

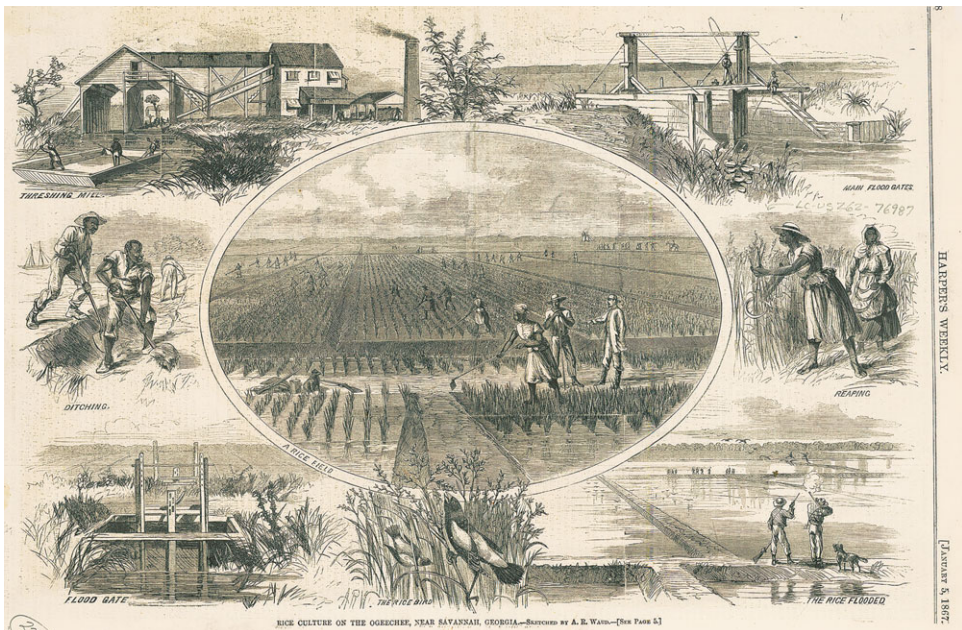
The Song of the Rice Bird, A Plantation Ekphrasis

Chi-ming Yang

Chi-ming Yang is Associate Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of *Performing China: Virtue, Commerce, and Orientalism in Eighteenth-Century England, 1660–1760* (2011) and a forthcoming book about Octavia E. Butler.

Abstract

This experimental ekphrastic essay meditates on the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rice plantation slavery from the ecocritical perspective of the bobolink, or rice bird. The vignettes of a postbellum image of a Georgia plantation reveal the many facets of this avian migrant's entanglement with Indigenous histories of wild rice and with Black labour and performance. Weaving in contemporary art and music, this essay explores how a prized songbird—and agricultural pest—developed its grain diet and flight patterns in tandem with the growth of plantation capitalism across the Americas and the Atlantic world.



Alfred R. Waud, *Rice Culture on the Ogeechee*, in *Harper's Weekly* (5 January 1867). This image is in the Public Domain, <https://tinyurl.com/WaudRiceCulture>.

Eighteenth-Century Fiction 34, no. 1 (Fall 2021)
ECF ISSN 0840-6286 | E-ISSN 1911-0243 | doi: [10.3138/ecf.34.1.87](https://doi.org/10.3138/ecf.34.1.87)
Copyright 2021 by Eighteenth-Century Fiction, McMaster University

Of all the ways I have been imaged, this one speaks volumes. It is not of my making, but I sing through and against it. I sing of the plantationocene.

There I am at the bottom centre, labelled “The Rice Bird.” I am a New World migrant, known by bobolink or rice bird to the Yankees, and *charlatán*—copyist, or trickster—in my winter home in South America. I am a blackbird, but my blackness, which comes and goes with the seasons, does not tether me to the rice plantation. See me supplying the full-throated soundtrack to the surrounding scenes of Black labour. *Sculpting the pain in 'em like Edmonia Lewis*.¹ See how my ladybird is safely hidden amongst the grass eating seed. This is 1867. For over a century, each season we were feared as the avian pests that could destroy entire harvests on our way to our New England breeding grounds in the North or our wintering homes in the austral South. We invented the 5,000-mile direct flight.

