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American Sediments: Race and the Environment in Literature along the Mississippi after Twain

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Abstract

"American Sediments" is a study of Black, white, and Indigenous literatures and complementary visual culture centered on the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico, in texts written after Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*—still the archetypal version of the Mississippi, but inevitably unaligned with historical changes, cultural diversities, and economic shifts that have transformed the river and its representations over time. I argue that the river's environments and industries seep into its literatures and manifest in different ideologies and literary genres: the nostalgia-colored river pastoral; the paradoxical wilderness quest; Black nature writing and post-Katrina environmentalism in flood literature; and anticolonial remappings of the river in Indigenous poetry. Drawing on Rob Nixon's and Edward Soja's respective theories of environmental slow violence and spatial justice, "American Sediments" addresses the long and ongoing histories of dispossession, environmental extraction, and resistance along the river. Building on scholarship around Black and Native reclamations of social spaces, my arguments attend inextricably to cultural and natural factors, superseding simplified narratives of erasure. Instead, my work centers historical memory, literary place, and their nuanced expression in works written by marginalized writers. Moreover, rather than focus on isolated environmental catastrophes, as many scholars have done, I approach the river and its creative legacies more broadly as interconnected networks, encompassing multiple archives and unexpected influences. This research contributes to debates about the relationship between ecological and cultural conditions and their expression in different literary genres and highlights the ways in which my archive shapes cultural memory. While situated within the interdisciplinary fields of environmental humanities and American Studies, my work maintains a strong foundation in literary studies, privileging multi-ethnic literatures.

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Flow: After Twain

Snaking its way through the Midwest and the South from Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico beyond the Louisiana delta, the Mississippi River, whose name derives from the Ojibwe 'Misi-ziibi,' acts as a conduit not only for enormous quantities of moving water and sediment, but also for the cultural imagination of a vast multiregional area. Though the river was central to American literary history of the nineteenth century, recent public and scholarly conversations often neglect or misunderstand it. This dissertation reads creative expression along the river as part of an interconnected network that includes its ecology and industry, thus shifting perspectives of the Mississippi River Corridor to include the interrelations between literary responses to the river and its ecological challenges, from the Flood of 1927 to the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf just beyond its Delta.

By foregrounding marginalized writers in those responses, "American Sediments: Race and the Environment in Literature along the Mississippi after Twain" creates a culturally and formally diverse archive of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Mississippi River environmental literature broadly construed: fiction, poetry, memoirs, travel narratives, postcards, cookbooks, and blues lyrics. The dissertation is the first ethnically diverse project reading creative expressions surrounding the river in the long twentieth century. My work brings together insights from the fields of African American Studies, Native American Studies, Southern Studies, and Environmental Studies to trace how the Mississippi's shifting banks, environmental conditions, and industrial uses manifest in these myriad literatures, which grapple with the river's sedimented histories of dispossession and extraction and reclaim those spaces by drawing on the discourses of environmental and spatial justice. Environmental justice condemns extraction from the lands of the politically disempowered, foregrounding their heightened exposure to

environmental toxicity and displacement resulting from catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina. Spatial justice locates these processes in the broader socio-political history of dispossession, whether of land and natural resources, as has been the case with Indigenous populations, or of labor and bodies, as was the case with enslaved peoples.

I take the concept of sedimentation from the geological action of the Mississippi itself, which moves the rich sediment of soil from across its watershed southward. The river nourishes farmlands as it overflows and builds land at its delta in southern Louisiana, although excessive leveeing has curtailed both processes, as I discuss in Chapter Four. I apply the same term to the process of cultural and metaphoric accretion of historical and literary narratives and processes of racialization and dispossession within particular geographic locales along the river. To understand history as a sedimentary process is to analyze the ways in which natural and social histories interact and to emphasize the connections between different places, periods, and groups of people.

The material conditions of life along the Mississippi reveal themselves in different political and environmental ideologies and literary genres: the nostalgia-colored river pastoral in Jack Kerouac's autobiographical novel *On the Road* (1957), which reproduces established tropes of cotton and fetishized labor; the paradoxical wilderness quest in travel writer Eddy L. Harris's memoir *Mississippi Solo* (1988), which seeks the contradictory American wilderness of the Romantic literary imagination; Black environmentalism in Kiese Laymon's novel *Long Division* (2013), which highlights the connections between social and environmental histories; and Indigenous anticolonial remappings in Heid E. Erdrich's collaborative video poem "Pre-Occupied" (2013), which emphasize continuity and relations between people and land. Works like Kerouac's and Harris's swerve between inherited representations of the Mississippi and

insights into the workings of American imperialism. Black flood literature and Indigenous remappings found in Laymon's and Erdrich's texts, on the other hand, reject extractive, colonial attitudes regarding people and resources and emphasize instead continuity and relations—to the river and to one another. These literatures embed environmental concerns into a broader articulation of spatial justice and show that treating the former necessitates addressing the latter. In other words, the texts reveal dispossession and extraction as two sides of the same coin, to draw on cultural theorist Imre Szeman, implicating the structure of capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy in the current state of the environment.

I analyze the cultural work performed by the frequent focusing of Mississippi River literature on remembering, tracking the ways the texts represent the river and the surrounding landscape to access memory that has been submerged in mainstream white settler colonial accounts. I draw on critical memory studies and the work of literary and media scholar Astrid Erll, who analyzes literature "as a medium of cultural memory," which she defines as "the totality of the context" within which history and individual remembering originate (82, 7). Erll identifies two conditions literary works must fulfill to affect cultural memory: "They must be received *as* media of memory; and they must be read in a broad swathe across society" (155). Readers must understand the work as an expression of historical and individual memory and read it widely, which explains why Mark Twain's river texts in particular have continued to have such sway over the American popular imagination.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I define memory as the preservation and shaping of individual and collective stories and histories recorded in literature and other cultural expression. Memory permeates objects like novels and postcards, but it is also embodied in individuals and stored in the landscape and sediment of the Mississippi, as Chapter Four and Joy Harjo's focus

on blood memory and the river's delta show. Some of my archives like the popular genres of riverboat cookbooks and pastoral postcards promote collective nostalgia about the river, which is rooted in the antebellum economy of the slaveholding South and a resistance to modernization. Upholding images of the river as a bucolic paradise or an Edenic wilderness requires the suppression of marginalized voices and the effacement of racial violence, exploitative labor, and environmental destruction. Genres like Black flood literature and Indigenous poetic remappings revise such idealized historical accounts of the river, which are typically the product of white cultural imagination. The artifacts I examine are both aesthetic and political; they create a record documenting the links between racial and environmental injustice along the Mississippi, redefine who gets to speak for the river, and imagine alternate futures.

In the twentieth century, the river plays a prominent role even in American literature not centered on the Mississippi. In his 1936 novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, William Faulkner called it "that Continental Trough," at once the "geologic umbilical" of the land and the "Environment itself." Faulkner's Mississippi River works against regional and national divides, connecting the Mississippi-born Quentin and his Harvard roommate, the Canadian-born Shreve, "in a sort of geographical transubstantiation" (Faulkner 208). Here, the river connects the North and the South of the continent environmentally, bodily, socially, and symbolically—even spiritually, as his use of eucharistic imagery implies. Its magnitude and fluidity convey the arbitrariness of borders on the one hand and unify the nation still cleft by the Civil War on the other.

The same year, in the midst of the Great Depression, James Agee documented the struggles of tenant farmers in Alabama. He published his lyrical, genre-bending account of their lives in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), a volume accompanied by Walker Evans' epochal photography. In a passage that focuses on soil, Agee claims that even "in the least

creasing of the land sucked into scars between two stalks of corn you are seeing an organic part of the great body of the Mississippi River" (222). Although the Mississippi does not technically reach Alabama, the northern part of the state lies in its watershed, which means that smaller tributaries like the Tennessee River drain into the Ohio and then the Mississippi. Via its tributaries and the entire interconnected system of water circulation, the Big Muddy shapes the lives of the tenant farmers observed by Agee. Their livelihoods depend not only on the land they inhabit, but upon the water that gives life on the one hand and causes destruction on the other, as is the case with floods and draughts. The importance of the Mississippi is reflected in the vernacular terminology, in which landlocked Alabama farmers call land terraces levees, prompting Agee to declare that "the Mississippi has such power that men who have never seen it use its language in their work" (291).[1] Agee's example shows the impact of the Mississippi on the cultural imagination of even those communities that are removed from it, showcasing the extent to which the Mississippi structures the language of the people in its watershed.

"American Sediments" unsettles outdated notions of the river that rely on Mark Twain's nineteenth-century account by offering a generically and culturally diverse panorama of Mississippi River texts, redefining whose voices have represented the river and the versions of national identity it has come to symbolize. I analyze the different types of literary environmentalism—writing that foregrounds the natural environment—articulated in these texts and the genre in which they are expressed. Highlighting the role of racial and economic

[1] The word 'levee' is itself inextricably linked to the Mississippi. It comes from the French 'lavée,' a variant of the verb 'lever' (to raise). Its original English usage in the late seventeenth century referred to the act of receiving visitors on rising from one's bed. The first recorded instance of the word denoting a raised embankment occurred on the shores of the Mississippi in New Orleans. One of the early uses of the sense appears in Frenchman Dumont du Montigny's 1747 map "Plan de la Nlle. Orleans, ville capitalle de la Louissianne," housed by the Newberry Library, in which the riverbank is referred to as 'la levée.'

conditions, I pay attention to the interplay between natural and social environments in such representation. While each chapter centers on a few key texts, I have also let works I could not analyze in detail seep in via footnotes to better reflect the richness of the river's archive and offer a wide view of the literary landscape of the Mississippi River in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

I foreground the people and places along the river that normally only become visible in times of disaster, whether it be environmental, humanitarian, or political, as was the case with the 2005 Hurricane Katrina. Canonical Mississippi River texts gain renewed interest in light of questions of environmental justice, and when placed alongside lesser-known texts not so obviously identified with the river. This lens draws out the longer history of environmental literature behind issues of urgent contemporary concern. I expose issues of class, race, labor, and environmental injustice, and the ways in which they play out in the pluralistic literature and other artistic production centered on the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico from the early twentieth century to today.

Because of the landscape-shattering dimension of the environmental disasters that have triggered so much writing, literary representations of the Mississippi after Twain often break the mold of idealized nature writing; such works highlight environmental problems that are increasingly urgent and explore their disproportionate impact on racially and economically diverse populations. Reading texts like Edna Ferber's novel *Show Boat* (1926), Joy Harjo's poem "New Orleans" (1983), and Marcus Eriksen's memoir *My River Home* (2007) alongside one another reveals a historical, spatial, environmental, and representational layering. The texts reveal an archeology of this regional corridor, seen most clearly along the Mississippi shores in Louisiana. There, the locations of Native American removal and plantation slavery now house

environmentally hazardous multinational plants, the sites functioning as palimpsests of the layered histories of colonial exploitation in all shapes and forms. By reading representations of the Mississippi across time, I make visible this otherwise easily overlooked sedimentation of history, focusing on the ways in which literature recuperates forgotten cultural memory and rewrites the story of this contested space.

Seeing Black flood literature and Indigenous remappings in Mississippi River literature as responses to previous modes of representation, I track the development of environmentally conscious writing through earlier twentieth-century texts that oscillate between the idealized river pastoral and the celebratory techno sublime. While literary genres tend to respond to moments of crisis like major floods, popular genres like cookbooks and postcards reveal the most widely circulated ideas about the river on the one hand and fill chronological gaps on the other. My archive reveals the Mississippi River as a battleground for racial ideology and a nostalgic symbol with ongoing currency in American memory. The dissertation follows the paradoxical retreat into the American wilderness found in contemporary travel narratives, which bring the reader into the heart of the petrochemical industry and global capital on the Lower River in Louisiana. The second half of the project focuses on the ways in which African American and Native American literatures use the landscape of the river to interweave natural and social history, navigating between rootedness and displacement and going beyond nostalgic conceptions of history to imagine a better future.

I. Literary Landscapes

Mark Twain, né Samuel Clemens, gave a lot of bad press to the early nineteenth-century Scottish author Sir Walter Scott for his historical romances and their resurgent popularity in the

antebellum South. He only half-jokingly attributed the Civil War to "the Sir Walter disease" and the author's "jejune romanticism of an absurd past that is dead" (*Life on the Mississippi* 208). Although Twain's representations of the Mississippi are always complex and ambivalent, it is his most idyllic scenes from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) that persist in the national and international imaginaries. As Twain himself notes in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), early European reactions to the river were original and varied, but "emotions are among the toughest things in the world to manufacture out of whole cloth" and people in places with longer traditions "can always borrow [them] from one's predecessors" (126). Ironically, his own retrospective version of the antebellum river has come to replace the many varied contemporary accounts from the period between 1803 and the war, prompting literary scholar Thomas Ruys Smith to dub Twain the "Mississippi river tamer" (7).

Drawing on Twain's own extensive experience with the Mississippi, *Huckleberry Finn* is set in antebellum years four or five decades before the novel's publication. Even as it condemns slavery and represents the river as a space of frequent violence, the story lingers nostalgically in a bygone pre-Emancipation period.[2] The novel uses the geography of the river and Huck and Jim's ill-advised journey deeper into the heart of the Confederacy to condemn American slavery. Although it follows the young Huck's denunciation of conventional white Christian morality as he resolves to "steal Jim out of slavery," the novel is also steeped in the river pastoral (Twain 223). It engages in paternalistic romantic racialism, using the trope of the eighteenth-century

[2] In the years leading up to the Civil War, Samuel Clemens worked as a steamboat pilot before reinventing himself as Mark Twain, a name that itself comes from the river, the term denoting the twelve feet of depth necessary for steamboat traffic. Literary scholar T.S. McMillin argues that it is Twain's material experience on the river rather than by the river that dispels his pastoral vision; the change of location reflected in the preposition shifts his perspective (12). *Life on the Mississippi* recounts the author's pilot days and his self-consciously nostalgic return to the river twenty-one years later. Reveling in the familiarity of the river and reliving his youth, Twain becomes "surprised, disappointed, and annoyed" when he comes across a bend he fails to recognize (112). The river of his memory comes to supersede the physical waterway right in front of him.

grateful slave to present Jim as a childlike dependent in need of Huck's rescue. The novel positions the river as a line between nature and civilization and between freedom and slavery and in doing so, promotes an Edenic vision of the Mississippi as a space of freedom, fleeting as it may be. Huck and Jim's raft, as literary critic Leslie Fielder argues, becomes an idealized interracial homosocial paradise.[3] In the non-fictional *Life on the Mississippi*, the history of Twain's river starts with European colonization and lingers on the antebellum years. When Native Americans come up, Twain invokes them via the trope of the vanishing Indian, cementing the idea that Indigenous people only play a role in the distant history of the Mississippi and are not a part of its present (Driscoll 15).[4]

If Twain cemented one version of the Mississippi in the U.S. imagination, this project focuses on works that respond more and less directly to the flow of his influence. In the most basic sense, it centers on the Mississippi River in literature which was published after Twain's river writing of the 1880s, focusing on the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. These works represent the river as a vehicle of remembrance, excavating a history that is often absent from the national imaginary. My dissertation centers African American and Indigenous texts that foreground perspectives which are either absent from or misrepresented in Twain's literary landscape of the Mississippi. As Toni Morrison once noted in an essay on memoir writing: "they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. 'Floods' is the word they use, but in fact it is not

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[3] Says Huck: "[We] dangled our legs in the water and talked about all kinds of things—we was always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitoes would let us […] Sometimes we'd have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time" (Twain 136). Fielder interprets Huck and Jim's life on the raft as one in which "they pet and sustain each other in mutual love and trust; make on their raft an anti-family of two, with neither past nor future, only a transitory, perilous present of peace and joy" (571).

[4] Twain's most visible Native character is Injun Joe from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), who is given no surname or tribe and is "Racially typecast as an incorrigible alcoholic" (Driscoll 37).

flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be." Writers, Morrison continues, perform the same task: "It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our 'flooding'" (99).

Even if African American voices shaped Huck's vernacular and "awakened Twain to the power of satire as a tool of social criticism," as literary scholar Shelly Fisher Fishkin claims, the perspective of *Huckleberry Finn* remains overwhelmingly white (4). John Keene's reimagining of the novel in his short story "Rivers" (2015) offers an important revision. The story is told from the perspective of the formerly enslaved Jim, who now goes by James Alton Rivers to honor the waterway that brought him to freedom at Alton, Illinois.[5] Keene gives voice and agency to a character who was previously denied both. Breaking the romance of "that boy's" relationship to his elder, Keene has Huck and James facing each other at the opposite ends of a Civil War battlefield years later, emphasizing a reality Twain's story of interracial friendship makes easy to ignore (Keene 219-236).

In contrast to Jim's simplified vernacular in Twain's novel, James's language is rich, lyrical, and modern; his long stream-of-consciousness sentences reveal a complex inner life which the character was not afforded as Jim. This recasts James as a respected elder during his time in the First Missouri Colored Troops, reframing the narrative by letting him choose how to tell the story and what to highlight (Keene 231-232). "Rivers" presents James's internal monologue in response to a reporter who was supposed to interview him about his military service but instead asks questions about Huck. "I silence him again with a turn of my head,"

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[5] Similarly, the hero of George W. Lee's 1937 novel *River George* changes his name in tribute to the Mississippi, the river that protected him and facilitated his escape from a lynch mob and its dogs. He assumes his new name when he starts working as a roustabout on the Memphis levee: "Aaron hesitated. He dared not say either Aaron George or George Thomas. The thought of the river and what it had meant to him in his escape from Blue Steel, and later from the posse, came to him. 'They call me River George'" (253).

James tells us when the reporter strays from the arrangement and tries to influence the course of his story (Keene 219).

James insists on talking about the Civil War and the conditions of slavery that led to it, seeing this history as the starting point of any discussion about the relationship between him and Huck and rejecting sentimentalized readings of their rapport. Keen stages the facing between James and Huck at the Battle of Palmito Ranch, which was fought on the banks of the Rio Grande in southern Texas between May 12 and 13, 1865, a month after Confederate General Robert E. Lee's fabled surrender at Appomattox. James McPherson's definitive history of the Civil War, for instance, does not mention this battle at all; popular historian Tony Horwitz, on the other hand, cites it as an example of the fact that what he thought he knew about the war "was based more on romance than on fact" (268). Lee only surrendered 28,000 men at the official end of the war, leaving about 150,000 soldiers in the field; the battle of Palmito Ranch occurred after this date and resulted in a Southern victory (Horwitz 269).

The fact that Huck continues to fight for the Confederacy even after its official dissolution indicates the legacy and persistence of the Civil War, which is still raging in the United States. The conflict repeatedly plays out through heated public debates and diverging strands of protests about historical narratives, monumentalization, police brutality and other forms of state violence, and the value of Black lives—in 2015, when Keene published the story, and perhaps especially in the summer of 2020, as I write this introduction. When James spots Huck directly across from him, he notes that "he still had not seen me, this face he could have drawn in his sleep, these eyes that had watched his and watched over his, this elder who has been like a brother, a keeper, a second father as he wondered why this child was talking him deeper and deeper into the heart of the terror." The familial intimacy the two shared in the past does not

take away from the fact that Huck had taken him "south instead of straight east to liberation" (Keene 235). The memory prompts James to switch to third person pronouns in order to distance himself from his younger self, a man who put his trust into the twelve-year-old boy who has grown up to risk his life in defense of slavery. The last lines of the story are somewhat open-ended, but the structure of the narrative tells us that James lived to tell the tale:

> I steadied the barrel, my finger on the trigger, which is when our gazes finally met, I am going to tell the reporter, and then we can discuss the whole story of the trip down the river with that boy, his gun aimed at me now, other faces behind his now, all of them assuming the contours, the lean, determined hardness of his face, that face, there were a hundred of that face, those faces, burnt, determined, hard and thinking only of their own disappearing universe, not ours, which was when the cry broke across the rippling grass, and the gun, the guns, went off.
>
> (Keene 236)

It is unclear whether or not Huck survives the face-to-face confrontation which reflects the Hegelian master-slave dialectic and perhaps reverses the roles. What persists, however, is the white supremacy ingrained in American society, even in the compassionate and morally courageous boy of Twain's imagination. Keene breaks the illusion of Huck and Jim's bucolic existence on the river by painting a stark picture of racial lines and battlegrounds with two distinct universes on each side. In his version, socialization wins over childhood idealism as Huck takes up arms to defend the Lost Cause. James, on the other hand, fights against slavery through his own decisive action, no longer putting his fate in the hands of a white child.

II. Muddy Waters: Context

Because literature of the Mississippi disproportionately focuses on the South, this project spends more time on the Lower Mississippi than it does on the Middle and Upper River. At the heart of the Lower River, the Mississippi Delta region serves as a particularly stark example of the connections between natural and human history, which play out in the literature I examine. In his

1944 memoir, William Alexander Percy, a self-proclaimed Southern aristocrat, describes the Delta in the following way:

> My country is the Mississippi Delta, the river country. […] Its western boundary is the Mississippi River […] Every few years it rises like a monster from its bed and pushes over its banks to vex and sweeten the land it has made. For our soil, very dark brown, creamy and sweet-smelling, without substrata of rock or shale, was built up slowly, century after century, by the sediment gathered by the river in its solemn task of cleansing the continent and deposited in annual layers of silt on what must have once been the vast depression between itself and the hills. This ancient depression, now filled in and level, is what we call the Delta.
>
> (Percy 3)

His language reflects both the sense of ownership of white settlers and the centrality of the Mississippi to life in the Delta. The river is at once feared and revered, described as sweetening the land even as it rises like a monster in flood times. It is the quality of the soil and the accessibility of a major riverine transportation route that first attracted white planters to the Delta, making it the hotbed of antebellum slavery in the nineteenth century after the U.S. government removed Native American tribes of the Southeast west of the Mississippi. The "ancient depression" that Percy describes reflects both the natural processes of sediment accretion that built the Delta and the exploitative social conditions that have operated in the region since the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. If the muddy river built this land from sediment washed off from the whole continent, the Delta with its cotton fields and slave labor also fueled the production of white American wealth well beyond the South, implicating the rest of the nation in the extractive processes that have taken place there.[6]

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[6] Enslaved Blacks greatly outnumbered whites in this area. Even after Emancipation and the mass exodus North—especially to Chicago—during the Great Migration of the early- to mid-twentieth century, Mississippi remains the Blackest state in the U.S. It is also the poorest, with some of the highest incarceration rates in the country. U.S. Census Bureau statistics from 2018 show that Blacks make up 37.8% of Mississippi's population, which is only comparable to other Southern states. The percentage is even higher in the Delta, where the population is 62-85% Black, depending on the county. In comparison, African Americans make up about 14.6% of the Illinois population and represent 17.7% of people in the state of New York, and as little as 0.6% in Montana. The situation is different in big cities like Chicago and New York City, though, where the percentage tends to be significantly higher.

In thinking about the Mississippi River Corridor in the Delta and beyond, I employ literary scholar Rob Nixon's theory of environmental slow violence to show the drastic changes the landscape of the river has undergone in the century of hyper-industrialization and engineering. By definition, slow violence is gradual and not always visible to the naked eye, creating a representational conundrum. Nixon focuses on the Global South and advocates for shifting the "intellectual centers of gravity away from the in-turned, American exceptionalist tendencies of wilderness literature and Jeffersonian agrarianism and toward more diverse environmental approaches" that can be found beyond the United States (261). This project, however, turns inward toward the Mississippi River Valley. I examine the traces and afterlives of extractive processes in the U.S. that range from colonial land theft to antebellum slavery to the contemporary petro-industry. Nixon's discussion of the ongoing industrial colonialism reflected in Western dependence on offshore exploitation of labor and resources—the so-called "outsourcing of environmental crisis" to the Global South (22)—applies to the Lower Mississippi River Valley as well. While the scales might be different, a similar dynamic exists between the North and the South of the United States, warranting renewed attention to the latter.

I broaden Nixon's idea of slow environmental violence, which disproportionately affects people of color, to include other forms of racialized structural violence. This builds on critical geographer Edward Soja's concept of spatial justice, which addresses the "interactive and multiscalar geographies of place-based discrimination" (53). I locate environmental extraction and displacement in the broader socio-political history of dispossession, whether of land and natural resources, which has been the case with Indigenous populations, or of labor and bodies, which was the case with enslaved peoples. As Soja states in his discussion of Hurricane Katrina: "Everything is connected to everything else, as the environmentalists say, but not just in a flat

horizontal ecosystem or biosphere. These connections also extend vertically through a socially produced layering of bounded geographical scales extending from the planet to the body" (54). Spatial (in)justice thus extends to the level of the human body, which is not only affected by the natural environment but by the social conditions in that particular space through history. Activist and author Naomi Klein describes a related "extractivist mindset" at the core of modern capitalism: "taking without caretaking" and "treating land and people as resources to deplete rather than as complex entities with rights to a dignified existence based on renewal and regeneration" (447). In short, settler colonialism and extraction capitalism are based on exploitation, and any discussion of environmentalism is incomplete without an analysis of racism and power.

