**Mississippi (Soil Erosion), A Conversation in Absence**

Art is charged with the power of lived experience distilled into the abstract and translated into the literal in tangible form. Hale Woodruff’s piece, *Landscape (Mississippi, Soil Erosion)*, finds a comfortable place in the study of African American history. The painting’s creation situates the work in the midst of the Great Migration, a period spanning decades during which time an exodus of African Americans left the south[[1]](#footnote-0) in search of figuratively *greener* locales. Woodruff’s landscape presents this metaphor in the context of this migration through the conscious artistic choices of color, composition and subject. It offers up an implicit *reason* for the journey, a justification drawn from the external and made into the internal.

On its surface, the painting depicts the red-brown clay and loam of Mississippi hilly lowlands, filling the canvas with the complement of a cool sky, and framed by dark trees[[2]](#footnote-1). Excluding all else, it may appear that nature and nothing else is at work here, that this landscape exists in a vacuum of time, adrift. Worth considering, however, is the bold choice of color. Mississippi during this period was a place of rich agriculture, many African Americans having labored as slaves in cotton fields before they relocated[[3]](#footnote-2). This, along with its temperate latitude and a proximity to its lifeblood rivers, would likely make it a pleasant, lush place. Woodruff, in his conception of Mississippi for this painting, instead opted to use dark, cool colors for fauna and foliage. The trees along the right edge are dark. What could be construed as foliage, on the gnarled, brown forms of tree branches along the left and matted over the hill in the background, is similarly a dark, shadowed green[[4]](#footnote-3). While there are times when the thriving landscapes of the South are bathed in gloom, its depiction in this painting lends that gloom permanence. This is how the South was, at least to Woodruff, at this singular point in time. The bleakness of the moment pervades. Could this be a “push” that drove African Americans away? Not the real, tangible color of the landscape, but the imagined landscape and what it represents. Warm colors - reds, oranges, yellows - tend to denote a spirit of invitingness and joy. Natural greens imply growth. Darker, cooler colors, on the other hand, speak to stillness or uncertainty, or an underlying emotional turmoil - sadness, turbulence. The Mississippi that Woodruff sears into our memory is one that pushes people away. It was perhaps the same Mississippi that left its imprint on Richard Wright during his stint in Jackson. The optician’s in which he worked presents a microcosm of the de facto systems of Jim Crow oppression that occurred across much of the South. Wright recounts his experience cautiously navigating his speech, his behavior, and his mannerisms in defense against the ravages of his White coworkers, whose domination was almost hidden until coaxed out over the threat of violence over a perceived slight: Wright supposedly not using an honorific when addressing them[[5]](#footnote-4). When subtly negotiating the system through social navigation failed, he resisted in the one way he safely could: He left and never returned. His story captures the sentiment which is contained in the stories of all of the African American persons who left at-large. The promise of true freedom unfulfilled after the end of the Civil War[[6]](#footnote-5), held hostage by the White population, drove people away. They left. Hidden in the warm light of emancipation was the dark Mississippi that Woodruff depicts.