Alfred, you drew me magnified as if seen through a future birder's binoculars.² (I am only seven inches head to tail.) Here, I am the same size as the ditch-digger to the left and the reaper on the right; man, woman, and me—a strange equivalence. We form a triangle of fearful symmetry.

Reaper, Ditch-digger, Sower, your African ancestors came with knowledge of rice growing. They were brought to South Carolina from West Africa via Barbados as the enslaved ones of recruited settlers. Your people were forced to build this rice empire that grew bigger than cotton and supplied the world, from the Mediterranean to India. I was only drawn to the feast.

The rice also migrated from afar.

Some say the first seed arrived in 1685 from Madagascar on an East India ship. For thousands of years the Asians had weeded their rice by hand, and so the weeds learned to look and act like rice. These *Echinochloa* were transported and transplanted alongside the real thing. Like me, they are mimics, with monikers like barnyard grass or jungle rice. *Alfred*, your drawing of the branched and open rice seed heads looks more like the weed than the cultivated *Oryza sativa* after which the taxonomists named me *Dolichonyx oryzivorous*, the devourer of rice.

1 Noname, “Part of me” (feat. Phœnix & Benjamin Earl Turner), track 9 on *Room 25*. 2018, digital download.

2 Alfred R. Waud, “Rice Culture on the Ogeechee, Near Savannah, Georgia,” *Harper's Weekly* (5 January 1867), <https://tinyurl.com/WaudRiceCulture>.

I know rice—and even the agronomists and weed and forage specialists concur³—this picture cannot be right. Only mature rice of August and September is leafy with open panicles as, Alfred, you picture me here with it. But by fall I would have shed my black coat and arrived at the plantation as a brown bird, indistinguishable from the female bobolinks. Yes, I would fill myself with harvest-ready rice for my migration south, but not looking like this image. Mr Waud, did you style me after Mr Catesby's colour painting of 1724?⁴ It's flattering, but it too mismatches my springtime colours with a portrait of autumnal rice. Catesby excelled in the aesthetics of plant and animal pairings, but he did not have all the facts. For one, he failed to realize my fellow males and I change colours with the seasons. He mistook our millions-strong, migrating brown flocks for a female-only swarm. *Please don't let me be misunderstood.*⁵



Detail, Waud, *The Rice Bird*.



Mark Catesby, *The Rice-bird and Rice*.

Alfred, you knew better, that I wouldn't be eating rice when in black plumage; you took the liberty of collapsing the seasons, as if to say, time is out of joint, order is deceptive, things are not as they seem.

"A rice plantation is, in fact, a huge hydraulic machine, maintained by constant warring against the rivers."⁶

- 3 Scientists consulted: Wayne Parrott, Allan M. Strong, Guo-Liang Wang, Yinong Yang, Yulin Jia, Scott Allen Jackson, Rod Wing, and Bodie Pennisi.
- 4 Mark Catesby, "The Rice Bird," in *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands* (London, 1731–43). Courtesy of Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania.
- 5 Nina Simone, "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" (written by Bennie Benjamin, Horace Ott and Sol Marcus), track 5 on *Nina Simone Gold*. Philips, 2007, compact disc.
- 6 Edward King, *The Great South* (1874), 434, quoted in James H. Tuten, *Lowcountry Time and Tide: The Fall of the South Carolina Rice Kingdom* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), n.p., ebook.

I am only a bird, but I have seen the sweat of the human cogs in this plantation machine. I must address *you* workers, the unsung agents of these vignettes of ditching, threshing, reaping, planting, flooding: so many gerunds made to obfuscate your labour.



Detail, Waud, *Ditching*.

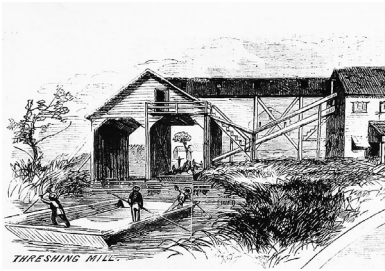
Ditching Scene. Sir, your rolled-up pant legs, hatless head, muscular arm exposed to the unforgiving elements and the system that kept you in place even postbellum. No war is civil. You handle your spade wearily, as if digging not a ditch but a grave. In another time and place of civil war, the Digger was a radical who fought for the commons. That was England 1649, this is Georgia 1867. Water, water, everywhere.