Many writers have represented the Mississippi River in pastoral terms, eschewing human suffering and exploitation to foreground bucolic scenes of nature. According to Raymond Williams, the pastoral mode has long worked to mask true economic and social relations and obscure labor (26-32). In a powerful passage that spells out the dangers of idealized bucolic modes, Williams explains how tropes of nature's bounty erase laborers: "The actual men and women who rear the animals and drive them to the house and kill them and prepare them for meat; […] who plant and manure and prune and harvest the fruit trees: these are not present; their work is all done for them by a natural order" (32).

"American Sediments" proposes to disrupt the river pastoral genre and to intervene in the cultural memory that takes place in twentieth and twenty-first century literatures of the Mississippi, following African American and Native American texts that rewrite the quiet violence of forgetting. I draw on historian David Blight, who talks about the "reconciliationist vision" of the Civil War in American public memory—which is to say white memory—and the

"sentimental remembrance" and "depoliticized memory" it requires (2-4, 389). I build on literary theories of Black reclamation of social spaces (Thadious Davis) and of Native women's creative remappings (Mishuana Goeman) to show how Black and Native writers use poetry and narrative to reclaim their histories, social spaces, and ecologies. Sociologist Zandria Robinson also grounds this argument in showing that Southernness is designed to exclude and oppress Blacks on the one hand, but on the other, "the South stands in for a cognitively and geographically distant African homeland," which makes Southernness constitutive of American Blackness, but also makes Blackness constitutive of Southernness (17).

My readings are guided by the work of literary scholars working in Native/Southern Studies, who address the frequent omission of Native Americans from scholarly accounts of regional literatures. As Annette Trefzer points out, in a place "as complex and ideologically charged as the 'South,' the layers of cultural stratification concerning Native Americans are often buried under the weight of the region" (29). Although typically absent from discussions of Southern literature, Native authors, Eric Gary Anderson argues, "occupy Southern territory both physically and discursively." They discuss the region "from Southern homelands and (more frequently) from points outside the South," embracing and repelling the South with a capital 'S' all at once (7-8). As Anderson points out, imposing regionalism on Native peoples replicates colonial violence, so it is more apt to speak about such literature in connection to concrete lands rather than a bordered and categorizable settler region (21-23). I read Indigenous texts not as expressions of Native Southernness but as meaningful engagements with the unbounded Mississippi River and adjacent lands that have been historically important for Native communities and have retained significance regardless of whether the tribes still physically inhabit them. Like Melanie Benson Taylor, I am interested in the ways these writers

"reterritorialize the South quite specifically (if only metaphorically and linguistically)" ("Indian Givers" 108). Although such reterritorializing takes place along the Upper Mississippi as well, it is most stark along the Lower River, where President Andrew Jackson carried out in his Indian Removal policies of the 1830s most effectively.

In tracking the development of environmental writing in Mississippi River literature from the 1920s and 1930s to the aftermath of Katrina, I see historically informed environmentalism as a rebuke to Agrarianism and its later manifestations in what I have termed the river pastoral, a pervasive structure of sentimental feeling that extends to unexpected voices like the Beat Kerouac and the Black libertarian Eddy L. Harris, who can revel in "the peaceful simplicity and the glamour of the images of the Old South without its ugliness" while championing multiculturalism (158). On the other end of the spectrum, writers like Kiese Laymon and Heid E. Erdrich not only make visible the longer histories of extraction along the river; they also stake a political claim to physical and figurative space which they remake as Black and Indigenous. Their acts of reclaiming and remapping go beyond identifying historical narratives of erasure and dispossession to articulate agency and envision a more just future. Laymon's *Long Division*, a novel that travels in time between 1964, 1985, and 2013, visualizes environmental and social slow violence over the course of the long twentieth century. The novel culminates in a near future in which the histories of racial and environmental violence have been redressed; the blank page at the end contains only an ellipsis, inviting readers to participate in the act of imagining and creating.

III. Meanders: Chapter Outlines

The diachronic approach of each chapter meanders from texts from the first to those of the second half of the long twentieth century, emphasizing patterns of historical memory in writing that is structured by the cultural and natural landscape of the Mississippi. This draws out the longer history of Mississippi River representation and the problem at the heart of the project: the ways in which culturally and aesthetically diverse depictions of the river complicate long-held ideas about the storied waterway and present different versions of environmentalism with various degrees of attentiveness to racial, economic, and political contexts.

My archival methods and reading practices follow the natural landscape of the river, replicating in literary history Harold Fisk's iconic maps of the meandering and course-shifting Lower Mississippi (Figure 1).

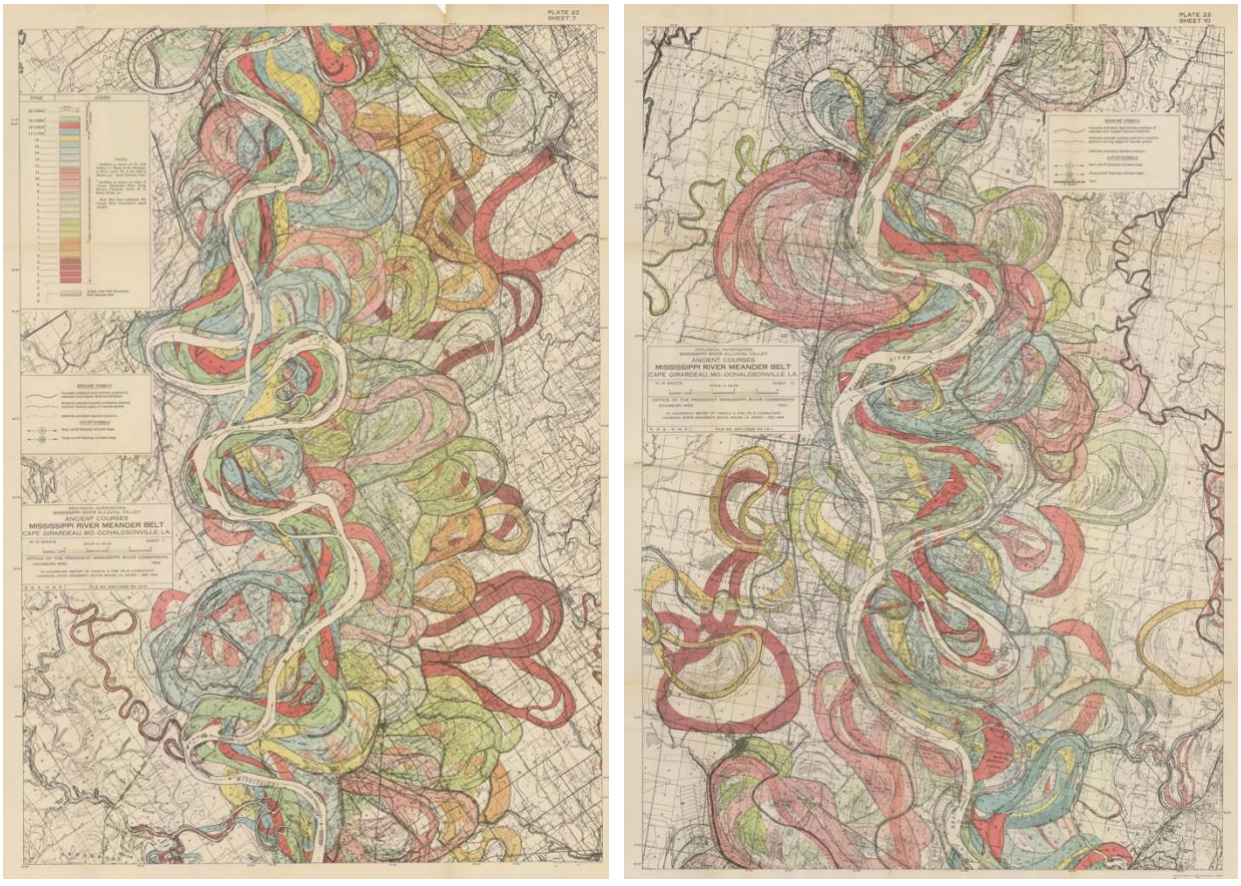

Figure 1: "The Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River," Maps 7 and 10 by Harold Fisk, 1944 (radicalcartography.net)

The maps act as allegories for the many shifting flows and tributaries of creative work that my project weaves together. Like Fisk's rendition of the river, my focus occasionally overflows chronological periods, moving transhistorically to understand artistic responses to the river and their relation to one another. As environmental historian Christopher Morris notes, the single white line running through the center of Fisk's colorful maps paradoxically made the case that the river could be engineered and straightened ("Reckoning with the Crookedest River," 43). In nature, large sections of the Middle and Lower River are now constrained by levees and floodwalls, out of sight and absent from the national consciousness except for in times of flooding. This allows for the perpetuation of a romanticized memory of steamboat days, but the Mississippi in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature refuses to be straightened. My aim is to discursively return to the crooked Mississippi invoked by Fisk's sinuous maps by foregrounding the many different voices and art forms that have made the river their own.

My contrapuntal method oscillates between cultural perspectives, time periods, and media forms to access insights which might elude a more homogenous approach. Each chapter considers works that are culturally pluralistic, balances literary writing and other modes of cultural production, and brings into conversation canonical and understudied writers. To cover the three main parts of this more than 2,000-mile waterway—the Upper, Middle, and Lower Mississippi—over the span of the long twentieth century, the chapters are divided in twain, so to speak. Each one focuses on an environmental phenomenon and its economic and aesthetic consequences, and each is split in two parts according to chronology. I position reading diachronically as a strategy for overcoming the representational challenges of the gradual slow

violence of industrialization, which is not always immediately visible to the naked eye. Joining texts that deal with geographically distinct parts of the river, I point to the environmental and imaginative connectedness of river hubs like Minneapolis, St. Louis, and New Orleans.

The material conditions of the Mississippi organize the chapters topically in terms of environmental concerns, rather than chronologically. Chapters One ("Cotton") and Two ("Steel and Industry") focus on regional forms of economic productivity that rely on the river for their national distribution and on the manmade structures that transform and confine it. Like this Introduction, chapters Three ("Overflow") and Four ("Sediment") take the form of the river. Together, these chapters speak to the production of the river itself, whether through nature or engineering, creating an interplay of environmentally focused literary genres like the river pastoral, the wilderness quest, Black flood literature, and Indigenous remappings. With its commitment to historicizing the role of the Mississippi River Corridor, the dissertation invests in a regional vision reclaimed from a past era of regressive regionalisms. It shows the territory's embeddedness in a complex of national and global ecological, economic, and political forces.

Placing literary works from the entire length of the river in conversation with one another, the project analyzes cross-cultural creative responses to environmental conditions along the Upper, Middle, and Lower River, as well as the Gulf. My approach follows environmental studies scholars and biologists, who recognize the Mississippi as a linked system of river ecologies (Christopher Morris, Calvin Fremling). Studying representations from all parts of the river highlights the multiplicity of the archive, but it also reveals unexpected influences that draw on the increasingly common legacies of environmental displacement. In her post-Katrina novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011) about a Black family on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, for example, Jesmyn Ward builds on the structure of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), a novel about

a poor white family facing catastrophic flooding in the Mississippi Delta, to rewrite Faulkner's representation of race and center a young Black girl's perspective. My research expands on the work of literary scholars and cultural historians who have highlighted the impact of isolated environmental catastrophes like the 1927 flood and Hurricane Katrina on the U.S. cultural imagination (Richard Mizelle, Susan Scott Parrish, Sonya Posmentier).

Each chapter focuses on race and the environment along the Mississippi and the Gulf Coast at different stages of the long twentieth century, tracking the changes in representational strategies. Although the dissertation, like the literature of the Mississippi itself, pays disproportionate attention to the Lower River, I discuss representations of its different geographical parts in each of the chapters. While my focus is on culturally diverse literature by canonical and less known voices, the project expands the notion of the literary to include popular genres such as travel narratives, cookbooks, and blues lyrics. It also goes beyond the textual to weave in examples of visual representation.

Chapter One, "Cotton: The River Pastoral," focuses on representations of the Mississippi in turn-of-the-twentieth-century pastoral postcards, Edna Ferber's 1926 novel *Showboat*, riverboat cookbooks, and Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *On the Road,* which is filled with river crossings and images of "happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" (170). These seemingly disparate texts are all part of a tradition I call the river pastoral, which celebrates multiculturalism, yet remains complicit in an antebellum ideology symbolized by cotton. The genre provides a formal crystallization of a particular strand of cultural memory. Despite moments of disruption in the two novels, the collective tendency of these works is to idealize and romanticize, taking a selective approach to history and facilitating nostalgia tourism. In white

cultural memory, the river pastoral reaches the twenty-first century, cropping up in texts deemed progressive and apolitical, respectively.

In Chapter Two, "Steel and Industry: The Wilderness Quest," pastoral romanticizing gives way to technological idealizing and what David Nye calls the technological sublime, which champions industrialization, human engineering, and Western notions of progress. Focused on railroads, bridges, locks, dams, and levees, the chapter explores the fascination with technology in modernist texts like Ernest Hemingway's 1920s vignette "Crossing the Mississippi" and the oscillation between different ideological modes of representation in African American travel writer Eddy L. Harris's *Mississippi Solo: A River Quest* (1988) and ex-Marine-turned-environmental-scientist Marcus Eriksen's *My River Home: A Journey from the Gulf War to the Gulf of Mexico* (2007). In the world of increasing industrialization, pollution, and commercial traffic on the Middle and Lower River, Harris's and Eriksen's Romantic notions of withdrawing into nature prove anachronistic. Instead, their travels end up destabilizing the myths of wilderness and individualism and revealing the new millennium's version of the nineteenth-century doctrine of Manifest Destiny, putting a contemporary twist on the journey of Huck Finn.

Chapter Three, "Overflow: Flood Literature," illuminates creative responses to flooding caused by failed levees and drained wetlands. The chapter follows the development of Black environmentalism in texts permeated by slow violence and motivated by moments of rupture and disaster in 1927 and 2005. These include the flood blues of Charley Patton and the poetry of Sterling Brown from the 1930s, as well as Jesmyn Ward's and Kiese Laymon's post-Katrina novels, *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Long Division* (2013). Black Southern flood writing shifts the traditional literary focus on land to center water and floods. The genre draws on various literary forms to go beyond pastoral tropes and represent bodies of water in relation to

heightened environmental risk and histories of displacement. It looks at historical causes of contemporary disasters and rewrites the quiet violence of forgetting by bringing the past and the present side by side. On the one hand, the texts invoke the painful historical experience of Black diasporic displacement; on the other, they convey a rootedness in the local landscapes of the Mississippi Delta and the Gulf Coast that comes with generational family ties and investment through labor. Invoking the history of labor instead of land ownership, Black flood literature articulates a rhetoric of belonging, voicing a political stake and focusing on survival, which opens up space for a new, post-apocalyptic order.

Finally, Chapter Four, "Sediment: Remappings," treats spatial injustice in its broadest socio-economic and political contexts, starting with Native American removal and the colonial ideology of extractivism. The chapter presents a layered history of the river, showing how texts like Eudora Welty's essay "Some Notes on River Country" (1944), Joy Harjo's poem "New Orleans" (1983), and Heid E. Erdrich et al.'s collaborative video poem "Pre-Occupied" (2013) trace Indigenous histories through language and reveal them in the landscape of the Natchez Trace and the mud of the Mississippi. Responding to colonial texts like Welty's, in which Native people are confined to the past, Harjo and Erdrich linguistically and creatively remap sites of erasure as places of Indigenous presence, rhetorically bringing Native people into the contemporary moment. They remap the Mississippi River Valley as Indigenous space and highlight the role of water in Native history and present. Harjo's poem makes this claim by linking post-removal Oklahoma to ancestral Creek lands along the Lower Mississippi via embodied memory and the metaphor of the river's geography: "I have a memory. / It swims deep in blood, / a delta in the skin. It swims out of Oklahoma, / deep the Mississippi River" (44). The

poems represent the Mississippi as a vehicle of Native memory, textually restoring ancestral homelands and ensuring Indigenous survival through remembrance.

Riverboat Queen

Figure 2: *Island Queen* paddle wheeler shadow on the muddy Mississippi in Memphis, Tennessee (Photo by author, 2019).

1. Cotton: The River Pastoral

The 1951 film version of *Show Boat*, a Metro Goldwyn Myer blockbuster shot in Technicolor, opens with an explosion of nostalgia for the Old South. Undulating in a swirly red font against the backdrop of the Mississippi River, the film's title appears in sync with the chorus's repetition of the words "Cotton Blossom," the name of the Reconstruction-era floating theater at the center of the plot. As the opening credits and shots of river sunsets run their course, the camera zooms in on an image of a rolling steamboat. Captain Andy Hawks stands proudly on a red-trimmed white deck, gazing toward the shore. The shot cuts from water to land, showing a close-up of a young Black boy dressed in Huckleberry Finn gear complete with a straw hat, seated in a Spanish moss-covered tree. "Hey, the showboat's coming," the boy announces excitedly to his peer, who rushes away to spread the news, sharing the screen with a white-columned plantation house in the background. The shot cuts back to the Captain, smiling contently as the *Cotton Blossom* approaches the shore, then pans to a field of cotton, from which a half a dozen smiling Black sharecroppers pop up in unison to greet the boat. A similar frame is repeated with different groups of people in quick succession, conveying the vastness of the fields and the unanimous excitement of the laborers who may or may not toil for a wage; it is unclear whether the musical took the Civil War and the end of slavery into account. By the time we get to the crinolines and parasols on the lawn of the big house, less than two minutes have elapsed since the roar of MGM's signature lion. More images of cotton, happy Blacks, and genteel whites follow, and neighbors from several plantations, regardless of race and status, run together to meet the boat, at which point the colorfully clad troupe breaks into dance and song.

Featuring Kathryn Grayson as Magnolia and the classic Hollywood star Ava Gardner as the mixed-race Julie LaVerne, *Show Boat* was the third Hollywood adaptation of the Jewish

author Edna Ferber's 1926 bestselling novel of the same name. The film took yet another adaptation as its basis, a Broadway musical by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II that debuted just a year after the novel. Kern and Hammerstein's popular musical enjoyed many film, live radio, TV, and stage adaptations.[7] The latter appeared intermittently on Broadway and on London's West End between 1927 and as recently as 2016. All these versions relied on the Mississippi of Ferber's imagination. Her vision of the river circulated perhaps more widely than any other across the twentieth century, first via the original text and then through increasingly mediated adaptations and the whitewashed conventions of the popular musical genre. Ferber's representation of the river became the definitive one, intensifying the romanticized view of the Mississippi that Americans inherited from Twain.

Ferber, however, never travelled the Mississippi. Despite her memories of crossing the river as a child, she never returned to it as an adult. She researched showboat culture in North Carolina and wrote the novel in New York and Paris, far removed from the setting she popularized (McGraw 47). With the novel taking place in the bygone era of floating steamboat theaters of the late nineteenth century, Ferber was removed from the Mississippi of her fictional world both spatially and temporally.

Show Boat's success capitalized on feelings of collective nostalgia in response to modernization. The novel exports a mythical history of the American South as a pastoral

[7] The first film adaptation, produced by Universal Pictures and directed by Harry A. Pollard, came out in 1929, three years after the novel. The second adaptation was based on the musical and again produced by Universal. It was directed by James Whale and premiered in 1936. The final and most famous adaptation was directed by George Sidney and released by Metro-Goldwyn-Myer in 1951. It earned two Academy Award nominations, one for Best Photography and another for Best Musical Adaptation. The 1936 version cast African American actors Paul Robeson and Hattie McDaniel, who won an Oscar for her portrayal of Mammy in the 1939 *Gone with the Wind*, as Joe and Queenie. In comparison, the 1929 stage version cast a white actress in blackface as Queenie; the role was taken by an Italian American vaudeville actress, Tess Gardella, who made her name when she started playing Aunt Jemima on radio in 1921 and later in the 1927 film short *Aunt Jemima: The Original Fun Flour Maker* (Cox 66).

paradise, relying on the effacement of race and labor.[8] This chapter examines texts ranging from Ferber's *Show Boat* and turn-of-the-twentieth-century river postcards to Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *On the Road* and riverboat cookbooks. All of them join a tradition I call the river pastoral, a genre that relies on images of steamboats, cotton, and fetishized laborers, ideologically maintaining the racist beliefs and practices that defined the antebellum plantation economy. The generic conventions of the river pastoral crystalize and formalize a particular strand of cultural memory that trades in the Lost Cause mythology and Old South nostalgia. Despite their tendency to idealize and romanticize, Ferber's and Kerouac's novels contain moments that disrupt the river pastoral, if only to eventually reinforce it. The texts move between classic pastoralism and a progressive consciousness that reproduces nostalgia while superficially promoting the ethos of inclusiveness.

The popular genre of cookbooks responds to multiculturalism and global capitalism and takes an even more selective approach to history, facilitating nostalgia tourism and bringing the experience of traveling the Mississippi into readers' homes. In white cultural memory, the river pastoral thus reaches the twenty-first century, cropping up in texts deemed progressive and apolitical, respectively. My archive reveals the Mississippi River as a battleground for racial ideology and a nostalgic commodity that has ongoing currency in American memory.

While these archives differ in modes of production as well as in genre and readership, all of them track the relationship between the political economy and tourism, catering to a desire for escapism and producing nostalgia about the South to fulfill this commercial need. Together, they

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[8] Literary scholar Lori Harrison-Kahan argues that Ferber's racial representation goes beyond a reliance on stereotypes from blackface minstrelsy. Ferber destabilizes whiteness by using the trope of passing, which she already employed in her novel *Fanny Herself* (1917) and her short story "The Girl Who Went Right," two early works with Jewish heroines who pass for gentile (61-62).

provide a window into the most widely circulated ideas about the river over the course of the long twentieth century. Representations of the river create nostalgia by effacing racial politics and the workings of racial capitalism, a term signaling the reliance of capitalism on slavery and imperialism (Kelley). These texts and objects center the river, exporting the affect it inspires through material objects like postcards and dishes made from riverboat cookbook recipes. As historian Christine DeLucia argues, tangible objects and their representations have the power to intertwine memory and materiality, acting as "nodes dynamically connecting past, present, future" (8-9). The embodied acts of sending a postcard, cooking, and even eating produce a transubstantiation and help us understand the ways nostalgia is lived, practiced, and embedded even in the act of reading a novel, which can itself produce a eucharistic experience.

Although these materials occasionally offer a glimpse behind the pastoral façade, they mostly invoke the progressive in order to cancel it. The narrative disruptions and the discourse of inclusiveness present across my archive highlight the elements nostalgia must erase and the contradictions with which it must deal in order to function. A surface progressive consciousness, in other words, is often invoked and revoked for the purpose of supporting a thinly veiled version of nostalgia and making it palatable for the twenty-first century. Even as they rely on diverse racial contexts to envision a future for the South, such texts only encompass them to efface them. The diversity celebrated in recipes, for instance, is both superficial and rooted in consumerism and global capitalism, trading in multiculturalism and pastoral tropes in the service of profits.

I. The River Pastoral

In the early twentieth century, depictions of the Mississippi vacillate between a simplified romanticizing of nature and the rural past, and a glorification of engineering and modernity, discussed in the next chapter. Crucial for my conceptualization of the river pastoral is Raymond Williams' contention in *The Country and the City* (1973) that the pastoral mode has long worked to mask true economic and social relations and obscure labor (26-32). Williams shows that idealized bucolic modes and tropes of nature's bounties work by erasing the laborers whose work made those harvests possible. Building on his approach, I take literary scholar Lawrence Buell's broad definition of pastoral ideology or the green script as the idealizing tendency to "represent the essential America as exurban, green, pastoral, even wild" (33). This runs counter to the changes the landscape underwent during the rapid industrialization of the twentieth century and masks any "environmental, somatic, and social consequences" of human intervention in given ecologies (Carruth 15-16).[9]

What I call the river pastoral refers to the common impulse to idealize life on and along the river. It grew out of the official end of slavery, relying on nostalgia as a representational technology to address commercialization, modernization, and a changing political economy. The genre dematerializes or naturalizes raced labor; scenes of toil along the river are either absent, with a focus instead on bucolic vistas of white cotton fields devoid of workers, or they are sentimentalized and incorporated into the picturesque landscape. The river pastoral obscures

[9]According to literary scholar Leo Marx, the American pastoral makes crucial compromises between the country and the city, championing the idea of the 'middle state,' a landscape that moves away from the ideal of pure wilderness and makes space for the incorporation of cultivation and technology (73-88). The numerous levees and other interventions in the Mississippi River valley thus fail to compromise this vision; the American version of the pastoral already encompasses a degree of engineering.

destructive environmental practices that abound along the shores of the Mississippi and contributes to fantasies about antebellum racial dynamics.

