

**Twenty-first Century Narratives of the Plantationocene from
the U.S. Gulf Coast**

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Abstract

This thesis intervenes in emergent discussions of the Plantationocene by demonstrating how current conceptualisations of the epoch belie the patterns of aqueously mediated, racialized violence that underpin it. While Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing offer an ontological definition of the Plantationocene, focusing almost exclusively on the exploitation of natural resources, this thesis turns to first-hand community responses to ecological, racialized violence in and surrounding the Gulf Coast of the U.S. South. In doing so, it explores how literary, visual, and sonic modes of vernacular storytelling offer alternative epistemologies of the Plantationocene and expose the ways in which plantation structures of the past and present are indebted to water. The imbrications between water and anti-black violence have long histories that stretch back to the Middle Passage and are manifest in recent crises, from hurricanes to water scarcity. In the wake of ongoing disasters, narratives of the Plantationocene – including the literature, photography and rap music drawn on throughout this thesis – help us to apprehend racialized capitalism and its ecological extension over time. As such, this thesis grapples with the ways in which these varying forms disclose the mnemonic capacities of water, bringing submerged memories to light and prompting us to consider how bodies of water – both human and more-than-human – materially evidence the plantation and its afterlives.

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Introduction



Figure 1. Jason deCaires Taylor, *Vicissitudes*, digital photograph, available at Artist A Day <<<https://www.artistaday.com/?p=3605#>>> [accessed 1st December 2020].

What the dark scientists are now saying is that the bones are there as fine as sand, the marrow like coral to itself, the magnesium and calcium has infiltrated the systems of even the lowest filter feeders. So any light that you find in the ocean right now cannot be separated from the stolen light of those we long for every morning, and I don't need to remind you that the ocean, that place where the evolutionists and creationists all agree that life began, the course of all the salt we breathed to get here, lives within us.

- Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After The End of The World* (10)¹

Material residues of the Middle Passage flow through bodies of water – oceans, rivers, and people carry forth traces of those transatlantic voyages and the enslaved people who weathered them. On board the slave ship, the insurance precept upheld by British commercial law furnished colonial authorities with the assurance that monetary compensation could be claimed ‘for cargo that was deliberately destroyed if the act was

¹ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *M Archive: After The End of The World* (London: Duke University Press, 2018), p.10.

absolutely necessary to secure the success of the larger enterprise'.² Though we do not know how many were cast into the blue, as Christina Sharpe puts it, we can be sure that 'the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today'.³ Sharpe invokes the science of residence time (pertaining to the duration that atoms remain in the ocean) to illustrate their abiding presence. 'They were eaten, organisms processed them, and those organisms were in turn eaten and processed, and the cycle continues', she writes, 'Human blood is salty, and sodium [...] has a residence time of 260 million years.'⁴ In the words of Diana Leong, the bodies of the formerly enslaved contribute to 'the saline content of the oceans'.⁵ Their material presence – albeit invisible –figures the continuities of transatlantic slavery and its interminable systems of racialized capitalism. 'The slave's status as object commodity, or purely economic cargo, reveals that a black archival presence not only enumerates the dead and dying, but also acts as an origin story', writes Katherine McKittrick.⁶ She argues that 'this is where historic blackness comes from: the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving'.⁷ On a planet caught in the residence time of slavery, the 'breathless numbers', whose presence still linger in the ocean, continue to inform ecological relations; and, as interconnected issues of rising sea levels and climate change are heightened, so too is the need for becoming more attuned to how bodies of water bear the burden of the past.

Demonstrating how on-going environmental disasters are shaped by the watery histories of slavery, this thesis calls for a much-needed racialization of the Anthropocene. Definitions of the Anthropocene stipulate that in a geological epoch in which humans have permanently altered the Earth's systems – inducing pollution, mass extinction and climate change, among other environmental emergencies – we are all bound by, to quote Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'a universal that arises from a shared sense of catastrophe'.⁸ As such, Anthropocene discourse does not adequately represent the inequalities and power structures that are embedded in the present. As Kathryn Yusoff writes, 'to be included in the "we" of the anthropocene is to be silenced by a claim to universalism that fails to notice its subjugations'.⁹ While conceptualisations of the Anthropocene tend to smooth over the

² Diana Leong, 'The Salt Bones: *Zong!* and an Ecology of Thirst', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 23 (2017), pp. 798-820 (p.801).

³ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), p.40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.141.

⁵ Leong, p.812.

⁶ Katherine McKittrick, 'Mathematics Black Life', *The Black Scholar*, 44, 2 (2014), pp.16-28 (p.16-17).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, 35, 2 (2009), pp.197-222 (p.222).

⁹ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p.12.

racialized contours of environmental catastrophe (which stretch back to histories of colonial violence), this examination builds on a small body of work that addresses the relationship between the environment and plantation structures of the past and present. I resolve to better understand the imbrications between the environment and the enduring legacies of slavery – specifically systems of racialized capitalism and violence – by redefining emergent theories of the Plantationocene. Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing offer the Plantationocene as a framework for recognising plantation slavery as a planet-altering moment in human and natural history. They outline how the plantation economy led to ‘the rapid displacement and reformulation of germ plasm, genomes, cuttings, and all other names and forms of part organisms and of deracinated plants, animals, and people’, but there is still more work to be done in terms of recognizing how this planetary transformation was rooted in (and continues to inflict) anti-black violence.¹⁰

In placing the Plantationocene in conversation with the oceanic origins of slavery, I argue that water is central to the Plantationocene’s long-established paradigms of capitalism, violence and dispossession. Current conceptualisations of the Plantationocene revolve around the land-based ontologies of the plantation and rarely acknowledge it as a water-borne phenomenon. This thesis, on the other hand, demonstrates how plantation structures are indebted to water. From the Middle Passage to the domestic slave trade, oceans and rivers served as highways to captivity, transporting subjugated bodies across continents and states, but these aquatic spaces were more than just sites of transportation. As Leong reminds us, these watery conduits gave birth to ‘an ecology of resource regulations that persists beyond the formal abolition of the transatlantic slave trade’.¹¹ In what follows, I explore how expressive cultures of the American South represent the aqueously mediated legacies of slavery, illuminating the ways in which the weaponization of water underwrites racial justice issues, from the carceral economy (as in, the monetization of racialized captivity through the prison industrial complex), to housing crises and extreme weather. I demonstrate how literature, photography and music of the U.S. South interrupts non-racialized Anthropocene discourses by portraying the durability of plantation logics and how they are ecologically extended over time. This thesis brings together critical race studies and eco-criticism to apprehend aqueous, racialized violence as it is expressed ecologically – through imbrications of the human and more-than-human – in Southern

¹⁰ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p.162.

¹¹ Leong, p.799.

literature, photography, and rap music. I explore how these forms conjure the mnemonic capacities of water and demonstrate the ways in which the substance materially evidences slavery and its afterlives in the age of the Plantationocene.

The Plantationocene and its “Hold”

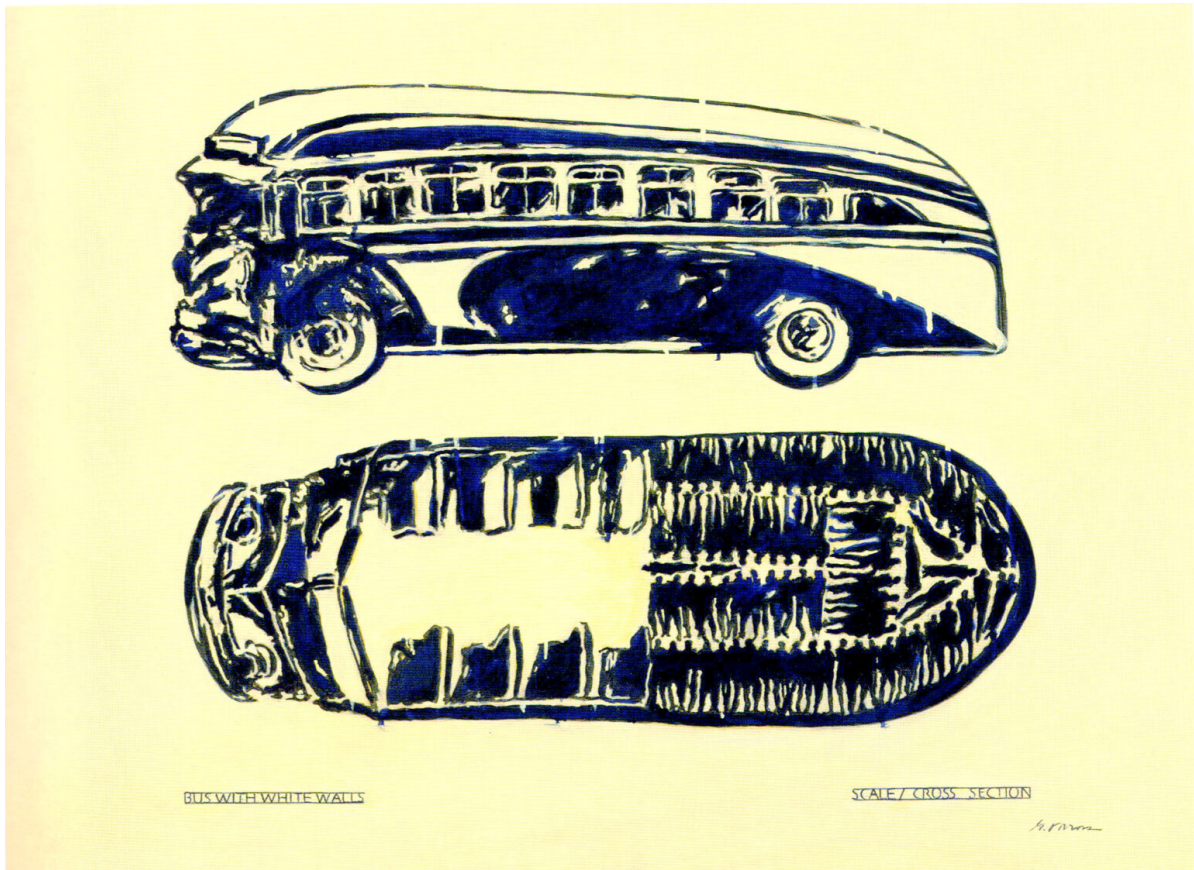


Figure 2. Geoffrey Moss, *Bus with White Walls*, 2003, oil on canvas, 30” x 40”, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

The intimacy with death that was first experienced in the hold continues to determine black existence. The matrix of our dispossession encompasses the fungible and disposable life of the captive/slave; the uneven distribution of death and harm that produces a caesura in human populations and yields a huge pile of corpses; the accumulation, expropriated capacity, and extracted surplus constitutive of racial capitalism and modernity; and the premature death, social precarity, and incarceration that characterize the present. Our dispossession is ongoing.

The hold continues to shape how we live.

- Saidiya Hartman, ‘The Dead Book Revisited’¹²

The hold repeats and repeats and repeats in and into the present [...] The details and the deaths accumulate; the ditto ditto fills the archives of a past that is not yet past. The holds multiply.

¹² Saidiya Hartman, ‘The Dead Book Revisited’, *History of the Present*, 6, 2 (2016), pp.208-215 (p.208).

In ‘The Dead Book Revisited’, Saidiya Hartman recalls the stories of two women whose deaths she reimagines in *Lose Your Mother* and ‘Venus in Two Acts’. Murdered on board the slave ship while crossing the Atlantic during 1792, Hartman asks us to consider how their death’s resemble ‘the threat of death that hangs over the head of a population that remains the target of the state’s militarized violence’.¹⁴ ‘How might the effort to reach two girls first condemned to the hold and then cast into the sea pose questions critical to the archive and to the history of the present?’ she asks.¹⁵ This thesis takes seriously the entanglements of captivity and water, which can be traced back to transatlantic slavery, and considers how the Plantationocene reproduces the features of the Middle Passage. Examining a range of environmental justice issues and resource regulations, as they are expressed in Southern literature and culture, I explore how the slave ship modulates into the present and serves as a useful tool for conceptualising the Plantationocene.

The Middle Passage represents a formative moment in the foundations of ongoing, entangled systems of racialized capitalism and ecological governance, from water scarcity to drowning. During the Middle Passage, water, as Leong puts it, became ‘the threshold between slave and non-slave’, with the ‘social hierarchy of the ship’ dependant on what she describes as an ‘ecology of thirst’.¹⁶ In Leong’s definition of the ecology of thirst, enslavers’ power rested on ‘an ability to control the relationship to water’, with the enslaved deprived of the substance as a source of nourishment but intensely vulnerable to it.¹⁷ The enslaved were thus caught in the chasm of either being thirsty for water or drowning in it. This rendering of black life as disposable demonstrates how ‘the edifice of modern finance is built on a violent erasure of black bodies’, with water central to its formation.¹⁸ C. L. R James described the human cargo of the Middle Passage as the first modern people, reminding us that their experiences lay bare the racialized capitalism that defines Western modernity.¹⁹ The aqueous violence of the Middle Passage – which views human life through a capitalist lens – is manifest in recent American catastrophes from the Flint water crisis to Hurricane

¹³ Sharpe, p.73.

¹⁴ Hartman, p.208.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.209.

¹⁶ Leong, p.804.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.810.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.802.

¹⁹ For more on C. L. R James’ work pertaining to the Middle Passage and modernity see C. L. R James, *The Black Jacobins* (London: Penguin Books, 2001).

Katrina. Just as in *Poetics of Relation* (1990), Édouard Glissant asks us to imagine the slave ship as both abyss and womb, this thesis will explore how the Middle Passage birthed the ecological conditions that define the present and its systems of anti-black violence.²⁰

In what follows, I attend to particular features of the Plantationocene – specifically the carceral economy, Hurricane Katrina, and petrochemical pollution. Each example is evocative of the plantation’s watery past, but not identical to it. I argue that the Plantationocene resonates with what Saidiya Hartman refers to as the ‘afterlife of slavery’, but when thinking about the ways in which the ecological and economic customs of the Middle Passage spill over into the present, I am not suggesting that present conditions are a direct continuation of enslavement.²¹ Rather, the twenty-first century narratives drawn on throughout the following analysis provide ways of noticing how the codes of the plantation, introduced on board the slave ship, are continually renewed post-slavery in ways that are new and different but always strangely familiar. As such, this thesis takes the “cene” (deriving from the Greek *kainos* meaning of recent) in the term Plantationocene literally, highlighting the ways in which plantation structures are repeatedly reinvented anew. In doing so, I grapple with the complex intersections between the material and discursive residues of the Middle Passage and contemporary forces such as the prison industrial complex and Big Oil companies.

One related history is that of the rise of contemporary neoliberalism, which although seemingly disconnected from the hold, compounds post-slavery cultural memory in narratives of the Plantationocene. The resurgence of neoliberalism during the late twentieth century was animated by the dominant ideology that, in the words of Vicente Navarro, ‘the reduction of state interventions in economic and social activities and the deregulation of labor and financial markets [...] have liberated the enormous potential of capitalism to create an unprecedented era of social well-being in the world’s population.’²² The environmental crises invoked throughout this thesis are often interpreted in relation to the neoliberal influence of privatisation and free-market capitalism. For example, in a collection

²⁰ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* translated by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University Michigan Press, 1997), p.5.

²¹ Hartman refers to the afterlives of slavery to denote ‘the skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment’ brought on by the plantation’s ‘racial calculus’: Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Staus, and Giroux), p.6.

²² Vicente Navarro, ‘Neoliberalism As A Class Ideology; Or, The Political Causes of the Growth of Inequalities’, *International Journal of Health Services*, 37, 1 (2007), pp.47-62 (p.47).

entitled *Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (2011), Cedric Johnson illuminates the role of pro-market reforms (established to the detriment of social welfare programs, labor rights and environmental protection) in both the emergence of the disaster and responses to it.²³ Johnson critiques the neoliberal tailoring of social policies to market relations, registering the ways in which the state prioritises the global movement and growth of capital over the safety of its citizens. Although tethered to the economic complications of the present, the contemporary force of neoliberalism and its processes of globalization and dehumanisation, contains subtle traces of plantation capitalism which can be traced back to the Middle Passage. As C. L. R. James tells us in *The Black Jacobins*, Atlantic slavery instigated the formation of the modern world system through monocultural production and a prevailing market logic that would foreshadow modern economic life and its exclusions.²⁴ As this thesis will show, the current system requires violence, and that violence is haunted by the ecologies and economies of the hold.

Writing Against The Anthropocene

Placing ongoing environmental injustices in conversation with the slave ship, this thesis will write against dominant conceptualisations of the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene, as Chakrabarty puts it, refers to the current epoch ‘in which humans act as a main determinant of the environment of the planet’.²⁵ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer are usually credited for naming the era (although scholars, such as Helmuth Trischler, have highlighted that other variations of the term precede Crutzen and Stoermer’s introduction of the Anthropocene in the newsletter for the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme in 2000). Crutzen and Stoermer indicate that the Anthropocene began as a result of human activity during the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth century. They identify the correlation between the increase in carbon dioxide emissions and the extraction and burning of fossil fuels, proposing that this consumption of non-renewable natural resources marked the end of the Holocene – the period that followed the Ice Age – and instigated the beginning of the Anthropocene. While Crutzen and Stoermer’s periodization of the Anthropocene is widely upheld, alternative start dates include the Neolithic Revolution

²³ Cedric Johnson, ‘Introduction: The Neoliberal Deluge’, in *Neoliberal Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* ed. by Cedric Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), pp.xvii-1 (p.xvii).

²⁴ James, *The Black Jacobins*, p.22-23, 37.

²⁵ Chakrabarty, p.209.

(circa 10,000 B.C) – during which ‘humans altered large portions of the landscape and intervened in the natural gene pool by cultivating plants for crops and domesticating animals on a previously unprecedented scale’ – and the nuclear age which ignited the Great Acceleration of the mid-twentieth century through accelerated energy consumption and mass motorization.²⁶

Debates surrounding the periodization of the Anthropocene are not the only tensions that are generated by the concept. Other objections emerge from what Jennifer Wenzel terms the ‘universalizing thrust of Anthropocene discourse’.²⁷ In the words of Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, ‘This new era of human impact on the globe known as the Anthropocene has made it possible for countless individual perpetrators of environmental wrong to hide their actions in the midst of the complexity and collectivity of global processes and thus escape accountability.’²⁸ As DeLoughry writes, ‘we need to consider the ways in which claims to a naturalized history of globalisation can sidestep the more thorny political formulations’.²⁹

Kathryn Yusoff reminds us that homogenous conceptualisations of the Anthropocene are misleading in that the geological tools with which knowledge of the epoch is developed are in fact inherently political with far-reaching colonial histories. In other words, evidence cited in support of the Anthropocene derives from the geologic practice of reading the Earth’s surfaces – or, strata – to assess how they change over time (and why). As such, Anthropocene discourse tends to present geology as a progressive tool for better understanding the environment and our relation to it but, crucially, geologic extraction was instructive in the colonial economy and the formation of plantation logics. ‘Slave capture and ownership’, writes Yusoff, ‘were initially instigated to mine for gold in the New World.’³⁰ Yusoff demonstrates how geology ‘has determined the geographies and genealogies of colonial extraction in a double sense: first, in terms of settler colonialism and the thirst for land and minerals, and second, as a category of the inhuman that transformed

²⁶ Helmuth Trischler, ‘The Anthropocene: A Challenge for the History of Science, Technology, and the Environment’, *NTM International Journal of History & Ethics of Natural Sciences Technology & Medicine*, 24, 3 (2016), pp.309-335 (p.313).

²⁷ Jennifer Wenzel, ‘Turning Over a New Leaf: Fanonian humanism and environmental justice’, in *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* ed. by Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), pp.165-173 (p.166).

²⁸ Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.26.

²⁹ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, ‘Postcolonialism’ in *The Oxford Companion to Ecocriticism* ed. by Greg Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.320-340 (p.324).

³⁰ Yusoff, p.68.

persons into things'.³¹ Colonised peoples, Yusoff reminds us, were therefore also rendered extractable. In this way, geology was central in the colonial commodification of both natural resources and black people. 'The fantasy was to assert commodity value of persons through the rendering of a nonagentic materiality (flesh) to generate surplus value, thereby disfiguring the black subject', she explains.³² That is to say that the conflations between colonised peoples and nonagentic matter were born out of the desire to boost the colonial economy by reducing black people to extractable commodities. Geologic practice, as it is employed in Anthropocene discourse, is still not free of its colonial past. 'The championing of the collective in geology under the guise of universality or humanity is actually a deformation of the differentiation of subjective relations made in and through geology', she argues.³³

Even where geologists have gestured towards the colonial and postcolonial plantation as an engine of planetary transformation, their theories are usually overlooked in favour of contexts in which issues of racialization are less pronounced. For instance, although not cited as heavily as theorists who pinpoint the Industrial Revolution, Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin proclaim that the ways in which humans began radically altering the earth can be traced back to the Columbian Exchange of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (as in, the colonization of The Americas which saw the mass movement of crops, people, diseases and animals between Europe, Africa and America). The Columbian Exchange radically impacted human populations and relations, from the forced migration of Africans to the Native American genocide. With disease, violence and famine widespread, by 1650 the indigenous human population in the Americas depleted to 6 million from the estimated 54 million in 1492.³⁴ One of the symptoms of the depopulation of America through colonisation is that previously agriculturally cultivated indigenous lands were uninhabited and became forests (or forests regrew). The institution of plantations in North America was established in 1607 with the first colony formed in Jamestown, and by 1610, atmospheric carbon dioxide levels drastically plummeted. According to Lewis and Maslin, this plunge 'is the most prominent feature, in terms of both rate of change and magnitude, in pre-industrial atmospheric CO₂ records over the past 2,000 years.'³⁵ They refer to 'the dip in atmospheric CO₂' that occurred as a result of the Columbian exchange as the 'Orbis

³¹ Ibid, p.67-68.

³² Ibid, p.69.

³³ Ibid, p.107.

³⁴ Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin, 'Defining the Anthropocene', *Nature*, 519 (2015), pp.171-180 (p.175).

³⁵ Ibid.

spike', advocating that 'the suite of changes (mark) 1610 as the beginning of the Anthropocene (...) because post-1492 humans on the two hemispheres were connected, trade became global, and some prominent social scientists refer to this time as the beginning of the modern 'world-system'.³⁶ It may, they say, have instigated the Little Ice Age (1594-1677). Alfred W. Crosby foregrounds these notions in *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (1986), through which he highlights how the transportation of previously separate biota enabled colonial expansion, revealing how Empire instigated planetary transformation.³⁷ What Lewis and Maslin refer to as the Orbis Spike magnifies the extent to which the fundamental definitions of the Anthropocene – that is, the presence of human imprints on the planet – precede the histories usually associated with the epoch, and are inextricable from the emergence of racialized capitalism. As such, I turn to the Plantationocene as a useful term for excavating the overlooked, colonial histories of the Anthropocene, seeking to better understand how anthropogenic imprints bear the mark of racial governance and exploitation.

Redefining the Plantationocene

This thesis builds on current conceptualisations of the Plantationocene, which demonstrate how the plantation shapes the environment through systems of homogeneity, control and commodification, but – like conceptualisations of the Anthropocene – existing discussions surrounding the Plantationocene are not without their own limitations and deficiencies. The term was coined in 2014 when organisers of *Ethnos*, an anthropological journal, gathered scholars for a talk at the University of Aarhus. Speakers used the term to describe the 'devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor.'³⁸ Foundational theories of the Plantationocene outline the role of the plantation in ongoing global environmental transformation. As Haraway explains, 'the Plantationocene continues with ever-greater ferocity in globalized factory meat production, monocrop agribusiness, and immense substitutions of crops like oil palm for multispecies forests and their products that sustain

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.4.

³⁸ Donna Haraway, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulecene: Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities*, 6 (2015), pp.159-165 (p.162).

human and nonhuman critters alike'.³⁹ While initial theorisations of the Plantationocene compel an understanding of the more-than-human assemblages embroiled in capitalist systems, Tsing and Haraway's early mediations tend to offer a view of the plantation that is characterised by what Janae Davis, Alex A. Moulton, Levi Van Sant and Brian Williams describe as a 'flattened multispecies ontology'.⁴⁰ In the 2014 conversation about the Plantationocene at the University of Aarhus, Noboru Ishikawa, Tsing and Haraway defined the plantation thus:

Noboru (Ishikawa): To me, plantations are just the slavery of plants.

Anna (Tsing): I agree.

Donna (Haraway): And microbes.⁴¹

In instances such as the above, where plantations are somehow disconnected from the racialized logics that sustain them, we see how Plantationocene discourse risks reproducing the essentialism it so vehemently opposes in theories of the Anthropocene. As Michael Warren Murphy and Caitlin Schroering remind us, while discussions of the Plantationocene defy 'the Eurocentric narrative that situates fossil fuels, steam engines, and the industrial revolution as the most important elements of global environmental change' and thereby challenge 'anthropocentrism by focusing on multispecies assemblages and dislocations', plants and microbes did not bear the burden of slavery in the same way racialized people (who found themselves in servitude to landscapes) did.⁴² Davis et. al write, 'the plantation was not a device of undifferentiated socioecological transformation, [so] the lack of an analysis underscoring human embodiment and examining socioecological hierarchies as both causes and consequences of the plantation is a conspicuous absence'.⁴³

Nonetheless, the concept of the Plantationocene presents a new opportunity to engage with slavery as an ecological event of global significance in ways that have not previously been explored. That is to say that we have not exhausted the theoretical potential of the Plantationocene but must remain vigilant to the ways in which we conceive

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Janae Davis, Alex A. Moulton, Levi Van Sant and Brian Williams, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, ... Plantationocene?: A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises', *Geography Compass* (2019), pp.1-16 (p.6).

⁴¹ Donna Haraway, Noboru Ishikawa, Scott F. Gilbert, Kenneth Olwig, Anna L. Tsing & Nils Bubandt, 'Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene', *Ethnos*, 81, 3 (2016), pp.535-564 (p.556-7).

⁴² Michael Warren Murphy and Caitlin Schroering, 'Refiguring the Plantationocene Racial Capitalism, World-Systems Analysis, and Global Socioecological Transformation', *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 26, 2 (2020) pp.400-415 (p.403).

⁴³ Davis et. al p.6.

of its origins and legacies, ensuring that we identify the plantation not only as a weapon of environmental degradation but anti-black violence. In this way, a lot can be gained from the concept of the Plantationocene when it is placed in conversation with critical race theorists who have long acknowledged the relationship between racialized violence and the environment, and the ways it inaugurated, to quote McKittrick, an ‘uneven colonial-racial economy’.⁴⁴

While the Plantationocene is a new term, it seems to draw on womanist theorist Sylvia Wynter’s ideas regarding the exchange-value structures of the plantation, wherein (racialized) humans and crops were reduced to their use-value. She writes:

With the discovery of the New World and its vast exploitable lands that process that has been termed the ‘reduction of Man to Labour and of Nature to Land’ had its large-scale beginning. From this moment on Western Man saw himself as ‘the lord and possessor of Nature’. The one-way transformation of Nature began. Since man is a part of Nature, a process of dehumanisation and alienation was set in train.⁴⁵

Here, Wynter’s brief history of the ecologically transformative moment that was slavery, reminds us that the control and commodification of plants and people was intrinsic to the plantation logic and its attempts at the naturalization of forced labour – as Stuart Hall put it, ‘the hope of every ideology is to naturalize itself out of History into Nature’.⁴⁶ Tsing and Haraway also synthesise the biological and ideological degradation (or, simplification) of crops and peoples that occurred on the plantation, but the racialized rationale behind this process is less overt in their discussions of it. ‘The plantation was precisely the conjuncture between ecological simplifications,’ says Tsing, ‘the discipline of plants in particular, and the discipline of humans to work on those...The plantation takes us into that discipline-of-people/discipline-of-plants conjuncture’.⁴⁷ Reading Tsing and Haraway in light of the likes of Wynter, however, highlights the need for being more explicit about the racialized dynamics of colonial, capitalist expansion and the violent conflations between black people and natural resources which occurred on and through the plantation. Thinking with the Plantationocene in this way demonstrates how the ecological nature of slavery and its

⁴⁴ Katherine McKittrick, ‘On plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place’, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 12, 8 (2011), pp.947-963 (p.948).

⁴⁵ Sylvia Wynter, ‘Novel and History, Plot and Plantation’, *Savacoi*, 5 (1971), pp.95-102 (p.99).

⁴⁶ Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal* (London: Verso, 1988), p.8.

⁴⁷ Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, ‘Reflections on the Plantationocene: A Conversation with Donna Haraway & Anna Tsing’, *EdgeEffects.Net* (2020) << https://edgeeffects.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/PlantationoceneReflections_Haraway_Tsing.pdf>> [accessed November 20th 2020].

legacies form the basis of racialized capitalism (within which the control of plants is just one component).

Decolonisation has always been linked to the struggle to physically and imaginatively reclaim territories. ‘Imperialism after all’, says Said, ‘is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control.’⁴⁸ In ‘Turning Over a New Leaf: Fanonian humanism and environmental justice’, Wenzel revives Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, excavating what she refers to as his ‘decolonial dialectic’. That is, ‘that the environmentalism of the poor is also a humanism of the poor’.⁴⁹ Wenzel’s reading of Fanon maps the ways in which species-divide and the exploitation of the natural resources corresponds with the subjugation of colonised peoples, revealing the entanglements between anthropocentrism and ethnocentrism. The decolonial pursuit is thus defined by the reclamation of both land and humanity – contrary to European humanism, built upon the exclusion of the Other. The work conducted by postcolonial critics who highlight the relationship between racialized violence and the natural environment can be used to foreground and enrich our understanding of the Plantationocene, emphasizing the imbrications between colonial and environmental histories.

Many of the forms of violence that emerge because of ongoing racialized environmental histories are insidious and overlooked. Rob Nixon asserts that while ‘violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, [...] erupting into instant sensational visibility’, there is also a need to ‘engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive’.⁵⁰ Nixon therefore offers the notion of slow violence to describe the vast temporal scales of ecological disaster, such as ‘toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans, and a host of other slowly unfolding environmental catastrophes’ which disproportionately affect people living in poverty.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Random House, 1993), p.271.

⁴⁹ Wenzel, p.170.

⁵⁰ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p.2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Given the elusive nature of slow violence, this thesis seeks to build a robust understanding of the Plantationocene by probing how, as McKittrick puts it, ‘the plantation is an ongoing locus of antiblack violence and death’.⁵² In doing so, I turn to literature, photography and rap music of the American South to explore how they cast new light on definitions of the Plantationocene. Rather than perpetuating hegemonic notions of the plantation – such as Tsing and Haraway’s definition of it being the slavery of plants and microbes – these Southern writers and artists lay bare the systems of ecologically mediated racialized violence that are rooted in slavery but still upheld by the state today. What we find in these works is, I argue, an engagement with water that reveals how the aqueously mediated violence of the Middle Passage (and subsequent slavery-borne atrocities) courses through the present through resource regulations and water management paradigms that render the racialized poor most vulnerable to aqueous, anthropogenic disaster. In engaging with the ecologically mediated legacies of slavery in this way, this thesis intervenes in current definitions of the Plantationocene which are usually bound by terrestrial definitions of the plantation. As such, I think with the plantation not as a literal, land-bound space, but as a seaborne, waterlogged concept that upholds racialized capitalism (and can be traced back to the Middle Passage). In doing so, this thesis will move beyond preliminary theorisations of the Plantationocene by highlighting the interconnections between land and water, and drawing underlying issues of race to the surface.

Plantationocene Shores: The Convergence of Land and Sea along the Gulf Coast

The Gulf Coast emerges as a focal point throughout this thesis as I engage with the ways in which narratives from states along the Southern shorelines of the U.S. emblemize post-plantation ecologies through an awareness of the porous boundaries between land and water. Most of the narratives I draw on emanate out of Southern coastal states – places that are intertwined with bayous, inlets, lagoons, and rivers – like the Mississippi Gulf South and Southeast Louisiana. Marshlands, swamps, and wetlands are not only a part of these regions, but sometimes the very foundations on which urban territories were established. For example, New Orleans, the focus of chapters two and three, was built on swampland. Richard Campanella outlines how, when French colonials established La Nouvelle-Orléans

⁵² Katherine McKittrick, ‘Plantation Futures’, *Small Axe: A Caribbean Platform for Criticism*, 17, 3 (2013), pp.1-15 (p.2-3).

on the natural levee of the Mississippi River in 1718, the upraised terrain was (at most) fifteen feet above sea level and surrounded by swamp and marsh.⁵³ For some time, settlements were limited to two thin stretches of land, but trends in urban expansion during the subsequent centuries led to huge investments in water management infrastructures. Levees, pumping systems, outflow canals, and pipelines, were all engineered to drain the wetlands. Through this engineering, the city's swamps became the city's suburbs; but attempts at keeping the land dry would also eventually, as Campanella reminds us, result in 'anthropogenic soil subsidence – the sinking of the land by human action'.⁵⁴ To quote Campanella, 'When runoff is removed and artificial levees prevent the river from overtopping, the groundwater lowers, the soils dry out, and the organic matter decays. All this creates air pockets in the soil body, into which those sand, silt, and clay particles settle, consolidate – and *drop below sea level*'.⁵⁵ Anthropogenic soil subsidence is a contributing factor to the rapid and ongoing disappearance of Louisiana's coastal wetlands, which offer protection from the effects of hurricanes by reducing storm surge. As Joshua Clark writes in *Heart Like Water: Surviving Katrina and Life in Its Disaster Zone* (2007), Louisiana's coastal wetlands are '*the fastest disappearing landmass on the planet*. More than 30% of the state's shoreline may be gone by 2050, while New Orleans continues to sink.'⁵⁶

As such, New Orleans is, as Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker put it, 'a city of amorphous boundaries, where land is forever turning into water, water devours land, and a thousand degrees of marshy, muddy, oozing in-between exist'.⁵⁷ The narratives I draw on throughout this thesis ask us to pay attention to the ways in which racialized communities are disproportionately situated at the unstable threshold between land and water. Hurricane Katrina, for instance, revealed the ways in which water management processes are paralleled by exercises in residential zoning and city planning that result in the region's black residents being concentrated in areas most vulnerable to flooding. After Katrina, 'Damaged areas were 45.8 percent African American, undamaged areas, only 26.4 percent. For the city of New Orleans alone, these figures were 75 percent and 46.2 percent,

⁵³ Richard Campanella, 'How Humans Sank New Orleans', *The Atlantic*, 6th February 2018 <<
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/02/how-humans-sank-new-orleans/552323/>>>
[accessed 4th May 2023].

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Joshua Clark, *Heart Like Water: Surviving Katrina and Life in Its Disaster Zone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), p.352.

⁵⁷ Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker, *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas* (California: University of California Press, 2013), p.1.

respectively.⁵⁸ I return to discussions around segregated residential zoning patterns in chapter two, but I raise them here to foreground the notion that in all of the narratives I draw on, occupying the liminal space between earth and water is accompanied by an awareness of racialized disposability. As Yusoff argues, black communities are frequently sacrificed as ‘a stratum or seismic barrier’ to hurricanes.⁵⁹ In this way, black residents of New Orleans are disproportionately stationed to substitute Louisiana’s vanishing wetlands and their protective qualities in terms of absorbing storm surge.

Paying attention to regions in the Gulf South, like New Orleans, opens up new ways of thinking about the Plantationocene by helping us to conceive of it as being a flooded concept, soaked in ongoing and interconnected histories of water and race. I am not advocating for a version of Southern (gulf) exceptionalism; rather, I want to think about the ways in which the Gulf Coast is an emblematic region that signposts methodologies for understanding our ecological present. Most of my analysis attends to specific manifestations of ecologically mediated, racialized violence in the Gulf South – but, like water, those manifestations cannot be neatly contained. In chapter three, I move beyond the Gulf Coast when engaging with Rapsody, a North Carolina based hip-hop artist. Rapsody’s nautical album, *Eve* (2019), and its accompanying visuals, retain a coastal focus through invocations of the South Carolina Sea islands. For example, Rapsody alludes to Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), a cinematic representation of the Gullah people (the African-American communities of the low-country sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia). As I will show, *Eve* resonates with the narratives of the Plantationocene we find along the Gulf Coast by sonically and visually evoking the role of water in the plantation and its legacies. In this way, this thesis does not address all components of the South (or claim to represent the Gulf in its entirety), but establishes the Gulf Coast as a representative zone for understanding how ongoing post-plantation ecologies have been shaped by historical, watery practices.

Plantationocene Epistemologies

Every literary, photographic, and sonic artefact I have gathered for the purpose of this exploration, has been selected because I believe it brings us closer to understanding the

⁵⁸ Manuel Pastor, Robert Bullard, James K. Boyce, Alice Fothergill, Rachel Morello-Frosch, and Beverly Wright, ‘Environment, Disaster, and Race After Katrina’, *Race, Poverty and the Environment*, 13, 1 (2006), pp.21-26 (p.23).

⁵⁹ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p.xii.

Plantationocene in ways that scientific data and definitions cannot. If, as Yusoff argues, geology is encumbered with colonial ideologies, then we ought to investigate other ways of knowing the Plantationocene – ways that are not reliant on the patterns of extractivism that led to it. My methodology for seeking knowledge of the Plantationocene is indebted to Katherine McKittrick’s call to recognise story as analytic, and analytic as story. In McKittrick’s words:

The story asks that we live with what cannot be explained and live with unexplained cues and diasporic literacies, rather than reams of positivist evidence. The story opens the door to curiosity; the reams of evidence dissipate as we tell the world differently, with a creative precision. The story asks that we live with the difficult and frustrating ways of knowing differentially.⁶⁰

Dear Science and Other Stories (2021) reverberates throughout this thesis. Throughout it, McKittrick encourages us to shift ‘from studying science to studying ways of knowing’.⁶¹ The guiding principle is not, as McKittrick puts it, ‘to track and quantify marginalized peoples and seek reparation through centering their objectification, but, rather, to posit that many divergent and different and relational voices of unfreedom are analytical and intellectual sites that can tell us something about our academic concerns and our anticolonial futures.’⁶²

In *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* (2017), Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor emphasize the centrality of storytelling to the Anthropocene because it marks ‘the epoch in which our singular species reads its transformative presence in the Earth’s strata, reads *itself* in the rocks, and in doing so establishes new stories about its identity and this planet.’⁶³ This thesis challenges the periodisation of the Anthropocene and is more concerned with watery inscriptions than geology and rocks, but as I attempt to navigate Plantationocene epistemologies, I am compelled by the underlying notion that ecological information and memory is transmitted through storytelling. Menely and Taylor, drawing on the work Thomas Burnet, argue that ‘any reconstruction of planetary history will exceed empirical explanation and rely on imaginative ways of knowing’.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (London: Duke University Press, 2021), p.7.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.3.

⁶² *Ibid*, p.121.

⁶³ Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor, ‘Introduction’, in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* edited by Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press University Park, 2017), pp.1-24 (p.3).

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.2.

However, unlike in dominant discussions of the Anthropocene, this thesis is less concerned with the planetary than it is with the local. As Timothy Clark asserts, ‘the Anthropocene enacts the demand to think of human life at much broader scales of space and time, something which alters significantly the way that many once familiar issues appear’.⁶⁵ The ‘scale effects’ of the Anthropocene therefore ‘resist representation at the kinds of scale on which most thinking, culture, art and politics operate’.⁶⁶ Lucy Bond argues that, from this perspective, the Anthropocene risks inducing a ‘crisis of memory’ and mourning ‘manifested in the failure to attune individual and collective losses to the scales of planetary destruction and the inability to relinquish anachronistic narratives that serve to mask the historical connection between socio-economic and ecological violence’.⁶⁷ In this thesis, I turn to the American South – not as an excursion into regionalism, but as a way of shifting the spatial and temporal frames of the Anthropocene which, due to their overwhelming planetary scale, too frequently obscure lived experiences of ecological violence. I think with Southern writers, photographers and rappers; reading, looking and listening out for ways of knowing the Plantationocene and how it is interwoven into the everyday. In this way, there are similarities between my methodology for examining narratives of the Plantationocene and Stephanie LeMenager’s work on the novel and the everyday Anthropocene. Throughout ‘Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre’, LeMenager draws on black cli-fi novels, illuminating the genre’s capacity to register what she terms the everyday Anthropocene. ‘By “everyday Anthropocene” I imply the present tense, lived time of the Anthropocene, and I recommend paying attention to what it means to live, day by day, through climate shift and the economic and sociological injuries that underwrite it’, writes LeMenager.⁶⁸ As such, LeMenager argues that ‘the Anthropocene novel [...] is at best a project of paying close attention to what it means to live through climate shift, moment by moment, in individual, fragile bodies’.⁶⁹ As in the work of Clark and Bond, the concept of scale is significant here as LeMenager highlights the growing need for a more granular approach to understanding the ways in which ecological loss is experienced day-to-day. That is why this thesis places its focus on the U.S. South; not because it is the only place in

⁶⁵ Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.13.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.x.

⁶⁷ Lucy Bond, ‘In the eyeblink of a planet you were born, died, and your bones disintegrated’: scales of mourning and velocities of memory in Philipp Meyer’s *American Rust*, *Textual Practice*, 31, 5 (2017), pp.995-1016 (p.996-997).

⁶⁸ Stephanie LeMenager, ‘Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre’, in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* edited by Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press University Park, 2017), pp.220-238 (p.225).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

which the ecologically mediated violence unfolds, but because placing geographic borders on the analysis that follows is necessary for avoiding sweeping global statements that displace the specificity of everyday life in the Plantationocene.

This thesis centres vernacular expressive cultures in its examination of the ecological legacies of the plantation in an attempt to shift Plantationocene discourse from geologic data to ordinary people. These narratives of the Plantationocene are multi-form. That is why although I begin by reading literary narratives of the Plantationocene, I go on to engage with the ways in which such stories can also be seen and heard in family photographs, in Southern rap music, in community filmmaking. To quote McKittrick: ‘In assembling ideas that are seemingly disconnected and uneven [...], the logic of knowing-to-prove is unsustainable because incongruity appears to be offering atypical thinking. Yet curiosity thrives.’⁷⁰ This thesis seeks to ignite curiosity around the ways in which Southern storytelling practices – divergent and multiform – together produce epistemologies of our current epoch and reveal the absences that permeate dominant conceptualisations of the Plantationocene. I am particularly interested in the ways in which these Plantationocene epistemologies form literary, photographic and sonic modes of recuperation against the losses incurred through the plantation and its destructive wake. In this way, these stories – more than the agricultural information Plantationocene discourse typically relies on – faithfully portray the ecological durability of the plantation, while also offering ways to, in the words of Sharpe, ‘imagine otherwise.’⁷¹

Drawing on the work of Karen Barad, I conceive of each narrative form drawn on throughout this thesis as an intra-active entity – which I argue is, in part, where the commemorative agency of narratives of the Plantationocene derives from. Barad defines intra-actions as ‘causally constraining nondeterministic enactments through which matter-in-the-process-of-becoming is sedimented out and enfolded in further materializations’.⁷² Notions of intra-activity offered by Barad help us to understand the ways in which the material-discursive forms engaged with throughout this examination – like the text, the photograph, and even sound – thus ‘produce differences that matter’.⁷³ In other words, I will

⁷⁰ McKittrick, *Dear Science*, p.4.

⁷¹ Sharpe, p.18.

⁷² Karen Barad, ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter’, in *A Feminist Companion to the Posthumanities* ed. by Cecilia Åsberg and Rosi Braidotti (New York: Springer, 2018), pp.223-240 (p.233).

⁷³ Barad, p.224.

explore how these narratives of the Plantationocene materially and discursively carry forth traces of the past in to the present and how this serves as a form of activism against the systematic erasures inflicted by the plantation and its afterlives. Rick Crownshaw writes that:

The work of cultural memory might apprehend the belatedness of the Anthropocene's present and future force as the materialization of a forgotten past, and the Anthropocene's geological inscriptions might be curated and archived by the work of cultural memory as the material of memories to come.⁷⁴

Throughout this thesis, I turn to counternarratives to those marks of violence left by perpetrators of the Anthropocene. In doing so, I draw on everyday, personal inscriptions of the Plantationocene that are recorded in vernacular expressive cultures of the American South, attending to the ways in which – despite patterns of racialized erasure– these black narratives of the environment will also become the ‘material of memories to come’.⁷⁵

Race, Ecology and New Materialism

A look back at the history of plantocratic colonialism exposes how the environment and its resources have long been synonymous with currency. In this way, the natural world is never neutral territory, but always a site upon which capitalist, racialized ideologies are constructed. As mentioned earlier, Wynter reminds us that the natural world and racialized people were embroiled in a process of commodification, reduced to their ‘use-value’ within the plantation’s structure of exchange value. With the entire plantation economy built on the exploitation of natural resources and racialized bodies, the conflation of blackness and the natural world was deployed as a justification for slavery. In other words, racial, economic and gender norms were upheld through the myth that they were part of the natural order of the world. The objectification of women, the racialized Other and the environment permeate colonial and pastoral literature, transmitting an anthropocentric, but decidedly European and male illusion of human superiority and exceptionalism. In colonial thought, the land was seen as what Val Plumwood refers to as *terra nullius* – empty and fit to be furnished with male fantasies.⁷⁶ Stacy Alaimo underlines the sexualized rhetoric of

⁷⁴ Rick Crownshaw, ‘Speculative Remembrance in the Anthropocene’, *Memory Studies*, 11, 4 (2017) pp.500-502 (p.501).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.190.

New World literature, which ‘naturalizes’ colonial processes ‘while depicting women, the land, and indigenous peoples as mysterious zones that invite their own violation’.⁷⁷

In *Race and Nature: From Transcendentalism To The Harlem Renaissance* (2008), Paul Outka writes that:

Evidence abounds that enslaved people, both in oral and written testimony, were intensely aware of how profoundly slavery depended on a violent and mutually constituting relation between blackness and a degraded pastoral – the reduction of the human to a locus of agricultural productivity, fertility, or a commodified and domesticated animality.⁷⁸

Outka locates this awareness in what he terms the ‘slave pastoral’ – antebellum narratives that critique and expose the ‘ecological instrumentalism practiced by European Americans’.⁷⁹ Citing the likes of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs as proponents of the slave pastoral, Outka’s analysis forms a useful starting point for investigating how the natural world came to be a mnemonic reminder of violence and servitude. Michael Bennett also examines the anti-pastoral elements of Frederick Douglass’ writings, explaining that ‘The definition of the slave as property makes it difficult for Douglass to have a positive relationship with the southern landscape since he is legally part of that landscape.’⁸⁰ As such, abolitionists worked to rebuke the alleged entanglements between the enslaved and the non-human in order to claim subjectivity and agency.

Stacy Alaimo, on the other hand, reminds us that the imbrications between the human and more-than-human are not purely discursive. In introducing the concept of transcorporeality to articulate the ways in the human and non-human materially flow through one another, Alaimo calls our attention to ‘an environment that is fleshy, emergent, and ultimately inseparable from the stuff of the human’.⁸¹ One of the reasons that the Plantationocene and its aqueously mediated patterns of violence are so potent and durable is because our watery bodies are perpetually porous, dependant and vulnerable to external bodies of water. As this thesis will highlight, these fleshy, watery imbrications are crucial to

⁷⁷ Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (London: Cornell University Press, 2000), p.13.

⁷⁸ Paul Outka, *Race and Nature: From Transcendentalism To The Harlem Renaissance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.51.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.53.

⁸⁰ Michael Bennett, ‘Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery’, in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* ed. by Karla Ambruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp.195-211 (p.200).

⁸¹ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p.2.

the (re)production of race. As such, bearing witness to the Plantationocene requires attending to the role of water in what Alexander G. Weheliye refers to as racializing assemblages. 'If racialization is understood not as biological or cultural descriptor, but as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans, then blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot', writes Weheliye.⁸² As this thesis will show, from the Middle Passage to the carceral economy, racialization has been and continues to be established in relation to water.

Although it does not conjure assemblages in relation to racialization, Philip E. Steinberg's work calls for a recognition of 'the ocean's geophysicality [...] as part of a marine assemblage in which humans are just one component'.⁸³ Steinberg's work utilises the notion of more-than-human assemblages – characteristic of the posthuman, new materialist turn of critical theory – which highlights the agentic properties of matter rather than viewing it as passive or inert. New materialist thinkers, such as Jane Bennett, argue that more-than-human '[a]ssemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group'.⁸⁴ Similarly, Steinberg emphasizes how 'water is constituted by moving molecules and by forces that push these molecules through space and time', and cannot be contained by, separated from, or easily controlled by the human.⁸⁵ Recognising the agentic capacities of matter, however, ought not to obscure discussions of human agency and culpability. Karen Barad's theory of intra-activity is therefore useful here, helping us to understand the ways in which seemingly dissociated forces – both human and more-than-human – compose one another as opposed to merely interacting.⁸⁶ Employing Barad's notion of intra-action throughout this thesis, I track the various ways in which humans merge with water in acts of both violence and rebellion.

⁸² Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), p.3.

⁸³ Philip E. Steinberg, 'Of other seas: metaphors and materialities in maritime regions', *Atlantic Studies*, 10 (2013), pp.156-169 (p.164).

⁸⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), p.23-24.

⁸⁵ Steinberg, p.160.

⁸⁶ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), p.152.

Although, arguably, new materialist thinking has reanimated oceanic discourse, many of these works demonstrate the extent to which new materialism has been dominated by discussions of the terrestrial. In the words of Kimberley Peters, ‘Whilst there has been a host of work taking seriously more-than-human geographies of soils, earth, and air [...] arguably that work has excluded a consideration of one of the most vast, more-than-human elementary forces of all – the sea.’⁸⁷ Instead, Peters, like Steinberg, calls for a recognition of hydro materiality – that is, the entanglements between the hydrological and biological, or, the relationality between human and aquatic forces – in order to demonstrate the extent to which water is an element that is both influenced by and beyond the remits of human governance. As Peters puts it, identifying the agentic marine assemblages that constitute the ocean should remind of the ways in which ‘the sea intrudes, encroaches, and permeates spaces beyond its mapped location.’⁸⁸

In *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (2017), Astrida Neimanis explores the more-than-human agency of water through the lens of embodiment, citing the fact that water is the very substance of the human as a challenge to ‘anthropocentrism, and the privileging of the human as the role of primary site of embodiment’.⁸⁹ Unravelling the enduring Enlightenment myth of the (homogenous) neatly-sealed, autonomous human – from which all external forces can be governed and conquered – Neimanis highlights how, our bodies of water are porous and vulnerable to external forces, encouraging us to view ‘[o]ur watery relations within (or more accurately: *as*) a more-than-human hydrocommons’.⁹⁰ The more-than-human hydrocommons outlined by Neimanis are bound by hydrological cycles. In her words:

our bodies enter complex relations of gift, theft, and debt with all other watery life. We are literally implicated in other animal, vegetable, and planetary bodies that materially course through us, replenish us, and draw upon our own bodies as their wells: human bodies ingest reservoir bodies, while reservoir bodies are slaked by rain bodies, rain bodies absorb ocean bodies, ocean bodies aspirate fish bodies, fish bodies are consumed by whale bodies – which then sink to the seafloor to rot and be swallowed up again by the ocean’s dark belly.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Kimberley Peters, ‘Manipulating material hydro-worlds: rethinking human and more-than-human relationality through offshore piracy’, *Environment and Planning*, 44 (2012), pp.1241-1254 (p.1243).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.1252.

⁸⁹ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p.2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.3.

Neimani's concept of what we might understand as a kind of hydrological corporeality, in contrast within humanist visions of the body, draws on Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality. While Alaimo's initial explorations of trans-corporeality were largely focused on the terrestrial, her more recent works explore 'to what extent the new materialisms and trans-corporeality specifically can extend through the seas'.⁹² Alaimo notes that such an exploration involves the suspension of the humanist attitude that marine habitats and pelagic zones are spaces that are alien and, ultimately, unknowable. Instead, Alaimo turns to ocean conservationists whose work, she observes, has been characterised by transcorporeal connections, 'by reminding us that the sea is in our very blood (Carson), by emphasizing that every breath we take contains oxygen produced by plankton (Earle), or by suggesting we see the ocean through the ocean – since our eyes are surrounded by saltwater (Whitty)'.⁹³

These discussions of new materialism, as they relate to our watery corporeality, help us to grasp the biopolitics of racialized water management paradigms, such as the carceral economy and extreme weather, that haunt Plantationocene. Memories of Hurricane Katrina are drawn on frequently throughout this thesis, in part, for the ways they encourage us to recognise the watery biopolitics of the Plantationocene. In critical theory, Katrina is frequently acknowledged as a biopolitical event, one in which natural disaster merged with institutional racism, but less attention is paid to the ways in which water is a biopolitical substance. Karen Bakker's work highlights the interrelationship between the biophysical properties and socio-technical formations of water – from the management of water supplies to irrigation schemes – advocating that '[w]ater is thus biopolitical in the Foucauldian sense: modern governments seek to optimize both water resources and our individual water-use practices in order to secure the health and productivity of the population'.⁹⁴ Crucially, however, as Bakker puts it, water management practices have historically been 'allied with, often overtly racist, strategies of population management'.⁹⁵ Bakker refers to the hydrologically mediated control of the aboriginal population in colonial Australia, but the biopoliticisation of water – the ways it is 'constitutive of both individual identity and public health' – is also manifest in American histories of water crisis, and the ways in which

⁹² Stacy Alaimo, 'States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 19, 3 (2012), pp.476–493 (p.477).

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Karen Bakker, 'Water: Political, biopolitical, material', *Social Studies of Science*, 42, (2012), pp.616–623 (p.619).

⁹⁵ Ibid.

water governance has catastrophically impacted African American communities.⁹⁶ In 2014, for instance, when fatal levels of toxic lead were unleashed into the homes and bodies of Flint's 100,000 residents through the city's waterways, the community was left without access to safe water whilst being assured by city officials that they had 'nothing to worry about'.⁹⁷ The poisonous copper-coloured effluence that streamed out of the community's taps was the result of city officials' decision to make the Flint River the primary water supply (without adequate tests or safety measures) – an exercise in minimizing the cost of water infrastructure. In 2019, Karen Weavor – successor to Dayne Walling (who was mayor of Flint at the time of the crisis and, in April 2014, was seen celebrating what would go on to become a catastrophic change to the City's water infrastructure) – said that Flint is 'still dealing with the trauma and the aftermath of having been poisoned at the hands of the government'.⁹⁸ Despite being one of the most infamous examples, based on data collected by the Environmental Protection Agency, Justin Worland asserts that in 2019, 'More than 30 million Americans lived in areas where water systems violated safety rules.'⁹⁹ In the words of Worland, 'As with basically all environmental and climate issues, poor people and minority communities are hit hardest.'¹⁰⁰ As indicated above, these water management paradigms also underpin the carceral economy which disproportionately exploits African Americans.

Ecological Memory

Grappling with the Plantationocene involves apprehending what Kennedy terms 'eco-memory' which entails being 'grounded in a deep memory of a habitat, conceived as an ecological assemblage in which all elements, human and nonhuman, are mobile, connected and interacted'.¹⁰¹ In 'The Site of Memory', for example, Toni Morrison recalls: 'they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and liveable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places "Floods" is the word they use, but in

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Anna Clark, 'Nothing to worry about. The water is fine': How Flint poisoned its people', *The Guardian* [online] << <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jul/03/nothing-to-worry-about-the-water-is-fine-how-flint-michigan-poisoned-its-people>>> (2018) [accessed March 2020].

⁹⁸ Karen Weavor quoted in *ibid.*

⁹⁹ Justin Worland, 'America's Clean Water Crisis Goes Far Beyond Flint. There's No Relief in Sight', *TIME* [online] <<https://time.com/longform/clean-water-access-united-states/>> (2020) [accessed March 2020].

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Rosanna Kennedy, 'Multidirectional Eco-Memory in an Era of Extinction', in *The Routledge Companion of the Environmental Humanities* ed. by Ursula K. Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann (London: Routledge, 2017) pp.268-277 (p.269).

fact it is not flooding; it is remembering.’¹⁰² Morrison’s account of the Mississippi reminds us that far from being an amnesiac substance – one that materially washes away remnants of the past – water is indeed the very medium through which the past returns to us. ‘All water’, she says, ‘has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.’¹⁰³ Morrison’s reference to water’s perfect memory bears the trace of Gaston Bachelard’s notion that water serves as a repository of the past. Water, he says, ‘remembers the dead’.¹⁰⁴ Morrison’s view of the Mississippi river’s capacity to remember, Bachelard’s conceptualisation of water as ‘a daily tomb to everything that dies within us each day’, and Sharpe’s concept of residence time, prompt us to engage with the notion of watery memories which permeates this thesis.¹⁰⁵

Recent trends in critical discussions of remembrance demonstrate the extent to which cultural theorists agree that memory is in flux. Astrid Erll conceives of memory as something that travels and flows.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Lucy Bond, Stef Craps and Pieter Vermeulen outline how although ‘Previously thought to be anchored in particular places, to be lodged in particular containers [...] memory has, in the last few years, increasingly been considered a fluid and flexible affair.’¹⁰⁷ This thesis takes the fluidity of memory literally, attending to the ways in which water is imbricated in the transmission of cultural memory. Katrina Schlunke’s work on the interconnections between memory and matter is also useful in this regard, helping us to imagine the ways in which biological, cultural, and hydrological forces co-produce memories. In her words, ‘memory is an ‘effect’ produced through and with materiality, rather than something only produced by a human centred consciousness’.¹⁰⁸ Thinking about this process in relation to narratives of the Plantationocene means recognising how the human and aquatic co-produce memories of the Plantationocene dating back to the Middle Passage. As NourbeSe Philip writes, ‘our entrance to the past is through memory – either oral or written. And water.’¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² Toni Morrison, ‘The Site of Memory’ in *What Moves as the Margin: Selected Nonfiction* ed. by Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), pp.65-82 (p.77).

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Dallas: Pegasus Foundation), p.56.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.55.

¹⁰⁶ Astrid Erll, ‘Travelling Memory’, *Parallax*, 17, 4 (2011), pp.4-18.

