being, are in some places, cleared and converted into nurseries for the young coffee-trees which remain sheltered from the sun and wind till sufficiently grown to transplant” (1825, 26). The grammar of this sentence disentangles the crop from the forced labor required to cultivate it. The nonhuman subject with the passive voice - “the woods... are... cleared and converted” – and the erasure of forced labor from the phrase “coffee-trees... sufficiently grown to transplant” propose an ecology that maintains itself, occluding the violence of the plantation system.

Brooks’s effort to disavow enslaving is further reflected in her characterization of the heroine, Eglá, and the narrative distribution of agency in the poem. An obedient daughter to her loving parents, Eglá has little control over what befalls her. Brooks portrays her as spirited but passive and languid: “[Her] soul... could spurn at fear / Of death or danger.... And this at

⁴ Other accounts of travel to Cuba include Hawthorne, Dana, Abbot.

intervals in language bright / Told her blue eyes; tho' oft the tender lid / Like lilly drooping languidly; and white / And trembling - all save love and lustre hid" (24). She spends time in the shaded acacia grove to escape midday heat. We see her playing the lute, crying about her impending marriage and sleeping, then receiving Zophiel's courtship and almost surrendering her virtue to her advances. Above all, we see Eglar waiting, unable to change her circumstances, an object of others' actions. The repeatedly asserted whiteness of Eglar's skin – "Whiter than the surf that foams against the sea-rock looked her neck" (1825, 23) – encodes her innocence besides stressing the racialized perfection of her beauty. If Eglar with her heightened emotionality and artistic sensibilities is Brooks's alter ego, her languor denies Brooks's active role in plantation enslavement.

Eglar's passivity stands in sharp contrast with Zophiel's agency: his mobility across long distances, his determination to win Eglar's affections, his elaborate courtship, and finally, his propensity to inflict violence as he kills Eglar's suitors. Assigning agency to the supernatural protagonist exonerates the human heroine and renders invisible the forced plantation labor. When newly wed Eglar waits for her groom in the bridal chamber, Zophiel brings her gifts of gold and precious stones: "in his hand, he held a little vase / Of virgin gold in strange devices wrought" (1825, 50). Zophiel's agency contracts the vast geography of empire and colonial trade into the contents of the vase: the "orient pearls" sought "mid the caverns of the sea," the ruby found "on a mountain tip," the diamond "cull'd from Indian mine" (1825, 53) (Lowe 83). This scene displaces colonial resource extraction from crop production on Brooks's *cafetal* to mining sites in Asia. To quote Lisa Lowe, the gems' "abstracted value occults the histories of labor, material, and geography" (85), further displacing the geography of the Caribbean.

Zophiel's Paratextual Negotiations of Enslavement

Brooks would go on to publish two more editions of *Zophiel* during her lifetime. The first, incomplete edition, published by the Boston firm Richardson and Lord in 1825, includes only Canto First and several shorter poems. Its goal was to solicit support for the full poem Brooks intended to write, build an audience, and gauge the critical response. “I am induced to place it before the public,” she states in the preface, “on the principle that no artist can make the same improvement... in private, as when... listening to the opinions of critics and the remarks of connoisseurs” (1825, 6). The full edition was published in London in 1833 under the auspices of Robert Southey and reprinted in Boston in 1834 with a new preface. The 1833 and 1834 editions include five additional cantos and replace the 1825 edition’s shorter poems with a different set of verse. Brooks also revised Canto First for the later editions and expanded the poem’s title from *Zophiel* to *Zóphiël; or, The Bride of Seven*, with a subtitle and diacritical marks in the angel’s name. Print was an unstable medium in the antebellum era, and authors often silently revised previously published texts (McGill). On the one hand, Brooks’s changes to *Zophiel* reflect her literary aspirations, which underlie the minor revisions to the text of Canto First that elaborate on a sentiment or refine the poetic language. On the other hand, the changes reflect Brooks’s changing relationship to enslavement, for between the two editions her status changed from a visitor on her brother’s plantation to the enslaver of several hundred Africans.

Brooks’s most direct reference to enslavement occurs in a footnote to the 1825 edition of the first canto of *Zophiel*.⁵ According to the signature that follows Canto First – “Cuba. Cafétal

⁵ The poem also makes several passing references to the enslavement of Israelites in Babylon, and a note to Canto Fourth, about a storm Brooks witnessed while a guest at San Patricio in 1823 or 1824, refers to a Black woman “who still slept soundly by the door of my apartment” (1833, 180 n. 5). Notably, Brooks chooses to describe an event from before she became an enslaver and does not mention the woman’s enslaved status.