The generic conventions of the river pastoral—a nostalgic idealization of the antebellum South that erases slavery or presents it as benevolent; the white gaze on scenes of Black agricultural labor; the iconography of cotton and steamboats; cultural appropriation of Black music and food; an empty celebration of diversity and inclusiveness—endure well beyond the turn of the twentieth century and the Depression-stricken 1930s, which produced Ferber's *Show Boat* and the postcards I examine. Glimpses of the river pastoral in Kerouac's escape from America's 1950s mainstream consumerist society speak to its enduring power, and the steamboat cookbooks with which this chapter ends show the color-blind guise the pastoral assumes in the twenty-first century. In these texts, the Mississippi functions as a repository of selective history and American national mythology, its commodification continuing to give shape to patterns of historical memory.

Literary scholar Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as a particularly modern longing that is both geographical and temporal, translating to an idealization of past epochs and "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed." It is at once "a sentiment of loss and displacement" and "a romance with one's own fantasy" (xiii-xvi). In the context of the American South, this yearning takes the form of what Civil War historian David Blight calls Lost Cause mythology, a "shell of sentimentalism" that glorifies the Southern pre-industrial slaveholding society and involves "careful remembering and necessary forgetting" (4-5).

Antebellum nostalgia along the Mississippi relies on steamboats as representations of a Southern past and at the same time, commercial engines of the future. Beneath the surface of outward glamour, historian Walter Johnson contends, the "Steamboat Gothic" palaces of the

Mississippi were "floating warehouses, vessels designed and built to the specifications of the goods they were supposed to carry" (93). The architecture of the boat is pastoral in the ideological sense in that it is deeply invested in maintaining a genteel façade that tries to keep the antebellum South alive. Likewise, the structure of Ferber's *Show Boat* relies on pastoralism: its geographical and temporal setting, the subject of steamboat entertainment, the prevalence of cotton imagery, and the tropes of blackface minstrelsy.

Like other forms of commodified mass culture, tourism along the Mississippi, a river that runs through the heart of the former Confederacy, capitalized on this nostalgia since its beginnings. Mississippi steamboats, which carried cargo, passengers, and entertainers, represent one of the early instances of American tourism. From Robert Fulton's 1807 success onward, steamboats and later railroads were instrumental in the development of tourism in the United States.[10] Still, it was not until after the Civil War that national rather than regional tourism emerged. Promoters marketed the activity as a "ritual of American citizenship," choosing which myths to highlight and which to ignore in order to create an idea of national unity and shared history (Shaffer 4, 13, 16). The politically prevalent culture of post-Civil War reconciliation relied heavily on white supremacy, a sentiment shared among many whites North and South. The former related to the latter based on their hostile attitudes toward newly arrived immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe (Cox 2).[11]

At the heart of nostalgic representations of the river driven by tourism lies cotton, the

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[10] While the first steamboat patent was filed by Isaac Briggs and William Longstreet in 1788, the steamboat era began with Robert Fulton's first commercially successful passenger steamboat, the *Clermont*, which made its maiden trip down the Hudson River in New York in 1807 (LeJeune Nobles 3).

[11] For more on the culture of reconciliation, see Nina Silber's *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900*, in which she argues that a "sentimental rubric took hold of the reunion process" among many middle- and upper- class white Northerners within a decade after the Civil War (3).

crop that upheld the antebellum and Reconstruction-era Southern economy and acted as a visual signifier of whiteness. The booming business of cotton, which depended on slave labor, financed the technological innovations of the expanding steamboat industry.[12] As one critic puts it, "Before coal and oil, civilization ran on a two-cycle engine: the energy of solar-fed crops and the energy of slaves" (Nikiforuk 3). Eli Whitney's 1793 invention of the cotton gin resulted in a cotton rush, starting a new wave of slave importation and causing soil exhaustion, which prompted East Coast planters to move further west. In the words of historian Sven Beckert, "cotton and slavery would expand in lockstep" up to the Civil War (102-3). Western lands on the shores of the Mississippi made cotton the United States' single biggest export. The crop fueled the rise of the national economy; it was "on the back of cotton, and thus the backs of slaves, that the U.S. economy ascended in the world" (Beckert 119).[13] The expansion occurred at the expense of Southeastern Indigenous tribes, whose lands the U.S. Government violently took away in the 1830s to make room for plantation agriculture.

The unbridled creation of white wealth in the Lower River Valley was short-lived, as the Civil War broke out in 1861; President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863,

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[12] The steamboat era started in 1812, when a vessel called the *New Orleans* made its way down the river. It peaked in the mid-19th century and declined with the rise of railroads and the Civil War, petering out by the Prohibition Era of the 1920s (LeJeune Nobles 2-6). For those who could not make the trip, a popular way of engaging in tourism in the nineteenth century was through the traveling exhibits of moving panorama paintings that approximated an early movie experience. When John Benvard took his "Three Mile Painting" of the Mississippi River to Boston in 1846, over 250,000 people saw it in six months. Reportedly, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was so inspired by Benvard that he composed his 1847 epic poem *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie* without having ever visited Louisiana (Ambrose and Brinkley 169-171). In 2012, the St. Louis Museum of Art conserved the only known surviving Mississippi River panorama, John Egan's 1850 "Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley."

[13] In 1796, cotton made up 2.2% of U.S. exports; that number rose to 32% by 1820 and surpassed 50% by 1860 (Beckert 119). In his global study of the political economy of cotton, Beckert shows the key role of Great Britain and the United States in the emerging cotton empire, with the latter providing the raw material and the former using it in manufacturing. The unprecedented boom of cotton farming in the U.S. was made possible by the western lands acquired during the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. If in 1811, only one sixteenth of U.S. cotton came from territories west of South Carolina and Georgia, that fraction rose to one third by 1820 and three quarters by 1860. By the late 1830s, Mississippi already led Southern cotton production (Beckert 103-104).

and the war ended two years later. The Cotton Belt, which included Lower River states like Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Tennessee, felt the economic consequences of the end of slavery most acutely.[14] Still, global demand for cotton kept growing, doubling between 1860 and 1890 and then again by 1920, causing a huge increase in the cultivation of the crop in the Deep South (Beckert 278).[15] The economic system of tenant farming and sharecropping replaced slavery, continuing the oppression of Black laborers in a slightly different key. While tenant farmers paid for the right to use someone else's land, sharecroppers farmed land that was not theirs in exchange for a share of the crops. Instead of working for pay, they kept only a portion of their yield, accumulating debt in order to buy food and other necessities that enabled them to work in the first place.[16] As the rest of the nation became increasingly urban and industrialized over the first half of the twentieth century, the South remained overwhelmingly rural, agricultural, and impoverished.[17]

Steamboat business felt these political and economic changes as well; nostalgia tourism soon replaced commercial trips, capitalizing on collective sentiments to create a new form of

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[14] The system of human bondage took with it "the South's main source of collateral for credit and the principal basis of tax revenues for state and local governments," causing widespread poverty (Schulman 4).

[15] Reconstruction dramatically increased U.S. cotton production for world markets, recovering the country's place as the leading producer of raw cotton. The year 1870 surpassed the pre-war high in production and by 1880, the U.S exported more cotton than it did in antebellum years (Beckert 291-292).

[16] After Emancipation, most Blacks worked as sharecroppers and some as tenant farmers, but the number of white farmers who did not own the land they farmed kept rising as well, reaching 36 percent in 1900 (Bolton). The untenable living conditions in the South and the promise of a better life in the North started the Great Migration, a mass exodus of Black Americans from the South. Isabel Wilkerson characterizes the Great Migration as a mass movement of people that "grew out of the unmet promises made after the Civil War and, through the sheer weight of it, helped push the country toward the civil rights revolution of the 1960s" (9). At the beginning of the migration in 1916, ninety percent of all Black Americans lived in the South; by its end in 1970, forty-seven percent lived outside of the region (Wilkerson 10). Wilkerson debunks the myth that the Great Migration was triggered by impacts on cotton farming such as the boll weevil infestation and the invention of the mechanical cotton harvester, suggesting that it was instead the labor drain that necessitated changes in cotton production (533-534).

[17] In 1930, the South accounted for 28% of the U.S. population, 41% of the nation's agricultural workers and 15% of industrial wage earners (Schulman 3). This only started changing with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs like the Tennessee Valley Authority hydroelectric power project and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration's cotton limitation program, which successfully raised the crop's prices by shrinking acreage, but notoriously hurt landless farmers, a large proportion of whom were Black (Schulman 16-38).

river economy.[18] The river's role in the transportation of passengers continued to decline in the twentieth century, but the end of the first World War saw a rise of riverboat jazz and excursion boats, which traded in nostalgia and commodified the history of the Mississippi. Such excursions offered "simplified and romanticized historical commentaries" on the river and the Civil War, and the accompanying jazz served as a "message that concealed upsetting social, political, and economic realities of Black life and American race relations" (Kenney 6).[19]

As the large-scale steamboat era came to a halt in the early twentieth century, some of its most lasting symbols emerged, a fact that imbues them with an air of nostalgia from inception. The trend is akin to the "distressed genres" like the epic and the ballad described by folklorist Susan Stewart. These emerge as nostalgic counterforces in periods of social upheaval or distress; in their yearning for a preindustrial existence, they imitate older forms and appropriate the past through manipulation and mediation (6, 25). As literary and cultural scholar Thomas Ruys Smith puts it, the steamboat became "an avatar of the Mississippi" in the twentieth century: "Antiquated, obsolete, stagnant; a former symbol of wealth and industry now characterized by poverty, nostalgia and romance; a space powerfully defined by racial hierarchy" (11).

One such symbol is the *Delta Queen*, an old-fashioned wooden paddle wheeler that toured the Mississippi and its tributaries between 1927 and 2008. Another is Ferber's novel *Show Boat*. While the latter is a representation of the outdated steamboat entertainment industry, the former revives and reenacts riverboat hospitality for new audiences in the twentieth century. The

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[18] After the war's end in 1865, the number of commercial riverboat customers never recovered. During Reconstruction, many steamboats rebranded as floating palaces and focused on providing entertainment to small towns along the Mississippi and its tributaries—Ferber's *Show Boat* focuses on one such traveling troupe in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Although the concept was not new, showboats regained popularity after the Civil War in the 1870s to offer vaudeville and melodramatic theatrical performances to riverside towns which supplied the growing demand for cotton (LeJeune Nobles 123).

[19] In 1918, at age seventeen, a young Louis Armstrong started his career as a Mississippi River jazz entertainer aboard the Streckfus Steamers excursion boat (Kenney 64).

material replica and the literary representation are both copies of the nineteenth-century phenomenon, acting as vehicles of antebellum nostalgia. Throughout the twentieth century, steamboats gained popularity in periods of economic boom, but with tourism as their main function, they remained a purely nostalgic commodity and a niche industry that has little in common with their dominance in the nineteenth century.[20] Conversely, economic hardships of the Great Depression curtailed steamboat tourism, but they propelled "an astonishing American appetite […] for the nostalgia of the Lost Cause of the Old South" (Blight 292).[21]

Like images of cotton and the steamboat, the figure of the roustabout represents another pervasive symbol of the river pastoral. In the post-Emancipation economy, the circulation of cotton and other goods relied on the labor of Black and immigrant workers known as roustabouts, tasked with loading and unloading freight from river levees (Arnesen vii). By the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century, steamboats were already nostalgic, so these figures themselves came to perform nostalgia functions rather than disrupt them. This can be seen most clearly in the widely circulated representational technology of the postcard.[22]

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[20] The *Delta Queen* was designed by the California Transportation Company in 1925 and got its start on the Sacramento River, but soon moved to the Mississippi. It was a hit with passengers for the first few years, but the majority of its profits were always made with freight: "As with the majority of steamers, passenger revenue was a bonus" (LeJeune Nobles 15). The Great Depression struck a blow to steamboat traffic, and the *Delta Queen* kept reinventing itself and serving different purposes and geographical locales in order to survive. In 1975, after two decades of serving as the only paddle wheeler in the nation, the wooden *Delta Queen* was joined by the thoroughly modern steel-made *Mississippi Queen*, which reproduced a similar nineteenth-century aesthetic but was a "true floating palace that had state-of-the-art everything" (LeJeune Noble 94). In the economic boom of the early 1990s, steamboats regaining popularity and in 1993, the Delta Queen Steamboat Company added the *American Queen* to its fleet, the company's third New Orleans-based paddle wheeler. The *American Queen* continues to offer cruises down the Mississippi in 2020.

[21] As Blight points out, these material conditions were intimately tied to the success of Margaret Mitchell's 1936 bestseller *Gone with the Wind.*

[22] Apart from roustabouts, riverfront workers also included longshoremen, cotton screwmen, and railroad freight handlers. As historian Eric Arnesen demonstrates, such workers formed Black and white labor alliances between 1880 and 1894 and between 1901 and 1923. Compromised as such alliances that came from "economic necessity and strategic considerations" might have been, they still offered a form of interracial collaboration that was an important if fleeting exception to white supremacy in the region (Arnesen viii, 255).

The works examined in this chapter produced images of the Mississippi and distributed them across the country, but they often originated from beyond the River Valley. In fact, it was outside of the South that the region became what visual studies scholar Tara McPherson calls "the mythic location of a vast nostalgia industry" (3). As historian Karen Cox shows, northern advertising agencies, radio broadcasters, and Hollywood films capitalized on the public's ambivalence toward modernization in the early twentieth century, disseminating the idea of the South as a "custodian of America's pastoral traditions" (8).[23] Because they participate in tourist industry tropes, a large percentage of representations relying on the river pastoral hail from outside of the South. The majority of texts and artifacts examined in this chapter come from the Midwest and the Northeast: the Michigan-born Ferber wrote her novel on the East Coast and in Europe; the Massachusetts-born Kerouac drafted his in New York City; the postcards I examine were published by companies from Chicago and Detroit. Only the steamboat cookbooks emerge from the South, although the tourist companies they promote also hail from elsewhere.[24]

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[23] Hollywood's infatuation with *Show Boat* forms one telling example, and Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), published by the New York Macmillan Inc. and read by ten million people within the first year, serves as another (Cox 8, 106). In Cox's account, the trend only started changing in the early 60s with the rise of television, which circulated images of the violent white backlash to the Civil Rights Movement (164-165). In his best-selling exploration of the unfinished nature of the war in the contemporary South, Tony Horwitz notes the war's commodification in the time of Civil Rights and the centennial of the Civil War: "Battle reenactments began in earnest; hundreds of Civil War books were published; war-related games, toy cannons and other mass merchandise abounded as never before" (185).

[24] *The Delta Queen Cookbook* (2012) focuses on the boat built by the California Transport Company in 1925 and operated by the Delta Queen Steamboat Company for many years under different names and ownership—in 1976, for instance, it was bought by the Coca-Cola Bottling Company of New York (LeJeune Nobles 15, 94). When it stopped running in 2008, the boat was operated by Seattle's Majestic America Line. Another riverboat cookbook, *Mississippi Current* (2014), shares recipes created for the *American Queen*, ordered by the Delta Steamboat Company in 1994. The still active cruise boat is owned and operated by the Indiana-based HMS Global Maritime and the American Queen Steamboat Company.

II. Mainstream Mississippi, 1900s – 1930s

The *Cotton Blossom*

Only slightly older than her Midwestern- and Southern-born literary contemporaries like T.S. Eliot (1888-1965), Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), and William Faulkner (1897-1962), Edna Ferber (1885-1968) did not embrace the modernist movement in the same way as these male counterparts.[25] Catering to a middlebrow audience, Ferber found critical and commercial success. She won the Pulitzer Prize for her 1924 novel *So Big* and wrote several novels that were immediately remade into huge Hollywood productions: *Show Boat* (1926), *Cimarron* (1930), and *Giant* (1950).

Although much more nuanced in terms of racial politics and representation than its many adaptations, Ferber's *Show Boat* nevertheless serves as a nostalgic tribute to the Old South and an elegiac ode to the freedom of Western rivers. Still, the narrative keeps interrupting the romance and escapism of the river pastoral with scenes of environmental destruction, industrialization, the appropriation of Black music, and the exploitative nature of the sharecropping economy, addressing some of the same themes that are central to Faulkner's novels but in a traditional narrative style not marked by modernist stylistic experimentation.[26]

Set in the post-Reconstruction years between the mid-1870s and the turn of the twentieth century, *Show Boat* centers on the *Cotton Blossom Floating Palace*, a traveling theater company

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[25] Ferber was born to parents of Hungarian and German-Jewish background in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She grew up in Chicago and in various smaller towns around Wisconsin and Iowa. Eliot was born in St. Louis, Missouri, Faulkner in New Albany, Mississippi, and Hemingway in Oak Park, Illinois. All of them have written about the Mississippi in their work.

[26] As Liesl Olson argues, modernism also looked different in the Midwest than it did elsewhere. Emphasizing the role of women in this literary movement, she notes that the "writers of Chicago contributed importantly to the voices of modernism—in ways that were uniquely responsive to the geographic midddleness and middlebrow audience to whom they addressed their work" (285-287).

that entertains farmers and sharecroppers along the Mississippi and its tributaries. The name of the boat already invokes the ideology of the river pastoral, which racial politics aboard the steamer only confirm. From the outset, descriptions of rivers abound with miscegenation metaphors, foreshadowing one of the biggest twists in the novel—the revelation of the alleged Blackness of one of the actors, Julie. We learn, for example, that Kim's birth occurred just south of Cairo, Illinois, where Jim and Huck missed their turn to freedom in Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Ferber describes the setting as "that region known as Little Egypt, where the yellow waters of the Mississippi and the olive-green waters of the Ohio so disdainfully meet and refuse, with bull-necked pride, to mingle" (2).

If the novel paints an idyllic past and acts as an elegy for a world relenting to industrialization and urbanization, the narration also reflects its 1920s vantage point by consistently undermining the perfection of the pastoral world it creates. The two biggest disruptions come from racism and the destructive potential of the environment, both of which appear in this opening image of the stubbornly separate waters of the Mississippi and the Ohio.

From the very first pages, the narrative highlights the ruinous force of the Mississippi, which lingers in the background of even the most pastoral visions. We are told that Magnolia Ravenal gave birth to her daughter Kim on the Mississippi during annual April flooding—a seasonal fact of which the whole country would become aware a year after *Show Boat*'s publication when the Great Flood of 1927 made national and international headlines.[27] During

[27] In fact, the Mississippi—personified as female and constantly being drawn upon for descriptions of the female characters' will, strength and endurance—is as central to the novel as the other main characters. In the opening sentence, we learn that Magnolia Ravenal, the strong-headed heroine who is identified most explicitly with the river, wants to name her firstborn after it: "Bizarre as was the name she bore, Kim Ravenal always said she was thankful it had been no worse. She knew whereof she spoke, for it was literally by a breath that she had escaped being called Mississippi" (Ferber 1). Magnolia goes with 'Kim' instead: "It is no secret that the absurd monosyllable which comprises her given name is made up of the first letters of the three states—Kentucky, Illinois, and Missouri—in all of which she was, incredibly enough, born—if she can be said to have been born in any state at all. Her mother

this season of heavy rains, the river is described as ravaging, the narrative drawing a parallel between Magnolia's labor and the swelling river: "The Mississippi itself was a tawny tiger, roused, furious, bloodthirsty, lashing out with its great tail, tearing with its cruel claws, and burying its fangs deep in the shore to swallow at a gulp land, houses, trees, cattle—humans, even; and roaring, snarling, howling hideously as it did" (Ferber 3).

Describing it in animalistic terms, Ferber represents the Mississippi as an adversary of humanity. At the same time, she compares its sheer natural power to Magnolia's: "But direction and management were as futile when applied to her as the great untamed Mississippi that even now was flouting man-built barriers; laughing at levees that said so far and no farther; jeering at jetties that said do thus and so; for that matter, roaring in this very moment in derision of Magnolia Ravenal herself" (Ferber 7). Magnolia's tomboy spirit comes from her river education and childhood spent on the Mississippi; the woman and the river, which itself becomes feminized, are "two tantrums of nature," and it is pointless to try to tame either of them through the twinned discourses of hydraulic engineering and social politesse (Ferber 8).

The novel undermines humankind's consistent attempts at taming the river, which are proven again and again not to work. Naturalizing the destructiveness of floods, *Show Boat* presents them as regular and inevitable events that the inhabitants of the Mississippi River Valley have learned to endure, for better or for worse. Like its audience, the cast and crew of the *Cotton Blossom* have little choice but to stay at the mercy of the river and adjust to the season of heavy rains: "The Mississippi Valley dwellers, wise with the terrible wisdom born of much suffering

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insists that she wasn't" (Ferber 1). The sardonic tone reveals the narrative's and the daughter's skepticism toward Magnolia's idealization of river life, but the passage also announces the main characters' rejection of traditional gender norms. The liminal space outside of any one state's jurisdiction on which Magnolia stubbornly insists connects her river education to her unconventional morals and attitudes toward race and gender.

under the dominance of this voracious and untamed monster, so ruthless when roused, were preparing against catastrophe should these days of rain continue" (Ferber 11). Although the quotation describes the Mississippi in flood time as an "untamed monster," at once linking it to the violence of slavery and expressing a desire for control and regulation, it nevertheless understands it as an organic, ever-changing entity, which overflows and reroutes as a matter of course. Writes Ferber: "Often, queerly enough, the town at which they made their landing was no longer there. The Mississippi, in prankish mood, had dumped millions of tons of silt in front of the street that faced the river" (72).

The novel juxtaposes the power of the river with human efforts to tame it; Ferber expresses her ambivalence toward modernization by linking the engineering along the Mississippi to the urban development of Chicago. This budding Midwestern metropolis in which a large portion of the novel takes place sits at the edge of the river's watershed and after the reversal of the Chicago River in 1887, sends its industrial waste to the Mississippi.[28] Here is a description of a gritty late-nineteenth-century Chicago as it appears in the novel, just before it begins to "feel the chastening hand of reform" and goes "civic" overnight (Ferber 247):

> [T]his city was only an urban Mississippi. The cobblestones were the river bed. The high grim buildings the river banks. The men, women, horses, trucks, drays, carriages, street cars that surged through those streets; creating new channels where some obstacle blocked their progress; felling whole sections of stone and brick and wood and sweeping over that section, obliterating all trace of former existence; lifting other huge blocks and sweeping them bodily downstream to deposit them in a new spot; making a boulevard out of what had been a mud swamp—all this, Magnolia thought, was only the Mississippi in another form and environment; ruthless, relentless, Gargantuan, terrible.
>
> (Ferber 180)

[28] The Chicago River, which once flowed into Lake Michigan, was reversed in an 1887 feat of civil engineering to save the city's drinking water from its own industrial pollution and waterborne diseases. Since then, the Chicago River empties into the Illinois River, a tributary of the Mississippi.

The passage compares the age of massive change and rebuilding after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 to the ever-shifting Mississippi; it also draws a connection between the urbanization and modernization of Chicago and the many efforts to tame the river, suggesting that the river is becoming like the city. Dammed, locked and leveed, the Mississippi was increasingly controlled at the time of Ferber's writing, resembling a laboratory not unlike Chicago: the "high grim buildings" stand in for the rising levees, and the city's inhabitants are like the water that the state is desperately trying to control and keep in its place. Characterizing the Mississippi as relentless, Magnolia simultaneously fears it and is in awe of it, which makes her descriptions of the river sublime rather than pastoral, at least while she still intimately engages with it, which changes as she grows older.[29]

The novel keeps retuning to a time before the city and the river underwent drastic changes of industrialization and regulation. The figure of the gambler, romanticized and condemned in turns, symbolizes the freedom of the period for which the novel expresses longing. When Magnolia moves to Chicago with her husband Gaylord Ravenal, his wins and losses keep the two moving between luxurious and dirt-cheap hotels along Clark Street, at the time an infamous gambling district.[30] The unofficial name of the neighborhood is telling—the Levee. Magnolia wonders: "It's really Clark Street, and no water anywhere near, so why do they call it the Levee?" (Ferber 203). The answer is rooted in history as well as the cultural representation of

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[29] In his 1757 treatise, Edmund Burke highlights fear and terror as the key features in identifying the sublime and distinguishing it from other aesthetic categories: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime" (37).

