

CYDNEY PHILLIP 

The Liquid Plantationocene and Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend* (2023)

Introduction

The liquid legacies of transatlantic slavery continue to spill over into the present, not just figuratively—in the sense that racial capitalism saturates contemporary ecologies and economies—but materially, too. Slavery altered the natural hydrology of the American South (Silkenat 81). Industrialized agriculture was dependent not only on precipitation patterns—as in, rainfall for harvest—but also on drainage systems to facilitate the control of water. Along the Mississippi River, enslaved people were deployed to build and maintain canals and levees were used to prevent flooding and to assist the cultivation of crops in low-lying areas across the Mississippi Delta and Louisiana. However, as Anna Hartnell writes, “In time it would become apparent that [. . .] man-made levees deprive the soil of the water and sediment that builds the land [. . .] and keeps it from collapsing in on itself and sinking” (934). In the words of Richard Campanella, “All this creates air pockets in the soil body, into which those sand, silt, and clay particles settle, consolidate—and *drop below sea level*” (Campanella). Compounded by anthropogenic climate change and the construction of oil pipelines, the hydraulic infrastructures of the Plantation continue to shape environmental crises across the US south, contributing

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to water quality issues and saltwater intrusion. Additionally, Louisiana's wetlands are among the fastest disappearing landmasses on earth.

Water management processes and patterns in residential zoning (through which Black and Indigenous communities are concentrated in areas most prone to flooding) have rendered racialized people disproportionately vulnerable to water's proclivity to take back the land. These contemporary modes of water-related violence and precarity can be read as a continuation of what Jonathan Howard describes as an "aqueous genealogy of unsettlement" that can be traced back to the Middle Passage (311). Yet theories of the Plantationocene, which claim to help humans name the ecological repercussions of plantation capitalism, retain a terrestrial focus. The concept of the Plantationocene, initiated by Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, offers as an alternative to theories of the Anthropocene that tend to overlook the impact of the plantation on the earth's systems. Dominant discourse of the Anthropocene argues that human activity has now irreparably shaped the planet, marking a new geological epoch that most scholars trace back to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution during the late eighteenth century (Crutzen and Stoermer 484) and the post-war Great Acceleration of the mid-twentieth century (Steffen et al 2015). Theories of the Plantationocene, by contrast, suggest that contemporary environmental crises cannot be disentangled from the emergence of plantation capitalism and the monocultural production of cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugar.¹ From Haraway's perspective, the Plantationocene names the "devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, parties, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations, relying on slave labor and other forms of exploited, alienated, and usually spatially transported labor" (162). At the forefront of Haraway and Tsing's conceptualization of the Plantationocene, then, is soil degradation, deforestation, and the long-term impact of agricultural monocultures. This terrestrial bias was evident during the 2014 conversation from which the term initially emerged:

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

Anna (Tsing): I agree.

Donna (Haraway): And microbes. (Haraway et al, 556-557)

As captured in this brief exchange, early meditations on the Plantationocene not only overlook the centrality of water to the overall

system but also fail to adequately engage with the racialized dimensions of slavery by reducing the plantation to a “flattened multi-species ontology” (Davis et al, 6). As Davis et al emphasize, “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” (6).

In this essay, I offer the notion of the liquid Plantationocene and argue that water management paradigms were inextricable from the material and discursive infrastructures of slavery and that racialized capitalism is still indebted to processes of aqueously mediated violence. Here, I conceptualize the liquid Plantationocene in relation to Jesmyn Ward’s neo-slave narrative, *Let Us Descend* (2023), which remembers the hydraulic systems of slavery and its atmospheres of violence, and in doing so, helps readers to think beyond the terrestrial limits of scholarship on the Plantationocene. It is worth noting that the novel maps out complex constellations of both physical and symbolic bodies of water, capturing the element’s material states as well as its spiritual resonances—the world is, Ward writes, “sopping with spirit” (125). For instance, Aza, one of the hydrous spirits readers encounter most often throughout the text, takes the form of a storm—the culmination of wind and water—and yet, readers are told, somehow resembles the lead protagonist’s grandmother (who Aza first encountered during her journey across the ocean during the Middle Passage). “Before you and me, before anything, there was the water. We come from the water. We return to the water,” says Aza (125). *Let Us Descend* is replete with descriptions of waters beyond this world, but this essay focuses mostly on the text’s engagement with earthly bodies of water: the ocean, swamps, and riverscapes.