San Patricio, April 1823”– she wrote it while visiting her brother on the plantation. Brooks had arrived at San Patricio in 1823, with one volume of poems already to her name: *Judith, Esther, and Other Poems* (1820). The titular poems’ reimagining of biblical events, common in early nineteenth-century U.S. women’s verse, allowed Brooks to evade the stigma women faced for publishing their work. In *Zophiel*, she expands her biblical interests to early Christian theology, heterodox Christian mysticism, Greek and Persian mythology, and Roman historiography – all meticulously documented in the erudite endnotes – to tell a fantastical story that foregrounds female desire while occluding the brutal realities of the plantation.

As noted earlier, Brooks mentions enslavement in a footnote to the Invocation preceding Canto First. Addressed to a personified Poesy, the Invocation trades in tropes of disappointed love, loneliness, and melancholia amidst a rugged northern landscape. However, the sprawling paratext reluctantly acknowledges African presence on the cafetal. Coined by Gerard Genette, the term paratext describes supplementary elements of the book that surround the main text, such as the title, the preface and afterword, epigraphs and annotations. Beth McCoy contends that rather than being politically neutral, the paratext in texts by African American authors is “a zone transacting ever-changing modes of white domination and of resistance to that domination” (156).⁶ In colonial texts by white authors, fraught descriptions of the racialized Other in the paratext similarly demonstrate that white domination is a struggle and that oppressive systems like settler colonialism and enslavement are riddled with contradiction.

Brooks’s footnote accompanies a stanza about the genius of untrained folk poets who find inspiration in nature:

⁶ On the uses of the paratext to assert white power over Black texts, see Sekora.

Scorner of thoughtless grandeur, thou hast chose
Thy best-beloved from ruddy Nature's breast:
 The grotto dark and rude –
 The forest solitude –
The craggy mount by blushing clouds carest –
Have altars where thy light ethereal glows. (Brooks 1825, 16)

The apostrophe to Poesy as “scorner of thoughtless grandeur” dismisses pretentious poetic expression. Instead, Brooks reiterates the Wordsworthian sentiment that rural life allows an untutored mind to express itself with a simplicity and spontaneity characteristic of nature (Wordsworth 245). With this claim, Brooks asserts a heightened feminine sensibility vibrating with nature's own passions.⁷ But her displays of erudition belie these protestations of amateurism. The Invocation restages what Mary Loeffelholz describes as “the dichotomy between... education and untutored spontaneity” that permeates the production and reception of early nineteenth-century women's poetry in the U.S. (16-17). In Brooks's case, this dichotomy is further complicated by the material scene of writing, a multilingual contact zone rife with intimacies that for Brooks are at once necessary and unwanted, fascinating and threatening. Her claim to simplicity opens up the fraught possibility of relation with enslaved laborers who, like the women sorting coffee in Lowell's account, sing together while working.

Following this reluctant opening, it comes as no surprise that the irreducible, unruly, stubbornly embodied African presence that subtends Brooks's scene of writing insinuates itself

⁷ On how nineteenth-century women poets accessed authorship, see Loeffelholz, esp. 1-9; see also V. Jackson on the rhetorical gestures through which sentimental women poets established authority.

into the paratext. In his discussion of the plantation, Glissant posits a contradiction between its “tidy composition” rooted in strict racial hierarchy and its “ambiguous complexities” that unsettle the separation between enslavers and enslaved (65). Written on the plantation and porous to its materiality, Brooks’s *Invocation* registers this contradiction through the text’s relationship to the paratext. The text reflects the plantation’s “tidy composition”: the intricate six-line stanza, likely of Brooks’s own invention, is composed of two pairs of iambic pentameter lines, interlinked by chiasmic rhymes, that surround a trimeter couplet. The whole stanza, rhymed abccba, forms a carefully crafted unit comprising a full sentence. This high level of organization contrasts with the loose, associative structure of the discursive footnote, which houses the autobiographical, referential excess that does not fit in the text.

The long paratextual digression begins with the universal appeal of poetry: “every nation, however rude, has... a taste for poetry” (1825, 16). This claim affirms the nineteenth-century belief in the hierarchy of civilizations, presumed to represent different stages of evolution, that resurfaces in antebellum racial science to justify enslavement.⁸ However, the *Invocation*’s praise of rustic poets unsettles this hierarchy, implying a permeable distinction between, on the one hand, Brooks herself as a poet immersed in nature and, on the other hand, the untutored poets who belong to nations on the lower rungs of civilization’s ladder. This train of thought continues with a quotation from Byron about poets who never wrote down their thoughts but saw the world through the prism of the imagination. Brooks strategically avoids the political Byron, admired by African American abolitionists for his revolutionary sentiments (Hickman). Instead, Brooks embraces the nonthreatening, self-referential Byron who glorified poetry as a superior mode of

⁸ For a discussion of this Hegelian narrative of world history as a teleological progression through stages of civilizational development, culminating in the fully developed Europe, see Lowe 139-149.

perception. But in lieu of commentary on the Byron quote, Brooks describes the plight of the Africans enslaved by her brother at Cafetal San Patricio. Byron's praise of untutored, unrecorded poetry serves as a point of entry to acknowledging the Africans' otherwise unspeakable presence:

In the place where I now write amid several hundred Africans of different ages, and nations, the most debased of any on the face of the earth, I have been enabled to observe, even in this, last link of the chain of humanity, the strong natural love of music and poetry.