¹⁰⁷ Lucy Bond, Stef Craps and Pieter Vermeulen, ‘Introduction: Memory on the Move’, *Memory unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), pp.1-28 (p.1).

¹⁰⁸ Katrina Schlunke, ‘Memory and Materiality’, *Memory Studies*, 6, 3 (2013), pp.253-261 (p.253).

¹⁰⁹ NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p.201.

In examining continuations of aqueously mediated violence, exploring how ongoing forms of racialized violence bear the trace of Atlantic slavery and the Middle Passage, the ways in which this thesis conceives of the Plantationocene and the imbrications between water and memory builds on discussions of ecological haunting. Ruth Heholt and Niamh Downing advocate that 'haunting disrupts the nature/culture debate', and encourage us to reconsider 'what is natural and what is supernatural'.¹¹⁰ Jesse Oak Taylor also evokes notions of ecological haunting in his theorisation of the abnatural, which 'speaks to both nature's absence and its uncanny persistence.'¹¹¹ 'Abnatural ecology', explains Taylor, 'attempts to capture the experience of dwelling in a manufactured environment, wherein everything from the bloodstream to the weather bears the traces of human action.'¹¹² Conceiving of the Plantationocene as being an epoch in which we are haunted by histories of the Middle Passage brings to the forefront the ways in which water materially and figuratively informs our conceptualisation of the ghostly.

The Plantationocene and Time

The patterns of haunting, return and recuperation that permeate the narratives I draw on throughout this thesis also require engaging with the temporal aspects of the plantation and its legacies. Underlining capitalist attitudes around time, Karl Marx asserts that, 'The value of labour-power is determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labour-time necessary for the production'.¹¹³ Crucially, as Wynter reminds us, this 'factory model of exploitation' can be traced back to the plantation.¹¹⁴ Put otherwise, capitalism emerged out of the chattel slave system as plantation labour required machine-level production of black bodies which were treated as instruments for accumulating wealth. With black bodies rendered machinic, time was employed as an instrument for measuring their economic productivity. Colonial temporalities, as Wynter suggests, were structured in accordance with the market value of time, conceived of as a horizontal tool for measuring capitalist progression.

¹¹⁰ Ruth Heholt and Niamh Downing, *Haunted Landscapes: Super-Nature and the Environment* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2016), p.13.

¹¹¹ Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2016), p.5.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, 3 vols. (New York: Vintage, 1976), p.274.

¹¹⁴ Sylvia Wynter quoted in Nijah Cunningham, 'The Resistance of the Lost Body', *Small Axe*, 49 (2016), pp.113-128 (p.125).

Building on discussions that outline the temporal logics of racialization, Alia Al-Saji argues that normative conceptualisations of time are structured around linear timelines pointed towards white futurity and fuelled by ‘the essence of racism to forget the histories and operations of power, which constitute it’.¹¹⁵ Al-Saji argues that the racialization and colonization of time can be thought of in terms of how ‘While the dominant frame is that of white ‘civilizational’ history, the second frame positions colonized and racialized peoples as foils to this history, as swept up in it without contributing to it.’¹¹⁶ Drawing on the likes of Frantz Fanon and Charles W. Mills, Al-Saji summarizes, ‘Racism is ambivalent, relying on an epistemology of ignorance (Mills, 2007). As Fanon notes, ‘[t]he European knows and he does not know’ (*BSWM*, pp. 199/161).’¹¹⁷

Temporal violence - predicated on mnemonic erasures and a commitment to capitalist expansion – was integral to the plantation and continues to shape its afterlives. Much of the work of resisting the Plantationocene through narrative therefore lies in rupturing these linear, colonial timelines. As I will show, the literary, visual and sonic narratives that appear in this thesis are intertemporal; they materially and discursively conjure the intersections between past, present, and future. They encapsulate what McKittrick describes as black expressive cultures’ enforcement of ‘heretical (nonmarket) time’, reconfiguring plantocratic, anti-black temporalities which associate whiteness with futurity and blackness with mechanized nonbeing.¹¹⁸

Chapter One: ‘Carceral Ecologies: Incarceration and Hydrological Haunting in the Literature of Jesmyn Ward’

The first chapter of this thesis interrogates the Plantationocene through the lens of the carceral economy in relation to historical systems of racialized captivity. Recent trends in American activism have gone a long way in exposing the racism that underpins the nation’s penal system, and yet, the ecological violence imposed by mass incarceration is rarely acknowledged, despite how heavily toxic environments have shaped the carceral experience since the birth of the American prison system.¹¹⁹ In 2017, the Prison Ecology Project – a program of The Human Rights Defense Center – began campaigning against the extent to

¹¹⁵ Alia Al-Saji, ‘Too Late: Racialized Time and the Closure of the Past’, *Insights*, 6, 5 (2013), pp.1-13 (p.4).

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.6.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.4.

¹¹⁸ McKittrick, *Dear Science*, p.163.

¹¹⁹ For more see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

which public policy has failed to recognise the ‘intersections between mass incarceration and environmental degradation’, emphasizing the pollution produced by ‘overpopulated and under-regulated prisons’ and the toxic impact they have on surrounding water ways.¹²⁰ In this sense, water can be seen as a medium for reading the accumulative nature of environmental injustices, from slave ship to penitentiary. Turning to Jesmyn Ward’s most recent publication, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) – and framing it within the broader context of her literature, which evokes themes of race and confinement – I examine how her work summons ghosts, water and prisons in order to narrate the accumulation of carceral ecologies in the US South. This chapter will explore how, in invoking the history of Parchman Prison through the presence of a combination of ghosts and the lead protagonist’s grandfather, River, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* provides a lens through which we might begin developing a concept of hydrological haunting in relation to the intersections between prisons and environmental degradation, revealing the entanglements between human and aquatic histories, and how they bear on the present. As such, this chapter will merge pelagic and prison studies in its reading of Ward’s neo-Southern gothic, exploring the notion of water as ghost and encouraging new approaches to ongoing issues of environmental degradation and mass incarceration – which can be traced back to the slave ship and the plantation.

The first chapter of this thesis places environmental degradation, mass incarceration, and histories of the Middle Passage in conversation by illuminating how Ward’s writings help us to understand how they are all bound by racialized, water-related systems. In doing so, I grapple with the extent to which carceral systems of the past reappear in the present. This thesis does not provide a complete history of the water crises characteristic of American carceral systems from slave ship to penitentiary, but rather draws on existing (albeit scarce) research to explore how Ward’s literature helps us to conceptualise how the water management paradigms that characterise the modern prison system of the US are haunted by histories of the Middle Passage.

In this chapter, I suggest that Ward’s literature prompts us to consider what it means to be haunted by water. Not only does it speak to the notion that material residues of the Middle Passage flow through water – which continues to be weaponized in ongoing forms of racialized captivity – it also demonstrates the value of textually recording ghostly encounters with the element. While the ecologically mediated continuities of the plantation

¹²⁰ *Nationinside.Org* (2016) <<https://nationinside.org/campaign/prison-ecology/about/>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

are bolstered by silence, erasure, and opacity, representations of hydrological haunting in Ward's literature can be viewed as an exercise in writing the ghosts of the carceral continuum out of oblivion.

Chapter Two: Picturing the Plantationocene: Photography, Belonging and Material Witnessing in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina

Patterns of hydrological haunting persist in Chapter Two, but this time I engage with how we might apprehend them visually. Exploring representations of the house and belonging in Southern literature and photography, the second chapter of this thesis will examine how the aqueously mediated displacement of racialized people, that began during the Middle Passage, constellates into the storm-induced crises of homelessness that surfaced in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In this chapter, I draw on watermarked polaroids found and photographed by Stan Strembicki after the storm, as well as Sarah M. Brooms photo-text memoir, *The Yellow House* (2019), to explore how engaging with vernacular photography generates new methodologies for conceptualising the Plantationocene. While Anthropocene photography is usually characterised by expansive aerial shots ostensibly telling the story of the earth's surface through cutting-edge technology, I propose that personal photographs – sometimes captured on handheld, disposable cameras – are also narratives of the environment. Materially and discursively marked by water, the photographs I think with throughout this chapter record the intra-actions between the quotidian and the catastrophic, the domestic and the ecological. Challenging the agricultural definition of the Plantationocene offered by Tsing and Haraway, I propose that these intimate snapshots bear witness to the ecological legacies of the plantation in ways that testify to the epoch's racialized structures. Crucially, however, like Ward's literary practice, the radical possibilities of everyday image-making in the age of the Plantationocene lies in the ways in which it goes on to represent the ongoing presence of the past. As such, this chapter is equally as curious about the recuperative processes that characterise these photographic practices as it is with the ways in which they evidence the aqueously mediated violence of the Plantationocene.

Chapter Three: Plantationocene Acoustemologies: The Sonic Ecologies of Southern Rap

Having considered textual and photographic narratives of the Plantationocene, in Chapter Three, I commence an excursion into the sonic, listening out for the ways in which the ecologically mediated legacies of the plantation are rendered audible in Southern Rap music. Borrowing the term ‘acoustemolgy’ from Steven Feld – referring to the idea of acoustic epistemologies, and the process of gathering knowledge with and through sound – I offer the notion of Plantationocene Acoustemologies to describe how Southern Rap offers alternative ways of knowing how plantation structures ecologically persist. These sonic narratives of the environment further demonstrate the need to re-conceptualise the Plantationocene as a racialized system heavily reliant on the weaponization of water. In this chapter, I engage with the complex entanglements between water and Southern Rap, developing an eco-critical approach to the study of the waterlogged genre, and thereby demonstrating how it is part of what Joshua Schuster describes as the ‘sonic ecology of the South.’¹²¹

This chapter conceives of Southern Rap as a waterborne mode of sonic resistance to systems of ecologically mediated racialized violence. Throughout the chapter, I demonstrate how the genre builds on patterns of sonic refusal established during the Middle Passage. On the one hand, I trace how Bounce Music – a New Orleans style of Hip Hop – served as a form of social and environmental activism following Hurricane Katrina. This section sheds light on how, despite anxieties regarding the impact of the storm on the city’s rich musical soundscape, Bounce artists were among some of the first activists to attempt to rebuild New Orleans. As such, I consider the significance of resisting aqueously mediated violence with a musical style which preserves the oral traditions of Middle Passage sonics. Further exploring the ways in which Middle Passage mnemonics are manifest in the Southern Rap tradition, I turn to Rapsody’s third studio album ‘Eve’, abundant with liquid lyricism and references to those original crossings. Drawing on the work of Karen Barad and Christina Sharpe, I think about how ‘Eve’ bodies forth the material-discursive intra-actions between Southern Rap and water, thereby sonically rendering the notion of residence time. Therefore, this chapter proposes that Southern Rap is a vessel for hearing the convergence of plantation temporalities. These hip-hop epistemologies of the Plantationocene, like the literary and photographic artefacts I draw on in the preceding chapters, are haunted by the plantation’s watery origins. It is precisely through the expression of being haunted,

¹²¹ Joshua Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), p.88.

however, that Southern Rap is able to resist the patterns of erasure intrinsic to the plantation and its afterlives.

Conclusion: The Futurity of Plantationocene Narratives

Finally, in the concluding chapter, I reflect on what narratives of the Plantationocene have in common. Observing the ways in which watery mnemonics and patterns of recuperation permeate narratives of the Plantationocene I reflect on how these storytelling practices are used to resist the plantation and its legacies. In doing so, I propose that the waterlogged narratives that appear throughout this thesis perform crucial memory-work by memorialising ghosts of the plantation (and its afterlives) hydrologically. These textual, visual, and sonic forms not only offer ecological epistemologies that remind us of the ways in which water is haunted by plantation pasts, but also generate new modes of Plantationocene activism.

Thinking about the impact of digital advancements and technological accessibility on vernacular narratives of the Plantationocene, this thesis ends with a reading of ‘Women of Cancer Alley’, a collection of short-films made by women who live along what is known as the chemical corridor situated next to the Mississippi River in south Louisiana. Cancer Alley – or, the chemical corridor – is the name given to an 85-mile stretch of land between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, burdened with more than 150 petrochemical plants and refineries. For the predominantly African American communities that reside in these river parishes, deadly pollution and chemical warfare are a part of everyday life, with the chemical corridor producing the highest rates of cancer caused by air-pollution in the United States. Cancer Alley provides site-specific evidence for the racialized, ecologically mediated legacies of the plantation. I turn to ‘Women of Cancer Alley’ for the ways in which the online collection of films serves as a form of activism against these conditions. This discussion will merge digital memory studies with ecocriticism to help us understand the ways in which the films intra-act with water (which, as I show, is a memorial substance). In doing so, I explore how, in merging technology with ecological memory work, these digital stories of the Mississippi transmit traces of the past whilst also signalling the futurity of Plantationocene narratives.

Carceral Ecologies: Incarceration and Hydrological Haunting in the literature of Jesmyn Ward

‘The first language the keepers of the hold use on the captives is the language of violence: the language of thirst and hunger and sore and heat, the language of the gun and the gun butt, the foot and the fist, the knife and the throwing overboard.
And in the hold, mouths open, say, thirsty.’

*Christina Sharpe, In The Wake: On Blackness and Being (2016)*¹²²

“You thirsty?” I ask.
“Yeah,” she whispers.

Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing (2017)*¹²³

Parchman Prison, a sweltering southern landscape, and characters perpetually wrestling with their own thirst: these are some of the defining elements of Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing (2017)*, a neo-gothic odyssey into the barren heart of the Mississippi State Penitentiary. ‘I swallow and my throat seems to catch like Velcro’, says thirteen-year-old Jojo, the novel’s lead protagonist whose incarcerated father’s release date prompts the road trip.¹²⁴ ‘I think’, he continues, ‘I know what the parched man felt.’¹²⁵ Jojo’s etymological interpretation of Parchman might easily be dismissed as a moment of humour – a reminder of the child narrator’s age – but his statement is significant insofar as water deprivation and contamination is an underlying issue at the Mississippi State Penitentiary. Following a 2019 state inspection that exposed an array of environmental health issues festering within the prison, activists took to the Rankin County courthouse in protest. Malaika Canada implored attendees at the rally to ‘[i]magine [...] being dehydrated for days, afraid to drink water that’s brown and smells like sewage within pipes filled with rust and mould.’¹²⁶ That the characters comprising *Sing, Unburied, Sing* develop an insuppressible desire for water the closer they get to the penitentiary, teaches Jojo that to fall into the grip of Parchman is to understand what it means to be thirsty.

¹²² Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), p.70.

¹²³ Jesmyn Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (London: Bloomsbury Circus, 2017), p.19.

¹²⁴ Ibid, p.64.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Malaika Canada quoted in Michelle Liu, *No water, no lights and broken toilets: Parchman health inspection uncovers hundreds of problems, many repeat violations (2019)* <<https://mississippitoday.org/2019/08/05/no-water-no-lights-and-broken-toilets-parchman-health-inspection-uncovers-hundreds-of-problems-many-repeat-violations/>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

‘Sometimes I wonder who that parched man was, that man dying for water, that they named the town and jail after’, says Jojo. ‘Wonder if he looked like Pop, straight up and down, brown skin tinged with red, or me, an in-between color, or Michael, the color of milk. Wonder what that man said before he died of a cracked throat.’¹²⁷ In the July of 2019, almost two years after the publication of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, a video obtained by the Prison Reform Movement went viral on social media for its exposure of water standards in Parchman Prison, affirming the carceral ecologies imagined by Jojo throughout the novel. ‘We are dealing with a serious crisis here’, an inmate can be heard saying as the camera remains fixed on a bottle of dull, brown water taken from faucets that prisoners are forced to drink from.¹²⁸ Weeks later, Bryan Shaver – then a religious volunteer at Parchman – received information that issues with plumbing persisted in Unit 29. Shaver reported these concerns to the appropriate authorities and had his access to the prison revoked the next day. Such examples were not the first occasions that accounts of the relationship between water and Parchman Prison had surfaced. For instance, in 2015, reports emerged about ‘Parchman’s Unit 29, where 1,412 inmates [were] without drinking water from their sinks’ for several days.¹²⁹ In the scorching heat of midsummer Mississippi – in a facility without air conditioning – inmates were incarcerated in cells without functioning water supplies. The director of the MacArthur Justice Center in Jackson referred to it as ‘a dangerous situation exacerbated by the fact that it’s hot as hell’.¹³⁰ These are not isolated incidents. In more than twenty US states, reports identified the presence of arsenic, lead, and other toxic substances in the waterways of prisons where ‘inmates – including pregnant women – were forced to drink toxic water while prison guards drank filtered water’.¹³¹

Recent trends in American activism have gone a long way in exposing the institutionalised racism that underpins the nation’s penal system, but the relationship between mass incarceration and ecological violence remains relatively concealed. In this chapter, I demonstrate how Ward’s work serves as a beacon for these kinds of discussions.

¹²⁷ Ward, p.63.

¹²⁸ Prison Reform Movement Movement, (2019). Water from the faucets at Parchman state prison in Mississippi. [video] Available at: https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=PrisonReformMovement%20parchman%20water&epa=SEARCH_BOX [Accessed 11 Dec. 2019].

¹²⁹ Jerry Mitchell, *Well woes leaves Parchman inmates without water* (2019) < <https://eu.clarionledger.com/story/news/2015/07/22/woes-leaves-parchman-inmates-without-water/30543441/>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

¹³⁰ Cliff Johnson quoted in *ibid*.

¹³¹ David N. Pellow, ‘Environmental Inequalities and the U.S. Prison System: An Urgent Research Agenda’, *International Journal of Earth and Environmental Sciences*, 2, 140 (2017) << <https://doi.org/10.15344/2456-351X/2017/140>>> [accessed 12th December 2020].

More specifically, I draw on *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and how it prompts us to engage with the ways in which water is imbricated in the carceral continuum from slavery to mass incarceration. Diana Leong argues that ‘slave ships thrived on an ecology of thirst’ – as in, ‘a set of relations in which humanity is measured through one’s relationship to water’, with the substance functioning as ‘threshold between slave and non-slave [...] as the slave’s impossibility of relating to water as “sustenance” bars her from the status of the human.’¹³² Land-based prisons of today still pivot around this set of relations. The ongoing control and weaponization of water forms what I refer to as carceral ecologies, which can be traced back to the Middle Passage.

My engagement with carceral ecologies is guided not by scientific data – of which, unsurprisingly, there is not much – but black storytelling practices. In her most recent book, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (2021) Katherine McKittrick advocates for methodological practices wherein we think ‘analytics as story’, and story as analytics, considering the ways in which black narratives ‘reinvent the terms and stakes of knowledge’.¹³³ Likewise, I turn to Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* to better understand the intersections between prisons and ecological violence. I examine how the novel summons ghosts, water and prisons in order to narrate the trajectory of carceral ecologies in the US South. In doing so, the following analysis will examine how, by invoking the history of Parchman Prison through Middle Passage symbolism, ghosts and the lead protagonist’s grandfather, River, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* provides a lens through which we might begin developing a concept of hydrological haunting in relation to the intersections between prisons and ecological violence, revealing the entanglements between human and aquatic histories, and how they bear on the present.

Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis develop the notion of ‘aqueous ecopolitics’ by illuminating how, ‘If we think of the political as the practice of speaking and acting together on matters of common concern, then water may be the most exemplary of political substances’ because we ‘all have water in common’.¹³⁴ Further, ‘given water’s capacity to connect and combine, thinking the political with water might help us bring

¹³² Diana Leong, ‘The Salt Bones: *Zong!* and an Ecology of Thirst’, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 23 (2017), pp. 798-820. (p.805).

¹³³ Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (London: Duke University Press, 2021), p.12, p.186.

¹³⁴ Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod and Astrida Neimanis, *Thinking with Water* (London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2013), p.6.

together issues and concerns too often addressed in isolation'.¹³⁵ In developing the concept of hydrological haunting as a means for understanding the watery politics of mass incarceration, I excavate how the crisis of water scarcity and contamination within Parchman Prison is embroiled in deeper issues of racial injustice that can be traced back to Atlantic slavery. This exploration will bring together critical discussions regarding the cultural significance of water in relation to slavery and more materially oriented theories, in order to highlight how water is a substance that is figuratively and materially haunted, as well as being the medium of historical (and on-going) violence.

In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), Avery F. Gordon writes:

slavery has ended, but something of it continues to live on, in the social geography of where peoples reside, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contractor formation we call New World modernity, propelling, as it always has, a something to be done. Such endings that are not over is what haunting is about.¹³⁶

Gordon's work on haunting belongs to what many critics have referred to as the spectral turn, set in motion by Jacques Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* (1993). It is within this seminal text that Derrida coins the concept of hauntology, which entails an ethics of haunting by recognising the importance of remaining attentive to injustices of the past, present and future. He writes:

It is necessary to speak *of the* ghost, indeed *to the* ghost and *with* it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable *and just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born.¹³⁷

Hauntological ethics underpin much of Ward's work. Her memoir, *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* (2013), is essentially about – to use Derrida's term – learning to 'live with [the] ghosts' of five men, friends and family, whose deaths were inextricably linked to endemic issues of poverty and racism.¹³⁸ Just as Derrida posits the importance of acknowledging the presence of ghosts – or, social injustices, even when victims are not present in the corporeal

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.139.

¹³⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London: Routledge, 2012), xvii.

¹³⁸ Ibid, p.xviii.

form – at the end of a chapter eulogizing the life of her brother, Ward declares, ‘I write these words to find Joshua, to assert that what happened *happened*.¹³⁹

In this chapter, I take a decidedly ecological approach to the study of the ghostly, emphasizing how haunting is often ecologically mediated through imbrications between humans and the so-called natural environment. Gordon writes that ‘the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place’, and although Gordon argues that the ghost is ‘a social figure’, I want to explore the notion that water functions as both figurative and material indicator that the present is haunted.¹⁴⁰ Ruth Heholt and Niamh Downing highlight that the very notion of haunting disturbs nature/culture divides by blurring the distinctions between the natural and supernatural, but their focus lies on haunting and terrestrial spaces, with little attention paid to the role of water in this process. Nonetheless, through maritime and aquatic spaces we are able to develop a methodology for haunting. Just as Heholt and Downing remind us that ‘haunting is not static’ because, to quote Astrid Erll, ‘the past [...] must [...] continually be reconstructed and re-presented’, in keeping with the operations of memory, water is boundaryless, cyclical, and – though it undergoes many incarnations – always flowing in motion.^{141 142} Further, if, like Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis, we recognise the political nature of water, then an aqueous approach to the ghostly gives rise to recognising haunting as a biopolitical phenomenon. In other words, we can begin to think about the ways in which the water management paradigms of the carceral economy, haunted by histories of the Middle Passage, are used to control and regulate black life. This exploration will therefore bring together critical discussions regarding the cultural significance of water in relation to slavery and more materially oriented theories in order to highlight how water is a substance that is figuratively and materially haunted, as well as being the medium of historical (and on-going) violence.

The overwhelming planetary scale of the Plantationocene risks obscuring how its affects are experienced by ordinary people, but by shedding light on community concerns – like the carceral economy – Ward’s writings prompt us to think about the Plantationocene at a local level by illuminating the issues through which it reveals itself. Water management

¹³⁹ Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped: A Memoir* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), p.249.

¹⁴⁰ Gordon, p.8.

¹⁴¹ Heholt and Downing, p.14.

¹⁴² Astrid Erll, ‘Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction’ in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* ed. by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp.1-15 (p.1).

and distribution is crucial to the carceral economy – which, as I will outline, borrows some of its defining principles from the plantation and its oceanic, Middle Passage origins. Ward’s writings recuperate Middle Passage memories of water and captivity in relation to the carceral economy, recording the ways in which the aqueously mediated legacies of slavery are experienced by African Americans. As such, Ward’s literature illuminates the need to reimagine the terrestrial bias of existing theories of the Plantationocene which offer an agricultural view of the plantation and its afterlives without attending its racialized structures or how they are manifest in everyday life.

The first section of this discussion, ‘Water, Prisons and the Plantationocene: From the Middle Passage to Mass Incarceration’, seeks to (re)frame mass incarceration as an environmental justice issue in which water is frequently weaponized and compromised. How does hydrological haunting contribute to our understanding of the Plantationocene, which, as I will outline in greater depth later on, was produced by (and continues to be dependent on) forms of captivity and labour for the purpose of profit and power at the expense of the racialized poor? ‘Watery Biopolitics: Amphibious Lives and Carceral Ecologies in *Where the Line Bleeds* and *Salvage the Bones*’ investigates how Ward’s earliest writings call attention to the ways in which racialized bodies are rendered vulnerable to waterborne violence. In this section, I seek to demonstrate how carceral ecologies are awash both within and beyond the penitentiary. Having established the biopoliticization of water, particularly in relation to the punitive politics of the South, ‘Watery Graveyards: Ecologies of Grief in *Men We Reaped*’ will advance the notion of hydrological haunting by exploring the mnemonic properties of water, and how as a memorial substance – in both figurative and material terms – water subverts the amnesiac aims of white supremacy (which seeks to obliterate the value of black life). Next, in ‘The Aqueous Uncanny: Mass incarceration and Memories of the Middle Passage’, I turn to the ways in which *Sing, Unburied, Sing* evokes memories of the Middle Passage, generating parallels between those violent voyages across the Atlantic and the water management paradigms of the prison industrial complex, resulting in what I refer to as the aqueous uncanny. Finally, I conclude by exploring how Ward’s literature might be used to inform our understanding of the role of literature in the age of the Plantationocene.

Water, Prisons and The Plantationocene: From the Middle Passage to Mass Incarceration

Critical discussions of incarceration are usually dominated by Foucauldian versions of prison history. Since its publication, Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) has served as touchstone for knowledge of Western carceral models, tracing the transition from spectacles of punishment to the modern prison system, a disciplinary apparatus built on surveillance and seclusion.¹⁴³ Patently absent in Foucauldian conceptualisations of incarceration, however, is an acknowledgement of the carceral infrastructures of colonialism and slavery. As Dennis Childs highlights, the Middle Passage formed the basis of America's carceral model, and while this is largely recognised as a capitalist system of racialized captivity, the conjunctures between water and incarceration are rarely acknowledged. In *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary* (2015), Childs writes, 'for the African and those of African descent, the modern prison did not begin with Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, the Walnut Street Jail, or the Auburn System, but with the coffles, barracoons, slave ships, and slave "pens" of the Middle Passage.'¹⁴⁴ Childs argues that the carceral model of the Middle Passage to inform land-based prisons in the age of mass incarceration. His work draws on Dylan Rodríguez's assertion that:

A genealogy of the contemporary prison regime awakens both the historical memory and the socio-political logic of the Middle Passage. The prison has come to form a hauntingly similar spatial and temporal continuum between social and biological notions of life and death, banal liberal civic freedom and totalizing unfreedom, community and alienation, agency and liquidation, the "human" and the subhuman/nonhuman. In a reconstruction of the Middle Passage's constitutive logic, the reinvented prison regime is articulating and self-valorizing a commitment to efficient and effective bodily immobilization within the mass-based ontological subjection of human beings.¹⁴⁵

The first chapter of this thesis moves beyond discussions of the spatial synergies between penitentiaries and the slave ship, and towards an understanding of the aqueous violence that underscores America's racialized penal infrastructures, from the Middle Passage to the modern prison system. Water-based prisons of the Middle Passage were fortified by what Leong describes as an ecology of thirst, and so it is uncanny, then, that issues of water scarcity and contamination are abundant in the land-based prisons of America today (which disproportionately incarcerate African Americans). As I will explore in greater depth later on, water continues to be central to America's carceral economy.

¹⁴³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), p.233.

¹⁴⁴ Dennis Childs, *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p.29.

¹⁴⁵ Dylan Rodríguez, 'Forced Passages', in *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy* ed. by Joy James (London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp.35-57 (p.48).

A 2017 report by *Earth Island Journal* called for a recognition of ‘the connections between mass incarceration and environmental issues, that is problems that arise when prisons are sited on or near toxic sites as well as when prisons themselves becomes sources of toxic contamination.’¹⁴⁶ They identify crises of unsafe, contaminated drinking water as one of the most pernicious environmental health implications that inmates are subjected to in an age of mass incarceration. Subjected to soaring temperatures and lack of air conditioning, inmates at the Wallace Pack Unit in 2017, for instance, were advised by The Texas Department of Criminal Justice to drink up to two gallons of water per day to alleviate the extreme heat. ‘There was just one problem’, write Candice Bernd, Zoe Loftus-Farren, and Maureen Nandini Mitra, ‘The water at the Unit contained between two-and-a-half to four-and-a-half times the level of arsenic permitted by the EPA. Arsenic is a carcinogen. The prisoners drank thousands of gallons of the arsenic-tainted water for more than 10 years before a federal judge ordered TDCJ to truck in clean water.’¹⁴⁷ The issue of toxic water is widespread in American prisons. ‘In fact, according to the EPA’s enforcement database,’ writes Bernd et al, ‘federal and state agencies brought 1,149 informal actions and 78 formal actions against regulated prisons, jails, and detention centers during the past five years under the Safe Drinking Water Act, more than under any other federal environmental law.’¹⁴⁸

The carceral economy, therefore, ought to be understood in relation to issues of environmental racism and injustice. The environmental justice movement gained leverage in the 1980s following the Warren County protests in North Carolina against the placement of a toxic disposal site in a predominantly African American area. In the words of Robert D. Bullard, often credited as the father of the movement, ‘[c]ommunities consisting primarily of people of color continue to bear a disproportionate burden of this nation’s air, water, and waste problems.’¹⁴⁹ Such disparities are referred to by environmental justice activists as examples of ‘environmental racism’, a term that has since been utilised by cultural theorists like Dorceta Taylor, Beverly Wright, Sylvia Hood Washington to highlight the intersections between racial and environmental violence. The issues environmental justice

¹⁴⁶ Candice Bernd, Zoe Loftus-Farren, and Maureen Nandini Mitra, ‘America’s Toxic Prisons’, *Earthisland.Org*, 2017 <<https://earthisland.org/journal/americas-toxic-prisons/>> [Accessed 18 November 2020].

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Robert D. Bullard, ‘The Threat of Environmental Racism’, *Natural Resources & Environment*, 7, 3 (1993), pp.23-26 (p.23).

activists address (such as the ways in which it is often minority communities that are subjected to toxic industrial plants and lack of sanitized water), are examples of what Rob Nixon terms ‘slow violence’ – as in, the ways in which the (often racialized) poor are put through ‘violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space’ and therefore rarely acknowledged as violence at all.¹⁵⁰ Mass incarceration, too, can be viewed within this context, but the ways in which the penal system enables aqueous slow violence is critically underexplored.

The end of the Civil War in 1865 marked the birth of a new system in which African Americans were routinely arrested for vagrancy, petty theft, and violating sharecropping arrangements, placing them within a new system of captivity in the form of ‘settlements or camps operated by private companies which leased state convicts’.¹⁵¹ In *“Worse than slavery”*: *Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (1997), David M. Oshinsky chronicles how the 20,000-acre plantation facilitated a post-Reconstruction drive to continue to substitute slaves with convicts. Exploiting the ‘rich cotton land of the Yazoo Delta’, and the population (which has, since its conception, been predominantly black) that were forced to occupy it, Parchman Farm came to function as ‘a labor-intensive plantation’, evidencing the ways in which the criminalisation of African Americans was used for the purpose of economic profit.¹⁵² Ward nods to the entanglements between incarceration and labour in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* through River’s memories of the penitentiary: ‘*I’d worked, but never like that*’, he recalls, ‘*Never sunup to sundown in no cotton field. Never in that kind of heat. It’s different up there. The heat. Ain’t no water to catch the wind and cool you off, so the heat settles and bakes.*’¹⁵³

US prisons continue to generate significant income for private companies. According to Pete Wagner and Bernadette Rabuy, in 2017, ‘[p]rivate prison corporations reported revenues of nearly \$4 billion’.¹⁵⁴ A report published by Worth Rises – a non-profit organisation tackling the ways in which mass incarceration has been used to ‘extract wealth and resources from the economically-distressed, and disproportionately black and brown, communities unjustly targeted by [the] criminal legal system’ – exposes more than 3000

¹⁵⁰ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p.2.

¹⁵¹ Christopher R. Adamson, ‘Punishment After Slavery: Southern State Penal Systems, 1865-1890’, *Social Problems*, Vol.30, No.5, June (1983), pp.555-569 (p.555).

¹⁵² David M. Oshinsky, *“Worse than slavery”*: *Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p.1, 225.

¹⁵³ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.22.

¹⁵⁴ Equal Justice Initiative, *Prison Conditions* (2020) <<https://eji.org/issues/prison-conditions/>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

corporations benefiting from the prison industry.¹⁵⁵ They assert that mass incarceration is an ‘\$80 billion industry’, reaping lucrative rewards based on the services and infrastructure involved in the commodification of nearly 25% of the world’s incarcerated population.¹⁵⁶

Racial inequalities in the US have a long history of being bolstered by the exploitation of the natural environment, which can be traced back to the nation’s colonial past and plantation slavery. The slow violence of water scarcity and contamination inflicted on an already racialized prison system illuminates the enduring grip of white supremacy and its longstanding co-option of the environment. What weight, then, do the intersections between carceral ecologies and economies bear in relation to our understanding of the Plantationocene? While Donna Haraway et al. coined the term in order to name the long-term, planetary consequences of the plantation that occurred as a result of ‘the rapid displacement and reformulation of germ plasm, genomes, cuttings, and all other names and forms of part organisms and of deracinated plants, animals, and people’, the carceral ecologies of the US prison system require us to think granularly about how the legacies of the plantation are experienced differentially.¹⁵⁷ In an essay entitled ‘Plantation Legacies’, Sophie Sapp Moore, Monique Allewaert, Pablo F. Gomez and Gregg Mitman write:

Invoking the Plantationocene in this way is at once a provocation and a reflection meant to challenge the species-level thinking of the Anthropocene. It helps to make visible power relations and economic, environmental, and social inequalities that have made ways of being in a world undergoing rapid climate change, accelerated species extinction, and growing wealth disparity more precarious for some human and nonhuman beings than others.¹⁵⁸

Bearing witness to the entanglements between the carceral economy and environmental degradation helps us to demystify the Plantationocene and its racialized operations. Further, just as the effects of plantation slavery could not be contained within the temporal or geographic borders of antebellum history, carceral ecologies cannot be contained within prison walls. The intersections between water and mass incarceration are thus replete with ‘layers of history and legacies of plantation capitalism that persist’ and continue to ecologically harm racialized people.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Worth Rises, *Capitalizing on Justice* (2019) <<https://worthrises.org/capitalizingonjustice>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p.162.

¹⁵⁸ Monique Allewaert, Sophie Sapp Moore, Pablo F. Gómez and Gregg Mitman, *Plantation Legacies* (2019) <<https://edgeeffects.net/plantation-legacies-plantationocene/>> [accessed 1 December 2019].

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

In developing the concept of hydrological haunting as a means for understanding the watery politics of incarceration, I excavate how crises of water scarcity and contamination in Parchman Prison are embroiled in ecological histories of racialized violence that can be traced back to Atlantic slavery. This chapter places environmental degradation, mass incarceration, and histories of the Middle Passage in conversation by illuminating how Ward's writings help us to understand how they are all bound by interconnected racialized, water-related systems. While I do not provide a complete history of the water crises characteristic of American carceral systems from slave ship to penitentiary, I draw on existing (albeit scarce) research to explore how Ward's literature helps us to conceptualise how the water management paradigms that characterise the modern prison system of the US are haunted by histories of the Middle Passage. These patterns of water shed new light on the Plantationocene, challenging the terrestrial focus of existing theories and clarifying the ways in which historical systems of racialized captivity ecologically reappear in the present.

It is important to note that to be haunted in this regard is not to experience a replica of the past. Michelle Alexander famously described mass incarceration as being the new Jim Crow, but analogies such as these – that seamlessly conflate the past and present in relation to racialized systems of control – have been met with criticism.¹⁶⁰ For example, in *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and The Rise of the Neoliberal State* (2016), Jordan T. Camp argues that 'the new Jim Crow analogy falls short as a theory of the historically specific articulation of racialization and criminalization in the present moment'.¹⁶¹ Camp argues that rather than being a linear continuation of Jim Crow order, 'prison expansion in this period has been the political expression of neoliberal racial and security regimes. Such regimes [...] are the outgrowth of a long counterinsurgency against the Black freedom, labor, and socialist alliance that took shape in the struggling to abolish Jim Crow racial regimes.'¹⁶² Mass incarceration is, Camp posits, a product of the 'neoliberal carceral state' which feeds on 'Structural unemployment, concentrated urban poverty, homelessness' and large prison populations.¹⁶³ In looking at the ways in which Ward's writings are haunted, I

¹⁶⁰ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

¹⁶¹ Jordan T. Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and The Rise of the Neoliberal State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), p.8.

¹⁶² Ibid, p.5.

¹⁶³ Ibid, p.3.

am not suggesting that they overlook the economic complexities of contemporary black life. Indeed, as Anna Hartnell reminds us, Ward's texts shed light on 'a globalized, neoliberal economy that brands large numbers of US citizens "disposable."'164 Yet, in Ward's works which are so rooted in the economic realities of the present, we also find the imprint of the past. In what follows I draw on patterns on hydrological haunting that appear in Ward's writings, connecting the land-based prisons of today to the water-based prisons of the past, and in doing so, I demonstrate how events and systems that are seemingly enclosed are actually subsumed in longer histories of structural violence. As Ashon Crawley writes, 'The state wants for these various modes of violence to seem ephemeral, to seemingly be stable and fully contained in each enactment, wholly unrelated to any other act.'165 In Crawley's words:

We know [...] that the current Prison Industrial Complex of the United States is but one iteration of the same old white supremacist capitalist patriarchal ordering of the western world. As old as 1492, though we know that date is spurious at best.[...] This ordering, which we may simply call western civilization, needs for us to think incarceration is distinct from sexism is distinct from homophobia is distinct from racism. It needs for us to think that these varied problematics are grounded in the individual who either receives or is refused rights, rather than the problematics emerging from within a system of inequities that are institutionally enforced. It needs these various strains of problematics to remain ephemeral.166

In textually registering the ghostly resonances of water that tether the contemporary neoliberal carceral state to older histories of plantation capitalism, Ward's writings rupture this ephemerality and destabilize the illusion that the carceral past, present, and future are entirely discrete and disconnected.

Watery Biopolitics: Amphibious Lives and Carceral Ecologies in *Where the Line Bleeds* and *Salvage the Bones*

The hydrological components of mass incarceration, such as water deprivation and contamination, emerge as a result of the carceral praxis of privileging profit over both

¹⁶⁴ Anna Hartnell, 'When Cars Become Churches: Jesmyn Ward's Disenchanted America. An Interview', *Journal of American Studies*, 50,1 (2016), pp.205-218 (p.205).

¹⁶⁵ Ashon Crawley, 'Otherwise, Ferguson', *Interfictions Online: A Journal of Interstitial Arts*, October 2016 << <http://interfictions.com/otherwise-fergusonashon-crawley/>>> [accessed 4th May 2023].

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

racialized people and the natural environment, a bias that lingers in the wake of plantation capitalism. Recognising this in conjunction with our biological dependency on water reveals the biopolitics of the carceral economy. In other words, the carceral economy, built on a damaged ecology, is sustained by the control of racialized bodies and a degraded environment. Within this rubric within, water is a particularly weaponized substance given that it is an element essential to the sustenance of human life. The relationship between water contamination in overcrowded prisons along with accelerated rates of illness, expose the ethical negligence at the heart of the carceral economy, with monetary gain prioritised over inmates' health. In this way, water is co-opted in the mission of controlling the population in the interest of capitalist expansion, with little regard for how this might impact inmates or the natural environment. Viewing the carceral ecologies of the prison system through a biopolitical lens helps us to imagine how, in an age of mass incarceration, the human and aqueous are embroiled in mutually contaminating exchanges which are always interconnected with societal modes of racialized capitalism.

Early on in *Salvage the Bones*, Ward stages a short exchange indicative of the community's despondency regarding the role of the media in relation to the criminal justice system. 'News don't know what they talking about', says Manny in *Salvage the Bones*. 'Everytime somebody in Bois Sauvage get arrested, they always get the story wrong', he continues.¹⁶⁷ Here, Manny nods towards the extent to which the criminalisation of African American communities is bolstered by narratives circulated by the mainstream media. As such, throughout the course of the novel, the characters highlight alternative ways of knowing that subvert what Dennis Childs describes as the 'culturally and legally crafted' myth of the "soulless" character of the captive "Negro".¹⁶⁸ In tracing how this myth underpins the American carceral model, from plantation to penitentiary, Childs cites Angela Davis' paper 'Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition':

If, as Foucault suggests, the locus of the new European mode of punishment shifted from the body to the soul, black slaves in the US were largely perceived as lacking a soul that might be shaped and transformed by punishment. *Within the institution of slavery, itself a form of incarceration*, racialized forms of punishment developed alongside the emergence of the prison system within and as a negative affirmation of the "free world" [...]. As white men acquired the privilege to be punished in ways that acknowledged their equality and the racialized universality of liberty, the punishment of black slaves was corporeal, concrete and particular.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), p.6.

¹⁶⁸ Childs, p.1.

¹⁶⁹ Angela Davis quoted in *ibid.*

The American Prison Industrial Complex is an ongoing racial caste system, disproportionately impacting African Americans, inflicting corporeal suffering on black bodies which are rendered punishable (both within and beyond the physical penitentiaries) by the state. As Alexander G. Weheliye reminds us, “The Latin phrase *habeas corpus* means “You shall have the body,” and a writ thereof requires the government to present prisoners before a judge so as to provide a lawful justification for their continued imprisonment’.¹⁷⁰ The politics and procedures that underpin the prison system always revolve around the possession of flesh. ‘The writ of habeas corpus – and the law more generally – anoints those individualized subjects who are deemed deserving with bodies even while this assemblage continually enlists new and/or different groups to exclude, banish, or exterminate from the world of man’, writes Weheliye.¹⁷¹ As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, Weheliye conceives of racializing assemblages as a group of sociopolitical processes that organise people into categories of human and less-than-human, paying attention to how these processes are enmeshed into flesh. In doing so, he illuminates ‘the role of the U.S. juridical apparatus [...] in the formation of racializing assemblages by equating the human, on the one hand, with property and ownership, and, on the other hand, with a legal status that can be granted and annulled by the court.’¹⁷² This chapter engages with the role of water in juridical racializing assemblages by attending to the ways in which Ward’s literature exposes the porosity between black people and bodies of water. Turning to Ward’s earliest novels, *Where the Line Bleeds* and *Salvage the Bones*, I analyze how– although not explicitly about the carceral economy – they foreground notions regarding the watery biopolitics that underpin mass incarceration. Both novels contain moments that are suggestive of the ways in which water has been, and continues to be, used punitively to penalize, harm and control black people. In evoking these carceral ecologies, both texts form counter narratives to accounts of the modern, ethical prison which exchanges corporeal punishment with methods for spiritual reform. ‘Bodies’, as Esch puts it, ‘tell stories’.¹⁷³

Ward is upheld as one of the most significant post-Katrina authors, and her work is therefore regularly examined for the ways in which it exposes Southern biopolitics, because, as Henry A. Giroux reminds us:

¹⁷⁰ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), p.77.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid, p.73.

¹⁷³ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, p.83.

Katrina revealed a biopolitics in which the societal contract has become obsolete and democratic governance dysfunctional. It also made visible many of the social mechanisms that render some populations disposable, spatially fixed, and caught in a liminal space of uncertainty that not only limits choices but prioritizes for such groups the power of death over life itself.¹⁷⁴

While little criticism exists on *Where the Line Bleeds*, critical readings of *Salvage the Bones* have investigated how the novel portrays the biopolitics of race and disaster in the post-plantation south. Holly Cade Brown says that the novel ‘can be read through the concept of Giorgio Agamben’s “bare life” in order to explore the complexities of representing bodies that have been stripped of their political significance’ and rendered disposable ‘in the wake of Hurricane Katrina’.¹⁷⁵ Drawing on Agamben’s notion of the Western ‘Anthropological Machine’, which sketched stark divisions between the human and animal (with anyone who did not fit the white, heteronormative model of the human falling into the latter category), Brown argues that structurally oppressed peoples ‘have been seen to retain their animality in human form and are accordingly examples of bare life’.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, Christopher Lloyd builds on Patricia Yaeger’s notion of throwaway bodies – ‘the disposable bodies denied by white culture’ – emphasizing how they are rendered creaturely, exploring how ‘the biopoliticization of southern life, particularly after Katrina, evinces a kind of creatureliness that is literalized in the connections between humans and animals’ as expressed in *Salvage the Bones*.¹⁷⁷ In the words of Rick Crownshaw, ‘Not only bestial, these characters are also increasingly indistinguishable from the surrounding detritus of poverty and post-hurricane ruination, and from the environment more generally’.¹⁷⁸ Building on these interpretations, I explore the biopolitics of Ward’s works in relation to the punitive politics of the region. There is, I believe, still more work to be done in terms of exposing the biopolitical representations of water and the abundance of amphibian motifs throughout Ward’s literature. I do so in the interest of exploring what they reveal about the ways in which water is used to impair and govern racialized bodies who live in intimate relation with bodies of water.

¹⁷⁴ Henry A. Giroux, *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p.30.

¹⁷⁵ Holly Cade Brown, ‘Figuring Giorgio Agamben’s “Bare Life” in the Post-Katrina Works of Jesmyn Ward and Kara Walker’, *Journal of American Studies*, 51, (2017) pp.1-19 (p.1).

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p.5.

¹⁷⁷ Christopher Lloyd, ‘Creaturely, Throwaway Life after Katrina: *Salvage the Bones* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*’, *South: A Scholarly Journal*, 48, (2016) pp.246-264 (p.246).

¹⁷⁸ Rick Crownshaw, ‘A Natural History of Testimony?’, in *The Future of Testimony: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Witnessing* ed. by Jane Kilby and Antony Rowland (London: Routledge, 2014), pp.160-176 (p.160).

Ward's literary representations of the body textualize the biopolitics of water and help us to understand them in relation to racial caste systems, like the carceral economy. *Where the Line Bleeds* is a southern Bildungsroman, chronicling the story of twin brothers, Joshua and Christophe, entering adulthood the summer after their high school graduation. Born and raised in Bois Sauvage, a town riddled with income deprivation and addiction, Joshua and Christophe find themselves at a crucial junction when Joshua receives an offer for a job that both he and Christophe applied for. Joshua begins labouring at the pier in order to generate a small income, while Christophe (with little alternative) becomes embroiled in the town's illegal drug business. Here, Ward nods to the legacies of America's War on Drugs which has meant, to quote Michelle Alexander, that 'In less than thirty years, the U.S. penal population exploded from around 300,000 to more than 2 million, with drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase.'¹⁷⁹ Arrests and convictions are predominantly targeted at minority demographics. As Alexander writes, 'No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities [...] In Washington, D.C., our nation's capitol, it is estimated that three out of four young black men and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods can expect to serve time in prison. Similar rates of incarceration can be found in black communities across America.'¹⁸⁰ It is significant that Ward elicits this context alongside a textual focus on the natural environment, particularly the aquatic. In this way, we are encouraged to think about notions of incarceration in relation to bodies of water. *Where the Line Bleeds* is replete with references to water, which is represented as an element of industrial, biological and social significance. The same can be said of *Salvage the Bones*, set in the Mississippi bayou and centred around Esch, the novel's teenage protagonist, in the days surrounding Hurricane Katrina. In *Salvage the Bones*, hurricanes collide with memories of water scarcity and toxicity as Esch recalls her mother's experience of Hurricane Camille. 'She said she and Mother Lizbeth walked miles for water from an artesian well', says Esch, 'She said she got sick, and most everybody did, because even the water wasn't clean, and she had dreamed that she could never get away from water because she couldn't stop shitting it or pissing it or throwing it up.'¹⁸¹ Investigating the watery biopolitics of *Where the Line Bleeds* and *Salvage the Bones*, I explore how the characters' vulnerability to waterborne violence is illustrated through a sensitivity to water and blood.

¹⁷⁹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010), p.6.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, p.218.

Trans-corporeal conjunctures between black people and fish are abundant in both novels, representing the ways in which racialized people are inscribed by and immersed within systems of water governance. ‘After my ninth-grade year, we read *As I Lay Dying*’, says Esch, in the opening chapter of *Salvage the Bones*.¹⁸² ‘I made an A because I answered the hardest question right: *Why does the young boy think his mother is a fish?*’ she says.¹⁸³ Ward’s re-invocation of Faulkner’s trans-corporeal fish motif undermines the rigid species divide between water and land-based animals – a pattern that reoccurs throughout her writings. Take, for instance, when, in *Where the Line Bleeds*, Joshua returns home to his grandmother, seemingly kinaesthetically transformed after obtaining an injury while working on the pier: ‘The fissures across Joshua’s hands felt like fish gills to Ma-mee’.¹⁸⁴ The trans-corporeality evoked here – as in, Alaimo’s concept referring to ‘the material interchanges across human bodies, animal bodies, and the wider material world’ and the ‘economic, political, cultural, scientific’ ideologies that they cannot be disentangled from – brings discussions of personhood to the forefront.¹⁸⁵ In other words, this merging of terrestrial and aquatic species speaks to the ecological vulnerability experienced by oppressed communities whose personhood has been denied by racialized water management paradigms (such as scarcity, toxification and extreme weather). We see this in the way Joshua’s employment at the pier nods towards the economic imbrications between water and race, as well as in Esch’s inherited anxieties regarding water as she remembers her family’s encounters with hurricanes – from Camille, to Elaine and Katrina.

Where the Line Bleeds begins as Christophe, with ‘the side of his mouth curving into a fishhook’, and Joshua, ‘squirming like a caught fish’, plunge themselves into the ‘water of Wolf River [...] dark and deep, feathered by the current’.¹⁸⁶ Like the bayou where ‘The water was dark brown and deep and muddy and smelled of eggs’, the Wolf River is ‘murky’ and ‘brown’.¹⁸⁷ ‘Joshua knew that there were some places in Alabama where the water was blue, where it was clear enough to see the sandy bottom, but here in Mississippi it was so gray’, writes Ward.¹⁸⁸ It is through these polluted waterways that the characters’

¹⁸² Ibid, p.7.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Jesmyn Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2008), p.215.

¹⁸⁵ Stacy Alaimo, ‘States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea’, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 19, 3 (2012), pp.476–493 (p.476).

¹⁸⁶ Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, p.1,3.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid p. 235, 3.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p.90.

amphibious trans-corporeality emerges, with Christophe and Joshua drawn to the bronzed waters and devoting much of their time to swimming in them. The amphibious trans-corporeality conjured in *Where the Line Bleeds* – inextricable from the novel’s focus on race, poverty and violence – speaks to the watery origins of histories of racialized incarceration in the US South. That the novel begins with descriptions of the river, a site associated with historical and ongoing acts of violence, is crucial. The origins of racialized incarceration in America lie in the institution of slavery to which the Mississippi river was vital, transporting enslaved bodies across the south. Rivers are still weaponized in the carceral ecologies of the region, most obviously in that the Mississippi is the second most polluted waterway in America, constraining predominantly minority communities who, due to structural poverty, are unable to escape the river’s toxic emissions. Further, the intersections between levees and prisons demonstrate how deeply entrenched rivers are in the foundation of mass incarceration. In ‘Lockdown Louisiana’, Lydia Pelot-Hobbs details how the prison industry derives from the white supremacist desire to confine and control both racialized bodies and water, tracing how ‘politicians and power brokers have sought to contain the longest river in the United States by building levees, regardless of known flaws in the system that leave the city increasingly vulnerable to floodwaters’.¹⁸⁹ Pelot-Hobbs illuminates how these water management paradigms parallel systems of racial domination, which stretch back to slavery and are manifest in ‘hyper-policing and imprisonment in what has become the incarceration capital of the world’.¹⁹⁰ ‘Angola, the 18,000-acre slave plantation turned plantation penitentiary, sits at the literal nexus of the containment of water and people’, writes Pelot-Hobbs.¹⁹¹ ‘More than five thousand people are imprisoned at this site next to the Old River Control Structure, which diverts a third of the Mississippi River toward the Atchafalaya Basin’, she explains, referring to the levee system.¹⁹² In the South, ‘even the river has been arrested and imprisoned’, she says, ‘and yet water still flows, resistance still flows’.¹⁹³

One of the ways in which we might begin to think about how resistance is figured in *Where the Line Bleeds* – particularly with regards the interrelationship between rivers and incarceration – is to engage with how the characters swim against the current, as it were.

¹⁸⁹ Lydia Pelot-Hobbs, ‘Lockdown Louisiana’ in *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas* ed. by Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker (California: University of California Press, 2013), pp.55-61 (p.55).

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, p.60.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid, p.55.

Swimming has complex associations with histories of racialized captivity. Although the Middle Passage is heavily associated with mass drownings (or, an inability to swim), on Southern plantations, swimming was synonymous with the potential for freedom. It was therefore forbidden by many slaveholders because it enabled escape from servitude. From ‘Alabama bondswoman Annie Davis [who] explained how her owner attempted to beat aquatic desires from her body with a “good tanning” every time he caught her swimming’, to Harriet Tubman’s crossing of the Niagara river to freedom, enslaved and enslavers alike were finely attuned to how swimming functioned as a threat to plantation order.¹⁹⁴ The subversive nature of swimming in these racialized contexts undoubtedly influenced the aqueous aspects of Jim Crow law, which transformed many waterways (previously enjoyed as leisurely spaces) into sites that were either harshly segregated or the backdrop to atrocious acts of racist violence. In the words of Kevin Dawson, ‘slipknots and rope transformed Southern U.S. bridges from recreational places where black youth leapt into rivers into lynching bridges where black bodies eerily hovered in mid-air, unable to complete their descent into the refreshing waters below.’¹⁹⁵ The Wolf River bridge upon which *Where the Line Bleeds* is endowed with all of these histories. When the brothers ‘were younger, all the kids from Bois Sauvage would ride their bikes there and spend all day in a circuit: plummeting from the bridge, swimming to the shore’, but historically the Wolf River was once the site of the public spectacle lynching of Ell Persons that took place in 1917.¹⁹⁶ Person’s arrested descent into the water is briefly recalled when the boys take their plunge; ‘They seemed to hang in the air for a moment, held in place by the heavy, humid blue sky’.¹⁹⁷ Nonetheless, ‘The moment passed, and they began to fall. They dropped and hit the water and an eruption of tepid water burned up their noses. The day exploded in color and light and sound around them.’¹⁹⁸ Viewing the euphoria captured in this passage in relation to the water-related sanctions and systems of violence that were enforced during slavery and Jim Crow (and are associated with Wolf River), illuminates how swimming in the present builds on a much longer trajectory of African American histories of swimming as liberation, a means of rejecting plantation order and its afterlives.

¹⁹⁴ Kevin Dawson, ‘Parting the Waters of Bondage: African Americans’ Aquatic Heritage’, *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education*, 11, 1 (2018), pp.1-26 (p.15).

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, p.3.

¹⁹⁶ Ward, *Where The Line Bleeds*, p.2.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, p.3.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Nonetheless, the amphibious trans-corporeality activated by the watery biopolitics that I have signalled is inseparable from the principles of dehumanization upon which the penal system rests. Legislative procedures loom within *Where the Line Bleeds* and *Salvage the Bones* through Christophe’s criminal activity and Manny’s distrust in representations of the criminal justice system – and law, as Colin Dayan puts it, ‘encapsulates, sustains, and invigorates philosophies of personhood’.¹⁹⁹ Judicial formations of the human can be traced back to ancient legal literature of civil death, which, in Caleb Smith’s words, deprived the ‘inmate of rights [...] transforming him into a legal nonperson comparable to a slave.’²⁰⁰ Smith illuminates the longstanding entanglements between fiction and penal literature, excavating the gothic style of legislative writings: ‘in the language of reformers, inmates, and literary artists at large, the prison was represented as the dark house of ghosts and monsters’.²⁰¹ The civil death praxis originated in Rome, where ‘the criminal could be branded with “infamia,” a mark signifying moral corruption and banishment from public life’ and persists in a present in which the incarcerated convict is excluded from civil rights, such as the right to vote.²⁰² ‘The medieval fiction of civil death lives on in the present. The felon rendered dead in law is no anachronism but a continuing effect of de-humanizing practices of punishment’, writes Dayan in relation to the contemporary carceral experience.²⁰³ ‘Disfigured as persons, they are then judged outside the law’s protection or most susceptible to its violence’.²⁰⁴ If, as I have suggested elsewhere through references to the notions foregrounded by Angela Davis, racialized, throwaway bodies are rendered punishable and deemed less-than-human before any formal entrance into the prison system, then Ward’s amphibious, trans-corporeal motifs symbolise not only the relationship between water and racial governance, but the extent to which legislative pronouncements of personhood stretch beyond prison walls, rendering marginalized communities nonhuman, and thereby divesting them of any protections in relation to water management paradigms or the criminal justice system. As Weheliye puts it, ‘If we take into account the racial dimensions of the U.S. penal system, imprisonment, and torture in their full juridical and cultural normalness, it would seem that racial violence is always already beyond the law under a constant state of siege.’²⁰⁵ Ward’s writings help us to think about the ways in which carceral

¹⁹⁹ Colin Dayan, *The Law is a White Dog – How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), p.xii.

²⁰⁰ Caleb Smith, *The Prison and the American Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), p.29.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid, p.30.

²⁰³ Dayan, p.xii.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Weheliye, p.86.

ecologies are manifest in everyday life through imbrications between racialized people and water.