In the first section, I outline how *Let Us Descend* foregrounds the role of these waterscapes in relation to the geographic and economic infrastructures of the plantation, and in doing so, recuperates vernacular knowledges of water that were registered in the antebellum slave narrative. For Toni Morrison, neo-slave narratives operate as “a kind of literary archaeology” and an opportunity to “fill in the blanks that the slave narrative left” (193). I agree with her argument, and yet, there is also value in salvaging what the slave narrative did not leave blank, by grappling with how the environmental warnings, observations, and lessons they did contain can, and should, be re-coded back into the present. The second section attends to the liquescent temporalities that course through the novel and posits that the text helps readers to conceive of the mnemonic properties of rivers and identify more-than-human modes of remembrance, which disturb dominant chronologies

of the Anthropocene. Finally, I reflect on how the ending of the novel, ultimately, resonates with histories of “marronage and other forms of fugitive mobilities,” which as Leslie Gross-Wyrtzen and Alex Moulton write, “highlight the social and spatial dynamics of resistance and refashioning that African, African-descended, and Indigenous people enacted wherever chattel slavery existed” (1260). Through the neo-slave narrative, Ward salvages the miscellaneous water-related histories and knowledges that are bypassed by the limited purview of the Anthropocene (tailored exclusively to the Western “Anthropos”) as well as terrestrial definitions of the Plantationocene. If, as Lucy Bond argues, the Anthropocene induces a “crisis of memory” through the perpetuation of “narratives that serve to mask the historical connection between socio-economic and ecological violence” (196-197), then *Let Us Descend* complicates that strategic forgetfulness by articulating how the so-called natural environment is physically and metaphorically soaked in histories of transatlantic slavery and its liquid legacies.

The liquid Plantationocene is a nod to two critical interventions in which the concept of liquid(ity) has proven to be a generative framework for understanding the fluid dynamics of racial capitalism. The first is Hartnell’s work on the experience of “liquid precarity” in what is now a sinking New Orleans (933). Whereas Zygmunt Bauman employs the notion of “liquid modernity” to describe the unfettered flows of global capitalism, Hartnell identifies the phenomenon of “liquid precarity” that continues to emerge as a result of the earth’s inability to withstand the weight of racial capitalism (933). As Hartnell reminds, this liquid precarity is evidenced by the sea’s ongoing absorption of the soil in Louisiana. Second, Rinaldo Walcott’s “The Black Aquatic” centers both the metaphorical and material proponents of liquid. Walcott argues that “Blackness begins in the context of liquidity—the coffer and the slave ship are its founding. From historical examples like the ships *Amistad* and *Zong*, we see how liquidity marks the birth of black possibility and/or potentialities that come into being. Liquidity, too, has its opposite: liquidation” (66). In doing so, Walcott draws the reader’s attention to “the liquidity of people and economies in which the historical implications of the ship meet the contemporary liveability of Black peoples’ lives” (66). Thus, while the concept of the Blue Plantationocene might have situated this essay firmly within the field of blue humanities scholarship, I want to maintain the focus on liquid that emerges in the work of both Hartnell and Walcott. Blue humanities discourse is usually focused on the possibilities that emerge when marine science and cultural studies are combined to challenge anthropocentric understandings of the sea (Opperman 2-3). However, grappling with the liquid ecologies of

transatlantic slavery and identifying how they come to bear on the present means transgressing the saltwater focus that has long dominated that discourse.² Liquid, with its lexical associations with both water and capital, is a particularly useful term when it comes to apprehending the intersections among aqueous violence, economic exploitation, and racial domination in the Plantationocene.

Remembering the (Hydro)logic of the Plantation

Black writers have long utilized literature, both fiction and nonfiction, as a strategy for recording the imbrications between environmental degradation and racial capitalism, even though, as Malcom Ferdinand reminds, “minorities of color in the United States are still underrepresented in governmental and nongovernmental environmental organizations, cultivating an imaginary of environmentalism as a particular place of whiteness” (183). Recent scholarship has discerned the ecological cautions contained in Antebellum narratives, excavating how enslaved writers anticipated catastrophes to come. Emily Waples, for example, grapples with “the gloom” in the writings of Olaudah Equiano and thinks relationally between the atmospheric registers of the plantation and (ongoing) environmentally mediated illnesses (97). Teresa A. Goddu recovers accounts of soil depletion in the US slave narrative and reminds us that “Frederick Douglass’s indictment of slavery” emphasizes the ecological unsustainability of industrialized agriculture and “begins with a description of the ‘worn-out, sandy, desert-like appearance of [his natal] soil’” (271). Similarly, in Charles Ball’s narrative, Joe P. L. Davidson and Filipe Carreira da Silva locate the foreboding presence of plantation wastelands produced by the destructive crop cycles of mass tobacco production (526).