Any little incident which occurs on the estate where they toil, and which the greater part of them are never suffered to leave, is immediately made the subject of a rude song which they, in their broken Spanish, sing to their companions; and thereby relieve a little the monotony of their lives.

I have observed these poor creatures, under various circumstances, and though, generally, extremely brutal, have, in some instances, heard touches of sentiment from them, when under the influence of grief, equal to any which have flowed from the pen of Rousseau. (Brooks 1825, 16-17)

The footnote is propelled by several conflicting impulses that bespeak the affective complexity of Brooks's response to the enslaved Other: fascination, an unwilling recognition of shared capacity for creative expression, and a distant suggestion of her complicity in their enslavement. First and foremost, Brooks feels compelled to write about the African workers and inscribe their presence into a poem about the sources of poetic inspiration. She acknowledges the

size and heterogeneity of their population - “several hundred Africans of different ages, and nations” – while noting their unity in song.⁹

However, Brooks minimizes the horror of enslavement by relegating the Africans to less-than-human status as “the last link of the chain of humanity.”¹⁰ The paratext attempts to contain their unruly, overwhelming, disturbing but economically requisite presence on the plantation.¹¹ The layout of the printed page mirrors this theater of white domination, with the highly aestheticized poetry visually positioned above the description of the laborers’ toil and grief.

⁹ As historians of Cuban enslavement point out, the majority of captive laborers on the plantations were African-born and belonged to the Congo and Yoruba nations (Singleton 185). Because the enslaved population was predominantly male, it did not reproduce itself and required enslavers to rely on trade in captive Africans (Bergard 102-103). According to Bergard, about 780,000 Africans were brought from Africa to Cuba between 1790 and 1867, when the trade ended on the island (112).

¹⁰ On the nineteenth-century concept of the Chain of Being as a racial technology, see Z. Jackson 48-51.

¹¹ See Rusert on paratext in James Grainger’s *The Sugar-Cane*.

Friendless—oppressed by fate—the restless fires
Of his thrall'd soul prey on his beauteous frame—
Till, strengthened by thine aid,
He shapes some kindred maid,
Pours forth in song the life consuming flame,
And for awhile forgets his sufferings and desires.

Scorn'er of thoughtless grandeur, thou hast chose
Thy *best-beloved* from ruddy Nature's breast:
The grotto dark and rude—
The forest solitude—
The craggy mount by blushing clouds caress—
Have altars where thy light ethereal glows.*

* Every nation, however rude, has, as it has been justly observed, a taste for poetry. This art after all that has and can be said for and against it, is the language of nature, and among the relics of the most polished and learned nations little has survived except such as simply depicts those natural feelings and images which have ever existed and ever must continue. Most of the great poets have been individuals of humble condition rising from the mass of the people by that natural principle which causes the more ethereal particles to rise and the denser to sink to the earth. But, as Byron exquisitely says, in one of the most wonderfully beautiful pages he ever composed.

"Many are poets who have never penned
Their inspirations, and, perchance, the best;
They felt, they loved, and died; but would not lend
Their thoughts to meaner beings; they compress
The god within them, and rejoined the stars
Unlaurel'd upon earth."

In the place where I now write amid several hundred Africans of different ages, and nations, the most debased of any on the face of

Thy sovereign priest by earth's vile sons was driven
To make the cold unconscious earth his bed: *
The damp cave mocked his sighs—
But from his sightless eyes,
Wrung forth by wrongs, the anguish'd drops he shed,
Fell each as an appeal to summon thee from heaven.

Thou sought'st him in his desolation; placed
On thy warm bosom his unpillowed head;
Bade him for visions live
More bright than worlds can give;
O'er his pale lips thy soul infusive shed
That left his dust adored where kings decay untraced.

the earth, I have been enabled to observe, even in this, last link of the chain of humanity, the strong natural love for music and poetry.

Any little incident which occurs on the estate where they toil, and which the greater part of them are never suffered to leave, is immediately made the subject of a rude song which they, in their broken Spanish, sing to their companions; and thereby relieve a little the monotony of their lives.