We see the hint of a ship in the near distance, the ocean is just beyond the levee. To me the ocean is a passage of constant return. As I make the treacherous 5,000-mile, cross-hemispheric flight each spring and fall, the flyway is freedom and precarity. For you, the plantation workers, the ship is a living hell. It exports the riches of your labour, it conveyed your ancestors to this place. They disembarked from the floating prisons only to toil in this aquatic grainyard. From the air I saw you divide the fields into one-acre plots bounded by ditches, and surrounded by the levees that control the tides. Year-round you go to war with the mud and weeds. With each of the seasonal floodings of the crop you remove the stagnant water, then wade in to pull the weeds that threaten the sprouting rice.⁷ Before that you cleared the swamps, chopping the trees while taking note of good hiding

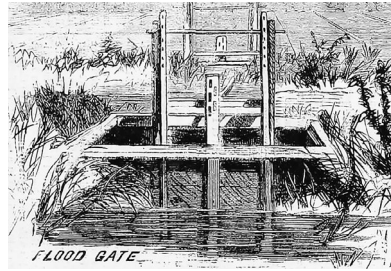
⁷ Details on rice plantation labour are taken primarily from Leslie Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997); and Julia Floyd Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture in Low Country Georgia, 1750–1860* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985).

places, places where you might make a maroon life, plant your own rice. Unpictured are the alligators, snakes, and mosquitos that attacked you while you stood waist-deep for days in the malarial water. I followed you there, keeping my distance, staying on the edges of the marsh.

This is the Ogeechee River in 1867, one of the many waters that make up the Rice Culture stretching from Cape Fear River in North Carolina to St. John's River in Florida. *I've seen rivers.*⁸ The Ogeechee that sustained Indigenous and Black lives is a Muskogean word for the Yuchi people that also names the Gulla Geechee people from West Africa's rice-growing areas. Plants and people alike have been displaced, transplanted, re-sown. I have not feasted on African rice of the savannahs but, across the ocean, my fellow queleas and weaverbirds wreak havoc on the farmers.



Detail, Waud, *Threshing Mill*.



Detail, Waud, *Flood Gate*.

In my stopover at the Ogeechee I studiously avoid the machinery of canals, gates, and mills that *you* built for this waterworld. See the flatboat in the upper left, near the mill in the threshing scene: *Sir*, you use it to carry rice to the threshing yard, but I have seen you stealthily set it adrift in one of your many refusals to preserve white property. Ditch work, indeed. The floodgates, in the bottom left and upper right vignettes, are the planter's pride and joy. These feats of engineering did not rise intact from the muddy water. *You* felled the trees and pounded the trunks into the mud—so many muddy baptisms.

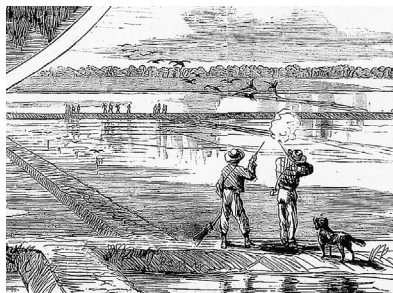
This flooding and draining wasn't always the norm. In 1750 the white people harnessed the tides, and Georgia got rich. Rice and slavery went hand in hand, and we bobolinks came in droves to feed off the system. We witnessed the rise of the large plantations that enslaved hundreds of thousands of your people. At first, rice was a lowly food reserved for the workers and the birds. We shared a diet. But *you* were also the bird minders, men and children put to work making noise with clappers and

⁸ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 4.

muskets, building fires on the banks, shooting us down, and yes, eating and selling us as well.



Detail, Waud, *Dog and guns*.



Detail, Waud, *Men shooting birds*.

Look closely, and see the signs of violence in the scenes. In the centre, two rifles casually rest on the ground along with a lazy dog. Over in the bottom right, active dog and rifles are aimed at us in the distance, an hour before our dawn departures, or at the hour of our dusk roosting in the marshes nearby. There were other, unpictured shootings. Confederates had fought in vain against Union attacks on the River four years before. The red-winged blackbirds spread the word. They flew by the Combahee Plantation on June 2, 1863, when General Tubman led the riverine workers to a sort of freedom. Short-lived jubilation, to move from slaves to refugees on Sea Island, where Black people were designated “contraband,” and the women were again abused, by the Union army.