Scarce attention, however, is paid to how the slave narrative emerged as a waterlogged genre, with writers acutely aware of how the mastery of cash crops and the domination of racialized people coincided with attempts to control and weaponize bodies of water. One such example is Olaudah Equiano’s seafaring slave narrative, which invites a consideration of the oceanic origins of the plantation. Water also pours through Charles Ball’s narrative as he sheds light on the environmental health consequences of the irrigation systems that were engineered on rice plantations. In Ball’s words, “watering and weeding the rice is considered one of the most unhealthy occupations on a southern plantation, as the people are obliged to live for several weeks in the mud and water, subject to all the unwholesome vapours that arrive from stagnant pools, under the rays of a summer sun” (quoted in Silkenat, 87). For Frederick Douglass, who grew up near

the Chesapeake Bay and went on to labor in two shipyards before executing his escape, water signals both the potential for freedom and the threat of violence. 'It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave. I will take to the water', writes Douglass (65). At the same time, water is also represented as source of terror in moments throughout *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, such as when an enslaved man, Demby, is shot after attempting to run away into a creek ("His mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood" [23]). In *Let Us Descend*, Ward remediates these cultural memories of water and, in doing so, brings aqueously mediated systems of harm and related histories of racial capitalism back into public awareness.

"This land is wet, veined with rivers and marshes" (70), says Annis, the novel's lead protagonist, when, after being sold by the slaveholder who fathered her, she is forced to travel by foot from the rice fields of the Carolinas to the slave auction in New Orleans. This image of the watery topography of the south—where rivers and marshes emulate veins—is indicative of how, during slavery, bodies of water functioned as arteries, facilitating the flow of both people and agricultural stock. It is unsurprising then, that Annis' journey through the deep South is inextricable from violent encounters with water. "The water burns the gore on my toes, is acid in the small cuts all over my legs" (70), she says. "Silt turns the river to sludge," Annis observes as she, and the other enslaved people to which she is shackled, struggle their way through the water and toward the auction block. Much focus is placed on the suspended impurities of the water which is, at times, "dark as the night" (73), and, at others, "shot through with yellow" (74). Ward's turbid rivers are an uncanny reminder of the mud-died waters Ball describes on the rice plantation—and, at the same time, they are also prophetic of the sugarcane plantation to which Annis' journey into the deep South is headed. After all, evidence suggests that sugar cane plantations lead to increased siltation in bodies of water and decreased shoreline stability (Southwick et al 4393)—which is now being materialized in ongoing patterns of coastal erosion across the gulf coast.

Though largely ignored, an awareness of the impact of intensive agriculture on Southern rivers can also be found in geological records and testimonies from the nineteenth century. As David Silkenat summarizes, while naturalists and missionaries marveled at the clarity of Southern waterways during the eighteenth century, the rapid expansion of slave frontiers and a drastic increase in topsoil erosion meant that by the nineteenth century geologists were beginning to observe how previously "pristine" rivers were being altered by plantation

agriculture (81). In 1846, for instance, “geologist Charles Lyell heard from locals that rivers that had previously run clear had become cloudy because of upland cultivation, which sent ‘copious amounts of red mud’ downriver [...] Lyell saw the transformation of Southern waterways as evidence that plantation agriculture had remade the landscape” (82). Much like Charles Ball’s warnings about waterborne pathogens, and Douglass’s 1852 conjecture that US rivers may one day “rise in wrath and fury, and bear away, on their angry waves, the accumulated wealth of years of toil and hardship” (27), Lyell’s observations—informed by local testimonies—would not deter capitalist forces from continuing to burden Southern waterscapes. The Deep South’s crude oil deposits, discovered in 1901, thrust the region into the center of America’s industrial activity, with many former plantations transformed into petrochemical plants. Today, petrochemical companies have inundated the Mississippi River with pollutants and expunged the coastal wetland system that once protected the region from storm surge and saltwater intrusion. Through the neo-slave narrative, which, as Goddu reminds, is often deployed to provide “a genealogy of the present crisis” (270), Ward brings plantation-related histories of water into relation with the economic afterlives of slavery and their fluid forms.