I have observed these poor creatures, under various circumstances, and though, generally, extremely brutal, have, in some instances, heard touches of sentiment from them, when under the influence of grief, equal to any which have flowed from the pen of Rousseau.

* "On the banks of the Meles was shown the spot where Critheis, the mother of Homer, brought him into the world, and the cavern to which he retired to compose his immortal verses. A monument erected to his memory and inscribed with his name stood in the middle of the city—it was adorned with spacious porticos under which the citizens assembled."

g*

Figure 1: The two-page footnote to "Invocation" on the music of enslaved Africans on the plantation in the 1825 edition of Maria Gowen Brooks's *Zophiel*. Hathi Trust.

The print layout registers how the plantation's regime of dispossession forms the foundation - the soil, if you will - from which Brooks's poetry grows. It enacts what Monique Allewaert calls a disruptive, decomposing "relation of proximity" created by the American tropics and plantation ecology (8). Although Allewaert speaks of organic life and inorganic nature, in *Zophiel* the relation of proximity occurs between Brooks's intellectual labor of writing and enslaved people's forced physical labor that at once enables and invades this writing, disrupting the creation of a poetry that deals in abstracted feelings and unnamed pain. This layout is further haunted by a specter of the ship transporting abducted Africans across the Atlantic. On the two neighboring pages of the open book, the paratext resembles the hold of the ship, the site of abjection of

people transformed into cargo. Brooks's description of the Africans thus carries ghostly traces of the Middle Passage, reinscribing its horror into the abstracted description of plantation labor.

The Africans' expression of grief through song subverts Brooks's attempt to diminish their humanity. Compelled to acknowledge their "strong natural love for music and poetry," she must also acknowledge their bondage "on the estate... which the greater part of them are never suffered to leave." Brooks's sympathy for "these poor creatures" disavows her complicity as a guest on the plantation, positioning her as a passive witness who "observed" and "heard" the Africans. However, as she reflects on their music – which is also a form of collective resistance – her syntax becomes tortured and fragmented, perforated by commas and qualifiers that bespeak the impossibility of justifying the plantation system. Hence the abrupt but calming display of erudition in the last part of this troubled sentence. Compared to Rousseau, the enslaved laborers are disciplined through inscription into high-cultural literary sentimentalism. Rousseau's written *description* of feeling replaces the Africans' oral, embodied and therefore threatening *expression* of feeling. Brooks brings the footnote full circle, ending in the safe realm of belles lettres rather than the brutal reality of plantation life.

Like the Invocation, Canto First of the 1825 *Zophiel* is annotated as well. Its footnotes and endnotes range from scholarly explanations of the poem's erudite references to autobiographical notes and naturalist descriptions of tropical vegetation. Unlike the footnote about enslaved Africans, these notes present the plantation as unpopulated, a site of luxurious if enervating solitude. The paratext's centrifugal energy directs attention away from the poem and toward Cuban scenery, Brooks's life, and the vast bibliography of her sources.

ZOPHIEL.

CANTO I.

I.

THE time has been—this holiest records say—
In punishment for crimes of mortal birth,
When spirits banished from the realms of day
Wandered malignant o'er the nighted earth. (1)

And from the cold and marble lips declared,
Of some blind-worshipped—earth-created god,
Their deep deceits; which trusting monarchs snared
Filling the air with moans, with gore the sod.*

Yet angels doffed their robes in radiance dyed,
And for a while the joys of heaven delayed,
To watch benign by some just mortal's side—
Or meet th' aspiring love of some high gifted maid.†

* The god who conducted the Hebrews sent a malignant spirit to speak from the mouth of the prophets, in order to deceive king Achah.

† It is useless to note this stanza, as two well-known poems have lately been founded on the same passage of the Pentateuch to which it alludes.

NOTES.

(1) *Wandered malignant o'er the erring earth.*

This passage and, indeed the whole poem, is founded on a belief, prevalent in the earlier ages of christianity, that all nations, except the descendants of Abraham, were abandoned by the Almighty, and subjected to the power of dæmons or evil spirits. Fontenelle in his "*Histoire des Oracles*" makes the following extract from the works of the Pagan philosopher Porphyry.

"Auguste déjà vieux and songeant à se choisir un successeur, alla consulter l'oracle de Delphes. L'oracle ne répondoit point, quiqu 'Auguste n'épargnât pas des sacrifices. A la fin, cependant, il en tira cette réponse. L'enfant Hebreu à qui tous les Dieux obeissent, me chasse d'ici, and me renvoie dans les Enfers. Sors de ce temple sans parler."