[30] Chicago had a reputation for gambling ever since it first incorporated as a town in 1833. It grew rapidly in size, becoming "the undisputed center of Midwestern gambling" by the 1850s (Schwartz1 68). In the 1890s Chicago of *Show Boat*, its wild west days are rapidly ending as the city becomes more and more sanitized: "They had had to borrow as they had often lent. It had all been part of the Clark Street life—the gay, wasteful, lax, improvident sporting life of a crude new Mid-west city. But that life was vanishing now. The city was vanishing with it. In its place a newer, harder, more sophisticated metropolis was rearing its ambitious head" (Ferber 256).

the Mississippi as a lawless place of confidence men and other con artists, an image rooted as much in the writings of Mark Twain and Herman Melville as it is in reality.[31] According to historian David Schwartz, gambling flourished in towns on the Mississippi in riverside districts like New Orleans's Swamp, Natchez-under-the-Hill, Vicksburg's Landing, and Memphis's Pinch Gut in the 1830s. At the same time, an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 professional gamblers worked on riverboats: "From New Orleans, professional gamblers fanned the length of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, and nearly every town had a red-light district" (133). When a series of reforms and prohibitions started in 1835, all gambling moved to the rivers, initiating "the golden age of the riverboat gambler" and cementing the connection between river life and this elicit activity (Schwartz 133-135).

In its uneasy attitude to modernization, *Show Boat* insists on a pastoral ideology, nostalgically invoking an agricultural political economy that relied on enslaved labor. *Show Boat* is replete with racial slurs and stereotypes, unable to escape them even in its more progressive moments. Magnolia's rigid and proper mother, Parthy Hawks, whose Puritan heritage the narrator repeatedly contrasts with her husband's and daughter's Basque ancestry and "swarthy" appearance, employs racial epithets without a thought (Ferber 21). To her, river life is itself racialized, and she longs for the time of year when she can finally escape the Mississippi: "No South for me, thank you. Eight months of flies and [racial slur] and dirty mud-tracking loafers is

[31] While gambling comes up repeatedly in Twain's 1883 *Life on the Mississippi*, conning is the central theme of Melville's 1857 novel *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* (1857), which takes place on the steamboat Fidèle on its journey downriver to New Orleans. Gambling on the Mississippi is not an activity confined to the past. Waterfront casinos have proliferated between St. Louis and New Orleans since dockside casinos were legalized in 1990 in an effort to revitalize local economies, with the caveat that they had to be located on water (Zheng 160-161). The river is still viewed as a liminal space removed from mainland society.

enough for me, Captain Hawks. I'm thankful to get back for a few weeks where I can live like a decent white woman" (Ferber 180).

In associating Magnolia and Captain Hawks with Blackness via their darker skin tones and their love of the river, the novel suggests that their dual identification makes them more morally attuned to the mistreatment of Blacks.[32] Magnolia capitalizes on this connection; her career as a performer is rooted in what Eric Lott calls love and theft, the white fascination with and financial exploitation of Black cultural expression.[33] When singing an African American tune at a Chicago social event, Magnolia—unconsciously, the narrator tells us—imitates Jo, a Black cook from the *Cotton Blossom*: "It's called Deep River. It doesn't mean—anything." (Ferber 239-240). Confused by the lack of recognizable minstrel tropes in the tune she chooses, one of the party guests pitches in: "You call that a coon song and maybe it is. I don't dispute you, mind. But I never heard any song like *that* called a coon song, and I heard a good many coon songs in my day. I Want Them Presents Back, and A Hot Time, and Mistah Johnson, Turn Me Loose" (Ferber 240). Since his idea of Blackness is intimately tied to the distorting tropes of blackface minstrelsy, Magnolia's less mediated rendition that does not rely on common racial stereotypes fails to meet his expectations.

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[32] Lori Harrison-Kahan draws attention to Ferber's Jewish background and emphasizes the subtleties of the novel's representations of mixed-race identity, passing, and femininity, as well as the space it leaves for racial ambiguity. In response to the common interpretations of Ferber's work as transforming "ethnic specificity into white universalism," she argues that by challenging the universality of whiteness and refusing the codes of white femininity, *Show Boat* tends to "unsettle, rather than stabilize" both of those categories (61-62).

[33] In *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993), Lott characterizes blackface minstrelsy as white men caricaturing Blacks "for sport and profit." The performers appropriate Black cultural expression for financial gains and mystify the material conditions of slavery out of which it arose, presenting that peculiar institution as "amusing, right, and natural" (3). As Lott succinctly puts it: "What was on display in minstrelsy was less Black culture than a structured set of white responses to it […] passed through an inevitable filter of racist presupposition" (101).

Magnolia trades in on the 'authenticity' of her lived experience with the African American kitchen staff of the *Cotton Blossom*, where Jo taught her Black spirituals and Queenie showed her how to cook. Jo, we learn, "the charming and shiftless, would be singing for her one of the Negro plantation songs, wistful with longing and pain; the folk songs of a wronged race, later to come into a blaze of popularity as spirituals" (Ferber 90). The inconsistency of the "shiftless" Jo described in the same breath as picking up a banjo with "work-stained fingers" seems to bother neither Magnolia nor the narrator (Ferber 91).

Although Magnolia learns all she knows about music from these kitchen sessions, it is her white music teacher who gets paid fifty cents an hour for his instruction, regardless of his ineffectiveness: "Certainly Magnolia unwittingly learned more of real music from Black Jo and many another Negro wharf minstrel than she did from hours of the heavy-handed and unlyrical George" (Ferber 93). If the novel draws attention to this contradiction, showing the context of exploitation, the narrator is often complicit in minstrel depictions of Blacks, as well as in the kind of racial essentializing the example suggests. In anticipation of the *Cotton Blossom's* shows, we learn, "Almost invariably some magic-footed Negro, overcome by the music, could be seen on the wharf executing the complicated and rhythmic steps of a double shuffle, his rags flapping grotesquely about him, his mouth a gash of white" (Ferber 71-72).

The Hawks family appropriates Black expressive arts and promotes a form of entertainment that commercializes feelings of nostalgia and profits from the exploitative Southern sharecropping economy. The *Cotton Blossom Floating Palace* theater plays "every little town and landing and plantation" between New Orleans and Minnesota, as well as the coal towns of West Virginia along the Mississippi's tributaries, "following the crops as they ripened—the corn belt, the cotton belt, the sugar cane; north when the wheat yellowed, following

with the sun the ripening of the peas, the tomatoes, the crabs, the peaches, the apples; and as the farmer garnered his golden crops so would shrewd Captain Andy Hawks gather his harvest of gold" (Ferber 8). The passage binds the showboat to sharecropping; it also connects the exploitative economy of the deep South to that of other regions like the coal-mining Appalachia. In the pithy words of the ever-pragmatic Parthy: "Crops are pretty good so business is according" (Ferber 229). Since the showboat's entertainment business relies on the wages of its sharecropping audience, its profits are only as good as the seasonal harvest.

In the service of profit, the showboat's nostalgia becomes intertwined with an ethic of inclusion, working alongside rather than against a progressive consciousness. In charge of the *Cotton Blossom* after her husband's drowning, Parthy runs the business in the vein of ruthless colorblind capitalism, gladly taking money from anyone and everyone even as her general attitude reeks of classism and racism: "Those dimes, quarters, and half dollars poured so willingly into the half-oval of the ticket window's open mouth found their way there, often enough, through a trail of pain and sweat and blood. It was all one to Parthy. Black faces, White faces. Hands gnarled. Hands calloused. Men in jeans, Women in calico" (Ferber 78).[34]

Even as it links the entertainment of the *Cotton Blossom* to the perpetuation of the sharecropping economy, *Show Boat* celebrates the power of the theater in making people forget about work and their everyday struggles by engaging them in an escapist fantasy:

> They forgot the cotton fields, the wheatfields, the cornfields. They forgot the coal mines, the potato patch, the stable, the barn, the shed. They forgot the labour under the pitiless blaze of the noonday sun; the bitter marrow-numbing chill of winter; the blistered skin;

[34] A description of the showboat's audience functions as a class catalogue of the laboring classes, the "moving living drama of a nation's peasantry" (Ferber 77). Among them are "Farmers, labourers, Negroes; housewives, children, yokels, lovers; roustabouts, dock wallopers, backwoodsmen, rivermen, gamblers" (Ferber 77). Ferber's use of semi-colons groups the catalogue into three separate categories based on occupation and social role. Black people, however, are not differentiated in this way—their race alone provides enough information about who they are and what they do.

> the frozen road; wind, snow, rain, flood. The women forgot for an hour their washtubs, their kitchen stoves, childbirth pains, drudgery, worry, disappointment. Here were blood, lust, love, passion. Here were warmth, enchantment, laughter, music. It was Anodyne. It was Lethe. It was Escape. It was the Theatre."
>
> (Ferber 79)

The novel names the fields, mines, and other settings and conditions associated with labor so that it can move past them. *Show Boat* engages the reader in the pastoral illusions of life along the Mississippi on which Ferber built the narrative, performing a similar operation of pleasure and forgetting for its twentieth-century audience as the theatrical performance aboard the *Cotton Blossom* does for the late-nineteenth-century viewers. The scenes of entertainment within the novel provide a temporary relief that transfixes workers into passivity and keeps them from resisting, perpetuating the status-quo.[35] The novel itself uses these descriptions of labor only to dismiss them, building upon pre-industrial nostalgia for allegedly simpler and happier times.

The novel does not present such impulses as neutral, however. The progression of the narrative shows that distance, both geographical and temporal, can itself yield nostalgia. The more physical separation Magnolia gains from the river and her childhood, the more idealized and nostalgic her view of the Mississippi becomes. To invoke David Blight again, Magnolia's memories become imbued with the pastoral impulse for careful remembering and necessary forgetting. Although she saw the Mississippi as more ruthless and threatening while living on the *Cotton Blossom*, Magnolia routinely romanticizes life along the river from Chicago. It is only when she returns to the river of her youth many years later that she delves into the river pastoral proper.

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[35] I draw here on the Adornoian model of mass culture as a phenomenon that tames and desensitizes the mind: "Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as is asserted, flight from wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance" (Horkheimer and Adorno 144).

Time away erodes the reality of the Mississippi and transforms Magnolia's perception of the river. Observing a scene on shore from the detached position of her upper-deck veranda, the older Magnolia focuses on the Edenic vegetation and Black sharecroppers' rare moment of leisure, emphasizing their relaxed lolling and loafing: "Lulu, Mississippi, in May, was humid and drowsy and dusty and fly-ridden. The Negroes lolled in the shade of their cabins and loafed at the water's edge. Thick-petalled white flowers amidst glossy dark green foliage filled the air with a drugging sweetness, and scarlet-petalled flowers stuck their wicked yellow tongues out at the passer-by" (Ferber 288). For her, these sharecroppers form a feature of the scenery, a backdrop that provides the local color she so yearned for during her years in the big city. "Unpainted weather-stained cabins, Black as the faces that peered from their doorways. When Magnolia Ravenal caught the first gleam of April dogwood flashing white in the forest depths as the rain bumbled by, her heart gave a great leap. […] This was her life" (Ferber 282).

The irony, of course, is that this never was her life, as she had always been safely cocooned: both by her own whiteness, announced by her first name, and by the metaphoric whiteness of the *Cotton Blossom*. The narrative emphasizes this fact when it draws attention to Magnolia's conscious use of racial privilege when speaking to a Black man in Chicago: "Magnolia had not spent years in the South for nothing. […] The man recognized the tone of white authority" (Ferber 262). Her cooptation of elite white Southern nostalgia masks her own social status as a struggling performer; by amplifying her whiteness, she at least momentarily elevates herself to the middle class.

Magnolia's sense of nostalgia blossoms in her years away from the river. In her many reveries about her Mississippi River childhood from the distance of adulthood in Chicago, Magnolia revels in the quiet satisfaction and calm that the images bring her:

> She shut her eyes so as to see more clearly the pictures passing in her mind. Deep rivers. Wide rivers. Willows by the water's edge trailing gray-green. Dogwood in fairy bloom. Darkies on the landing. Plinketty-plunk-plunk-plunk, plinketty-plunk-plunk-plunk. Cotton bales. Sweating black bodies. Sue, ef he loves yuh, go with him.
>
> (Ferber 247)

The stereotypical moonlight and magnolias may have been replaced by willows and dogwood flowers and emancipated slaves renamed as sharecroppers, but the effect is the same. Still, the narrative also offers a critique of such tropes. As Kim remembers her father pointedly remarking: "God's sake, Nola, don't fill the kid's head full of that stuff about the rivers and the showboat. The way you tell it, it sounds romantic and idle and picturesque" (173). Indeed, once the young Kim finally encounters the river she left as a baby and only knew from her mother's memories, she is shocked by the discrepancy between the narrative she grew up with and her own perception: "It's dirty and ugly. You said it was beautiful" (Ferber 252). This signals a generational and regional chasm between the nostalgic mother who grew in the midst of the Southern sharecropping economy and the daughter brought up in the rapidly modernizing Chicago.

In contrast, the embodied years on the river in Magnolia's youth are much less colored by sentimental impulses, confirming that distance is a necessary ingredient of nostalgia. As a fifteen-year-old girl living on the *Cotton Blossom*, Magnolia describes her life on the country's rivers in the following way:

> Broad rivers flowing to the sea. Little towns perched high on the river banks or cowering flat and fearful, at the mercy of the waters that often crept like hungry and devouring monsters, stealthily over the levee and into the valley below. Singing Negroes. Fighting whites. Spawning Negroes. A life fantastic, bizarre, peaceful, rowdy, prim, eventful, calm. On the rivers anything might happen and everything did. She saw convict chain gangs working on the roads. Grisly nightmarish figures of striped horror, manacled leg to leg. At night you heard them singing plantation songs in the fitful glare of their camp fires in the woods; simple songs full of hope.
>
> (Ferber 117)

Poverty, natural adversity, threat of catastrophe, labor exploitation. For all the idealizing impulses in this passage, growing up on the Mississippi exposes Magnolia to some of the harsher realities of river life, even if she never fully processes those details. While she associates convict labor with nightmares and horror, this is more likely the result of her own fear of Black men in chains than of an understanding of the structural conditions that created this new form of unfree labor. The connections between the "Singing Negroes" that form the colorful backdrop of the levee and the chain gang that fills her with horror are clearly lost on Magnolia.[36] Still, unlike her later memories, these early descriptions do not put a veil over such sights, as the young Magnolia at least notes the violence perpetrated against Blacks.[37]

Magnolia idealizes river life and stays divorced from hard labor; she nevertheless develops a moral sensibility toward the laboring classes. She is less governed by racial prejudice than other white members of the *Cotton Blossom* cast and crew, even if she remains undeniably limited by her historical time and place. Take, for example, her reaction to the revelation of alleged 'Black blood' in Julie, a charismatic actress whom Magnolia aspires to be like. Aware of his wife's mixed-race heritage, Julie's husband Steve cuts her finger and his own to join their blood and evade charges of miscegenation when authorities are brought in to arrest them: "Well, I got more than a drop of—n[…] blood in me, and that's a fact. You can't make miscegenation out of that" (Ferber 109). As Harrison-Kahan argues, the dash signals his hesitation at repeating

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[36] As Douglas Blackmon argues, after the failed Reconstruction, slavery was reinstated in all but name. Southern states acted on the peonage and convict leasing loopholes coded in anti-slavery laws, widely arresting Blacks for such vague offenses as vagrancy and loitering. These were easy enough to muster up for a population for which there were few jobs and little land available (1-10).

[37] In *Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois introduces the concept of the Veil, which functions as a tangible yet elusive symbol of the divide between Blacks and whites in the segregated South: "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows" (2).

the racial epithet the sheriff just used, but the scene also points to the inherent falsity of bloodwork fantasies (88).

While Steve's ploy works, the threat of racial violence and the impossibility of a racially mixed cast still drives the two off the boat, revealing that the pastoral fantasy can only be maintained through the effacement of race. When Elly, another cast member, finds out about Julie's mixed-race heritage, she reacts in a hostile manner: "She gets out of here with that white trash she calls her husband or I go, and so I warn you. She's black! She's black! God, I was a fool not to see it all the time. Look at her, that nasty yellow—" (Ferber 112). The young Magnolia and Captain Hawks are the only sympathetic characters on board, but the narrator is on Julie's side as well, cutting Elly off to condemn her reaction: "A stream of abuse, vile, obscene, born of the dregs of river talk heard through the years, now welled Elly's lips, distorting them horribly" (Ferber 112). Magnolia's wailing reaction in defense of Julie is perhaps as fierce as Elly's is against her—her river education makes her relatively free from social norms and prejudice. It is quite likely, however, that Magnolia would have had the same paternalistic and condescending attitude toward Julie as she has toward other Black people on board if her race had been legible from the start.

Later in the novel, the narrative stages the contradictions and limitations of the adult Magnolia's sheltered perspective. Once she returns to the river, Magnolia observes scenes of labor along the banks from an elevated position on the boat deck: "Magnolia lay relaxed in the low deck chair and surveyed through half-closed lids the turgid, swift-flowing stream that led on to Louisiana and the sea. […] A mule team toiled along the river road drawing a decrepit cart on whose sagging seat a Negro sat slumped, the rope lines slack in his listless hands, his body swaying with the motion of the vehicle" (Ferber 290). The image is one of an elevated white

woman lounging around leisurely and surveying the action like a genteel overseer, commenting on the man's perceived listlessness. The novel juxtaposes Black labor with Magnolia's letter-handling hands, describing such images as "a colorful background against which the woman in the chair viewed the procession of the last twenty-five years" (Ferber 291). Indeed, in a post-Reconstruction landscape, the showboat alone "seemed to be leading an enchanted existence, suspended on another plane," removed from the life along the river's banks like Magnolia is from the workers she overlooks from above (Ferber 60).

This kind of escapism is implied by the title of the novel itself. A showboat, after all, is a very particular kind of steamboat, a pleasure boat that exists for entertainment purposes, offering relief from the realities of everyday labor—an exception rather than the rule of river life. The novel emphasizes this distinction, drawing out the difference between the actors on board the *Cotton Blossom* and the steamer crew of the *Mollie Able*, which is docked alongside the showboat. As a result of opposing schedules and vastly different ways of life, a measurable degree of hostility emerges between the two groups: "[The actors] complained that the steamer crew, with its bells, whistles, hoarse sounds, hammerings, puffings, and general to-do attendant upon casting off and getting under way, robbed them of their morning sleep" (Ferber 64). Although repurposed into a floating theater, the *Cotton Blossom* hides things in its underbelly, most notably the boat's uneasy relationship to physical labor and the sharecropping economy. Despite Ferber's considerable distance from the Mississippi and the novel's frequent veiling of socio-economic realities, the narrative calls Magnolia's nostalgic idealizations of the river into question, destabilizing the pastoral vision of river life that is usually all that remains in *Show Boat*'s many adaptations.

Pastoral Postcards

Like Ferber's novel, the postcards I examine in this section use representations of the river and steamboat commerce to produce a sense of longing and nostalgia. Included in the Newberry Library archives, the ephemeral postcards paradoxically take on monumental status, preserved in their transitory medium and transformed into history. As touristic Americana, these collectable postcards represent the history and culture of the United States and carry historical significance, providing a window into the ideas and images that circulated widely at the time of their production. Frequently depicting small towns and the American heartland, these artifacts belong to popular rather than high culture and produce feelings of nostalgia in the contemporary as well as the historical viewer. As commercial artifacts, the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Mississippi River postcards from Newberry Library's vast Curt Teich Postcard Archives Collections are prone to idealizing impulses and are not likely to engage critically with the realities of life along the river.[38] In the characterization of visual culture scholars Jordana Mandelson and David Prochaska, the "typical postcard, with its aspirations to the beautiful, sublime, and heroic, usually delivers a heavy dose of nostalgia, sentimentality, and kitsch" (xvii).

Postcards are not the most historically reliable medium, as evidenced by several instances of the same image being used to promote different places on the Upper, Middle, and Lower River.[39] Their significance lies not in their veracity, but in the ways they carefully stage reality,

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[38] The Curt Teich Company, which operated between 1898 and 1978, grew into the world's largest printer of view and advertising postcards. The collection was acquired by the Newberry in 2016.

[39] The same Underwood & Underwood 1921 image of Streckfus Steamboat Line's excursion steamer *Capitol*, for instance, albeit with different levels of pigmentation, is used to dispatch greetings from Davenport, Muscatine, Ford Madison, and Keokuk—all in Iowa—as well as from New Orleans (A87791). A V.O. Hammon Publishing Company postcard similarly features the same leisure motorboat image, variously titled as "Vacation Days up the Mississippi" (VO1688A), "'Easy Life' entering Spring Lake, Mich" (VO1522), and "Vacation Days on Lake Michigan" (VO1688), postmarked in July 1911.

at times whitewashing it and at others displaying scenes of labor for voyeuristic purposes to promote a romanticized idea of a pre-industrial society. The selective focus of Mississippi River postcards on steamboats and bridges often ignores the poverty on its banks. Because of anxieties surrounding modernization, Mendelson and Prochaska explain, there emerges a complementary nostalgic attempt at preserving a "record of rural folkways" (xviii). In the American context, this often takes the shape of antebellum nostalgia.[40] An overview of early-twentieth-century Mississippi River postcards reveals two competing impulses: an attempt to cling to the past on the one hand and a desire to embrace new technologies and the future on the other; we see an oscillation between the river pastoral and David Nye's concept of the technological sublime, a mode celebrating modern engineering which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The postcards I analyze use the increasingly available medium of photography, an art form whose staging and framing are highly constructed but pose as real and unmediated. As scholar of visual culture Shawn Michelle Smith points out, photography is "a technology of revelation and obfuscation." It makes many things visible and guides the viewers' gaze through careful framing, distracting them from what cannot be seen. "Occasionally, however," Smith argues, "the weight of what has been obscured, or culturally repressed, pierces the visible world, ushering forth the invisible into sight" ("Edge of Sight," 215). In the postcards below, the elements at the edge of sight include history of slavery in the South; the whiteness of the

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[40] Although talking about Amsterdam, Mendelson and Prochaska provide a useful theorization of the selective nature of postcards' framing and the feelings they generate: "The postcard emerges as a mediator of modernity, a means to identify and possess the totality of the city at a time when it was in fact fragmenting physically and socially. The preference for depicting the medieval core of the city, the selective inclusion of spectacular new buildings and relative exclusion of the new working-class districts […] all evidence the postcard construction of Amsterdam, the visual story Amsterdam created about itself" (xii). In her influential discussion of Paris postcards at the turn of the twentieth century, theorist Naomi Schor dubs the nostalgic feelings of visual and cognitive pleasure one gets when viewing aestheticized postcards "plaisir de la carte." She notes that the interplay between the sepia hues, the imposing architectural legacy of the city, and the ubiquitous icons of modernity in the form of public transportation produces "a Paris proud of its glorious past but enamored of the present" (237, 225).

photographer's gaze; the postcards' role in consumerism; the appetite for nostalgia of the American public; and the layers of mediation in a medium posing as authentic. These postcards track the relationship between the political economy of slavery, sharecropping, industrial modernity, and tourism, providing a window into widely circulated ideas and images in the early twentieth century. They also matter because as Smith points out, "visual culture not only reflects but also shapes the racialized formation of American identities," producing "narratives of national belonging and exclusion" ("American Archives," 5).

A postcard showing a group of steamboat passengers observing workers on the dock loading coal (Figure 1) resembles the passage from *Show Boat* in which Magnolia sits on the upper deck of the *Cotton Blossom*, overlooking the scene on shore. Titled "Coaling a River Packet Under Way, Mississippi River," the postcard was produced by the Corporate Detroit Publishing Company. The company was best known for its photocrom photographs, produced through the process of coloring black and white negatives ("Detroit Publishing Company: About"). The Teich Postcard Dating Guide estimates that the postcard was made between 1906 and 1907, well after the mid-nineteenth-century golden age of the Mississippi steamboat.

Figure 3: "Coaling a River Packet" (DPC10418, Newberry Library)

Taken from behind, the photograph focuses on an upper-class white woman in Gibson Girl fashion perched on the railing of the upper deck in the right-side of the photograph, with the all-male group of spectators in front of her and the many Black male workers on the left-side functioning as a backdrop.[41] The vertical lines of the white steamboat serve as a stark barrier between the Black workers and the presumably white passengers. The gap between the two groups is reinforced by the blackness of the coal, visually marking the Jim Crow spatial divisions of steamboat life. The foregrounding of the only woman in sight suggests that the scene is shot

[41] The iconic 1890s images of the Gibson Girl were created by illustrator Charles Dana Gibson. The glamorous and feminine figure was considered the epitome of the pre-WW I "New Woman" (Gibson Girl's America).

from her perspective; the postcard offers up middle-class white womanhood to highlight the pleasures of leisure in contrast to the scene of labor.