For the characters in *Let Us Descend*, the threat of flooding looms large, as it does for communities living across the US South today as extreme weather is becoming increasingly common in the region. The text is abundant with volatile rivers, heavy rainfall, and ferocious storms that leave those who are enslaved and denied access to adequate shelter vulnerable to elemental forces. There are, for instance, images of “women and children [...] wrapped around trees, around each other, making a human chain to clear the wood-choke of the storm” (251) before Annis is forced to watch her friends, Mary and Esther, as they are dragged away by the river. One might read these scenes in relation to the antebellum testimonies that were beginning to detail how mass, monocultural production was impacting the US landscape, leading to topsoil erosion and increased siltation in waterbodies as well as altering the natural flows of water. At the same time, readers are told that it is the spirit of Aza, with her “wind-etched skirts” (265), who controls the storms. The supernatural aspects of *Let Us Descend* remember west African and African American spiritual traditions. Aza is, in many ways, evocative of the Yoruba deity, Oya, the Orisha of storms, winds, and rainfall. That Aza emerges during the Middle Passage to accompany Annis’ grandmother on her journey across the ocean is also reminiscent of African American folktales in which hurricanes are depicted as the materialization of avenging

spirits of those who did not survive the Atlantic crossing—a notion attributed to the fact that many storms have followed the Atlantic slave trading route, from the coasts of Africa to the shores of the US South (Shepherd). What geological testimonies of the antebellum period and African American folktales have in common—beyond the fact that traces of both can be detected in *Let Us Descend*—is that, ultimately, they both conceive of the threat of flooding as a repercussion of plantation slavery. Thus, one can read the storms as a consequence of intensive agriculture or unpack the symbolic implications of African American folktales that attribute hurricanes to retaliatory spirits that died during the Middle Passage. Both suggest hurricanes carry with them histories of the plantation.

“We come to dread the rivers,” says Annis, “In the shallow ones, our feet sink down in the bottom, and the walking that was hard on dry ground becomes a searing struggle. In the deeper ones, we fight drowning. The women who can swim, the women who successfully cross, pull the others, the gasping ones, the thrashing ones, through” (72). The gasp—a convulsive breath caused by shock, pain, and/or asphyxiation—reverberates across the novel, like when Annis and several other enchained characters struggle their way through the rivers: “I sink, rise, and gasp” (75).³ Readers can also hear it when Aza recalls the Middle Passage through descriptions of enslaved people “gasping like fish in the hold. Crying so the water run in their mouths” (89). As it echoes through the novel, the gasp indexes patterns of water-mediated violence that sustained the plantation economy and many of its afterlives. In an essay entitled “Carceral Ecologies: Incarceration and Hydrological Haunting in Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*,” I argue that the novel illustrates how “water is imbricated in the carceral continuum from slavery to mass incarceration” (290). Diana Leong argues that “slave ships thrived on an ecology of thirst,” that is, as “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” (805). In doing so, I argue that land-based prisons of today continually reinforce this logic, as evident in issues of water scarcity and toxicity in US prisons which are disproportionately populated with racialized people. In that essay, I attend to the thirsty ecologies that haunt *Sing, Unburied, Sing* through its invocations of Parchman Prison and the water-based prisons of the Middle Passage. In *Let Us Descend*, however, Ward reminds that punitive water-related ecologies are diffused beyond prison walls, with the (hyrdo)logic of the plantation—manifest in violent extremes of both drowning and

thirst—articulated, in part, through the motif of the gasp. In the Plantationocene, racial violence is interchangeably mediated by both the surplus and absence of water; thus, in Ward's literary reimagining of the plantation, sometimes the characters are "vomiting water [...] coughing a lurching ashore" (71) after nearly drowning, and at other times, their tongues are "large and cotton heavy from thirst" (243).