(2) *While friendly shades the sacred rites enshroud.*

The captive Jews, though they sometimes outwardly conformed to the religion of their oppressors, were accustomed to practice their own in secret.

Figure 2: The beginning of Canto I in the 1825 edition of Maria Gowen Brooks's *Zophiel* with footnotes, and the corresponding endnotes. *Hathi Trust*.

This extensive paratextual apparatus undermines the aesthetic autonomy of the poem, which Brooks so painstakingly fashions as self-referential, rooted in literary tradition and scholarship. In the annotated epic genre, the annotations form a Derridean supplement, at once a surplus and a lack (Derrida 144-45). *Zophiel's* paratext blurs the boundary between the book and the world, the poem and the material site of its production, pulling the poem back toward the plantation and invading the supposedly timeless orientalist fantasy with the localized temporality of writing. The notes require that the reader decide whether to continue reading or pause and redirect the gaze to the bottom of the page. While the footnotes allow the reader to stay on the same page, the endnotes require turning pages at the prompt of the number, but they are also easier to ignore.

Brooks herself experienced considerable anxiety over the paratext's impact on the reception of the poem. In the preface to the complete U.S. edition, she refutes the criticism that the poem is difficult to understand by blaming readers for a failed performance of reading:

[They] probably, read it hastily, and confused themselves by looking from the verses to the notes, and back again, when the attention was distracted. It will be better to read the story as it was composed, without reference to explanations or comments till the whole is finished. The notes can be read afterwards with equal advantage. Indeed they are merely added, to show how much authority exists for every incident and allusion of a narrative imagined under the influence of soft luxuriant tropical scenery; where the writer drew solely from nature, and had access to no books at all relative to the subject. (Brooks 1834, vi)

Brooks tries to script the act of reading in order to protect the poem's aesthetic unity from invasion by the heterogeneous paratext. Her claim that she imagined *Zophiel* "under the influence of soft luxuriant tropical scenery" folds plantation enslavement into the lush vegetation and climate. Identifying the scenery as the main source of the poem, Brooks metonymically displaces the laboring Africans onto the scenery, produced by combining their labor with the climate, the soil, and the vegetation (Lowe 82-85).¹² However, as we will see, plantation enslavement haunts the poem's most imaginative events, settings, and plotlines.

¹² On metonymy as a decolonizing tool see Chander, Dembicki. In *Zophiel*, however, the shift from Brooks's Cuban scene of writing to the audience's scene of reading in Britain or the northern U.S. disentangles the metonymy from its context, occluding the traces of forced labor.

Mediations of Enslavement in the Palace of Gnomes

Although Brooks saw her annotations as an integral if supplementary component of *Zophiel*, the footnote about the music of enslaved Africans was excised from the complete edition of the poem that was published in London in 1833. In the London edition, Brooks removed the Invocation, replacing it with a tribute to Southey, who not only helped her publish the poem but also secured *Zophiel*'s short-lived reputation as a work of passion unparalleled on the U.S. literary scene, lauded for the author's "[l]earning, brilliant imagination, and masculine boldness of thought and diction" (Griswold 150).¹³ A year later, the poem was reprinted in Boston from the London edition. The Boston edition was published "for the benefit of the Polish Exiles," mostly aristocrats and educated landowners who emigrated to the U.S. after the repressed Polish uprising of 1830 against Russian rule (Brooks 1834, iv-v).

Much had changed for Brooks between the 1825 and the 1833 editions of the poem. As I have mentioned, Brooks inherited Cafetal San Patricio and its enslaved laborers from her brother in 1825, becoming an enslaver herself. At that moment, Britain was on the verge of abolishing slavery in the West Indies, and Southey, whose support was essential to Brooks, sympathized with the British antislavery movement. Finally and perhaps most importantly, the Caribbean was being swept by rebellions.¹⁴ In the summer of 1825, enslaved Africans in Matanzas – the region where San Patricio was located – organized a large-scale uprising, which spread to twenty-five plantations and killed fifteen white people, intensifying enslavers' fears of revolt on their

¹³ See Gruesz on Griswold's reception of Brooks ("Poe Circle"). Griswold described Brooks as "the poet of passion; her writings are distinguished by a fearlessness of thought and expression; she gives the heart its true voice" (148).