When, in *Where the Line Bleeds*, Christophe is rushed to hospital with stab wounds, ‘The stitches oozed red. He was wet everywhere. He smelled the salt from snot and blood high up in his nostrils and thought he could be at the dock, in the car in the morning, riding along the sea with Christophe, all of it salty and blue’.²⁰⁶ Here, Ward describes the marine aspects of the human body representing how bodily substances, particularly blood, are inseparable from saltwater environments. ‘The sea surges through the bodies of all terrestrial animals, including humans, in our blood, skeletons, and cellular protoplasm’, writes Alaimo.²⁰⁷ In *Hypersea: Life on Land*, Mark A. McMenamain and Dianna L. Schulte McMenamain advocate that ‘many contemporary health threats have a hypermarine aspect, that is, they owe in part to the fact that body fluid is, to a certain extent, a shared resource.’²⁰⁸ Imagining the body as a marine environment helps us to imagine the extent to which both human and more-than-human bodies of water are at the mercy of water management paradigms. When, earlier on in the novel, Christophe emerges with water on his face, Joshua recoils - ‘it reminded him of the veil of blood on the big Jesus statue hanging from the cross in the St. Salvador Catholic church’.²⁰⁹ When read in relation to the overriding themes of race and incarceration that accumulate across Ward’s writings, Joshua’s uncanny vision, merging water and the blood of Christ, is evocative the ways in which water is sacrificed – or, burdened – by the carceral economy, as evident in the pollution and degradation of waterways surrounding overpopulated American prisons.

The characters’ hyperawareness of the extent to which they are embroiled with degraded aqueous environments, however, also raises questions regarding more-than-human agency. Jane Bennett’s theory of distributive agency argues that matter functions ‘as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’, warning us to ‘tread lightly upon the earth, both because things are alive and have value as such *and* because we should be cautious around things that have the power to do us harm’.^{210 211}

²⁰⁶ Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, p.226.

²⁰⁷ Alaimo, ‘States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea’, p.482.

²⁰⁸ Mark A. McMenamain and Dianna L. Schulte, *Hypersea: Life on Land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p.255.

²⁰⁹ Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, p.115.

²¹⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), p.viii.

²¹¹ Jane Bennett, ‘The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter’, *Political Theory*, 31, (2004), pp.347-372 (p.365-366).

Kimberly Peters extends this notion to aqueous matter, arguing that the agentic capacities of water must be taken just as – if not more – seriously, because ‘[w]hereas humans might have greater agency over nature on land, this dynamic alters with the alternative material composition of the sea, and accordingly humans are uniquely affected by it.’²¹² ‘Humans cannot force power back on to the sea, they can but harness its qualities, or manipulate [it] to best effect’, Peters explains.²¹³ Whilst these new materialist perspectives risk perpetuating a rather universal logic, Ward prompts us to think of more-than-human agency in local, geographically specific terms. For example, In *Where the Line Bleeds*, the saltwater bodies that the characters inhabit – specifically their ‘Bois Sauvage blood’ – grants them alternative ways of knowing and connecting with their environment:

“I smelled it,” Christophe said. “Ma-mee always say we got that blood in us, the kind that know things, that Bois Sauvage blood. I know she can tell the weather, but I swear, before them clouds came and before I even knew they was on they way, I smelled it in the air. It was like a metal kind of smell.”²¹⁴

Ma-mee’s guidance suggests that when the family are attuned to their corporeal, marine environments – as in, the ‘Bois Sauvage blood’ that surges through their bodies – they possess the ability to decipher ecologically mediated information. Interestingly, as I will show later on, Mam, Jojo’s grandmother in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* also seeks to steer her family towards their bodily connections to water. As Mam says, ‘I think it runs in the blood like silt in river water’.²¹⁵ In Ward’s writings, the grandmother figure evokes the notion of inheritance, particularly in terms of an emergent potential for ecological awareness contained in black Southern bloodlines.

The amphibious mode of being that Ward describes through imbrications of blood and water – which I have suggested was born out of the carceral continuum – challenges narrowly defined concepts of the human based on the myth of human exceptionalism from which black people have been historically excluded through connotations between racialized people and degraded (aqueous) environments. As Weheliye puts it, although racializing assemblages are ‘borne partially of political violence’, they ‘cannot be reduced to it’.²¹⁶ In Weheliye’s words:

²¹² Kimberley Peters, ‘Taking More-Than-Human Geographies to Sea: Ocean Natures and Offshore Radio Piracy’ in *Water Worlds: Human Geographies of the Ocean* ed. by Kimberley Peters and Jon Anderson (London: Routledge, 2016), pp.177-192 (p.186).

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, p.130.

²¹⁵ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.40.

²¹⁶ Weheliye, p.51.

instances of systematic political violence moored in the law and beyond not only herald the naissance of bare life and its racialized progeny but also produce a surprise, a line of flight in Deleuze and Guattari's and George Jackson's parlance, that evades capture, that refuses rest, that testifies to the impossibility of its own existence. Taking the workings of flesh seriously frees and sets in motion the deviances that lay dormant in the concept of bare life and that repudiate by their very existence the equation of domination and violence with the complete absence of subjectivity, life, enjoyment, hunger, and so on.²¹⁷

This is borne out by the novel through the characters' sensory vitality and propensity to see, smell, touch, taste and feel water. The characters' enchanted relationship with water is underlined from the very beginning of the text; like when from 'deep beyond the bronze wash of the river [...] Christophe exhaled crystal bubbles of air, grabbed his brother's soft, squirming sides, and pulled him to the quiet below.'²¹⁸

In *Salvage the Bones*, Esch and her neighbours spend much of their time submerged in 'the black water of the pit'.²¹⁹ This imagery of murky, discoloured water is reminiscent of a swamp. A combination of earth and water, the swamp is a liminal space between the aquatic and terrestrial, and thus serves as a kind of amphibious zone to which the characters are drawn. In many ways, the Pit forms a retreat from the characters' domestic lives. Historically, swamps, as Monique Allewaert outlines in 'Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the American Plantation Zone', were spaces that radically destabilized plantation order by undermining the colonial dichotomy between the human and environmental.²²⁰ Swamps lay bare the imbrications between the human, vegetative, animal, aqueous and terrestrial. The entangled, more-than-human assemblages that form the swamp, served as refuge for maroon communities who fled to the wetlands in order to defy their positions as chattel on the plantation. 'The Great Dismal Swamp [...] was an ideal hideout', write Marvin L. Michael Kay and Lorin Lee Cary. 'Runaways deep in its watery isolation were 'perfectly safe, and with the greatest facility to elude the most diligent search of their pursuers', J. F. D. Smyth noted in 1784'.²²¹ In the words of Allewaert, 'human agents found ways to interact with nonhuman forces and in so doing resisted the order of

²¹⁷ Ibid, p.51-52.

²¹⁸ Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, p.4.

²¹⁹ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, p.52.

²²⁰ Monique Allewaert, 'Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the American Plantation Zone', *PMLA*, 123 (2008) pp.340-357 (p.34).

²²¹ Lorin Lee Cary and Marvin L. Michael Kay, 'They are Indeed the Constant Plague of Their Tyrants': Slave Defence of a Moral Economy in Colonial North Carolina, 1748-1772', in *Out of the House of Bondage: Runaways, Resistance and Marronage in Africa and the New World*, edited by Gad Heuman, (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1986) pp.37-56 (p.40).

the plantation.²²² Drawing on histories of the swamp, Allewaert asserts that, ‘In the plantation zone, animals, persons, plants, artifacts and their histories, and even land were penetrating, fusing with, transforming one another’.²²³ Ward helps us to conceive of the legacies of this process in the post-plantation South by evoking connections between blood and water: ‘The water, which was normally pink, had turned a thick, brownish red. The color of a scab’, she writes, describing the swamp.²²⁴ Although the grotesque imagery of the Pit might evoke horror and notions of death, we might think of it alongside Allewaert’s assertion that ‘conceiving of agency as a collaboration of forces that join with planetary flows contributes to a theory of revolution in which death – of the subject or the moment – need not be understood as the limit of any agent or event.’²²⁵ In this way, we ought to ‘shift from thinking of the plantation zone as a space of endings’.²²⁶ It is poignant then that Esch experiences what might be interpreted as a baptism in the Pit: ‘I walk into the water with all my clothes on. When I am all wet, I grab the soap from Skeetah and rub suds into my clothes, too. I make them white before I pull them away, one by one, until I am naked in the water, my clothes in a dirty, slimy pile on the mud bank.’²²⁷ Baptisms evoke notions of rebirth, with an individual’s submersion into water symbolising the drowning of their past so as to emerge anew. Poignantly, when describing Hurricane Katrina, Esch writes ‘She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother we with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes.’²²⁸ When read in relation to Esch’s swampy baptism in the Pit further highlights how violent, racializing assemblages also generate the potential for new ways of being and surviving.

The ongoing role of water in these racializing assemblages is intertwined with ‘the modernization of water’ which, in the words of Bakker, ‘entails new forms of governance, and newly emergent processes of state formation that administer both water use practices and the water technologies designed to support them’.²²⁹ As illustrated in *Where the Line Bleeds* and *Salvage the Bones*, these paradigms leave corporeal inscriptions on the bodies they subjugate and are compounded by the principles of dehumanization that have historically defined the penal system. This material-discursive conjuncture has configured definitions of

²²² Allewaert, p.341.

²²³ Ibid, p.352.

²²⁴ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, p.52.

²²⁵ Allewaert, p.355.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ward, *Salvage the Bones*, p.53.

²²⁸ Ibid, p.255.

²²⁹ Bakker, p.618.

personhood and left marginalized communities grappling with what it means to be viewed as less-than-human by the state. In the final moments of *Where the Line Bleeds*, Joshua sits at the water's edge, observing a school of fish:

He could imagine them running their large tongues over the insides of their mouths and feeling the scars where the hooks had bit them, remembering their sojourn into the water-thin air, and mouthing to their children the smell of the metal in the water, the danger of it. They would survive, battered and cunning.²³⁰

Rendered vulnerable to water-mediated violence, Joshua connects to the wounded fish he beholds, imagining both their fear and will to survive. We can think of this alongside Allewaert's assertion that in plantation zones, 'Bodies and persons pulled apart, trespassed, and brutalized in these regions produced modes of story [...] gave rise to a minoritarian mythos of the Americas in which the autonomy of parts engenders new fusings'.²³¹ In *Where the Line Bleeds* and *Salvage the Bones*, the characters possess an emergent, amphibious mode of ecological awareness, symbolised by trans-corporeal motifs. It is through this sensitivity that they 'survive, battered and cunning'.²³²

Where the Line Bleeds concludes as Joshua envisions the fish floating '[o]ut and out through the spread of the bay until their carcasses, still dense with the memory of the closed, rich bayou in the marrow of the bones, settled to the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico and turned to black silt on the ancient floor of the sea'.²³³ Depicting the ocean as a material repository bodies forth histories of the Middle Passage and evokes Christina Sharpe's notion of 'residence time' – referring to the length of time that substances remain in the ocean.²³⁴ In this way, Ward places the aqueous biopolitics I have here described in dialogue with historical systems of aqueously mediated captivity, exposing how the two are not mutually exclusive. I return to the concept of residence time in greater depth later on in relation to the aqueous uncanny, but I raise it here to demonstrate how the ongoing biopolitics of water are haunted by historical systems of racialized incarceration, therefore illuminating how our watery bodies cannot be dissociated from the 'watery graveyards' that surround us.

²³⁵

“Watery Graveyards”: Water and Memorialisation in *Men We Reaped*

²³⁰ Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, p.238-239.

²³¹ Allewaert, p.25.

²³² Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, p.239.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Sharpe, p.41.

²³⁵ Ward, *Men We Reaped*, p.16.

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that great vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up

- Derek Walcott ²³⁶

[I]n Mississippi, the rivers and bayous were watery graveyards.

- Jesmyn Ward, *Men We Reaped* ²³⁷

In the final chapter of *Men We Reaped*, Ward writes: ‘By the numbers, by all the official records, here at the confluence of history, of racism, of poverty, and economic power, this is what our lives are worth: nothing’.²³⁸ Throughout the memoir, Ward eulogizes the lives of five young black men, friends and family, whose deaths were entangled with issues of systemic racism and poverty that surrounded their lives. ‘About 35 percent of Black Mississippians live below the poverty level, compared with 11 percent of Whites, and “about one of every 12 Black Mississippi men in their 20s is an inmate in the Mississippi prison system”’, explains Ward. ²³⁹ In what follows, I explore how, while deprived of economic opportunity and legal rights, the DeLisle community that Ward textualizes in *Men We Reaped* experience ecologically mediated modes of remembrance that defy the state’s assertion of their nothingness. ‘This grief, for all its awful weight, insists that he matters’, writes Ward in memory of Joshua Adam Dedeaux, her brother.²⁴⁰ Highlighting imbrications of water and mourning in *Men We Reaped*, I explore how the memoir portrays the mnemonic qualities of water, prompting us to think about grieving and remembrance ecologically. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how Ward’s earlier works conjure the longstanding, nuanced relationship between water and black death – which foregrounds the notion of hydrological haunting as it appears in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* and relates to the U.S. prison system.

In *Water Graves: The Art of the Unritual in the Greater Caribbean* (2020), Valérie Loichot traces the long history of deaths by water from the Middle Passage to Hurricane

²³⁶ Walcott, p.500.

²³⁷ Ward, *Men We Reaped*, p.16.

²³⁸ Ibid, p.237.

²³⁹ Ibid, p.236-7.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, p.243.

Katrina. Investigating how writers and artists conjure aqueous modes of memorialisation which she describes as the ‘ecological sacred’, Loichot demonstrates how sites of violence are transformed into spaces of healing.²⁴¹ Loichot argues that aqueous violence is usually accompanied by the unritual, particularly the denial of traditional burials for victims, as an extension of harm given that ‘the stripping of rituals is a fundamental attempt to uncouple humans from their humanity’.²⁴² Therefore, Loichot offers the notion of the ‘ecological sacred’ in order to describe the ways in which artistic works that remember water deaths ‘pick up a sacred function’ by countering the absence of rites.²⁴³ These works, she argues, ‘instil rest in the turmoil of water deaths’.²⁴⁴ The ecological sacred ‘relates the planetary and the personal, the tiny and the giant, through a shared vulnerability and trembling, but also, through an intricate sense of life and agency with the stubborn growth of life’.²⁴⁵ While sacrality is usually associated with theology, it is this notion of un-interference that emerges in Loichot’s theorisation through notions regarding the ‘stubborn growth of life’ that resonates most with my reading of *Men We Reaped*.²⁴⁶ In other words, in what follows, I suggest that a sense that water carries forth unthwarted traces of the past is manifest in the memoir through the ways in which human and more-than-human bodies of water are embroiled in processes of remembrance.

Water is a sacred substance – one that can be biologically healing, but also one that is considered spiritually redemptive in many ancient practices (not least in West African religions and Caribbean Revival ceremonies in which ‘consecrated water, placed in glasses, jars, pans and pools, is used to heal, attract spirits to services, drive away evil spirits, divine the nature of a problem or illness, catch duppies and petition favours from “river maids”’).²⁴⁷ It also, however, serves as a repository of suffering, with rivers and oceans altered by the water deaths that have characterised Atlantic slavery and its afterlives. I conceive of the sacred in relation to water as a term for naming the extent to which the substance ought to be protected – not just in terms of ecological conservation, but also through a presence in art and literature – because it is a vestige of the past. In this way, the ecological sacred, as it

²⁴¹ Valérie Loichot, *Water Graves: The Art of the Unritual in the Greater Caribbean* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020), p.15.

²⁴² Ibid, p.8.

²⁴³ Ibid, p.18.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, p.25.

²⁴⁵ Ibid, p.62.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Arvilla Payne-Jackson and Mervyn C. Alleyne, *A Source of Healing* (Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2004), p.130.

appears in the form of the memoir, propels our understanding of hydrological haunting and how it can be mobilized to confront past and ongoing injustices.

In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Across the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), Saidiya Hartman, travelling along the coast of Ghana, describes how ‘With my eyes shut, the ocean sounded louder and even more threatening [...] The roar and clap of the Atlantic reverberated in my head’.²⁴⁸ While a filmmaker from Atlanta Hartman encounters feels that through his proximity to the shores of the Atlantic ‘All the folks taken across the waters are returning home through me [...] It’s like when I visit my grandmother’s grave’, Hartman responds: ‘It feels like the crash to me, not the grave [...] It’s the place where the car hit the tree and your mother and brother died [...] But it’s just a regular street for everyone else.’²⁴⁹ Thus, while Loichot posits that ‘zones of the unritual’, such as the Atlantic, ‘more sharply embrace’ the ecological sacred, Hartman’s account emphasizes the trauma that hinders this process.²⁵⁰ Perhaps that is why Christina Sharpe refers to the imbrications between water and grief (drawing parallels between the wake of a ship and the act of holding vigil) as being part of which she terms wake *work*, emphasizing the labour involved in what she describes as an ethics of care, proposing that in the wake of Atlantic slavery, ‘thinking needs care (“all thought is Black thought”) and that thinking and care need to stay in the wake’.²⁵¹ The hard work of remaining in the wake is also present in M. NourbeSe Philip’s writings as she memorialises the lives lost to water during the Middle Passage: ‘What is the word for bringing back bodies from water? From a ‘liquid grave’? I find words like resurrect and subaquatic but not ‘exaqua’. Does this mean that unlike being interred, once you’re underwater there is no retrieval – that you can never be exhumed from water?’ asks Philip.²⁵² Loichot observes that ‘retrieving the bones that the ocean drowned is impossible’, but argues that it is important to recognise that they do not just disappear. Maritime materialities serve as a record of drowned bodies – as Diana Leong puts it, salt becomes ‘the medium for a kind of material memory’ at sea in the wake of Atlantic slavery:

As the “bone” of water, (sea) salt is produced through a process of dehydration that also affects slaves in so similar a manner that they find themselves contributing to the saline content of the oceans. The sea became a “cradle” for the perpetually thirsty [...] There is both water and salt in the bones of the slave,

²⁴⁸ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Across the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) p.107.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.107, 108.

²⁵⁰ Loichot, p.51.

²⁵¹ Sharpe, p.5.

²⁵² M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, (Toronto: The Mercury Press, 2008), p.201.

and the casting of slaves overboard was, in effect, a salting or “boning” of the seas²⁵³

While each of the writers I have drawn on here take different approaches to discussions of aqueous graves, they all agree that water, as Gaston Bachelard put it, ‘remembers the dead’.²⁵⁴

Ward describes the rivers and bayous of Mississippi as ‘watery graveyards’ in relation to the histories of hurricanes in the region, and while the deaths of men she memorialises are not directly connected to water, the lexical feel with which they are remembered is distinctly aqueous. Describing the anniversaries of her brother’s passing, Ward writes:²⁵⁵

Every year on the day he died, I wake up to the dread of another year passing. I lock myself in my room, wherever I am living, and I cry until my eyes swell shut. And at the edge of the longing, the terror that I will forget who he was and forget our lives together immobilizes me, pulls me down further, until I am like someone in those cartoons from our youth, stuck in a quagmire of quicksand, mired in the cold, liquid crush, and then: drowning.²⁵⁶

Here, Ward describes grieving in terms of a process of submersion. The watery resonances of her language evoke the imbrications between loss and water and help us to conceive of the ecological undercurrents of grief. For Ward, remembering Joshua, her brother, is aligned with drowning and therefore water. This serves as a metaphor for the depths of her grief but is also suggestive of how ecological memory subverts systematic attempts to obliterate the value of African American life (as evident in the issues of endemic poverty, mass incarceration and environmental racism to which the memoir refers). For example, one of the last memories of Joshua that Ward shares in the memoir involves the pair of them riding ‘toward the bayou and over the bridges, the water shimmering silver’.²⁵⁷ These watery memories help Ward to affirm, ‘I love Joshua. He was here. He lived. Something vast and large took him, took all of my friends: Roger, Demond, C.J., and Ronald. Once, they lived.’²⁵⁸ In many ways, remembering Joshua is figured as a returning to water. We see this

²⁵³ Leong, p.14-15.

²⁵⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (Dallas: Pegasus Foundation), p.91.

²⁵⁵ Ward, *Men We Reaped*, p.16.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, p.242.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, p.248.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, p.249.

in Ward's imagined reunion with Joshua: 'He will look at me with his large dark liquid eyes, his face soft. He will know that I have been waiting.'²⁵⁹

The interconnections between grief and ecology in *Med We Reaped* are not just figurative. Ward's assertion that 'the landscape echoed with loss and grief', for instance, is evocative of the ways in which the natural environment is imbricated in historical and ongoing losses – from the drownings of the Middle Passage, to lynching, and extreme weather.²⁶⁰ It is worth noting that ecologies of grief, as they appear in the memoir, recall but are ultimately distinct from Jane Bennett's notion of the 'political ecology of things'.²⁶¹ Synthesising the 'agency of assemblages' – as in, the call to imagine 'agency as a confederation of human and nonhuman elements' – Bennett poses questions regarding whether we ought to 'acknowledge the distributive quality of agency to address the power of human-nonhuman assemblages and to resist a politics of blame? Or should we persist with a strategic understatement of material agency in the hopes of enhancing the accountability of specific humans?'²⁶² Bennett veers towards the former option, but I want to suggest that what I am describing as ecologies of grief do not set about sustaining a 'strategic understatement of material agency' in order to promote an understanding of 'the accountability of specific humans', but rather generate an understanding of the ways in which vast assemblages memorialize racialized suffering and thereby expose the impossibility of negating discussions of culpability.²⁶³ If, as Bennett argues, human actors form at least a part of the assemblages she refers to, then the 'accountability of specific humans' inevitably comes in to play – that is not to say that they are the only agentic forces within human/nonhuman networks, but rather, recognising that there are agencies beyond the parameters of the human does not mitigate abuses of power perpetrated by particular groups, individuals, and organisations.²⁶⁴

Beginning with a statement from Harriet Tubman, the memoir instantly foregrounds the notion of a landscape saturated with African American suffering: 'We saw the lightning and that was the guns; and then we heard the thunder and that was the big guns; and then we heard the rain falling and that was the blood falling; and when we came

²⁵⁹ Ibid, p.251.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, p.23.

²⁶¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p.iii.

²⁶² Ibid, p.38.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

to get in the crops, it was dead men that we reaped.’²⁶⁵ As a prelude to the memoir, these descriptions are indicative of the ways in which the men Ward mourns throughout the text will be reaped ecologically. When Tubman describes the aftermath of the Civil War, she evokes a sense of how indistinguishable the soldiers became from the landscapes upon and through which the terror they endured unfolded. The conflations between blood and rain remind us that the latter is in ‘continual reformation’, as Philip E. Steinberg puts it, prompting us to consider how corporeal effluences infiltrate our water cycles.²⁶⁶ In broader ecological terms, Tubman’s provocation that bloodshed becomes enmeshed with the ecosystem parallels the post-war ecologies Jessica Rapson examines in *Topographies of Suffering: Buchenwald, Babi Yar, Lidice* (2015), such as ‘the rediscovery of [a] mass grave in the Lidice area by local farmers, who noticed discoloured crops above it several years after the war.’²⁶⁷ Histories of racialized violence are often ecologically archived through imbrications between blood, rain and soil. As such, ecologies of grief necessitate discussions of power and culpability because, as Ward reminds us through invocations of an American landscape steeped in black blood, the ways in which suffering saturates the natural environment are often racialized.

The notion of reaping ghosts through the natural environment, as foreshadowed in the form of Tubman’s quotation and later in Ward’s reference to watery graveyards, involves acknowledging what Steinberg refers to as ‘marine assemblages’ (within which ‘humans are just one component’), what Kimberly Peters terms ‘hydro materiality’ (describing how ‘wet ontologies’ evince the entanglements between the hydrological and biological), and what Christina Sharpe refers to as ‘residence time’ (that is, ‘The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean’ – a notion that I will return to in my analysis of the aqueous uncanny in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*).²⁶⁸ ²⁶⁹ ²⁷⁰ The material interconnections between the human and the aqueous, as synthesised by these writers, demonstrates how water and people haunt one another through reciprocal, material, temporal interchanges.

²⁶⁵ Harriet Tubman quoted in *Men We Reaped*, p.i.

²⁶⁶ Philip E. Steinberg, ‘Of other seas: metaphors and materialities in maritime regions’, *Atlantic Studies* (2013), pp.156-169 (p.156).

²⁶⁷ Jessica Rapson, *Topographies of Suffering: Buchenwald, Babi Yar, Lidice* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2015), p.146.

²⁶⁸ Steinberg, p.164.

²⁶⁹ For more on Kimberly Peters’ conceptualization of hydro materiality see Kimberly Peters, ‘Manipulating material hydro-worlds: rethinking human and more-than-human relationality through offshore radio piracy’, 44, *Environment and Planning* (2012) pp.1241-1254.

²⁷⁰ Sharpe, p.41.

It is, perhaps, this notion that those who have been politically annihilated leave traces in their ostensible absence and, therefore (although not wholly recoverable) ecologically persist and are therefore not entirely lost, that accounts for the emergence of the ecological sacred in *Men We Reaped*. While Ward does not censor the connections between water and violence in the memoir, often drawing on the community's experience of hurricanes, water is by no means represented solely as a source of terror. When Ronald (who Ward met as a boy whilst working as a camp councillor) dies due to suicide, Ward and friends gravitate to the river after the burial. The summer after, Ward, her sister, and CJ sit by 'The Gulf water, black in the night' as it 'rolled inexorably in. We felt good', she says, and when Ward recalls the suffering endured by her family in DeLisle, she describes how 'The beauty of the massive oaks and the water over the southern horizon belied that history'.²⁷¹ These moments conjure a sense of watery sacredness that somehow co-exists with histories of racialized water deaths. For example, when reflecting on the passing of Roger, a childhood friend, Ward imagines:

Maybe he thought of the sky over the Pacific Ocean, the water stretching away to meet the clouds and disappear over the horizon, the way it seemed to go on forever. Maybe he was thinking of his family, of his mama's return from working offshore in the Gulf of Mexico on an oil rig [...] Maybe he wasn't thinking about any of these things, but I like to imagine that he was thinking about all of them.²⁷²

Here, the idyllic imagery of the horizon is interrupted by the insidious presence of labour, toxicity and violence, because the Gulf waters, as Loichot reminds us, 'hold the abysmal memory and deep futurity of drownings and disasters past and present: the Middle Passage or *Maafa*, Cuban and Haitian refugee crises, the passage of various hurricanes, and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill.'²⁷³ Ward underlines the value of remembering these watery pasts in relation to present injustices - 'I like to imagine that he was thinking about all of them', says Ward.²⁷⁴ Similarly, when describing Joshua's passing, Ward imagines her brother looking out at 'an open horizon over the water, where the waves from the Gulf quietly lapped the shore, where the oak trees in the median stood witness over centuries to wars, to men enslaving one another, to hurricanes, to Joshua riding along the Coast'.²⁷⁵ Ward concludes that, when a drunk driver hits Joshua's car, 'there was so much momentum, so many bodies and cars and histories and pressures moving all at once, that my brother

²⁷¹ Ward, *Men We Reaped*, p.178, 113, 173.

²⁷² Ibid, p.36.

²⁷³ Loichot, p.2.

²⁷⁴ Ward, *Men We Reaped*, p.36.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, p.231.

could not stop his car'.²⁷⁶ Ward thus takes the coastline – ‘the sands white as tombstones’ – as a site for conceptualising the ways in which ecologies of grief reconcile personal and historical losses despite a judicial disregard for both (after all, the man who killed Joshua ‘served three years and two months of his sentence before he was released, and he never paid [their] mother anything’).²⁷⁷

It was along that very coastline, where Joshua ‘would die months later’, that some of Ward’s final memories with him were made to the sound of ‘All That I Got Is You’ by Ghostface Killah. ‘*Sometimes I look up at the stars and analyze the sky,*’ so the lyrics go, ‘*and ask myself was I meant to be here... why?*’²⁷⁸ In some ways, the dialectic between the ocean and stars, as it appears in this passage, recalls ancient oceanic histories of celestial navigation. ‘Pacific Islanders’, writes David H. Lewis, ‘developed techniques of navigation that allowed them to travel thousands of miles between small islands [...] by observing the rise and fall of individual stars, constellations, and planets’.²⁷⁹ These indigenous practices are also drawn on in Ward’s *Navigate Your Stars* (2020), in which she recalls how, for her family, ‘life was a tumultuous sea, and [...] my grandmother had spent her days afloat on a raft, and [...] she’d paddled and bailed water, and read the map of constellations in the sky to find land, reprieve, and to survive.’²⁸⁰ As a recurring concept in Ward’s writings, utilizing the entanglements between the stars and the ocean as a means of navigating aqueous terrain, speaks to the notion of legibility – or, discernment – in relation to water. In this way, by drawing associations between history and celestial constellations, Ward conjures a sense of the ways in which the past serves as a map for reading the suffering endured in the present. Applying this to the ways in which the water deaths of the Middle Passage constellate into anthropogenic disasters (such as Katrina) and other ongoing, dehumanizing injustices, prompts us to consider not only how watery histories bear on the present but also how they might be navigated.

When sketching out the geography and history of her hometown, DeLisle, at the beginning of the memoir, Ward gestures towards the fact that ‘the early settlers called it

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, p.248, 235.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, p.248.

²⁷⁹ David H. Lewis, ‘Pacific Island Open Ocean Navigation’ in *The Ocean Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. by Eric Paul Roorda (London: Duke University Press, 2020), pp.60-68 (p.60).

²⁸⁰ Jesmyn Ward, *Navigate Your Stars* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), Amazon Kindle e-Book (location 29).

Wolf Town'.²⁸¹ In a chapter entitled 'We Are in Wolf Town', Ward once again re-invokes the Wolf River, which we were introduced to in the opening scenes of *Where the Line Bleeds*. 'The Wolf River, brown and lazy, snakes its way through DeLisle, fingers the country in creeks before emptying into the bayou', writes Ward.²⁸² 'When people ask me about my hometown, I tell them it was called after a wolf before it was partially tamed and settled. I want to impart something of its wild roots, its early savagery. Calling it Wolf Town hints at the wildness at the heart of it', she continues.²⁸³ This wildness, imagined in relation to the river, is figured – at least in part – by the temporal gesticulations that permeate the memoir. Take, for instance, the non-linear, tidalectic structure of the memoir, which emulates flows of water and its mnemonic qualities. Lisa Fink, drawing on new materialist thinking such as Steinberg's notion of the continual reformations of water (referenced above), describes how 'the sea breaks matter apart and then pieces it back together in new configurations'.²⁸⁴ Likewise, the structure of the memoir is 'not straightforward', as Ward puts it.²⁸⁵ 'To tell it, I must revisit each of the five young black men who died: follow them backward in time, from Rog's death to Demond's death to C.J.'s death to Ronald's death to my brother's death' writes Ward.²⁸⁶ 'At the same time, I must tell this story forward through time, so between those chapters where my friends and my brother live and speak and breathe again for a few paltry pages, I must write about my family and how I grew up.'²⁸⁷ The tidal flows of the memoir, pulling back and forth between the past and present, can be understood in light of Kamau Brathwaite's theory of 'tidalectics' which, in the words of DeLoughrey, 'resists the synthesizing telos of Hegel's dialectic by drawing from a cyclical model, invoking the continual movement and rhythm of the ocean' in contrast to the linear epistemologies of western colonialism.²⁸⁸ The tidalectic temporalities of *Men We Reaped* represent an attempt at ritualising ecologies of grief in the face of the unritual – which, in Loichot's definition entails the 'abject [...] gesture [...] of throwing bodies overboard or the neglect of populations vulnerable to floods or mass exiles' and how perpetrators attempt to further uncouple victims from their humanity by denying them traditional burials.²⁸⁹ In this instance, the unritual also encompasses the judicial dehumanization of black men, whose

²⁸¹ Ward, *Men We Reaped*, p.9.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Lisa Fink, "'Sing the Bones Home": Material Memory and the Project of Freedom in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, *Humanities*, 9 (2020), pp.1-16 (p.3).

²⁸⁵ Ward, *Men We Reaped*, p.8.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ DeLoughrey, p.2.

²⁸⁹ Loichot, p.4.

lives, as Ward's narrative details, are unprotected by the state. The aqueous structure of the memoir, paired with its content which seeks to 'assert that what happened *happened*' and that victims of the unritual matter, rather than abandoning water as an agent of the unritual, reappropriates it as a memorial substance, illuminating the mnemonic, haunted flows of the element.²⁹⁰

If water is a memorial substance, one that 'remembers the dead', then Ward's waterlogged memoir becomes somewhat of a funerary rite in spite of the fact that the men being memorialised (along with the historical deaths that preceded their passing) are denied legal and economic agency.²⁹¹ 'The land that the community park is built on, I recently learned, is designated to be used as burial sites so the graveyard can expand as we die', writes Ward.²⁹² 'One day our graves will swallow up our playground. Where we live becomes where we sleep.'²⁹³ These spatial politics, coupled with legislative and economic inequalities, highlight how the community at the heart of the memoir are forced to occupy the liminal space between life and death, systematically enduring what Loichot describes as 'the obstruction of the sacred'.²⁹⁴ Exhuming the men the memoir reaps from what Sharpe terms the 'Fanonian zone of non-being', Ward demonstrates how textualizing ecologies of grief through descriptions of watery memories enables survivors to hold vigil for those lost, not simply as part of an essentialist mark of humanity, but as a declaration of importance from within vast networks of more-than-human assemblages.²⁹⁵ 'We love each other fiercely, while we live and after we die', says Ward, a notion later echoed by Loichot when she writes that 'in death, as much as in life, all humans deserve dignity. Aesthetic creation and the critical scholarship it fosters help to alleviate – not to forget solve or absolve – the unritual'.²⁹⁶ ²⁹⁷ In *Men We Reaped*, watery graveyards - whether it be the aqueous sites the memoir refers to or the tidalectic form of the text itself – represent avenues for, as Derrida instructs, 'localizing the dead', thereby presenting a hauntological, ecological approach to mourning.²⁹⁸ Narratives of ecological grieving might therefore be read as counter narratives to economic ordinances and legislative pronouncements that systematically desecrate the value of black life. 'We honour anniversaries of deaths by cleaning graves and sitting next

²⁹⁰ Ward, *Men We Reaped*, p.249.

²⁹¹ Bachelard, p.91.

²⁹² Ibid, p.127.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Loichot, p.7.

²⁹⁵ Sharpe, p.20.

²⁹⁶ Ward, *Men We Reaped*, p.250.

²⁹⁷ Loichot, p.25.

²⁹⁸ Jacques Derrida quoted in *ibid*, p.8.

to them before fires, sharing food with those who will not eat again. We raise children and tell them other things about who they can be and what they are worth: to us,' writes Ward, 'everything'.²⁹⁹

The Aqueous Uncanny: Mass incarceration and Memories of the Middle Passage

In the wake, the semiotics of the slave ship continue: from the forced movements of the enslaved to the forced movements of the migrant and the refugee, to the regulation of Black people in North American streets and neighborhoods, to those ongoing crossings of and drownings in the Mediterranean Sea, to the brutal colonial reimaginings of the slave ship and the ark; to the reappearances of the slave ship in everyday life in the form of the prison, the camp, and the school.³⁰⁰

As Jojo journeys to Parchman Prison in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, memories of the Middle Passage collide with his encounters with new forms of captivity. Sat in the back seat of a confined vehicle alongside his motion-sick sibling, Kayla, Jojo recalls oral histories his grandfather relayed to him about their ancestors who came 'across the ocean' and were 'kidnapped and sold.'³⁰¹ Stories of the voyage that were passed down their family lineage return to Jojo during the roadtrip: 'everyone knew about the death march to the coast, that word had come down about the ships, about how they packed men and women into them', River told Jojo.³⁰² 'Some heard it was even worse for those who sailed off, sunk into the far. Because that's what it looked like when the ship crossed the horizon: like the ship sailed off and sunk, bit by bit, into the water.'³⁰³ By invoking the carceral continuum, from the middle passage to mass incarceration, and allocating the ghosts of both systems the space to dwell within the novel, Ward performs what Christina Sharpe theorises as wake work. Sharpe utilises 'the metaphor of the wake in the entirety of its meanings (the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness)' as a way of conceptualising the work required to navigate slavery and its afterlives.³⁰⁴ Wake work is inherently hauntological and Sharpe cites NourbeSe Philip's *Zong* as an example. Philip asserts that her poetic exploration of the slave ship 'is hauntological; it is a work of haunting, a wake of sorts, where the spectres of the undead make themselves present'.³⁰⁵ Significantly, haunting is experienced hydrologically in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, as Ward demonstrates the centrality of water in the carceral

²⁹⁹ Ward, *Men We Reaped*, p.250.

³⁰⁰ Sharpe, p.21.

³⁰¹ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.69.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Sharpe, p.17-18.

³⁰⁵ NourbeSe Philip cited in Sharpe p.38.

continuum, reminding us that the watery politics of mass incarceration cannot be neatly separated from older forms of racialized imprisonment. In what follows, I argue that in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, hydrological haunting is experienced as the aqueous uncanny, revealing the ways in which patterns of violence and captivity re-surface, and thus illustrating the importance of staying in the wake, as Sharpe puts it, in an era of mass incarceration.

The aqueous uncanny draws on the Freudian concept of something that is both frightening and familiar: ‘the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’, says Freud.³⁰⁶ In other words, according to Freud, ‘the uncanny is something which is secretly familiar’ but ‘has undergone repression and then returned from it’.³⁰⁷ While we often speak of fear of the unknown, the uncanny reveals the ways in which the ‘secretly familiar’ is also capable of provoking horror. I want to think about this concept in relation to the water-related systems of both Atlantic slavery and mass incarceration, and the ways in which they are remembered and represented in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant reminds us that ‘[f]or the Africans who lived through the experience of deportation to the Americas, confronting the unknown with neither preparation nor challenge was no doubt petrifying’, but in what follows I explore how the present (haunted by histories of Atlantic slavery) also provokes terror precisely because it resembles repressed pasts.³⁰⁸ Eco-critical theorists (such as Timothy Morton, Rod Giblett, Rebecca Richardson) have established the uncanny as a framework from recognising the ways in which the entanglements between the human and more-than-human provokes fear in an age of environmental crisis. Jesse Oak Taylor describes it as the abnatural, referring ‘to both nature’s absence and its uncanny persistence’ having been altered by anthropogenic climate change.³⁰⁹ That water is a particularly useful substance in terms of understanding the ecological uncanny, however, remains under-examined. The reflective nature of water is more than just a physical attribute: in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, water reminds us that the present mirrors the past, all the while re-configuring our understanding of the role of the element in both contexts.

³⁰⁶ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), pp.219-253 (p.220).

³⁰⁷ Ibid, p.245.

³⁰⁸ Glissant, p.5.

³⁰⁹ Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2016), p.5.

Analysing the function of water in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, I suggest that the aqueous uncanny emerges in the novel through the ways in which Ward's language conjures what Glissant termed the abyss in two of its incarnations – as in, the hold ('the belly of the boat') and the ocean ('the depths of the sea').³¹⁰ Although Freud suggests that feelings of the uncanny are a pathological response to the return of the repressed, an examination of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* reveals that the aqueous uncanny is an appropriate response to recognising how the water-mediated violence of the past and present merge to form the carceral continuum. Nicholas Royle, in his work on variations of the uncanny, writes that '[t]he uncanny has to do with the sense of a secret encounter: it is perhaps inseparable from an apprehension, however fleeting, of something that should have remained secret and hidden but has come to light'.³¹¹ It therefore 'can be a matter of something gruesome or terrible [or] something strangely beautiful [...] eerily reminding us of something, like *déjà vu*'.³¹² That said, and as I will explore in more detail further on, water is not solely represented as a source of horror. As Glissant puts it, the abyss, 'in the end became knowledge' – the 'freeing knowledge of Relation within the whole'.³¹³ In the case of the aqueous uncanny, Relationality is that between the past and present. I approach the aqueous uncanny, therefore, with all of the hauntological ethics that underpin Relationality and wake work outlined above. In other words, I argue that *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is about confronting the aqueous uncanny, and learning to live in Relation to hydrological haunting – or, in the words of River, 'learning how to work that current: learning when to hold fast, when to drop anchor, when to let it sweep you up'.³¹⁴

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the characters' journey to Parchman Prison through a desiccated Southern landscape is haunted by the transatlantic voyages of the Middle Passage. Nicole Dib, in her reading of the novel, argues that Ward deploys the road trip narrative in order to critique the ways in which 'white fantasies of mobility and freedom' are built on the systematic immobilization of black people.³¹⁵ It is poignant then, that when Jojo and company arrive at the prison to collect his white father, Michael, the ghost of Richie – an African American boy who was incarcerated at Parchman at the same time as Jojo's grandfather – emerges alongside him. The racialized juxtaposition between Michael and

³¹⁰ Glissant, p.6.

³¹¹ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.2.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Glissant, p.8.

³¹⁴ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* p.68.

³¹⁵ Nicole Dib, 'Haunted Roadscapes in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*', *MELUS*, 45, 2 (2020), pp.134-153 (p.135).

Richie is stark. For while Michael revels in his reacquired freedom, ready to resume his dysfunctional relationship with Leonie, Richie is never truly able to leave Parchman, as represented in his ghostly, arrested development. ‘The roots of African and African American mobility in the United States must be understood in terms that reveal how travel has been contested for black individuals and communities from the start’, writes Dib.³¹⁶ Like the watery highways into slavery, for the characters in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the road, as Dib reminds us, ‘functions as a policed space where they are subjected to violence.’³¹⁷ In what follows, I grapple with the ways in which Ward imagines the imbrications between cars and ships, land and sea, in order to demonstrate how the novel helps us to better understand the racialized, oceanic origins of the carceral state.

In a 2016 interview, ‘When cars become churches: Jesmyn Ward’s disenchanting America’, Anna Hartnell spoke with Ward regarding *Men We Reaped* and the role that cars play within the work ‘as vehicles that transport, bridge, and create important spaces’.³¹⁸ Cars, says Ward, ‘symbolize freedom. But then they also become these places where we’re able to be introspective and reflect and connect in certain ways. And so [...] it makes me think of the ways the church can function, or has functioned in the past, in the community.’³¹⁹ While cars continue to be spaces of introspection and reflection in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the redemptive qualities of the automobiles are less pronounced throughout the novel, with cars being inscribed with greater ambivalence. In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, cars are synonymous with captivity: despite his wishes to remain at home with his grandparents, Jojo is forced to accompany his mother to collect Michael, his father, from Parchman, cooped in the back of a claustrophobic, overheated space. The car, in many ways, resonates with the belly of the ship – a ‘nonworld’ occupied by both the living and dead.³²⁰ “‘It’s like a snake that sheds its skin’”, Ritchie tells Jojo, folded into the space between the back and front seats of the car, “‘The outside look different when the scales change, but the inside always the same’”.³²¹ This is not the first time that Ward conjures comparisons between the car and the ship. In *Where the Line Bleeds*, ‘The car sailed across the barren, black sea of the

³¹⁶ Ibid, p.139.

³¹⁷ Ibid, p.142.

³¹⁸ Anna Hartnell, ‘When Cars Become Churches: Jesmyn Ward’s Disenchanted America. An Interview’, *Journal of American Studies*, 50,1 (2016), pp.205-218 (p.214).

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Glissant, p.5.

³²¹ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.172.

parking lot'.³²² From within the interior of an 'electric blue' car, in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Jojo experiences the spatial dimensions of captivity that, in many ways, leads us back to the Middle Passage.³²³ After all, the relationship between confined spaces and dehumanisation stretches back to the Middle Passage and reappears in overcrowded penitentiaries. As Stephanie E. Smallwood highlights, 'Because human beings were treated as inanimate objects, the number of bodies stowed aboard a ship was limited only by the physical dimensions and configurations of those bodies.'³²⁴ When examining the ways in which this logic persists, Dennis Childs' work on the evolution of captivity is instructive. Childs highlights how the 'dehumanizing and suffocating aspects of [...] spaces of racial capitalist terror register the affiliations of the prison architectures of slavery and freedom', arguing that 'land-based' prisons are fundamentally influenced by the 'water-based moving prisons of the Atlantic'.³²⁵ The ways in which *Sing, Unburied, Sing* alludes to the 'prisons of the Atlantic' through stories of the Middle Passage and the trope of the car as a space of captivity is particularly uncanny in a present in which – as I have outlined above – water-based violence continues to play a role in carceral practices.³²⁶ As Saidiya Hartman writes, 'The hold continues to shape how we live'.³²⁷ The car in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* features as a hybrid carceral space – one that helps us to think about the ways in which the hold modulates into the present by conjuring the entanglements between mobile prisons of the Middle Passage and land-based prisons of today. In this way, the novel symbolises how, to quote Christina Sharpe, 'The hold repeats and repeats and repeats in and into the present [...] The details and the deaths accumulate; the ditto ditto fills the archives of a past that is not yet past. The holds multiply.'³²⁸

It is worth recognising, however, that Glissant refers to the constricted space of the hold as the womb abyss: 'This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clamor of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know'.³²⁹ The car, transporting its passengers across the South, to and from the penitentiary, haunted by histories of the ship, also intimates this notion of a womb abyss. It is a space in which

³²² Ward, *Where the Line Bleeds*, p.41.

³²³ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.62.

³²⁴ Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.68.

³²⁵ Childs, p.41, p.43.

³²⁶ *Ibid*, p.43.

³²⁷ Saidiya Hartman, 'The Dead Book Revisited', *History of the Present*, 6, 2 (2016), pp.208-215 (p.208).

³²⁸ Sharpe, p.73.

³²⁹ Glissant, p.5.

intergenerational encounters are fostered through the return of memories of the ocean, and different forms of incarceration. To borrow Freud's term, the car provides a setting in which strangers meet and, throughout the course of the narrative, learn to exist in Relation to one another. When the family arrive at Parchman Prison to collect Michael's father, and the ghost of Richie slips into the car, Richie recognises Jojo instantly – 'The boy is River's', he says, 'I know it'.³³⁰ It is Jojo's eyes, 'dark as swamp bottom', that reveal him to Richie.³³¹ In other words, the strange familiarity evoked by Jojo's connection to water and the spatial dimensions of the vehicle in which they meet, allows Ward to situate Richie within a carceral continuum that exceeded his lifetime.

The second abyss, the ocean, is conjured through the motif of drowning. Describing a vision that came to her during a dream, Leonie, Jojo's mother, recalls: 'I am trying to keep everyone above water, even as I struggle to stay afloat. I sink below the waves and push Jojo upward so he can stay above the waves and breathe'.³³² She continues, 'I thrust them up toward the surface, to the fractured sky so they can live, but they keep slipping from my hands'.³³³ Though the episode could easily be read psychoanalytically as a manifestation of Leonie's feelings of being overwhelmed by parental responsibilities, drowning is also associated with broader racial histories, and it is of no little significance that these histories emerge in Leonie's unconscious on the night subsequent to her visiting Parchman. Human cargo was regularly overthrown throughout the course of the Middle Passage and critics often turn to William Turner's iconic painting *Slave Ship (or Slavers Overthrowing the Dead and Dying – Typho[o]n Coming On)* – which, as Ana Lucia Araujo puts it, depicts 'the bloody pieces of enslaved bodies being eaten by sharks in ocean waters' – when referencing this practice and how drowning became an iconic component of the trauma of Atlantic slavery.³³⁴ In many ways, the terror of Leonie's dream following her encounter with Parchman evokes the image of Turner's painting as she describes being submerged in an ocean that is animated and volatile, 'far out where the fish are bigger than men'; 'there are mantra rays gliding beneath us', she says, 'and sharks jostling us'.³³⁵ Leonie is at the whelm of the aquatic assemblages depicted in Turner's painting. The motif of drowning, conjured most poignantly following Leonie's encounter with Parchman, thus nods to a long

³³⁰ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.135.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid, p.195.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ana Lucia Araujo, *Shadows of the Slave Past: Memory, Heritage, and Slavery* (London: Routledge, 2014), p.78.

³³⁵ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.195.

trajectory of water being used as weapon in both land and water-based prisons, while brining notions regarding the imbrications between human and more-than-human agency (that contribute to our understanding of how these histories are ecologically remembered – or, at least, archived) to the forefront. Agentic oceanic forces – as depicted in Turner’s painting and imagined in Ward’s novel – are a prominent feature in Sharpe’s theories pertaining to water, race and memory (particularly in relation to the Middle Passage). Invoking this history, Sharpe writes: ‘the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today. They were eaten, organisms processed them, and those organisms were in turn eaten and processed, and the cycle continues.’³³⁶ Sharpe outlines residence time – as in, ‘The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean’ – and scientific indications that human blood ‘has a residence time of 260 million years’: ‘we, Black people’, she writes, ‘exist in the residence time of the wake’.³³⁷ The ocean is both figuratively and materially perfuse with traces of enslaved Africans who endured the water-based prisons of the past. It is therefore rendered uncanny, given that Leonie, too, has been impacted by the carceral continuum. While Leonie may only think water, the water management paradigms that I have referred to throughout this chapter evidence the extent to which inmates contained in land-based penitentiaries, endure watery biopolitics that can be traced back to the mobile prisons of the Middle Passage. It is this strange familiarity, perhaps, that accounts for Leonie’s resignation to a watery grave: ‘I am failing them’, she says, ‘We are all drowning’.³³⁸

Although drowning serves as a powerful motif, it must also be understood in relation to the notion of resurfacing – a pattern that occurs throughout the novel, reminding us that what happens in the depths of the ocean is rarely contained there. ‘I only visited that Parchman in memory, memories that rose like bubbles of decay to the surface of the swamp’, says Richie.³³⁹ What is most significant, perhaps, are the ways in which Ward demonstrates the legibility of water, and how it brings histories of racialized captivity to the surface. Take the following: ‘Across the face of the water, there is land. It is green and hilly, dense with trees, riven by rivers. The rivers flow backward: they begin in the sea and end in land’.³⁴⁰ This imagery of the river’s transverse flows brings to mind the wake left behind the slave ship, which, as Sharpe reminds us, travelled in a backward motion. ‘Transverse waves

³³⁶ Sharpe, p.40.

³³⁷ Ibid, p.41.

³³⁸ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.195.

³³⁹ Ibid, p.187.

³⁴⁰ Ibid, p.241.

are those waves that run through the back; they are perpendicular to the direction of the motion of the ship. Transverse waves look straight but are actually arcs of a circle', explains Sharpe.³⁴¹ We might therefore interpret Ward's haunting imagery of watery surfaces as being symbolic of the ways in which the substance renders the ghosts of the Middle Passage – both ships and people – perceptible in the present.

Hydrological haunting – the ways in which histories of water-based violence materially and figuratively resurface – is experienced as the aqueous uncanny, in part, because water is not something that can be considered distinguishable from the human, highlighting the porosity of the body to water-mediated violence. For example, in 'States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea', Stacy Alaimo reinvents her concept of trans-corporeality in relation to water.³⁴² Alaimo conceptualises trans-corporeality at sea through the notion of suspension, 'as a sort of buoyancy, a sense that the human is held, but not held up, by invisible genealogies and a maelstrom of often imperceptible substances that disclose connections between humans and the sea'.³⁴³ During the dream outlined earlier, Leonie experiences this sense of buoyancy as something we could call the aqueous uncanny:

I dropped into the feathery dark heart of the water and went all the way to the bottom, where the sand was more muddy than grainy and downed trees decomposed, slimy and soft at the core. I didn't swim up; the fall had stunned my legs, the thunderous slap of the water numbed them. I let the water carry me. It was a slow rise: up, up, up toward milky light. I remember it clearly because I never did it again, scared by the paralyzing ascent.³⁴⁴

For Leonie, being slowly suspended by invisible forces within the river (that, as Alaimo suggests, indicate the inter-connections between aquatic assemblages and the human) evokes horror. Of all the characters in the novel, it is Leonie who finds the aqueous uncanny most frightening. Resisting both memory and water, Leonie turns to avoidance as a coping mechanism: '*I can't be a mother right now. I can't be a daughter. I can't remember*'.³⁴⁵ Ultimately, Leonie wishes to attain a state of oblivion that, for her, can only be achieved by imagining borders between the human, the aquatic, and their shared histories: thus, she is most at peace when she imagines being alongside Michael in a 'dome of glass' as they 'pretend at forgetting' – 'Our world', she says, 'an aquarium'.³⁴⁶

³⁴¹ Sharpe, p. 40.

³⁴² Alaimo, 'States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea', p.476.

³⁴³ Ibid, p.477-478.

³⁴⁴ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.193.

³⁴⁵ Ibid, p.274.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

Aquatic trans-corporeality appears elsewhere in the novel, particularly through Jojo's grandmother, Mam, who repeatedly tries to introduce Leonie to the healing capacities of water. Leonie recalls anxiously telling Mam about her pregnancy, and Mam 'shushing like a stream, like she'd taken all the water pouring on the outside world into her'.³⁴⁷ '[S]he was invoking Yemaya,' says Leonie, 'the goddess of the ocean and salt water'.³⁴⁸ Deriving from the spiritual concepts of Yoruba, stories of Yemaya survived the amnesiac conditions of slavery and the Middle Passage through the oral tradition. In the words of Montré Aza Missouri, Yemaya thus became 'the deity associated with the Middle Passage and the patron of those incarcerated, enslaved and oppressed'.³⁴⁹ In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Mam serves as an embodiment of Yemaya – she is, as Richie puts it, 'the saltwater woman'.³⁵⁰ Mam's embodiment of Yemaya is a reminder of our watery corporeality, whilst her deteriorating health is a representation of the ways in which the waters that comprise our bodies are vulnerable to the flows of the 'economic, political, cultural, scientific' ideologies to which Alaimo refers.³⁵¹ Ward's invocation of Yemaya is also, however, an invitation to consider the role of mnemonic storytelling in resisting systems of racialized captivity; just as the story of Yemaya weathered the amnesiac crossings of the Middle Passage, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* demonstrates how stories of water recuperate concealed entanglements between the slave ship and penitentiary in an age of racialized mass incarceration. Before her passing, Mam tells Jojo: 'I hope I fed you enough. While I'm here. So you carry it with you. Like a camel [...] Maybe that ain't a good way of putting it. Like a well, Jojo. Pull that water up when you need it'.³⁵² Mam's passing message encourages us to think about water as a resource – which, we know, is weaponised and withheld by the carceral system – whilst also prompting us to recognise that as land-based prisons continue to thrive, we too, must 'pull that water up', confronting repressed aquatic stories of racial dominance in order to better understand how the current (both aquatic and temporal) has been shaped by them.³⁵³

Towards the end of the novel, Jojo and his three-year-old sister, Kayla, encounter a tree 'full with ghosts [...] all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves'.³⁵⁴ Recounting the

³⁴⁷ Ibid, p.159.

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Montré Aza Missouri, *Black Magic Woman and Narrative Film: Race, Sex and Afro-Religiosity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.133.

³⁵⁰ Ward, p.245.

³⁵¹ Alaimo, p.476.

³⁵² Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.233-234.

³⁵³ Ibid, p.234.

³⁵⁴ Ibid, p.282.

terror that lead to their deaths, the ghosts' eyes speak of being 'hung', 'dragged', and drowned.³⁵⁵ It is only when Kayla begins to sing, and they are, in the process, acknowledged in relation to 'all water', that the ghosts are able to rest 'with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease':³⁵⁶

Kayla hums over my shoulder, says "Shhh" like I am the baby and she is the big brother, says "Shhh" like she remembers the sound of the water in Leonie's womb, the sound of all water, and now she sings it. *Home*, they say. *Home*.³⁵⁷

Here, new light is shed on the novel's call for the unburied (as in, both the living and the victims of racial terror that never received a proper burial) to sing. Ultimately, it is through the sound of the abyss (both womb and marine) that the ghosts find home, a nod to the fact that the Middle Passage was an originary moment in terms of both what Glissant refers to as the 'freeing knowledge of Relation within the whole' and the carceral continuum in its entirety.³⁵⁸

In a rare exchange between Michael and Jojo, following the former's return home from Parchman, the conversation turns to water. Michael, who worked on the rig in the time leading up to and during the BP oil spill, tells Jojo about how he remains haunted by the memory of the event: '*I actually cried*, Michael told the water [...] How the dolphins were dying off, how whole pods of them washed up on the beaches in Florida, in Louisiana, in Aladama and Mississippi: *oil* burnt, sick with lesions, hollowed out from the insides.'³⁵⁹ Ward's references to the BP oil spill place the carceral ecologies of mass incarceration within America's broader history of environmental racism. The economic trajectory from plantation to petrochemicals is highlighted in the works of a range of writers and activists, from Bullard to LeMenager, who expose 'the trade-off of civil rights for corporate privileges'.³⁶⁰ St John the Baptist parish, Louisiana, for example, is an area concentrated with both chemical plants and plantation houses. Approximately 45,000 people reside in the area, predominantly black and routinely exposed to the toxins emanating from chemical plants – and with air replete with almost 50 poisonous chemicals, the area has the highest rates of cancer in the U.S. This ecological violence has been at the forefront of concerns for

³⁵⁵ Ibid, p.282, 283.

³⁵⁶ Ibid, p.284.

³⁵⁷ Ibid, p.285.

³⁵⁸ Glissant, p.8.

³⁵⁹ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.266.

³⁶⁰ Stephanie LeMenager, 'Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief', *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, 19, (2011), pp.25-56 (p.30).

activist groups including the Poor People's Campaign and RISE St. James. When Ward nods to these politics in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Jojo remarks that he will 'never forget' what Michael said next: 'Some scientists for BP said this didn't have nothing to do with the oil, that sometimes this is what happens to animals: they die for unexpected reasons. Sometimes a lot of them. Sometimes all at once.[...] And when that scientist said that, I thought about humans. Because humans is animals.'³⁶¹ The dismissive response offered by officials following the BP spill, remembered by Michael, following his release from Parchman, is uncanny because it parallels the resounding silence surrounding the intersections between the prison industry and water degradation, and the ways in which governing bodies have failed to acknowledge the potential links between the toxification of water and cancer rates in penitentiaries like Parchman. It is in this absence that the importance of recognising the fact that the present is hydrologically haunted becomes glaringly clear; this is the work performed in *Sing, Unburied, Sing*.