When she eventually arrives on the sugarcane fields in Louisiana, Annis quickly learns of the punitive water management strategies deployed by the mistress of the plantation and her associates. This first becomes apparent when Emil, an enslaved man, is sent to "the hole" (146), a claustrophobic, thirst-inducing space used to punish those who violate plantation order. Emil spends four days in the earthy cell, buried below ground and denied sustenance. During this time, Annis furtively attempts to ensure that Emil receives water: "I kneel next to the dark grate, and I pour water, one cup, two, in a stream through the grille [...] I hope he catches some of it in the cup of his palms or in his mouth", she says (149). "I pour, thinking of my mama, wondering if she found herself in a hole like this and if anyone snuck her mercy", Annis continues (149). Later in the novel, when Annis finds herself in the hole, she expresses the following: "I feel one of many, feel as if all them that done been in this hole, bled into this mud, all them bound with ropes, hacked with hatchets, burned alive, buried alive, are all here with me. We swallowing rainwater, gulping mud, wailing against the wind" (261). Here, the hole is cast as a plural zone, containing multiple experiences, and serving as a microcosm for the broader dynamics of the plantation. In particular, the hole encapsulates the ways in which access to liquid—in the form of both adequate hydration and the economic liquidity that keeps the plantation economy afloat—shapes plantation structures.

"I've Known Rivers": Fluvial Memory and Black Eco-criticism

... Dear singing river full
Of my blood, are we as loud under-
Water? Is it blood that blinds
Brothers? Or is it the Mississippi
Running through the fattest vein
Of America?

-Excerpt of "Langston's Blues," from *The New Testament* by
Jericho Brown (quoted in Ward, p.i)

Before taking readers on a journey through Southern plantation zones, *Let Us Descend* begins with three epigraphs each concerning cultural memories of slavery. The last is an excerpt of “Langston’s Blues” by Jericho Brown which foregrounds the novel’s engagement with riverine ecologies. Here, Black blood and river water blur into one another; the Mississippi—“the fattest vein Of America”—is presented as the economic life source of the nation, brimming with the blood of Black people. In this poem, Brown reimagines Langston Hughes’ seminal “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, wherein the speaker recalls knowing “rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in/human veins” (lines 2-3). While Hughes focuses on notions of wisdom and spirituality, recalling a time before the absorption of Black blood into ancient rivers, Brown paints a more ambivalent picture, gesturing to the mnemonic ecologies of rivers and the ways in which they are materially and metaphorically charged with histories of racial violence. Similarly, in *Let Us Descend*, in addition to serving as liquid channels that enable and restrict the flow of capital, rivers also influence how and when memories of water-related violence are brought to the surface. As the following analysis will show, *Let Us Descend* experiments with what might be understood as a fluvial mode of remembrance insofar as memory is often shaped by (and related to) rivers. Following on from calls to “think with water” (Chen et al 11)—a call which has somewhat become the overarching refrain of the blue humanities—*Let Us Descend* encourages readers to *remember with* rivers, and engage with the ways in which, despite the saline bias of blue humanities scholarship, “all water,” to quote Toni Morrison, “has a perfect memory” (199).⁴

An understanding of the entanglements between rivers and cultural memory has long been present in Black ecocritical thought, with scholars interpreting riverscapes as repositories of Black ecological knowledge and experience (Savoy 2015, Ruffin 2010). Memory, as Jennifer James writes, “walks out of rivers” (163). In this way, memory is analogous with fluvial deposits—as in, sediments transported and deposited by rivers and streams. In geological terms, fluvial deposits include materials such as sand, silt, clay, and gravel, but, since those residues have been altered by hydrodynamic processes and socioecological histories, they are also mnemonic devices, assisting in the retrieval of historical knowledge.⁵ Like material sediments, river-related memories accumulate and resurface across time and space. Both material and discursive fluvial deposits can be understood in relation to Tiffany Lethabo King’s heuristic of the Black shoal. A shoal, King explains, is “an accumulation of granular materials (sand, rock, and other) that through sedimentation create a bar or barrier that is

difficult to pass" (2). King explores the ways in which shoals alter and slow down the movement of liquid and therefore serve as a metaphor for Black and indigenous methodologies that disrupt "normative discourses within colonial, settler colonial, and postcolonial studies" (4). Like shoals, the fluvial modes of remembrance that surface in *Let Us Descend* reorient the saltwater focus of blue humanities scholarship and challenge landlocked definitions of the Plantationocene by stratifying interconnected histories of rivers and the plantation system.