The photograph was originally taken in black and white, which means that the pastel pinks coloring the sky are an artistic choice—and perhaps a reflection of the woman's rose-colored perspective—and not necessarily reflective of reality. Although the postcard depicts a scene of harsh and toxic labor along the Mississippi, the time of day softens any edges through the pink hues of the sunset, aligning with the leisurely perspective of the spectators. The dual image reinforces the racially segregated status quo and provides a justification for the usefulness of the Black working class, which enables the very play and pleasure depicted on the right side of the image.

The woman's longitudinal and latitudinal distance from the scene of labor ensures that she cannot see it clearly, allowing her to color the view according to her own imagination and unconscious desires. The postcard uses the laborers as a picturesque landscape meant to emphasize ideas of white leisure and perhaps trigger a nostalgic yearning for bygone days in the recipient.[42] As Thomas Ruys Smith notes, the figure of the roustabout, the typically Black riverboat deckhand or dock laborer, remained popular with white travelers in the early twentieth century because of its power to conjure up slavery: "If the Mississippi seemed to transport these travelers into an antebellum idyll, the racial dynamics of steamboat life apparently offered an

[42] Although the author of the image is unknown, the sitting woman's perspective can be linked to the gaze of female photographers whose images of U.S. imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century Laura Wexler analyzes. Wexler points to the shield of gender, which allowed women to turn away from the consequences of slavery and colonization, giving them a "gender privilege *not* to portray." Their work shows that "the constitutive sentimental functions of the innocent eye masked and distorted what was otherwise apparent," namely the violence of colonization (7).

echo of slavery itself—one which, with discomfiting voyeurism, these men seemed rather to enjoy" (20).

Depictions of labor along the Mississippi were also used for commercial purposes. "A Cotton Shipment of 634 Bales from Hickman, KY," produced by Chicago's Curt. Teich & Co. in 1915 (Figures 2 and 3), functioned as an advertising flyer selling cotton. The postcard, the front of which prominently displays the name of its commissioner, Dodds' Cotton Seed, is pre-printed with the types and prices of cotton the company sells. "Gets the Boll Weevil's Goat," it states, before offering up a selection which ranges from Dodds' Kentucky Prolific, a medium staple that costs $2.50 per hundred-pound sack to Dodds' Kentucky Weber, an extra good staple that sells for $4 for the same weight.

Figure 4: "Cotton Shipment," front (A60354, Newberry Library)

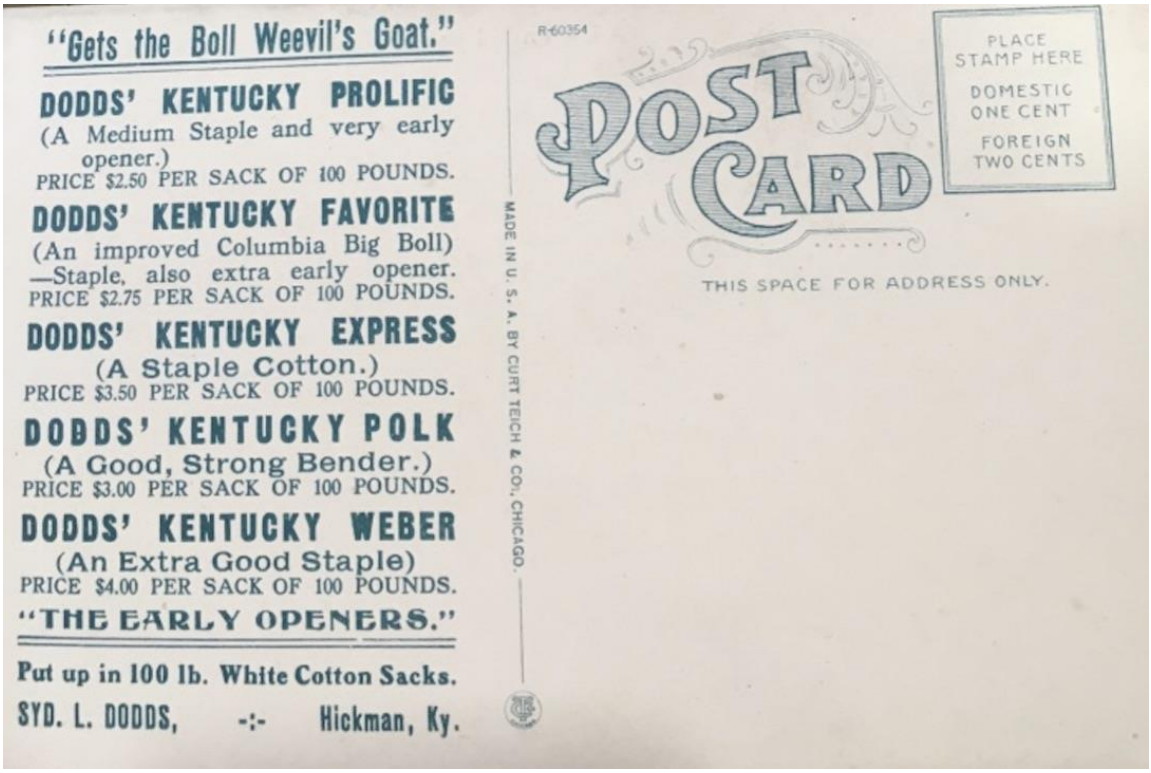

Figure 5: "Cotton shipment," back (A60354, Newberry Library)

The boll weevil, a pest that feeds on cotton, would devastate Southern agriculture in the 1920s, contributing to the devastation of the Great Depression in the following decade, but the infestation had already entered Southern states by the 1900s. Marketed as "the early openers," Dodds' cotton strands are promoted as capable of beating the boll weevil, which is most active late in the spring and infects immature cotton balls ("History of the Boll Weevil in the United States").[43] The idiom of getting someone's goat, denoting one's ability to annoy or irritate, was

[43] In Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), the boll weevil infestation causes the vitriolically racist and misogynist Jason Compson to lose his cotton speculation gamble, fueling his hatred and fury: "Cotton is a spectator's crop. They fill the farmer full of hot air and get him to raise a big crop for them to whipsaw on the market, to trim the suckers with. […] Let him make a big crop and it wont be worth picking; let him make a small crop and he wont have enough to gin. And what for? so a bunch dam eastern jews […]" (191). The novel was published shortly before the Wall Street Crash of 1929, which prompted the Great Depression; for a detailed analysis of Jason's experience with the volatile cotton market, see Wayne Westbrook's "Skunked on the New York Cotton Exchange."

new at the turn of the twentieth century. This gives the ad an air of newness while rooting it in traditional rural imagery; in combination with the boll weevil, the phrase becomes doubly agricultural. Like its visual component, the language of the postcard is straddling the line between the old and the new, striving to make seemingly outdated concepts relevant in a rapidly modernizing world.

Commissioned by the cotton company Dodds, the postcard is networked into the circuits of industry and acts as an advertising tool. With the various transportation options on display in the image, the company situates itself between modernity and tradition, embracing the first while remaining rooted in the second. Railroad tracks are in the front; Dodds' red warehouse, numerous bales of cotton and a large number of horse-drawn carts and workers are in the prominent middle; and the Mississippi River with a docked steamboat is in the background. The river is not central in these postcards, but instead provides a colorful setting for the nostalgic scenes of post-emancipation labor, bringing together steamboats, cotton, and roustabouts. The horizon carries a peachy orange hue once again, complementing the deep red of the warehouse. The presence of workers, most of whom appear to be resting and reclining, adds to the charm, reassuring the viewer that a way of life is being preserved. The image speaks to growing anxieties about changing race relations in the South and the shifting economic trends along the river, from the gradual transition from steamboats to trains to the threat of an invasive pest, which the flyer writes off with a joke and a leisurely depiction of laborers whose race is not discernable from a distance.

Postcards of cotton scenes and Black agricultural workers remained popular throughout the Depression-ridden 1930s. One such example is "Levee Scene and Water Front, Loading Cotton, Memphis, Tenn." from 1932. The postcard was published by Curt Teich of Chicago, but

the credit on the back suggests it was shot by the Bluff City News Co. from Memphis, Tennessee, which produced weekly news coverage of Shelby County from 1903 onward and seems to have focused on African Americans ("About Bluff City News"). According to historical census statistics, Black people represented thirty-eight percent of the city's population in 1930, down from forty-eight percent in 1900 ("Historical Census Statistics," 100). The drop reflects the Great Migration, which sent roughly six million Southern Blacks to Northeastern, Midwestern, and Western cities between 1915 and 1970 in search of a better life. This caused many anxieties among Southern planters, who worried about their cheap supply of labor. In his memoir about the 1927 Mississippi flood in the Delta, for instance, William Alexander Percy writes about planters' refusal to evacuate Black flood victims. These advocates included his father, who "knew that the dispersal of our labor was a longer evil to the Delta than a flood" (Percy 258).

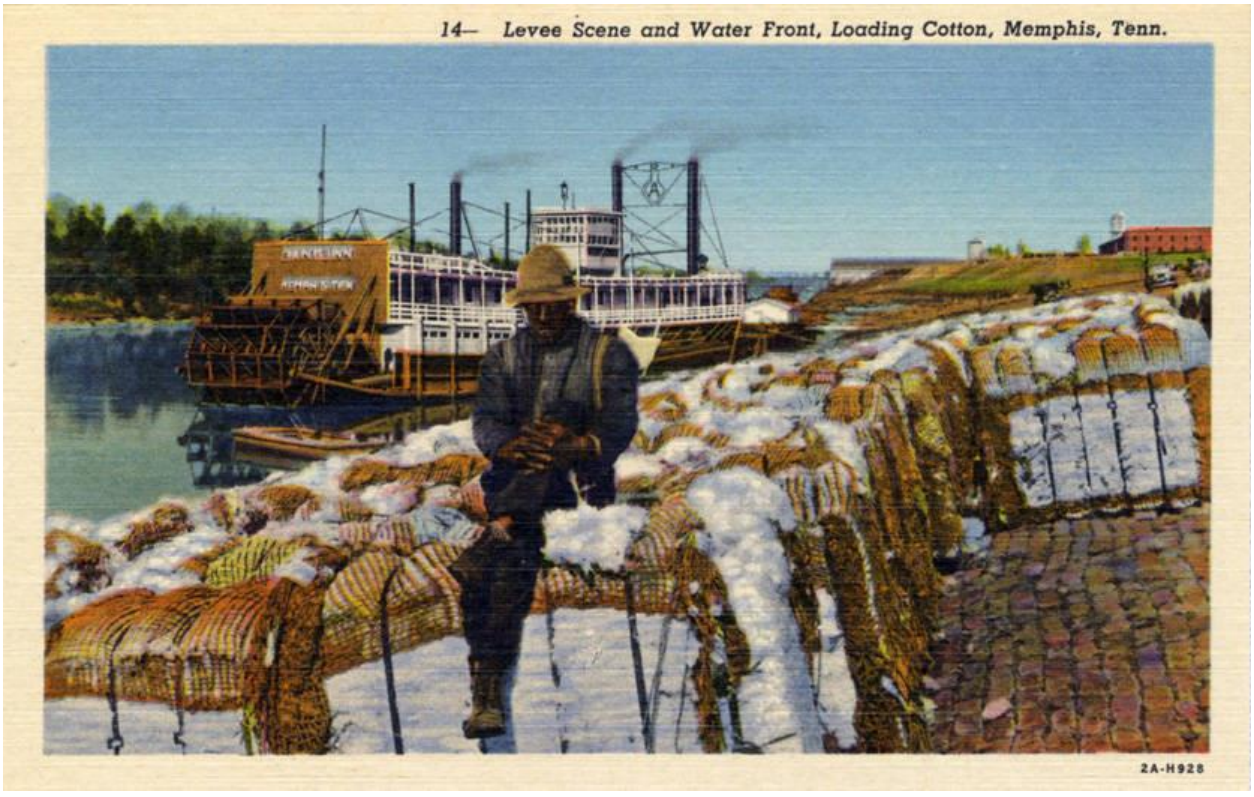

Figure 6: "Levee Scene and Water Front" (2AH928, Newberry Library)

The postcard depicts a steamboat in the background and bales of cotton ready to be loaded in the foreground. In the middle, a Black man with his legs crossed sits on a heap of cotton, dressed in Huckleberry Finn-style straw-colored hat, shirt, and suspenders. The street leading down to the river is scattered with parked automobiles, creating a contrast between the anachronistic scene on the cobbled levee and the contemporary world of the modernizing city of Memphis in the margins. Using a new method called Art Colortone, "a five-color process made on linen finish stock from a black and white photo" ("Teich Postcard Dating Guide"), the postcard points to this duality even materially. The old-fashioned coarse paper works against the vibrant coloring enabled by the new technology.

The man's averted gaze conveys a sense of melancholy, while the fact that the image appears on a postcard, a mass medium selling picturesque imagery and nostalgia, speaks to larger white anxieties about the changing racial dynamics in the country. Almost seventy years after Emancipation, the postcard echoes what Walter Johnson calls the nineteenth-century "racial-commercial sublime," which had "the spectacle of slaves at work" at its heart (83). Indeed, as Cox notes in her study of representations of Dixie in American popular culture, travel literature of the 1920s often expressed northern travelers' desire to see Black workers in cotton fields during their tours of the South (123). This is supported by Curt Teich's geographically unspecified "C.T. cotton-picking scenes," a series commissioned in 1936, which signals an increased appetite for softly colored images of Black people in cotton fields. [44]

[44] Some of its ten subjects include "Romeo and Juliet in the Cotton Field" (6AH1930), "Down Where the Cotton Blossoms Grow" (6AH1931), and "My Heart Turned Back to Dixie" (6AH1928). The desire for nostalgic images of Black labor did not abate by the 1950s. The decade was marked by postwar prosperity and the growing Civil Rights Movement, which fought against the legal discrimination against African Americans that continued even after many Black men served the U.S. army overseas during World War II and beyond. Two highly stylized hand-drawn

III. Nostalgia Tourism, 1950s – 2010s

Digging the Mississippi

In Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *On the Road,* two prominent routes in the national imaginary, the Mississippi River and Route 66, intersect. With their respective north-south and east-west orientations, each tells a different history of the U.S. empire as they run through the territory claimed through the Louisiana Purchase and Westward expansion. Like the postcards, the novel relies on imagery of the Mississippi and fields of cotton to revel in pastoral tropes and romanticize African American and immigrant poverty, repackaging nostalgia as a progressive attention to agricultural workers.

The same year Kerouac published his novel, the U.S. government authorized the Interstate Highway System, which reflected and promoted a rising national preoccupation with driving. Cultural historian Cotten Seiler sees both the interstate and automobility as specifically American expressions of subjectivity, "the products of a highly specific conception of what it

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postcards from the 1950s, both by New Orleans artist Adolph Kronengold, take a romanticized yearning for the past and racial phantasmagoria to the extreme. The self-consciously nostalgic "Romantic Old-fashioned Steamboat—Bayou Teche, near New Orleans" (G3010) uses everything from cursive writing to Spanish moss, water lilies and surface mirroring to transport the viewer into the fantasy of bygone days. It is Kronengold's "Picturesque Watermelon Boats—The Basin—New Orleans, Louisiana," however, that speaks most clearly to the ideological charge of these images (G3008). The postcard shows a shipping canal connecting Lake Pontchartrain to New Orleans; the Basin refers either to the Old or to the New Basin Canal. Since upstream travel on the Mississippi was difficult before the invention of the steamboat, the Old Basin Canal was built in 1794 by the Spanish colonial government to connect the old quarter of New Orleans with the shipping routes on Lake Pontchartrain on the city's north side. The wider New Basin Canal was built in the 1830s and started making the old canal obsolete but kept functioning into the early twentieth century due to its proximity to the French Quarter before being filled up in the 1930s (Picou). Neither of the two canals was operational by the 1950s, so the image is mediated through nostalgic memory. Despite the modernist quality of the stylized figures that seem to cut against regressive nostalgia, the postcard is imbued with the ideology of the river pastoral. With drawings of Black people carrying watermelons and two small children biting into slices nearly bigger than themselves, the image engages in racial stereotype and promotes the scene as "picturesque." It makes the people in the foreground a part of the quaint and old-fashioned scenery it portrays, conveying a sense of nostalgia and longing for the past.

means to be modern and free" (2). According to Seiler, artists like Kerouac, anxious about the perceived loss of a particularly masculine type of American individualism, "suggested the open road as the site of its renewal" (14). Although it displays an element of nostalgia in its privileged excursions into working class life, *On the Road* is indebted to the proletarian writing of the 1930s; it ultimately explodes white middle class boundaries in an act of rebellion against consumerism and normativity. Still, the protagonist's rite of passage is rooted in the cotton aesthetic of the river pastoral and a fetishized conceptualization of African American and migrant agricultural labor that highlights its dignity but disregards the racial politics that shape it.

The repeated return to the Mississippi is itself an expression of such nostalgia in this countercultural classic. Sal Paradise, the largely autobiographical narrator-protagonist, is self-consciously obsessed with imitating Hemingway and endows the Mississippi with culturally formative meaning. Crossing the river is a recurrent symbol in the novel; Sal's erratic crisscrossing of the continent provides him with frequent encounters with this historic natural marker between the east and the west. Recounting his first glance of the waterway as he drives over the bridge that connects Rock Island, Illinois to Davenport, Iowa, he remembers: "And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up" (Kerouac 17-18). Like Walt Whitman, whose poetry celebrates the country in its complex and contradictory entirety, Kerouac encompasses the whole of America into his travels, reveling in experiencing its underbelly. The low-water stench does nothing to dampen his enthusiasm, as it only makes the river more viscerally present in his mind. Constantly seeking authenticity and wanting to escape from the polished and artificial expression of the past, Sal nevertheless engages in his own version of American mythologizing.

For Sal and his friend Dean, 'digging' the Mississippi—like digging the primitivized "happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" with whom Sal wishes he could trade places (Kerouac 170)—becomes a way of getting in touch with the part of America that is most removed from white middle class norms. The slang use of the word was first recorded in the 1930s in the African American vernacular, deviating from its agricultural use to convey understanding and admiration. Dean's favorite verb thus indicates the tension between the material conditions of working class (rural) Blacks in the 1930s and beyond, and the urban white youth of the late 1950s seeking to steep themselves in the experience of the former. Sal attempts to immerse himself in the essence of the land by interacting with many different rural and urban groups of people of different ethnic, racial, cultural, and class backgrounds. It matters little to him that his perception is clouded with old-fashioned racial stereotypes of simplicity and patient contentment stemming from paternalistic attitudes to slavery.

Sal romanticizes poverty and the difficult physical labor he never had to perform himself. Convinced that both provide a more authentic experience, he laments: "I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned" (Kerouac 169-170). In another passage full of racial essentializing that would seem self-mocking if the novel did not consistently rely on such rhetoric, he describes his experience in the cotton fields:

> We bent down and began picking cotton. It was beautiful. […] [an old black couple] picked cotton with the same God-blessed patience their grandfathers had practiced in ante-bellum Alabama; they moved right along their rows, bent and blue, their bags increased. My back began to ache. But it was beautiful kneeling and hiding in that earth. If I felt like resting I did, with my face on the pillow of brown moist earth. Birds sang an accompaniment. I thought I had found my life's work.
>
> (Kerouac 92-93)

If Sal's exaltation over his experience in the cotton fields erases slavery, his rhetoric of Black agricultural workers' saint-like patience goes back to Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 sentimental novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the grateful slave trope of the eighteenth century. Sal himself draws out this genealogy as he compares the quality of the laborers' "God-blessed patience" to that of their enslaved ancestors.[45]

From the repetition of the word 'beautiful' to the accompanying birdsong, the universe Sal occupies is parallel to that of the Black couple working by his side. Lacking any real imperatives, he rests when he wants to and faces no consequences if he fails to meet a daily quota. Picking cotton is not an activity that has ever shaped and determined his life; it is merely another experience in which he is indulging in hopes of gaining working-class authenticity. The privilege that drives his rumination is apparent. His youth, mobility, and middle-class whiteness give him an almost imperial point of view, ensuring that this excursion is both voluntary and temporary. This prevents him from being even nominally on par with the old couple who have likely been undertaking this work all their lives.[46]

Still, in the spirit of the rest of the novel, the scene represents a detour from Route 66 as guided national tourism. Says Shaffer: "As a personal rite of passage, Kerouac's journey was far removed from the ideal of tourism as a patriotic ritual of citizenship," transforming the open road "into a liminal countercultural space at odds with the marketed tourist landscape and mainstream

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[45] In his exploration of the grateful slave trope, George Boulukos argues that rather than working toward abolitionist goals, as it has often been assumed, the trope in fact undermines them, supporting amelioration over abolition. According to Boulukos, the ameliorative sentimental reforms for which the trope advocates "are intended not to challenge the institution of slavery, but instead to modernize management techniques and improve slaves' productivity" (116). The trope paints African enslaved people as guided by excessive emotion and irrational gratitude rather than by reason, and ultimately presents them as particularly suited to a paternalistic system of slavery.

[46] As Cotten points out, freedom of movement and the capacity to enact it serve as an index of an individual's or a group's power (11).

American culture" (318). The experience Sal seeks is less a confirmation of the nation's greatness than it is an exploration of its deepest wounds. But even if Kerouac identifies with the downtrodden workers of America, as Shaffer points out, these encounters remains superficial and cut off from the proletarian labor tradition the writer was trying to access, signaling a generational failure of solidarity in the face of postwar anticommunism. To borrow words from James Agee, who wrote about Depression-era white tenant farmers in Alabama: "I have a strong feeling that the 'sense of beauty,' like nearly everything else, is a class privilege" (277).

Impressed by the river's "eternal waterbed" and endless voyaging into the Gulf and beyond, Sal is drawn to the Mississippi's connective power, describing the Montana timber he observes floating downstream in St. Louis with poetic praise as "grand Odyssean logs of our continental dream" (Kerouac 149, 99). Unlike the localized pastoral idiom, the expansive phrase encompasses the national and the international realms by casting the river and the continent it connects as actors in a Greek epic. Crossing the river on a ferry that connects two historic neighborhoods of New Orleans, the French Quarter and Algiers, he looks out at "the great brown father of waters rolling down from the mid-America like the torrent of broken souls – bearing Montana logs and Dakota muds and Iowa vales and things that drowned in three forks, where the secret began in ice" (Kerouac 134). Observing old international freighters, he has a revelation:

> There was a mystic wraith of fog over the brown waters that night, together with dark driftwoods; and across the way New Orleans glowed orange-bright, with a few dark ships at her hem, ghostly fogbound Cereno ships with Spanish balconies and ornamental poops, till you got up close and saw they were just old freighters from Sweden and Panama. The ferry fires glowed in the night; the same negroes plied the shovel and sang. Old Big Slim Hazard had once worked on the Algiers ferry as a deckhand; this made me think of Mississippi Gene too; and the river poured down from mid-America by starlight I knew, I knew like mad that everything I had ever known and would ever know was One.
>
> (Kerouac 140)

Appearing in the exact middle of the novel, this passage, which, like Langston Hughes's 1920 poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," is an ode to planetary oneness, is central to Sal's vision of the world. On one level, the oneness could be referring to a transcendental unity of people and places, inspired as it is by the material conditions of the Mississippi and its interregional and transnational environmental connectedness. The river unites the various itinerant workers Sal meets along his travels, all of whom have a real or imaginary connection to the Mississippi. But the international freight ships also signal the river's embeddedness in the global economy, and the French place names encode the colonial past of the river and of New Orleans in particular. In the "Cereno ships," Sal alludes to Herman Melville's 1855 novella *Benito Cereno,* a story of a slave rebellion on board the Spanish ship *San Dominick.* On another level, then, Sal's insight makes visible the oneness of the global history of imperialism that structures Melville's tale. The observation is less about making an overt moral judgement on the nature of slavery than it is about drawing out connections between seemingly disparate time periods and geographic locales. *On the Road* identifies the common stench of imperialism in the economic activities associated with the river Sal describes at the outset as smelling "like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up" (Kerouac 17-18).

Even this insight into the nature of imperialism has a nostalgic component, however, as only pages earlier, the sight of the "same negroes" from the Algiers ferry passage above invigorate Sal's travel companion, Dean. Exiting the car and "bustling with his sunglasses and cigarettes," Dean proclaims excitedly that they must "all get out and dig the river and the people and smell the world." Sal goes on to narrate: "Negroes were working in the hot afternoon, stoking the ferry furnaces that burned red and made our tyres [sic.] smell. Dean dug them, hopping up and down in the heat" (Kerouac 134). Although the purpose of the road trip is to

escape bourgeois values, Dean and Sal's 'digging' of ferry furnace workers and cotton pickers reproduces an imperialist gaze that fetishizes the Other, finding pastoral beauty in the scene of labor on display.