¹⁴ "The slave population increased from around 52,000 in 1792 to nearly 200,000 in 1827 in the Cuban western districts" – which included Matanzas – "and slaves accounted for over 48 percent of the total population" (Bergard 125).

plantations.¹⁵ Lowell's diary registers just how pervasive these fears were: one night she heard "the most violent shrieks & knocking & the breaking of glass" and thought that an insurrection broke out, a reaction she describes as "usual in Cuba when any thing out of the way happens at night" (63-64). Lowell was relieved to learn that in fact she had heard a mentally ill African boy screaming upon waking up from a nightmare. Her relief left no space for empathy for the traumatized child. News of revolts on other Caribbean islands reached Cuba as well, demonstrating that oppressed Africans were capable of organizing and inflicting violence (Lowell 69). The growing revolutionary sentiment across the Caribbean prompted Cuban enslavers to heighten control over the enslaved and arm themselves for protection. One enslaver, as Lowell reports, "shuts all the [Africans] out of the house at night... & in his bed room he keeps two or three pairs of pistols, guns & swords." This enslaver also forbade dances except on Sunday evenings (Lowell 78-79), recognizing that communal dancing – like singing, drumming, and other forms of creative expression – was a mode of collective resistance (Van Norman 107, Camp 70-76). Although Lowell and other white visitors to Cuba described them as evidence of contentment, these practices could morph into violent revolt.

Brooks would have had multiple reasons to excise the footnote about the Africans' pain from the 1833 edition of *Zophiel*, from disavowing her role as enslaver to suppressing her feelings of danger. Erased from the paratext, enslavement returns in the main text of the poem in highly mediated ways that bespeak a desire for more categorical physical and psychic containment of enslaved people. In particular, Brooks's anxieties resurface in Canto Third, "Palace of Gnomes," a reluctant allegory of colonialism and the plantation that bears ghostly

¹⁵ On the "great African slave revolt" of 1825, see Barcia Paz. On the influence of the Haitian Revolution on the political consciousness of the enslaved in Cuba, see Ferrer.

traces of the ship as well, and which Griswold reprinted in *The Poets and Poetry of America* (1842) as the most imaginative section of the poem. Canto Third, which tells of Zophiel's journey to the Gnomes' submarine kingdom to obtain an immortality elixir, constructs an imaginary "carceral geography" (Gilmore 225) with insurmountable barriers between the Gnomes and the poem's human protagonists. This fantastic figuration extracts literary value from the material reality of enslavement while attempting to mitigate the threat of revolt. The palace is a "ghostly palimpsest" (McKittrick 5) bearing traces of multiple sites of enslavement and forms of oppression. Their mediation through the fantastic has rendered those ghostly traces invisible to most readers, from Brooks's contemporaries Southey and Griswold, both invested in representing Brooks as an ideal romantic poetess, to present-day critics. While the palace can be read as a ghostly figuration of the plantation, it is also haunted by the specter of the Middle Passage and the captive Africans who were thrown overboard from ships to find a watery grave at the bottom of the Atlantic.¹⁶

Katherine McKittrick's account of the plantation's entanglement in colonialism provides a helpful conceptual framework for reading Canto Third. Drawing on the work of Sylvia Wynter, McKittrick writes that "the uninhabitable... is the geographic (non) location through which the plantation emerged" (6). As destinations of colonial "discovery," Africa and the Americas were deemed geographically newer and inhabited by inferior peoples. This colonial representation led to racially segregated global geographies, in which the "lands of no one" were regulated to situate different racial groups at different rungs of racial hierarchy (McKittrick 5-6). Black geographies, including enslaved quarters and auction blocks, "were designated as incongruous

¹⁶ The past decade has seen an outpouring of scholarship on the history and theory of the plantation. In addition to the work quoted above, see, e.g., Rusert; Burnard; Bates et al.; Thomas; and the special issue of *American Literature* 93.3.

with humanness” and uninhabitable to white people (6). The plantation was “mapped onto the lands of no one and became the location where black peoples were ‘planted’ in the Americas – not as members of society but as commodities that would bolster crop economies” (8). Further, the plantation “became key to transforming the lands of no one into the lands of someone,” underlying the accumulation of wealth by white people who colonized the previously “uninhabitable” Americas (8).

Canto Third is haunted by this colonial logic. Zophiel and his angelic companion Phraerion fly toward the sunset – that is, west, in the direction of colonial “discovery” and with the colonial purpose of extracting a resource, the elixir of life.¹⁷ It’s an arduous journey even for the supernatural protagonists: it takes “the night, a day / And half the night that follows it, alas! ... And then such depths, such caverns we must pass –” (122). The aquatic location renders the palace inaccessible to humans and unbearable to the angels, who experience pain as “storms and rocks [their] feeling substance tear” (133). It also serves to contain the Gnomes’ mobility. The Mediterranean Sea - the much safer, enclosed, historically distant “time-space” (McKittrick 2) to which Brooks transposes the Caribbean - is itself a site of containment. As Glissant writes, “Compared to the Mediterranean, which is an inner sea surrounded by lands... the Caribbean is, in contrast, a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc” (33). Brooks is careful to specify the geographical location of the angels’ descent: “for flowery Sicily [Phraerion] bent; / Then, where Italia smiled upon the night, / Between their nearest shores chose midway his descent (1833, 123). These lines prompt a footnote that emphasizes the site’s proximity to places in Graeco-Roman mythology and the even greater remoteness of the Gnomes’ kingdom: “Not far