Through ghostly evocations of the Middle Passage, Ward illuminates how water and land-based prisons are intimately connected. In these entanglements, we are able to read how, in the words of Sharpe, 'Racism, the engine that drives the ship of the state's national and imperial projects [...] cuts through all of our lives and deaths inside and outside the nation, in the wake of its purposeful flow'.³⁶² Though the aqueous uncanny entails histories of horror, navigating the present in Relation to them is crucial to unpacking what Derrida conceives of as the non-contemporaneity of the present.³⁶³ Observing how Jojo has not yet grown to understand these temporal convergences, Richie asserts, 'I didn't understand time, either, when I was young [...] how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once? That the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness would show me that time is a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once?'³⁶⁴ By evoking the ghostly resonances of water in relation to ongoing histories of mass incarceration, Ward helps us to think of haunting ecologically. In doing so, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* sheds new light on Parchman Prison by illuminating the ecological components of captivity; water materially bears the burden of plantation pasts, the hold constellates into the prison, and carceral ecologies of the past and present merge as

³⁶¹ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.266.

³⁶² Sharpe, p.3.

³⁶³ Derrida, p.xviii.

³⁶⁴ Ward, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, p.186.

we are hydrologically haunted by the abyss. As Sharpe emphasizes, quoting Toni Morrison, ‘everything is now. It is all now’.³⁶⁵

Watery Words: Writing the Plantationocene

I have argued throughout this chapter that the imbrications between water and incarceration, and the ways in which they are manifest in Ward’s writings, are haunted by the history of Atlantic slavery and the Middle Passage. In this way, Ward’s stories of water – localised, grassroots, and often deeply personal – lay bare the hydrological constellations of the Plantationocene and offer an intimate insight into how they are endured and resisted within her community. As such, Ward’s literature encourages us to take a granular approach to discussions of the ways in which plantation ecologies persist. In memorialising histories that are routinely drowned out, Ward’s textual representations of hydrological haunting can be read as a form of literary activism against enduring plantation structures, prompting us to consider the role of writing in the age of the Plantationocene.

In ‘Novel and History, Plot and Plantation’, Sylvia Wynter describes how plantation-societies ‘were both the cause and effect of the emergence of the market economy; an emergence which marked a change of such world historical magnitude, that we are all, without exception still “enchanted”, imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in its bewitched reality.’³⁶⁶ Wynter traces the market economy back to plantation areas ‘since many of its units were ‘planted’ with people, not in order to form societies, but to carry on plantations whose aim was to produce single crops for the market.’³⁶⁷ In other words, people became ‘an adjunct to the product’.³⁶⁸ As I have suggested throughout this examination, the ‘*exchange-value*’ of black lives persists in the present in the form of the carceral economy.³⁶⁹ I cite Wynter because her discussions regarding the market economy, with its roots in the plantation system, expose the entanglements between the novel form and racialized capitalism and the ways in which the latter has ecologically altered the planet. Wynter explains how the novel and Plantation are entangled by building on the work of Lucien Goldmann:

³⁶⁵ Toni Morrison quoted in Sharpe, p.41.

³⁶⁶ Sylvia Wynter, ‘Novel and History, Plot and Plantation’, *Savacoi*, 5 (1971), pp.95-102 (p.95).

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.97.

the novel form itself, according to Goldmann, came into being with the extension and dominance of the market economy, and “appears to us to be in effect, the transposition on the literary plane, of the daily life within an individualist society, born of production for the market.” The novel form and our societies are twin children of the same parents.³⁷⁰

However, although Wynter highlights how the novel – and the commodification of narrative – is inextricably linked to the market economy of the plantation, she also argues that it has since been re-appropriated to ‘critique [...] the very historical process which has brought it to such heights of fulfilment’.³⁷¹ She describes this relationship as the plantation-plot dichotomy, wherein ‘instead of expressing the values of the market society’ from which the novel form emerged, it ‘develops and expands as a form of resistance to this very market society’.³⁷²

The plantation-plot dichotomy is crucial to how we understand the role of post-plantation literature in the age of the Plantationocene, an epoch in which the market economy of plantation-societies endures, and continues to devastate both the natural world and racialized people. In synthesising the links between the novel and the capitalist infrastructures of plantation slavery, the plantation-plot dichotomy can also be placed in relation to discussions regarding the eco-materiality of the novel. As Patricia Yaeger advocates, texts can be sorted ‘according to the energy sources that made them possible’.³⁷³ While, in the context of these discussions, the novel is usually linked to the Industrial Revolution given their eighteenth-century rise, the systems that underpinned said period – including a dependency on energy in order to facilitate the accumulation of capital – can be traced back to Atlantic slavery, which was reliant on ships and ocean steam navigation. In other words, if the novel is an energy-fuelled form, it cannot be dissociated from histories of Atlantic slavery. Therefore, the plot-plantation dichotomy not only speaks to with the ways in which the novel is discursively linked to the plantation, it also resonates with how the novel materially emerged from the systems that characterised it. In the words of Karen Barad, ‘Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in relationship of externality to each other, rather, *the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity*’.³⁷⁴ Or as Stef Craps and Rick Crownshaw put it, ‘the novel bodies

³⁷⁰ Ibid, p.95.

³⁷¹ Ibid, p.97.

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Patricia Yaeger, ‘Editor’s Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources’, *PMLA*, 126, 2 (2011), pp.305-326 (p.305).

³⁷⁴ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), p.152.

forth (implicitly and explicitly) entangled human and nonhuman dramas of people and things, and their agencies in shaping the planet, found within its pages or in the material emergence of those pages.³⁷⁵ Thus, through its content and form, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* prompts us to consider the maritime origins of both racialized captivity and the novel. As Saree Makdisi reminds us, ‘global empire, for all its interest and investment in other forms of energy – water, wind, steam, oil – has always depended most on human energy’.³⁷⁶ The (post)-plantation plots of Ward are representative of literary movements – like those Wynter describes – in which human energy is engaged in textual forms of resistance that work to oppose the market economy of the plantation and its afterlives. Viewing Ward’s work through the lens of an eco-material interpretation of Wynter’s plantation-plot dichotomy highlights how – in the case of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* – fiction has taken up the work of activism where critical theory and public policy have, so far, failed to adequately theorize and politicize the intersections between racialized incarceration and water degradation.

That is not to say, however, that the novel form is inherently progressive. As Wynter puts it, novels that challenge plantation economies are dependent on individual authors, who, ‘instead of expressing the values of the market society’, re-appropriate the novel ‘as a form of resistance to this very market society’.³⁷⁷ Similarly, Paul Gilroy writes that, ‘The clutch of recent African-American novels which deal explicitly with history, historiography, slavery, and remembrance all exhibit an intense and ambivalent negotiation of the novel form that is associated with their various critiques of modernity and enlightenment’.³⁷⁸ Such a negotiation is evident in the aesthetics of novels like *Sing, Unburied, Sing* that demonstrate ‘the polyphonic qualities of black cultural expression’ through the use of multiple narrators and different dialects, challenging narrative hegemony and standardised conventions of the novel. Subverting what Goldmann describes as the novel’s reflection of an individualist society, Ward constructs modes of collective memory which are haunted by voices of the past and present; together, they help us to piece together an understanding of how the plantation and its watery origins persist.

³⁷⁵ Stef Craps and Rick Crownshaw, ‘Introduction: The Rising Tide of Climate Change Fiction’, *Studies in the Novel*, 50, 1 (2018), pp.1-8 (p.2).

³⁷⁶ Saree Makdisi, ‘Empire and Human Energy’, *PMLA*, 126, 2 (2011), pp.318-320 (p.318).

³⁷⁷ Wynter, p.97.

³⁷⁸ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.218.

If, as Gilroy argues in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), the ship is a chronotope for the black novel – in this case, because of the ways in which it is capable of mobilising ideas and channelling resistance to the horror of the aqueous origins and afterlives of slavery – it is important to remember that these ships traverse what DeLoughrey describes as ‘heavy waters’.³⁷⁹ That is to say that the Black Atlantic is best understood when we acknowledge it ‘alongside the national and military claims on the world’s oceans so that we might complicate natural metaphors of liquid circulation and think more critically in terms of a modern ocean that Christopher Connery has aptly described as “capital’s myth element”’³⁸⁰. We might remember the ways in which AI refers to the gulf in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* – ‘I mean seriously, they shouldn’t even call that a gulf since it’s the color of ditch water. I mean real water.’³⁸¹ As this exploration has shown, the waters that flow through *Sing, Unburied, Sing* are troubled by histories of racialized incarceration and violence. As DeLoughrey puts it, ‘Atlantic modernity’ – and the systems of capitalism it propagates – ‘becomes legible through the sign of heavy water’.³⁸² In this way, water becomes the very substance of the Plantationocene, charging the novel with the task of re-appropriating the market-economy from which it derived in order to stay afloat and challenge its material, racial and political outcomes and foundations.

What Glissant refers to as ‘The unconscious memory of the abyss’ shapes present relations in terms of both carceral conditions and cultural artefacts, such as the novel and the memoir.³⁸³ As both material and figurative phenomenon, what I have described as hydrological haunting provides a framework for thinking about the ghostly resonances of water and how they are manifest textually. More specifically, hydrological haunting, as it appears in Ward’s literature, prompts us to engage with the role of water in ongoing patterns of racialized incarceration, by continually guiding us back to the transatlantic crossings of slavery. In placing the Middle Passage in conversation with ongoing systems of racialized captivity in this way, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* thus demonstrates the ways in which the post-plantation novel could be used as a vessel, as Glissant put it, ‘in which we may honour our boats’.³⁸⁴

³⁷⁹ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, ‘Heavy Waters’, *PMLA*, 125 (2010), pp.703-712 (p.703).

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.705.

³⁸¹ Ward, p.148.

³⁸² DeLoughrey, ‘Heavy Waters’, p.703.

³⁸³ Glissant, p.7.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.9.

Picturing the Plantationocene: Photography, Belonging and Material Witnessing in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina

'In one minute the entire life of a house is ended. The house as casualty is also mass murder, even if it is empty of its inhabitants. A mass grave of raw materials intended to build a structure with meaning, or a poem with no importance in time of war. The house as casualty is the severance of things from their relationships and from the names of feelings, and from the need of tragedy to direct its eloquence at seeing into the life of the object. In every object there is a being in pain – a memory of fingers, of a smell, an image. [...] Photographs, toothbrushes, combs, broadcast aloud in the devastation. All these things are a memory of the people who no longer have them and of the objects that no longer have the people'

- 'The House as Casualty', Mahmoud Darwish ³⁸⁵



Figure 3. Chris Jordan, *Remains of a Home, Ninth Ward Neighborhood*, online image, Chris Jordan Photographic Arts, 2005 <<<http://www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/katrina/#remainsofhome2>>> [accessed 3rd March 2022].

When Sarah M. Broom collected the demolition report for her Katrina-ravaged childhood home during the months following the storm, she 'carried it around in [her] purse and wrote "Autopsy of the House" in large letters on the front page'.³⁸⁶ As Broom describes in

³⁸⁵ Mahmoud Darwish, 'The House as Casualty', *A River Dies of Thirst*, translated by Catherine Cobham (New York: Archipelago Books, 2009), p.12.

³⁸⁶ Sarah M. Broom, *The Yellow House* (London: Corsair, 2020), p.230.

her 2019 memoir, *The Yellow House*, the report indicated that ‘the house was stable after the hurricane. It just wasn’t contained.’³⁸⁷ On August 29th 2005, toxic water surged from the Industrial Canal and wound its way through surrounding neighbourhoods before intruding on the yellow house where it ‘pushed out the walls’ until the structure quite literally burst at the seams.³⁸⁸ Broom’s descriptions of her eviscerated house are a haunting reminder of some of the images that surfaced after the catastrophe, like Chris Jordan’s photographs of post-Katrina landscapes bestrewn with personal belongings that were expelled out of the homes they once furnished during the flood. In Jordan’s collection, *In Katrina’s Wake: Portraits of Loss from an Unnatural Disaster*, for example, we find images of dilapidated homes that remained after the deluge subsided – architectural carcasses emptied of their once-interior contents that now, waterlogged and displaced, bedecked the streets of New Orleans.



Figure 4. Will Steacy, *Photograph found May 2006*, online, National Geographic, <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/article/portraits-of-katrina-seven-photos-of-destruction-and-resurrection>> [accessed 3rd March 2022]

³⁸⁷ Ibid, p.231.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

Among the items cast outside during the wreckage were photographs. Not the heavily mediatized images of Katrina's unburied that swept across our screens during the disaster, but personal photographs captured by the community in the years that preceded the hurricane. 'I kept seeing flood-damaged family photographs among all the debris. The faces in these pictures, peering up at me, stopped me in my tracks every time. Here was the evidence of people's lives before the storm', Will Steacy describes, reflecting on his journey to New Orleans in 2006.³⁹⁰ In what follows, I consider how, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, these dispersed and waterlogged photographs emerge as material artefacts that bear witness to what came both before, during and after the storm. I endeavour to listen to the stories these watermarked photos tell about the ecological aspects of racialized displacement. In addition, I also want to pay attention to the ways in which vernacular photographs can function as a form of grassroots activism against the mnemonic erasures and systems of gentrification and disenfranchisement that were accelerated by the so-called natural disaster. In many cases, the photos that the storm left behind depict people who were geographically displaced by Katrina but still present in the 'altered snapshots' that remained scattered throughout New Orleans for quite some time after the storm.³⁹¹ Drawing on the post-Katrina work of Stan Strembecki and Sarah M. Broom, I examine how they invoke images that materially register the entanglements between water, race, and displacement, while also illuminating how they provide valuable contributions to evolving discussions around material witnessing, particularly as they relate to environmental injustices.

The devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina was the culmination of years of systematically enforced levels of racialized poverty and segregation. In *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class and Hurricane Katrina* (2006), Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires trace these processes through time, citing 250 years of slavery, the Civil War, a century of legalised segregation that ensued throughout the South, a social security system that excluded occupations dominated by African Americans, and federal housing programs that frequently withheld assistance from minority households and upheld patterns of residential zoning. These histories, they argue, cannot be disentangled from ongoing issues, such as unequal access to adequate schooling, employment discrimination, healthcare

³⁹⁰ Will Steacy quoted in Jessie Wender, "Portraits Of Katrina: Seven Photos Of Destruction And Resurrection", *Photography*, 2015 <<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/article/portraits-of-katrina-seven-photos-of-destruction-and-resurrection>> [Accessed 15 February 2021].

³⁹¹ Ibid.

disparities, city planning regulations, and mass incarceration. As such, by 2005 when Katrina made landfall, thirty-five percent of black people were living in poverty, more than three times the white poverty rate of eleven percent. In the words of Hartman and Squires, 'Various processes of racial segregation have resulted in middle-and upper-income whites being concentrated in the outlying (and in New Orleans, literally higher) suburban communities, while blacks have been concentrated in the central city, where the flooding was most severe.'³⁹² These residential zoning structures resonate with Kathryn Yusoff's observations regarding the ways in which Blackness has been organised to 'buffer the petrochemical industries and hurricanes'.³⁹³ After centuries of structural segregation and poverty, black communities were geographically stationed to shield wealthier, white residents from the storm, and disproportionately paid the price for the government's failure to maintain an effective levee system.

As Cedric Johnson writes in relation to Katrina and its uneven distribution of harm, 'Forces of nature were instrumental, but policy choices made by local and national publics were more decisive'.³⁹⁴ Johnson argues that the social inequalities that made the storm so catastrophic were rooted in neoliberal reforms of the welfare system and notions around citizenship which meant that, by the time Katrina struck, responsibility was individualized and state-funded protections were rendered obsolete. Similarly, in 'Drowning Democracy: The Media, Neoliberalism and the Politics of Hurricane Katrina', Henry A. Giroux demonstrates how the Bush administration adopted the neoliberal 'ideological hostility to the essential role that government should play in providing social services and crucial infrastructure'.³⁹⁵ This, he says, was manifest in tax cuts for the rich, increased military spending, the underfunding of environmental protection programs, and 'the growing immiseration of poor Americans and people of color'.³⁹⁶ The neoliberal unravelling of welfare programmes and other public services – like housing, schools, and healthcare – reminds us that the historical trajectories outlined by Hartman and Squires are nonlinear; but they do repeatedly return to customary, long-established structures of racialized capitalism – the constellations of which, I have argued, are haunted by the market logic of the plantation and its watery origins.

³⁹² Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires, 'Pre-Katrina, Post-Katrina', in *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster: Race, Class and Hurricane Katrina*, edited by Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.1-12 (p.5).

³⁹³ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p.xii.

³⁹⁴ Johnson, p.xx.

³⁹⁵ Henry A. Giroux, 'Drowning Democracy: The Media, Neoliberalism and the Politics of Hurricane Katrina', *Counterpoints*, 434 (2014), pp.54-64 (p.60).

³⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p.5.

In this chapter, I want to engage with how, against this violence, quotidian photographic practices are a method through which families and communities exercise agency over the ways in which they are seen and remembered. Histories regarding the ways in which the camera was weaponised as a tool for racial subjugation have dominated critical discussions of photography. In the late twentieth century, Laura Wexler advocated that a key element of ‘the photographic past that ought now to be among our most urgent concerns is the remembrance that photography has helped to shape our current violent predicaments of race, class, gender.’³⁹⁷ Overall, conversations around the camera and racialized violence tend to overshadow histories of photographic resistance, but as bell hooks reminds us, ‘Cameras gave to black folks, irrespective of a class, a means by which we could participate fully in the production of images’.³⁹⁸ In the words of Campt, vernacular photographs in the black diaspora ‘represent expressive cultural texts that are of abiding historical significance for the insights they offer into the process of diasporic cultural formation’ forged against all odds.³⁹⁹

What I hope to contribute to these discussions through my engagement with vernacular photography in relation to Hurricane Katrina is an understanding of the ways in which the images I describe open up current conceptualisations of the Plantationocene to new considerations. The everyday photographs that were salvaged after Hurricane Katrina are doubly poignant in that they materially register the entangled tensions between community-making and the violent ecologies that have characterised the diaspora and the ongoing experiences of loss and separation the Plantationocene has entailed. On the one hand, such photographs represent quotidian acts of resistance, affirming kinship and care and refusing misrepresentation and erasure. On the other, these water-damaged photos are multi-layered images that record water mediated violence (which has long facilitated racialized displacement and separation). In recording the imbrications between water and racialized violence in this way, these photographs challenge widely upheld land-bound conceptualisations of the Plantationocene. Moreover, despite the ways in which dominant discussions of the epoch bypass the racialized structures of the plantation, these photos also

³⁹⁷ Laura Wexler, ‘Seeing Sentiment: Photography, Race, and the Innocent Eye’, in *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, ed. by Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, Helene Moglen (London: University of California Press, 1997), pp.159-186 (p.181).

³⁹⁸ bell hooks, *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p.57.

³⁹⁹ Tina M. Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (London: Duke University Press, 2012), p.17.

bear witness to the fact that racialized capitalism – and the patterns of dispossession and displacement it leaves in its wake – is the ordering principle of the Plantationocene. Too often, conceptualisations of the Plantationocene are non-representational and abstract. In Tsing and Haraway’s definition of the epoch, nuanced radicalized histories are transmuted into homogenous, multispecies ontologies of ‘plants, animals, microbes, and people’. What these photographs provide are ways of understanding how the Plantationocene is manifest in the lives of the communities it continues to exploit. Merging critical discussions of vernacular photography and ecology, this chapter conceives of everyday image-making as a form of resistance, whilst also attending to the ecological intra-actions recorded in their material presence. These vernacular photographs thus capture the dialectic between the domestic and the ecological, which can be traced back to the original forced migration during which water – or, the Atlantic – was used to rupture and displace families and communities. In this way, they demonstrate what Shawn Michelle Smith describes as the ‘temporal recursivity intrinsic to photography, a backward and forward movement inherent to the medium’.⁴⁰⁰ Thinking about the ways in which the past modulates into the present, I grapple with the ways in which these photographs become witnesses to plantation structures and their ecological protraction over time.

Material Witnessing

This chapter engages with photographs taken before the storm in their post-Katrina afterlives. In Stan Strembicki’s collection, *Post Katrina: Books and Photographs Found After the Flood*, we find photographs of photographs (and books) that were damaged during the storm, and in *The Yellow House* we see the ways in which Sarah M. Broom appropriates the memoir form in order to restore the memory of photographs that were lost through the deluge. Both pieces help us to conceive of polaroids as objects that resonate with the past and possess the potential to bear witness. Recognising photographs as material witnesses entails discerning memory from both the content of the image and the material inscriptions they accrue with time. Although the lost and damaged photographs evoked by Strembicki and Broom do not themselves provide a self-explanatory reconstruction of the past, in this chapter, I suggest that they become testimonial through their remediation. Through ‘Post Katrina: Books and Photographs Found After the Flood’ and *The Yellow House*, Strembicki

⁴⁰⁰ Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photographic Returns: Racial Justice and the Time of Photography* (London: Duke University Press, 2020), p.1.

and Broom translate the imminent testimony of the material witness – as in, the photograph – by finding meaning in their material traces and various physical iterations.

In invoking the concept of material witnessing I am drawing on Susan Schuppli's monograph *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (2020) in which she explores 'the power of materials to record and recall events'.⁴⁰¹ As such, Schuppli calls for an expansion of 'acts of witnessing to more-than-human realms'.⁴⁰² The theoretical framework of *Material Witnessing* is shaped by Schuppli's work with Forensic Architecture, a human rights agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London, seeking to demonstrate the evidential role of matter and how it testifies to various human rights violations. In the words of Eyal Weizman, who directs the project, 'every material object can be read as a sensor [...] because they are both storage and inscription devices'.⁴⁰³ Unlike Schuppli and Weizman I do not enter into debates surrounding legal definitions of material witnessing as they relate to the judicial power of matter, but this exploration is certainly compelled by the fundamental concepts that underpin their projects – that is, to quote Schuppli, that 'nonhuman entities and machinic ecologies [...] archive their complex interactions with the world, producing ontological transformations and informatic dispositions that can be forensically decoded and reassembled back into history'.⁴⁰⁴ This exploration engages with the ways nonhuman entities (in this case, photographs) are materially inscribed by the past and – through processes of interpretation and remediation – participate in affirming often discursively erased histories. In this way, they prompt us to consider how the past unfolds into the present.

The ways in which I conceive of material witnessing with regards photographs and Hurricane Katrina is, perhaps, most closely aligned with Shela Sheikh's conceptualisation of witnessing. Sheikh takes inspiration from Michal Givoni's *The Care of the Witness: A Contemporary History of Testimony in Crisis*, because, in the words of Sheikh, it 'provides a blueprint for conceiving of witnessing as both a practice of care for the other, and of political protest that contests contemporary (neoliberal, neo-colonial and extractivist) forms of governmentality'.⁴⁰⁵ However, whereas Givoni's definitions of witnessing are limited to the

⁴⁰¹ Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (London: The MIT Press, 2020), p.3.

⁴⁰² Ibid, p.4.

⁴⁰³ Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2018), p.52-53.

⁴⁰⁴ Schuppli, p.3.

⁴⁰⁵ Shela Sheikh, "The Future of the Witness: Nature, Race and More-than-Human Environmental Publics." *Kronos*, no. 44 (2018), pp. 145–162 (p.150).

human, Sheikh seeks to move beyond these boundaries by suggesting that more-than-human entities are embroiled in ‘witness-collectivities’ that co-produce forms of testimony.⁴⁰⁶ Sheikh’s work, particularly the ways in which she extends discussions pertaining to the relationship between witnessing, activism and care beyond the parameters of the human, is useful to the discussion at hand which will ultimately argue that, in the wake of Katrina, personal photographs that re-surfaced after the storm are a testament to both care and violence. Although Sheikh conceives of material witnessing in relation to the natural world, and this discussion looks at photographs (inorganic matter, bearing the authorial imprint of the human), such photographs are archives – they evidence the lives of the people they depict, but they also materially register the storm – and, in bearing witness in this way, can be understood as objects of political activism. Here, as is in Sheikh’s work, ethics of care are pivotal. I want to bring Sharpe into this discussion around witnessing and care by evoking her thinking on wake work once again: *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* is a work that insists and performs that ‘thinking needs care (“all thought is Black thought”) and that thinking and care need to stay in the wake.’⁴⁰⁷ As is in witnessing, wake work involves attending to the past as a way of affirming that it happened (*‘Wake; the state of wakefulness; consciousness’*).⁴⁰⁸ Every photograph that I turn to throughout this chapter was taken, and then salvaged, with care. Through these processes, they challenge the state-imposed erasure of black life, while also materially registering continuities of water mediated violence. What I propose throughout this discussion is that the ways in which photographic recuperation, activism, care and material witnessing intersect in the wake of Katrina further demonstrate the need for upholding Sheikh’s call to recognise ‘witnessing as a distinctive form of ethics and politics’.⁴⁰⁹

Much of the debate surrounding material witnessing comes from the notion of testimony. That witnessing is linked to the ability to testify poses an array of questions given matter’s inability to speak. Sheikh signposts the dangers in this regard, warning against becoming too anthropomorphic in our use of the term witness, while also reminding us of the ways in which we might risk reproducing the colonial rhetoric of speaking for the voiceless. Schuppli is also attentive to tensions that arise around witnessing, materiality, and testimony, recalling Jacques Derrida’s distinctions between testimony and evidence.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, p.148.

⁴⁰⁷ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), p.5.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, p.4.

⁴⁰⁹ Sheikh, p.161.

‘where there is evidence there is not testimony. The technical archive, in principle, should never replace testimony’, says Derrida.⁴¹⁰ For Derrida, testimony is limited to human speech acts and the ability to verbally relay an event – but such claims certainly come with ethical complications given questions of agency and the historical silencing of certain people and events. Schuppli responds to calls to distinguish evidence from testimony by suggesting that material evidence brings with it ‘the possibility of testimony without it necessarily being contracted to the conventions of legal speech, nor indeed that of human language. This involves a conceptual realignment away from a functional understanding of “speech” toward an engagement with the expressive technicity of matter.’⁴¹¹

This exploration is interested in how these ideas surrounding the communicative capacities of matter relate to photographic theory – which, although not explicitly about material witnessing, prompts us to engage with the expressive qualities of photographs. For instance, we might consider how Weizman’s recognition of the ‘mediated speech of inanimate objects’ resonates with Camppt’s call to ‘listen’ to photographs.⁴¹² Throughout *Listening to Images* (2017), Camppt seeks to engage ‘photography through a sensory register that is critical to Black Atlantic cultural formations: sound.’⁴¹³ In doing so, Camppt extends ‘the range and scope of our understanding of sound by returning to the fundamental definition of what constitutes sound and sonic perception’:⁴¹⁴

To a physicist, audiologist, or musicologist, sound consists of more than what we hear. It is constituted primarily by vibration and contact and is defined as a wave resulting from the back-and-forth vibration of particles in the medium through which it travels. The lower frequencies of these images register as what I describe as “felt sound” – sound that, like a hum, resonates in and as vibration. Audiologists refer to such frequencies as infrasound: ultra-low frequencies emitted by or audible only to certain animals, such as elephants, rhinoceroses, and whales. While the ear is the primary organ for perceiving sound, as lower frequencies, infrasound is often only *felt* in the form of vibrations through contact with parts of the body. Yet all sound consists of more than what we hear.⁴¹⁵

Camppt explores the lower frequencies of what she describes as ‘quiet photographs’ – images that ‘before they are analyzed, they must be attended to by way of the unspoken relations that structure them’.⁴¹⁶ Much like Schuppli’s and Weizman’s notions regarding the (often

⁴¹⁰ Jacques Derrida quoted in Schuppli, p.10.

⁴¹¹ Schuppli, p.11.

⁴¹² Eyal Weizman, ‘Introduction: Forensis’ in Forensic Architecture (eds), *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014) pp.9-32 (p.9).

⁴¹³ Tina M. Camppt, *Listening to Images* (London: Duke University Press, 2017), p.6.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid, p.7.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid, p.8.

overlooked) expressive qualities of matter, Camppt asserts that ‘quiet photography names a heuristic for attending to the lower range of intensities generated by images assumed to be mute’.⁴¹⁷ The photographs considered throughout this chapter belong to this category of quiet photography; unlike the notorious images of black people brutalised by water that were sensationalised by the media and made symbolic of the disaster, these often quotidian photographs refuse spectacles of black suffering and instead reveal how ‘the trivial, the mundane, [and] the banal are in fact essential to the lives of the dispossessed’, thereby demonstrating how ‘both quiet and the quotidian are mobilized as everyday practices of refusal’.⁴¹⁸ In this way, what Camppt describes as the lower frequencies of quotidian photographs might be understood in relation to discussions regarding the testimonial potential of matter (beyond the limits of human-centric definitions of testimony) insofar as these watermarked photographs form modes of affirmation – of care and violence, of erasure and recuperation, of vulnerability and refusal. As Broom writes in *The Yellow House*, ‘The most powerful things are quietest, if you think about it. Like water.’⁴¹⁹

In exploring the ways in which photographs emerge as material witnesses, I write alongside a collection of critics that Peter Buse describes as ‘photo-materialists’ who take up photo-objects as their subject.⁴²⁰ Geoffrey Batchen, for example, writes about the ‘need to develop a way of talking about the photograph that can attend to its various physical attributes, to its materiality as a medium of representation’.⁴²¹ Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart are also interested in the materiality of photography, categorising it into three key features – ‘the plasticity of the image itself, its chemistry, the paper it is printed on’, its ‘presentational forms’, and ‘the physical traces of usage and time’.⁴²² They advocate for an ‘ongoing investigation into the lives that photographs lead after their initial point of inception’, and call for a recognition of the ‘social biography’ of objects.⁴²³ In this way, photographs exemplify what Serenella Lovino and Serpil Oppermann describe as ‘storied matter’ – they are ‘a site of narrativity, a storied matter, a corporeal palimpsest in which

⁴¹⁷ Ibid, p.6.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid, p.8, p.4.

⁴¹⁹ Broom, p.146.

⁴²⁰ Peter Buse, *The Camera Does the Rest: How Polaroid Changed Photography* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p.106.

⁴²¹ Geoffrey Batchen, *Forget Me Not: Photography and Remembrance* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), p.94.

⁴²² Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.3.

⁴²³ Ibid, p.9, p.4.

stories are inscribed'.⁴²⁴ These stories are decipherable via the photo-object's materiality and the material inscriptions that mark them, which are assigned literacy through perception and investigation.

The photographs I draw on throughout the discussion at hand are certainly storied matter. The stories they contain, decipherable via both the content of the images, their material presence, and the material inscriptions that mark them, can be understood as a form of testimony, affirming the past. Testimony, like photography, is always a form of storytelling – an exercise in conveying a particular narrative. As Schuppli reminds us, material witnesses 'cannot perform their truth claims entirely within the register of representation, and require further elaboration and forensic analysis', and so storied matter becomes testimonial at the point at which it begins to undergo interpretive processes.⁴²⁵ Merging the notion of storied matter with the concept of material witnessing I seek to interpret the ways in which the photographs I turn to bear witness to the Plantationocene. In doing so, I draw inspiration from Katherine McKittrick's theorisation of the story:

stories offer an aesthetic relationality that relies on the dynamics of creating-narrating-listening-hearing-reading-and-sometimes-unhearing. The stories do not offer lucid tales or answers; rather, they signal ways of living in a world that denies black humanity (or, more aptly, the stories signal ways of black livingness). The story-text itself, read aloud or quietly, is an imprint of black life and livingness that tells of the wreckage and the lists and the dance floors and the loss and the love and the rumors and the lessons and the heartbreak. It prompts. The story does not simply describe, it demands representation outside itself. Indeed, the story cannot tell itself without our willingness to imagine what it cannot tell. The story asks that we live with what cannot be explained and live with unexplained cues and diasporic literacies, rather than reams of positivist evidence.⁴²⁶

Storied matter – or, the material witness – is always in flux and as photographs unfold across time, they take on new stories through interpretation and material changes to the image. Material witnesses are not fixed entities. Their testimony accumulates and evolves. The personal photographs in question do not provide a complete testimony of the domestic/private lives of the people they depict, nor do they provide a full account of the origins and systems of the Plantationocene. They do, nonetheless, record imbrications between the domestic and ecological and transmit 'shared stories of black worlds and black

⁴²⁴ Serenella Lovino and Serpil Oppermann, 'Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 19, 3 (2012), pp.448-475 (p.451).

⁴²⁵ Schuppli, p.192.

⁴²⁶ Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (London: Duke University Press, 2021), p.6-7.

ways of being [that] breach the heavy weight of dispossession and loss because these narratives (...) are embedded with all sorts of liberatory clues and resistances'.⁴²⁷ This exploration is interested in the ways in which these clues and resistances might inform our conceptualisation of the Plantationocene without the need for quantifiable data. This speculative approach to interpreting these images in relationship to the Plantationocene upholds McKittrick's assertion that '*analytics, as story, allows us to learn and share, and get in touch, without knowing totally.*'⁴²⁸

The Plantationocene and Belonging

Before turning more specifically to the images I have been describing, I want to first foreground the relationship between photography and the Plantationocene particularly as it relates to diaspora, belonging, home. As Toni Morrison writes in "Home" (2012), 'The overweening, defining event of the modern world is the mass movement of raced populations, beginning with the largest forced transfer of people in the history of the world: slavery.'⁴²⁹ Much has been written about the violent displacement and separation of black people, communities, and families through slavery, but less attention has been paid to the ways in which issues surrounding belonging, emplacement, and housing are ongoing features of the Plantationocene. However, as evident in the storm-induced crises of homelessness that surfaced in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the aqueously mediated displacement of racialized people, originating from the slave ship, continues to constellate into the present.

In October 2005, 'the then-acting director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency estimated [...] that between four hundred thousand and six hundred thousand people had been left homeless' by hurricane Katrina, with destruction disproportionately impacting predominantly African American communities, such as the Lower Ninth Ward.⁴³⁰ As critics have frequently noted, Hurricane Katrina escalated processes of racialized disenfranchisement and social cleansing that were already insidiously underway and, as Anna Hartnell reminds us, after the event, politicians and real estate developers began speaking publicly about their intentions to further displace individuals and communities:

⁴²⁷ Ibid, p.7.

⁴²⁸ Ibid, p.12.

⁴²⁹ Toni Morrison, "Home." *The House That Race Built*. edited by Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Random House, 1998), pp.3-12 (p.10).

⁴³⁰ Evie Shockley, 'The Haunted Houses of New Orleans: Gothic Homelessness and African American Experience', in *Katrina's Imprint: Race and Vulnerability in America* edited by Keith Wailoo, Karen M. O'Neill, Jeffrey Down, and Roland Anglin (London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp.95-116 (p.95).

Republican Senator Richard Baker told lobbyists “we finally cleared up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it but God did”. The financial and social opportunities that the storm presented to some were spelled out by real estate magnate Finis Shellnut: “The storm destroyed a great deal and there’s plenty of space to build houses and sell them for a lot of money... Most importantly, the hurricane drove poor people and criminals out of the city and we hope they don’t come back”.⁴³¹

The demolition of public housing, accompanied by a host of obstacles placed against black homeowners resulted in the overarching political struggle that emerged in the wake of the disaster which, ultimately, boiled down to, to quote Hartnell, ‘who is able to return and rebuild and who is not.’⁴³² In ‘Civic Culture and the Politics of Planning for Neighborhoods and Housing in Post-Katrina New Orleans’, Adelaide H. Villmore and Peter G. Stillman trace the emergence of residence groups and nongovernmental organisations that were established in order to help displaced communities rebuild their neighborhoods, but they assert that ‘Although New Orleanians have moved well beyond their initial shock from the devastation into action and sought a substantial role in rebuilding the city, the city, state, and federal governments have either failed to act on or have rejected many of the residents’ visions.’⁴³³ Clearly the so-called natural disaster became an exercise in gentrification, and as indicated in recent research – such as Bloomberg Citylab’s 2019 study – ‘recovery from Katrina was terribly unequal, and disasters pave the way for the replacement of the poor by the much more affluent.’⁴³⁴ To suggest that only low-income families were displaced, however, would belie the storm’s impact on the black middle class of New Orleans. In an article entitled ‘Katrina Washed Away New Orleans’s Black Middle Class’ written ten years after the storm, Ben Casselman asserts:

African-Americans have long accounted for most of the city’s poor, but before the storm they also made up a majority of its middle class and were well represented among its doctors, lawyers and other professionals. After Katrina, the patterns changed: The poor are still overwhelmingly black, but the affluent and middle

⁴³¹ Anna Hartnell, *After Katrina: Race, Neoliberalism, and the End of The American Century* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2017), p.13.

⁴³² Ibid, p.87.

⁴³³ Adelaide H. Villmore and Peter G. Stillman, ‘Civic Culture and the Politics of Planning for Neighborhoods and Housing in Post-Katrina New Orleans’, in *Culture After Hurricanes: Rhetoric and Reinvention on the Gulf Coast*, ed. by M. B. Hackler (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), pp.17-43 (p.20).

⁴³⁴ Richard Florida, ‘How Natural Disasters Can Spur Gentrification’, *Bloomberg*, 12th February 2019 <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-12/new-orleans-gentrification-tied-to-hurricane-katrina>> [accessed 12th February 2021].

classes are increasingly white. Moreover, what remains of the black middle class is graying.⁴³⁵

Thus, when referring to the ways in which Katrina transformed neighborhoods and displaced communities, I am conscious of avoiding perpetuating any reductive claims around income and class when evidently the underlying issues are that of race (or, put better, racism). According to Casselman, ‘the non-Hispanic white population has nearly returned to its pre-storm total, and the Hispanic population, though still small compared with other Southern cities, has grown by more than 30 percent.’⁴³⁶ Meanwhile, ‘the trends have pushed the African-American share of the population down to 59 percent in 2013, from 66 percent in 2005.’⁴³⁷

Residential inequities are rarely framed as an ecological issue, but as Richard Florida summarizes:

another outcome of climate change is more frequent and fiercer natural disasters, and these can change the racial and class composition of cities. Devastating physical damage pushes existing populations out. This makes it easier for developers to assemble large tracts of land that can be rebuilt, not just to higher standards, but for far more advantaged groups, paving the way for a kind of mass gentrification.⁴³⁸

Before Katrina, decades of residential zoning and segregation resulted in a vast number of predominantly African American neighborhoods in New Orleans, and as Florida notes, ‘previous studies have found that mostly African-American neighborhoods are less likely to gentrify than neighborhoods with a lower percentage of black residents.’⁴³⁹ However, ‘damage from a hurricane could alter a neighborhood’s demographics by displacing large numbers of residents.’⁴⁴⁰ In this way, the ways in which ecological violence facilitates systematic gentrification, racialized disenfranchisement, and spatial dispossession are revealed. The state failed the residents of New Orleans in catastrophic and ongoing ways (firstly by failing to build adequate levees that would have protected residents, and then by neglecting to facilitate residents’ safe return after those levees were proven to be inadequate) choosing to nurture the tourism industry and entrepreneurship with little

⁴³⁵ Ben Casselman, ‘Katrina Washed Away New Orleans’s Black Middle Class’, *FiveThirtyEight*, 24th August 2015 <<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/katrina-washed-away-new-orleanss-black-middle-class>> [accessed 12th February 2021].

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ Florida, ‘How Natural Disasters Can Spur Gentrification’.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

regard for, to quote Casselman, ‘rising rents, gentrification and the erosion of the culture that made New Orleans special’.⁴⁴¹

Understanding the intersections between gentrification and environmental justice issues demonstrates the need for recognising the imbrications between water and racialized displacement as an elemental feature of the Plantationocene. Histories of water and forced migration circle back to the Middle Passage and once again remind us of the entanglements between human and natural histories particularly as they relate to water and racialization. As the disaster unfolded, politicians and media platforms categorised those displaced by the storm as ‘refugees’, but activists and residents quickly pointed out that this was a strategic and racist negation of American citizenship in ways that reflect histories of racialized capitalism which were dependent on inflicting homelessness as a requisite of black experience. For instance, in Spike Lee’s *When The Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), Michael Eric Dyson says:

Some people suggested that this was akin to slavery. “Oh no, you’re being hyperbolic. You’re just engaging in all forms of racial inflammatory rhetoric, calm down.’ Well, the fact is, they were treating them like slaves in the ship, families were being separated, children were being taken from their mothers and fathers. Those who were more weary and those who were more likely to be vulnerable were separated from those who were stronger. Babies literally ripped out of the arms of their mothers and fathers. The separation of the evacuation where people lost sight and lost sound and lost sense of their loved ones.⁴⁴²

Evie Shockley also connects Katrina to a much longer trajectory of racialized displacement that can be traced back to the largest ‘involuntary displacement of human beings’ in history, the Middle Passage.⁴⁴³ Shockley describes the Middle Passage as ‘a violent, forced migration carried out purposefully so as to prevent the retention of kinship groups, languages, or cultural practices that might have enabled black people to (re)create a home for themselves in the United States’ and prompts us to consider the ways in which these systems are extended over time, as manifest in Katrina.⁴⁴⁴ Similarly, in *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (1990), bell hooks grapples with the ways in which ongoing forms of displacement can be linked ‘to the collective journeying of black people, to the Middle Passage’.⁴⁴⁵ For Shockley, ‘nearly four centuries of violent, racist disregard for black humanity on what is now U.S. territory and the long-standing, ongoing history of blacks’ physical and cultural

⁴⁴¹ Casselman, ‘Katrina Washed Away New Orleans’s Black Middle Class’.

⁴⁴² *When The Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, dir. by Spike Lee (40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, 2006).

⁴⁴³ *Ibid*, p.98.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.98.

⁴⁴⁵ bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p.42.

displacement here combine to create a kind of *social terror* that can be described as ‘gothic homelessness’.⁴⁴⁶ It is gothic homelessness, she argues, that ‘has made the Katrina disaster a particularly harrowing experience for African Americans’.⁴⁴⁷

I choose not to uphold Shockley’s use of the Gothic throughout this exploration because I do not believe that Gothicism necessarily reflects the aesthetics we find in the photographs I turn to throughout this examination. However, I do find Shockley’s observations regarding the continued exclusion of African Americans from dominant domestic configurations useful to the discussion at hand. ‘If domestic ideology asks us to think in term of a private/ public divide, with the “home” as a kind of safe haven from the dangers, diseases, and degradation of the streets, African Americans have been doubly denied participation in this social configuration’ writes Shockley.⁴⁴⁸ Instead, African American dwellings are rendered porous, ‘made permeable (by law or lawlessness) to Ku Klux Klan posses, police invasion, state welfare agencies, and unchecked crime’ – and, as evident in the devastation of predominantly black neighbourhoods in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, also pervious to water and toxins.⁴⁴⁹ We can think of this alongside Wai Chee Dimock’s notion of flooded containers. Dimock argues that rather than being ‘contained within a single nation,’ history becomes an ‘instance of the flooded container: flooded, in this case, by the casual web that links it, against the illusion of sovereignty, to cross-currents affecting the entire planet.’⁴⁵⁰ She conceives of flooded containers in relation to Katrina, ‘when a seemingly secure jurisdiction suddenly bursts at the seams, becoming a kind of flooded container, flooded by an outside that refuses to stay out’.⁴⁵¹ In this context, the house is also a flooded container; flooded in the literal sense by water, but also by historical plantation logics which, I argue, can be traced back to the slave ship. All of these discussions are useful in conceptualising representations of home in the Plantationocene and black diaspora, both of which can be traced back to the forced migration of Africans across the Atlantic.

⁴⁴⁶ Shockley, p.98.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Wai Chee Dimock, ‘World History according to Katrina’, in *States of Emergency: The Object of American Studies*, ed. By Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), pp.143-160 (p.152).

⁴⁵¹ Ibid, p.146.

Having identified aqueously mediated displacement as a longstanding and ongoing feature of the Plantationocene, I want to consider the relationship between photography and belonging in the black diaspora. To quote Camp:

How do black families and communities in diaspora use family photography to carve out a place for themselves in the [...] contexts they come to call home? What do these images tell us about the processes of self, community, and homemaking in which they were engaged, and how do they use photography to communicate this?⁴⁵²

I cannot think of the water-damaged photographs that surfaced and were salvaged in the wake of Katrina without being reminded of bell hooks' essay, 'In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life':

The word *remember* (*re-member*) evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds. Using images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye.⁴⁵³

hooks helps us to comprehend the importance of photography in relation to the black diaspora by outlining the significance of camera-ownership for African Americans, advocating that it offered a new mode of political intervention by allowing them to disrupt 'white control over black images' and thereby 'resist misrepresentation' and erasure:

When the psychohistory of a people is marked by ongoing loss, when entire histories are denied, hidden, erased, documentation can become an obsession. The camera must have seemed a magical instrument to many of the displaced and marginalized groups trying to carve out new destinies for themselves in the Americas. More than any other image-making tool, the camera offered African-Americans, disempowered in white culture, a way to empower themselves through representation. For black folks, the camera provided a means to document a reality that could, if necessary, be packed, stored, moved from place to place. It was documentation that could be shared, passed around. And, ultimately, these images, the world they recoded, could be hidden, to be discovered at another time.⁴⁵⁴

This notion of photographic recuperation – particularly as it relates to resisting systems of loss and displacement which pervade the diaspora– resonates with the images I describe throughout this discussion, and helps us to ascribe such photographs their due political significance. This discussion engages with vernacular photography – as in, 'not made as art'

⁴⁵² Camp, *Image Matters*, p.14.

⁴⁵³ hooks, p.64.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, p.59-60.

photographs, ‘defined as a genre of everyday image-making most often created by amateur photographers and intended as documents of personal history’.⁴⁵⁵ These photographs demonstrate the ways in which, to quote Camp, ‘photography is an everyday strategy of affirmation and a confrontational practice of visibility’.⁴⁵⁶ In *In the Wake*, Christina Sharpe writes, ‘I am interested in plotting, mapping, and collecting the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and in tracking the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially.’⁴⁵⁷ That is why I propose that when seeking to understand the relationship between the Plantationocene and photography in relation to Katrina, we turn not to the sensationalised images of the hurricane and the terror it induced, but to everyday photographs and waterlogged archives that (when also viewed in light of the discussions of material witnessing outlined above) prompt us to engage with, to quote Brian Wallis, ‘the role of artifactual objects – such as photographs – in any individual’s contested daily social, political and personal interactions’.⁴⁵⁸

‘Post Katrina: Books and Photographs Found After the Flood’: Vernacular Image-Making and Hurricane Katrina

‘Not all photographs wait to be found. Some return uninvited.’⁴⁵⁹

- Shawn Michelle Smith

‘within the urgency of witnessing a present that the witness knows very well he will not survive, within the event itself, images suddenly appear, in spite of it all’⁴⁶⁰

- Georges Didi-Huberman

In November 2006, Stan Strembecki, who had been photographing New Orleans since 1982, travelled to the city – still marked by the storm – and began capturing ‘objects in the debris field’.⁴⁶¹ ‘I looked for symbols of loss, and gravitated to found photo albums, wedding albums, snapshots’, Strembecki explains.⁴⁶² There are other collections that include personal

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid, p.7.

⁴⁵⁶ Camp, *Listening to Images*, p.7.

⁴⁵⁷ Sharpe, p.13.

⁴⁵⁸ Brian Wallis quoted in Camp, *Image Matters*, p.8

⁴⁵⁹ Smith, p.10.

⁴⁶⁰ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, translated by Shane B. Lillis (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), p.30.

⁴⁶¹ Stan Strembecki, Post Katrina: Books and Photographs Found After the Flood <<https://www.lensculture.com/articles/stan-strembecki-post-katrina-books-and-photographs-found-after-the-flood>> [accessed 12th March 2021].

⁴⁶² Ibid.

photographs that in some form survived the deluge, but I have chosen Strembicki's project entitled 'Post Katrina: Books and Photographs Found After the Flood' as the collection through which to explore the impact of the storm through the lens of vernacular photographs, in part, because of the ways in which Strembicki's photographic ethos resonates with the discussions of care outlined above. 'I made a few rules for myself. No photographs of homeless citizens in distress [...] I also stayed out of homes that were still in some way intact [...] I brought along a 60mm macro lens and made photographs on location of the objects I found, taking nothing with me but images', Strembicki recalls.⁴⁶³ Strembicki's collection can therefore be understood as a careful curation of vernacular photography originally produced by the displaced, ordinary people, who took and posed in the snapshots. Through Strembicki's collection, we behold photographs of photographs taken by the anonymous photographers whose work he presents. In focusing on vernacular image-making as it surfaces throughout the collection, I believe we are able to further engage with Campt's claims that vernacular photographs in the black diaspora serve as a 'a record of the ever-present wounded kinship and the dialectic of belonging and unbelonging, presence and absence, of lost and found, orphaned and fugitive relations that is constitutive of both the family and diaspora' but from a decidedly ecological perspective.⁴⁶⁴ The water-damaged personal photos that Strembicki found and captured in the wake of Katrina bear witness to the imbrications between the ecological and the domestic. Like the family photographs that represent the African diaspora in Europe which Campt examines throughout *Image Matters*, these African American vernacular photographs that were recuperated after Katrina also record the diasporic dialectic of belonging and unbelonging that Campt describes, but they also materially register how central water has been, and continues to be, to this experience.

Given the ever-increasing accessibility of image-making tools and storage devices, 'all manner of ordinary or banal photographic images are so prevalent in our culture that they are most often overlooked and underexamined', as Brian Wallis explains.⁴⁶⁵ Nonetheless, *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography* (2020), a collection (born out of a symposium) edited by Tina M. Campt, Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg, and Brian Wallis, marks a revival of critical discussions around everyday

⁴⁶³ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴ Campt, *Image Matters*, p.204.

⁴⁶⁵ Brian Wallis, 'Why Vernacular Photography? The Limits and Possibilities of a Field', in *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography*, ed. by Tina M. Campt, Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg, and Brian Wallis (New York: The Walther Collection, 2020), pp.17-21 (p.17).

photographs. Much of the earlier reflections on vernacular photographs are indebted to Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980) in which he outlines his theory of the *punctum*, referring to the affective capacities of the photograph – a theory he introduces in relation to a personal photo of his deceased mother.⁴⁶⁶ Barthes conceives of the *punctum* as being the counterpart to the *studium*, which he describes as the prescribed cultural knowledge systems that inform a viewer's interpretation of an image. In contrast, the *punctum* is a small, affective detail that pierces through trained readings of an image and evokes a personal response instead – one that entails loss and temporal convolution. Despite Barthes' oft cited *Camera Lucida* taking quotidian images as its focal point, vernacular photography has long been a contentious subject for visual art theorists. As Wallis reminds us, 'in 2000, the photo historian Geoffrey Batchen noted the categorical problem this new interest in vernacular photography posed' because they 'challenged the art historical formalist precepts of the history of photography not only because of their sheer omnipresence and variety but also, and worse, because of what is often perceived as their dull or repetitive qualities.'⁴⁶⁷ It is precisely these qualities, however, that inspire Wallis to call for new approaches to everyday photographs, repositioning ordinary images 'as symbolic and inherently political objects that communicate, tell stories, evoke memories, predict futures' but 'require attentive engagement, active listening, and ongoing critical interrogation'.⁴⁶⁸ Crucially, as the editors put it in the introduction to *Imagining Everyday Life*, vernacular photographs 'are often fragile and neglected artifacts portraying underrepresented, oppositional, marginalized, misunderstood, or effaced communities. In this respect, these fugitive images may offer precisely the material and methodological terms for future historical reconsiderations.'⁴⁶⁹

What the following exploration seeks to demonstrate are the ways in which critical discussions of vernacular photography might be used to reconceptualise emergent conceptualisations of the Plantationocene. I have argued throughout this thesis that existing theorisations of the Plantationocene fail to engage with the racialized structures of the plantation and its afterlives, and that in this way theories of the Plantationocene risk

⁴⁶⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), p.28.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, p.18.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, p.21.

⁴⁶⁹ Tina M. Campt, Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg, and Brian Wallis 'Introduction', in *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography*, ed. by Tina M. Campt, Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg, and Brian Wallis (New York: The Walther Collection, 2020), pp.11-13 (p.13).

reproducing the generalised logic of Anthropocene discourse. One overriding criticism of theories of the Anthropocene (which also translates to existing Plantationocene discourse), is that, as Lesley Duxbury puts it, it is ‘difficult to comprehend or connect with in an appreciable way’.⁴⁷⁰ In the words of Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker, ‘Although framed in a language of urgency and impending crisis, “climate change” has taken on an abstract quality in contemporary Western societies. Melting ice caps and rising sea levels are “perceived as spatially and temporally distant” (Sloucum 2004, 1) from our everyday lives.’⁴⁷¹ What I am proposing is that by engaging with vernacular photographs salvaged after Hurricane Katrina, we are able to apprehend the ways in which such photo-objects demystify the Plantationocene and how it constellates into everyday life. The water-damaged, personal photographs that I turn to throughout this chapter, materially and symbolically register patterns of ecological, racialized violence that can be traced back to slavery and the Middle Passage and serve as a physical reminder of the ways in which these systems intrude on the lives of the communities they continue to violate. Photographic theory, particularly discussions around vernacular image-making, helps us to understand how these ordinary photographs (albeit extraordinarily damaged by the storm) resist the racialized capitalism’s – or the Plantationocene’s – disregard for black life, by affirming black kinship and care.

⁴⁷⁰ Lesley Duxbury, ‘A Change in the Climate: New Interpretations and Perceptions of Climate Change through Artistic Interventions and Representations’, *Weather, Climate, and Society*, 2, 4 (2010), pp.294-299 (p.294).

⁴⁷¹ Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Lowen Walker, ‘*Weathering*: Climate Change and the “Thick Time” of Transcorporeality’, *Hypatia*, 29, 3 (2014), pp.558-575 (p.559).

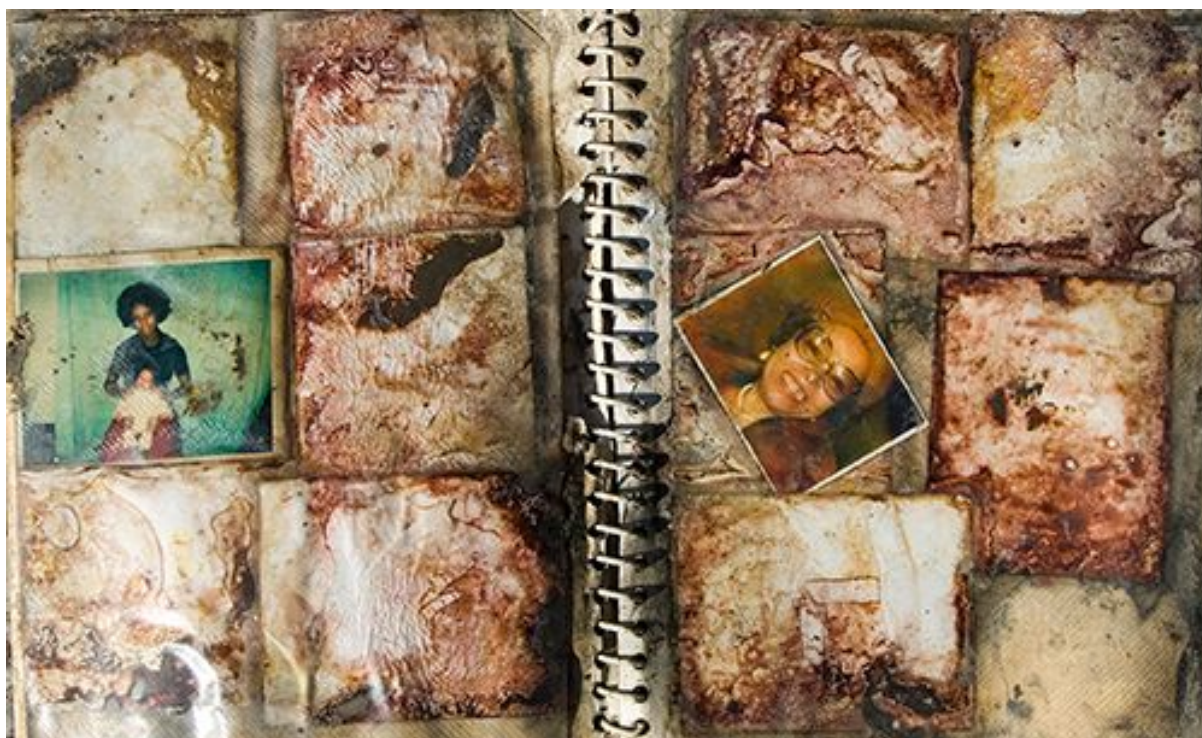


Figure 5. Stan Strembicki, *Post Katrina: Books and Photographs Found After the Flood*
<< <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/stan-strembicki-post-katrina-books-and-photographs-found-after-the-flood#slideshow>>> [accessed 3rd March 2022]

In the words of John Berger, 'Photographs bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation ... [It] is already a message about the event it records ... At its simplest, the message, decoded, means: *I have decided that seeing this is worth recording*'.⁴⁷² What becomes apparent through the patterns of representation that emerge in 'Post Katrina: Books and Photographs Found After the Flood', is that for both Strembicki and the anonymous photographers to whom the displaced polaroids belong, kinship and family are among the experiences most worthy of being recorded. Curators of family photo-albums are able to construct narratives of the family, not only through the optics of kinship contained within the photographs, but through the ways in which they are assembled. The geometric sequencing of the album depicted above, for instance, involves overlapping polaroids that visually convey the interconnected lives of the family (even though the storm washed their image off of the surface of many of the photos). As such, although there are layers of ambiguity surrounding these photographs, the sequencing of them, along with iconography of family photo-albums, means that we are automatically able to deduce a key message through their presence; there was a family, their image was once carefully curated within this artefact. From the Middle Passage to mass incarceration, racialized families have

⁴⁷² John Berger quoted in Camp, *Image Matters*, p.7.

been subject to systems of estrangement that weaponize the ocean, toxic water, and extreme weather. In this way, in the face of ongoing ecological violence enacted against black families, these photo-albums are a quiet but radical affirmation of care, closeness, connection and belonging. Nicole R. Fleetwood draws on the ways in which the carceral economy has impacted her family, reflecting on photographs taken during visitations to see incarcerated relatives, in order to assert that ‘incarcerated people and their loved ones use visual art and photographs as practices of belonging, while the prison regime works to eviscerate familial, intimate, and social relations.’⁴⁷³ In her words, ‘As the state continues to attack and disrupt families of black, Latino, poor, immigrant, and gender nonconforming people, incarcerated subjects find ways to create practices of belonging through visual culture.’⁴⁷⁴ As evident in the aftermath of Katrina, the systems of state-sanctioned estrangement to which Fleetwood alludes extend beyond the boundaries of the prison industrial complex; and the photographs that surfaced in the wake of storm, like those Fleetwood gestures toward, are the materialization of practices of belonging against the underlying threat of violence and separation that pervades the Plantationocene.