The composition grants further insight into the perception of Mississippi and the South as a whole. Part of this rests on the physical dimensions of the piece. The size of its canvas, approximately 26 by 34 inches[[7]](#footnote-6), scrunches the aspect ratio to resemble a square. Often, traditional landscapes assume rectangular aspect ratios to capture the full extent of a scene, occasionally even being much wider than they are tall in panorama. The totality of a vista is perhaps enhanced by these distinct aspect ratios, whether larger than life or, in the case of Woodruff’s, somewhat smaller than life. Pushing all of the details of this vast space into an area so small produces a sense of confinement, a smallness that is almost suffocating. The hills are warped and distorted by the restraint of dimensionality, narrower than they would be in reality.[[8]](#footnote-7) These lands contain multitudes, but they are also *constraining*. If this is the South, then by comparison the North must be liberating, or at the very least *freer*. Isabel Wilkerson describes a scene in Washington D.C., “expectant faces of people hoping for all the rights and privileges of citizenship.”[[9]](#footnote-8) This line alone speaks to the deprivation of the South, extending the metaphor of smallness and suffocation proffered by Woodruff’s work. The absence of these *rights and privileges* in the South couples with what seems like expansive opportunity in the North. The vignette of Frank Custer in *The Killing Floor* compounds this view of relative freedom; the character, based on the real person, looks toward the northern city of Chicago as a beacon of hope and opportunity, a means of rising above the station he was tied to in the South. He arrives, primed with optimism and awe, and a dream to bring his family northward to share in the wealth of wonder.[[10]](#footnote-9) Woodruff’s depiction of Mississippi lacks this optimism, absent all but perhaps a lingering desire to remain; there are hints of life, after all: small streaks of red around the center and toward the bottom-left another streak of blue.[[11]](#footnote-10) There was hope here, too, in the South, but to the many who moved, it could very well have just been a taste of what they *could* have elsewhere.

More broadly, the subject matter of *erosion* speaks to degradation. Could it be that what African Americans were striving toward in Mississippi and in the South as a whole was gradually deteriorating at the edges? The denial of their rights at the hands of a White elite in the context of Jim Crow would be evidence enough, a form of *additive* pressure to migrate that compounded with each threat or act of violence. One should not ignore the *subtractive* pressure - yet another metaphor imbued in the painting, as the use of paints is inherently a “subtractive” color process[[12]](#footnote-11) - that galvanized swaths of the population to move. John Merrick describes the violent undermining of accumulated political power by the White economic elite, using the Wilmington massacre as an example[[13]](#footnote-12), and though his solution is at its face debatable, the conclusion he draws about *subtraction* of political gains is material. Drawing the whole of the analysis back to the higher-level, is it not impossible that this very scene of erosion is what one may have seen looking out the window of a train car as they made their way through Mississippi northward?

Hale Woodruff employs art to amplify his own perceptions and perhaps the shared perceptions of many about the nature of the period in which the piece was created. Artistic expression has never stood alone in a vacuum, instead simultaneously being informed by and inform*ing* the era during which it came into being. It is more a tool than an abstract pastime, more a language of the heart and soul. These migrants carried north with them their art and music[[14]](#footnote-13), and continued to create masterpieces of individual experience.

1. Isabel Wilkerson. "Leaving." In *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, 8 (New York: Vintage Books, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Hale Aspacio Woodruff. “Landscape (Mississippi, Soil Erosion).” New York: Estate of Hale Woodruff, 1944. The Ackland Art Museum. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Isabel Wilkerson. "Leaving." In *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, 9 (New York: Vintage Books, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Hale Aspacio Woodruff. “Landscape (Mississippi, Soil Erosion).” New York: Estate of Hale Woodruff, 1944. The Ackland Art Museum. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Richard Wright. "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch." In *Uncle Tom's Children*, 7(1938; reprint New York: Vintage Books, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Isabel Wilkerson. "Leaving." In *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, 9 (New York: Vintage Books, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Hale Aspacio Woodruff. “Landscape (Mississippi, Soil Erosion).” New York: Estate of Hale Woodruff, 1944. The Ackland Art Museum. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Isabel Wilkerson. "Leaving." In *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, 11 (New York: Vintage Books, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Bill Duke, director. The Killing Floor. Film Movement, 1985. 1 hr., 55 min. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Hale Aspacio Woodruff. “Landscape (Mississippi, Soil Erosion).” New York: Estate of Hale Woodruff, 1944. The Ackland Art Museum. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Dan Scott. “Different Systems for How We See Color.” Draw Paint Academy. Draw Paint Academy Pty Ltd, May 7, 2021. https://drawpaintacademy.com/subtractive-additive-color/. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Robert McCants Andrews, "John Merrick, The Race Builder," In *John Merrick: A Biographical Sketch* (1920; reprint Chapel Hill: Academic Affairs Library, University of Chapel Hill, 2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Warmth, 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)