¹⁷ On Brooks’s self-fashioning as a poetess of the West, signaled by her pen name Maria del Occidente, see Gruesz, “Cafetal.”

from the scene of Vulcan's labours; yet the regions sought by these spirits must have been very much deeper" (1833, 123n). Even though the Mediterranean has a warm climate, Brooks describes the seawater as cold and forbidding. Epithets like "that fluid dense and chill" (124), "that black, bitter element," "the thick cold floods" (125) reinforce the Gnomes' separation from the poem's earthly world and further distinguish the Mediterranean from the Caribbean Sea.

The structure of the Gnomes' palace indirectly echoes plantation architecture. As Singleton discovered, some Cuban cafetal owners constructed walls around enslaved people's housing to restrict their movement to designated paths. Brooks draws on the built environment of the plantation to construct an elaborate system of physical barriers that confine the Gnomes to their realm. A crystal wall marks the entrance to the kingdom, but the palace is hidden deep in a maze of rock corridors through which even the sound travels slowly. When the angels greet King Tahathyam, "Those gentle tones... kept repeating, / As through the perforated rock they pass, / Echo to echo guiding them" (1833, 127). The king asks the angels to come to him because, "half mortal as he was," he would need many days to travel to the gate (1833, 128). The inadequate speed of his movement forms another carceral measure.

The palace is the only site of labor and production in the poem. The Gnomes' immortal father had "for many a year, endured / The vilest toils, deep hidden in the ground" (1833, 133) to produce an elixir of life but could not obtain it in time to save his mortal wife. Devastated by this loss, he abandoned his children in the submarine kingdom. The elixir is the color of blood, but also of coffee berries. Its constant motion echoes the perpetuity of plantation labor, while the vase that holds it serves as another figure of containment:

Of solid diamond formed, a lucid vase;

And warm within the pure elixir glow'd;
Bright red, like flame and blood, (could they so meet)
Ascending, sparkling, dancing, whirling, ever
In quick perpetual movement. (Brooks 1833, 143)

Another product of labor is the palace itself, whose intricate ornaments and furnishings were likely made by the Gnomes. Described as “So wild and so uncouth; yet all the while, / Shaped to strange grace in every varying part” (1833, 133), it echoes Brooks’s reference to the enslaved Africans’ “rude song” in the omitted footnote. Like the “rude song,” posited as a natural rather than artful expression of feeling, the various elements of the palace blur the distinction between art and nature: “High towered the palace and its massive pile, / Made dubious as of nature or of art” (1833, 135).

If the palace stands in for the plantation, the Gnomes themselves can be interpreted as a mediation of enslaved Africans. Gendered male, they reflect the mostly male demographic of the enslaved population in Cuba with its low birth rates.¹⁸ Brooks implies that the Gnomes are infertile – King Tahathyam laments, “Nor life nor being have I power *to give*” (1833, 134) – and represents them as effeminate and beautiful. Tahathyam “look’d like heaven” and has a “beauteous hand,” a “cold, fair form,” and a “paly cheek” (1833, 129, 137, 142). The Gnomes’ feminine beauty mediates the libidinal economy of enslavement, while their emasculation through infertility mitigates the threat of aggression against enslavers like herself.

The Gnomes’ plight - they cannot die or leave the palace and are confined to endless isolation - is justified by their lower status as semi-angelic, semi-human beings. Chattel

¹⁸ See note 9.

enslavement does exist in the Gnomes' kingdom: "Four dusky Spirits... thoughtful of his wants, / Tahathyam kept, for menial toil apart, / But only deep in sea were their permitted haunts" (1833, 138). But the other Gnomes too are disturbingly servile as they "vie / In seemly show to please [Zophiel's] eyes, / And show what could be wrought without or soil or sky" (1833, 131). Their inferiority to the angels Zophiel and Phraerion gestures back to the omitted footnote, which posits enslaved Africans as the "last link of the chain of humanity" (Brooks 1825, 16). Similarly, the Africans' sorrow described in the footnote returns in the form of the Gnomes' sadness and King Tahathyam's longing to see his father. Like the Africans on the *cafetal*, the Gnomes express their sorrow in music. The court musician "in gushing songs, / Pour'd forth his sad, deep sense of long departed joys" (1833, 141). His song about lost love evokes "such sensations in the soul... As make it pleasure to the eyes to weep" and causes Tahathyam to feel a "mournful extacy" (1833, 141, 142).