North, South, Bird, Rice, Man, Woman. Our fates are intertwined. I feed off human activity. *WAVIP, We’re all VIP*.⁹ In this sketch of a plantation I do not keep to my place on the margins; I breach the lower edge of the central oval and interrupt the scene of young rice being weeded. I wouldn’t have been there in May, but you put me there, Alfred, and so I sing for the women of the fields.



⁹ The Coup, “WAVIP” (feat. Das Racist and Killer Mike), *Sorry to Bother You*. Anti- / Epitaph, 2012, digital download.

Reaping Scene, Hoeing Scene. Women, with your rigid hoes and crescent scythes, you outnumbered the men in the fields. They alone were given spades, and only they were granted artisan status. *You* were called “a human hoeing machine.”¹⁰ Even your children had to work alongside you with child-sized hoes. You taught them to wield their tools like weapons, like seditious, blue-lipped Topsy’s.¹¹ You sowed seeds with such precision in the rows upon rows, I was loathe to upturn your work when I passed through on my way north in March and April. I needed the fuel to get to safety and make my own family. I did not, though, find you picturesque.



Alison Saar, *High Cotton; Rice (sickle), Cotton (bale hook), Indigo (hoe), Tobacco (tobacco knife), Sugar (machete)*, 2018, wood, copper, ceiling tin, bronze, tar and vintage found tools. Photo courtesy L.A. Louver Gallery. Reproduced by permission.

The rice overlords and the sugar barons were the ones to take sadistic pleasure in the “most regular cadence” of workers who formed a living, “moving landscape.”¹² I benefited from your backbreaking care of the plant. You nursed it, rid it of weeds, gathered the seed. When I see your full skirts in the reaping scene, sun scorching and grim, I wonder if your dress secretly hides the seed you’ve ~~stolen~~ earned for your families and

¹⁰ Frances Kemble, *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation in 1838–39* (1863), n.p., Project Gutenberg.

¹¹ Artist Alison Saar, *Topsy Turvy* exhibition, L.A. Louver (28 March–12 May 2018).

¹² William Beckford, *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica* (London, 1790), 48, 49.

sold for your own ~~profit~~ survival. *Phantom under the thread*.¹³ Or, do the loose skirts hide your swollen belly since you've been forced back to work only weeks after delivering your newborn?



Detail, Waud, *Reaping*.



Detail, Waud, *Hoeing*.

This is 1867, the war is over. Everyone pictured here is technically free. In this Reconstruction moment, rice has passed its century-long production peak. Women, you are there in the fields, but you are also at work negotiating new contracts with the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, collecting your wages, and buying back the land. Freedwomen, you were always known for challenging the white overseers. You fought for less time in the field, more time to raise your families.

Alfred, this idyllic scene of plantation order seems a throwback to a golden time that never existed. I was not the only force of disorder that came and went. For every action of threshing, ditching, planting, reaping, flooding there was a counteraction of plotting, scheming, singing, dreaming, dancing, fleeing.

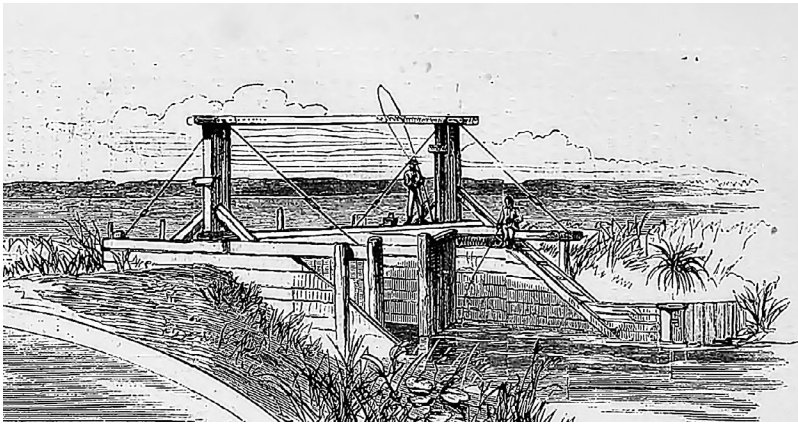
Together we sing of the plantationocene, an era of disciplining and punishing the land and those enclosed within it. The plantation was fixed in space, and yet we plant, animal, and humankind were brought in to form new ecologies against our will. We were a “system of multispecies forced labor.”¹⁴ Monoculture gathers pathogens and pests (like me) that (we) avians can then spread across the seas. I am a migratory creature. I do not stay put, I switch North for South. Don't blame the birds for the pestilence, though, call it “capitalist” flu. The plantation of the