Cookbook Tourism

While *On the Road* only swerves toward the river pastoral occasionally, plantation and riverboat cookbooks are thoroughly steeped in it. As a genre, cookbooks mediate personal and cultural memory; the dishes they produce provide a sensory experience of the memories they activate. When they focus on a particular region or geographic locale, cookbooks also offer a way of participating in tourism without leaving one's kitchen, often invoking a nostalgic journey to a different time. In the sub-genre of Mississippi River cookbooks that accompany paddle wheeler cruises, plantation tours, and Great River Road excursions, tourism is preserved in cookbook form. The white-authored recipes appropriate Black sources, circulating a particular pastoral vision and ideology of the river in communities far removed from the Mississippi.

Acting as a literalization of the consumption of tourism, cookbooks of Mississippi River foodways and steamboat culture stoked antebellum nostalgia. Examples include the multi-volume *River Road Recipes* (1959) anthology published by the Junior League of Baton Rouge, Bobby Potts' *Cookin' on the Mississippi: Gourmet French and English Recipes from Louisiana and Mississippi Plantations and Paddle Wheelers* (1972), and Regina Charboneau's *Mississippi Current Cookbook: A Culinary Journey Down America's Greatest River* (2014).[47]

[47] For a more rhetorically neutral and historically oriented book, see Cynthia LeJeune Nobles' *The Delta Queen Cookbook: The History and Recipes of the Legendary Steamboat* (2012). Other titles that speak to the entanglement of food and memory along the Mississippi are: Rick Rodgers' collection of recipes from the Delta Queen Steamboat, *Mississippi Memories: Classic American Cooking from the Heartland to the Mississippi Bayou* (1994) and Ron

Designed to accompany and promote Mississippi River cruises and plantation tourism, these cookbooks are prime examples of the river pastoral filled with idealizations, omissions of labor, and the glorification of the antebellum South. If profiting off these recipes represents an act of cultural appropriation, consuming them becomes a way of incorporating what is not of the body into the body. While the older volumes I examine in this section are blatantly racist, the more recent ones are filled with hollow post-racial rhetoric that celebrates diversity and the strides the country has allegedly made in race relations. Since celebrations of Southern history and heritage fuel racial strife, food is seen as a safe, apolitical, and unifying way of claiming regional pride and identity. But even the cookbooks that celebrate cultural pluralism on the surface perform an implicit type of erasure.[48] In the words of literary and cultural critic Lauren Jackson, food becomes a "way for liberal white Americans to have the South they want (pleasant, rich, storied, flavorful) without the black and brown people who remind them of how the South came to be" (122).

The popularity of Mississippi River cookbooks goes back to at least the 1950s. The first volume of *River Road Recipes* anthology was reprinted eighty times since it was first published in 1959, selling more than 1.3 million copies nation-wide. Featuring Louisiana women's recipes that were passed on generationally, many of the dishes are grounded in practices of Black cooks but described in words that erase their contributions: "Influenced principally by the French and Spanish, it is Creole Cooking. And it is truly Southern!" (3). Paradoxically, one of the first sections of the cookbook focuses on gumbos, acknowledging that the Louisiana staple is named

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Kattawar's *Cornbread Memories: Home of Cotton, Catfish, and Hot Tamales!* (2014) and *Cornbread Memories 2: Growing up in the Mississippi Delta* (2014).

[48] As food writer John T. Edge demonstrates, complex past and present immigration patterns mean that diversity in the present-day South goes well beyond the Black-white binary, which is reflected in the many different cuisines that are present throughout the region (293-305).

after the West African word for its crucial ingredient, okra, and adding that the thickening filé, a blend of powdered sassafras leaves, was first used by Choctaw Indians.[49] Despite this nod, the recipe book downplays the legacy of non-white cooks and culinary traditions, giving credit for individual recipes to white women who submitted them using their husbands' names. A Mrs. Charles Hustmyre, for instance, contributed the recipe for chicken okra gumbo, while a Mrs. Frank Samuel contributed her okra gumbo instructions (13-14). Dedicated to "a glorious past and a gourmet future," the first volume of *River Road Recipes* celebrates only the European cultural strand of the heritage of Louisiana, collapsing it all into the word "Creole" (3). In another instance of love and theft, to return to Lott's concept, these cookbooks claim the distinct culinary inventions of the South as white property.[50]

Mississippi River cookbooks help promote Southern steamboat and plantation tourism in direct and indirect ways. Bobby Potts' *Cookin' on the Mississippi* provides a culinary tour of Mississippi River paddle wheelers and over twenty plantation houses in Louisiana and Mississippi between New Orleans and Vicksburg. It seeks to continue the legacy of these sites by sharing recipes for dishes popular at each, providing brief histories and images of decadent spreads. Although published in 1972, Potts' cookbook uses language that makes it sound like a

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[49] In a characteristic aside that is at once humorous and political, the South Carolinian Gullah cook Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor ruminates on "so-called okra" in *Vibration Cooking* (1970): "If you are wondering how come I say so-called okra it is because the African name of okra is gombo. Just like so-called Negroes. We are Africans. Negroes only started when they got here. I am a black woman. I am tired of people calling me out of my name. Okra must be sick of that mess too. So from now on call it like it is. Okra will be referred to in this book as gombo. Corn will be called maize and Negroes will be referred to as black people" (74-75).

[50] This culturally prevalent narrative has recently been rectified by culinary histories such as Toni Tipton-Martin's *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* (2015), which discusses cookbooks by Black women such as Lena Richard's 1940 *New Orleans Cookbook* and Helen Mendes' *African Heritage Cookbook: A Chronicle of the Origins of Soul Food Cooking, with 200 Authentic—and Delicious—Recipes* (1971). Tipton-Martin describes the Jemima code as a set of imagery and rhetoric "synchronized to classify the character and life's work of our nation's black cooks as insignificant," portraying them "as passive and ignorant laborers incapable of creative culinary artistry." But as Tipton-Martin shows, not only did Black women perform much of the labor in plantation kitchens; they also "did so with the art and aptitude of today's trained professionals, transmitting their craft orally" (2).

nineteenth-century plantation novel. In Potts' account, the people who purchased land in the Mississippi Delta were "English American folks" from the Southeast and "farther," as well as sophisticated Creoles from France and Spain—"a breed apart from the good peasant Acadians." The houses they built were modest at first, she informs the reader, "but crops of indigo, cotton, and later, sugar cane, produced such extreme wealth, that mansions of grand design began to appear rapidly" (1).

Like *River Road Recipes, Cookin' on the Mississippi* engages in acts of cultural appropriation and intellectual theft, reproducing the power differential found in society. As Jackson puts it, "When appropriative gestures flow to the powerful, amnesia follows"—Black innovators get forgotten as white practitioners turn their ideas into profits (5). From the veiling of slavery and land theft to ethnic and class-based hierarchies between people of French descent, *Cookin' on the Mississippi* raises every imaginable red flag even before it gets to the recipe for 'Johnny Reb' Oysters. The misleading highlighting of European influences is evident in the volume's subtitle, which goes against the informal elision of "Cookin'" and markets "gourmet French and English recipes," even though its repertoire includes classics like jambalaya, gumbo, and Hoppin' John, a Southern staple based on rice and cowpeas that speaks to "a past where plantation agriculture fueled the slave trade and peas provisioned ships for the Middle Passage" (Edge 5). These dishes are all indebted to West African cuisine and enslaved people's innovation.[51] When Potts brings up enslaved Black people, she disguises them as 'workers' for whom the benign masters had to care in typical paternalistic fashion: "The plantation wife was

[51] The soul food that features so prominently in Mississippi River cookbooks is unmistakably African American. As historian Fredrick Douglass Opie asserts in *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* (2008), even if it was shaped by Indigenous, European, and Asian influences, soul food is primarily the "intellectual invention" of Black Americans. Soul food is "an amalgamation of West African societies and cultures, as well as an adaptation to conditions of slavery and freedom in the Americas" (Opie xi-xii).

often doctor, nurse, and welfare visitor to the workers on the plantation, and the master of the manor usually worked as hard as his overseer" (1).[52] The book also ignores Native American influences to which many of its corn-based dishes like cornbread are indebted. As a traditional crop, corn features prominently in many Indigenous dishes like hominy corn breads and was unknown to Europeans (Greene 157).[53]

In comparison to these earlier cookbooks, the 2014 *Mississippi Current* by the Natchez-born Regina Charboneau is relatively tame. As the title implies, its recipes are both indebted to the culinary cultures along the river and updated for the new millennium; they represent a fusion of traditional Southern cooking with local Mississippi River Valley ingredients and Charboneau's French influences and training. When the updated *American Queen* steamboat was planning to make its debut in 2011, the new owners commissioned Charboneau to "create the culinary direction for the opulent vessel," promoting recipes that mix her personal style with "the cultural and agricultural influences" of river towns. The recipes are clustered into elaborate meals of the kind one might expect on a river cruise.

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[52] A slave cabin does appear among opulent pictures of the Destrehan Plantation just outside of New Orleans, but without any commentary, functioning as a pastoral backdrop that recalls the region's agricultural roots.

[53] As Greene points out, traditional Native practices of food preparation created protein and amino acid-rich meals like hominy corn breads and lime corn. White farmers' lack of experience with this crop and nixtamalization, the process of cooking corn in an alkaline solution, resulted in niacin/vitamin B-3 deficiency. In the 1960s U.S. South, the lack of this nutrient caused an epidemic of pellagra, a disease market by dementia, diarrhea, and dermatitis (157). The frequent elision of Native Americans from the South happens in spite of the marks Indigenous peoples left on every aspect of the region and their ongoing physical presence. As Michael Twitty, an African American writer with Native ancestry puts it in his culinary history of the Black South: "Because of corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and sunflowers, we are native." In LeAnne Howe's 2001 novel *Shell Shaker*, pre-removal Native Southern food figures prominently, highlighting its importance for the preservation of Choctaw collective identity. Some examples from the novel include a strategically prepared pre-contact Southern feast of fried squash, red beans, mashed potatoes, roasted venison, and peanut pudding that emphasizes the importance of community, as well as a bowl of dough that mysteriously turns into Mississippi mud, beckoning the Oklahoma Choctaws back to their ancestral homeland. Food is central to the novel's representation of Choctaw identity across time and place. The tribe's sense of self and the dishes they consume are all inextricably linked to the Southeast. For Howe, the deliberate and conscious preservation of ancient Southeast Indian foods becomes a way of claiming not only an identity, but also the rightful ownership of stolen land.

The surface inclusiveness of Charboneau's recipes only perpetuates nostalgia; invoking a progressive consciousness allows the author to at once engage in the river pastoral and celebrate a South falsely purged of its racial violence and inequalities. Her tribute to the region's competing histories, however, indicates a larger cultural amnesia of the South. One chapter, for example, lauds the influence of African Americans and the blues on Southern cuisine, while the very next one celebrates Confederate President Jefferson Davis' penchant for corn and crab bisque and chess pie: "Sweetened buttermilk makes this the best version of this desert. I believe Jefferson Davis would approve" (227). The eclectic pairing is oriented by a multiculturalism that justifies nostalgia and tries to reconcile ideological and political difference in the service of colorblind profits. In Charboneau's rendering of riverine inclusivity, Davis thus becomes balanced out with Union General Ulysses S. Grant's Buckwheat-Buttermilk Pancakes with Fig Syrup and bourbon-infused coffee.

Charboneau's hybrid dishes such as bacon-sweet potato pierogi, spicy shrimp-stuffed sesame rice balls, and smoked catfish tamales with jalapeño green salsa show more of the demographic diversity along the river than just about anything else. Delta tamales, she explains, in which cornmeal usually replaces the traditional nixtamalized masa, have been a staple of the area since Mexican migrant workers first introduced them to Black cotton field laborers at the end of the nineteenth century (217). Food writer and historian John T. Edge points out that the first Mexican migrant labor was hired in the Mississippi Delta to help manage the cotton harvest during especially productive years at the turn of the twentieth century. The workers brought their foodways with them, and what "began as field meals for Mexican American laborers became street merchandise for African American vendors who sold tamales, often simmered in lard buckets over canned heat fires, to river town customers" (297). Hot sauce-doused Delta tamales

are now a staple in Mississippi, launching "stories about late-nineteenth century Mexican migrations, commissary diets, and boom-and-bust cotton economies" (Edge 5).

While *Mississippi Current* names a wide array of cultural influences, the inclusion is superficial, allowing the author to revel in the river pastoral while declaring a twenty-first century progressiveness. In the introduction, Charboneau explains that coming up with these recipes involved learning about Mississippi River foodways from "the Chippewa Native Americans, Scandinavians, Poles, and other Eastern Europeans, and Hmong settlers along the Upper Mississippi; Germans, Italians, French, and Serbians in the middle region; and French, Spanish, English, Irish, Creole, African, and Vietnamese in the lower region" (ix). As Cynthia LeJeune Nobles points out in her culinary history of the popular *Delta Queen*, the advent of the steamboat drastically diversified and upgraded "the way America ate," not just because the boats themselves were a "culinary melting pot" staffed by African American cooks and stewards but also because they enabled an affordable and timely exchange of perishable goods between land-based grocers North and South (5-6).

If it were not for the hybridity of Charboneau's innovative dishes, one would have no inkling of the diverse set of cultural backgrounds and migration patterns in the river corridor from paging through *Mississippi Current*. The books' images show an almost exclusively white middle-class demographic, although it is true that the majority of photographs are of carefully laid out food, not of people. Likewise, the swirly font and the frequent fleur-de-lis graphic are meant to invoke the glamour of the Old South and emphasize French influences, activating a particular strand of cultural memory and drawing attention to the author's family background. Charboneau, who attended cooking school in Paris, repeatedly claims authenticity as a Southern cook via her Natchez roots: "I am of the seventh generation of my family to be born in Natchez

on the river. Food and entertaining have always been at the center of my life" (viii). While this listing of credentials pays homage to her French training and her family's tradition of entertaining, it leaves out other influences that might have shaped the family's longstanding culinary traditions in Natchez, the town with the highest concentration of plantation-driven antebellum wealth.[54]

Charboneau's "Delta Tamale party (For 12)" consists of four dishes: Deviled Eggs with Crabmeat and Wasabi Caviar; Peppadew Pimento Cheese on Fried Green Tomatoes; Smoked Catfish Tamales with Jalapeño Green Salsa; and Coconut Cupcakes with Seven-Minute Icing. The selection clearly displays Charboneau's blending of traditional and contemporary, lowbrow and highbrow, local and global methods and ingredients. Some of the combinations sound more inventive, others more gratuitous. Commenting on her take on fried green tomatoes, she says: "Every southern cook serves pimento cheese with crackers at just about every gathering. Instead of pimentos, I add Peppadew peppers—tangy pickled peppers from South America—and spoon it on slices of fried green tomatoes" (217). PEPPADEW® peppers actually hail from the Limpopo province of South Africa, but regardless of the slip, the ingredient, which Charboneau notes can be purchased at gourmet groceries, signals a class distinction and a worldly sophistication that permits a simple rural dish like fried green tomatoes a place on the table. The

[54] With more millionaires than New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, Natchez was the most affluent American town per capita in the 1850s. Some of the wealth created by slave labor is still on display today, with dozens of palatial antebellum mansions still standing. Natchez has more pre-1860 buildings than any other comparably sized town in America (Ambrose and Abell 93). Commenting on the contemporary preservation of this history in tourism, Anthony Walton puts it best in *Mississippi: An American Journey* (1996), an autobiographical work that describes the experience of a Black man reckoning with the land that enslaved his ancestors. Wondering if the glorification of pre-Civil War Natchez is "an indirect expression of a continued wish to oppress Blacks," he concludes: "I could not see, in the painstaking preservation of the house and grounds, an innocent love of history. If I felt welcome amid this splendor, I also felt angry: it is all of it enjoyed too much, and what it cost willfully ignored" (Walton 24-25).

recipe thus enacts a surface diversity that is rooted in consumerism and global capitalism, which relies on pastoral tropes in its careful narratives of brand marketing.[55]

The pastoralism of these recipes misdirects us from the reality of big agriculture in the Delta today. It points instead to a whitewashed past in which the rich farmland of the Mississippi Delta gave birth to the blues, the writings of William Faulkner and Eudora Welty, and "a thriving cotton plantation economy" (217). More could be said about each of the dishes in this cluster, but I want to focus on the Smoked Catfish Tamales with Jalapeño Green Salsa, both because of the labor history that brought tamales to the Delta in the first place and because of the centrality of catfish to Mississippi River foodways.

The recipe calls for dried whole cornhusks, yellow cornmeal, low-sodium chicken or vegetable broth, lime zest, green chilies, green salsa, green onions, and culturally contradictory ingredients like lard and kosher salt. It replaces the usual pork filling with smoked catfish: "2 cups (about ¾ pound) smoked catfish or smoked trout (see Source Guide, page 316), in ½ inch dice" (Charboneau 223). Catfish—usually fried—is another Delta staple and popular throughout the Mississippi River Valley. While Charboneau's source guide suggests an artisan Delta brand for the cornmeal, it directs readers further upriver to a local fresh and smoked fish supplier in Prairie du Chien along the Upper Mississippi in Wisconsin for this Delta dish.

The choice is not coincidental. Because of the accumulated chemical pollution of the Lower River from agricultural run-off and industry, which has been shown to contaminate fish and make it unsafe for consumption, few commercial fishers looking for catfish even work the Lower River anymore. According to environmental historian Christopher Morris, those that do

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[55] In *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), journalist and food writer Michael Pollan coins the term 'supermarket pastoral' to talk about organic food marketing and the ways in which the industry relies on pastoral tropes, both visually and rhetorically (137).

cater to low-income immigrant communities and people of color, selling them fish that would not pass safety inspections and would therefore be rejected by the larger markets serving more affluent customers: "In the Delta, the self-proclaimed catfish capital of the world, people eat wild fish at their peril" (188-189).[56] The substitution and sourcing of the tamale filling point to Charboneau's sanitized take on a dish first created by poor Mexican and African American field laborers. They also highlight a class dimension displayed throughout the book. Apart from revealing the issues of inequitable food access and safety, the recipe also brings up questions of cultural appropriation and the monetizing of Southern foodways.

While the addition of the Jalapeño green salsa at first seems like a culinary return of Delta tamales to their Mexican roots, the specificity of the recipe points to commercial appropriation instead. In a rare instance of brand name promotion, the recipe calls for "1 (12-ounce) jar Mrs. Renfro's Jalapeño Green Salsa (see Source Guide, page 316)." (Charboneau 223). The elaborate narrative on the Mrs. Renfro webpage recounts the story of the family company's founding in Fort Worth, Texas in 1940 and their initial success with a single product, the nostalgically branded Dixieland Chow Chow, a blend of cabbage, bell peppers, sugar, spices, and vinegar. Once the company "anticipated that customers' tastes were changing" in the early 1970s, it decided to "ride the wave of interest in Mexican foods," producing a wide variety of salsas that led to a large expansion of their production operations ("Mrs. Renfro's – Our Story").

The "Delta Tamale Party" recipes capitalize on the diversity and cultural authenticity that Mexican migrant labor and the blues bring to the dishes. Charboneau interrupts the recipe cluster

[56] For this reason, wild fishing in the Lower River Valley has been largely replaced by fish farming, now a booming industry, with pond-raised catfish accounting for the majority of the market by the year 2000. As Morris argues, this has turned "fish into a crop, fishing into farming, ponds into fields, and ultimately, water into land," repeating the environmental issues of exploitative agricultural processes in the Delta (189-191).

with an insert on the blues along the river, stating that it is "hard to imagine food along the Lower Mississippi without hearing a bit of the blues with every bite" (221). The post-racial rhetoric selling the Southern experience to middle-class whites relies on the historical repackaging of a "thriving cotton plantation economy," designed to indulge the reader without invoking guilt or causing discomfort (Charboneau 217). An investigation of the dishes' ingredients and their origins reveals the ongoing power structures inherent in all parts of the food industry. These range from the intellectual property of recipes, to access to uncontaminated foods, to corporate ownership and profits, and to the selection of chefs for upscale kitchens like the *American Queen*'s, undermining the surface diversity of the colorful dishes on display. If the imperative mood of instructions in the standard recipe form "choreograph[s] the present by per*form*ing: by executing something that has already been imagined," as Kyla Wanza Tompkins argues (442), then it is time to recognize the ideology enacted by tourism and activities as personal and quotidian as eating and cooking.[57]

In riverboat cookbooks and postcards as well as Kerouac's and Ferber's novels, the Mississippi is a repository for selective history. At the same time, it is the source of representational energy that authors draw on to describe the tensions of modernization and romanticize a preindustrial world, creating nostalgia by effacing racial politics and racial capitalism. In these representations, the river acts as a transportation network, a commercial lifeline, and a site of historical richness, cultural diversity, and natural beauty, but the river pastoral can only be achieved by erasing slavery and ongoing racial inequality.

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[57] Says Tompkins: "the recipe valorizes the place of culinary work in binding the fabric of the everyday into something we call 'time,' and links that work to the project of living within, and writing, history" (444).

Petrochemical Corridor

Figure 7: Petrochemical Corridor, Norco, Louisiana. Here, the Mississippi overflows into Lake Pontchartrain via the open Bonnet Carré Spillway before reaching New Orleans. Directly across the river, behind the *Tenner C* tugboat in the foreground, are several petrochemical plants: Koch Pipeline, Western International Gas, and Dow Chemicals (Photo by author, 2019).

2. Steel and Industry: The Wilderness Quest

"All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn," Ernest Hemingway wrote in an early manuscript version of his 1935 memoir, *The Green Hills of Africa* (261). White, male, Midwestern, trained as a journalist, stylistically innovative, unapologetically invested in masculine pursuits, and as canonical to American literature of the twentieth century as Twain is to that of the nineteenth, Hemingway shares many characteristics with his literary predecessor and pays tribute to him in subtle and overt ways. Given this influence—a word that itself signals the inflow of water—it is no surprise that aspiring American writers like Eddy L. Harris and Marcus Eriksen turn their trips down the Mississippi River into wilderness quests, literary journeys marked by a search for the heart of America. Their travels act as solo rituals of citizenship, representing an attempt to reconnect with the country and become part of its whole.

In *Mississippi Solo: A River Quest* (1988), African American travel writer Eddy L. Harris, who grew up in St. Louis, describes his canoe trip from "where there ain't no black folks to where they still don't like us much," as one of his friends puts it (Harris 7).[58] Like his childhood, his writing aspirations bind him to the river; the Mississippi runs through the work of two figures to whom he looks up, Hemingway and Twain. "I'm haunted by the ghost of Ernest Hemingway," Harris tells us early on, describing the writer as a type of recipe: "All writers—American male—probably are. His style of writing, sure, but mostly his zesty style of living" (29). Harris also expresses an appreciation of Twain as the ur-American writer, falling to his

[58] In a later edition of Harris's narrative, the original title was changed to *Mississippi Solo: A Memoir*.

knees like "a pilgrim arrived at Mecca" once he reaches Hannibal, Missouri, "Home of Huck and Jim" (Harris 111).

Marcus Eriksen, a former Marine turned environmental scientist and activist, takes a similarly introspective raft trip down the Mississippi, a river that also marked his childhood; he grew up in New Orleans and his mother worked for the Army Corps of Engineers. *My River Home: A Journey from the Gulf War to the Gulf of Mexico* (2007) describes a quest that is meant to reconnect Eriksen with the nation whose rhetoric of democracy surrounding wars in the Middle East disillusioned him, constantly confirming his "belief that freedom is a farce" (Eriksen 163). Recalling a promise he made to a fellow Marine in Kuwait to raft down the Mississippi, he begins the trip in August 2003, taking it as "a chance to reconnect with America, find forgiveness, and reclaim [his] life" (Eriksen xi). The memoir is filled with references to Twain, and like Huck and Jim, Eriksen relishes the peace and solitude of withdrawing from society.[59]

Harris and Eriksen seek a retreat into the American wilderness even as the river keeps serving examples of the consequences of the country's imperialism and displaying its role in global capitalism. In Hemingway's own 1920s Mississippi River vignette, "Crossing the Mississippi," on the other hand, the impulse is to revel in the techno sublime and overlook the river, to use literary scholar T.S. McMillin's term. In his usage, to overlook the river means to

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[59] Although the memoir makes several references to Twain and uses epigraphs from *Life on the Mississippi*, "The Chronicle of Young Satan," and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*—none in relation to the river—Eriksen never mentions *Huckleberry Finn*. Still, the Twain's novel's presence is pervasive, not least thanks to the cover blurb by Ron Kovic, author *of Born on the Fourth of July*, who writes: "Like Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Eriksen takes us on an extraordinary journey; home from war, chaos, and sorrow, down the mighty Mississippi." In contemporary American literature, *Huckleberry Finn* serves as a common trope of Americanness. In *Fives and Twenty-Fives: A Novel* (2014), an account of the Iraq War written by former Marine Michael Pitre, an Iraqi interpreter who is both enamored with American culture and highly critical of U.S. interventionism walks around with a much-loved copy of Twain's novel, complete with annotations. His constant invocations of the text are a recurring theme in the novel: "*The Arab reader can relate. How easy it would be to cast away the twentieth century, with its cities and wars built on petro-wealth, and go back to our bedouin tents. Huck's regression* [after some time in the wilderness], *however, offers a cautionary tale*" (Pitre 207).

gaze upon it from an elevated perspective but also to forget and ignore it, allowing it to become consumed by pollution and industry (xv, 3). Modernist writing turns away from the river in its celebration of engineering, but mounting evidence of industrial wastelands in the late twentieth century only makes the travel writers examined in this chapter chase the wilderness more ardently.