This subdued affect of sadness, combined with the Gnomes' reverence for their guests, eliminates any threat of violence that the angels might face from the hosts who far outnumber them, just as those enslaved on the plantation outnumber their enslavers. The Gnomes could be angry with their father for abandoning them to eternal confinement and jealous of Zophiel's and Phraerion's freedom. Tahathyam could exert power when he demands that Zophiel bring him a wife in exchange for a drop of the elixir. Instead, he makes a sorrowful plea:

Tahathyam filled a slip of spar with dread,
As if stood by and frown'd some power divine;
Then trembling, as he turn'd to Zophiel, said...
"Bring me a wife." (Brooks 1833, 144)

Potentially vehement feelings are thus transposed to fear and melancholia – the fear of a more powerful being on whom Tahathyam depends for the fulfillment of his desire, and the melancholia of resignation to an eternity of confinement at the bottom of the sea. Brooks’s depiction of the submarine palace and its unhappy residents figuratively confines the agency of enslaved plantation laborers to avert the threat of a revolt.

As Brooks displaces the plantation from land to water, the aquatic setting activates a host of other horrific associations. The palace of Gnomes not only repeats the plantation’s geographies of containment, but it also bears traces of the Middle Passage and enslaved people’s descent into what Glissant calls “the belly of the boat” (6). As an enslaver, Brooks must have bought abducted Africans to maintain her labor force. Lowell’s diary documents one such purchase of newly arrived captives. Describing a *cafetale*, she remarks that “Twenty new blacks have just arrived recently brought from Africa” (92) and that the hold damaged their eyesight: “Most of the boys who have just landed are troubled with weak eyes” (92-93). In *Zophiel*, the submarine kingdom’s lies so deep in the sea - “so low from the life-wakening sun” - that sunlight does not reach it; instead, it is lit by an orb imitating the sun.

The suspended time in the palace, unmarked by sunrise and sunset, and the Gnomes’ oppressive immortality echo the interminable horror of the Middle Passage, its slow temporality incommensurable with the outside world. King Tahathyam has been underwater since before the biblical Flood (1833, 144). The palace is Brooks’s imaginary brush with the interminable, abstracted as fantastic and poetic. While Glissant urges his readers to imagine the overcrowding, torture, and filth in the hold of the ship (5), the traces of the ship that haunt Brooks’s palimpsest are sanitized, cleansed of disease, horror, bodily fluids, and physical pain. But the aquatic setting

is also haunted by the bodies of captive Africans thrown overboard. As Glissant writes of maritime voyages, “Navigating the green splendor of the sea... still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains” (6). The imaginary of the transatlantic voyage, punctuated by what Stephanie Smallwood describes as “the dispersal of bodies committed without ceremony to the sea” (141), invades Brooks’s fantastic underwater palace.

Zophiel’s journey to the Gnomes’ kingdom ends in failure: he loses the elixir in a storm raised by Lucifer. In the narrative logic of the plot, this loss foils his plan to tie Egla’s fate to his by burdening her with immortality. However, in the logic of the plantation, the loss bespeaks Brooks’s anxiety about the sustainability of the colonial extraction of crops and labor and the continued profitability of coffee.¹⁹ Since the vial that holds the elixir is yet another container, its loss implies that Brooks’s technologies of physical and psychic containment might fail to protect her from the Africans she enslaved, were they to rise in rebellion.

In sum, *Zophiel* performs the imaginative work of exonerating and protecting white womanhood. Its excised paratexts and elaborate figurations reveal how deeply the specters of enslavement haunted Brooks’s poetic imagination. The poem’s intricate system of textual and paratextual enclosures bespeaks a profound unease that the narrative seeks to soothe with luxurious tropical and submarine settings, repeated assertions of Egla’s languor, and uneven distribution of agency, denied to Egla and the captive Gnomes alike. The 1825 *Zophiel*’s representation of laboring Africans in the footnote to Invocation and the 1833 *Zophiel*’s portrayal of Gnomes in Canto Third transpose their anger – a tense, empowering affect often oriented

¹⁹ On the decline of coffee production in Cuba in the 1840s, see Gruesz, “Cafetal” 53. Brooks died in 1845 at the age of 51.

toward collective action – to sadness, a more individualized, introspective affect associated with powerlessness.²⁰ The narrative desire to repress or resolve the contradictions of enslaving fuels the poem's boldest feats of the imagination.

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²⁰ Tina Campt engages the work of Frantz Fanon and Darieck Scott to examine the muscular tension of colonized Black bodies as embodied resistance that anticipates action (50-52).

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