Much like in *Men We Reaped*—Ward's memoir in which she describes the rivers and bayous in Mississippi as "watery graveyards" (16)—in *Let Us Descend*, rivers often function as liquid cemeteries. Not unlike during the Middle Passage when "They dumped the dead. They let the water have them" (Ward 2023, 87), in Ward's depiction of the Deep South, in death, enslaved bodies are frequently relinquished to "float downriver" (78). Christina Sharpe's work has been instrumental in drawing attention to the fact that "the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today" (40). 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," Sharpe writes, "human blood is salty, and sodium [. . .] has a residence time of 260 million years" (141). *Let Us Descend* prompts readers to conceive of how rivers, like the ocean, are also a memorial body of water through which one can locate the trace of people who were discarded by, and in, the liquid Plantationocene. Due to differences in inflow rates and the fact that freshwater does not have the saline properties of the ocean, the mnemonic timescales of rivers are, of course, distinct from Sharpe's references to oceanic residence time, but the biophysical imbrications between water bodies and racialized people remain significant. After all, recognizing the "co-constitutive and dynamic relationalities" (Opperman 10) between salt water and freshwater ecosystems helps one to conceive of how the atomic residues of people who were overthrown during the Middle Passage are not only "out there in the ocean" (Sharpe 40) but also much closer than one might imagine, seeping through inland bodies of water—which, in "the wake" (Sharpe 5) of plantation slavery and global climate change, are increasingly vulnerable to saltwater intrusion.

Building on Brown's notion of the "singing river"—prefaced in the epigraph—Ward conceives of the narrative capacities of freshwater in relation to the sonic dimensions of rivers, which are continually sounding their way through the text, sometimes in noises that can be decoded and, at other times, in the form of nonhuman, untranslatable

speech. On one of the occasions on which a river speak to Annis, it says, "I am so full, so full, but I could do with another, another, I could do with you, I would wrap myself around you and we could go far, to the bayou flats, to the bays, to the sea" (251). "I could swallow you," another river says, "hold you" (74). Annis explains that sometimes "the old river speaks in a language I cannot fully understand but I catch words" (85); at other times, rivers speak with "the gurgle and swish of water" (160). That Annis frequently finds herself in dialogue with rivers is indicative of the ways in which *Let Us Descend* conceives of memory fluvially—through interchanges between humans and riverscapes—thus distorting the teleological, anthropocentric modes of remembrance that usually characterize discourses of the Anthropocene.

Ward's sonic riverscapes speak to the temporal aspects of freshwater. Drawing on the rhythmicity of rivers to conceptualize the relationship between rivers and time through sound, Jackson et al "define river rhythms as periodic recurrent phenomena of a riverscape that are synchronized with the rise and fall of river water, creating regimes of *river time*" (951). They write that "Within the fields of hydrology and aquatic ecology the concept of *flow regime* signifies the cyclical patterns of the movement of water, organisms, energy and other matter through time and space" (Jackson et al 951). These riverine temporalities—and their cyclical, flow regimes—provide a model for thinking about how memory is always materially and metaphorically fluid in the liquid Plantationocene. In the words of James Olney, "Memory creates the *significance* of events in discovering the pattern into which those events fall. . . it is in the interplay of past and present, of present memory reflecting over past experience on its way to becoming present being, that events are lifted out of time to be resituated not in mere chronological sequence but in patterned significance" (47-48). The patterned significance of water-mediated violence (as well as violence enacted against water) helps to apprehend how the past is "watery, repeating and yet different depending on the context or container" (Bailey-Charteris 63). In *Let Us Descend*, liquescent temporalities arrive by way of Ward's vocal rivers which echo throughout the text. A fluid conceptualization of time is also registered in the narrative structure of the text itself insofar as the neo-slave narrative, in its very essence, unravels temporal linearity by inviting "a contemporary audience to see the past in terms of the present" (Anim-Addo et al 5).

Throughout the novel, rivers provide an onto-epistemological site for conceptualizing the terraqueous afterlives of plantation slavery and their transtemporal confluence over time. Despite the colonial myth that the ocean serves as "*aqua nullius*" (DeLoughrey 34), blank space fit for conquest, all water is an expressive repository of the past.

In *Let Us Descend*, representations of more-than-human remembrance center the victims of water-related violence that have accumulated since the Middle Passage. “Only those who foretell would have known that your people who were thrown overboard, who leapt overboard, who sank to the bottom of the ocean, would become one with the deep, and after that sinking [...] they would sing,” Aza tells Annis (126). Here, the cyclicity of water speaks to the fact that those who have been hydrologically annihilated by the plantation system leave traces in their ostensible absence and, although not wholly recoverable, ecologically persist in both saltwater and freshwater systems. “*There is life in the sinking, the water at my feet says. Life in the descent, the aquifer’s whisper intones*” (Ward 260).