In the world of increasing industrialization, pollution, and commercial traffic on the Middle and Lower River, Harris's and Eriksen's Romantic notions of withdrawing into nature prove anachronistic. Instead, their travels end up destabilizing the myths of wilderness and individualism. This reveals a new millennium version of the nineteenth-century doctrine of Manifest Destiny, putting a contemporary angle on the journey of Huck Finn. Harris's and Eriksen's narratives emphasize the green script, which literary scholar Lawrence Buell defines as a tendency to represent America as essentially "green, pastoral, even wild" (33). But even as they observe manifestations of global capital along the Lower River and note its historical connections to exploitation based on race and class, they fluctuate between exposés of social and environmental injustice and a focus on an individualistic retreat from society, and between critiques and tacit endorsements of the American imperial project.[60] While Harris ultimately returns to the river pastoral, Eriksen's representation of the river bleakly diagnoses the wasteland

[60] Focused on the nineteenth century, literary scholar Stephanie LeMeneger reads Twain's Southwestern riverine narratives as at once affirming and exceeding the Agrarian and racial doctrine of Manifest Destiny (7). She argues that texts centering on spaces that convey commerce and cannot be farmed, such rivers and oceans, figure as "eruptions of the foreign on the projected map of U.S. nationhood," generating the "counter-narratives of Manifest Destiny" (2). In Twain's writing, the South gets recast as the old Southwest, inventing an American voice and healing the country from the trauma of the Civil War (189). The Mississippi River acts as Twain's "ultimate West" precisely because as a body of water, it can never be settled (142). With its role in the internal slave trade, Indigenous displacement, domestic and international commerce, and even show business and tourism, the Mississippi of the nineteenth century displayed both "the destructive and creative energies of the market," producing "a knowing, troubled literature that offered a powerful critique of domestic and international capitalism" (LeMeneger 141).

of the Lower River in terms of American reliance on fossil fuels and military interventionism in the Middle East.

I. Wilderness Quests

Representations of the river often link to the infrastructural interventions along its banks. The environmental history of the Mississippi in the twentieth century records immense changes in terms of engineering and industrialization. The modernist texts examined in the next section reflect this shift, moving from depictions of life along the river to a focus on the infrastructure that brings the Mississippi into the twentieth century and simultaneously diminishes the river's role in the national economy. By the late twentieth century, stretches of the Middle and Lower River, especially within urban centers, became industrial wastelands that were hard to celebrate. River renderings in Harris's and Eriksen's travel narratives are torn between the river of the American collective imagination and the industrial landscape the authors encounter, seeking a wilderness that is no longer there.

As the river's functional role in the transportation of people became relegated to the past in the twentieth century, an obsession emerged in its place with the romance and adventure of traversing it in any way imaginable. Most Mississippi travel narratives straightforwardly describe journeys down the river, recounting daily sights and encounters. Examples include William Least Heat-Moon's *River-Horse: A Logbook of a Boat Across America* (1999), in which Heat-Moon navigates the river highways in order to cross the country from east to west; Eugene Osmondson's *Odd Ones Never Quit: 2,500 Miles Solo on the Mighty Mississippi* (1999); Gayle Harper's *Roadtrip with a Raindrop: 90 Days Along the Mississippi* (2014), and Ellen Kolbo McDonah's *One Woman's River: A Solo Source-to-Sea Paddle on the Mighty Mississippi*

(2016). Eddy L. Harris's *Mississippi Solo* (1988) and Marcus Eriksen's *My River Home* (2007) provide more complex accounts than the average travelogue, meriting critical attention. My focus on Harris's and Eriksen's travel memoirs answers Buell's call for a more sustained study of non-fiction, which he claims meets criteria for environmental texts more frequently than other genres yet remains understudied relative to nature poetry and fiction (9).[61] In travel narratives that recount respective canoe and raft trips down the Mississippi, Harris and Eriksen observe and lament the many ecological challenges, engineered structures, and industrialized landscapes that have developed over the course of the twentieth century. Failing to find the mythical waterway wilderness they initially sought out, both writers oscillate in their representations of the Mississippi between the river pastoral and less idealized descriptions of racism, poverty, and environmental destruction.

The wilderness quests of both narratives may be traced to American Romanticism. For the Puritans, wilderness signified conquerable territory; the freedom from social norms it invoked produced feelings of terror (Nash 29, 35). As settler cities grew more industrialized, inhabitants stopped perceiving wilderness as a threat. Romantic writers imbued wilderness with literary value and used it for nationalist ends at a time when the budding United States was trying to establish itself as a nation and culturally differentiate itself from Europe. In Romantic literature, in other words, wilderness promised a particularly American aesthetic; as historian Roderick Frazier Nash points out, American arts and letters set themselves apart by promoting

[61] Buell's criteria for environmental texts include: an emphasis on the nonhuman environment and an exploration of the influence of people on natural history, human accountability to the natural environment, and a sense of the changing nature of the environment. He claims that with the exception of scholarship on Henry David Thoreau, "nonfictional writing about nature scarcely exists from the standpoint of American literary studies, even though by any measure it has flourished for more than a century and has burgeoned vigorously in the nuclear age" (Buell 8-9).

New World themes, which included the wilderness trope (74).[62] In nineteenth-century literature, wilderness expressed the vastness and plenitude of the American landscape and promoted the expression of values that shaped the national character, individualism and self-reliance. Although this literature celebrated the wild country, it also hinted at the possibility of further expansion, fueling the doctrine of Manifest Destiny.

As a literary trope, wilderness persisted beyond the peak era of American Romanticism and found a particularly influential formulation in Mark Twain's 1884 novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Akin to Adam before the Fall, the title character serves as an American archetype of the wilderness narrative, a tale of possibilities found in man's retreat from society. Literary critic R.W.B. Lewis describes the American Adam in the following way:

> [A] radically new personality, the hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race: an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources.
>
> (Lewis 5)

Huck's river trip positions the young boy as such a figure; removed from society, the conventional upbringing provided by the widow Douglas and her sister, Miss Watson, and the abusive parenting of his drunk and largely absent father, Huck is able to remake himself and reject the justification of slavery favored by the society in which he grew up. Although his raft experience with Jim expands the trope of self-reliance to apply to the two of them in tandem, it is the white child and not the Black adult who propels the narrative in Twain's novel. Despite these

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[62] Nash posits that wilderness appreciation only began in cities: "The concept of the sublime and the picturesque led the way by enlisting aesthetics in wild country's behalf while deism associated nature and religion. Combined with the primitivistic idealization of a life closer to nature, these ideas fed the Romantic movement which had far-reaching implications for wilderness" (44). Wilderness was a specifically American asset that had "no counterpart in the Old World." By mid-nineteenth century, "wilderness was recognized as a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem" (Nash 67).

contradictions, Huck embodies the freedom to which Harris and Eriksen aspire during their trips downriver.

Contemporary wilderness quests stumble on the incompatibility of the Mississippi of the American literary imagination with the material river on which the authors find themselves. While Harris and Eriksen are drawn to the retreat from society offered by Twain's river, their experience proves that neither they nor the inhabitants of the Mississippi River Valley are emancipated from history. Class and race prove to be of great consequence; the viability of self-reliance is consistently undermined; and the concept of American wilderness, built on colonial assumptions from the start, becomes even more unattainable in the heavily industrialized twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

II. Big Muddy Modernism

In the early decades of the twentieth century, representations of the Mississippi display a tension between nostalgia for the past and a modernist desire for the future, conveyed through images of infrastructure like railroads and steel bridges. A young Ernest Hemingway's posthumously published vignette, "Crossing the Mississippi," and a strand of 1930s postcards from the Newberry's Curt Teich collection both articulate and probe these desires. While these representations turn away from the imagery and symbols of the river pastoral—cotton, steamboats, roustabouts—they import the sense of the river's significance, even if they ultimately turn away from the Mississippi to celebrate modernization and technological progress along its banks.

Despite the persistence of Romantic tropes, the Mississippi River Corridor ceased to be a wilderness even before the nineteenth century. The river had long been shaped by human

intervention and modifications, albeit to different degrees. Indigenous agriculture in the Delta reached a peak during the late Mississippian era, but in the words of environmental historian Mikko Saikku, "the relationship between human and nonhuman worlds […] remained sustainable" during that period (249). In the sixteenth century, the Spanish started drying out the wetlands in the River Valley (Morris 1-6). When the first monumental signs of modernization like the railroad and steel bridges started appearing along the river, the U.S. public embraced them as signs of progress. Around the time of the First World War, pastoral romanticizing along the Mississippi gave way to technological idealizing and a celebration of industrialization and engineering, but both modes effaced race and labor. As historian Walter Johnson explains, praising human innovation often masks the labor and exploitation it is built on. This was true with the marketing of the Eads Bridge in St. Louis, whose construction killed and injured many workers, and with the earlier phenomenon Johnson terms the 'steamboat sublime,' which overwrites "the history of conquest with the history of technology," revealing yet another way in which popular cultural narratives erase history (Johnson 74). Praising steam power thus became a way of civilizing the previously wild and savage nature, "a sort of alibi for imperialism and dispossession" (Johnson 76).

The industrialization and modernization along the river of the early twentieth century marketed progress and salvation. The most visible and consequential sign of engineering along the Mississippi came in the form of bridges, which brought the east and the west of the country closer, increasing reliance on railroad transportation and reducing the river's role in commerce. The imposing steel structures are a recurrent motif in many 1930s Mississippi River postcards. In contrast to the retrospective images of steamboats and cotton bales discussed in the previous chapter, which remain rooted in the antebellum economy, images of technologically novel

bridges celebrate and embrace modern engineering. They employ a modernist mode American Studies scholar David Nye calls the technological sublime, a genre that conveys the awe inspired by machines and engineering.[63] The immense Mississippi, itself an example of the natural sublime, became at least temporarily tamed by the many bridges and levees of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, reflecting the assumed triumph of man over nature. In the American context, the sublime is "inseparable from a peculiar double action of the imagination," Nye explains, "by which the land [is] appropriated as a natural symbol of the nation while, at the same time, it [is] being transformed into a man-made landscape" (37). This goes directly against the Romantic valorization of wilderness, celebrating instead the conquering of nature.

The Eads Bridge, the most iconic symbol of modernity along the Mississippi, had a major role in the revitalization of St. Louis, which fell behind the rapidly expanding Chicago during the Civil War blockade of navigation on the Mississippi. A technological marvel, the bridge was built using a dangerous new approach that involved pneumatic caissons filled with high atmospheric pressure, which enabled laborers to work in boxes on the river's bottom. It killed fourteen and disabled many more, attracting many headlines and spectators (Nye 79).[64] In awe of the project, the public "felt that the bridge represented an epic confrontation between man and a powerful natural obstacle," Nye explains (79). As Walt Whitman describes the structure in "Nights on the Mississippi," a diary entry from *Specimen Days in America* (1887): "Wonderfully fine, with the full harvest moon, dazzling and silvery. I have haunted the river every night lately,

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[63] In Nye's account, the multicultural makeup of the United States makes the nation particularly hungry for another unifying force, and the American sublime, which encompassed technology, religion, and nationalism, "transformed the individual's experience of immensity and awe into a belief in nation greatness" (43).

[64] Describing the famous Eads Bridge, Eddy L. Harris later imprints it with the human sacrifice that went into attempts to tame and bridge the river. "Of the six hundred men who labored under the river on the caissons" to build the Eads Bridge between St. Louis, Missouri and East St. Louis, Illinois, Harris tells us, "one hundred nineteen were afflicted, fourteen died" (133). Unlike the postcards that present the Eads bridge as a sublime testament to man's ingenuity, Harris's account does more than just hint at the possible dangers that come with daring engineering.

where I could get a look at the bridge by moonlight. It is indeed a structure of perfection and beauty unsurpassable […] so fascinating, dreamy" (244).[65]

Figure 8: Eads Bridge (RT66260, Newberry Library)

"Eads Bridge Showing the Skyline of St. Louis, Missouri" (Figure 4), a vibrant 'natural color' postcard published by the St. Louis Greeting Card Company and produced by the E.C. Kropp Company from Milwaukee, conveys the optimism and enthusiasm that accompanied engineering feats meant to tame the river. The postcard puts industrialization on touristic display.

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[65] Decades later, modernist poet Hart Crane still shared Whitman's fascination, writing *The Bridge* (1930), a prime example of the techno sublime, in tribute to the Brooklyn Bridge. Designed by John Roebling and completed in 1883, the suspension bridge hangs between two towers that mimic the architecture of a gothic cathedral, pointing to the duality between tradition and modernity. Likewise, Crane's poem weaves together the fascination with new technology and an exploration of the complex history on which the American myth was built. In "The River," a section of "Powhatan's Daughter," the Mississippi, which covers "De Soto's bones," figures prominently: "Poised wholly on its dream, a mustard glow/ Tortured with history, its one will—flow!" (Crane 21).

Although it has not been officially dated, we can assume it appeared sometime in the 1930s when the natural color technology was still new enough to merit a specific mention on the postcard, and not yet replaced by more realistic derivations (Petrulis). "Eads Bridge, the foot of Washington Avenue, was completed in 1874, having required ten years for its construction. Cost $10,000,000. The bridge is always illuminated at night and is an imposing sight," the official inscription at the back of the postcard tells us in telegraphic fashion. Both the rainbow light illuminating the bridge and the awestricken description that marvels at the cost of the project in time and dollars speak to the novelty of such structures and the optimism they inspired even decades after their construction.

The affect produced by the techno sublime represents "group experience rather than a moment of private contemplation" and often carries political consequences, like the belief in the genius and invincibility of the United States. Since such sentiments propelled the nation's ability to pick itself up after the Great Depression, innovative bridges remained a relevant source of the techno sublime throughout the 1930s (Nye xvi-xx). Whether the postcard bridges are lit up by moonlight, bathed in pink and orange light at dusk and dawn, or left in black and white, their ubiquity points to the awe they inspired. The paradox, of course, is that as such feats of engineering circulated widely both as reproduced images and as staple tourist stops, they were no longer able to awe viewers with their newness, losing their ability to inspire the same feeling (Nye 13).

Comparatively, "Crossing the Mississippi," Ernest Hemingway's brief autobiographical vignette of Nick Adams's first encounter with the Big Muddy shows a more dialectical relationship between the past and the future. The fragment was written in the 1920s and published posthumously in 1972 as part of *The Nick Adams Stories*; according to Hemingway

scholar Philip Young, it is based on a trip Hemingway took in 1917, when he left home to start an apprenticeship at the *Kansas City Star* ("Big World," 8).[66] In the story, Nick does not occupy a boat or a raft; instead, he looks forward to overlooking the river from a train—the invention that precipitated the demise of the Mississippi River steamboat economy. Unlike the prolonged engagement with the river that transpires on boat trips, Nick's interaction with the Mississippi is fleeting; to use McMillin's term, he overlooks the river in more ways than one. As he looks out the window, the only beings in sight are a solitary man and his horses, none of them filled with much life: "A wagon lurched along through the ruts, the driver slouching with the jolts of his spring seat and letting the reins hang slack on the horses' backs" (Hemingway 133). Lacking a personal investment in this economically declining rural setting, Nick only engages in his sentimental voyeurism for long enough to wonder whether the man ever goes fishing, but the modern world of New York and the World Series soon crowds the driver and his horses out of his mind.

Though filled with expectations, Nick's brief crossing only counts as another distraction: "Nick opened his Saturday Evening Post and commenced reading, occasionally looking out of the window to watch for any glimpse of the Mississippi. Crossing the Mississippi would be a big event, he thought, and he wanted to enjoy every minute of it" (Hemingway 134). Signs of modernization are everywhere, from the train itself to the telegraph poles Nick observes through the window. Speed and new technologies mark this scene, with the news of the World Series outcome travelling faster than was previously imaginable. Incapable of sitting still and waiting

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[66] After finishing high school in the Oak Park suburb of Chicago, Hemingway (born 1899) left home for the apprenticeship at one of the nation's leading newspapers on October 15, 1917. He stayed there for six months. By the following year, he sailed toward Europe to work as an ambulance driver in Italy during World War I (Dearborn 44-45, 25).

for the river to materialize, Nick constantly relies on the newspaper for additional stimulation. Below the railroad bridge, however, lies an entirely different world: abandoned, stuck in the past, and "half a foot deep with dust," with "nothing in sight but the road and a few dust-grayed trees" (133). The description does not conjure a verdant bucolic vision, but a deserted, even barren land.[67]

Nick's expectations about the mighty river turn out to be misaligned with reality, severing his imagined ties to the past. The bluffs of his imagination dissolve into an "endless seeming bayou," and the water finally appears in an underwhelming "muddy brown" hue (Hemingway 134). To see the bluffs, Nick would have to cross the river further north than around Louisiana, Missouri, a spot between Twain's boyhood home of Hannibal and St. Louis. There, the popular Chicago and Alton railroad crossed the river on its way toward Kansas City (McNally). For Nick, the landscape of the Mississippi has been prepopulated both by geographical features like the bluffs and by literary and historical legends: "Mark Twain, Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer, and LaSalle crowded each other in Nick's mind as he looked up the flat, brown plain of slow-moving water." Finally, he thinks happily to himself: "Anyhow I've seen the Mississippi" (Hemingway 134).

The ending points toward the mythic dimensions of the Mississippi River in the national imagination, and the special currency it carries for aspiring writers who want to simultaneously follow Twain and break from his influence. Engaging the pastoral only to abandon it in favor of the techno sublime, the story offers a glimpse into the breaks and continuities between Twain's time and Hemingway's. The train replaces the steamboat, but the river remains; Twain is both a

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[67] Later, the St. Louis-born expatriate T.S. Eliot, who had a profound influence on American modernism, invoked a similar type of landscape in his 1922 poem "The Waste Land."

pervasive influence and a symbol of Hemingway's break from the past. The crossing of the Mississippi allows the young writer to put himself in conversation with one of the greatest voices of the previous generation and to declare his writerly independence by having a profoundly different experience of the river. As Young argues, the "adventures of the generic Nick Adams are the adventures of Huckleberry Finn in our time" ("Ernest Hemingway," 234).[68] The trope of engaging with the Mississippi acts as a tribute to the literary forefather, but it also signals a strong departure from tradition. Nick crosses the river by train instead of traversing it on a steamboat; his point of contact is brief, and his attention is focused on the future, not the past.[69]

III. Industrial Wastelands, 1970s-present

If the industrial wastelands of the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries show the endpoint of the conquering mentality of profit-driven modernization, literary representations of the Mississippi remain fixated on the river of the American literary imagination. The physical landscape of the Middle and Lower River had undergone heavy industrialization by the last

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[68] In Young's reading of the most famous Nick Adams story, "Big Two-Hearted River," Nick Adams "is Huck grown." Young posits that Hemingway did what Twain only planned but never executed: "he took Clemens' boy, and 'ran him through life' in *our* time" (233).

[69] Hemingway was not the only American modernist expatriate who was born in the Midwest and influenced in some way by the Mississippi. T.S. Eliot, a naturalized citizen of Great Britain, was born and raised by the banks of the river in St. Louis. Although his most famous work is set among the ruins of post-WWI Europe, he unequivocally acknowledged the imprint the Mississippi left on him. As he put it in a letter to Marquis W. Childs on August 8, 1830: "As I spent the first 16 years of my life in St. Louis […] it is self-evident that St. Louis affected me more deeply than any other environment has done. […] The River also made a big impression on me; and it was a great treat to be taken down to the Eades [sic.] Bridge in flood time." He concludes: "I feel that there is something in having passed one's childhood beside the big river, which is incommunicable to those that have not. […] Missouri and the Mississippi have made a deeper impression on me than any other part of the world" (555-556). In "The Dry Salvages" (1941), the third poem in his *Four Quartets* (1943), Eliot makes this impression evident: "I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river/Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable,/ […]/ Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder/ Of what men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated/ By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and waiting" (191).The opening segment offers an environmental critique of industrialized modernity. The poem condemns humankind's arrogant faith in technological innovation and the blind equation of such changes with progress.

quarter of the twentieth century, however. This is evidenced by a series of photographs from the 1970s *DOCUMERICA* project, which began commissioning photographers from all over the country to document the changing industrialized landscape of America and pay attention to the accumulating waste and squalor. The four-year initiative was sponsored by the newly-formed Environmental Protection Agency, which President Nixon founded in December 1970.[70] The goal was to "tally the social and economic costs of environmental change and depict the Nation's successes and failures" (Bustard 29).[71] With the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, which warns against the chemical industry and the use of pesticides, ecology was becoming an evolving framework for explaining human interaction with the environment.[72] In the 1970s, the government passed a slate of environmental regulations, including the revised Clean Air Act of 1970, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970, the Pollution Prevention Packaging Act of 1970, the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the Safe Drinking Water Act of

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[70] *DOCUMERICA*'s short life span was not planned; Congress soon began questioning the need for the project. After attempts to "capture the attention of the public or the opinion makers who might have supported its continuation" failed, budget cuts ended it in 1977 (Bustard 30).

[71] The project, clearly a part of its rising ecologically minded zeitgeist, produced over 22,000 photographs, which are now stored on photographic slides at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland. For all of its attention to specific locales, the archive is startling in the sameness of industrialized America it highlights, whether in Washington State or in Louisiana. If it were not for the inclusion of photographs that portray region-specific landscapes, the plants themselves could belong anywhere. As Bustard points out, many manufacturing jobs were leaving the North and the Midwest at that time, outsourced to the sunbelt South, the West, and overseas (*Searching* 1). The long and detailed captions that accompany the photographs—sometimes several full sentences—serve to document the sites' specificities, but they also highlight the photographers' own interpretations, pointing us to things we are not seeing. As Walter Benjamin put it in his 1931 essay on the short history of photography, captions create "a photography which literalises the relationships of life and without which photographic construction would remain stuck in the approximate" (25).

[72] Identifying the Great Acceleration of the Anthropocene without naming it, Carson states: "Only within the moment of time represented by the present century has one species—man—acquired significant power to alter the nature of this world" (6). Focusing on the costs of widespread pesticide use, she condemns the practice and seeks to educate the public on its adverse effects to get readers to act politically. A work of accessible environmental science, *Silent Spring* is framed by literary techniques, beginning with an anti-pastoral "Fable for Tomorrow." In it, people suck the life out of an idyllic American town, killing the birds and producing "a spring without voices" (2). Carson ends with an allusion to Robert Frost, calling on readers to choose the road not taken (278).

1974, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976, and the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976.

Although overall industrial pollution along the Mississippi has improved since the 1970s, the trend does not apply to Southern Louisiana, a state wedded to big oil and loose regulation.[73] Louisiana's Petrochemical Corridor, for instance, a section of the river between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, has become known as the Cancer Alley because of its proximity to residential areas.[74] The one hundred and fifty facilities lining this eighty-five-mile strip were built mainly on former cotton and sugar plantations. They make up one of the most polluted industrial areas in the world, although their toxicity is not always apparently visible (Hochschild

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[73] As biologist Calvin R. Fremling explains, the extent of pollution has declined drastically along the Upper River, and many bird species which had been nearly extinct have returned, but those facts alone do not show the full picture. Agricultural runoff, soil erosion, and excessive sedimentation that comes from dams' constriction of the river all present major problems (372-379). Downriver, sociologist Arlie Hochschild describes "great pollution and great resistance to regulating polluters" in Louisiana, naming the situation the Great Paradox (21). The conundrum stems largely from the perception that oil creates jobs, but given the high level of automation and the fact that most skilled labor actually comes from elsewhere, this is a flawed assumption. As Hochschild points out, the discrepancy in various statistics is significant, with the Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association reporting that oil and petrochemical plants account for 15% of jobs in Louisiana, while he U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that they only account for 3% (74). Implicating the entire country and not just the red-voting state of Louisiana, Hochschild concludes that "Louisianans are sacrificial lambs to the entire American industrial system." She argues that while we all happily use plastics, electronics, and cars, we do not all pay for the American way of life with high pollution: "red states pay for it more—partly through their own votes for easier regulation and partly through their exposure to a social terrain of politics, industry, television channels, and a pulpit that invites them to do so" (232). In the words of landscape architect Kate Orff, "the continued proliferation of dispersed single-family housing subdivisions and the explosion of plastic products that comprise and fill the typical home represent the near-complete conversion of the American countryside into a petrochemical-consuming machine." The U.S. accounts for a highly disproportionate twenty-five percent of the world's consumption of petrochemical products (Orff and Misrach 115, 127).