Figure 6. Stan Strembecki, *Post Katrina: Books and Photographs Found After the Flood*

⁴⁷³ Nicole R. Fleetwood, ‘Troubling Portraiture: Photographic Portraits and the Carceral Archive’, in *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography*, ed. by Tina M. Campt, Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg, and Brian Wallis (New York: The Walther Collection, 2020), pp.115-120 (p.115).

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

<< <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/stan-strembicki-post-katrina-books-and-photographs-found-after-the-flood#slideshow>>> [accessed 3rd March 2022]

Photographs of children are particularly haunting in this regard. As Wallis notes, in the twentieth century, children became the centre of family life, and this social belief continues to be reflected in the curation of family photo-albums which children are typically a focus of. Wallis asserts that ‘such common images assiduously document growth, not in order to stop time or defy death, as photography is sometimes describes as doing, but as an inheritance – a time-spanning gift – passed along to the next generation’.⁴⁷⁵ In the context of the discussion at hand, however, photographs have been separated from the families to which they belong, and the ritual of familial photographic inheritance has therefore been ruptured. Such photographs are, in effect, orphaned objects. Thy Phu categorises orphan images as ‘materials whose provenance is unknown and whose hallmark, accordingly, is a seemingly irretrievable sense of loss’.⁴⁷⁶ We can relate this notion of loss to the Plantationocene’s systems of estrangement as well as to the absences that emerge through our viewing conditions. In the words of Phu, as long as orphaned images are ‘separated from their owners/makers, whatever stories they tell can be only partially gleaned from what remains in them.’⁴⁷⁷

Unlike the images Phu refers to, the orphan status of the photographs found by Strembicki is ecologically generated; such photographs were displaced by floodwaters which not only transported the images but (through water-damage) produced further absences within them. Take, for instance, the image below in which the water-colour effect blends away the subject’s eyes: the storm interrupts the familial gaze. Marianne Hirsch’s theorisation of the familial gaze takes into account the ways in which ‘Familial looking is embedded in other extrafamilial looks and gazes’ – we see this in the ways in which newspaper clippings, for example, infiltrate the family photo-album, reminding us that ‘to look is also, always, to be seen.’⁴⁷⁸ However, I am more interested in the fact that, to quote Hirsch, ‘familial gazing can only be pursued to its full end when looking at an image of one’s own family’.⁴⁷⁹ That is to say that, from the peripheries of the family network, we can only

⁴⁷⁵ Wallis, p.19-20.

⁴⁷⁶ Thy Phu, ‘Photos Unhomed: Orphan Images and Militarized Visual Kinship’, *Family Photographs, Guest Edited by Deepali Dewan* (2018) <<<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0009.108>>> [accessed 12th March 2021].

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁸ Marianne Hirsch, ‘Introduction: Familial Looking’, in *The Familial Gaze*, ed. by Marianne Hirsch (London: University Press of New England, 1999), pp.xi-xxiv (p.xv).

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, p.46.

draw on familial conventions to ascribe the subject a typical role or narrative: there are secrets within every family (and their photographs) that escape the recognition of strangers. The orphan status of the photographs found by Strembicki is compounded by the irretrievability of the familial looks once registered in the frames; even if they were returned to their owners, there is no longer a returned gaze to stare back at.



Figure 7. Stan Strembicki, *Post Katrina: Books and Photographs Found After the Flood*
<< <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/stan-strembicki-post-katrina-books-and-photographs-found-after-the-flood#slideshow>>> [accessed 3rd March 2022]

How, then, does the rupture of the familial gaze impact the ways in which these orphaned images bear witness and inform our viewing experience? In many ways, the aqueously erased gaze of the subject is symbolic of the process of anonymization that tends to occur when images are transferred from the private to public sphere. This process, as Phu writes,

'lays bare a core epistemological challenge: What can and what should we know about these photographs?'.⁴⁸⁰ In the case of the photos found by Strembicki, we know very little and as far as we are aware, since their publication, those in connection with the images have not come forward to publicly disclose the contexts of the photographs or announce the identity of the subjects depicted therein. This speaks to what Campt describes as the 'fugivity' of orphan images – as in, the ways in which they uphold a pledge to secrecy by withholding informatic identification.⁴⁸¹ In this way, the quiet refusal both surrounding and embedded in the photographs instate boundaries between the private and public despite the anthropogenic ecologies (like extreme weather) that infiltrate family dynamics in the age of the Plantationocene.

We might understand this in relation to Glissant's call for 'the right to opacity for everyone'.⁴⁸² Glissant asserts that opacity is crucial to the formation of political subjectivities and the foundation of freedom by illuminating how the governing logic that underpins Western thought has sought tirelessly to render the racialized Other transparent, thereby subjecting them to ongoing processes of possession and reduction. Framed by Glissant using the language of legality through notion of rights, this call for opacity resonates with debates surrounding who and what has the right to bear witness. In the words of Zach Blas, 'A politics of opacity [...] establishes itself in contradistinction to state-based forms of legal recognition, which necessitate the elimination of ambiguity to obtain the rights of a free citizen.'⁴⁸³ Concepts of entangled 'witness collectivities', to borrow Sheikh's term, and testimonial 'constellations', to borrow Sybille Krämer and Sigrid Weigel's, destabilize Western positivism which only recognises that which is supported by scientific data as truth.⁴⁸⁴ Further, despite the legal oath taken by those who bear witness in court to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, ironically, 'it is testimony's imperfections that bear witness to the fact of violence', writes Weizman, alluding to the relationship between trauma and memory loss.⁴⁸⁵ Testimony is always

⁴⁸⁰ Thy Phu, 'Intimate Estrangements and the Shape of the Family', in *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography*, ed. by Tina M. Campt, Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg, and Brian Wallis (New York: The Walther Collection, 2020), pp.219-269 (p.293).

⁴⁸¹ Campt, *Image Matters*, p.90.

⁴⁸² Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* translated by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University Michigan Press, 1997), p.190.

⁴⁸³ Zach Blas, 'Informatic Opacity', in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), << available at <http://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/24032/>>> [accessed 23rd March 2021].

⁴⁸⁴ Sheikh, p.44.

⁴⁸⁵ Weizman, p.45.

mediated (even if just by time) and is therefore prone to gaps, but what I am proposing is that the testimonial absences within and surrounding the photographs in question, not only mimic the nature of memory, but uphold a politics of refusal wherein witness collectivities – entailing both the human and more-than-human – merge to sustain a degree of opacity, refusing total recognition or comprehension. In this way, these photos affirm what Lisa Deml (drawing on the work of Schuppli) synthesises as the material witness’ capacity to ‘map out nuanced navigations between material evidence and ambiguity, between documenting and caring for the integrity of marginalised materials and precarious subjects.’⁴⁸⁶ Strembicki’s role is crucial in this process. He does not pursue intrusive methods of identification or employ photographic technologies in order to restore the damaged images. Instead, Strembicki’s artistic remediation of the material witness insists that there is meaning to be found in the evidentiary status of the object.

In the collection of uncaptioned images, the found photographs are tightly framed within each composition and the wider surroundings are excluded from view. On the one hand, Strembicki’s careful staging of the object creates the illusion of immediacy, producing the impression that we are encountering the polaroids directly as opposed to beholding a remediated version of them captured through Strembicki’s 60mm macro lens. In *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (1999), Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin describe immediacy as being a style of (re)mediation characterised by ‘a transparent interface ... one that erases itself, so that the user would no longer be aware of confronting a medium, but instead would stand in an immediate relationship with the contents of the medium’.⁴⁸⁷ It could, therefore, be argued that Strembicki renders his curatorial role invisible, creating a semblance of un-interference when, in fact, the collection has gone through a deliberate process of selection and curation. As J. J. Long argues, collecting and archiving objects, images, and artefacts, is usually accompanied by a process of decontextualization wherein ‘the specific histories of the object and its conditions of production and use’ are overlooked whilst ‘the collection has the capacity to assign new value to objects that fall within its system’.⁴⁸⁸ However, my interpretation is that the intention behind the sense immediacy that emerges throughout Strembicki’s collection is not to mislead the viewer by diverting

⁴⁸⁶ Lisa Deml, ‘Book Review: Susan Schuppli, ‘Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence’’, *Third Text: Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*, 10th September 2021 << <http://thirdtext.org/deml-materialwitness>>> [accessed 1st September 2022].

⁴⁸⁷ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: Mit Press, 2000), p.23-24.

⁴⁸⁸ J. J. Long, *W. G. Sebald- Image, Archive, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p.28.

our attention away from his role in organizing our viewing of the polaroids. To the contrary, my sense is that the severance of the found photographs from their new surroundings by focusing in on the artefacts, the deliberate absence of captions, and the selection of numerous photographs in which the subjects' facial features are blurred, all work towards frustrating the viewers desire to fully know or understand the contexts from which these images were born. First, the contextual absences that haunt the collection are a reminder of Strembicki's position outside of the familial networks presented in the images. In addition, the omission of contextual details – both visually and in the accompanying text (or, lack thereof) – also encourages the viewer to adopt what McKittrick describes as a deciphering practice influenced by Glissant's call for opacity which asks us to 'embrace one another without desiring to totally know and consume each other. (*I don't have to explain why this is important—we know how the figure of the objectified black functions in our world as transparently knowable [...] how Glissant is explicitly unsettling these racist logics.*)'⁴⁸⁹ As David Deitcher writes in relation to the recovery of unclaimed vernacular photographs, 'The fact that these photographs can only perpetuate uncertainty regarding precisely what they picture in no way detracts from the significance of their recovery... Nor should the importance of this modest salvage operation be denied on the basis of its more speculative (and therefore depreciated) historical method.'⁴⁹⁰ In many ways, Deitcher says, 'defiance [...] informs the salvage of [...] vernacular photographs which the majority of culture has found unworthy of preservation and study, consideration and care'.⁴⁹¹ This defiance is registered in Strembicki's determined channelling of the viewer's attention on to the orphaned photo-objects, which challenges any longing we may have for them to be re-presented in categorised and contextualized formats.

In other words, against the backdrop of state surveillance, these photos, orphaned and opaque, affirm fragments of the past without reducing it completely to informatic identification and contextualisation to be comprehended, or consumed, by the public. This opacity is particularly significant given the patterns of surveillance and neoliberalism that critics have observed specifically in relation to New Orleans. In *After Katrina: Race, Neoliberalism, and the End of the American Century* (2017), Hartnell engages with the ways in which the sensationalist news coverage of the storm – abundant with reports of looting and

⁴⁸⁹ Katherine McKittrick, 'Dear April: The Aesthetics of Black Miscellanea', *Antipode*, 54, 1 (2021), pp.3-18 (p.7).

⁴⁹⁰ David Deitcher quoted in Camp, *Image Matters*, p.91.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

violence amongst African Americans – served the neoliberal narrative that the storm provided a redemptive opportunity to remake the city. ‘[Lauren] Berlant suggests that the surveillance state means that everyday life for *everybody* has become “an audition for citizenship” [...] but as the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina showed [...] the relationship between the camera and African-American bodies remains especially troubling’, writes Hartnell.⁴⁹² The opaque photographs drawn on throughout this chapter, however, to invoke McKittrick, require us to ‘live with the difficult and frustrating ways of knowing differentially. (And some things we can keep to ourselves. They cannot have everything.[...]) They cannot have everything.’⁴⁹³



Figure 8. Stan Strembicki, *Post Katrina: Books and Photographs Found After the Flood*
 << <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/stan-strembicki-post-katrina-books-and-photographs-found-after-the-flood#slideshow>>> [accessed 3rd March 2022]

What we find in these photos is a material and symbolic reminder of the ways in which the past interrupts the present; such photographs are indeed emblems of quotidian acts of resistance, but they are also haunted by older histories of displacement and dispossession. Much of the enchantment around photography is due to the perceived ways in which the camera is capable of arresting time, but as Smith puts it, ‘this stopping of time is also the

⁴⁹² Hartnell, p.114.

⁴⁹³ McKittrick, *Dear Science*, p.7.

starting of another time, the temporal trajectory of the photograph itself, and that time is multiple.’⁴⁹⁴ As Smith explains in *Photographic Returns: Racial Justice and the Time of Photography*, ‘the photograph does not return from a single past, the moment of its making, but accumulates the many pasts through which it passes, both synchronically and diachronically. The photograph is a record of a moment and its many possible receptions, and in this way it is always of pasts and presents and futures.’⁴⁹⁵ Thus, while the photographs I draw on may have depicted families and communities as they wished to be viewed in a particular moment, they take on new meanings as they endure the passage of time. Like the European photographs Campt describes in *Image Matters*, these photos ‘have circulated privately and publicly; they are images that travelled within families across different generations and, in some cases, even across oceans and continents.’⁴⁹⁶ In the case of the photographs I turn to, this physical movement through time (wherein the photograph takes on the multiple temporalities Smith describes) is evidenced through eco-material intra-actions which are registered within the frames. Here, I am drawing Karen Barad’s concept of intra-activity which she describes as the ‘causal (but nondeterministic) enactments through which matter-in-the-process-of-becoming is sedimented out and enfolded in further materializations.’⁴⁹⁷ We see this in the ways in which the water-marked photographs considered here are a repository of different (sometimes competing) memories; that is, the memories of the people they depict, as well as material traces of the storm.

‘The photograph is emblematic of the way a past continues to inhabit and punctuate a present, and also one of the central vehicles through which that temporal collision takes place’, writes Smith.⁴⁹⁸ Thus, photographs are precisely the kind of emblems that help us in conceptualising the Plantationocene (which asks us to engage with the ways in which histories of the plantation ecologically emerge in the present). The photographs I refer to throughout this discussion are particularly useful in this regard. Histories of the Middle Passage, memories of Hurricane Katrina, and emergent Plantationocene futures collide in the photographs in question because storm-water is super-imposed onto these family frames – and, as I have argued throughout this thesis, water is always materially loaded with plantation pasts. Again, I am thinking of Sharpe’s notion of residence time and the ways in

⁴⁹⁴ Smith, p.5.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Campt, *Image Matters*, p.17.

⁴⁹⁷ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), p.170.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid, p.1.

which ‘Africans who were in the holds [...] are alive in hydrogen, in oxygen; in carbon, in phosphorous, and iron; in sodium and chlorine.’⁴⁹⁹ As Sharpe emphasizes, traces of those who were drowned during the Middle Passage materially persist in bodies of water. In this way, the waterlogged photographs I describe bear the imprint of those overthrown during the Middle Passage. It is also crucial to remember that the polaroids photographed by Strembricki are marked by storm water that was generated by human actions.

Anthropogenic climate change likely impacted the ferocity of Hurricane Katrina because of the ways in which rising sea levels and water vapor in the atmosphere (symptoms of global warming) are connected to an increased risk of flooding due to storm surge. In the case of Katrina, these factors coincided with an inadequate levee system which further exacerbated the storm-related risks of global warming. Further, according to a Climate Signals article:

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, the impacts to life and property were disproportionately borne by the Black community. The hardest hit areas in the New Orleans and Biloxi-Gulfport coastal regions were 46 percent Black and 21 percent poor compared to undamaged areas which were 26 percent Black and 15 percent poor.⁵⁰⁰

In this way, the evidential artefacts photographed by Strembricki – polaroids of Black families in their water damaged form after Hurricane Katrina – are also a record of anthropogenic environmental racism and catastrophe. As such, these photographs bear witness to various plantation temporalities, reminding us of the ways in which histories of aqueously mediated violence stretching back to the Middle Passage haunt us in an era of racialized climate change. In aiding the perception of these continuities, these photo-objects facilitate what Sheikh describes as witness collectivities; they possess the potential to become legible because of the ways in which the photograph, people, and water merge when apprehending the photograph’s various iterations, which body forth inscriptions that, when decoded, bring us closer to understanding Plantationocene pasts, presents, and futures.

In this sense, it is useful to think of the watermarked photographs captured by Strembricki in terms of what we might describe as post-Katrina polaroid patina. As Shannon Lee Dawdy explains in *Patina: A Profane Archaeology*, Katrina patina was a term ascribed to the watermarks that were imprinted on all kinds of objects after the deluge. Dawdy argues that in patina we find ‘a social palimpsest of New Orleans’, because, in her words:

⁴⁹⁹ Sharpe, p.19.

⁵⁰⁰ Climate Signals, *Hurricane Katrina 2005* (2021) <<<https://www.climatesignals.org/events/hurricane-katrina-2005>>> [accessed 1st March 2021].

The dead are a creative force in ongoing life. If we understand a city as a churning assemblage of human and nonhuman elements undergoing processes of accumulation, demolition, decay and rebirth [...] then the New Orleans habit of granting recognition to old things seems entirely warranted, if unusually alert. Patina represents generations of social formation.⁵⁰¹

In the polaroid patina we encounter through Strembicki's collection we apprehend the convergence of different temporalities and agencies – both human and more-than-human. Thus, when placed in conversation with Schuppli's work on material witnessing, these patina-marked photographs, can be understood as evidentiary artefacts wherein we behold the imbrications 'between entities and events that enables even minor forms of material evidence to gather and testify on behalf of much larger political processes'.⁵⁰² Schuppli asserts that material witnesses are capable of 'harboring direct evidence of events as well as providing circumstantial evidence of the interlocutory methods and epistemic frameworks whereby such matter comes to be consequential'.⁵⁰³ The polaroids drawn on throughout this chapter are inscribed with evidence of the hurricane (manifest in the patina recorded on their surfaces), and provide circumstantial evidence – through content and interpretation – that testify to the intimate consequences of the anthropogenic disaster that lay bare the epistemic failures of theories of the Plantationocene that fail to attend to the racialized structures of the epoch.

Photography facilitates processes through which witness collectivities – as in, 'alternate modes of witnessing that operate across scales and entities – including the technical and more-than-human' – emerge.⁵⁰⁴ Recognising this means de-centering the humancentric conceptualisations of image-making that have long dominated visual theory. As Joanna Zylińska writes, in art history 'photographs are positioned as discrete objects that yield themselves to being framed and displayed' with little critical attention paid to the ways in which they are 'subject to dynamic and ongoing processes of mediation – only some of which involve humans'.⁵⁰⁵ In *Nonhuman Photography* (2017), Zylińska responds to these trends by calling for a posthuman philosophy of photography by turning to 'practices from which the human is absent' – as in, photographs that are 'not *of* the human', 'not *by* the human', 'not *for* the human'.⁵⁰⁶ Zylińska advocates that adopting posthuman ways of seeing enables an expansion of 'the temporal scale beyond that of human history' that will enhance

⁵⁰¹ Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Patina: A Profane Archaeology* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p.8.

⁵⁰² Schuppli, p.27-28.

⁵⁰³ Ibid, p.3.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid, p.309.

⁵⁰⁵ Joanna Zylińska, *Nonhuman Photography* (London: The MIT Press, 2017), p.3

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

our ability to grapple with planetary scale extinction in the age of the Anthropocene. My conceptualisation of photography differs from Zylinska because although I argue that photographs are porous to the more-than-human, I also uphold Camp's claim that they are 'records of [human] intention'.⁵⁰⁷ Even the examples of nonhuman photography that Zylinska cites are never entirely without human intervention given photography's dependency on humanmade technologies. Further, as I have argued, the photographs that I refer to record traces of the ways in which the depicted families intended to be seen. What is significant, though, are the ways in which those photographs (and intentions) are perpetually vulnerable to external social and environmental factors. Although we are aware of, to quote Drew Thompson, 'the possibility of losing Polaroids, due to either natural disasters, gentrification, or the deterioration of the image with time', we rarely acknowledge the ecological intra-actions that transpire through their materialization or address the ways in which they reflect our own ecological experiences.⁵⁰⁸

Polaroids are always embroiled in what Barad describes as the process of 'dynamic intra-active becoming that never sits still'.⁵⁰⁹ Barad uses the science of diffraction – as in, the molecular effect of ripples and waves (or, interference patterns) generated by a disturbance – as part of her conceptualisation of this process. Diffractive intra-actions are material-discursive processes in that they involve apprehension 'of the diffraction pattern, observing it, telling its story. In an important sense, this story in its ongoing (re)patterning is (re)(con)figuring me'.⁵¹⁰ Haraway also uses the theory of diffraction and advocates for ways of seeing and thinking diffractively by becoming attentive to 'the interference patterns on the recording films of our lives and bodies'.⁵¹¹ In order to grapple with the ways in which the photographs salvaged by Strembicki bear witness to the ongoing repatterning of the plantation, we ought to view them diffractively. After all, diffraction is optically registered through the interference patterns recorded on the surface of the photos. In the image below, for example, the image of two men, one embracing the other in his arm, is disturbed by the imprint of the floodwaters, which literally resemble intersecting wave patterns. Diffraction occurs through the collision of differences, and we can think about this in relation to the

⁵⁰⁷ Camp, *Image Matters*, p.6.

⁵⁰⁸ Drew Thompson, 'Polaroids and Loss', in *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography*, ed. by Tina M. Camp, Marianne Hirsch, Gil Hochberg, and Brian Wallis (New York: The Walther Collection, 2020), pp.284–289 (p.289).

⁵⁰⁹ Barad, p.170.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.172.

⁵¹¹ Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p.16.

photographs in question in two ways. First, these photographs, as records of diffraction, continually develop through a ‘complex network of human and nonhuman agents’ and help us to conceptualise the Plantationocene; different racialized ruptures – the Middle Passage, residential zoning, hurricane Katrina – are materially and discursively entangled. Secondly, when we attend to the materiality of the photograph more specifically, and the ways in which these photographs are literally inscribed with diffraction patterns, we might consider the ways in which these vernacular polaroids can be categorised as what Barad describes as diffraction apparatuses.⁵¹²

Consider a situation in which ocean waves impinge on a breakwater or some very large barrier with a sizable hole or gap in it. As the waves push through the gap, the waveforms bend and spread out [...]. The ocean waves are thus diffracted as they pass through the barrier; the barrier serves as a diffraction apparatus for ocean waves.⁵¹³

It is easy to grasp the ways in which the floodwaters interrupted the photographic content of the personal images here explored, but it is equally important to acknowledge the ways in which the photographs interrupted the trajectory of the water. I have argued that these photographs are, on the one hand, materialized representations of care and kinship, but that these photographs and the modes of belonging they affirm, are ruptured and made vulnerable to ecological violence. Thus, if ‘diffraction has to do with the way waves combine when they overlap and the apparent bending and spreading of waves that occurs when waves encounter an obstruction’, we might consider how these photographs emerged as diffraction apparatuses during the storm: opposing forces – as in, community modes of resistance and water – collided when the floodwaters impinged on these polaroids, and in so doing produced new material-discursive outcomes, like the discussion at hand.⁵¹⁴ This process of diffraction is crucial to the ways in which these photographs function as material witness which, as Schuppli reminds us, are always emergent, incipient entities – ‘Matter becomes a *material witness* only when the complex histories entangled within objects are unfolded, transformed into legible formats, and offered up for public consideration and debate.’⁵¹⁵ The material witness is not self-evident; it requires language and investigation – be it through artistic remediation or critical discussion – in order to retrieve and reconstruct

⁵¹² Barad, p.23.

⁵¹³ Ibid, p.74.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

⁵¹⁵ Schuppli, p.18.

the past. These interpretive processes through which the material witness is rendered legible, emerge, develop and diffract over time.



Figure 9. Stan Strembicki, *Post Katrina: Books and Photographs Found After the Flood* << <https://www.lensculture.com/articles/stan-strembicki-post-katrina-books-and-photographs-found-after-the-flood#slideshow>>> [accessed 3rd March 2022]

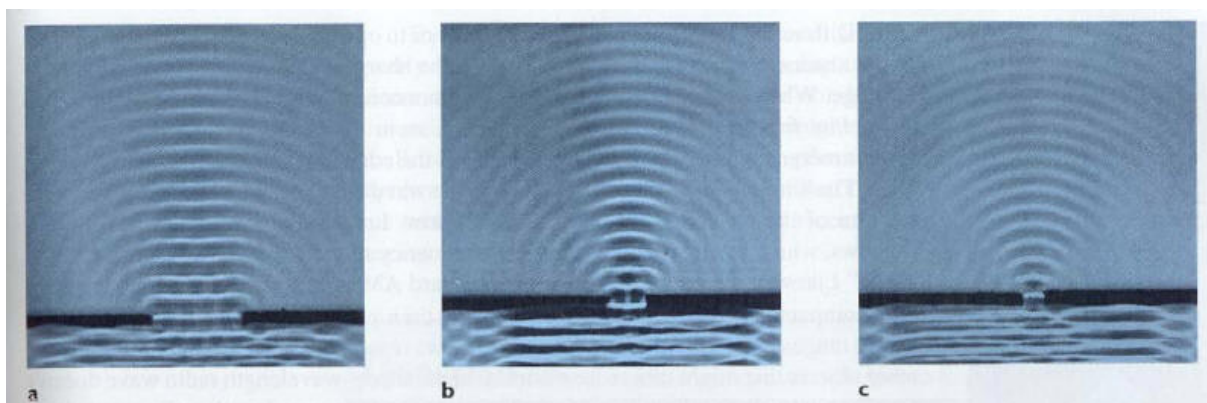


Figure 10: The University of Tennessee, Department of Physics, *Single Slit Diffraction*, << <http://labman.phys.utk.edu/phys136core/modules/m9/Diffractionpictures/single.htm>>> [accessed 10th March 2022].

We can also use the model of diffraction, as in the collision of different forces, to engage with the complexities surrounding care and witnessing. As Lisa Baraitser writes, ‘care [...] is inextricably bound up with histories of the antithesis to care, or failures of care, that bring on ways of thinking that we also need to take care of.’⁵¹⁶ Bearing witness to the Plantationocene through the recuperation of vernacular photographs involves what Baraitser describes as ‘the temporal practice of staying alongside others and ideas when care has failed; waiting, staying, delaying, enduring, returning, as the temporal forms that care takes’.⁵¹⁷ As Smith reminds us, ‘there is a temporal recursivity intrinsic to photography, a backward and forward movement inherent to the medium that invites such returns.’⁵¹⁸ Thus, when we honour the right to opacity but remain attentive to the ways in which photographs convey fragments of the past, photographic recuperation in the wake of Hurricane Katrina invites modes of witnessing predicated on care. Sharpe emphasises the importance of distinguishing ‘care from state-imposed regimes of surveillance. How can we think (and rethink and rethink) care laterally, in the register of the intramural, in a different relation than that of the violence of the state?’⁵¹⁹ Contrary to the proliferation of sensationalised images of Katrina-related violence, the polaroids in question throughout this discussion did not serve as a touchstone for media outlets or the government officials who featured on them in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. Rather, these family polaroids quietly bear witness to the storm while materializing quotidian practices of care and belonging. In this way, they help us to conceive of, to quote Sheikh, ‘witnessing as both a practice of care [...] and of political protest that contests contemporary (neoliberal, neo-colonial and extractivist) forms of governmentality’.⁵²⁰ These orphaned images, storied with ecological intra-actions, emerge as a way of remembering, to quote Sharpe, ‘the dead, those lost in the Middle Passage, those who arrived reluctantly, and those still arriving’, without reducing any of these plantation temporalities to empirical knowledge to be possessed.⁵²¹ In prompting us to engage with the ways in which the past continually supplements the present through the (sometimes opaque) lens of the familial and domestic, these photographs stage epistemological interventions in ontological definitions of the Plantationocene and ask us to think beyond positivist evidence and ecological data which

⁵¹⁶ Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p.14.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

⁵¹⁸ Smith, p.1.

⁵¹⁹ Sharpe, p.20.

⁵²⁰ Sheikh, p.150.

⁵²¹ Sharpe, p.20.

fails to account for everyday struggles against the plantation and its afterlives. In the words of Sharpe, ‘thinking needs care [...] and thinking and care need to stay in the wake.’⁵²²

Imagetext as Disaster Recovery in Sarah M. Broom’s *The Yellow House*

‘Ray snapped Polaroid images of the Yellow House’s demise, instant evidence that she misplaced and could not find when we came back around, months after the fact, asking “Did you see it? Did you see the house go down, Ray? Did you see?”’⁵²³

Observing the relationship between photography and the architecture of the house in ‘In Our Glory’, bell hooks describes the ‘walls of images in Southern black homes’ as ‘sites of resistance’.⁵²⁴ ‘These walls were a space where, in the midst of segregation, the hardship of apartheid, dehumanization could be countered’, asserts hooks.⁵²⁵ What happens, then, when as Sarah M. Broom writes in *The Yellow House*, the ‘story of [the] house [is] the only thing left’?⁵²⁶ ‘The Yellow House was witness to our lives’, Broom writes in the memoir, which she describes as being about ‘architecture and belonging and space’.⁵²⁷ As *The Yellow House* unfolds, it becomes clear that for Broom, like hooks, vernacular photographs are intimately connected to the structure of the house. In an interview with Sean O’Hagan, Broom said, ‘A book is like a house; it needs a support structure, beams, entrances and exits, all these layers of construction and form.’⁵²⁸ Broom explains that, in this way, writing the memoir became a way of re-building the home she lost during Katrina. Like the homes described by hooks, *The Yellow House* is furnished with photographs. The house cannot be reimagined without photography. Scanned polaroids and verbal recollections of family photographs adorn *The Yellow House*. In what follows, I examine how the memoir can be understood in relation to W. J. T. Mitchell’s concept of the imagetext, used to name pictures and texts that synthesise the visual and the verbal. While it is not always possible for Broom to optically reproduce the photographs she describes, language supplements the visual and, as such, the resultant imagetext can be understood as a form of photographic recuperation. Situating the imagetext within the broader context of post-Katrina disaster recovery, I explore how the

⁵²² Ibid, p.5.

⁵²³ Broom, p.230.

⁵²⁴ hooks, p.59.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

⁵²⁶ Broom, p.372.

⁵²⁷ Ibid, p.9, p.8.

⁵²⁸ Sarah M. Broom quoted in Sean O’Hagan, Sarah M. Broom: “There’s no easy way to write about your family”, *The Guardian* (2020) << <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/08/sarah-m-broom-theres-no-easy-way-to-write-about-your-family>>> [accessed 1st March 2021].

pages of the book, like the ‘walls of images in Southern black homes’, represent sites of photographic resistance.⁵²⁹

Writing about vernacular photography in the black diaspora, Campt synthesises how ‘forms of filiation and affiliation, linkage and belonging that family evokes constitute a crucial sensibility that registers in these images at multiple sensory and affective levels. It is a sensibility that begins with vision and sight, with *what we see*, but it certainly does not end there’.⁵³⁰ I am interested in how vernacular image-making, and the sensory and affective sensibilities it evokes, modulates into post-Katrina literature even when, as was the case following the storm, those very photographs are ostensibly lost due to being destroyed or displaced by water. In establishing the text and image relations that emerged following the disaster, I turn to Mitchell’s notion of the imagetext which he uses to describe the conjunctures between the visual and verbal. He writes that:

The difference between the visual and verbal is actually *two* differences, one grounded in the senses (seeing versus hearing), the other in the nature of signs and meaning (words as arbitrary, conventional *symbols*, as distinct from images as representations by virtue or likeness or similitude). The phrase “visual-verbal,” then, produces a productive confusion of signs and senses, ways of producing meaning and ways of inhabiting perceptual experience.⁵³¹

In other words, perceptual experience is always characterised by the conflation of senses – ‘all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no ‘purely’ visual or verbal arts’.⁵³² We can think of visual-verbal relations alongside the work of Anne-Marie Garat who conceives of the family photo-album as a kind of novel. Garat asserts that the ‘family album, in its naïve and defective way, certainly satisfies the immense need for a story [*le dit*] which for lack of written documents [*l’écrit*] haunts each family’.⁵³³ While we might initially interpret *The Yellow House* as an inversion of this model insofar as the written document is haunted by an incomplete visual archive of the family, the memoir not only reveals how language recovers lost images, but also demonstrates how crucial vernacular image-making has become to storytelling practices.

⁵²⁹ hooks, p.59.

⁵³⁰ Campt, *Image Matters*, p.13.

⁵³¹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture and Media Aesthetics* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.40.

⁵³² W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), p.5.

⁵³³ Anne-Marie Garat quoted in Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*, 2nd edition (London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021), p.5.

Thinking of the imagetext as a form of disaster recovery in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans, requires acknowledging the extent to which, for many residents, the loss of familial photographic archives was bound up in the traumatic experience of returning to a house in ruins. Broom's first memory of returning to New Orleans Eat after the floodwaters receded is of her friend and neighbour, Herman, leaping out of the car in search of family photographs. 'Herman rummaged through soaking-wet dresser drawers for photographs of his dead brother and my childhood friend Alvin. Searched for intact images of his mother, Big Karen, and his grandmother, Ms. Octavia, who had died of old age two years before. Came up short.', Broom recalls.⁵³⁴ The memory of Herman's search, verbally relayed by Broom, calls to mind those haunting scenes captured by Lee in *When the Levees Broke*, in which residents return to find family albums destroyed among the debris. Photographic recuperation thus became a part of the disaster recovery efforts that followed the crisis, with various nonprofit organizations, including Operation Photo Rescue and The Picture Project, established precisely for the purpose of finding and restoring photographs that were caught in the deluge.

The Picture Project, as the organization is called, takes to heart the oft-repeated assertion that the first things one saves from one's house in the event of a disaster, and conversely the most tragic things to be lost, are the family snapshots. While any number of domestic objects may hold significant financial or sentimental value – grandmother's pearls, the family bible, title deeds, diplomas, or other personal documents – nothing seems to rival the album or shoebox full of family photographs as a souvenir of the past, a record of family history, and an existential and indexical trace of the self.⁵³⁵

Given the racialized contours of Hurricane Katrina, the relationship between the disaster and the loss of vernacular photographs forms part of an ongoing assault on the black archive that can be traced back to the Middle Passage. During Broom's interview with O'Hagan, Broom presents a copy of Saidiya Hartman's 'Venus in Two Acts', and begins to read from its pages:

We stumble in the archives upon her exorbitant circumstances that yield no picture of the everyday life, no pathway to her thoughts, no glimpse of the vulnerability of her face or of what looking at such a face might demand. We only know what can be extrapolated from the analysis of the ledger, or borrow from the road of her captors and masters and apply to her.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁴ Broom, p.224.

⁵³⁵ Catherine Zuromskis, 'Outside Art: Exhibiting Snapshot Photography', *American Quarterly*, 60, 2 (2008), pp.425-441 (p.425).

⁵³⁶ Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, 12, 2 (2008), pp.1-14 (p.2).

Here, Hartman is referring to the ‘silence in the archive’ resulting from the ‘scarcity of African narratives of captivity’ on board the slave ship.⁵³⁷ Broom’s recuperative project seeks to resist further mnemonic absences by retrieving and documenting recent histories. ‘Each year I gain a new fear related to blindness or to water’, writes Broom – a consequence, perhaps, of Katrina, which merged both of these fears through the storm’s destruction of many families’ photographic archives.⁵³⁸ Once again, in the ‘wake of disappearance’, Broom grapples with questions around how best to ‘yield [a] picture of [...] everyday life’ and memorialize it.⁵³⁹ Typically, as Campt and hooks demonstrate, vernacular image-making serves this purpose in the black diaspora. Broom affirms this notion in *The Yellow House*, describing how, during her childhood she understood her mother to be ‘the art director of family memory, organizing photographs and presenting the story of us in books with labels handwritten in her curlicue’.⁵⁴⁰ Broom knows well the power of this practice, explaining how, through the familial archive, she salvages the presence of her father, who passed on when she was six months old: ‘my father is six pictures’, she says.⁵⁴¹ How, then, to respond to the destruction of family albums during Hurricane Katrina? In what ways can communities counteract this amnesiac violence so as to inhibit further ‘silence[s] in the archive’?⁵⁴² *The Yellow House* responds to these questions by centering the ways in which language supplements lost images, positioning the imagetext as an alternative form of photographic recuperation and disaster recovery. ‘Mom always thought words had enormous power, was always saying, *You have what you say.*’, writes Broom.⁵⁴³ ‘Absences allow us one power over them: They do not speak a word. We say of them what we want.’⁵⁴⁴

No other critic has considered the ways in which *The Yellow House* functions as an imagetext but it clearly meets the criteria on the basis of two key features. First, the incorporation of photographic elements is literally at the forefront of the memoir; the title page consists of scanned polaroids organized into a fractured geometric sequence, calling to mind the family photo-album. These are the first of many of Broom’s personal polaroids that we encounter throughout the text. Second, and just as important, are the photographs that are verbally transmitted through Broom’s detailed descriptions of their content (‘In a

⁵³⁷ Ibid, p.3.

⁵³⁸ Broom, p.119.

⁵³⁹ Hartman, ‘Venus in Two Acts’, p.14.

⁵⁴⁰ Broom, p.127.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid, p.349.

⁵⁴² Hartman, p.2.

⁵⁴³ Broom, p.142.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid, p.9.

picture taken outside the house, I am returning from elsewhere, barefoot and diapered, holding a decrepit baseball mitt. I am captured midstride, examining my found object, oblivious to the camera.’⁵⁴⁵ As is typical of the imagetext, there are photographs in *The Yellow House* that we only come to know through language. Hirsch reminds us that Barthes’ seminal work *Camera Lucida* incorporates this mode of photographic narration. ‘In his book, his mother’s picture exists only in the words he uses to describe it [...] the image has been transformed and translated into a “prose picture”’, she writes.⁵⁴⁶ Hirsch leans further into Barthes’ work to suggest that ‘Writing the image accomplishes even more in this scene of mourning: it undoes the objectification of the still photograph and thereby takes it out of the realm of stasis, immobility, mortification – what Barthes calls “flat death” – into fluidity, movement, and thus, finally, life.’⁵⁴⁷ Merging the work of Mitchell and Barthes, Hirsch helps us to conceive of the ways in which text and image are ‘intricately entangled in a narrative web’.⁵⁴⁸ I do not raise this notion of an entangled narrative web of image and text to suggest that all photographs must be written about in order to be rendered meaningful, but rather for the ways in which it resonates with the processes of remediation that make material witnessing possible. Broom’s verbal restoration of absent images (those that were destroyed by Katrina as well as those that were misplaced prior to the event) reminds us of the ways in which language supplements and translates the material witness – as in, the photograph.

Thinking of the imagetext as a form of disaster recovery, however, requires a more nuanced approach than simply highlighting the verbal reproduction of damaged or lost photographs; it also demands that we attend to the complex relationship between the imagetext and trauma. Disaster recovery is a prominent theme in the memoir, with Broom chronicling various organizations that professed their commitment to rebuilding the city, such as the Road Home programme which was ‘generally agreed to be a massive failure’.⁵⁴⁹ Broom also gestures towards the absence of psychological support for water-related trauma, which, by the time Katrina struck, had been an ongoing issue in New Orleans East for generations. After Betsy – when, “the area, even then, was a drowned and abandoned symbol of water’s destructive power when facilitated by human error’ - ‘Residents in Pines

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid, p.116.

⁵⁴⁶ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (London: Harvard University Press, 2012), p.3.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid, p.3-4.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid, p.4.

⁵⁴⁹ Broom, p.277.

Village, one of the earliest eastern neighborhoods [...] were threatening lawsuits against the city's Sewerage and Water Board for "mental anguish and anxiety suffered during floods and all heavy rainstorms".⁵⁵⁰ In what ways, then, might the imagetext serve as an instrument for working through - or, at least, confronting - Katrina-induced trauma?

In the introduction for *Eco-Trauma Cinema* (2015), Anil Narine defines eco-trauma as 'the harm we, as humans, inflict upon our natural surroundings, or the injuries we sustain from nature in its unforgiving iterations.'⁵⁵¹ Ecological traumas, as Narine asserts, are usually mediated by mainstream news media sources wherein 'sensationalism and [...]' narrative conventions take the reins, and citizens are presented with the familiar story of a polluter brought to justice, as if the infraction were an isolated incident or something activists have already addressed'.⁵⁵² 'In cases where news media and even scientific findings may face challenges connecting with an over-stimulated public, art forms such as film may hold the key to mapping contemporary eco-traumas', writes Narine.⁵⁵³ While Narine focuses on the capacities of cinema in representing ecological traumas beyond the redemptive narrative conventions of mainstream media channels, this exploration will extend these discussions to the imagetext, demonstrating the ways in which *The Yellow House* disrupts the perception that Katrina can be reduced to an event that is isolated and has been resolved.

I want to stress that I am not proposing that the imagetext is so profound and accessible that it negates the underlying (but unfulfilled) requirement for the state to protect its citizens (in this case, by providing tangible support to those who experienced loss and suffering as a result of the catastrophe). After all, as Hartnell reminds us:

Solnit suggests that "one reason that disasters are threatening to elites is that power devolved to the people on the ground in many ways," but in so doing she misses the fact that the "do-it-yourself" society is precisely what the neoliberal roll-back of public services is all about.⁵⁵⁴

On the other hand, I am conscious of the fact that, in this context, to claim that grassroots modes of disaster recovery absolve the state of its responsibility and thereby enable the roll-

⁵⁵⁰ Broom, p.88.

⁵⁵¹ Anil Narine, 'Introduction', in *Eco-Trauma Cinema*, edited by Anil Narine (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp.1-24 (p.9).

⁵⁵² Ibid, p.5.

⁵⁵³ Ibid, p.9.

⁵⁵⁴ Hartnell, p.14.

back of public services, would imply that the U.S. state has ever adequately and sustainably protected the wellbeing of black Americans. In *In The Wake*, Sharpe writes:

For, if we are lucky, we live in the knowledge that the wake has positioned us as no-citizen. If we are lucky, the knowledge of this positioning avails us particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world [...] I want *In The Wake* to declare that we are Black peoples in the wake with no state or nation to protect us, with no citizenship bound to be respected, and to position us in the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death: to think and be and act from there.⁵⁵⁵

I want to frame *The Yellow House* within this praxis of wake work. That is to say that the imagetext, as a form of disaster recovery, does not absolve the state of any responsibilities it does not uphold, but rather, offers ways of ‘re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world’ in an attempt at rupturing the discursive codes of violence.⁵⁵⁶ The optics of black trauma are everywhere. This is what Sharpe describes as the ‘dysgraphia of disaster, and these disasters arrive by way of the rapid, deliberate, repetitive, and wide circulation on television and social media of Black social, material, and psychic death.’⁵⁵⁷ What I am proposing is that the modes of photographic recuperation that appear in *The Yellow House*, are what Sharpe describes as ‘rituals to enact grief and memory’ that work adjacently and against the dysgraphia of disaster.⁵⁵⁸ In other words, Broom engages with her own traumatic losses without offering up shocking spectacles of suffering for consumption. Instead, she draws on her familial archive, exploring the utterances of belonging, kinship and refusal they contain, while also mourning the various losses associated with them.

In *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (2014), Alan Gibbs argues that ‘conventional methods of representing trauma’ tend to be so preoccupied with evoking emotional affect – sensationalising traumatic events in order to convey the severity of them – that they fail to instigate political action.⁵⁵⁹ Drawing on the work of Laura Brown, Gibbs asserts that ‘envisioning trauma as extraordinary [...] safely brackets it, giving the illusion that it is not part of normal life’.⁵⁶⁰ Broom’s use of the imagetext form does precisely the opposite by incorporating vernacular photography and everyday memories into an account of the impact and legacies of Hurricane Katrina. Analysing the PostSecret art project,

⁵⁵⁵ Sharpe, p.22.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid, p.21.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁹ Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.36.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid, p.22.

wherein anonymous individuals submitted confessions in the form of 4-by-6 inch postcards, Tanya K. Rodrigue asserts that ‘Imagetext functions as a productive means to recognise an event as traumatic, represent traumatic experiences, and engage in dialogue for the purposes of understanding trauma.’⁵⁶¹ The photographs that are visually and verbally reproduced in *The Yellow House* do not depict shocking spectacles of traumatic events but viewing them from a post-Katrina perspective requires that we attend to the traumatic experiences of death, displacement, and estrangement that frame them in the present. ‘Remembering’, says Broom, ‘is a chair that is hard to sit still in.’⁵⁶² In trauma studies, it is generally upheld that traumatic events are accompanied by an inability to remember them entirely because their sudden and catastrophic nature escapes language and recollection. Even though trauma defies absolute cognition and representation, ‘Imagetext offers an avenue for a traumatized person to feel, see, sense, and live the trauma – without actually experiencing it again. Via imagetext, a person who has experienced trauma can bear witness and thus ultimately come to know his/her trauma or something about it.’⁵⁶³

“By bringing you here, to the Yellow House, I have gone against my learnings. *You know this house not all that comfortable for other people*, my mother was always saying’, Broom writes.⁵⁶⁴ Despite this conditioning, Broom visually and verbally draws the reader into the house in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and in doing so is able to develop and communicate a sense of how familial and environmental traumas work in tandem. Further, Rodrigue argues that imagetexts open up a ‘process for testifying [...] that in itself directly confronts and resists oppressive dominant discourses. The process eradicates the demands, which dominant discourses have created, to “prove” or provide “forensic evidence” in court or elsewhere of a traumatic experience.’⁵⁶⁵ The notion of witnessing reappears throughout the length of *The Yellow House*. Broom is interested in the ways in which the landscape bears witness (‘Ghost cypress tree trunks stood up everywhere in the water like witnesses, evidence of vanquished cypress forests.’), but also – as I am about to explore – in how photographs bear witness.⁵⁶⁶ In this way, the memoir resonates with Schuppli’s assertion that ‘technical objects can account for and express their historical conditions; that artifacts

⁵⁶¹ Tanya K. Rodrigue, ‘Postsecret as Imagetext: The Reclamation of Traumatic Experiences and Identity’, in *The Future of Text and Image: Collected Essays on Literary and Visual Conjunctions*, ed. by Ofra Amihay and Lauren Walsh (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2012), pp.39-68 (p.40).

⁵⁶² Broom, p.223.

⁵⁶³ Rodrigue, p.59.

⁵⁶⁴ Broom, p.9.

⁵⁶⁵ Rodrigue, p.42.

⁵⁶⁶ Broom, p.71.

can induce the affective register of testimony; and that materials can, in short, bear witness'.⁵⁶⁷ So, in the wake of mass photographic loss and damage, with entire familial archives destroyed in the storm, the imagetext emerges as a vehicle for writing into and against traumatic voids.

In the memoir, Broom revisits the first time she accompanied her brother, Carl, to the Yellow House after the hurricane. The family were dispersed when the storm struck, and Carl was the only one who was at the Yellow House when it did. Remembering the moment in which she watched her brother return to the house in search of weed eater, Broom recalls, 'We were here, it was apparent, as witnesses to what Carl had come through. To retrieve, in some way, not the weed eater but the memory.'⁵⁶⁸ Broom responds to this perceived need to bear witness by utilising her camera. 'I photographed his every movement as if to save him from disappearance', Broom writes.⁵⁶⁹ 'Believing, even against my will, that to be photographed is to be present, alive, confirmed', she explains later on.⁵⁷⁰ Broom describes the photographs she takes of Carl in detail:

Picture a man set against a wide blue sky, wearing a bright-red Detroit Pistons hat, blue jean shorts that fall far below the knee, and clean blue sneakers. In the first frame, he is bent down, holding himself up by his hands, entering the escape hole, a rugged map carved through the roof, feet first. By the second frame he is shrunken to half a man. In the last frame, we see only his head.⁵⁷¹

Broom chooses not to visually incorporate the photographs themselves, but she vividly reproduces them verbally. Through imagetext, Broom retrieves traumatic memories of Carl's, without reproducing them; Carl returns to the scene of trauma, Broom and her camera bear witness (using photography and then language to further emplace him at the scene), together they interrupt the traditional trajectory of trauma by 'making things real, findable, fighting disappearance.'⁵⁷² As Rodrigue asserts, 'imagetext paves an avenue for the reclamation of memory'.⁵⁷³

I want to remain with this notion of reconstruction for a moment to think of it more specifically in relation to imagetext, architecture, and witnessing. 'How to resurrect a house

⁵⁶⁷ Schuppli, p.13-14.

⁵⁶⁸ Broom, p.227.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid, p.226.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid, p.326.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid, p.226.

⁵⁷² Ibid, p.262.

⁵⁷³ Rodrigue, p.40.

with words?': this is the question that haunts and drives Broom throughout the course of the memoir.⁵⁷⁴ I have suggested that through visual-verbal conjunctures Broom conjures the Yellow House; that houses, as hooks reminds us, are intimately connected to the vernacular photographic archives of the family and that this is thematically and aesthetically represented throughout the memoir. Reading the imagetext as a reconstruction of the Yellow House (and thus an opportunity to write into and against traumatic voids), I am reminded of an investigation detailed in *Forensic Architecture* in which the research group met with the survivor of a drone attack. Weizman explains how 'some of the details of the strike were obscured from memory', and so they assisted her in building a digital model of her house, in the hopes that it would provide 'another route to memory'.⁵⁷⁵ Through this process, the witness 'started narrating fragments of life in this house and some aspects of the incident itself.'⁵⁷⁶ In the words of Weizman, 'Architecture, in this investigation, functioned as a mnemonic technique, a conduit to testimony. The model became a stage on which some of her memories were accessed and performed.'⁵⁷⁷ Similarly, we can see how Broom's visual-verbal reconstruction of the Yellow House, built with language and photographs, is a mnemonic technique, with the imagetext emerging as an entity through which testimony unfolds, reminding us that testimony is always a form of storytelling. As McKittrick reminds us, 'The story asks that we live with what cannot be explained and live with unexplained cues and diasporic literacies, rather than reams of positivist evidence.'⁵⁷⁸ Or, as Broom writes, quoting from James Baldwin's *Evidence of Things Not Seen*, 'My memory stammers: but my soul is a witness'.⁵⁷⁹

When thinking about the mnemonic techniques that feature in the imagetext it is worthwhile to note how Broom's incorporation and evocation of visual, familial archives emulates the family photo-album. Henry Sayre claims that photo-albums are 'the mnemonic devices of a new oral history'.⁵⁸⁰ Similarly, in *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*, Martha Langford builds on this notion, suggesting that 'the organization of photographs into albums has been one way of preserving the structures of

⁵⁷⁴ Broom, p.292.

⁵⁷⁵ Weizman, p.44, p.45.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid, p.46.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ McKittrick, p.7.

⁵⁷⁹ James Baldwin quoted in Broom, p.253.

⁵⁸⁰ Henry Sayre quoted in Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*, p.5.

oral tradition for new uses in the present' because 'the album functions as a pictorial aide-memoire to recitation, to the telling of stories'.⁵⁸¹ Langford writes:

Our mimetic *photographic memories* need a mnemonic framework to keep them accessible and alive. The album reflects that need and preserves its evanescent conditions. To *speak* the photographic album is to hear and *see* its roots in orality [...]. Mnemonic structures that serve oral recitation are put to use as the scaffolding of the pictorial *aide-m'emoire*. We cannot see them, of course. Oral scaffolding is by nature impermanent. The album is what remains.⁵⁸²

As apparent in the wake of Katrina, it is not necessarily the case that the photo-album is what remains, but such claims effectively encourage us to engage with the links between the oral and the visual – and, when read in relation to *The Yellow House*, prompt us to consider the ways in which the imagetext bridges the gaps between the two. Sound is clearly an important feature of *The Yellow House*, with Broom organizing it into four movements, as if it were a piece of music. Furthermore, alongside photography, Broom incorporates oral recitation into the memoir, recording verbatim statements she gathered from conversations with her family during the research stages for the memoir. In a way, then, the imagetext builds on a much longer history of mnemonic preservation that can be traced back to the Middle Passage and the oral tradition. As Paul Gilroy reminds us, a 'closeness to the ineffable terrors of slavery was kept alive – carefully cultivated – in ritualised, social forms' that uphold a refusal to forget.⁵⁸³ Gilroy traces this back to the modes of oral expression that emerged during the Middle Passage and fundamentally shaped music of the black diaspora. I return to discussions around orality and the Middle Passage in detail in the next chapter of this thesis, but I raise this history briefly here to suggest that it re-signifies Broom's imagetext, connecting it to the recuperative patterns of resistance that began in the oral form onboard the slave ship. In other words, the Plantationocene and its systems of aqueously mediated displacement have always been met with black modes of resistance and remembrance.

Early on in the memoir, Broom explains how, 'From time to time, Simon set up a projector in the backyard [...]. the side of the house becoming, for a night, the greatest movie screen.'⁵⁸⁴ Here, we are reminded of hooks' notions regarding the power of image and

⁵⁸¹ Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums*, p.21.

⁵⁸² Ibid.

⁵⁸³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p.73.

⁵⁸⁴ Broom, p.68.

the architecture of the house, but the scene is also symbolic of the ways in which we might conceive of the Yellow House *as* media. In *Forensic Architecture*, Weizman writes:

Architecture and the built environment [...] could be said to function as media, not because photographs of buildings might circulate in the public domain, but because they are both storage and inscription devices that perform variations on the three basic operations that define media: they sense or *prehend* their environment, they hold this information in their formal mutations, and they can later *diffuse* and externalize effects latent in their form.⁵⁸⁵

The Yellow House was destroyed as a result of Katrina. First, it was cracked open by the storm, which left it looking ‘as though a force, furious and mighty, crouching underneath, had lifted it from its foundation and thrown it slightly left’.⁵⁸⁶ In Broom’s words ‘The house had split in two’.⁵⁸⁷ Then, in 2006, the house was demolished by the City of New Orleans. Yet, despite the fact that The Yellow House was ostensibly erased by the time Broom was writing its story, its presence is diffused and externalised into the former occupants of the house and their photographic archives – and later, of course, into the imagetext itself. ‘*And then you see the lives of the children and they become the living people of the house, the house lives in them. They become the house instead of the house becoming them. When I look at you all, I don’t really see the house, but I see what happened from the house. And so in that way, the house can’t die*’, Broom’s mother tells her.⁵⁸⁸ She had also ‘grown to believe that the objects contained within a house spoke the loudest about the person to whom the things belonged. More than that, she believed that the individual belonged to the things inside the house, to the house itself’.⁵⁸⁹ Throughout the memoir, vernacular photographs are objects that form part of the narrative web of the house and are identified as a source of self-knowledge. Thinking of the house as media (‘all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous’) and engaging with the ways in which it shapes the narrative assemblage of architecture, photography and language that constitutes *The Yellow House*, brings us closer to understanding how the imagetext forms a practice of emplacement in the traumatic wake of dislocation, an exercise in rebuilding what was destroyed, and thus, a poetic form of disaster recovery.⁵⁹⁰

Plantationocene Perspectives

⁵⁸⁵ Weizman, p.53.

⁵⁸⁶ Broom, p.224.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁸ Broom, p.192.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid, p.98.

⁵⁹⁰ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p.5.

as we grieve long- standing racial violences, as we are punched by memories of those we have lost, as we archive the most brutal of punishments, as we are weighed down by losing her, them, over and over and we know her and we do not know her and we did not know their name until it happened (we did not know his name until he was gone, I did not know his name, I cannot know, I found the name, I came across her after she was gone) and we feel heart- break and we see it again and again, as we study the severity of plantation temporalities (then-now), as we are weighed down, and the loss is there beside us, as we grieve and collapse, we do not know absolutely. Still.⁵⁹¹

Southern practices of vernacular image-making, whether they reveal themselves to us in the form of photo-objects or via the imagetext, open up a new field of inquiry into the ways in which personal photographs constitute everyday epistemologies of the Plantationocene. I hope that this exploration marks the beginning of a conversation about the need to recast quotidian photographs as interlocutors in critical discussions of plantation structures and their prolonged ecological extension over time. This involves highlighting how photographs ecologically intra-act in the world, while also paying attention to the modes of resistance and refusal registered in their frames. The photographs that I have here drawn on destabilize theories of the Plantationocene by imparting stories of ecologically mediated racialized violence, which expose the inadequacies of existing ontological conceptualisations of the epoch. From the Middle Passage to Hurricane Katrina, water has long played a role in the displacement of Black people. Understanding this Plantationocene pattern requires moving beyond the agricultural terms that characterise Tsing and Haraway's initial definition of the Plantationocene and, instead, delving into the intimate territory of the familiar and the quotidian. In *The Yellow House*, Broom recounts an exchange she shared with Samantha Power:

I told her about my urge to travel in order to “understand more broadly the displacement of my New Orleans family.” I had said this line so much it had become like saying my name. I was genuinely interested in placing what had happened in New Orleans in a more global context to understand how loss, danger, and forced migration play out in other parts of the world. I was also finding, I can admit now, anthropological, academic language for the urge to distance myself from the fate of my family, which of course was my fate, too.⁵⁹²

Vernacular photography re-establishes our proximity to the Plantationocene by diverting our attention away from biocentric, scientific definitions of planetary decline and towards the everyday patterns of ecological violence and political resistance working alongside and against one another.

⁵⁹¹ McKittrick, p.7.

⁵⁹² Broom, p.240.

These vernacular photographs are everyday strategies of resistance materialized. They form a practice of belonging that refuses the Plantationocene's aqueously mediated systems of estrangement, dislocation, displacement. In the words of Camp:

Regardless of whether these individuals accomplished the modes of belonging or inclusion they aimed to create; regardless of whether those who viewed or received them invested these images with the meaning their sitters had intended; and regardless of whether these images succeeded in presenting their subjects' aspirations or intentions with greater or lesser accuracy [...] these images of black communities in diaspora visualize creative forms of family and relation produced over and against the disparate geographies and temporalities that constitute diasporic migration, settlement, and dwelling.⁵⁹³

These photographs are indeed materially vulnerable to the external ecological forces that have historically violated modes of belonging, family and relation, but their latent forms, produced by this porosity, go on to tell new stories about the process of finding belonging in the Plantationocene. Polaroid patina, captured in Strembicki's collection, and the imagetext, exemplified by Broom in *The Yellow House*, demonstrate this, but they are just two examples of the ways in which vernacular photographs symbolically and materially epistemologize the Plantationocene; it is, I believe, a framework that warrants further inquiry and cannot be contained within this short examination.