Maroon Methods for Surviving the Liquid Plantationocene

Annis is repeatedly told that she “must sink in order to rise” (126). “The Italian wrote about this,” says Annis referring to how the notion of sinking to rise echoes Dante’s *Inferno*, from which the novel borrows its title (127). In North Carolina, Annis frequently overheard *Inferno* being read to her white half-sisters on the plantation. “After the tutor and my sisters came to the end of the man’s journey through the depths of hell, the guide led him up and out of that sunken place by the *sound of waters*” (127), she recalls. “I want to rise. I want stars. But I cannot do what the seer says. My hope, my desire for freedom, is too great an offering,” says Annis (127). Annis wants to find freedom in relation to water, not in death, but in life. Ward’s intertextual references to *Inferno* gesture to the historical mythologization of rivers—in Greek mythology (from which Dante draws many of his references) rivers are the passages to the underworld, with Lethe, Styx, Acheron, Phlegethon, and Cocytus emerging as fluid tunnels to the afterlife. Yet, Ward resists the mythologization of rivers by recasting them as ontological spaces, which—despite their continued weaponization and militarization globally—are also imbricated in histories of political resistance. In this way, her desire resonates with Davidson and da Silva’s notion of “maroon survivalism [...] in which the task is to build communities that offer a shelter from the apocalyptic processes unleashed by the Middle Passage [...] maroon communities were also oriented towards a break with the dominant contours of the plantation, offering a foretaste of an alternative mode of living that eschews backbreaking labour, environmental devastation and racial violence” (532).

When Aza tells Annis that “The worlds are oceans [...] There are currents between them, that connect them. Straits, like streams. This is

how we travel, when we dance" (224), she also offers her a word of caution: "Your spirit can travel the straits, but your body is bound" (225). Thus, while the spirits insist that there is "*life in the sinking*," Annis ultimately rejects their claim: "This ain't living," she says, as she resists drowning and fights for survival (260). While Annis lives in relation to the spirit world and therefore understands that death is not finite, it is the injustice of what would be a premature death that she refuses to succumb to. In this sense, her defiance is evocative of what Stuart Earle Strange describes as "Maroon anti-necropolitics" (291). In his theorization of necropolitics, Achille Mbembe argues that "sovereignty resides. . . in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (11). Necropolitical order thus seeks to maintain divisions between the living and the dead, with the latter rendered no longer existent. Strange argues that maroon anti-necropolitics are underpinned by a cosmopolitical relationality between living and ancestral beings, which diminishes necropolitical assumptions around death. While necropolitical violence attempts to "pry apart the living from the dead" (294), the living maroon communities that Strange works with believe that unjust killings inadvertently intensify such relations, and that "the effects of killing or letting die will inevitably reverberate through the lives of all future generations" (292). Likewise, Annis' communication the spirit world affirms that the ghosts that accumulate through plantation slavery continue to shape the lives of the living. This haunting does not mean, however, that Annis is prepared to die in order to ascend to the spiritual plane and transcend the plantation. Like contemporary maroon communities, Annis learns that "Every injustice seeds further injustices" (Strange 302) and "every bad death will eventually have ultimately unfathomable repercussions for everything and everyone" (Strange 305).

For Annis, surviving the plantation is dependent on her ability to reconfigure her relationship to water. During her journey to the slave auction another enslaved woman, Phylis, tells Annis, "they got islands in them swamps [. . .] you got to find them" (81). From that moment onwards, Annis retains a fascination with swamps and the fact that there are "whole families, whole communities, living there" (175). While on the plantation in Louisiana, Esther further ignites Annis' affinity to these bodies of water when she tells her that swamps and marshes are the places to seek "if you dare live free" (177). Eventually, Annis decides to take the risk despite tales of those who were caught and recent knowledge of her mother's failed attempt to flee. When she does, it is an escape that can only be facilitated by the liquid conduits through which she arrived in New Orleans. As Ifor Duncan's work

reminds, “the very same water bodies that have been exploited and weaponised for the purposes of division are also crucial routes of crossing for those in search of asylum” (92). What Duncan describes as “riverine routes of necessity” (92) carry Annis to the marshy shelter where the novel ends. Here, more-than-human assemblages—bees, vines, water, and swamp grass—offer Annis protection: “The swamp hums in assent around me, sealing me in its secret heart” (284). It is at the swamp that Annis learns of her pregnancy: “I know there is a seed, a song, a babe coming to me” (293). Annis’ newfound freedom, established in relation to the swamp, along with the imminent birth of her child, leaves the reader to ponder the possibility of, to quote Duncan, “establishing maroon communities upstream and outside of the plantation imaginary” (92).