¹³ Noname, “noname” (feat. Yaw & Adam Ness), track 11 on *Room* 25. 2018, digital download.

¹⁴ Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, *Reflections on the Plantationocene: A Conversation with Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing* (Edge Effects, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 18 June 2019): 5, 11. See <https://edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/>.

past and the future is with us still. It didn't stop, it morphed into the factories, prisons, and modern plantations of global capitalism. "The idea of the plantation is migratory."¹⁵ For every plantation there is a counterplantation. Each scene of labour embeds within its details other bobolink vignettes, other fables of modernity.¹⁶ I give you two such stories of the beyond, which fly in the face of the market machine.

Fable #1 The Dance of the Fish



Detail, Waud, *Fishing on the floodgate*.

Look again at the bucolic image in the top right vignette—atop the main floodgate, two men fish.

Sirs, fishing was your customary right. At midday when your tasks were done you were allowed to fish, hunt, grow your own gardens of cabbage and potatoes. The masters measured a day's task by what you did in your assigned acre. They say this task system was better than the way of the cotton plantation gangs. Cold comfort. Even so, you used these snatches of time to sell your fish at the markets, and you planned for the day of self-determination.

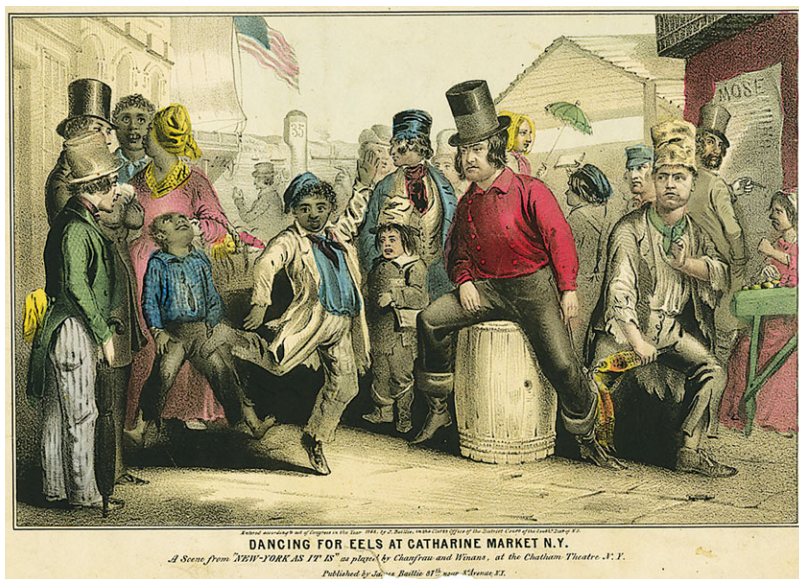
Your Northern brethren used to dance for eels and pocket change on their days off at Catharine Market, at the south end of Manhattan. Bob Rowley made his fame there in the 1780s. He came over from Long

¹⁵ Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe* 17, no. 3 (2013): 3, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/532740>.

¹⁶ Laura Brown, *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the English Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

Island on holidays to sell the provisions he had gathered—fish, berries, fruits, even birds. When performing for the crowded streets of stalls, did he forget for a split second he was still a farmer's slave? He fashioned himself after me, took on my braggadocio of song and my black face. He called himself *Bobolink Bob*.