Understanding the Plantationocene in this way substitutes positivism with speculative, generative ways of knowing. That is, in part, why the notion of witnessing (and the discussions of affirmation and care it brings with it) are so crucial to this examination. When we attend to the ways in which photographs bear witness to the past, we grapple with the distinctions between testimony – which is always a kind of narrative – and what is considered scientific fact. While, in environmental discourse, the latter is usually privileged over testimony, this exploration demonstrates how vernacular photography exposes the political blind-spots that purely science-led definitions of the Plantationocene leave in their wake. 'I thought of the stories we made as children, how we called the ground quicksand, the nature of our world evident. We didn't need scientific fact. We were on sinking ground and knew it as children and still we played', Broom writes in *The Yellow House*.⁵⁹⁴ Vernacular photographic archives capture community-led epistemologies of the Plantationocene that function in excess of scientific fact. When we view the photographs in question through the

⁵⁹³ Camp, *Image Matters*, p.17.

⁵⁹⁴ Broom, p.364.

lens of material witnessing, it is not positivist evidence that we find, but vernacular testimonies of the Plantationocene. In the words of Weizman, ‘Presenting evidence in these contexts is not what we understand, with much justifiable suspicion, as “positivism” – the desire to overcome language through materiality and to hold reality to be knowable without any intermediaries’.⁵⁹⁵ Instead, he says, it is ‘the art of making claims using matter and media, code and calculation, narrative and performance.’⁵⁹⁶

‘Whenever I speak of eco-photography [...] I refer to photographs that employ the all-encompassing and floating bird’s eye view, which is the paradigmatic visual mode of the Anthropocene’, Verena Lashinger writes.⁵⁹⁷ Aerial photography features heavily in Anthropocene discourse because, in the words of Chombart de Lauwe, ‘As a method it serves many sciences, principally, those which observe the surface layer of the ground and the phenomena that occur upon it. It extends scientific possibilities and opens up new horizons.’⁵⁹⁸ As Weizman reminds us, however, ‘taking aerial photographs requires the resources to rent an aircraft and specialized photographic and navigational equipment’.⁵⁹⁹ Broom grapples with these tensions in *The Yellow House*. In her words:

From high up, fifteen thousand feet above, where the aerial photographs are taken, 4121 Wilson Avenue, the address I know best, is a minuscule point, a scab of green. In satellite images shot from higher still, my former street dissolves into the toe of Louisiana’s boot. From this vantage point, our address, now mite size, would appear to sit in the Gulf of Mexico. Distance lends perspective, but it can also shade, misinterpret. From these great heights, my brother Carl would not be seen.⁶⁰⁰

Anthropocene photography indicates a position of privilege and a distance between the observer and the environment. Picturing the Plantationocene – a concept that claims to recognise the legacies of the Plantation – cannot be achieved from a remote, birds eye view. In other words, if we are to move beyond hegemonic conceptualisations of the Anthropocene, it is crucial that we develop ways of seeing that offer an alternative to its paradigmatic visual mode; because, if we are to truly understand the ecologically mediated legacies of the Plantation and the uneven contours of environmental crisis, we need not look down, but around.

⁵⁹⁵ Weizman, p.83.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁷ Verena Lashinger, ‘On Photography in the Anthropocene: Surface Views and Imagetexts by J. Henry Fair and Tom McCarthy’, in *Anglophone Literature and Culture in the Anthropocene*, ed. by Caroline Rosenthal and Gina Comos (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), pp.214-230 (p.219).

⁵⁹⁸ Chombart de Lauwe quoted in *ibid* p.221.

⁵⁹⁹ Weizman, p.227.

⁶⁰⁰ Broom, p.3.

'We were cutting grass for the look of it, making a small blot of pretty in a world of ugly. From high up above where the survey pictures are taken, this would not show. But standing on the ground, *we* knew.'⁶⁰¹

⁶⁰¹ Broom, p.361.

Plantationocene Acoustemologies: The Sonic Ecologies of Southern Rap

I lost everything, but I ain't the only one
First came the hurricane then the morning sun
Excuse me if I'm on one and don't trip if I light one
I walk a tight one
They try to tell me keep my eyes open
My whole city under water, some people still floating

- Lil Wayne, "Tie My Hands"⁶⁰²

New Orleans born and raised Lil Wayne was at the pinnacle of his rap career at the 51st Annual Grammy Awards ceremony of 2009. Eight months had passed since the release of his sixth studio album, *Tha Carter III*, which debuted at number one on the Billboard charts and quickly became one of the fastest selling albums in US history. By the end of 2008, 2.88 million copies of *Tha Carter III* had been sold, with singles like 'Lollipop', 'A Milli', 'Got Money', and 'Mrs Officer' propelling the album's commercial success. As orange lights filled the stage for Lil Wayne's performance at the 2009 award ceremony, the audience were likely anticipating a rendition of one of the album's well-known party anthems. Instead, the sounds of a live band playing a midtempo groove in the bluesy key of B minor came flooding from the stage. Robin Thicke's vocals rippled like liquid, and then Lil Wayne began to flow; 'Some say tragedy's hard to get over but sometimes that tragedy means it's over', he begins.⁶⁰³ Footage of Hurricane Katrina overlooked the performance, and the orange lights modulated until the stage was awash in a cold blue hue. The audience were submerged.

Lil Wayne's 2009 performance can be understood in relation to the surge of post-Katrina hip-hop activism that was generated in response to the storm.⁶⁰⁴ From Mississippi-born-rapper David Banner's suspension of his tour in order to re-purpose the tour bus as a rescue vehicle, to Kanye West's assertion that "George Bush does not care about black people" during a live broadcast on NBC, rappers nationwide galvanised public awareness and provided physical aid in the wake of the storm.⁶⁰⁵ Hip-hop's engagement with post-Katrina activism was also manifest in the genre's musical outputs. As Zenia Kish puts it,

⁶⁰² Lil Wayne, *Tie My Hands*, (London: Universal Music Group, 2008) [on CD].

⁶⁰³ *Lil Wayne & Robin Thicke – Tie My Hands [51st Grammys]*, online video recording, Daily Motion, 2009, <<<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8b6f5>>> [accessed 10th September 2021].

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p.42.

⁶⁰⁵ *Kanye West: George Bush doesn't care about Black people*, online video recording, YouTube, 21st September 2007, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UJUNTcOGesw>> [accessed 12th September 2021].

both underground and mainstream rappers contributed to a 'veritable subgenre of Katrina hip-hop'.⁶⁰⁶ These musical responses, Kish argues, 'engaged the violence, racism, displacement, and vulnerability that came to represent the experiences of the Katrina diaspora, and became a cultural force of identification and activism that intervened in constructions of the event as a national emergency.'⁶⁰⁷ At the forefront of these sonic responses to the catastrophe, was the urge to expose Katrina as being a form of racialized violence. As evoked lyrically and visually by Lil Wayne – through the title of his musical offering, 'Tie My Hands', and the accompanying video footage of black people arrested by floodwaters – Hurricane Katrina brought to the surface the systematic immobilisation of predominantly black communities in New Orleans. When Katrina made landfall in 2005 after centuries of racial segregation, wealthy white neighbourhoods, like the French Quarter and the Garden District, were unscathed, whilst black people were concentrated in low-lying neighbourhoods in the central city where flooding was most extreme. In addition to an ineffective levee system that failed to protect residents in these low-lying (and also poverty stricken) areas, evacuation was only viable for those with access to transportation and resources. In the words of Karen M. O'Neill, when we engage with 'the lack of social and economic resources available to impoverished African Americans in New Orleans, [...] we see why so many of them ended up in their attics or on their roofs waiting for help after the hurricane.'⁶⁰⁸ Despite this, 'most reporters had trouble representing the complex interaction of human engineering, environmental constraints, racial and class segregation'.⁶⁰⁹ Hip-hop artists, however, were among the most outspoken commentators in terms of calling out the ways in which black people were rendered most vulnerable to the storm.

⁶⁰⁶ Zenia Kish, "My Fema People": Hip-Hop as Disaster Recovery in the Katrina Diaspora', *American Quarterly: In the Wake of Katrina: New Paradigms and Social Visions*, 61, 3 (2009) pp.671-692 (p.671).

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ Karen M. O'Neill, 'Who Sank New Orleans? How Engineering the River Created Environment Injustice', in *Katrina's Imprint: Race and Vulnerability in America*, ed. by Keith Wailoo, Karen M. O'Neill, Jeffrey Dowd, and Roland Anglin (London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), pp.9-20 (p.14).

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.



Figure 11. Still from *Lil Wayne & Robin Thicke – Tie My Hands* [51st Grammys], online video recording, Daily Motion, 2009, <<<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8b6f5>>> [accessed 10th September 2021]

When Lil Wayne's Grammy performance took place, the fourth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina was approaching. Allen Toussaint and the Dirty Dozen Brass Band joined the performance, representing iconic, sonic dimensions of New Orleans and helping to stage the interconnectivity between musical expression of the US South and histories of the environment. 'New Orleans is a musical city, and although spatial discourse has tended to privilege the visual, the cultural practices of New Orleans beg for a multisensory understanding of place as both landscape and soundscape', writes Matt Sakakeeny.⁶¹⁰ Sakakeeny draws on the history of the brass band (which emerged when African Americans re-appropriated instruments used by colonial military bands and fused them with musical features that 'preceded the middle passage') to demonstrate how music-making in New Orleans is a longstanding 'forum for "sounding back" to the unending economic and political disparity.'⁶¹¹ Writing just over a month after the deluge, Sakakeeny observes the ways in which the storm not only decimated neighbourhoods and dispersed communities, but in so doing, also ruptured the sonic landscape of the South and troubled the patterns of resistance that have long characterised it. 'On August 29, 2005, extraordinary forces claimed the streets of New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath have left the city void of the people who constituted it as place', writes Sakakeeny.⁶¹² 'For 300 years, New

⁶¹⁰ Matt Sakakeeny, 'Resounding Silence in the Streets of a Musical City', *Space and Culture*, 9, 1, (2006), pp.41-44 (p.41).

⁶¹¹ Ibid, p.42.

⁶¹² Ibid, p.43.

Orleans has been many things, but it has never been silent until now, and we cannot divine exactly how New Orleans will re-sound.’⁶¹³ Four years later, when Lil Wayne took to the stage at the 2009 Grammy awards ceremony, his performance affirmed what, by then, many already knew: despite the threat of silence induced by anthropogenic disaster and forced displacement, Southern patterns of sonic resistance will not be drowned out.

Attentive to post-Katrina soundscapes, this chapter will investigate how Southern rap calls forth new ways of understanding the Plantationocene. The first chapter of this thesis was dedicated to reading the Plantationocene in Southern Literature, the second revolved around looking at the Plantationocene through the lens of vernacular photography, and finally, in this chapter, I investigate ways of listening to the Plantationocene. To begin, I turn to sonic repercussions of Hurricane Katrina by investigating how New Orleans Bounce Music responded to the catastrophe. In keeping with this thesis’ engagement with different modes of Plantationocene activism, this section will examine how rap emerged as a form of resistance and environmental activism in post-Katrina New Orleans. I then go on to think about the ecological aspects of sound more granularly and how Southern rap is imbricated in the sonics of slavery and its afterlives. In this way, I conceive of Southern rap as being a musical component of broader sonic ecologies. Invoking Rapsody’s ‘Eve’ (2019), I draw out the oceanic aspects of the album, offering the notion of Nautical Hip Hop as a framework for thinking about how Southern rap is shaped by water. In what ways does Rapsody’s nautical style of hip hop record and evoke entangled histories of water and race? What do these sonic ecologies reveal about the Plantationocene? Throughout this chapter, I suggest that rap music of the US South can be understood as Plantationocene acoustemologies. Steven Feld coined the term acoustemology – an amalgamation of acoustics and epistemology – as a model for investigating ‘what is knowable, and how it becomes known, through sounding and listening’.⁶¹⁴ Acoustemology, he says, refers to a process of knowing with and through the audible. In this chapter, I attend to sonic traces of the plantation that can be found in Southern rap music and demonstrate the ways in which they provide auditory knowledge of the ecologically mediated legacies of slavery and the ways in which plantation structures are

⁶¹³ Ibid.

⁶¹⁴ Steven Feld, ‘Listening to Histories of Listening: Collaborative Experiments in Acoustemology with Nii Otoo Annan’, in *Musical Listening in the Age of Technological Reproduction*, ed. by Gianmario Borio (London: Routledge, 2016), pp.91-106 (p.93).

remembered and resisted. Hurricane Katrina evidences how so-called natural disasters in the Plantationocene are characterised by racialized violence, and in this chapter I turn to post-Katrina rap music to consider how and to what extent the Plantationocene (and resistance to it) is audible.

“We Gon’ Bounce Back”: New Orleans Bounce Music and Hurricane Katrina

As I write a little more than a month after Katrina, New Orleans remains essentially uninhabited, an empty place. When former residents return, and new arrivals become residents, will the dynamism and flexibility that has characterized New Orleans culture allow for the creation of new outlets and the restructuring of former ones? As New Orleans is reconstituted, how will the plans of governmental organizations, developers, and contractors rearrange the social organization of the city? Will neighborhoods long associated with certain soundscapes become replaced with something else? New Orleanians have creatively responded to past crises, such as enslavement, failed Reconstruction, Jim Crow, enforced integration, and continued inequity. This current disaster, however unprecedented, is but the latest episode in an uninterrupted history of disasters and the “anonymous and everyday” responses to them (de Certeau, 1984, p. v).⁶¹⁷

After Katrina, anxieties regarding the ways in which the mass displacement it induced would jeopardize the soundscape of New Orleans were profuse, but in October 2015, ten years after the storm, New Orleans based emcee Impulss recalls: ‘Music was one of the first things to come back. People [...] got settled in other places. Others said I’m not gonna come back to a post-apocalyptic, decimated place that’s practically like *The Walking Dead* and rebuild a music scene. It takes a kind of crazy to do that, but there’s plenty of crazy in New Orleans.’⁶¹⁸ Impulss took a leading role in salvaging New Orleans’ underground hip hop scene after the hurricane by reconnecting the city’s scattered hip hop artists through a series of rap battles. In the words of Truth Universal, a fellow emcee who was displaced by the storm, ‘Impulss was putting on battles at One-Eyed Jacks [...] These events were a place for everyone to congregate and see who was there again. It was a real turning point for getting things back together’.⁶¹⁹ While, here, Truth uses the language of sight, naturally, the events were an opportunity to hear, as well as see, who had returned to the city – in addition to being an opportunity to hear and see the city itself. These gatherings were therefore a sonic revival of the past, just as much as they were a physical reunion of the area’s dispersed and fragmented rap community.

⁶¹⁷ Sakakeeny, p.44.

⁶¹⁸ Impulss quoted in Justin Ivey, “There’s Plenty of Crazy in New Orleans”: How The Post-Katrina Underground Hip-Hop Scene Rebuilt Itself, *Passion of The Weiss*, 15th October 2015 <<https://www.passionweiss.com/2015/10/15/new-orleans-underground-hip-hop-post-katrina/>> [accessed 1st August 2021].

⁶¹⁹ Truth Universal quoted in *ibid.*

Recalling the post-Katrina proliferation of Bounce music, the following exploration engages with the ways it emerged as a form of local memorialisation in the wake of catastrophe and destruction. In 2006, Kalefa Sanneh prophetically asserted that, despite what was then an absence of work aimed at preserving (or even recognizing) the histories of Bounce, 'New Orleans hip-hop will endure not just because the music is so thrilling, but also because the rappers vividly evoke a city that is, for worse and (let's not forget) for better, never going to be the same.'⁶²⁰ Six years later, Holly Hobbs founded the NOLA Hip Hop and Bounce Archive in collaboration with the Amistad Research Center. The digital collection consists of over sixty interviews with artists and producers aimed at helping to 'provide resources/further acknowledgement for artists and to document/collect hiphop and bounce oral histories and ephemera.'⁶²¹ Their efforts highlight the need for recognising Bounce as a form of memorialisation, as well as being a form that, itself, ought to be remembered. The previous sections of this thesis engaged with the extent to which black vernacular literature and photography are embalmed with watery memories, and so in examining the relationship between rap and recuperation, this exploration will further reveal the patterns of preservation that characterise grassroots Plantationocene activism of the U.S. South in its myriad forms. In what follows, I discuss how New Orleans Bounce music lends itself to a theoretical framework that conceives of creolisation as preservation – which, as I will suggest, is a process inherent to Plantationocene acoustemologies and their emergence during the Middle Passage.

Bounce is a style of hip hop that emanated out of New Orleans and rose to popularity during the 1990s. The style is characterised by what is colloquially known as “that beat”, which, as Matt Miller puts it, consists of ‘a particular mid-tempo rhythmic feel created by a propulsive, syncopated bass drum pattern in combination with layered, continuous percussive elements such as handclaps of simple melodic lines and often featuring particular sounds samples from other recordings’.⁶²² In the words of Miller, after Katrina, “dat beat” remained a touchstone of local musical identity and a beacon calling the city’s dispersed population back.⁶²³ Miller provides the only detailed written account of the history and

⁶²⁰ Kalefa Sanneh, 'New Orleans in the Home of Gangsta Gumbo', *New York Times*, 23rd April 2006 << <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/23/arts/music/new-orleans-hiphop-is-the-home-of-gangsta-gumbo.html>>> [accessed 1st August 2021].

⁶²¹ *Nola Hiphop and Bounce Archive* << <https://digitallibrary.tulane.edu/islandora/object/tulane:p16313coll68>>> [accessed 1st July 2021].

⁶²² Matt Miller, *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), p.1.

⁶²³ *Ibid.*

ongoing importance of the style in *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans* (2012) in which he asserts that following the emergence of New York-borne hip-hop culture, ‘African Americans in New Orleans took the idea of rap and made it their own – a syncretic process of creolization and experimentation led to the emergence of distinctive musical style and forms of identification.’⁶²⁴ A musical representation of the South’s party scene, Bounce music is a sonic expression of celebration, pleasure and excitement. As Miller outlines, the rise of social and pleasure clubs in 1970s New Orleans was linked to the popularity of brass bands and black mutual-aid societies. ‘These phenomena, along with other distinctive forms of grassroots expressive culture,’ he explains, ‘influenced local rap in direct and indirect ways, contributing specific musical ideas and providing a model of self-determined cultural organization and enjoyment.’⁶²⁵

Like New York’s hip hop movement, Bounce was preceded by a host of socioeconomic factors, like segregation, residential zoning and the war on drugs; nonetheless, the subgenre became a vessel for joy in spite of the conditions from which it emerged. The resurgence of Bounce music in the wake of Hurricane Katrina was produced in response to violence, but the subgenre’s expression of celebration and pleasure is an affirmation of black agency, prompting us – to invoke McKittrick’s instruction regarding black authors, writers and artists – ‘to honor these voices as brilliant and intellectual and method-making.’⁶²⁶ While there is much to be said of the ways in which Bounce might support the political agency of disenfranchised groups given the economic opportunities that come with the music industry – such as ticket sales, record sales, and celebrity culture – this discussion will explore the methodological value of Bounce. How do Southern Bounce lyricists and producers, like the authors and photographers invoked in the previous chapters, respond to ecological events? What do these responses reveal about the relationship between sound, memory and water in the age of the Plantationocene? To what extent do the processes of creolisation that characterise Bounce music evoke the Middle Passage? How do we hear these resonances without reducing the rappers’ work to ongoing histories of objectification? In the words of McKittrick, ‘one thing black creative text and black creative praxes do is[...] create conditions through which relationality, rebellion, conversation, interdisciplinarity, and disobedience are fostered.’⁶²⁷

⁶²⁴ Ibid, p.3.

⁶²⁵ Ibid, p.6.

⁶²⁶ McKittrick, *Dear Science*, p.57.

⁶²⁷ Ibid, p.51.



Figure 12. Sha Ribeiro, 2011, *Bounce, block party, New Orleans*, online image, *The Vision*, 2011 <<https://thevision.com/cultura/sha-ribeiro/>>> [accessed 1st November 2021].

Sketching out a brief history of regionalism and rap is crucial to conveying the ways in which Bounce is an inherently creolised form – and, crucially, how this renders it full of recuperative possibilities. Alongside graffiti and breakdancing, rap emerged in the South Bronx in New York during the mid-1970s, forming three key pillars of hip hop. Reflecting on this history, Tricia Rose writes, ‘Hip hop gives voice to the tensions and contradictions in the public urban landscape during a period of substantial transformation in New York and attempts to seize the shifting urban terrain, to make it work on behalf of the dispossessed.’⁶²⁸ Hip hop went on to grow nationally and globally, but for quite some time the emergent subgenres that followed were often sidelined in favor of New York-borne hip hop. It was not until around 1987 that hip hop born out of the greater Los Angeles area began to destabilise New York’s pre-eminence. Miller argues that the success of West Coast rap was dependent on ‘an important step away from the conception of rap as inherently dependent on a New York-based imaginary and stylistic palette to one that would increasingly encourage and depend on a proliferation of distinct, musically inflected representations of place.’⁶²⁹

⁶²⁸ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p.22.

⁶²⁹ Miller, p.49.

Later, when Southern rap, which had long been overlooked, began gaining recognition during the nineties, it too emerged as a geospatially attuned form. In commercial contexts, Outkast, an Atlanta-based hip-hop duo, were gaining accolades and sales as proponents of what is known Dirty South hip hop. In “‘The South got something to say’: Atlanta’s Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America’, Darren E. Grem asserts that ‘Throughout the 1990s, industry leaders and southern rappers promoted the Dirty South as a new type of rap music. A blending of older rap styles with southern music, accents, and themes.’⁶³⁰ It was also, Grem argues, ‘a bold statement from rappers who felt estranged from Atlanta’s economic and social progress and excluded by their southernness from competing in a rap-music market dominated by New York and Los Angeles.’⁶³¹ Meanwhile, New Orleans was fashioning its own style of rap music, Bounce, which Kelefa Sanneh refers to as ‘Gangsta Gumbo’ for the ways in which it sonically blends the City’s unique and diverse cultural landscape.⁶³² In ‘By Us, For Us: On New Orleans Bounce’, Garnette Cadogan writes:

“Project Music”—that’s what they call it. This energetic, rambunctious, stuttering New Orleans variant of hip-hop that frequently pays homage to the city’s neighborhoods, blocks, and housing projects. This musical lingua franca of New Orleans with its infectious rat-a-tat beat and colorful deejays exhorting hyperkinetic crowds to dance like electrified rubber bands or send up shout-outs to the places that elicit their allegiance. This musical style stuffed with New Orleans sonic heritage: Mardi Gras Indian-influenced chants; brass band music (that festive second line bass line); New Orleans funk; rip-roaring call-and-response; and a propulsive, swinging beat. This dance-party music—aptly termed “bounce”—ubiquitous in local nightclubs, block parties, and, more than anywhere else, the city’s storied housing projects.⁶³³

It is the hyper-local focus of Bounce and its consequential sonic hybridity that rendered it capable of salvaging a sense of the city after the deluge. Bounce music resounds with local nuances and references to street names and housing projects. After Katrina, it became a sonic apparition of the places that informed its conception, because in some instances, the music outlived the architectural infrastructure of the spaces that inspired it and the people who produced it.

⁶³⁰ Darren E. Grem, “‘The South got something to say’: Atlanta’s Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America’, *Southern Cultures*, 12 (2006), pp.55-73 (p.56).

⁶³¹ Ibid.

⁶³² Kelefa Sanneh, ‘New Orleans in the Home of Gangsta Gumbo’, *New York Times*, 23rd April 2006 << <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/23/arts/music/new-orleans-hiphop-is-the-home-of-gangsta-gumbo.html>>> [accessed 1st August 2021].

⁶³³ Garnette Cadogan, ‘By Us, For Us: On New Orleans Bounce’, *Lit Hub*, 12th October 2016 <<https://lithub.com/by-us-for-us-on-new-orleans-bounce/>> [accessed 1st August 2021].

In the last chapter, I proposed that through *The Yellow House* we bear witness to the ways in which Broom utilizes the photo-text form as a means of figuratively rebuilding her water-ravaged home. Although Broom never mentions Bounce, clearly there are synergies between her literary task and the work of southern Bounce artists who, too, were performing the work of recuperation as it relates to homes lost during the disaster. Bounce music's post-Katrina commitments to conjuring neighbourhoods and homes destroyed by water and neglected by the state are in keeping with historical hip-hop sensibilities. Reflecting on the origins of rap, Rose asserts that 'In hip hop [...] abandoned parts, people, and social institutions, were welded and then spliced together, not only as sources of survival but as sources of pleasure.'⁶³⁴ Highlighting the prominence of place in 'hip hop lyrics, sounds, and themes', Rose argues that 'Hip hop replicates and reimagines the experiences of urban life and symbolically appropriates urban space through sampling, attitude, dance, style, and sound effects.'⁶³⁵ Rose's notions surrounding the ways in which hip hop salvages and reappropriates abandoned parts resonates with post-Katrina Bounce and its remembrance of the waterlogged wards residents were forced to abandon and which the state had long forsaken. We hear this in the ways in which these residences infiltrate Bounce lyricism both before and after the disaster. Kish illuminates how, in 'Fuck Katrina', for example, 5th Ward Weebie 'inverts the practice of shouting out to specific locations in the city as a metonymic address to one's friends or acquaintances. Instead, Weebie invokes the city's wards, districts, and housing projects [...] to name not the people who lived there, but rather their absence':⁶³⁶

Ninth Ward shattered
 Eighth Ward suffered
 Seventh Ward gone but my man said fuck it
 Sixth Ward empty
 Fifth Ward through
 Callipe and Iberville ain't a thing we can do⁶³⁷

These are the wards and projects that gave birth to Bounce – and that many of the genre's rappers, like 5th Ward Weebie and 10th Ward Buck, named themselves after. In this way, we can think about how, after Katrina, Bounce music arose as a way of remembering through sound, even whilst Bounce artists were untethered from the geospatial origins of the genre.

⁶³⁴ Rose, p.22.

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

⁶³⁶ Kish, p.677.

⁶³⁷ 5th Ward Weebie, *Fuck Katrina*, online video recording, YouTube, 13th November 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpwgThDE48w> [accessed 5th August 2021].



Figure 13. Sha Ribeiro photographs Big Freedia with fans holding copies of her mixtape, online image, Indie Mag, 2018, <<https://indie-mag.com/2018/06/bounce-music-big-freedia/>> [accessed 3rd October 2021].

Rap, and the ways in which it necessitates processes of creolisation as it is dispersed throughout the U.S., is part of a much longer history of sonic creolisation and diasporic cultural practices that began during the Middle Passage (and were further activated by Hurricane Katrina). It is important to note here that I am referring to creolisation as praxis, as opposed to an ethnically specific category – in the words of Amanda M. Capelli “Creole” as an identity marker differs from “creolization” as a process’.⁶³⁸ The blending of African, French, Spanish, Cajun, and Native American cultures (among others) that took place during the colonial period, transformed Louisiana into an epicenter of interculturality, with

⁶³⁸ Amanda M. Capelli, ‘Creolization; Spotlight: George Washington Cable’, in *The Routledge Companion to Literature of the U.S. South*, ed. Katherine A. Burnett, Todd Hagstette and Monica Carol Miller (New York: Routledge, 2023), pp.171-174 (p.172).

the port city of New Orleans, in particular, enabling ‘a fluidity of racial designations’.⁶³⁹ Over the centuries, there have been various uses of the term Creole in relation to Louisiana. The term Louisiana Creoles has typically been used to describe the descendants of colonial Louisiana before it was purchased by the United States in 1803, but today it is also applied ‘broadly to all people of mixed European, Caribbean and African ancestry’ in the region.⁶⁴⁰ This discussion, however, engages with theories of creolisation as an unending process, rather than tracing the emergence of the Creole category of ethnic identification in Louisiana.

Theories of creolisation are vast and many of them relate to the formation of Caribbean cultures, born out of colonial interference and the synthesis of different ethnicities, languages, and traditions. In the words of Nicole King, the term can be used to refer to ‘the process by which a new culture took root in the Caribbean as a result of European exploration, the Atlantic slave trade and the importation of indentured labour to the region.’⁶⁴¹ Similarly, Kamau Brathwaite describes creolisation as a ‘cultural action’ in relation to the formation of Jamaican society, illuminating how ‘nothing is really fixed and monolithic. Although there is white/brown/black, there are infinite possibilities within these distinctions and many ways of asserting identity.’⁶⁴² Perhaps most significant to the discussion at hand are Glissant’s theories of creolisation, which – as Ian Baucom reminds us – emphasise the Middle Passage origins of the process. Invoking Glissant’s notion of exchange, which he uses to describe the ways in which new cultural forms emerged out of the Middle Passage, Baucom argues that the drowned body we encounter in Glissant’s work is ‘the originary body in a genealogy of creole identity’.⁶⁴³ Baucom asserts that ‘this body, this vanishing but not vanished, drowning but transformed, lost but repeating body has come to function in black Atlantic narrative, aesthetic, and commemorative practices much as the entombed body of the unknown soldier functions in Benedict Anderson’s account of nationalism.’⁶⁴⁴ In this way, creolisation can be understood as a form of memory work, a process of renewing and remembering – it is, as Baucom puts it, ‘a gathering in scattering’.⁶⁴⁵ It is the mnemonic aspects of creolisation that Glissant draws on when

⁶³⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁴¹ Nicole King, ‘Creolisation and *On Beauty*: Form, Character and the Goddess Erzulie’, *Women: a cultural review*, 20, 3 (2009), pp.262-276 (p.264).

⁶⁴² Kamau Brathwaite, ‘Creolisation in Jamaica’, in *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.202-205 (p.205).

⁶⁴³ Ian Baucom, ‘Specters of the Atlantic’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100, 1 (2001), pp.61-82 (p.68).

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid, p.68.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid, p.70.

writing about the emergence of the process in the American South. In 'Creolization in the Making of the Americas', Glissant describes creolisation as an act of 'Imagining and recreating from traces of memory'.⁶⁴⁶ 'During my stay in Louisiana, I have had the opportunity to observe some of the concrete manifestations of such a creolization' writes Glissant, recalling conversations in Creole, Zydeco music, Cajun songs and 'rhythms of the blues and black music'.⁶⁴⁷ The following discussion upholds Glissant's definitions of creolisation, viewing it not as a racial identity but a process cultural memory work wherein traces persist. Placing post-Katrina Bounce within this framework, I want to think about the ways in which the genre helps us (to quote Glissant) 'imagine diffracted times coming together'.⁶⁴⁸

Sound was, and continues to be, an important aspect of creolisation. Glissant has written extensively about the relationship between orality and the Middle Passage because 'In the silent universe of the Plantation, oral expression [was] the only form possible for the slaves'.⁶⁴⁹ When writing about creolised sound on board the ship, Glissant is particularly interested in linguistics and the formation of creole language which, he argues, is designed 'to renew itself in every instance on the basis of a series of forgettings. Forgetting, that is, integration, of what it starts from: the multiplicity of African languages on the one hand and European ones on the other'.⁶⁵⁰ What is particularly significant to the discussion at hand are the ways in which Glissant synthesises how the cultural collisions that erupted on board the ships of the Middle Passage and formed creole language is manifest in music of the black diaspora:

These musical expressions born of silence: Negro spirituals and blues, persisting in towns and growing cities; jazz, *biguines*, and calypsos, bursting into barrios and shantytowns; salsas and reggaes, assembled everything blunt and direct, painfully stifled, and patiently different into this varied speech. This was the cry of the Plantation, transfigured into the speech of the world.⁶⁵¹

In many ways, this cry is perceptible in post-Katrina Bounce, because of the ways in which it is used to sound back to ongoing patterns of water-mediated dispossession, disposability, and violence. In what follows, I will explore how the oral structures Glissant describes re-

⁶⁴⁶ Édouard Glissant, 'Creolization in the Making of the Americas', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 2008, 54, 1 (2008), pp.81-89 (p.87).

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid, p.88.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* translated by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University Michigan Press, 1997), p.68.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid, p.69.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid, p.73.

surface in Bounce, helping us to think of sonic creolisation as a form of Middle Passage mnemonics. Firstly, however, it is important to note that connecting sonic responses to historical and ongoing erasures does not negate the culturally specific, local emergence of Bounce. Rose has warned against readings of rap that describe it as being a direct result of African-American oral traditions because ‘it renders invisible the postindustrial city on the shape and direction of rap and hip hop’, but her own work acknowledges that ‘Rap’s primary force is sonic, and [...] are part of a rich history of New World black traditions and practices’.⁶⁵² What I am proposing is that creolised sonics have long been activated in relation to water, and post-Katrina Bounce music preserves this tradition without diluting or distracting from its culturally specific, localised history and aural qualities. In this way, interpreting Bounce songs as Plantationocene Acoustemologies (that are thus connected to the sonic practices of creolisation that emerged during the Middle Passage) does not render invisible the geospatial politics that shape Southern rap, but rather, demonstrate the ways in which historical and ongoing violences – and community responses to them – are entangled. It is of no little significance that the creolised sonics of Bounce – the ways in which the style salvages, blends and reimagines various musical styles – were amplified after Katrina. At a 2012 roundtable, Holly Hobbs explains that this is ‘particularly stark after the storm because a lot of mixing is happening that didn’t happen before’.⁶⁵³ Against the threat of silence and erasure induced by extreme weather and mass displacement, post-Katrina Bounce echoes the patterns of preservation through creolisation that began on board the slave ship. Southern rap’s propensity to adapt and reimagine hip hop, continually challenging its geographic and sonic parameters – first in response to the exclusion of regional rap from the commercial marketplace and then in response to the post-Katrina jeopardization of New Orleans’ soundscape – speaks to Bounce music’s refusal to relinquish the City and its culture to the forgotten past. In the words of Betsy Wing, ‘Though creole may be based on a “succession of forgettings” (83), its formal structures can be used to induce memory.’⁶⁵⁴

Structures that emerged out of the oral tradition, like repetition and call and response patterns, were abundant in the post-Katrina surge of Bounce music as rappers sought to preserve the memory of the places that birthed the style but were now decimated

⁶⁵² Rose, p.64.

⁶⁵³ Holly Hobbs in conversation at a 2012 Roundtable available at Nocgsmedia, *Roundtable: Holly Hobbs, Truth Universal, “Grassroots Hip-Hop”*. Tulane University (07.13.12), online video recording, Youtube, 29th September 2012, << https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQH_mKJW2QY>> [accessed 1st September 2021].

⁶⁵⁴ Betsy Wing, ‘Introduction’, in *Poetics of Relation*, p.xx.

by the deluge. ‘Everything under water, everything gone’, Mia X anaphorically raps on ‘My FEMA People’.⁶⁵⁵ “Looking for the culture all through the city, we were left for vultures all through the city”, she says, the epistrophe, ‘all through the city’, symbolic of the community’s desire to see the City return, and the invocation of culture foregrounding the role of music in this process of recovery. Mia X raps over the top of a triggerman beat, a one-bar drum loop heard originally on New York-based Show Boyz’ 1986 record “Drag Rap” that later became a signature feature of New Orleans Bounce. Tim Smooth refers to the triggerman beat as ‘the cornerstone of the local sound [...] Once they put that in, that’s New Orleans music’.⁶⁵⁶ Thus, through the track’s iconic rhythm and lyrical repetitions, “My FEMA People” blends contemporary hip-hop styles with structures deriving from the oral tradition – which, as the likes of Glissant and later Baucom remind us, was one of the creolised cultural forms that were born out of the Atlantic exchange. In this way, the song is an aural assemblage of the various Plantationocene histories – from the Middle Passage to urbanization – that are imbricated in New Orleans’ continually evolving creole culture. The sonic blending found in “My FEMA People” is representative of the ways in which creolisation was a key strategy deployed by Bounce artists in their effort to sonically renew New Orleans. This, after all, was the objective of much of the Bounce music released in the wake of the hurricane. As Kish writes, “Many bounce songs written post-Katrina channelled the anger, fear and sadness of evacuating New Orleans as it drowned. These songs [...] served as much to reclaim community bonds and suggest strategies for getting home as to lodge criticism.”⁶⁵⁷

Master P and the 504 Boyz also merge different sonic structures throughout their 2005 album ‘Hurricane Katrina: We Gon’ Bounce Back’. ‘After the storm, after the rain, after the moaning, after the pain, we gon’ bounce back (bounce back), bounce back (bounce back)’, they chant in call and response style over distinctive Bounce drum-patterns and synths.⁶⁵⁸ What is striking about ‘Hurricane Katrina: We Gon’ Bounce Back’ is that although the album title and artwork centre the storm, musically, the album is essentially a collection of unfiltered club tracks. In fact, the disaster is seldom lyrically addressed except for on ‘Bounce Back’. As Miller highlights in his study of the history of Bounce, music

⁶⁵⁵ ‘My FEMA People’ is not available to stream or purchase on mainstream platforms for music sales, but the track can be accessed via *Mia X- My FEMA People*, online video, YouTube, 27th November 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xA7uBRyCB7Y>> [accessed 1st September 2021].

⁶⁵⁶ Tim Smooth quoted in Miller, p.95.

⁶⁵⁷ Kish, p.677.

⁶⁵⁸ 504 Boyz, *Bounce Back* (New Orleans: Guttar Music Entertainment, 2005) [CD].

critics have long ‘dismissed bounce as apolitical “rap-lite” with crude “sex and violence” – based lyrics meant to entertain an underclass in pursuit of pleasure and escape. But this evaluation depended on a narrow definition of politics’.⁶⁵⁹ Bounce originally emanated out of block parties in some of New Orleans’ most deprived housing projects and highlighted how, amidst poverty and segregation, sound – in this case local rap styles – could be used to facilitate entertainment and celebration. Much of ‘Hurricane Katrina: We Gon’ Bounce Back’ is a frank reflection of the themes (narcotics, the body, and neighbourhood rivalries) that have always characterised Bounce music and its party-scene roots – themes that, as Miller asserts, music critics deemed unpalatable. What the album represents, then, is a bold proclamation that the unruly spirit of sonically mediated pleasure would not be diminished by the disaster. In this way, pleasure and entertainment are political. Recalling Sylvia Wynter’s *Black Metamorphosis*, in which she grapples with the emergence of music from the Middle Passage and other plantation systems, we can begin to understand that the sonic politicization of pleasure has always been folded into Plantationocene Acoustemologies. As McKittrick summarizes, throughout *Black Metamorphosis*, ‘Wynter draws attention to how the creation of culture, the making and praxis of music – within the context of hateful and violent racist axioms – is underwritten by “the revolutionary demand for happiness” that, at the same time, demonstrates that creative acts mark the affirmation of black life.’⁶⁶⁰ Not only do post-Katrina Bounce records, like ‘Hurricane Katrina: We Gon’ Bounce Back’, sonically recuperate demolished neighbourhoods, they also uphold this rebellious Middle Passage praxis to which Wynter refers, by remembering the right to pleasure and entertainment through music despite the persistence of aqueously mediated displacement and destruction.

Building on Wynter’s work, McKittrick advocates for the ways in which ‘ungraspable resonance – sound – allows us to think about how loving and sharing and hearing and listening and grooving to black music is a rebellious political act that is entwined with neurobiological pleasure and the melodic pronouncement of black life.’⁶⁶¹ After Katrina, live music events – from Impulss’ rap battles to Truth Universal’s Grassroots showcase – were also forums in which rappers and audiences were able to reunite in their neighbourhoods and revel in sonic entertainment as a method of political insubordination. Bounce music has always been imbricated in the art of gathering because of its deep

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid, p.7.

⁶⁶⁰ McKittrick, p.154.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid.

connections to New Orleans' block parties. The wards and housing projects these parties took place in were some of the most heavily affected by the wreckage and, after the storm, displaced Bounce artists returned to the city to salvage the rapture that had been lost. When Big Freedia, a Bounce pioneer, returned to New Orleans in 2006, for example, she organised FEMA Fridays at Club Caesar's. "I was lucky enough to open FEMA Fridays on the west bank and it was the only club that was open in New Orleans and the lines were down the streets and the people were all around the corner", she says.⁶⁶² Big Freedia is one of the more well-known artists who were active after Katrina, but her efforts are representative of the widespread, grassroots engagement with Bounce during the efforts to rebuild New Orleans. As Garnette Cadogan recalls:

bounce parties were happening all over the city. It was at these shindigs at home and abroad that one would hear the shout-outs to housing projects that had been depopulated, closed, or razed. It was there that a performer would sing "Magnolia is in the building," and an enthusiastic crowd would affirm, "They say that." It was there that everyone would demonstrate the potency of the past by singing "From the Magnolia to the Melpomene to the Calliope," a roll call of the three most famous and honored housing projects in the city, places where many, if not most, of the celebrants no longer lived. Psychological record-keeping with a thrilling beat. Turns out that bounce answered the question "Where did the projects go?" They found a home in song, the location for so much in New Orleans that has been preserved by memory and sentiment.⁶⁶³

For many, the rambunctious joy embedded in Bounce music was synonymous with home and so it was through these live music events that displaced communities were able to collectively engage in a sonic conjuring of the past – as in, the homes and neighbourhoods they used to share but could no longer return to, at least physically.

While plantation models of the past and present seek to inflict the erasure of black personhood, cultural methods through which racialized people assert their presence, resilience, and agency persist. Against the colonial logic of extraction and erasure, lies the opportunity to 'imagine otherwise' when we direct our attention at seeing and hearing what remains.⁶⁶⁴ In the case of Katrina, there is a lot to listen out for. Despite initial post-Katrina fears that the storm had washed away the City's musical soundscape ('What has, what will, become of these streets? Where did the people go? Did they transplant their exuberance?'),

⁶⁶² Snippets of this interview are available at The Root, *How Bounce Music Rebuilt New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina*, online video recording, YouTube, 28th August 2020

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwD_z3H5Rkc>> [accessed 1st October 2021].

⁶⁶³ Cadogan, 'By Us, For Us: On New Orleans Bounce'.

⁶⁶⁴ Christina Sharpe, 'Lose Your Kin', *The New Inquiry*, 16th November 2016 <<<https://thenewinquiry.com/lose-your-kin/>>> [accessed 1st June 2021].

through records and live events, the New Orleans rap scene soon affirmed their presence, and that the city would, as they put it, “Bounce” back.⁶⁶⁵ Building on Atlantic genealogies of sound that can be traced back to the Middle Passage, Bounce music – a creolised, sonic mode of expression – is an extension of Plantationocene histories in which music becomes an exercise in remembrance. Referring to New York borne hip hop, Rose writes, ‘In the postindustrial urban context of dwindling low-income housing, a trickle of meaningless jobs for young people, mounting police brutality, and increasingly draconian depictions of young inner city residents, hip hop style *is* black urban renewal.’⁶⁶⁶ Hip hop is also renewal for Southern rappers wrestling with ongoing systems of aqueously mediated violence – which, as I have argued, is a defining feature of the Plantationocene.

The Sonic Plantationocene

Bounce music demonstrates how rap responds to anthropogenic catastrophe but thinking about the sonic dimensions of the Plantationocene also requires listening for the ways in which rap contains the ecological soundspaces of slavery and its afterlives. Tuning into the sonic ecologies in and surrounding Southern rap introduces the need for incorporating sound studies, and not just musicology, into this discussion. Sound studies, as Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld put it, is an interdisciplinary field of inquiry involving ‘acoustic ecology, sound and soundscape design, anthropology of the senses, history of everyday life, environmental history, cultural geography, urban studies, auditory culture, art studies, musicology, ethnomusicology, literary studies’.⁶⁶⁷ Critics such as David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny have cautioned against sound studies, warning that ‘the generalizability of sound, in its most imprecise uses, can sidestep the effects of institutional histories and the structuring influence of entrenched debates’.⁶⁶⁸ However, as Jennifer Lynn Stoeber writes in *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (2016), such sidesteps represent ‘methodological moves made not to avoid contending with established music history but rather as a strategy of critical sonar to navigate the epistemological terrain that

⁶⁶⁵ Cadogan, ‘By Us, For Us: On New Orleans Bounce’.

⁶⁶⁶ Rose, p.61.

⁶⁶⁷ Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, ‘New Keys to the World of Sound’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, ed. by Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) pp.3-38 (p.7).

⁶⁶⁸ David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, ‘Introduction’, in *Keywords in Sound* ed. by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), pp.1-12 (p.6).

“music” – as a culturally specific, politically charged, and “entrenched” category of value can obscure’.⁶⁶⁹

Various scholars within the field of Anthropocene studies have begun to engage with the imbrications between the aural and environmental, and what they mean in terms of generating an understanding of the audibility of the Anthropocene. For example, in 2016, Feld – who coined the term ‘acoustemology’ – delivered a lecture, ‘Hearing Heat: An Anthropocene Acoustemology’, in which he suggests that, in relation to rising global temperatures, ‘cicadas have sounded as bio-political archives, and how ethnographic, scientific, and art sound recordings can recompose culture and nature into what Donna Haraway calls “naturecultures”’.⁶⁷⁰ Writing more broadly, Ivo Louro, Margarida Mendes, Daniel Paiva and Iñigo Sánchez-Fuarros, in a double issue entitled ‘A Sonic Anthropocene: Sound Practices in a Changing Environment’, assert that ‘incorporating practices of listening and aural documentation that register the transformations in the acoustic landscape creates a space of potential for examining the increasing impact of human activity on the environment.’⁶⁷¹ Similarly, Katerina Talianni argues that:

Audio is a powerful tool when it comes to communicating the climate crisis and when we engage critically with the soundscape of the Anthropocene [...] The kind of listening we need in the time of the Anthropocene, when “human beings have become the primary emergent geological force affecting the future of the Earth system” (Angus 2016, 9), calls for an ecocriticism whose goal is to make the urgency of our ecological moment audible in a new way. Ecocritical listening thus explores the possibilities of an ecological ear, developing modes of a polyphonic and empirical listening to sounds made by contemporary sound artists and field recordists that make possible connections between sound ecology and cosmology (Smith 2019). This polyphonic listening will act as a model for environmental awareness.⁶⁷²

Talianni’s work draws on the concept of Acoustic Ecology – as in, ‘the science that helps us understand the mediating sounds between any living organism and environment around it.’⁶⁷³ Such discussions around sound and the Anthropocene are certainly relevant to the discussion at hand because they emphasize the methodological promise of listening to a

⁶⁶⁹ Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), p.18.

⁶⁷⁰ Research Center For Material Culture, *Hearing Heat: An Anthropocene Acoustemology*, 2016 << <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/events/hearing-heat-anthropocene-acoustemology>>> [accessed 3rd October 2021].

⁶⁷¹ Ivo Louro, Margarida Mendes and Daniel Paiva and Iñigo Sánchez-Fuarros, ‘A Sonic Anthropocene: Sound Practices in a Changing Environment’, *Journal of Art and Anthropology*, 19 (2021), pp.3-17 (p.3).

⁶⁷² Katerina Talianni, ‘The soundscape of Anthropocene: Exploring the instrumentality of collaboration and agency in environmental field recordings’, *Airea: Arts and Interdisciplinary Research*, 2 (2020), pp.63-76 (p.73-74).

⁶⁷³ *Ibid*, p.64.

changing environment, but they do raise questions around who and what is listened to. In other words, just as the concept of the Anthropocene risks conflating a broad spectrum of experiences into one shared sense of crisis, existing theories pertaining to the sonic and the Anthropocene tend to bypass the racialized structures of ecological catastrophe by amplifying the sounds of non-human soundscapes without becoming attuned to the sounds of the racialized people who are rendered most vulnerable to anthropogenic disaster.

When thinking about Plantationocene Acoustemologies, I am seeking ways of transposing these concepts to the study of transatlantic slavery and its aqueously mediated afterlives. Acoustemology, as Talianni puts it, is a ‘tool or strategy that connects humans, spaces, technologies, and the natural world; that makes relational ontologies audible’.⁶⁷⁴ In *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana*, Feld synthesises the acoustemologies of the region by writing that, ‘Jazz cosmopolitanism in Accra is about histories of listening, echoing, and sounding, about acoustemology, the agency of knowing the world through sound. Let me suggest that this acoustemology, this sonic knowing, is the imagination and enactment of a musical intimacy.’⁶⁷⁵ Similarly, in defining Plantationocene Acoustemologies, rather than solely listening to natural soundscapes, I am also building on the concept of musical intimacies – particularly between Southern rap and water.

Paul Gilroy conjures links between hip hop and the ocean, arguing that black music is part of a complex transatlantic network of modern cultural forms that were born out of the ‘ineffable terrors of slavery’ which began with the Middle Passage.⁶⁷⁶ ‘Though they were unspeakable, these terrors were not inexpressible, and [...] residual traces of their necessarily painful expression still contribute to historical memories inscribed and incorporated into the volatile core of Afro-Atlantic cultural creation’, he writes.⁶⁷⁷ Gilroy argues that there is a doubleness embedded in Black music in and of the Atlantic because of its ‘location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic rules which distinguish and periodise modernity.’⁶⁷⁸ For Gilroy, Black music is both modern (due to its hybrid emergence in the West), and antimodern because it is haunted by ‘pulses

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid, p.74.

⁶⁷⁵ Steven Feld, *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana* (London: Duke University Press, 2012), p.49.

⁶⁷⁶ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p.73.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

from the past'.⁶⁷⁹ Gilroy does not offer an essentialist history of black music whereby we perceive it to have emerged discretely and unchanged since the Middle Passage – indeed, networks of Black music vast, layered, and continually morphing, but bear the trace of the Atlantic nonetheless. Building on these discussions, Baucom conceives of the Atlantic genealogies of modern cultural forms as a series of assemblages, 'Because this fatal Atlantic 'beginning' of the modern is more properly understood as an ending without end. Because history comes to us not only as a flash or revelation but piling up. Because this is, not was. Because this is the Atlantic, now. Because all of it is now, it is always now, even for you who never was there.'⁶⁸⁰ How, then, can we think of the Atlantic genealogies of Southern rap ecologically? After all, as this chapter will demonstrate, the genre is structurally and lyrically connected to water.

Much like the blues (which many critics have argued was the genre that gave birth to rap) Southern rap has become a part of what Joshua Schuster describes as the 'sonic ecology of the South.'⁶⁸¹ Schuster writes of the sonic ecology of the South in relation to the blues, asserting that the genre demonstrates how 'environmental distress is closely linked to the brutal Jim Crow system by sonically linking the wails of the singer to the bioregional sounds that reverberated across the cash crop plantation system.'⁶⁸² The agricultural and biological sonics of the plantation and its afterlives – from the noise of insects to the rhymical sounds of tending to crops – are embedded in the blues and work songs, testifying to the interconnectivity between human and environmental histories.⁶⁸³ Similarly, Kimberly Ruffin argues that the blues is a form of 'ecological testimony'.⁶⁸⁴ W.C. Handy, often credited as the father of the blues, described the genre as an 'earth born music', but as Schuster puts it, "To "come from" or "come out" of the land does not necessarily mean a harmonious melding of sound and environment. One could also make the case that blues comes from trying to avoid the fields, a way to dodge the body-killing, soul-draining toil.'⁶⁸⁵

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid, p.74.

⁶⁸⁰ Ian Baucom, *Spectres of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p.333.

⁶⁸¹ Joshua Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), p.88.

⁶⁸² Ibid, p.95.

⁶⁸³ Schuster offers the example of Charley Patton's "Mississippi Boweavil Blues" in order to synthesise how the agricultural and biological sounds of the plantation and its afterlives are embedded in the blues and testify to the interconnectivity between human and environmental histories. Ibid, p.95.

⁶⁸⁴ Kimberly Ruffin, *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), p.137.

⁶⁸⁵ Schuster, p.88.

Furthermore, ecological discussions of the blues that focus solely on its land-bound dimensions, fail to adequately engage with the ways in which the agricultural landscapes to which African Americans found themselves tethered to were acutely vulnerable to aquatic disaster. For instance, when the 1927 Mississippi flood struck, African Americans were disproportionately impacted under the sharecropping system of the period. Not only were their crops destroyed, but, in the words of Schuster:

Thousands of black people were forced at gunpoint to work on the levees, coordinate food distribution, and do heavy labor in the service of disaster relief. Refugee camps doubled as labor prisons. The camps were divided by race; black workers were not paid and were told that after the flood subsided, they would be forced to return to their sharecropping commitments even if the harvest was ruined.⁶⁸⁶

In ‘High Water Everywhere: Blues and Gospel Commentary on the 1927 Mississippi flood’, David Evans assembles a catalogue of twenty-one songs, specifically connected to the flood.⁶⁸⁷ The flood resulted in an influx of the blues, reminding us of the relationship between the genre and aqueously mediated violence, stretching back to the Middle Passage. African American musical expression still serves as a form of relief from disaster and violence. As Kish writes, post-Katrina rap ‘marks a significant contribution to the history of black American creative output in response to disaster’, providing counternarratives to the dominant representations of black flood-victims demonised in the wake of Katrina.⁶⁸⁸

In conceptualising Plantationocene Acoustemologies, I emphasize the extent to which Southern rap, like the blues, emanates out of watery histories and how this is not only evident in the surge of post-1927 blues and the outpouring of post-Katrina rap, but also in the ways in which modes of sonic agency that were established on board the slave ship emerge in the present through Southern rap. The sonic continuities that connect the sounds of the Middle Passage and contemporary Southern rap can be understood, in part, in terms of the Atlantic genealogies of the oral tradition. As Glissant writes, ‘It is nothing new to declare that for us music, gesture, dance are forms of communication, just as important as the gift of speech. This is how we first managed to emerge from the plantation: aesthetic form in our cultures must be shaped from these oral structures.’⁶⁸⁹ I listen out for these oral

⁶⁸⁶ Ibid, p.90.

⁶⁸⁷ David Evans, ‘High Water Everywhere: Blues and Gospel Commentary on the 1927 Mississippi flood’, in *Nobody Knows Where The Blues Comes From: Lyrics and History* ed. by Robert Springer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), pp.3-75.

⁶⁸⁸ Kish, p.674.

⁶⁸⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, translated by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), p.248.

structures – like polyphony, call and response patterns, and repetition – in the music drawn on throughout this chapter, but I want to begin by framing their emergence in terms of sound and agency because, as Gilroy reminds us, ‘It is important to remember that the slaves’ access to literacy was often denied on pain of death and only a few cultural opportunities were offered as a surrogate for the other forms of individual autonomy’.⁶⁹⁰ Music, he says, therefore ‘becomes vital at the point at which linguistic and semantic indeterminacy/polyphony arise amidst the protracted battle between masters, mistresses, and slaves.’⁶⁹¹

It is worth emphasizing that Black Atlantic genealogies of sound are not limited to voice. Here, Danielle Skeeahan’s work on black Atlantic acoustemologies is indispensable. ‘Sound was an essential element of ship life’, Skeeahan writes, referring to the slave ships of the Middle Passage.⁶⁹² ‘These sounds included elements of the natural world as ships moved through it, such as water, birds, storms; however, they also included spoken orders and resulting work, such as the ‘heaving’, ‘loosing’, or ‘bracing’ [...] often accompanied by songs or sea shanties.’⁶⁹³ Most poignantly, Skeeahan describes how the architecture of the slave ship lent itself to functioning as a tool for amplification: ‘if ships were spatially designed to produce racial difference, their composition – a ‘hollow place’, in Olaudah Equiano’s words, structured by wood, cloth, and copper – was designed to resonate and carry sound. Marcus Rediker has compared ships to drums.’⁶⁹⁴ As such, ‘the material properties of ships may have led to the formation of unique forms of audio production’.⁶⁹⁵ Skeeahan’s work resonates with Tom Rice’s sonic interpretation of contemporary carceral practices. ‘Visually, prisons may be bounded spaces, their limits tightly controlled, clearly demarcated by walls and fences. From an acoustic perspective, however, they are porous [...] sounds can move through and around prison buildings’, writes Rice.⁶⁹⁶ Thinking about sonic continuities, in many ways, this discussion is about the ways in which black Atlantic acoustemologies have advanced and unrolled over time given the realities of the Plantationocene; the prolonged patterns of aqueously mediated violence, the ongoing

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid, p.74.

⁶⁹¹ Ibid.

⁶⁹² Danielle Skeeahan, ‘Black Atlantic Acoustemologies and the Maritime Archive’, in *Acoustemologies in Contact: Sounding Subject and Modes of Listening in Early Modernity*, edited by Emily Wilbourne and Suzanne G. Cusick (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2021), pp.107-134 (p.119).

⁶⁹³ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid, p.117.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid, p.118.

⁶⁹⁶ Tom Rice, ‘Sounds inside: prison, prisoners and acoustical agency’, *Sound Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 2, 1 (2016) pp.6-20 (p.12).

systems of racialized captivity – all of these things mean that what began as black Atlantic acoustemologies at sea have now developed into Plantationocene Acoustemologies given their persistence in the present and on land. As such, slave spirituals of the antebellum period, the outpouring of blues following the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, and the surge of Southern rap after Katrina, are all connected as Atlantic genealogies of sound. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant describes how, during the Middle Passage, sonic uprisings emerged against the silences, absences, and erasures of slavery. In other words, while enslaved people were incarcerated by the physical architecture of the ship, the oral traditions of the Middle Passage testify to the ways in which enslaved people played an active role in resisting and reshaping the brutal soundscapes of the ship. Similarly, Rice illuminates how, in prisons, ‘rattling keys and slamming doors mix with loud vocalisations from prison staff (16-17)’, but are met with ‘prisoners’ ability to exercise acoustical agency [...] in the phenomenon of “window-to-window communication” or shouting between cells’, for example.⁶⁹⁷ ‘Multiple acoustical agencies, brought together in a confined space, are in on-going interaction, a sonic ecology mapping onto or morphing into an ecology of power’, Rice argues.⁶⁹⁸ We can apprehend this in the Plantationocene in broader terms; for example, as we saw in relation to Bounce, roaring hurricanes that culminate as a result of authoritarian power, activate grassroots forms of hip-hop that critique and contest those structures. In other words, methods of acoustical agency – which can be traced back to the Middle Passage – continue to inform contemporary Southern rap.