As Katherine Mckittrick argues, in response to plantocracies, “differential modes of survival emerge—creolization, the blues, maroonage, revolution, and more—revealing that the plantation, in both slave and postslave contexts, must be understood alongside complex negotiations of time, space, and terror” (3). Many of those modes of survival are negotiated in relation to water. Édouard Glissant traces creolization back to the womb abyss of the Middle Passage (5). Clyde Woods highlights the sonic imbrications between the Mississippi river, the blues, and hip hop (59). And Justin P. Dunnivant reminds of the “maritime aspects of flight and maroon life” (886). Accounts of water and escape also proliferate throughout antebellum slave narratives. In *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave* (1848), for instance, Brown recalls transporting “sixty-nine fugitives over Lake Erie to Canada.” “It is well known,” Brown continues, “that a great number of fugitives make their escape to Canada, by way of Cleveland: and while on the lakes, I always made arrangement to carry them on the boat to Buffalo or Detroit, and thus effect their escape to the ‘promised land’” (48). In this way, *Let Us Descend* not only reverberates with the limnological and maritime concerns of the slave narrative but also resonates with the fugitive desire to transform commodified waterways into anti-capitalist sites of resistance.

While the current crises our terraqueous planet faces are not a direct replica of slavery, Ward’s literary excursion into the Antebellum deep south invites readers to consider how, to quote Ferdinand, “the descendants of Maroon communities and Black people in the United States [...] are still waiting for their demands to be met” (198). Those unmet demands are registered in Ward’s broader body of work which addresses, among other things, entangled networks of Hurricane Katrina, carcerality, and petrochemical pollution. Through the neo-slave narrative, Ward reminds that the crises that take center stage in

her previous works are drenched in the economic and environmental legacies of the plantation. In textualizing the narrative capacities of water and recovering cultural memories of rivers, seascapes, and swamps, Ward helps readers to apprehend the temporal, geographic, and epistemological overlaps between the events and forces that flood the liquid Plantationocene. As oceans rise, freshwaters recede, and racial capitalism continues to ravage the globe, humans need to become attuned to how different bodies of water, both human and more-than-human, disproportionately bear the burden of the past. This increasing awareness will require more narratives that recuperate vernacular knowledge systems and rupture the flattened chronologies of dominant discussions of the Anthropocene. After all, as bell hooks once put it, “remembering makes us subjects in history [and] it is dangerous to forget” (54).

NOTES

1. This challenge to dominant chronologies of the Anthropocene is paralleled by CO₂ records, which register a drastic reduction in atmospheric carbon dioxide in 1610, three years after the establishment of the first North American plantation in Jamestown. Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin refer to “the dip in atmospheric CO₂” that occurred after the Columbian exchange—as in, the colonisation of the Americas—as the “Orbis Spike” and argue that this “suit of changes (marks) 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’” (175). Thus, the Plantationocene is a useful term for further explicating how anthropogenic imprints bear the mark of plantation slavery and settler colonialism.

2. I am grateful to Alison Glassie whose generous response to my presentation at the “Narratives of Water: Flows, Routes, and Crises in the Atlantic World” conference (University of Turin, 2024) made me think more about the saltwater bias of Blue Humanities scholarship.

3. The gasp also evokes M.NourbeSe M. Philip’s essay, “The Ga(s)p,” in which she describes *Zong!* a book-length poem that rearranges words taken from legal documents relating to the infamous slave ship massacre—as a “series of ga(s)ps for air with syllabic sounds attached or overlaid” (39).

4. To date, one of the central aims of blue humanities scholarship has been to illuminate how developments in oceanography—and emergent cultural representations of the sea—reconfigure anthropocentric understandings of time (Alaimo 2017). This scholarship engages with the ways in which the “non-linear temporalities of ocean circulation” (Glassie 2020, 454) register the overlapping timescales of past, present, and future. Yet, there is still more

work to be done in terms of understanding how the transtemporal aqueous narratives readers identify at sea are also pertinent to freshwater ecosystems.

5. It is also worth noting that rivers are not merely material, but also imbued in and with Black storytelling traditions, from the blues to poetry (Woods 2007).

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