Bob and his fellow Afro-Long Islanders were known for their suppleness and fashionable hair, a “plaited forelock tied up with tea-lead.”¹⁷ They danced, plotted, and conspired in the country and the city. They jumped Jim Crow before the white men packaged it into blackface minstrelsy, before it was reclaimed as hip-hop. Dance forms were long tied to the harvest (the Jonkonnu dance) or to rebellion (the Myal dance). Reader, I was there at the harvest and the market. Even Jim Crow, that racist caricature of plantation life, was named after a fellow black bird. “Folklore was the cultural guerilla resistance against the Market economy.”¹⁸



James Baillie, *Dancing for Eels at Catharine Market N.Y.* (ca. 1848). This image is in the Public Domain.

¹⁷ Thomas De Voe, *The Market Book* (1862), 344–45. See also W.T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to hip hop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Sylvia Wynter, “Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Toward the Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process,” *Jamaica Journal* 4, no. 2 (1970): 36.

Fable #2 Zhigaag and Manoomin

Detail, Waud, *The Rice Bird*.

Look again at me at the bottom of the picture. The rice on which I perch is drawn as if it is wild. It reminds me that before the plantations came we ate wild rice, *Zizania aquatica*, as did the Native peoples of the region. After 1716 the Yemassee were pushed out of South Carolina; their leaving made way for the Georgia colony and the market for mass-produced rice. Without enslaved people and refugees there would be no Carolina Gold. To many, wild rice is *manoomin*, the “good berry” or sacred “food that grows out of the water” that counters the plantation economy. Over 1,000 years ago the Ojibwe followed another rice bird, *Zhiishiib* (Duck), to where watery rice grew. After a great migration, they found home with the rivers and lakes of northern Minnesota.¹⁹

In the fall I feed on *manoomin* along with the ducks, geese, coots, swans, and other blackbirds. Unlike the white New Englanders, the Chippewa/ Ojibwe/ Anishinaabe do not call me bobolink, or even rice bird, but *zhigaag*, or skunk bird, for the white patch down my black back. I don’t mind, the *zhigaag* can unleash magical powers through its stink.²⁰ Like the pungent *shikako*, or wild leek, it marks its territory. Place names bear witness. I would like to visit Chicago one day, for I have also been called the Chicago bird, Shi-ka’-go-bi-ne’-shi.²¹

19 *The Food that Grows out of the Water: The Economic Benefits of Wild Rice in Minnesota* (Tacoma: Earth Economics, 2018), <https://www.eartheconomics.org/all-publications/manoomin>. See also “Protect Our Manoomin,” <http://protectourmanoomin.weebly.com/protect-our-manoomin--mission-statement--declaration.html>.

20 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *The Gift Is in the Making: Anishinaabeg Stories* (Winnipeg: HighWater Press, 2013).

21 W.W. Cooke, “Chippewa Bird Names,” *The Auk* 1, no. 3 (1884): 245.



Seth Eastman, *Gathering Wild Rice* (1853). This image is in the Public Domain.

Article 5 of the Treaty of 1837 reads: “The privilege of hunting, fishing, and gathering the wild rice, upon the lands, the rivers and the lakes included in the territory ceded, is guaranteed to the Indians, during the pleasure of the President of the United States.”²² Indigenous brothers and sisters, your prairie grasslands were stolen to make way for white agriculture. I used to come two years after your custodial burning of the grasses to do my part in eating insects, spreading seed, building my nests. You agreed to give up your land with the understanding that you had the right to continue to gather the rice. You harvested *manoomin* not by enslaved people and machines, but by hand with wooden knocking sticks aboard canoes that wound quietly through the rushes. The *manoomin* nourishes you still, and it is often gifted rather than sold in the capitalist way. After so many treaty violations, what choice did you have but to grant to the *manoomin* legal personhood, or the right to “flourish, regenerate, and evolve”?²³ Must we all be declared people to be protected from sulfates, pesticides, farmers with guns? If rice is a person, if water were a refugee, where would they run to?

²² “Treaty with the Chippewa, 1837,” <https://glifwc.org/TreatyRights/TreatyChippewa07291837Web.pdf>.

²³ White Earth Band law, *Rights of Manoomin*, December 2018, <https://celdf.org/2019/02/the-rights-of-wild-rice/>.

I am Bobolink, *zhigaag*, *charlatán*, chupador—a mere passerine,
a migrant songbird.

I sing of strife and ecological destruction, survival and subsistence.

I sing of Atlantic transplantations, forced migrations, fugitive flights,
dreams of freedom, homes away from home.