‘The ship is the first of the novel chronotopes presupposed by my attempts to rethink modernity via the history of the black Atlantic and the African diaspora into the western hemisphere’, writes Gilroy.⁶⁹⁹ As Martyn Hudson elaborates, ‘[t]he ship was not a metaphor for carrying over meaning but was the vital means by which the whole system was made and unified. The ship made modernity.’⁷⁰⁰ Black practices of sonic resistance to forms of racialized captivity, violence, and displacement are an ongoing feature of this waterborne modernity. Songs of the Black Atlantic therefore ought to be understood in terms of the converging temporalities they carry forth: their immediate context and precursory histories of sound that can be traced back to the ship. In this way, as Skeehan puts it, the ship came to serve as an instrument, ‘made to ‘sound’ and ‘play’ by the captives

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid, p.16-17, p.13.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid, p.17.

⁶⁹⁹ Gilroy, p.17.

⁷⁰⁰ Martyn Hudson, *The Slave Ship, Memory and the Origin of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2016), p.12.

as they contest their imprisonment, forge bonds, and express themselves in ways that will carry over to inform New World diasporic cultures.⁷⁰¹ Atlantic genealogies of sound echo into the present. In the words of Skeehan, ‘Sound does not respect boundaries, barricades, or segmentations: the entire ship is designed as a space to carry and echo voices’.⁷⁰² Fred Moten, drawing on Hartman’s conceptualisation of the diffusion of terror, writes, ‘I remain convinced that Aunt Hester’s scream is diffused in but not diluted by black music in particular and black art in general’.⁷⁰³ I grapple with the sonic diffusion of different temporalities in greater depth later on, but I raise these notions around reverberation here in order to foreground the notion that Plantation Acoustemologies are, to invoke Moten, ‘a pouring forth, a holding or spreading out, or a running over that never runs out and is never over; a disbursal more than a dispersal; a funding that is not so much founding as continual finding of that which is never lost in being lost’.⁷⁰⁴

Southern Rap and The Sonic Color Line

Before offering a close analysis of particular Southern rap movements and songs, it is important to contextualise the genre within and against the hostile listening practices it endures. Here, I am thinking of Stoever’s concept of the sonic color line and ‘the long historical entanglement between white supremacy and listening’.⁷⁰⁵ Stoever argues that the occularcentric focus of discussions of race have left other aspects of racialization, such as what she describes as the sonic color line, ignored. The sonic color line, Stoever argues, ‘produces, codes, and polices racial difference through the ear; enabling us to hear race as well as see it.’⁷⁰⁶ The concept is indebted to W. E. B. Du Bois’ definition of the color line. Du Bois, in 1903, posited the notion of the color line as a means for referring to patterns of segregation and exclusion, asking ‘how far differences of race . . . will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization.’⁷⁰⁷ Stoever addresses the auditory features of the color line, arguing that ‘U.S. white supremacy has attempted to suppress, tune out, and willfully misunderstand some sounds and their makers and histories’.⁷⁰⁸ While Stoever traces this back to antebellum slave narratives of the U.S. South, I am proposing

⁷⁰¹ Skeehan, p.115.

⁷⁰² Ibid, p.118.

⁷⁰³ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur (consent not to be a single being)*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p.x.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid, p.xi.

⁷⁰⁵ Stoever, p.2.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid, p.11.

⁷⁰⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois quoted in Jessica Blatt, *Race and the Making of American Political Science* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), p.54.

⁷⁰⁸ Stoever, p.6.

that, actually, the relationship between white supremacy and listening began at sea. For example, Skeehan, examining archives of records kept by captors during the passage (such as ships' logs, journals, and literary representations of the voyage) argues that the sounds produced onboard the ship by those who were denied speech came to serve as a mode of disguised communication which their captors only heard as confused and unpleasant noise.⁷⁰⁹ While enslaved people were establishing modes of sonic solidarity, this, writes Skeehan, is 'how white westerners heard an emergent Black Atlantic soundscape'.⁷¹⁰ Contemporary Southern rap is a conduit for the sonic strategies that characterised the Black Atlantic soundscape, but they are not the only auditory practices that survived the voyages: the sonic color line, the racist listening protocols with which these strategies of sonic resistance were met with during the Middle Passage, also persists.

The sonic color line rests on the auditory naturalisation of whiteness. In *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (2008), Paul Outka theorises the relationship between whiteness and invisibility by demonstrating the imbrication of nature in the 'historical narrative by which whiteness became an unmarked normative "humanity" and blackness solidified into a clearly marked racial essence'.⁷¹¹ Examining representations of nature and race in American literature of the antebellum period through to the Harlem renaissance, Outka posits that nature, particularly the 'traumatic conflation between African-American subjectivity and the natural world', is 'a critically important origin for the production of an essential blackness and a largely invisible whiteness'.⁷¹² While Outka is concerned with the relationship between whiteness and invisibility, when conceptualising the sonic color line, Stoever demonstrates how sound is also pivotal in the naturalisation of normative racial constructs by exposing the sonic Othering of African Americans and the consequential relationship between whiteness and inaudibility. 'The inaudibility of whiteness stems from its considerably wider palette of representation and the belief that white representations stand in for "people" in general', she writes.⁷¹³ Stoever asserts that:

As dominant listening practices discipline us to process white male ways of sounding as default, natural, normal, and desirable [...] they deem alternate

⁷⁰⁹ Skeehan, p.121.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹¹ Paul Outka, *Race and Nature: From Transcendentalism To The Harlem Renaissance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.10-11.

⁷¹² Ibid, p.57, 11.

⁷¹³ Stoever, p.12.

ways of listening and sounding aberrant and – depending upon the historical context – as excessively sensitive, strikingly deficient, or impossibly both.⁷¹⁴

Blackness, in juxtaposition with white silence, is thus aligned with loudness. ‘The sonic color line invokes noise in direct connection (or as a metonymic stand-in for) people of color, and particularly blackness’, writes Stoever.⁷¹⁵ ‘The sound of hip-hop pumped at top volume through car speakers’, she explains, ‘has become a stand-in for the bodies of young black men in American culture; noise ordinances seeking to “tame the boom car monster” – words used in Rochester, New York – allow for racial profiling without ever explicitly mentioning race.’⁷¹⁶ Stoever examines the emergence of the sonic color line in Antebellum slave narratives, observing how the racialized sonics of slavery are represented and resisted in the work of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. For example, Douglass’s narrative is replete with references to *The Columbian Orator* by Caleb Bingham which helped define American sonic standards. Bingham defined ‘harmony’ as the sonic ideal, classifying any “violent”, “ecstatic,” and excessively emotional sounds as threats to the social order.’ Stoever writes:⁷¹⁷

Championing the sound of restraint, a cultural construct the post-Enlightenment mind-body split associated with whiteness and intellect [...] Bingham’s use of “ecstatic” is especially telling [...] as antebellum whites often used “ecstatic” to describe what they considered the irrationality and excess of black speech, music, and worship.⁷¹⁸

Stoever demonstrates how *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) inverts the sonic color line when, for example, Douglass parodies the hymn “Our Heavenly Union” in order to ‘expose hypocritical white Southern preachers via nonverbal imagery; self-proclaimed upstanding Christians become “roaring, ranting, sleek man-thie[ves]” who “roar and scold, and whip, and sting.”’⁷¹⁹

With Outka’s work in mind, I want to think about the sonic color line in ecological terms, revealing the ways in which it was formed in conjunction with representations of the natural world. Outka offers a rather terrestrial account of the interconnected construction of race and nature – which he traces back to the ‘European colonization of the “New” World – illuminating ‘the cultural history of the racialized split between an ahistorical and

⁷¹⁴ Ibid.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid, p.13.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid.

⁷¹⁷ Caleb Bingham quoted in Stoever, p.40.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

⁷¹⁹ Ibid, p.42.

vulnerable wilderness ever in need of defense and a degraded and exploitable “other” nature.’⁷²⁰ However, contrary to Outka’s landbound analysis of the ways in which racialization was formed in relation to the natural world, I am interested in the ways in which the sonic naturalization of whiteness was established on board the slave ships of the Middle Passage, before settlers even arrived on land. In the Western imagination, the ocean is represented, to quote Elizabeth DeLoughrey, ‘as a foreign, extraterrestrial space outside human orbits.’⁷²¹ Various blue humanities interpretations of the ocean, like Stefan Helmreich’s work on microbial seas, describe it as alien due to the ways in which it challenges (or, surpasses) human knowledge and escapes complete knowability. ‘The figure of the alien materializes [...] when uncertainty overtakes scientific confidence about how to fit newly described life forms into existing classifications or taxonomies’, writes Helmreich.⁷²² Crucially, given the racialized ideologies that underpinned Western humanism, racialized people were excluded from the realm of the human and rendered alien and other, much like water. This conflation between blackness and water is precisely what John Ruskin famously interpreted from Turner’s Middle Passage painting, ‘Typhon Coming On’. ‘The storm has torn the sky to shreds and broken the back of the sea’, writes Marcus Wood, summarising Ruskin’s interpretation. ‘Ruskin creates imagery which suggests the effects of a terrible whipping’, and the sea is thus conjured as ‘a personification of the tortured slave’.⁷²³ If Turner’s painting visually evokes the conflations between the ocean and the enslaved, how, then, was the sonic imbricated in this process?

Skeehan observes that in maritime records produced by captors, ‘where the voices of African captives enter the written record, they are recorded as *noise* rather than communication. Translated as ‘murmurs’, ‘cries’, ‘complaints’, ‘shrieks’, ‘groans’, ‘bursts’, and ‘uproars’, the record renders these communications non-sensible and non-linguistic’.⁷²⁴ In other words, having banned the use of language among captives, maritime masters used the non-verbal modes of sonic insurrection performed by enslaved Africans to justify their treatment of them as less-than-human. Slave ships were loud spaces, reverberating with the sonics of the Middle Passage – from defiant voices to the vicissitudes of the sea – and so, poignantly, captors’ descriptions of black noise as comprising of ‘bursts’ and ‘uproars’,

⁷²⁰ Outka, p.2.

⁷²¹ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (London: Duke University Press, 2019), p.134.

⁷²² Stefan Helmreich, *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), p.16.

⁷²³ Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p.63.

⁷²⁴ Skeehan, p.110.

evokes the patterns of the sea, and exposes the ways in which they heard black sonics as an extension of the tumultuous Atlantic, alien and incomprehensible to landbound colonisers.⁷²⁵

Southern rap is a powerful example of how black sonic protocols are still aligned with water. Big K.R.I.T., for example, is known for being able to ‘flow like the river’.⁷²⁶ Similarly, on a post-Katrina mixtape, New Orleans rapper Hollygrove Mikey says, ‘The government blew the levees, I used that Katrina water to master my flow’.⁷²⁷ Evidently, the acoustemological blend of water and blackness, which can be traced back to the Middle Passage, is manifest in contemporary rap. If, as I have suggested, this conflation emerged during the trauma of the Middle Passage, and the ecological constructions of race forged on the slave ship, how, then, should we interpret the ways in which it is diffused and, to an extent, embraced in Southern rap. Here, I want to return to Fred Moten’s work to suggest that Southern rap and the ways in which it leans into comparisons between black sonics and water exemplifies his claim that ‘black art, or the predication of blackness, is not avoidance but immersion, not aggrandizement but absolute humility’.⁷²⁸ Though the sonic colour line was born out of the ecological violence of the Middle Passage, Southern rap’s reappropriation of the blurred boundaries between water and black sonics, unwaveringly upholds that there is power outside the confines of the normative, enlightenment model of the human.

The exclusion of Southern rap (and black sonic practices more generally) from emergent interdisciplinary discussions of the Anthropocene and sound studies, can be viewed in relation to the sonic color line and the historical propensity to render black noise ‘unsensible’. Thus, as I move through this chapter, I am conscious of the ways in which we ought to acknowledge the politics and poetics of making noise in a world in which whiteness is sonically naturalised and all else is heard but rarely listened to. Yet, waterborne modes of black, sonic refusal are diffused throughout the Plantationocene, even though the sonic color line was designed to obfuscate them.

⁷²⁵ Ibid.

⁷²⁶ Rob Boffard, ‘Flow Like the River: Big K.R.I.T and Mississippi’s flood of Hip-Hop’, *The Guardian*, 27th March 2013 << <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/mar/27/mississippi-hip-hop>>> [accessed 1st July 2021].

⁷²⁷ Hollygrove Mikey quoted in Holly Hobbs, ‘I Used That Katrina Water to Master my Flow: Rap, Performance, Disaster and Recovery in New Orleans’, *Southern Spaces*, 6th May 2015 << <https://southernspaces.org/2015/i-used-katrina-water-master-my-flow-rap-performance-disaster-and-recovery-new-orleans/>>> [accessed 1st July 2021].

⁷²⁸ Moten, p.xii.

Nautical Hip Hop: Rap and Residence Time in Rapsody's 'Eve' (2019)

“You the captain of your own ship, young blood
A smooth sea never made a skilled sailor”
- Rapsody ⁷²⁹

Interpreting Plantationocene epistemologies throughout this thesis has required attending to the ways in which narrative forms mediate watery memories. Each of my readings, whether I have been exploring Ward's literary excursions into the carceral economy and how they are haunted by histories of the Middle Passage or looking at watermarked photos that bear the traces of multiple pasts, has been guided by Christina Sharpe's notions of wake work and residence time. Sharpe's work has been indispensable to my thinking around the ecological afterlives of the plantation because I believe that no other critic expresses how the watery origins of the plantation persist aqueously with as much clarity as Sharpe does in *In The Wake*. By shedding light on how ‘The atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today’ because human blood has a residence time of 260 million years, Sharpe prompts us to think about how multiple plantation temporalities converge in the present and how they are both materially and discursively connected to water.⁷³⁰ That is why, in part, Sharpe advocates for staying in the wake – evoking both the path left behind by a ship and the act of holding vigil. In the previous chapters, I grappled with literary and visual encounters with residence time and wake work and demonstrated how they help us to conceptualise the Plantationocene. In this chapter, I want to think about how these concepts are manifest sonically in Southern rap by turning to North Carolina-based rapper Rapsody's album ‘Eve’ (2019). In what ways does the album amplify the imbrications between watery temporalities and the plantation? How does Rapsody perform wake work sonically? To what extent does ‘Eve’ provide ways of hearing the Plantationocene? In attending to these questions, I suggest that ‘Eve’ can be interpreted as what might be described as Nautical Hip Hop – a sonic, embodied form of watery storytelling that centers the role of water in plantation histories and their ongoing ecologies.

⁷²⁹ Rapsody, *Serena* (Raleigh: Jamla Records/ Roc Nation, 2019) on Spotify <<<https://open.spotify.com/track/0cSiOUEG3hl59NDMAIBC6K?si=2c79045ed85e43c1>>> [accessed 1st October 2021].

⁷³⁰ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), p.40.

In ‘Oprah’, Rapsody describes her style of rap as a ‘mothership flow’, helping us to conceive of the ways in which Nautical Hip Hop – as in, rap music evoking oceanic memories – serves as a vessel for staying in the wake, thereby reminding us that memories of the Middle Passage are transmitted, in part, through sound.⁷³¹ The entire album echoes with memories of the ship and the sea. Maritime lyricism evoking the Middle Passage is abundant throughout ‘Eve’ and foregrounded early in the album through ‘Cleo’ – ‘we all on the same continent and off the same boat’, Rapsody asserts, alluding to the emblem of the slave ship.⁷³² While American maritime writings are usually associated with nineteenth-century nautical fiction revolving around heroic seafaring men, Nautical Hip Hop – as it emerges in ‘Eve’ – reimagines the genre to narrate how plantation histories flow through bodies of water, with a particular focus on black women. With the rise of environmental criticism, nautical literature has garnered recent attention with critics observing and critiquing dominant interpretations of the ocean in these literary contexts as being symbolic or simply serving as backdrop to human history. As Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthum write, the ocean ‘needs to be analysed as a deeply historical location whose transformative power is not merely psychological or metaphorical – as its frequent use as a literary motif might suggest – but material and very real.’⁷³³ Building on these discussions, Emily Alder asserts that ‘Revising the sea as a space, medium, and environment in its own right can help to recover both the role of the sea in cultural history, and the involvement of people with the sea – often overlooked in the aesthetic construction of a primal, timeless ocean.’⁷³⁴ While there is not scope to explore historical representations of the ocean in nautical fiction, I raise these discussions in order to suggest that Rapsody’s Hip Hop songs of water challenge conceptions surrounding the timelessness of the sea by prompting us to consider the material interchanges that occur between oceanic temporalities and the watery corporeality of our bodies.

We are encouraged, in many ways, to think of ‘Eve’ as a voyage. For example, when Rapsody describes being ‘More than a woman, real enough to rock the boat’, she conjures

⁷³¹ Rapsody, *Oprah* (Raleigh: Jamla Records/Roc Nation, 2019) on Spotify <<<https://open.spotify.com/track/3IHwH8tPmchRYNCOMYvPOI?si=136810cc2a004ec9>>> [accessed 1st October 2021].

⁷³² Rapsody, *Cleo* (Raleigh: Jamla Records/Roc Nation, 2019) on Spotify <<<https://open.spotify.com/track/3mMpLkkVjO69cEo5E2wq4Y?si=8cb06ac6d2d5442f>>> [accessed 1st October 2021].

⁷³³ Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthum, ‘Introduction: The Sea is History’, in *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean*, edited by Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthum (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.1-12 (p.2).

⁷³⁴ Emily Alder, ‘Through Oceans Darkly: Sea Literature and the Nautical Gothic’, *Gothic Studies*, 19, 2 (2017), pp.1-15 (p.6).

connections between women and the ocean – and, in this way, and with each song on the album named after iconic women, the listening experience emulates a seafaring journey.⁷³⁵ ‘Black women, you are a threat on every point of the map’, Rapsody asserts during ‘Reyna’s Interlude’.⁷³⁶ As Alder writes, in nautical fiction, the ocean is usually ‘perceived as timeless, inhuman, impervious, trackless, and empty of history’.⁷³⁷ As such, ‘the temporality of voyaging is characterised more by monotony and repetition’.⁷³⁸ Rather than perpetuating perceptions of the ocean and timelessness, the sonic voyage Rapsody conjures through ‘Eve’ reimagines the temporality of voyaging we encounter in nautical fiction in order to convey the complex, layered, and convergent time of water.

The convergent temporalities embedded in ‘Eve’ recode and resist normative, linear structures of time which can be traced back to their colonial origins. As Wynter’s work helps us to understand, colonial temporalities are structured around the market value of time – that is, the notion that time is synonymous with money, and a tool for measuring and predicting economic value and labour.⁷³⁹ From this colonial perspective, the past is static and time is conceived of as linear, always moving towards capital expansion and progress. This rubric was built on the commodification of black bodies; after all, these economic trajectories were reliant on their labour. In *Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World*, Wynter asserts that the ‘subversive quality of black popular music has been primarily its assault on this [colonial sense of time], its freeing of time from a market process, its insistence on time as a life process.’⁷⁴⁰ McKittrick builds on this notion, arguing that ‘the invention of black music is a revolutionary act that keeps heretical (nonmarket) time, negates black nonbeing by honouring and recoding black life, repurposes and interrupts linear temporalities, and is expressed in the midst of a violent and stigmatizing knowledge system.’⁷⁴¹ Similarly, Baucom suggests that the ways in which the Middle Passage continues to haunt the present ‘constitutes a knowledge and experience of time in

⁷³⁵ Rapsody, *Aaliyah* (Raleigh: Jamla Records, 2019) on Spotify <<<https://open.spotify.com/track/0hzuZvrOQpFDwQZIkLhJM1?si=83496015cd1b452a>>> [accessed 1st October 2021]

⁷³⁶ Rapsody, *Reyna’s Interlude* (Raleigh: Jamla Records, 2019) on Spotify <<<https://open.spotify.com/track/2Kegba3QEJc55Jj5VCjABX?si=1140b9d0ae0d444c>>> [accessed 1st October 2021]

⁷³⁷ Alder, p.7.

⁷³⁸ Ibid, p.8.

⁷³⁹ Recently, various critics have synthesised Wynter’s ideas around colonial temporalities and the market value of time, but Wynter’s original ideas are contained in the unpublished manuscript of *Black Metamorphosis*: Sylvia Wynter, *Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World*, Institute of the Black World Records, MG 502, Box 1. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

⁷⁴⁰ Sylvia Wynter quoted in McKittrick, p.162.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid, p.163.

which the present is present to more than itself, in which the now finds itself serially inheriting, playing, and transmitting a traumatic “past” that is not, in fact, past.’⁷⁴² Building on these discussions and exploring how we can conceive of them ecologically and in relation to sound, I suggest that Southern rap is a method through which bodies of water disrupt notions surrounding the linear unfolding of time. Listening to Rapsody in particular, I propose that ‘Eve’ materially-discursively stages the intra-actions between racialized bodies and the ocean, illuminating how the present is haunted by the watery origins of the plantation.⁷⁴³ Barad’s discussions of temporality are also useful in this way, helping us to think about the ways in which the album works ‘against the colonialist practices of erasure and avoidance and the related desire to set time aright’.⁷⁴⁴ Instead, Rapsody performs ‘a certain undoing of time; a work of mourning more accountable to, and doing justice to, the victims of ecological destruction and of racist, colonialist, and nationalist violence, human and otherwise – those victims who are no longer there, and those yet to come.’⁷⁴⁵

We can think of this reified sense of time in relation to Hurricane Katrina, the historical backdrop against which Rapsody raps. Much has been written about the ways in which Katrina forcibly disrupted the nation’s sense of time. Most notably, Dimock – whose notion of the flooded container appeared in the previous chapter – argues that America’s normative pre-Katrina notions of time were structured around rigid and enclosed national chronologies. ‘As a unit of time, the nation tends to work as a pair of evidentiary shutters, blocking out all those phenomena that do not fit into its intervals, reducing to nonevents all those processes either too large or too small to show up on its watch’, writes Dimock.⁷⁴⁶ Through Katrina, these national, temporal enclosures became a flooded container wherein local, national, and global histories powerfully and indisputably converge and overflow. As I will show, one of the ways in which ‘Eve’ represents the concurrence of multiple scales and temporalities – conceptualised by Dimock using the metaphor of the flooded container – is through the lens of embodiment.

‘In these troubling times, the urgency to trouble time, to shake it to its core, and to produce collective imaginaries that undo pervasive conceptions of temporality that take

⁷⁴² Ian Baucom, ‘Introduction: Atlantic Genealogies’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100, 1 (2001), pp.1-13 (p.8).

⁷⁴³ Barad, p.84.

⁷⁴⁴ Karen Barad, ‘Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-memembering, and Facing the Incalculable’, *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, 92 (2018), pp.56-86 (p.56).

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.56.

⁷⁴⁶ Wai Chee Dimock, ‘World History according to Katrina’, in *States of Emergency: The Object of American Studies*, ed. By Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), pp.143-160 (p.145).

progress as inevitable and the past as something that has passed and is no longer with us is something so tangible, so visceral, that it can be felt in our individual and collective bodies', writes Barad.⁷⁴⁷ We can think of this alongside 'Nina', the debut single from 'Eve'.

We are not the same
I've lived more lives than you,
I have less pride than you
I'm extraterrestrial,
I was created different
I've been here many times before and I've never been defeated,
and still
I will never be defeated⁷⁴⁸

In these lyrics, Rapsody represents her body as a vessel through which the past returns. Through the assertion that she has 'been here many times before' and through her use of repetition ('I'), Rapsody evokes notions of return and reincarnation that are inextricable from the idea that she is, as she puts it, 'extraterrestrial' – or, not of the earth. This suggestion of a kind of durability that does not come from the earth, in conjunction with the fact that the lyrics to 'Nina' are replete with motifs of blood and water, calls forth the principle of residence time: 'I felt more damned than Mississippi was, and still we persevere like all the 400 years of our own blood, Africa', she spits.⁷⁴⁹ 'Human blood is salty, and sodium [...] has a residence time of 260 million years', Sharpe reminds us.⁷⁵⁰ These invocations of blood, water, and the Middle Passage prompt us to consider the persistence of plantation pasts at a cellular level (both within and beyond the human), and how this returning is manifest sonically through rapping, a form of embodied sound.

'Nina' is the first track on the album and instantly foregrounds the notion that "spitting bars" (the colloquial term used to name rapping) is an act of making audible embodied histories that stretch back to the Middle Passage.

Here's to the honey in you
To the bittersweet in me
I will shed this blood so romantically, so viciously quiet
Here's to a moment of silence
I've poured and poured my soul again, here's to epiphanies⁷⁵¹

⁷⁴⁷ Karen Barad, 'Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-memembering, and Facing the Incalculable', p.57.

⁷⁴⁸ Rapsody, *Nina* (Raleigh: Jamla Records, 2019) on Spotify <<
<https://open.spotify.com/track/7qDYx1hasHgyRMPsezx0dR?si=8a4b8a12e25444db>>> [accessed 1st October 2021]

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁰ Sharpe, p.141.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid.

Employing motifs of shedding and pouring, Rapsody alludes to her liquid corporeality. Here, brimming with ‘blood’ and ‘epiphanies’, in many ways, the body is a flooded container. First, because Rapsody’s evocation of a corporeal liquid surplus is reminiscent of Yusoff’s assertion that normative ecological relations are ‘predicated on the presumed absorbent qualities of black and brown bodies to take up the body burdens of exposure to toxicities and to buffer the violence of the earth.’⁷⁵² Secondly, because, as explored above, in linking blood, water and time, Rapsody encourages us to think of these confluences temporally, prompting us to consider how embodied memories spill over through sound (‘I’ve poured and poured my soul again’). In this way, Rapsody rebels against colonial conceptualisations of time that were projected on to black bodies. Through slavery, black bodies were rendered machinic, with their labour and productivity measured based on the market value of time and its linearity. As I will show, Rapsody rebukes this sense of time, sonically demonstrating how her body does not serve as an instrument of capitalist progression and linearity, but as a living entity flooded with co-existing temporalities that are poured out in the form of rap. ‘For the present and future days, I say what I gotta say’, says Rapsody.⁷⁵³

The track opens with a sample of Nina Simone’s 1965 version of ‘Strange Fruit’, originally performed by Billie Holiday in 1939. ‘Southern trees bearing strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root’, she sings, her voice echoing throughout the duration of the song.⁷⁵⁴ Likening lynching victims to strange fruit (‘Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze, strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees’), the song describes black blood seeping out of the lynching tree and into Southern soil.⁷⁵⁵ ‘Here is a strange and bitter crop’, so the lyrics go, reminding us of the violent fusions that occurred between racialized people and the natural environment and emerged out of plantation slavery and its watery origins.⁷⁵⁶ Building on the ecological legacies of racialized violence. ‘Strange Fruit’ is itself a Plantationocene Acoustemology, sonically responding to the ways in which the legacies of slavery are experienced ecologically, through imbrications between blackness and a degraded natural world. Rapsody builds on black sonic responses to ecological violence, and in doing so, shifts our focus to water. For while Rapsody begins with these terrestrial

⁷⁵² Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), xii.

⁷⁵³ Rapsody, *Nina*.

⁷⁵⁴ Nina Simone, *Strange Fruit* (UMG Recordings, 1965), on spotify <<<https://open.spotify.com/track/2eKwjJkBUaeaGq5GA1wTwc?si=f6764dd08c594c65>>> [accessed 1st November 2021].

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

references to trees and earth, 'Nina' – and the album more generally – goes on to suggest that the same blood that saturated the land as a result of lynching, surges through the sea.



Figure 14. Still from Rapsody, *Nina*, online video recording, YouTube, 23rd August 2019 <<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54yOD994ors>>> [accessed 1st October 2021]

What I have described as Rapsody's sonic engagement with water and temporality is visually affirmed in the music video. Rapsody stands in a white cotton dress by the ocean's shore, evoking the iconic imagery of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). Set on St. Simon island, Georgia, *Daughters of the Dust* tells the story of a Gullah family living at Igbo Landing where, notably, in 1803, after a revolt on board the *Wanderer*, approximately seventy-five captured men and women marched into the ocean, choosing death over captivity. 'Nina' invokes these histories of drowning in relation to the durability of human blood, conjuring a sense of how the people who drowned during the Middle Passage materially persist in water, connecting the living and the dead, the past and the present. 'Survival', Rapsody utters as the director cuts to a wide shot of the ocean, its shores ostensibly (but not molecularly) empty of people. In describing her 'bittersweet' corporeality alongside visuals of the ocean, and in conjuring a sense of bodily porosity through references to pouring fourth, 'Nina' also calls to mind Baucom's notions regarding the body as contact zone. Invoking histories of the Middle Passage, Baucom asserts that 'at the dense nodal point of this scene of substitutions, reversals, abandonments, recoveries, losses, and gains, at the absolute zero point of relational contact, is that image of the drowning human

body, an image of the body less *in* than *as* a contact zone, an image of a body impoverished and strangely rewarded by “exchange”.⁷⁵⁷ Here, when referring to exchange, Baucom is drawing on Glissant’s work on creolisation and the processes of cultural exchange it entails, but ‘Nina’ helps us to conceptualise how the body emerges as contact zone for the exchange of memory. That is why ‘Nina’ remembers the Middle Passage through invocations of ‘Daughters of the Dust’, alongside histories of more recent racialized bloodshed by incorporating Nina Simone’s rendition of ‘Strange Fruit’, an anti-lynching protest song. ‘Nina’ disrupts temporal linearity by lyrically and visually evoking layered, concurrent and embodied histories of violence that can be traced back to the ordering moment of the Middle Passage.



Figure 15. Still from Rapsody, *Nina*, online video recording, YouTube, 23rd August 2019 <<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54yOD994ors>>> [accessed 1st October 2021]

⁷⁵⁷ Baucom, ‘Spectres of the Atlantic’, p.67-68.



Figure 16: Still from Rapsody, *Nina*, online video recording, YouTube, 23rd August 2019 <<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54yOD994ors>>> [accessed 1st October 2021]



Figure 17: Still from Rapsody, *Nina*, online video recording, YouTube, 23rd August 2019 <<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54yOD994ors>>> [accessed 1st October 2021]

From the ‘Tryna catch a wave’ refrain on ‘Ibtihaj’, to ‘Sojourner’ in which J. Cole raps ‘I swam for miles only to realize the current is fightin’ against me and I’m so tired, I’m floatin’ now’ and Rapsody responds ‘Swim good, enjoy the ride (yeah)/ everyday I rise,

thank God that I am alive (yeah)', 'Eve' is replete with references to waves.⁷⁵⁸ Rapsody's obsession with water, expressed through the form of soundwaves – many of which are samples taken from older pieces of music, troubling the album's periodization – helps us to conceptualise Barad's notion of temporal diffraction. Barad explains temporal diffraction to explain how a 'particle can be in a state of indeterminately coexisting at multiple times – for example, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.'⁷⁵⁹ Techniques in music technology, like vocal sampling, demonstrate how sound can coexist in multiple times. By incorporating Nina Simone's rendition of 'Strange Fruit', 'Nina', for example, is temporally layered. Put otherwise, when we acknowledge the material properties of sound, the fact that it is, after all, a physical vibration, we can begin to understand that what we are hearing in 'Nina' is a material-discursive convergence of different temporalities through soundwaves. 'Southern trees bearing strange fruit, blood at the leaves and blood at the root', the song begins with the sound of Nina Simone. 'So bleed...' Rapsody says before proceeding to pour forth her rap over Simone's reverberating voice. Poignantly, Barad explains that temporal indeterminacy can be thought of as a 'diffraction pattern' – 'a manifestation of different times bleeding through one another.' Barad argues that, like spatial diffraction, temporal diffraction 'means that it's not that some event is taking place at one time or another, but we don't know which; rather, the point is that temporal diffraction is the manifestation of an *ontological indeterminacy of time*: there is no fact of the matter to when it is taking place.'⁷⁶⁰ We see this in the carceral ecologies of water that bind the prison industrial complex and the slave ship, and patterns of extreme weather that are haunted by histories of Middle Passage; the material-discursive afterlives of slavery are an example of 'different times bleeding through one another.'⁷⁶¹ 'Nina' evokes these notions through references to shedding and pouring forth blood ('I will shed this blood so romantically') and by merging voices of the past and present. In this way, it is a sonic affirmation of Barad's assertion that 'It is not merely that the future and the past are not 'there' and never sit still, but that the present is not simply here-now.'⁷⁶²

⁷⁵⁸ Rapsody, *Eve* (Raleigh: Jamla Records/ Roc Nation, 2019), on spotify << <https://open.spotify.com/album/4W5qCJNSN3oNHB986TdO9S?si=OnEzXrdAREG52FLnjsodQ>>> [accessed 2nd October 2021].

⁷⁵⁹ Barad, 'Troubling Time/s', p.67.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid, p.68.

⁷⁶¹ Ibid.

⁷⁶² Karen Barad, 'Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come', *Derrida Today*, 3 (2010), pp.240-268 (p.244).

Drawing on the work of Arthur Jafa, Tricia Rose argues that the key elements of hip hop – rap, graffiti, and breakdance – ‘seem to center around around three concepts: *flow*, *layering* and *ruptures in line*.’⁷⁶³ We see this in ‘Eve’ and the ways in which it incorporates loops throughout the album. In music production, loops are a short fragment of repeated audio. Writing about the emergence of looping during the 1950s, Cliff Truesdell asserts, ‘Some of the early loop-based experiments were accomplished by splicing audio tape and creating a “closed loop” with a tape machine’.⁷⁶⁴ In the 1980s, with developments in audio technology, ‘digital sampling began to mimic many of the same effects created by tape loops.’⁷⁶⁵ Loops are still abundant in hip hop today. ‘Cleo’ is a particularly poignant track through which we can think about the use of looping throughout ‘Eve’ and how it helps us to conceive of ecological temporalities. The track is haunted by vocal samples and a drum loop from Phil Collins’ ‘In The Air Tonight’, the significance of which is layered. Most obviously, this sonic repetition reflects Barad’s notions of re-turning and temporal indeterminacies, but there are also ecological nuances to the use of the ‘In The Air’ sample. The incorporation of fragments of ‘In The Air’ evokes the memory of the original (‘I can feel it coming in the air tonight’) and might therefore be interpreted as an invocation of the weather.⁷⁶⁶ With the rise of Anthropocene discourse, critical discussions of climate change have tirelessly sought to meaningfully engage with the porosity between the human and more-than-human. Neimanis and Walker describe this relationship as one of ‘weathering’, helping us to understand the ‘spatial overlap of human bodies and weathery nature’, while also implying ‘a certain perdurance – a getting on with, a getting by, a getting through’.⁷⁶⁷ How, then, might Neimanis’ and Walker’s conceptualisation be modified in light of Christina Sharpe’s more recent assertion that ‘the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is anti-black’?⁷⁶⁸ We can think of this alongside Yusoff’s suggestion that black bodies have been made to absorb environmental harm, from chemical toxicity to Hurricanes. In this way, by invoking the weather – which, in the Southern context of Rapsody’s work evokes histories of Katrina as well as more recent hurricanes – ‘Cleo’ is imbued with underlying reminders that racialized bodies disproportionately bear the burden of the Plantationocene. ‘A black woman’s story,

⁷⁶³ Rose, p.38.

⁷⁶⁴ Cliff Truesdell, *Mastering Digital Audio Production: The Professional Music Workflow with Mac OS X* (Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, 2007), p.411.

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁶ Phil Collins, *In The Air Tonight – 2015 Remastered* (Burbank: Rhino Entertainment Company, 2015), on Spotify << <https://open.spotify.com/track/18AXbzPzBS8Y3AkgSxzJPb?si=acf528dbfe334c40>>> [accessed 4th October 2021].

⁷⁶⁷ Neimanis and Walker, p.560.

⁷⁶⁸ Sharpe, p.104.

they don't want this kind of rapping', Rapsody says over the repeated 'In The Air' loop.⁷⁶⁹ Sharpe's notions regarding of the totality of the weather are reflected in the use of layering, loops and repetition throughout 'Cleo', reminding us of the temporal indeterminacies that render Plantation structures present across both human and more-than-human bodies of water.

In *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (2017), Astrida Neimanis explores the more-than-human agency of water through the lens of embodiment, citing the fact that water is the very substance of the human as a challenge to 'anthropocentrism, and the privileging of the human as the role of primary site of embodiment'.⁷⁷⁰ Unravelling the enduring Enlightenment myth of the (homogenous) neatly-sealed, autonomous human – from which all external forces can be governed and conquered – Neimanis highlights how, our bodies of water are porous and vulnerable to external forces, encouraging us to view '[o]ur watery relations within (or more accurately: *as*) a more-than-human hydrocommons'.⁷⁷¹ The more-than-human hydrocommons outlined by Neimanis are bound by hydrological cycles and imbricated in vast networks of 'gift, theft, and debt with all other water life.' In Neimanis' words, 'human bodies ingest reservoir bodies, while reservoir bodies are slaked by rain bodies, rain bodies absorb ocean bodies, ocean bodies aspirate fish bodies, fish bodies are consumed by whale bodies – which then sink to the seafloor to rot and be swallowed up again by the ocean's dark belly.'⁷⁷² Neimanis outlines what we might describe as a kind of hydrological corporeality which draws on Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality and challenges humanist visions of the body. To what extent, then, are the sounds we make a product of the watery, more-than-human assemblages that comprise our being?

If, as I have argued, rapping is an embodied mode of remembrance, recalling the imbrications between the body and water, we might take this further and explore the extent to which the sonic body of work helps us to develop a notion of more-than-human antiphony. In his study of the expressive cultures of the black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy argues that antiphony – or, call and response structures – is embedded in black arts movements, symbolising and anticipating 'new, non-dominating social relationships.'⁷⁷³ 'Eve' presents

⁷⁶⁹ Rapsody, *Cleo*.

⁷⁷⁰ Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p.2.

⁷⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷⁷² Ibid, p.3.

⁷⁷³ Gilroy, p.79.

ways of thinking about antiphony and the Atlantic in more-than-human terms, not only due to the incorporation of sea sound effects in the album, but also because – as I have already emphasized – of the inseparability between the substance of the human and the substance of the ocean. In the words of Jane Bennett, ‘through sound, through the various refrains we invent, repeat, and catch from nonhumans, we receive news of the cosmic energies to which we humans are always in close, molecular proximity’.⁷⁷⁴ For Gina Bloom, the ‘synecdochal relationship between dispersed particles of sound and their source ensures that each particle has the power to carry the essence of a message intact’.⁷⁷⁵ As such, we can begin to synthesise a sense of the eco-materiality of Southern rap and how it aurally conveys messages of the Middle Passage, not only because rappers frequently cite the sea, but because every inhalation and exhalation is haunted by it. In the words of Alaimo, ‘*every breath we take contains oxygen produced by plankton.*’⁷⁷⁶

In this way, Plantationocene rap is an embodied, material-discursive form of remembrance that affirms that, to quote Barad, ‘Attempts at erasure always leave material traces: what is erased is preserved in the entanglements, in the diffraction patterns of being/becoming.’⁷⁷⁷ ‘Eve’ demands that we understand the extent to which Middle Passage pasts diffract into the present. It is a Plantationocene acoustemology that materially-discursively re-members the ghosts of the Middle Passage. It is a conjuring of the ‘breathless numbers’.⁷⁷⁸ ‘Trying and dying to breathe poetry to rise in the light of day’, says Rapsody, ‘To subconsciously exist cautiously ascending towards freedom/Praying for a breather’.⁷⁷⁹ Rapping, Rapsody attests, ‘Black life, we still going/ They mad we still flowing’.⁷⁸⁰ Flowing being a double meaning for the principle of residence time, and the rebellious act of rapping which disrupts linear temporalities and the erasures they incur. ‘Eve’ is a sonic portrayal of the temporal indeterminacies of the plantation, offering sonic epistemologies of the Plantationocene. As McKittrick writes, ‘Music, then, is not only an invention that subverts and undoes common-sense workings of racism; music, music-making, and music-listening, together, demonstrate the subversive politics of shared stories,

⁷⁷⁴ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.168.

⁷⁷⁵ Gina Bloom, *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p.98.

⁷⁷⁶ Stacy Alaimo, ‘States of Suspension: Trans-corporeality at Sea’, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 19, 3 (2012), pp.476–493 (p.477).

⁷⁷⁷ Barad, ‘Troubling Time/s’, p.67.

⁷⁷⁸ Katherine McKittrick, ‘Mathematics Black Life’, *The Black Scholar*, 44, 2 (2014), pp.16–28 (p.17).

⁷⁷⁹ Rapsody, *Nina*.

⁷⁸⁰ Rapsody, *Serena*.

communal activities, and collaborative possibilities wherein “one *must participate* in knowing.”⁷⁸¹ Listening, in this instance, is an act of participation; one that guides us towards an understanding of the ecologically mediated legacies of slavery without the need for quantifiable, scientific data. Instead, Rapsody’s nautical style of hip-hop offers a sense of the ways in which indeterminable plantation temporalities flow through bodies of water. As McKittrick writes, ‘*song helps us think consciousness without being distracted by the demand for clarity. Song, story, invite “the ability to feel-with.” We feel-with.*’⁷⁸²

Towards an Understanding of Hip Hop Epistemologies of the Plantationocene

sound opens up a way of being black that ties consciousness to work, to liberation. [...] What happens when we go listen to the song and listen outside of text as the text weights us down? Do we listen as a way of working out who and what we are? Does listening to the song offer some relief? What if it doesn’t? What if the experience is hard and awful? The labor of black life and black consciousness, the dailiness of black effort, and struggle, points to how wave-forms and soundscapes emerge from and move through, and then burst out of, ongoing plantocratic colonialisms. Listening changes the text. Listening changes things.⁷⁸³

Throughout this thesis, I have investigated the Plantationocene in print, the Plantationocene in polaroids, and the Plantationocene in pieces of rap music. While this examination began with the page, it could not end there. Vernacular interventions in plantocratic colonialisms and their systems of erasure are multiform, abundant, and far-reaching, with sonic strategies of resistance being one of the oldest methods through which racialized people have contested plantation models. This thesis’ conceptualisation of the Plantationocene would therefore be incomplete without the study of sound. Skeeahan argues that, in juxtaposition with the ocularcentrism of the Enlightenment-era, a study of sound could produce new ways of knowing. ‘In accounts that record the sounds of insurrection along the routes of colonial slavery, we can begin to listen for the radical breaks in which the scream, the din, and the noise will not be reduced to the visual field of Enlightenment rationality – that is, the page’, writes Skeeahan.⁷⁸⁴ Plantationocene acoustemologies, like the music I have here drawn on, provide a framework for re-hearing and remembering ‘the ghosts who are not yet born of who are already dead.’⁷⁸⁵ In this way, Plantationocene acoustemologies make audible the gaps in theoretical discussions of our current epoch which tend to erase the racialized structures of the plantation and its aqueously mediated legacies.

⁷⁸¹ McKittrick, p.163.

⁷⁸² Ibid, p.70.

⁷⁸³ Ibid, p.69.

⁷⁸⁴ Skeeahan, p.133.

⁷⁸⁵ Barad, ‘Troubling Time/s’, p.56.

In *Development Arrested: Race, Power, and the Blues in the Mississippi Delta*, Clyde Woods posited the concept of the blues epistemology, referring to the ways in which the tradition of the blues became a ‘pillar of African American identity’ that ‘emerged in spite of, and in opposition to, plantation power.’⁷⁸⁶ Black critical theorists have long called for a recognition of the extent to which the blues guides alternative knowledge and modes of being that refuse to submit to the hierarchal structures of the plantation and its afterlives.⁷⁸⁷ Emerging from the Mississippi delta, the blues traditions included an abiding engagement with geography, resulting in what Woods describes as ‘the blues ethos of social-spatial justice’.⁷⁸⁸ ‘The levee hollers and those of the fields, prisons, docks, and streets were fully incorporated into the blues,’ writes Woods, ‘and these hollers and chants are still heard in hip hop’.⁷⁸⁹ Moving beyond Woods’ concept of the blues epistemology and towards a more granular understanding of how hip hop elicits new methodologies for ecological knowledge, this exploration illuminates how Southern rap specifically provides sonic information regarding plantocratic logics and their aqueous durability. Southern rap music thereby provides hip hop epistemologies of the Plantationocene.

What this chapter reveals is that this thesis’ attempts at writing into the absences and oversights embedded in theories of the Plantationocene are preceded by critical interventions in the form of Southern rap music which already lays bare – or, “calls-out” – these epistemological omissions. Centering these sonic modes of resistance disrupts such methodological erasures and demands that we ask questions of them: ‘What stories of creation and annihilation is the void telling? How might we approach the possibility of listening?’⁷⁹⁰ Thinking with Barad, we learn that *avoidance* is not synonymous with a void, and Southern rap affirms that there is life, agency, and a host of intellectual interventions beyond the boundaries and erasures that dominant academic discourses of the Plantationocene have imposed. MicKittrick teaches us that sound is the enunciation of black livingness, and by its very nature (being the physical vibration of particles) music is always on the move. Thus, when listening to Plantationocene acoustemologies, this is what we hear: other ways of knowing (and existing in) the Plantationocene, the re-turn of those

⁷⁸⁶ Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: Race, Power, and the Blues in the Mississippi Delta* (London: Verso, 1998), p.29.

⁷⁸⁷ Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

⁷⁸⁸ Clyde Woods, ‘Sittin’ on Top of the World: The Challenges of Blues and Hip Hop Geography’, in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007), pp.46-81 (p.54).

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid, p.59.

⁷⁹⁰ Barad, ‘Troubling Time/s’, p.77.

excluded from established Plantationocene discourse, and, to invoke Barad, ‘the possibilities of justice-to-come’.⁷⁹¹

⁷⁹¹ Ibid, p.62.

Conclusion: The Futurity of Plantationocene Narratives

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that dominant conceptualisations of the Plantationocene obfuscate the watery patterns of racialized violence that underpin it. When Tsing and Haraway offered us the notion of the Plantationocene, they provided us with the terminological framework for naming the ecological legacies of the plantation. However, their assertion that the plantation can be defined as the enslavement of plants and microbes, means that to understand the racialized contours of the Plantationocene, and how they are manifest in everyday life, we need to look elsewhere. That is what I have attempted to do throughout this thesis. Thus, while Tsing and Haraway conceptualise the epoch through the lens of ‘germ plasm, genomes, cuttings’, I turn to literary, visual, and sonic artefacts that register intimate encounters with the Plantationocene – like a Mississippi memoir, a waterlogged family photo-album, a Southern rap refrain. I have argued that each of the works studied in this thesis can be understood as a form of activism, and that centring these grassroots expressive cultures in discussions of the Plantationocene, helps us to pivot from studying organisms to bearing witness to and for ordinary people. As LeMenager writes in relation to the Anthropocene, the geologic scale and consequential externalisation of the current epoch ‘works to organize new modes of forgetting’.⁷⁹² It attaches the incremental losses the epoch entails ‘to stone, to universal history’, thereby obscuring ‘the present tense, lived time of the Anthropocene’.⁷⁹³ Concentrating on contemporary, vernacular modes of storytelling in the U.S South, the conceptualisation of the Plantationocene I have offered throughout this thesis seeks to avoid the abstraction that has befallen theories of the Anthropocene, by grappling with the ways in which communities on the frontlines of anthropogenic catastrophe offer ways of knowing how the plantation ecologically emerges in the present. In this way, contrary to LeMenager’s anxieties regarding the notion of epochs, narratives of the Plantationocene organize new modes of remembering. That is why, in each chapter, I have drawn on Plantationocene narratives that simultaneously offer epistemologies of the epoch whilst resisting its legacies – specifically its patterns of mnemonic erasure.

⁷⁹² Stephanie LeMenager, ‘Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre’, in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* edited by Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press University Park, 2017), pp.220-238 (p.225).

⁷⁹³ Ibid.

In the first chapter, I examined how the carceral economy operates under the rubric of the Plantationocene by highlighting how Jesmyn Ward's literature helps us to conceptualize patterns of hydrological haunting in relation to ongoing systems of racialized captivity. In a recent interview, Ward said, 'I feel like in every book that I commit to telling the truth about the place that I live in, and also about the kind of people who live in my community.'⁷⁹⁴ What I gathered from my reading of Ward's work is an understanding of the extent to which the realities of the Plantationocene permeate the places and people she writes about. Ward's literature helped me to understand the ways in which carceral customs of the Middle Passage unfurl into the present by shedding light on water-management paradigms and watery mnemonics that flow through human and more-than-human bodies of water. I proposed that the characters Ward conjures experience hydrological haunting as what might be understood as the aqueous uncanny as they grapple with the continuities between the slave ship and penitentiary in an era of mass incarceration. In her work, Ward uncovers the concealed relationship between captivity and water, and in doing so, resists the patterns of erasure these carceral ecologies have historically entailed. 'I found myself commanded to amplify the voices of the dead that sing to me, from their boat to my boat, on the sea of time', writes Ward.⁷⁹⁵ In this way, each of Ward's texts can be read as a watery disturbance, a project of remembrance in which histories of water, particularly those relating to the ghosts of the Middle Passage, are situated in relation to the Plantationocene present.

Chapter Two viewed the Plantationocene through the lens of vernacular photography by drawing on Sarah Broom's post-Katrina photo-text, *The Yellow House*, and watermarked polaroids that were salvaged after the storm. I grappled with the ways in which family photographs materially bear witness to patterns of aqueously mediated displacement – which, I argue, is a longstanding feature of the Plantationocene – while also establishing resistant modes of belonging, care, and remembrance. In this chapter, I posited that engaging with quotidian photographic practices in this way pulverizes the overwhelming scale of the Plantationocene because it requires a more granular

⁷⁹⁴ Jesmyn Ward quoted in Sam Briger, 'For Jesmyn Ward, Writing Means Telling The "Truth About The Place That I Live In"', *National Public Radio*, November 28th 2017 << <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/28/566933935/for-jesmyn-ward-writing-means-telling-the-truth-about-the-place-that-i-live-in?t=1648750446180>>> [accessed 2nd January 2022].

⁷⁹⁵ Jesmyn Ward, 'On Witness and Repair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic', *Vanity Fair*, September 2020 << <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2020/08/jesmyn-ward-on-husbands-death-and-grief-during-covid>>> [accessed 2nd January 2022].

understanding of how the epoch's violent ecologies are endured and resisted by the communities that are most vulnerable to them. Put otherwise, I investigated the ways in which polaroid photography materially registers the ways in which Plantationocene ecologies intra-act with the domestic, the familial, the everyday. Like Jesmyn Ward's literature, the photographic artefacts I draw on as part of this discussion are haunted by Middle Passage histories, further demonstrating the need to challenge terrestrial-centric conceptualisations of the Plantationocene by illuminating the centrality of water to ongoing systems of ecologically mediated, racialized violence. Given that photography is an exercise in remembrance – and that the photographs I draw on throughout this chapter are always resisting aqueously mediated erasure specifically – these photographic mediums, material witnesses to the ecological legacies of the Plantation, ought to be viewed in relation to Sharpe's notion of wake work – *'Wake; the state of wakefulness; consciousness'*.⁷⁹⁶ The vernacular photographic practices explored in this chapter are characterised by processes of care, kinship, and remembrance; all of which are antithetical to Plantationocene structures of violence, separation, and erasure. Thus, whilst these images register the Plantationocene in their material formation, they are also a record of all that has been presumed lost – a radical affirmation that something remains and that, despite it all, kinship is still present. Similar to Ward's writings which memorialise past, present and future ghosts of the Plantation, the vernacular photographs I engage with throughout this chapter re-enforce the extent to which memory work conducted by ordinary people sheds new light on the Plantationocene by highlighting how interconnected histories of water and race haunt the present. Unlike Tsing and Haraway's geologic and agricultural definitions of the epoch, these Plantationocene epistemologies center intimate human experiences, reminding us that when thinking about the Plantationocene, 'thinking needs care [...] and that thinking and care need to stay in the wake.'⁷⁹⁷

Having engaged with both literary and visual epistemologies of the Plantationocene, in Chapter Three, I offered the notion of Plantationocene Acoustemologies, demonstrating the ways in which Southern rap offers sonic ways of knowing the epoch. Employing Feld's notion of acoustemology – as in, ways of knowing with and through sound – I investigated the ways in which Southern rap intervenes in narratives of the environment.⁷⁹⁸ In this chapter, I listened out for the ways in which sonic traces of the plantation modulate into the

⁷⁹⁶ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (London: Duke University Press, 2016), p.4.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid, p.5.

⁷⁹⁸ Steven Feld, 'Acoustemology', in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 12–21, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375494-002>.

waterlogged genre of rap music, and how Southern rappers aurally transmit knowledge of the ecologically mediated legacies of slavery. Apprehending the racialized contours of anthropogenic catastrophe through song is a sensory affront to the homogeneity of Plantationocene discourse. In taking this approach, I explored the material-discursive interactions between song and sea in the “post”-plantation South. Like the writings and photographs gathered in the previous chapters, they are haunted by histories of water that began with the Middle Passage. In this chapter, I thought about the imbrications between the sonic rebellions of the Middle Passage and contemporary Southern rap. I proposed that engaging with Plantationocene Acoustemologies not only expounds how water has been weaponized in systems of racialized violence, NOLA Bounce music and Rapsody’s ‘Eve’ also require us to acknowledge the diffusion of waterborne modes of sonic refusal that contest the epoch’s patterns of erasure. In this way, Southern rap reverberates with ‘ghosts who are not yet born or who are already dead.’⁷⁹⁹ Plantationocene Acoustemologies, as Ward might put it, ‘amplify the voices of the dead’.⁸⁰⁰

Reflecting on these chapters, it seems that narratives of the Plantationocene are always a form of hydrological memory work. By that I mean that, soaked in grief and memories of the Middle Passage, these narratives ask us to consider what it means to remember and be remembered in a present in which watery losses persist. Narratives of the Plantationocene – textual, photographic, sonic and otherwise – are invested in material-discursive processes of recuperation. They are mnemonic acts of refusal, reminding us that despite the imbrications between water and loss in the age of the Plantationocene, there is always something to be salvaged. ‘What happens to our understanding of black humanity when our analytical frames do not emerge from a broad swathe of numbing racial violence but, instead, from multiple and untracked enunciations of black life?’, asks McKittrick.⁸⁰¹ Throughout this thesis, I sought to reimagine our analytical frames for understanding the Plantationocene by relinquishing geologic methodologies that naturalize racial violence and substituting them for vernacular storytelling practices that record the evolution of plantation structures while also bodying forth ‘multiple and untracked enunciations of black life’.⁸⁰² In these narratives of the Plantationocene, we learn of the role of water in racialized

⁷⁹⁹ Karen Barad, ‘Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-membling, and Facing the Incalculable’, *new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, 92 (2018), pp.56-86 (p.57).

⁸⁰⁰ Ward, ‘On Witness and Repair: A Personal Tragedy Followed by Pandemic’.

⁸⁰¹ Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (London: Duke University Press, 2021), p.105.

⁸⁰² *Ibid.*

violence, but we also see the ways in which storytellers incorporate water as a memorial substance through which such enunciations of black life occur.

I have argued throughout this thesis that vernacular expressive cultures offer the most intricate epistemologies of the Plantationocene. In this conclusion, I want to think about the role of the digital in this process. The rise of smartphones and increased access to social media has expanded the scope of everyday storytelling practices. As such, this conclusion will attend to how these technological advancements in practices of everyday storytelling are producing new narratives of the Plantationocene. Given that narratives of the Plantationocene are always perfuse with watery memories, the following exploration will merge the notion of hydrological memory work with discussions of digital memory, illuminating the emergence of digital Plantationocene epistemologies.

Textual, photographic and sonic stories of the Plantationocene are recuperative artefacts, reminding us of the ways in which traces of the past haunt the present, and the digitized narratives I draw on in this conclusion are no exception to this pattern. As Kim Gallon puts it, ‘Applied as a technology in Black studies and in the lives of black people living in the digital era more generally, recovery restores black people’s humanity.’⁸⁰³ In Gallon’s words:

Everyday discursive interactions on social media networks are a case in point. Black people’s subsistence in and resistance to the complex oppressive systems of slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, and police brutality, across time and space, make black lives ground zero for a technology of recovery using social media. Movements that protest the ongoing police brutality of black women and men, which began on “Black Twitter” and Facebook with hashtags such as #SayHerName, #BlackLivesMatter, and #ICantBreathe, continue black people’s centuries-old endeavor to make their collective humanity apparent to the world.⁸⁰⁴

Building on these discussions, Sonya Donaldson asserts that ‘digital Blackness and Black digitality [...] has managed to avoid the “willful” erasures of Black people’s creative expressions’⁸⁰⁵ Even though technology has been weaponised in relation to various issues pertaining to criminal (in)justice – like in the use of policing algorithms and facial

⁸⁰³ Kim Gallon, ‘Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities’, in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, ed. by Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), pp.42-49 (p.44).

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁵ Sonya Donaldson, ‘The Ephemeral Archive: Unstable Terrain in Times and Sites of Discord’, in *The Digital Black Atlantic*, ed. by Kelly Baker Josephs and Roopika Risam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), pp.19-29 (p.21).

recognition software targeting black people – activists have reappropriated technological devices in order to call for better futures. In an article for *Wired*, C. Brandon Ogbunu posits that ‘Black Lives Matter and related hashtag activist movements are strikingly Afrofuturist: They utilize existing technology to amplify their signal and build coalitions’.⁸⁰⁶ He asserts that ‘the use of cameras on mobile phones to record acts of violence is also Afrofuturist’ because ‘we wouldn’t be having discussions about how to dismantle corrupt systems in law enforcement without them.’⁸⁰⁷ By bringing discussions of digitalization into this thesis in the final chapter, I highlight new ways that memories of the plantation and its afterlives will be carried forward through time and thereby engage with the futurity of narratives of the Plantationocene.

The polaroids, texts and songs that feature in this thesis are vessels for the transmission of memory. As such, they are just as invested in the future as they are in the past. The very creation of the artefacts drawn on throughout this thesis, which narrativize twenty-first century experiences of the Plantationocene, encapsulates a hope that there will be a future in which remembering – dependent on retrospect and the passing of time – will be made possible. In the introduction to this thesis, I invoked Crownshaw’s work on the Anthropocene and cultural memory to suggest that narratives of the Plantationocene will become ‘the material of memories to come’.⁸⁰⁸ I revisit that notion in this conclusion to underline the futurity of Plantationocene narratives. Every excursion into the expressive cultures examined throughout these chapters, encourages us to consider how these generative textual, visual and sonic forms memorialise plantation pasts whilst upholding an abiding belief in (and commitment to) black futurity. In this way, these vernacular epistemologies of the Plantationocene resonate with what Camppt describes as the ‘quotidian practice of refusing to stay put or to stay in their designated place, [...] a refusal to accept the rejection of and limitations on black futurity.’⁸⁰⁹ That is why, in part, I have decided to conclude this thesis with an expedition into the digital – after all, in an age of technological advancement, bearing witness to the expansion of virtual worlds forces us to grapple with the prospect of the future and questions around who and what will have agency in it.

⁸⁰⁶ C. Brandon Ogbunu, ‘How Afrofuturism Can Help the World Mend’, *Wired*, 2020 <<<https://www.wired.com/story/how-afrofuturism-can-help-the-world-mend/>>> [accessed 1st September 2022].

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁸ Rick Crownshaw, ‘Speculative Remembrance in the Anthropocene’, *Memory Studies*, 11, 4 (2017) pp.500-502 (p.501).

⁸⁰⁹ Tina Camppt, *Listening to Images* (London: Duke University Press, 2017), p.43.

Any discussion of the Plantationocene that seeks to expose the racialized harm inflicted by (post)plantation ecologies in the US South would be incomplete without an acknowledgement of the chemical warfare enacted against the predominantly African American communities in the river parishes of what is known as the chemical corridor – or, Cancer Alley. I have therefore chosen to end this thesis with a reading of ‘Women of Cancer Alley’, a collection of short films made by women who reside on the noxious stretch of land located alongside the Mississippi river between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Containing more than 150 petrochemical facilities situated near predominantly black communities, the 85-mile stretch of land also known as Cancer Alley is responsible for approximately a quarter of petrochemical production in the United States.⁸¹⁰ The chemical corridor is a site of ecological violence, but it is also a hub of activist activity against environmental injustice. Demonstrating the ways in which ‘Women of Cancer Alley’ documents and resists the Plantationocene, I suggest that the collection can be understood as a digital form of hydrological memory work – which, I argue, is a form of grassroots environmental and civic activism.

To begin, I think about the intersections between digital memory and water. How do the digital and hydrological intra-act in processes of remembrance? In what ways might activists utilise the relationship between digital and ecological memory? Having foregrounded these notions, I preface my reading of ‘Women of Cancer Alley’, with a look at the socio-cultural landscape of the region. More specifically, I trace the trajectory from plantations to petrochemical plants in Louisiana and think with the likes of Jessica Rapson to outline the profound impact this has had on collective memory and memorialisation in and around Cancer Alley. Rapson’s work sheds light on the ways in which petrochemical companies – through the monopolisation of capital, land, and heritage sites – have steered collective memory, seeking to purify plantation slavery and its legacies. I then go on to show how ‘Women of Cancer Alley’ intervenes in these dominant commemorative trends, demonstrating how the vernacular collection of short films merge media, memory and the Mississippi to expose petrochemical violence and resist mnemonic erasure.

Digital Memory and Water

⁸¹⁰ Isabella Kaminski, ‘US court revokes permits for plastics plant in Louisiana’s ‘Cancer Alley’’, *The Guardian*, 16th September 2022 << <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/sep/16/plastics-plant-louisianas-cancer-alley>>> [accessed September 2022].

Andrew Hoskins posits that the intersections between digitization and memorialisation constitute a 'connective turn', which, he says, is the result of 'the massively increased abundance, pervasiveness and accessibility of digital technologies, devices and media, shaping an ongoing re- calibration of time, space (and place) and memory by people as they connect with, inhabit and constitute increasingly both dense and diffused social networks.'⁸¹¹ On one hand, connective memory represents possibilities for new means of disseminating information and archiving the past in ways that traditional media has historically repressed. On the other, as Anna Reading's work on mediated memory reminds us, connective, digital memory is still filtered through the same corporate, capitalist structures we are accustomed to elsewhere. Reading advocates for the need to 'conceptualize digital memory in terms of commodity chains of environmental impact, human labour, and material processes involved in the various aspects of production and consumption.'⁸¹² To quote Reading, 'we should attend to the commercial imperatives of memory in digital cultures, including the infrastructures that allow digital assemblages to flow and get stuck, the corporate ownership of digital domains, and of server farms, rather than over-inflating the new possibilities that seem to be offered for the construction of memories by new kinds of memory agents.'⁸¹³ As such, I am conscious of the need to avoid making sweeping suggestions regarding the redemptive capacities of digital media. However, even though the following discussion does not seek to bypass the underlying context so poignantly synthesised by Reading, I do uphold that even within the oppressive, commercial infrastructures of digitalization, lie rebellious forms of digital memorialisation that breach the capitalist imperatives of the technology they rely on. In other words, I am not suggesting that social media or the internet in general has been designed to facilitate the modes of grassroots activism we encounter in the following discussion of digital memory, but rather, that despite the commercial constructs of digital cultures, like algorithms that privilege capitalist content, there is still wayward media that seeps through the cracks.

Joanna Zylinska's concept of hydromedia is useful here. In her words:

water is involved in the production, transportation, and usage of media devices: the excavation of minerals that serve as media components, the cooling down of computer servers – not to mention the actual makeup of human media users, 60 percent of whose bodies and 77 percent of whose brains are constituted of water.

⁸¹¹ Andrew Hoskins, '7/7 and Connective Memory: Interactional trajectories of remembering in post-scarcity culture', *Memory Studies*, 4, 3 (2011), pp.269-280 (p.271).

⁸¹² Anna Reading, 'Seeing Red: a political economy of digital memory', *Media, Culture & Society*, 36, 6 (2014), pp.748-760 (p.749).

⁸¹³ *Ibid*, p.752.

*Water thus literally saturates media ecologies, binding media subjects and media objects into a liquid dynamic of exchanges.*⁸¹⁴

Thus, ‘*all media can be understood as hydromedia*’.⁸¹⁵ Zylinska therefore calls for ‘shifting scholarly focus from the boundedness of media as both carriers of meaning and material entities, and toward a more entangled media epistemology.’⁸¹⁶ Nonetheless, Zylinska observes an underlying hydrophobia because of our collective awareness of water as a threat to technological devices – for example, ‘when a phone is dropped in a toilet, coffee is spilled over a laptop, or a network grid is flooded’.⁸¹⁷ Zylinska prompts us to consider to what extent this technological hydrophobia has hindered our ability to truly engage with the hydrological components of media. ‘How would the conditions of knowledge about media change if we were to displace or transport those media to a more aqueous environmental context, or were actually to acknowledge that inherent and foundational fluidity of media in the first place?’, asks Zylinska.⁸¹⁸

Thinking about the intersections between media and water calls forth John Durham Peters’ notion of elemental media. In *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* Peters conceives of the environment as a communicative medium that precedes new media. ‘If we mean mental content intentionally designed to say something to someone, of course clouds or fire don’t communicate. But if we mean repositories of readable data and processes that sustain and enable existence, then of course clouds and fire have meaning’, he explains.⁸¹⁹ As Jue puts it, ‘In this view, the environment functions analogically as a kind of media infrastructure, or at least presents the conditions of possibility through which transmission, storage, and recording might occur.’⁸²⁰ As I will show, in ‘Women of Cancer Alley’, water can be thought of as a media infrastructure, with the online collection of films used to remediate ecological memories from the riverside parishes of the Mississippi.

Recognising the imbrications between media and water in the age of the Plantationocene helps us to think about the possibilities of the digital in resisting the watery losses associated with the plantation and its legacies. In this way, this discussion can also be

⁸¹⁴ Joanna Zylinska, ‘Hydromedia: From Water Literacy to the Ethics of Saturation’, in *Saturation: An Elemental Politics*, ed. by Melody Jue and Rafico Ruiz (London: Duke University Press, 2021), pp.45–69 (p.46).

⁸¹⁵ Ibid.

⁸¹⁶ Ibid.

⁸¹⁷ Ibid.

⁸¹⁸ Ibid.

⁸¹⁹ John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.4.

⁸²⁰ Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater* (London: Duke University Press, 2020), p.24.

situated within the field of digital humanities. Bethany Nowviskie, in a keynote speech for the 2014 Digital Humanities conference, meditated on the role of digital humanities in the face of anthropogenic extinction. In Nowviskie's words:

What is a digital humanities practice that grapples constantly with little extinctions and can look clear-eyed on a Big One? Is it socially conscious and activist in tone? Does it reflect the managerial and problem-solving character of our 21st-century institutions? Is it about preservation, conservation, and recovery—or about understanding ephemerality and embracing change? Does our work help us to appreciate, memorialize, and mourn the things we've lost? Does it alter, for us and for our audiences, our global frameworks and our sense of scale? Is it about teaching ourselves to live differently? Or, as a soldier of a desert war wrote in last autumn's *New York Times*, is our central task the task of learning how to *die*—not (as he put it) to die 'as individuals, but as a civilization' (Scranton, 2013), in the Anthropocene?⁸²¹

Transposing these questions to filmic representations of the Plantationocene, in what follows, I suggest that digital hydromemorialisation practices much of the above. 'Women of Cancer Alley', the collection of films I turn to in the following section, recuperates repressed histories while acknowledging ongoing erasures, memorialises and mourns Plantationocene-induced losses, and disrupts the overwhelming scale of the Plantationocene by offering a site-specific insight into how plantation structures emerge in the present. In her keynote address, Nowviskie expressed an interest in 'the rhetorical, technological, aesthetic, and deeply personal, sometimes even sentimental, struggles brought into focus by the Anthropocene—and how they prompt us to position the work of the digital humanities in time.'⁸²² Likewise, the exercise in community filmmaking this chapter draws on, offers an intimate portrayal of everyday life on the post-plantation landscapes of the US South – and, in doing so, invites us to consider the role of digital memory in the Plantationocene.

Water, Memory and Digital Activism in Louisiana Bucket Brigade's 'Women of Cancer Alley'

'The problem is that of extinction—of multiple extinctions; heart-breaking extinctions; boring, quotidian, barely-noticed extinctions—both the absences that echo through centuries, and the disposable erosions of our lossy everyday.'⁸²³

In 2019, Louisiana Bucket Brigade released a collection of eight two-minute short films made by women facing the petrochemical industry's destruction of the river parishes of the

⁸²¹ Bethany Nowviskie, 'Digital Humanities in the Anthropocene', *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, 30, 1 (2015), pp.4–15 (p.5–6).

⁸²² *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁸²³ *Ibid.*

Mississippi river known as Cancer Alley. Established in 2000, Louisiana Bucket Brigade is a non-profit organisation who have been supporting communities in recording and resisting the environmental racism brought about by the petrochemical industry for more than twenty years. They assert, ‘getting these communities in the media and elevating their work is a core part of what we do.’⁸²⁴ ‘Women of Cancer Alley’ is the culmination of a collaboration between Louisiana Bucket Brigade and StoryCenter who facilitated the workshops through which the films were produced. StoryCenter is another non-profit organisation whose objective is to galvanise grassroots storytellers for the purpose of social justice. In their words, ‘The emerging digital technologies of the 1990s offered new tools for expression and fertile ground for experimentation. Drawing on these new practices, a group of San Francisco Bay Area media artists and designers came together to explore how digital media tools could be used to empower personal storytelling.’⁸²⁵ ‘Nobody ever asked me about my story before. Here it is. I’ve been waiting to exhale for so long’, says Cheryl Adams, resident of St. Rose, Louisiana, and contributor to the collection.⁸²⁶ As Louisiana Bucket Brigade remind us:

The Women of Cancer Alley are not limited to the eight women who made the films. There are dozens of Women of Cancer Alley who organize their communities and spend countless hours, at their own expense, in commission meetings and hearings, offering testimony to government officials who have never protected them or even acknowledged their concerns.⁸²⁷

Nonetheless, each testimonial story in the collection offers a deeply personal account of life (and death) in Cancer Alley, where plantation structures ecologically persist. While the Anthropocene, as Yusoff puts it, offers a ‘view from nowhere’, these digital stories of the environment provide a site-specific lens through which we behold the ecological legacies of slavery – or, the Plantationocene.⁸²⁸ In shifting from the global to the local, these digital stories of the Mississippi chronicle the everyday losses in ways that granularly depict the Plantationocene.

From Plantation to Petrochemicals

⁸²⁴ Louisiana Bucket Brigade, ‘About Us’ <<<https://labucketbrigade.org/about-us/>>> [accessed December 2021].

⁸²⁵ StoryCenter, ‘Our Story’ <<https://www.storycenter.org/history>> [accessed December 2021].

⁸²⁶ StoryCenter, *This is My Story- by Cheryl Adams*, online video recording, Youtube, 24th January 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lr6eqw_Myu0>> [accessed 1st February 2022].

⁸²⁷ Louisiana Bucket Brigade, ‘About the Women of Cancer Alley Film’ (2019) <<<https://labucketbrigade.org/our-work/women-of-cancer-alley/>>> [accessed November 2021].

⁸²⁸ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), p.1.

Before commencing my analysis of ‘Women of Cancer Alley’, I want to foreground the historical context from which the collection emerges – specifically the trajectory from slavery to industrialisation which brought with it new slaving frontiers and transformations in labour productivity. In 1944, Eric Williams, in *Capitalism and Slavery*, suggested that slavery enabled multiple facets of the metropolitan economy and led the way to the industrial revolution.⁸²⁹ Plantation slavery established systems of trade and labour which the wealthy elite were able to apply to the foundations of industrialisation. Through plantation slavery, resources like cotton formed the basis of a global economic machine, which ultimately generated enough capital to help fuel the shift from agriculture to industrialisation. Industrialisation and slavery remain politically and geographically linked to this day, with toxic chemical plants occupying what was once plantation territory. When the end of the Civil War brought with it challenges to the agricultural economy based on free labour, chemical corporations claimed the land, installing chemical plants nearby and preserving some of the antebellum topographies that were under threat. The Deep South’s crude oil deposits, discovered in 1901, thrust the region into the centre of America’s industrial activity. For the racialized poor, agricultural servitude was simply exchanged for chemical warfare, with predominantly African American communities – in which chemical plants have been situated – subjected to the deadly emissions produced by petrochemical activity.

Chemical and methane plants became so abundant in Louisiana that it resulted in the formation of the Chemical Corridor, often referred to as a Sacrifice Zone and Cancer Alley. The label Cancer Alley can be traced back to 1987, when a small community in Jacobs Drive, St. Gabriel, ascribed it to their neighbourhood after recording 15 residents with cancer within a two-block radius. Now, Cancer Alley, refers to the entire 85-mile stretch of land along the Mississippi river from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, which is rife with more than 150 chemical plants. Approximately 45,000 people reside in the area, with residents predominantly black and routinely exposed to the toxins emanating from chemical plants. With air replete with almost 50 poisonous chemicals – the largest threats including chloroprene and ethylene oxide – the area has the highest rates of cancer in America. In 2014, the Environmental Protection Agency’s National Air Toxic Assessment indicated that, in comparison to most Americans, residents of Cancer Alley are 95 percent more likely

⁸²⁹ For me see Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944).

to get cancer because of air pollution.⁸³⁰ This ecological violence has been at the forefront of concerns for activist groups including the Poor People's Campaign and RISE St. James. 'I would have to take a long tablet to write down all the names of the people I know that died of cancer and the people who have cancer right now', says Sharon Lavigne, founder of RISE St. James, a grassroots organisation aimed at fighting for environmental justice and tackling petrochemical pollution in St. James Parish, Louisiana.⁸³¹ In an interview with *The Guardian*, Robert Taylor, who also lives in cancer alley, said, 'The petrochemical industry and human beings cannot live and operate side by side, so they have decided they're OK with just wiping us out, especially because of the fact that this is a poor black population. We were the lowest-hanging fruit.'⁸³²

The Heritage Industry and Memorialisation along the Mississippi River

When thinking about the ways in which 'Women of Cancer Alley' employs digital memory as a strategy of resistance against petrochemical warfare, it is important to recognise the extent to which said industries have an ongoing history of attempting to control and monopolise public memory in Louisiana. Jessica Rapson, in her illuminating essay 'Refining memory: Sugar, oil and plantation tourism on Louisiana's River Road', exposes the links between sugar, oil and memory in the post-plantation south. Rapson argues that the exclusion of black perspectives at Southern heritage sites is linked to a process through which stakeholders – of which petrochemical giants make up a large number – refine memory. On the post-plantation landscapes of Louisiana, memory and oil undergo a process of refinement, just as sugar did during the antebellum period. In the words of Rapson, 'the heritage industry serves the demands of the present in much the same way as sugar once served the lifestyles of the antebellum sugar elite.'⁸³³ This extractive memorial economy – based on the exploitation of natural resources and African American history – is legible when reading the memorial landscapes of Louisiana, which fail to adequately memorialise (ongoing) histories of racial violence. In this way, we can observe how the regions oily

⁸³⁰ Environmental Protection Agency, *2014 Nata Summary of Results* (2014) <https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/documents/nata_2014_summary_of_results.pdf> [accessed 5th January 2022].

⁸³¹ Sharon Lavigne quoted in Sharon Lavigne and Steve Curwood, *Hurricane Ida adds misery to 'Cancer Alley': Part II* (2021) << <https://theworld.org/stories/2021-09-21/hurricane-ida-adds-misery-cancer-alley-part-2>>> [accessed 5th January 2022].

⁸³² Robert Taylor quoted in Jamiles Lartey and Oliver Laughland, 'Almost every household has someone that has died from cancer' (2019) <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2019/may/06/cancertown-louisiana-reserve-special-report>> [accessed 10th December 2021].

⁸³³ Jessica Rapson, 'Refining memory: Sugar, oil and plantation tourism on Louisiana's River Road', *Memory Studies*, 13, 4 (2020) pp.752-766 (p.764).

economy has enabled slippages in public memory, and how this may have prompted activists to pursue alternate modes of remembrance that interrupt dominant petrochemical memoryscapes.

I noted above the economic shift from agricultural plantation to chemical plant, but as Rapson reminds us, plantation tourism should not be overlooked when addressing this transformation. The ways in which oil companies have intervened in the post-plantation landscapes of the US South demonstrates a vested interest in narrating the region's history. One such example is the Ashland-Belle Helene plantation, owned by Shell Chemical Company. Ray Torgerson, Plant Manager, in the introduction to *Beyond the Great House: Archaeology at Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation*, writes of how an ironic collaboration between the chemical company and the Environmental Protection Agency granted the former possession of the land:

As part of the process to acquire the necessary permits to construct and operate the expanded facilities, Shell Chemical worked in cooperation with the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, and the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Office to recover and preserve archaeological artifacts and data from the plantation grounds. Artifacts from the archaeology have been donated to the State of Louisiana, and a detailed report of the data recovery has been produced for the State by Earth Search, Inc. who conducted the archaeology for Shell.⁸³⁴

Here, Shell's archaeological exercise mirrors their digging of the earth for fossil fuels: the artefacts, or products, that emerge from both extractive activities are then, as Rapson might put it, purified for the purpose of profitability. The booklet that emerged as a result of Shell's archaeological endeavours promises to shed light on the lives of the enslaved African Americans whose 'sweat and hard labor [...] converted the fertile land into wealth and prestige for the planter', and yet, patently absent from the booklet is any acknowledgement of the violence (which the plantation economy was dependent on) endured by enslaved peoples.⁸³⁵ Shell's management of the Ashland-Belle Helene plantation is an example of how petrochemical companies refine memories of slavery: the Greek-Revival Architecture of the Big House remains intact, but archaeological findings assemble sanitized visions of the plantation, and plantation violence is censored – or left below the surface.

⁸³⁴ Ray Torgerson in Jill-Karen Yarkubik and Rosalinda Méndez, *Beyond the Great House: Archaeology at Ashland-Belle Helene Plantation* (1994) available at <<<https://www.crt.state.la.us/Assets/OCD/archaeology/discoverarchaeology/virtual-books/PDFs/BTGH.pdf>>> [accessed 1st April 2022].

⁸³⁵ Ibid.

The Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation – in conjunction with the NPS (a federal agency responsible for many national parks, monuments, and other spaces related to conservation and heritage) – for instance, uphold that ‘industry and preservationists have cooperated with spectacular results’ in Louisiana.⁸³⁶ With no reference to the suffering endured by enslaved peoples, The Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation lament the reduction of historic properties (plantation houses and slave quarters) in the region, but posit that ‘much of the past remains to be enjoyed’ – in part, due to the petrochemical industry.⁸³⁷ ‘The region’s revival’, they state, ‘began with the restoration of Oak Alley in the 1920s [...] Chief among these is the restoration of San Francisco Plantation house, which was accomplished with the financial assistance of the Marathan Oil Company’.⁸³⁸

Oil’s extractive relationship with the history of antebellum violence exacerbates the issue of organised amnesia in the region. When Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small published their research on plantation museums situated in the American South in 2002, they presented a case for the extent to which the exclusion of slave perspectives from public memoryscapes is motivated by an ideological impulse to render certain histories disposable in order forge a regional identity of the South being ‘genteel, beautiful, romantic, marked by honour and nobility’.⁸³⁹ Touring these heritage sites, Eichstedt and Small locate the representational strategies employed in order evoke a nostalgia for the ‘lost’ South, thereby vindicating Southern ‘enslavers’. These strategies include symbolic annihilation and erasure (a technique whereby stakeholders ‘ignore the institution and experience of slavery altogether’), trivialization and deflection (achieved through ‘mechanisms, phrasing, and images that minimize and distort’ slavery), and segregation and marginalization of knowledge (when sites ‘include information about enslaved people but present it largely through separate tours and displays that visitors can choose to see or ignore, depending on their desire’).⁸⁴⁰

Recognising the oil industry’s governance of memorial landscapes of Louisiana demonstrates how the politics of cultural memory are an environmental justice issue. Plantation tourism bolsters the petrochemical industry, with corporations such as Shell

⁸³⁶ Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation, ‘The River Road’ << <https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/louisiana/riverroad.htm>>> [accessed November 2021].

⁸³⁷ Ibid.

⁸³⁸ Ibid.

⁸³⁹ Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), p.9.

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid, p.10.

utilising plantations not just to generate revenue but as sites through which they conduct operational affairs and meetings. In this case, the consequences of the capitalisation of cultural memory are literally toxic. For the racialized poor living in Louisiana, the violence is twofold. On the one hand, chemical corporations systematically attempt to annihilate black history. On the other, they are subjected to the onslaught of airborne pollution emitted by chemical plants (whose governing bodies are, often, bolstered by plantation tourism).

Therefore, the petrochemical economy not only impacts Louisiana's residents and natural resources, but also attempts to shape (and hinder) the way these communities remember and are remembered. In *The Natural Contract*, Michel Serres writes, 'If there is a material, technological, and industrial pollution [...] then there is also a second pollution, invisible, which puts time in danger, a cultural pollution that we have inflicted on long-term thoughts'.⁸⁴¹ The ways in which oil has been imbricated in the memory work of the US South risks producing a fossil-fuelled amnesia. If, as Rapson argues, the heritage industry upholds certain plantation structures (the distribution of wealth, knowledge and violence) due to its links to oil companies, in what ways does 'Women of Cancer Alley' resist this process?

'Women of Cancer Alley': Media, Memory and the Mississippi

In 'This is My Story', Cheryl Adams' filmic contribution to 'Women of Cancer Alley', she recalls her time as an employee at a chemical plant located close to where she lives in St. Rose. 'Daily a smell would come over the shipyard', says Adams.⁸⁴² 'They would sink the dock with raw sewage right into the Mississippi river – and I thought, that's where we drink our water from.'⁸⁴³ As Adams narrates, a polaroid of employees working by the river's edge transitions across the screen. Here, as is in the rest of the collection, the Mississippi river and testimonial memories merge and flow through the film. In what follows, I explore how human, digital and hydrological forces intra-act in a process of mediation that memorialises the stories of the 'Women of Cancer Alley' and illuminates the significance of digital Plantationocene narratives.

⁸⁴¹ Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract* translated by Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), p.31.

⁸⁴² StoryCenter, *This is My Story*- by Cheryl Adams.

⁸⁴³ Ibid.



Figure 18. Still from StoryCenter, *This is My Story*- by Cheryl Adams, online video recording, Youtube, 24th January 2019 << https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lr6eqw_Myu0>> [accessed 1st February 2022].

In ‘No Gardens’, Genevieve Butler conjures the hydrological cycles of the Mississippi in Freetown in St. James Parish through the suggestion that hydraulic toxicity flows out of the river and in into bodies and the land. In the short film, Butler remembers the gradual ecological decline of Freetown through the microcosm of her family gardens. ‘My family has lived in Freetown St James for over a hundred years. My grandfather purchased his property there in the 1830s. He grew fruit trees and had large gardens with beans, okra, melons and everything’, she says.⁸⁴⁴ In adulthood, Butler carried this tradition on - ‘I was able to grow a garden myself. Fruit and vegetables grew right up. My mom had to teach me how to prune and trim.’⁸⁴⁵ With the infiltration of chemical plants, gardening became untenable. ‘In 2008, after working out of state, I returned home again. I noticed the pecan trees weren’t producing like they used to. The wallflowers were gone along with the hummingbirds and fireflies’, Butler explains.⁸⁴⁶ ‘There’s oil in the water, there’s ammonia in the air. I can’t grow a garden anymore’, she says.⁸⁴⁷ Butler’s testimony reminds us that even though water is a substance that is vital part of our ecosystem and for the sustenance of

⁸⁴⁴ StoryCenter, *No Gardens* – by Eve Butler, online video recording, Youtube, 24th January 2019, << <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MY7h9R6H6xA&list=PL2zMrq22-Y2t5jbGmwYB1-o443Daya6e0>>> [accessed 1st February 2022].

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid.

human life, its toxification is often weaponised against black people and spaces. ‘In 2017 the skin of my face was peeled off twice from being in the rain. I looked like I had a blotchy sunburn’, she recalls.⁸⁴⁸ Butler speaks of her breast cancer diagnosis and thyroid surgery, and water is presented as a medium for reading the pollution responsible for both her health struggles and barren garden. In what follows, I also want to think about how the water cycles that appear in the collection prompt us to engage with the intersections between the technosphere and hydrosphere and how they intra-act in the processes of remembrance that occur throughout the films.

Peter K. Haff introduced the notion of the technosphere in a 2012 paper entitled ‘Technology and human purpose: The problem of solids transport on the Earth’s surface’, wherein he observed the ‘widely distributed and interconnected technological systems on whose function modern civilization and society are based’.⁸⁴⁹ The technosphere refers to the large-scale technological networks that enable processes such as ‘extraction and processing of raw materials; energy production; electronic communications; transport of goods and merchandise; food industry; political and economic bureaucracies; etc.’⁸⁵⁰ Haff proposes that like the lithosphere, hydrosphere, and biosphere, the technosphere is the newest of the earth’s systems because it ‘is in any practical sense a global phenomenon, spanning the planet and absorbing into itself almost all of the world’s human population’.⁸⁵¹ Technology, argues Haff, is thus inextricable from the neoenvironment which ought to be understood in its totality.

In 2019, Haff theorised the imbrications between the technosphere and hydrosphere in relation to the Mississippi river. ‘As one of the major arteries of transport supporting the metabolic requirements of the technosphere, the Mississippi River is an important part of this network’, writes Haff.⁸⁵² Not only does the river help facilitate the technosphere through the transportation of materials and goods, the technosphere manages and restricts the flow of the river through the construction of levees that modify the width and direction of a channel. In Haff’s words, ‘if one thinks of the technosphere as an organism (although it

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁹ Peter K. Haff, ‘Technology and human purpose: The problem of solids transport on the Earth’s surface’, *Earth System Dynamics*, 3 (2012), pp.149-156 (p.149-150).

⁸⁵⁰ Peter K. Haff quoted in João Ribeiro Mendes, ‘Does the Sustainability of the Anthropocene Technosphere Imply an Existential Risk for Our Species? Thinking with Peter Haff’, *Social Sciences*, 10, 314 (2021), pp.1-14 (p.3).

⁸⁵¹ Ibid, p.4.

⁸⁵² Peter K. Haff, *The Anthropocene and the Mississippi River* (2019) << <https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/contribution/the-technosphere-and-the-mississippi-river>>> [accessed 1st February 2022].

does not reproduce or evolve though Darwinian evolution), it functions somewhat as a parasite on the Mississippi, redirecting part of the river's metabolism to its own ends.'⁸⁵³ The global technosphere infiltrates the lives of the communities residing near the river, being passed down from 'its larger components, such as state and federal governments, through corporations and agencies, to local businesses, municipalities, and departments, and finally to individual elements of the human community spread out along the river'.⁸⁵⁴ As such, Haff argues that the technosphere is an invisible force that surges through the river's entangled networks 'reappearing as local causes affecting human life along the Mississippi.'⁸⁵⁵

From this perspective, the technosphere is an insidious force made up of the systems and processes that underpin global capitalism. As João Ribeiro Mendes summarizes, many of the anxieties surrounding the technosphere derive from the prospect that despite being manufactured by human beings, 'at a certain moment [it] will have acquired a high degree of autonomy, to the point of raising the question about whether and to what extent the Technosphere still needs its creators to survive.'⁸⁵⁶ However, in 'Women of Cancer Alley', the temporal durability of the technosphere serves the project's memorial aims; these digital stories of life along the Mississippi will likely outlive their creators. In this sense, the imbrications between the Mississippi and the technosphere are nuanced. On one hand, for many, the technosphere – namely the petrochemical industry – accelerates the precarity of life. On the other, the memory work performed in and through 'Women of Cancer Alley' reappropriates the entangled networks between the Mississippi and digital media to affirm the resilience of the collection's creators. Residents in Cancer Alley are faced with a decreased life expectancy because of petrochemical pollution. This brings with it a kind of mnemonic violence due to the frightening prospect that residents' testimonies could die with them. 'Women of Cancer Alley', however, encourages us to think about how digital memory might supplement living memory, and how this refusal to be forgotten is not only a commitment to black memory but also black futurity.

⁸⁵³ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁶ Mendes, p.5.



Figure 19. Still from StoryCenter, *No Gardens* – by *Eve Butler*, online video recording, Youtube, 24th January 2019, << <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MY7h9R6H6xA&list=PL2zMrq22-Y2t5jbGmwYB1-o443Daya6e0>>> [accessed 1st February 2022].



Figure 20. Still from StoryCenter, *No Gardens* – by *Eve Butler*, online video recording, Youtube, 24th January 2019, << <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MY7h9R6H6xA&list=PL2zMrq22-Y2t5jbGmwYB1-o443Daya6e0>>> [accessed 1st February 2022].

In ‘Women of Cancer Alley’, water, memory, and the filmic form, are all embroiled in an entangled process of mediation. Zylinka’s work with Sarah Kember, *Life after New Media: Mediation as Vital Process*, is helpful here. They conceive of mediation as ‘multiple, entangled processes of becoming’.⁸⁵⁹ Mediation thus helps us to understand ‘our being in, and becoming with, the technological world, our emergence and ways of intra-acting with it, as well as the acts and processes of temporarily stabilizing the world into media, agents, relations, and networks.’⁸⁶⁰ Kember and Zylinska suggest that rather than focusing on discrete media objects, we ought to engage with the temporality of media processes that progressively unfurl. As Jue puts it, Kember and Zylinska’s call to engage with media as a temporal process, ‘complements environmental justice frameworks like Nixon’s “slow violence,” attentive to forms of violence that normally extend past human scales of time’.⁸⁶¹ This, in conjunction with Haff’s work on the imbrications between the Mississippi and the technosphere, helps us to decipher the ways that the river’s saturation of ‘Women of Cancer Alley’ resonates with the temporal confluence of the past, the present, and the future and the slow violence of the Plantationocene.



Figure 21. Still from StoryCenter, *Our Town, Our Fight* – by Shamell and Sharon Lavigne, online video recording, Youtube <<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZsPTLWCuOA&list=PL2zMrq22-Y2t5jbGmwYB1-o443Daya6e0&t=6s>>> [accessed 1st February 2022].

⁸⁵⁹ Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, *Life after New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process* (London: The MIT Press, 2012), p.xvi.

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid, p.xv.

⁸⁶¹ Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, p.25.

One way that ‘Women of Cancer Alley’ encourages us to think of media as a temporal process – one that destabilizes normative concepts of time – is through the slow sequencing that occurs throughout the collection and transitions us backwards and forwards through time. In ‘Our Town, Our Fight’, for example, slow transitions between shots slide between different images of the Mississippi delta, past and present, and are accompanied by a slow, foreboding instrumental composed by Kyle Rodriguez. In this way, the film emulates Thom Davies’ assertion that ‘For some of the predominantly black communities located alongside petrochemical infrastructure, the everyday conditions produced through exposure to slow violence promote spatialized feelings of constriction and claustrophobia but also a temporal dimension of helplessness and slow observation.’⁸⁶² In Davies’ view, ‘residents of polluted landscapes in former plantation regions of the lower Mississippi not only live in a contested death world but experience and interpret the environmental violence of their changing landscape and health patterns in time-focused ways.’⁸⁶³ In ‘Women of Cancer Alley’, representations of time as slow-moving not only signifies the slow violence of pollution, but also gestures towards memory-work – or, processes of remembrance – as being incremental, mediated, and on-the-move. If we view the slowing down of time that occurs throughout ‘Women of Cancer Alley’ in light of Kember and Zylinska’s call to acknowledge ‘the temporal aspects of media—its liveness (or rather, lifeness), transience, duration, and frequently predicted death’, these digital stories of the Mississippi represent an attempt at prolonging the memory of a diminishing community.⁸⁶⁴ ‘It used to be so vibrant’, says Lavigne, whose family have lived in St. James for five generations.⁸⁶⁵ Lavigne’s story, ‘Our Town, Our Fight’ – saturated by the Mississippi – can be interpreted as a digital memorial to the St. James community, demonstrating, to quote LeMenager, ‘The ecological value of artful expression as means of human endurance’.⁸⁶⁶

Hydrological notions of time and the significance of endurance have reoccurred throughout this thesis guided by Sharpe’s theory of residence time and her call to remain in the wake. What we see in ‘Women of Cancer Alley’ is a juxtaposition of watery temporalities and the time of oil. In *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an*

⁸⁶² Thom Davies, ‘Toxic Space and Time: Slow Violence, Necropolitics, and Petrochemical Pollution’, *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 108, 6 (2018), pp.1537-1553 (p.1541).

⁸⁶³ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁴ Kember and Zylinska, p.xvi.

⁸⁶⁵ StoryCenter, *Our Town, Our Fight* – by Shamell and Sharon Lavigne, online video recording, Youtube <<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZsPTLWCuOA&list=PL2zMrq22-Y2t5jbGmwYB1-o443Daya6e0&t=6s>>> [accessed 1st February 2022].

⁸⁶⁶ Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.118.

Omani Town, Mandana Limbert suggests that the presence of oil in Oman – specifically its finitude – has resulted in what can be described as a sense of dreamtime in the region.⁸⁶⁷ This, Limbert suggests, is not only because dreams relate to (often unconscious) desires and fears, but because dreams – like fossil fuels – are impermanent (or, finite) and always approaching an end. In Cancer Alley, the dreamtime of oil – and the fantasy of economic prosperity for all – has already ended. ‘During the 1960s my grandfather helped integrate the parish’ public schools. Going through the struggles of segregation and fighting for voting rights, he welcomed the development of a fertiliser plant in the fifth district’, says Lavigne.⁸⁶⁸ ‘He believed it would create job opportunities for young blacks – a good salary, employer paid health insurance, and pension plans.’⁸⁶⁹ Lavigne continues, ‘If my grandfather was still living, he would stand and fight with us against the pollution.’⁸⁷⁰ If, as Michael J. Watts suggests, echoing Limbert, oil frontiers produce their ‘own specific configuration of time, space and power’, then the watery temporalities of ‘Women of Cancer Alley’ – slow, enduring, and undulating between past and present – disrupts the ephemeral dreamtime time of oil.⁸⁷¹ We see this in the use of repetition throughout the collection. In her contribution, Liz Gordon slowly utters the refrain ‘nothing happens’ to convey the slow violence of pollution and the state’s slow responses, while also reflecting the durable, residence time of water. To invoke Sharpe, the women of Cancer Alley stay in the wake.

⁸⁶⁷ Mandana Limbert conceptualises the dreamtime of oil in detail in *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory, and Social Life in an Omani Town* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁸⁶⁸ StoryCenter, *Our Town, Our Fight – by Shamell and Sharon Lavigne*.

⁸⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁷¹ Michael J. Watts, ‘Securing Oil: Frontiers, risk, and spaces of accumulated insecurity’, in *Subterranean estates: Life worlds of oil and gas*, ed. H., Appel, A. Mason, and M. Watts (London: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp.211-236 (p.215).



Figure 22. Still from StoryCenter, *Our Town, Our Fight* – by Shamell and Sharon Lavigne, online video recording, Youtube <<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZsPTLWCuOA&list=PL2zMrq22-Y2t5jbGmwYB1-o443Daya6e0&t=6s>>> [accessed 1st February 2022].



Figure 23. Richard Misrach, *Sugar Cane and Refinery*, Mississippi River Corridor, Louisiana, 1998 from *Petrochemical America*, photographs by Richard Misrach, Ecological Atlas by Kate Orff (Aperture, 2012). © Richard Misrach, courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; and Marc Selwyn Gallery, Los Angeles.

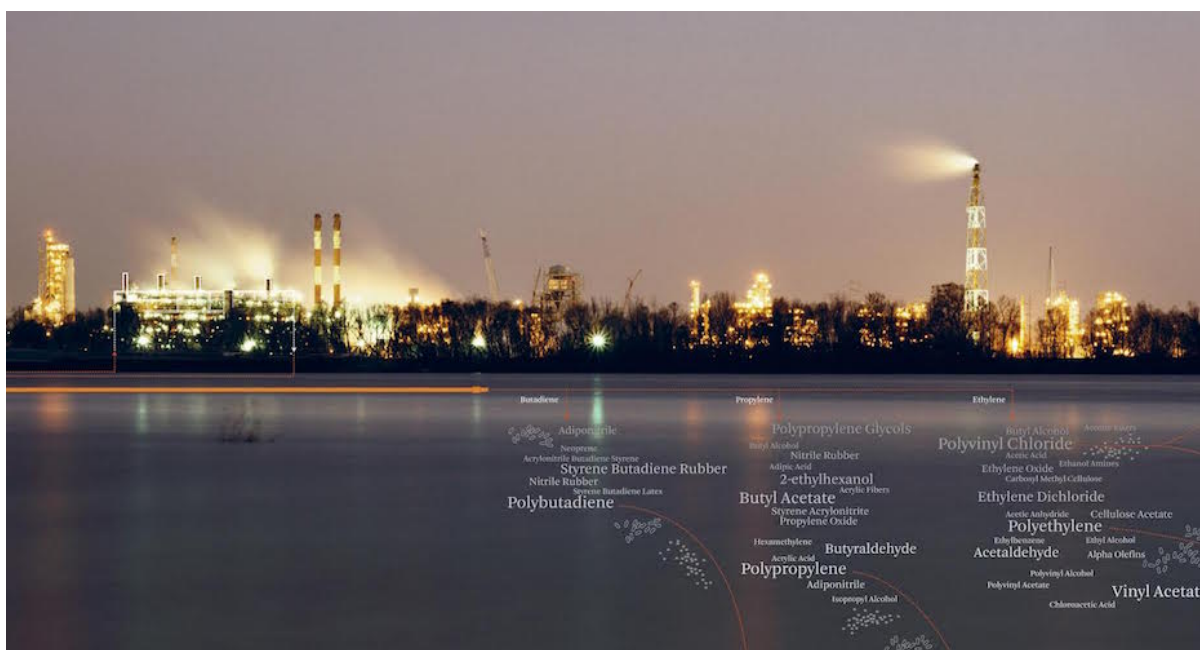


Figure 24. Kate Orff, 'From Pipe to Plastic Bag', 2012. © SCAPE/Landscape Architecture PLLC.

In 'Our Town, Our Fight', wide angle shots of oil refineries are overlaid with aerial images mapping St. James and conveying the magnitude of the pollution. These shots are reminiscent of Richard Misrach and Kate Orff's *Petrochemical America* (2010), which merges haunting photographs of Cancer Alley with data mapping to represent the scale of toxicity wrought by the petrochemical industry in Louisiana. Critics, including Caroline Blinder and Casey Ryan Kelly, have illuminated how Jennifer Peeples' notion of the toxic sublime is a useful lens through which to read Misrach's imagery. Peeples conceives of the toxic sublime in relation to the technological sublime, writing:

The *toxic sublime*, then, is the counterpart and required "other" to the technological sublime. It shares with the technological sublime a marvel at human accomplishments. Instead of staring up as a rocket soars into the sky, the viewer stares a mile straight down into an open-pit mine – both constructed by humans, both amazing feats of technology capable of conjuring feelings of insignificance and awe. But the toxic sublime acts to counter that marvel with alarm for the immensity of destruction one witnesses. Furthermore, in contrast to the sublime in nature, which functions to improve moral character (Oravec, 1982), the horror of the toxic sublime calls to question the personal, social and environmental ethics that allows these places of contamination to exist.⁸⁷²

The sublime is also inherently temporal. As Marta Hernández Salván writes, summarizing Kant, 'To measure the sublime, we (our imagination) must wrestle with our limited capacity

⁸⁷² Jennifer Peeples, 'Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes', *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, 5, 4, (2011) pp.373-392 (p.380).

to understand time and with our limited perception of it (our intuition). Understanding the seemingly incomprehensible notion of the simultaneity of time requires a cognitive violence.⁸⁷³ In 'Our Town, Our Fight' temporal slippages unsettle our sense of time. For example, the wide-angle shots of refineries that loom over the Mississippi are intercepted with archival family photographs of Shamell Lavigne's relatives rowing on the river. Here, the toxic sublime – mediated by imagery of the Mississippi delta – becomes a form of memorialisation whereby the viewer not only beholds the scale of petrochemical pollution but is also called to recognise the profound personal losses it incurs. In this way, in 'Women of Cancer Alley' there is a friction between the sublime and the personal. Peeples suggests that the toxic sublime refers to 'the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery and ability to inspire awe', but 'Women of Cancer Alley' reimagines the toxic sublime, rendering it dis-ambiguous. Put otherwise, the collection historicises the toxically sublime landscapes that feature in Misrach's images through the incorporation of personal testimonies and vernacular family photographs. Whilst Misrach's images convey the magnitude of the pollution, through the absence of people, they retain an atmosphere of mystery. 'Women of Cancer Alley', however, ruptures the temporal enigmas and historical indeterminacy of the toxic sublime by granularly relaying the human cost of pollution.

In this way, 'Women of Cancer Alley' resonates with Casey Ryan Kelly's concept of the toxic screen which merges Peeples' theory of the toxic sublime with Joshua Trey Barnett's notion of toxic portraits. Kelly summarizes how Peeples argues that toxic landscape images are capable of 'producing a sublime experience that disrupts argumentative stasis on issues of environmental justice', but Barnett calls on toxic portraits 'to produce more complete arguments, to make more pronounced visual enthymemes that demonstrate cause-and-effect relationships between industrial activity and bodies in pain.'⁸⁷⁴ Kelly transposes these discussions to the moving image, outlining how popular television holds the potential to merge both objectives and styles. In Kelly's words, 'the toxic screen presents precarious lives in large industrial landscapes where the causes and effects of exposure are transparent and accessible to audiences.'⁸⁷⁵ 'Women of Cancer Alley' oscillates between Peeples' toxic sublime and Barnett's call for toxic portraits, conjuring the scale of

⁸⁷³ Marta Hernández Salván, *Minima Cuba: Heretical Poetics and Power in Post-Soviet Cuba* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), p.111.

⁸⁷⁴ Casey Ryan Kelly, 'The Toxic Screen: Visions of Petrochemical America in HBO's *True Detective* (2014)', *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 10 (2017) pp.39-57 (p.43).

⁸⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p.44.

pollution (through the incorporation of shots that evoke Misrach's landscape photography), but with each film ending with a close-up moving portrait of the protagonist. In these closing shots, the protagonist stares into the camera, returning the spectators gaze, and drawing us into relationship with the subject. These final frames serve to remind us that what is being memorialised is not the sublime landscape of Cancer Alley, but the people who inhabit it.



Figure 25. Still from StoryCenter, *Please Care-* by Ariel Williams, online video recording, Youtube << <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJg2HvQkzCo&list=PL2zMrq22-Y2t5jbGmwYB1-o443Daya6e0&index=3>>> [accessed 1st February 2022].



Figure 26. Still from StoryCenter, *No Gardens – by Eve Butler*, online video recording, Youtube, 24th January 2019, << <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MY7h9R6H6xA&list=PL2zMrq22-Y2t5jbGmwYB1-o443Daya6eQ>>> [accessed 1st February 2022].

Kelly theorises the toxic screen in relation to HBO’s popular television series, *True Detective* (2014) which incorporates images from Misrach’s *Petrochemical America*. In ‘The Toxic Screen: Visions of Petrochemical America in HBO’s *True Detective* (2014)’, Kelly argues that ‘the petrochemical mise-en-scene of *True Detective* enlivens the toxic image with inferential power, or *visual enthymemes*, that invite audiences to draw connections between trauma that unfolds through narrative action and omnipresence of toxic iconography.’⁸⁷⁶ In ‘Women of Cancer Alley’, we see how the toxic screen can be transposed to grassroots films disseminated via social media. Over time, these films are subject to remediation by various media frameworks, like the social media platforms through which the collection circulates. This, in turn, adds a new enthymeme to the toxic screen, reminding us that the pollution and memory are mobile and in flux. ‘Where the blogosphere compensates for the bleak condition of being alone with mortality is in its inter- active and therefore open-ended mourning—melancholia enabled and emboldened through Internet sociality’, writes LeMenager.⁸⁷⁷ If, as LeMenager argues, seeking environmental justice includes the ‘struggle to find artistic forms relevant to ecological endurance’, then digital memory work – seen here in ‘Women of Cancer Alley’ and its gradual, online distribution of stories of

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid, p.39.

⁸⁷⁷ Stephanie LeMenager, ‘Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief’, *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, 19, 2 (2011), pp.25-56 (p.44).

Mississippi's river parishes – opens up new possibilities for the toxic screen and resisting the Plantationocene.⁸⁷⁸ 'Women of Cancer Alley', transmitted to audiences through social media and therefore probably viewed predominantly on mobile devices, places the toxic screen into the hands of the beholder. As Genevieve Butler says in 'No Gardens', 'Believe what you're seeing, feeling, and touching for yourself.'⁸⁷⁹

"My great grandparents [...] passed down 40 acres of land. My parents built our home on the family land in the 1980s and took pride in it. My siblings and I spent hours playing outside and exploring the field. I wanted that for my daughter', Shamell Lavigne recalls.⁸⁹¹ 'Instead, we've had to worry about what's being pumped into the river, soil, and air [...] Shouldn't everyone want a world where all the kids grow up with their basic human rights, like clean air and water?' she asks.⁸⁹² In a 2021 interview, Sharon Lavigne – Shamell's mother and founder of RISE St. James – said, 'It Hurts me to know that people are afraid to speak up [...] Some of them speak without the camera, I don't care what it is, I'm going to speak up. And they're afraid for me. I'm not afraid for me. I'm afraid that we're going to die of all these chemicals and nobody do something about it.'⁸⁹³ At the time this interview with Sharon Lavigne was conducted, petrochemical pollution – as recorded in 'Women of Cancer Alley' – had been compounded by both a pandemic and Storm Ida. 'Recent studies show that people who are exposed to high levels of air pollution are more likely to die from COVID-19 than those who are not. Not surprisingly, residents of Cancer Alley are dying five times more often than the national average', writes Steve Curwood.⁸⁹⁴ These conditions, which continually inflict violence and erasure, make projects like 'Women of Cancer Alley' – which merge digital and hydrological memory as a widely accessible strategy of resistance – ever more needed.

Narratives of the Plantationocene are multi-form and in various and interconnected ways always concerned with the persistence of the past. Every narrative of the Plantationocene I have drawn on throughout this thesis conceives of the durability of

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid, p.47.

⁸⁷⁹ StoryCenter, *No Gardens – by Eve Butler*.

⁸⁹¹ StoryCenter, *Our Town, Our Fight – by Shamell and Sharon Lavigne*.

⁸⁹² Ibid.

⁸⁹³ Sharon Lavigne quoted in Sharon Lavigne and Steve Curwood, *Hurricane Ida adds misery to 'Cancer Alley': Part II* (2021) << <https://theworld.org/stories/2021-09-21/hurricane-ida-adds-misery-cancer-alley-part-2> >> [accessed 5th January 2022].

⁸⁹⁴ Steve Curwood in *ibid*.

memory in relation to water, and these digital stories of Cancer Alley are no exception to this pattern. Reflecting on the importance of durability in relation to oil and the arts of grief, LeMenager writes:

Understanding the Gulf Coast as a diminished American future may be crucial both to national and species survival. Such understanding takes time, the sort of time handled well by the traditional arts of duration. But the printed arts require great quantities of water and trees. There may not be time enough, in terms of the endurance of human habitat, for print media or for commercial film production, which also relies heavily upon petroleum products and is a major emitter of greenhouse gasses. What this means for the endurance of genre remains to be seen.⁸⁹⁵

Although we ought not to ignore the fact that the internet relies on equally extractive industries and polluting systems, 'Women of Cancer Alley' asks us to think about how these technologies can be reappropriated to prolong the memory of precarious lives. Vernacular online films open up new possibilities for the problem of durability and the arts, and encourage us to think about how different entangled processes of memory work might be used to compliment and sustain one another. As LeMenager puts it, 'The relentlessly social and interactive creativity of the blogosphere may be complemented by performance arts that are entirely off-grid, or Internet sites that refer out to embodied performances, like the New Orleans social network *Humid Beings*, whose name reminds us that we, too, are made of water.'⁸⁹⁶ In the case of 'Women of Cancer Alley', the digital collection of activist films, transmitted largely via social media – interactive and mobile – refers us back to the embodied protests that regularly flow through the streets of Louisiana in real time.

⁸⁹⁵ LeMenager, 'Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief', p.51.

⁸⁹⁶ Ibid.



Figure 27. Still from StoryCenter, *Our Town, Our Fight* – by Shamell and Sharon Lavigne, online video recording, Youtube <<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZsPTLWCuOA&list=PL2zMrq22-Y2t5jbGmwYB1-o443Daya6e0&t=6s>>> [accessed 1st February 2022].

In both ‘Women of Cancer Alley’ and the in-person protests the films allude to, we find what Campt describes as ‘a desire to be seen, to be photographed, to be visible, and to matter. In each case, it is a desire to live a future that is now, because of the precarity of black quotidian life wherein tomorrow is fleeting and often too risky to wait for or imagine.’⁸⁹⁷ These entanglements between digital activism and people marching forward in protest, helps us to conceive of the ways in which storytellers and activists strive for (and conjure snapshots of) alternative futures that disrupt the present.

Troubling the Water

This thesis has demonstrated how plantation structures ecologically inform the present through the weaponization of water against racialized people, from the carceral economy to aqueously mediated displacement and extreme weather. The expressive cultures through which I understand these structures are materially and discursively replete with watery mnemonics, and form grassroots strategies of resistance that help us to reimagine the plantation’s patterns of erasure. Wendy Wolford reminds us that plantations were large-scale production units that exercised power through the mass monopolisation of capital, land, and labour:

⁸⁹⁷ Campt, *Listening to Images*, p.42-43.

Thus, on plantations, resistance has tended to be vested in small-scale plots, hidden from the overseer's gaze and oriented toward local communities and self-sustenance. As Marx wrote, freed plantation slaves in the West Indies enraged the plantation class by avoiding wage labor and instead becoming "self-sustaining peasants working for their own consumption" (Marx 1857, 249). This was not populism, per se; it was a rejection of the plantation, countering alienation required embedding in intimate, small-scale relationships with land and people. Resistance will not always be small-scale, of course, and not all small-scale initiatives work against the structures of oppression, but centering the plantation in our understanding of the modern political economy suggests that dismantling one of the plantation's key characteristics—that of operating at a large scale—opens up important emancipatory possibilities.⁸⁹⁸

Contemporary narrative interventions into the ongoing legacies of the plantation still sustain a small-scale focus, providing intimate insights into how the plantation's afterlives are ecologically manifest in everyday life. Whilst the plantation has had a global impact on the earth's systems as foregrounded in the introduction, this thesis illuminates how sustaining a focus on the local helps us to demystify the Plantationocene and its racialized contours. As such, this thesis turned to vernacular Southern narratives of the Plantationocene, those that are on the page and those that are unwritten – like personal photographs, grassroots rap, and community-led films. Forms of local activism, these waterlogged narratives of the plantation serve as conduits for black resistance.

This engagement with vernacular Plantationocene epistemologies shows that their resistant capacities lie in their recuperative potential, and how this potential opens the imagination up to the imminent possibility of alternative worlds. Narratives of the Plantationocene are formed in memoriam to Plantation structures of the past and present, but simultaneously, to quote Campt, insist on 'a future that hasn't yet happened but must.'⁸⁹⁹ These grassroots narratives of the Plantationocene help us to conceive of storytelling as a form of activism, capable of memorialising the past whilst generating different outcomes. As Ward writes, '[t]hese pieces give me words that I might use to push past the fear and exhaustion and speak to my daughter, my nieces and nephews. This work helps me to believe that this is worthwhile work, and that our troubling the water is worthy'.⁹⁰⁰

In the introduction to this thesis and throughout I conceptualised the Plantationocene in relation to the hold of the slave ship, and Saidiya Hartman's work has

⁸⁹⁸ Wendy Wolford, 'The Plantationocene: A Lusotropical Contribution to the Theory', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 111, 6 (2021) pp.1622-1639 (p.1625).

⁸⁹⁹ Campt, *Listening to Images*, p.17.

⁹⁰⁰ Jesmyn Ward, 'An extract from The Fire This Time', *Foyles*, 18th April 2018 << <https://www.foyles.co.uk/blog-extract-the-fire-this-time>>> [accessed December 2022].

been indispensable to this theorisation. Revisiting *Scenes of Subjection* in 2022 to mark the 25th anniversary of the book, Hartman synthesises how the text ‘attempted to underscore the incompleteness of freedom and the hold of slavery. What did it mean to exist between the “no longer” enslaved and the “not yet” free?’⁹⁰¹ In the words of Hartman, ‘What awaited us was another century of extreme domination, precarious life, dispossession, impoverishment, and punishment. What awaited us were centuries of struggle animated by visions that exceeded the wreckage of our lives, by the avid belief in what might be.’⁹⁰² Narratives of the Plantationocene reanimate memories of the hold – reminding us of the ways in which it haunts the present in the form of racialized captivity, extreme weather and displacement – but they are also saturated in the belief in what might be. These Plantationocene epistemologies demonstrate the resonances between the past and the present, but they also activate an enduring faith in black futurity; so that as we are remembering, we are also relinquishing old patterns, beliefs, and deliberate erasures that reproduce the plantation logic of equating blackness and nonbeing.

In retrieving watery memories and rewriting dominant narratives of the environment, the patterns of hydrological memory work that have emerged throughout this thesis recover glimpses of the past in order to participate in the creation of the future. In this way, these vernacular narratives of the Plantationocene can be thought of in relation to what Rinaldo Walcott describes as the long emancipation, wherein despite ongoing plantation structures, black expression still works towards, anticipates, and awaits freedom. ‘Freedom as imminent condition [...] is both belated and always just ahead of us. Black freedom has been denied despite juridical emancipation, and that denial produces the conditions of a future-oriented Black expressivity—a Black freedom to come’, writes Walcott.⁹⁰³ Narratives of the Plantationocene participate in the unfinished project of freedom by memorialising ecological (often violent) truths and guiding us towards the hope that things can, indeed, be different. The writers, photographers, and artists I draw on employ imagination in order to contend with the logic of the plantation. Put otherwise, against the backdrop of ecological violence and racialized capitalism, these multi-form narratives evoke curiosity and wonder about the prospect of freedom to come. In the words

⁹⁰¹ Saidiya Hartman, ‘The Hold of Slavery’, *The New York Review*, 24th October 2022 << <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2022/10/24/the-hold-of-slavery-hartman/>>> [accessed 3rd November 2022].

⁹⁰² Ibid.

⁹⁰³ Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Black Freedom* (London: Duke University Press, 2021), p.5.

of Walcott, 'Black freedom is not just freedom for Black subjects; it is a freedom that inaugurates an entirely new human experience for everyone'.⁹⁰⁴ 'This is not an exceptionalist argument on behalf of Black people', Walcott writes, 'but an accounting of the ways that Black people's dispossession and its possible rectification would require global reordering, rethinking, and remaking; such an accounting would mean a reorientation of the planet and all modes of being human on it.'⁹⁰⁵ The artists I have engaged with throughout this thesis model this reordering, rethinking, and remaking through the reinvention of cultural forms which were not designed to be redemptive. The novel – which, as Wynter reminds us, is heavily linked to the market economy of the plantation – is remodelled as a vessel for both environmental and criminal justice.⁹⁰⁶ The photograph, a form historically used to supplement the colonial gaze, is reappropriated as a record of resistance and care. Social media, despite the violence of oppressive technologies (such as policing algorithms which disproportionately target black people), is mobilised as a tool for social change. In demonstrating the reordering, rethinking, and remaking that will come with Black freedom, the creators I turned to throughout this thesis perform a future that is now, as Campt would put it. Slavery and its afterlives stimulate endings, loss and disappearance, but these textual, photographic, sonic and digital stories of the Plantationocene, remind us that narrative nurtures new possibilities.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁶ Sylvia Wynter, 'Novel and History, Plot and Plantation', *Savacoi*, 5 (1971), pp.95-102 (p.95).

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