[74] The same land was once inhabited by Native American tribes, removed in the 1830s by the U.S. government to clear the area for agriculture. Slaveholding planters moved here from the East and by the mid-1800s, plantations lined both banks of the Mississippi. This is made visible in the 1866 version of the Coloney, Fairchild & Co. Ribbon Map of the Father of Waters, which served as a portable tourist souvenir. The map contains the names of plantation owners along the Lower River (see the map here: http://www.davidrumsey.com/maps499.html). A comparison of the section between Baton Rouge and New Orleans with Orff's present-day maps of the petrochemical industry in Southern Louisiana shows a disturbing spatial overlap of these antebellum and contemporary sites. Lands from which the United States removed Native Americans to make space for plantation slavery are now occupied by environmentally hazardous multinational plants.

63).[75] Colonialism, removal, enslaved agricultural labor, and the extraction and processing of mineral sources are all tied to the rich land in the Lower River Valley that serves the American economy, but the exploitation of people and resources took different guises in different periods. Sites of antebellum plantations and, later, freedmen's towns have combined impoverished residential areas with oil refineries and processing plants since Louisiana's oil boom of the 1960s. The towns that grew out of freedmen's communities were among the first to get displaced, repeating the African and Cajun diasporas on a regional scale, but a number of people still inhabit these toxic sites (Orff and Misrach 76, 115, 157, 161). In the parishes whose drinking water comes from the Mississippi, some of the highest cancer mortality rates in the country have been recorded (Orff and Misrach 52). The proximity of these plants to residential areas has caused a spike in all sorts of diseases, contributing to a significant gap in life expectancy between Louisiana (75.7) and a state like Connecticut (80.8) (Hochschild 8).[76]

Despite the hyper- industrialization, the river remains a symbol of American wilderness in the national imaginary. Harris's and Eriksen's initial idealistic descriptions of the river are part of a longer tradition of wilderness narratives in American literature, drawing on established tropes and an inherited sentiment about the role of the river in American life. Amidst changing infrastructure and evidence of the reign of fossil fuels, however, the wilderness pastoralism informing the two works—the joint impulse to imagine the river as a wild refuge from society and to idealize it by ignoring the realities of racism, poverty, and environmental destruction—

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[75] In the words of General Russel Honoré, best known as commander of Joint Task Force Katrina: "That's not the Mississippi's water. That's Monsanto water. Exxon water. Shell Oil water. It's a public waterway, but that's private water. Industry owns the Mississippi now. There's hardly a public dock along it" (qtd. in Hochschild 63).

[76] The poverty, toxicity, and environmental degradation of these places do not take away from the tourist hunger for antebellum nostalgia, however. Restored plantation mansions along the Great River Road, despite the less than idyllic setting, are among the most profitable tourist destinations in Louisiana (Orff and Misrach 20).

quickly dissipates in Eriksen's *My River Home*, although it keeps seeping into Harris's *Mississippi Solo*. The two narratives demonstrate the dialectic between established literary ideas of the Mississippi and the experience of changing material realities of life along the river, negotiating the weight of each as they move the reader further South.

Race and Rugged Individualism

Hemingway's story leaves us in 1917 Missouri with Nick; the opening of Eddy L. Harris's travelogue *Mississippi Solo: A River Quest* (1988) locates the reader nearby in St. Louis half a century later at the time of the author's childhood. Although much of the text is filled with characteristic 1980s optimism celebrating the American national project, the opening passage displays skepticism toward commercial boosterism and pastoral tropes surrounding narratives of the Mississippi. Recognizing the river's role in aiding the American imperialism and the internal slave trade in particular, the opening passage reads:

> The Mississippi River is laden with the burdens of a nation. Wide at St. Louis where I grew up, the river in my memory flows brown and heavy and slow, seemingly lazy but always busy with barges and tugs, always working—like my father—always traveling, always awesome and intimidating. I have watched this river since I was small, too young to realize that the burdens the Mississippi carries are more than barges loaded with grain and coal, that the river carries as well sins and salvation, dreams and adventure and destiny.
>
> (Harris 1)

Emphasizing their common brownness, Harris likens the labor of the river to that of his father, a notable gesture given the history of literary whitewashing of unfree and constrained Black labor along the Mississippi. Using family history to link the river to his father, Harris also points to the mobility that work along the river could historically provide for Blacks. As historian Thomas C. Buchanan explains in his study of nineteenth-century Black life on the Mississippi,

the "radical possibilities of river mobility" enabled communication between slaves and free Blacks and contributed to what he calls a "pan-Mississippi African American culture" (5, 16). The river, in other words, never held a fixed meaning for Black Americans. Harris ends the passage above with trademark optimism, however, adding salvation to sin and closing with the positive—if somewhat vague—notion of dreams, adventure, and destiny, which reflects his libertarian politics and trust in the American Dream. This signals the nationalistic sentiments Harris displays later in the text. Carried away by his own enthusiasm, he proclaims the Mississippi "a symbol of America, the spine of the nation, a symbol of strength and freedom and pride, wanderlust and history and imagination" (30).

Mississippi Solo recounts Harris's 1985 canoe trip down this historically fraught terrain from the viewpoint of a 1980s Black libertarian. Initially an ode to rugged individualism and the purity of American wilderness, the narrative gets disrupted by racism, poverty, and industrialization. As Harris himself experiences racist threats and witnesses the racialized poverty and dilapidation of communities along the Lower River, he becomes increasingly skeptical of Reaganomics, reflecting the narrative arc of Huck's conversion to a quasi-abolitionist in Twain's story.[77] If this is an African American writer's rewrite of *Huckleberry Finn*, it is one that differs significantly from John Keene's, which I discuss in the Introduction. While Keene gives voice to Jim, Harris represents a twentieth-century Black Huck.

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[77] At the beginning of the narrative, Harris, who is best described as libertarian, also expresses core beliefs about the relative insignificance of race which he shares with neoconservatives. As historian Leah Wright Rigueur explains, Black conservatism goes back to "nineteenth-century middle-class mores of respectability, built upon a faith in the Protestant work ethic and the lodestones of self-help, personal responsibility, morality, and political involvement" (9). African American participation in the GOP increased, she points out, as the party polished its language into a "seemingly race-neutral ideology of individual rights, freedom of choice, and free market enterprise" (9). Legal scholar Christopher Bracey marks the Fairmont Conference of 1980 as a tipping point that lead from traditional Black conservatism to the neoconservatism of the 1980s and 1990s. In his characterization, Black neoconservatives "viewed the civil rights revolution largely as a 'success' and argued that race [is] less determinative of black progress and empowerment" (123).

Although the memoir relies on the trope of one man's individual mission into the wilderness, structural inequalities and historic oppression tied to race keep turning the narrative's back on the myth of rugged individualism. At the outset of his journey, Harris is not a believer in structural racism or a proponent of identity politics. "For me," he tells us, "being black has never been such a big deal, more a physical characteristic rather like being tall: an identifier for the police and such. Part of my identity, but not who I am" (13). His racial disavowal stems from an individualistic ideology that disregards the history of slavery and systemic racial oppression. Harris sees individual success as proof of the validity of the American dream rather than an outcome of social and educational opportunities that are frequently out of reach for economically disadvantaged Black Americans facing systemic disinvestment. A 1980s libertarian political rhetoric propels these observations, declining to see discriminatory practices as enshrined in law.

Beginning with this disclaimer, the narrative can then gradually question libertarian assumptions by recounting the incidents Harris experiences as he travels down the Mississippi. Harris tries not to let other people's racist remarks and condescending appellations affect his experience of the river or cloud his judgment of the places he visits. He generously interprets the stares he gets in Walker, Minnesota as curious rather than hostile and maintains that the "effect and effectiveness" of racism "depend as much on the reaction as on the action" (43, 69). He continues giving people the benefit of the doubt and retains good faith even after he gets addressed with a racial slur by one of the locals in La Crescent, Minnesota, noting that the man seems unaware of having uttered anything offensive and even feeling guilty for making him feel "so rotten over a harmless little joke" (70, 72). A few pages later, when he passes a Black man in Dubuque, Iowa, he understands the stranger's exuberant waves immediately (Harris 76). This

recalls Langston Hughes' trip to Shanghai in 1934 and his joy upon greeting another Black man in a passing rickshaw (Hughes, "Passing" 332).

But as Harris wonders about the lack of racial diversity in some American geographical and cultural spaces, he moves rhetorically from accepting the fact as neutral to suggesting that those settings might be more exclusive and self-segregating than the people who frequent them would like to admit.

> I went to a wonderful bluegrass festival in Park City, Utah, high up in the Uinta Mountains. […] I was the only black face there. Why? Because blacks don't want to listen to certain kinds of music? Because blacks don't like the mountains and crisp clear air? Or because blacks feel there are certain places where they don't belong, certain things they can and cannot do? Is the exclusion self-imposed or by hints both subtle and overt?
>
> (Harris 14)

Despite the racially mixed musical roots of what we now call country music and the history of interracial collaboration—hierarchical though it might have been—the racist practices associated with the South and the country music genre by extension cause most African Americans to distance themselves from it.[78] As Harris defies expectations and attends an almost exclusively white bluegrass festival, he suspects that there might be more than tradition keeping Blacks away. He applies a similar logic to his river trip, foreshadowing events that occur later in the narrative: "You don't find many blacks canoeing solo down the Mississippi River and camping out every night. Why not? Are there evils out there to greet them if they do?" (Harris 14). The question gestures toward the racial terror hidden behind the pastoral façade, a surface Harris often refuses to scratch.

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[78] Exceptions include the country star Charley Pride and listeners like Harris himself. See Pamela E. Foster's *My Country: The African Diaspora's Musical Heritage* (1998).

His frequent colorblind rhetoric aside, Harris knows he needs to play by the rules and ignore racist remarks in order to avoid trouble, acknowledging the omissions on which pastoral visions of the river are built. When he befriends Don Smith, the owner of a small business in Osceola, Arkansas in charge of helping Mississippi barge traffic run smoothly, he gets on Don's good side because of the respect he shows for private land (Harris 182). Convinced that hard work and individual responsibility are the answer to America's racial problems, Harris does not seem to take much issue with the racial slur or the observation, even though he expresses his dissatisfaction with the river's privatized waterfront earlier in the narrative. Around Lock 25 upriver from St. Louis, for instance, he has no choice but to camp on private land protected by a barbed fence: "From here on down, most of the land that edges down to the river is private land. I hate the thought of it./ As I canoe down in the weak morning grey, voices yell down to me […] I wave anyway, even though I can't hear if the calling is friendly or not" (125).[79] Here, Harris's love of the river as a symbol of liberty trumps his respect for private property, signaling an internal tension that is present in the narrative from the outset as well as the caution Harris needs to exercise as a Black man trespassing in America's heartland.

An encounter with Jimmy, a Black employee of Don's who gets treated with considerable disdain by his boss, provides a turning point in the narrative, shaking Harris's confidence in the bootstrap myth: "Jimmy was talking about his family, a tale of bleak opportunities that aimed toward jail or the dole or the army. Times may have changed, but not *that* much" (184). This

[79] Under the Clean Water Act of 1972, all navigable waters belong to the state and cannot be privately owned (National Organization for Rivers). The riverbanks, however, defined as the area between the ordinary low- and high-water levels, can be either private or public, but can be used by river travelers. As article 456 of Louisiana's Civil Code tells us, "The banks of navigable rivers or streams are private things that are subject to public use." Beyond the banks, it is a different story. In Louisiana in particular, the vast majority of land is privately owned, making public access to the river more sporadic and interrupted. See the map of Louisiana's public lands and waters at: http://sonris-www.dnr.state.la.us/gis/agsweb/IE/JSViewer/index.html?TemplateID=381

marks the first time Harris openly considers the impact of structural racism in America—a realization that sets in by the time he reaches Helena, Arkansas some hundred and fifty river miles south. The town is known for its blues legacy, which has been attracting visitors from all over the world to its annual King Biscuit Blues festival every fall since 1986, but lies desolate for the rest of the year:

> Dirt and squalor all round, it looked like Mexico. […] This *was* the Third World. And I was wrong too when I thought that *my* luck was bad, and wrong again if I ever considered a man's fate to be entirely his own choosing and making. Wrong and naïve.
>
> I wanted to leave. I was much more comfortable and at peace on the river, far away from the horrors man creates out of what should be beauty and plenty. Even the most ugly industrialized strips along the river were not as horrible as this.
>
> […] my whole constitution is affected. I'm not as tough as I thought. I can't look at people so poor, so dead-ended and not want to cry.
>
> (Harris 200)

The encounter triggers a reevaluation of events leading up to this point. Many of the myths Harris promotes earlier in the narrative are cleft open by the sight of Helena and his conversation with Jimmy: the accumulative effect of being addressed with racial slurs (70); encountering Confederate flags; and witnessing the circle of poverty in which so many Blacks along the Mississippi are trapped all drown his belief in the bootstrap narrative, undermining his earlier claims about the relative insignificance of race in America.

If the sights in Helena make him witness the economic consequences of slavery and sharecropping, the scene that follows makes him experience racial violence first-hand. As he sets up camp and prepares dinner, two "greasy rednecks" with shotguns approach him in the woods of Arkansas and begin to harass him (206). They condescendingly address him as "boy" and make threatening remarks about the dangers of being in the woods all by himself, complaining that they "ain't shot at nothing since the early morning." Harris flees in panic, falling and breaking his tooth; he hears the pair "howling with glee" behind him (207). They come after him,

laughing and calling out "with hideous, taunting cries they might use for calling animals" and only leave after he fires his pistol at their voices (Harris 208). Crossing the river in pitch dark, Harris, fuming with anger and worrying about "rednecks and Southern sheriffs in pursuit," vows to get "far away and off this damnable river and out of this idiot adventure" (210).

The violent encounter with a world he hoped no longer existed does not make Harris withdraw from his journey; on the contrary, the incident prompts him to articulate a political claim to African American belonging on the river and in the South more generally. Although shaken by the intimidation techniques of the racist whites, which prove to him that white supremacy is alive and well, Harris claims the territory as his own, refusing to be run off: "I would not be quitting today. Not from fatigue, not from pain, and certainly not from fear. No number of redneck crackers with shotguns or nooses in the night could scare me off that river now. After all I'd been through, all the wonder I'd seen, all the pain, that river was mine" (Harris 210, 217). The vow acts as a powerful reclamation of places and spaces from which Blacks have been historically excluded.[80]

But as soon as Harris's anger dissipates, so does his belief in the pervasiveness of racism in America. Harris soon lands on a patriotic embrace of all aspects the nation, essentially billing himself as "the poet of slaves, and of the masters of slaves," to quote from Whitman's notes for *Leaves of Grass* in his earliest existent notebook (qtd. in Erkkilä 50). "And the faces of strangers are no longer strange. I recognize and love them all," Harris tells us. "Robert and Robinovich, Emily, Don, a little boy nicknamed Tiger, two gun-toting hillbillies. I have seen them, I have

[80] Three decades later, Harris repeated his canoe trip down the Mississippi for a full-feature documentary, *River to the Heart*, which premiered at the St. Louis International Film Festival in 2017. In it, he expands on the idea of river reclamation and promotes canoeing and kayaking among a group of Black urban youth: "The reason we don't come down to the river is that very subtly—subconsciously—we don't think it's ours. We have to recognize that this river, this land, this country, belongs to us too. We are not restricted to anything."

known them, I am them. There is no color that separates us, no race, no issue deeper than humanity to bind us" (221).

The memoir keeps slipping back and forth between scenes of racism and pastoral rewritings of Southern history. When just a few pages and river bends later, Harris reaches Natchez, Mississippi, once the crown jewel of the Confederacy known for its enormous wealth, he describes the opulent white antebellum plantation mansions as "reminders of gentler and nobler times" (224). His rhetoric engages in the kind of revisionist romance of the antebellum South for which Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and its film adaptation are known. If the adjectives seem out of place, they are consistent with the dynamic of ideological incongruities that crop up throughout the narrative.[81]

On the following page, Harris offers a subtle critique of the plantation setting. Faced with the nostalgia machine that is the *Delta Queen* steamboat, he remarks that the setting invokes the year 1836. After getting shunned by three well-dressed women later that day when he asks them for the time, he notes that he feels "like the invisible man" (225). The use of the definite article alludes to Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man,* which describes the disillusionment of an unnamed Black Southern protagonist in the North, who feels invisible "simply because people refuse to see [him]" (3). Swerving once more, *Mississippi Solo* ends on a sentimental, non-confrontational note of ritual communion: drinking a shot of brandy from a Styrofoam cup by the river in New Orleans, Harris pours another one into the water.

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[81] The incredible popularity of *Gone with the Wind* (1936) points to the widespread persistence of Agrarian ideals and romanticized notions of the antebellum South in American society at large. While the Lost Cause may not have been "essentially inhuman in character," its "very existence depended upon dehumanizing a group of people" (Blight 292). In its glorification of red Georgia clay, white cotton fields, and genteel Southern society, Mitchell's novel puts a veil over slavery and the labor that made the Southern aristocratic life possible, portraying slaves as content, happy servants. In the opening pages of the novel, we thus get an idealized description of Tara, the O'Hara plantation, with the sound of the "careless laughter of negro voices" coming from the field in the background (10).

While the narrative remains ambivalent in its treatment of racism in the United States, oscillating between descriptions of racism and moments of the river pastoral, it destabilizes the ideas of the romanticized river quest on which Harris initially sets out. *Mississippi Solo* pits the myth of self-reliance against the structural conditions of American society, deconstructing the ode to individualism and the American wilderness that its title suggests. While Jim might have freed himself from Huck in this version, racial oppression has not disappeared and is evident left and right of Harris's canoe. Toward the end of the narrative, Harris repeatedly entertains the idea of "shooting past [New Orleans] and landing in Brazil" (222, 228), perhaps hoping to escape the racial terror he thought was confined to the past, displacing the postracial fantasy onto South America.[82] Still, as literary scholar Barbara Eckstein points out, Harris, despite touching upon the economic plight of river towns and calling to mind issues of sustainability, does not join "with others in common cause" to address "the dangers, economic and environmental, that his 1980s journey witnessed" (142-147).[83]

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[82] In the popular imagination, South America and Brazil in particular is often seen as a racial paradise, despite the fact that it is a racially complex society forged by many of the same contradictions. See Henry Louis Gates' documentary series *Black in Latin America* (2011).

[83] Harris's later work is much more critical and unapologetically political, suggesting that the trip was more transformative that the first book alone can demonstrate. His third book, *South of Haunted Dreams: A Ride Through Slavery's Old Back Yard* (1993) reads in many ways as a corrective to *Mississippi Solo*. In the very first chapter, he deconstructs the façade of a genteel South to which he at least partially subscribed just a few years earlier: "Beneath the myth of chivalry and gallantry lay a reality of paternalism and repression that lent shame to the miracle of human justice and equality upon which this country was founded" (14). Proclaiming unequivocally that he has "awakened from [his] slumber", Harris tells us: "I am not the man I once was, not the man who once believed he was who he was from the inside out, that the blackness of my skin is merely a physical attribute like being bearded or being tall. […] I am black, and being black matters" (23).

The Wilderness Paradox: From Disneyland to an Industrial Park

For Harris, part of what draws him to the river is the myth of wilderness and the freedom that can only occur outside of the laws of society, as is the case in the most idyllic scenes of Huck and Jim on their raft. Intent on experiencing the last remaining wilderness the river has to offer, Harris laments the conditions of modern life and the taming of the Mississippi by the Army Corps of Engineers. He complains that the river, like contemporary society, is "Computerized, mechanized, itemized, formalized, and most dangerously, standardized. Laws hemming us in and fencing us out, stripping us down and standardizing behavior" (30).

Harris's wilderness quest is paralleled by a libertarian disdain for regulation. There is good evidence that the river has been over-engineered with locks, dams, and levees in efforts to maintain the river's commercial viability and prevent it from flooding. Over the course of the twentieth century, the Army Corps of Engineers built twenty-nine locks and dams on the Upper River, which keep the river navigable but cause irreparable damage to the ecosystem. The dams are slowly killing the immortal river by transforming it into a sediment-laden lake (Fremling 368-373). The Corps also maintains a 3,500-mile levee system on the Mississippi and its tributaries comprised of levees, floodwalls, and similar control structures ("Levee Systems"). The levees on the Lower River prevent sedimentation and dry out the historically muddy land in the river valley, making flooding more catastrophic where and when it occurs and contributing to the unprecedented land loss in coastal Louisiana (United States Geological Survey). Still, Harris's critique is planted less in environmental woes and more in a 1980s distaste for governmental intervention.

When he first encounters Mississippi lock workers, for example, Harris is thrilled to finally see his tax dollars doing something he appreciates, but his enthusiasm wanes as soon as he starts contextualizing their presence:

> *En masse* they are possibly the nicest group that earns tax dollars. I've never heard anything but praise for them (which can hardly be said for soldiers and the IRS and most politicians).
>
> And yet, they are part of the Corps of Engineers and because of that, as much as I respect them, I harbor a fundamental grudge against them. They have enslaved the river.
>
> The river is now, at least between Minneapolis and St. Louis, as tame as a silent partner, a minority shareholder.
>
> (Harris 57)

Using terms borrowed from finance, he positions this highly controlled section of the Upper Mississippi as exploited in the service of corporate economic interests. If the metaphor seems critical of the 1980s capital-centered culture of the Reagan era, Harris's language exudes those very values. The passage crassly reduces slavery, an utterly dehumanizing and violent state-sponsored institution, to a position of weak corporate bargaining power. His rhetorical move draws on the long tradition of different political ideologies expropriating scripts from abolition: from white 'wage slavery' of the 1850s to proto-feminist movements of the late nineteenth century to the libertarianism of the 1980s.[84]

Saddened by the structures that control the river, Harris displays a similar skepticism of government regulation when encountering industrial and agricultural waste. He makes an argument for personal rather than corporate responsibility, concluding that it is futile to try to control everything: "If some idiot upstream wants to dump into the river, what can you do?"

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[84] The figure of the white slave was prominent in mid-nineteenth century literature, in which "the trope of wage slavery sensationalized capitalist exploitation and the hazards of the marketplace for white workers and middle-class intellectuals" (Shapiro 57). The tradition continues into the twentieth century.

(Harris 213).[85] He similarly focuses on consumer behavior when the sight of trash floating by the river's edge makes him feel "dirty and disgusted and angry," echoing the kind of shallow ecological concerns made popular by Lady Bird Johnson in her Keep America Beautiful anti-litter and beautification campaign of the 1960s, which was sponsored by Philip Morris, PepsiCo, and Coca-Cola, among others.[86]

Harris's most bucolic descriptions of the Mississippi are reserved for the relatively unaltered Headwaters in Minnesota. Exclaiming in awe over Lake Itasca's "pristine glory" and purity, he declares it "quite possibly […] the most beautiful place on earth" (10, 15). He continues: "But so pristine and serene in its beauty is this place, it can hardly be called majestic or imposing, overpowering or breathtaking. Instead, it whispers to you […] It's not a Gothic cathedral, but a lovely little chapel whose absolute artistry you do not expect, and you're awestricken" (Harris 15). The passage compares the quiet, unassuming beauty of Itasca to a comforting chapel one might find in the countryside. Harris does not liken it to awe-inspiringly sublime gothic cathedrals, which evoke something like the natural bridge Thomas Jefferson finds in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.[87] On the contrary, the beauty of Itasca is pastoral rather than sublime—idyllic, calm, simple, and tame. Just as it did for Romantics and Transcendentalists, nature clearly has a religious dimension for Harris. On the Wisconsin part of the river around Goose Island, the "beauty and splendor of the river" confirm for him that "there

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[85] In her 2016 study of rural Louisiana Tea party voters, Hochschild shows that environmental regulation is often seen by her subjects as incompatible with the principles of small government for which they so fiercely advocate. She dubs this situation the 'Great Paradox' because environmental issues are in fact among the concerns that most influence the quality of life of the people she interviews.

[86] When she joined the Keep America Beautiful highway beautification campaign in 1965, the first lady proclaimed: "Ours is a blessed and beautiful land. But much of it has been tarnished. What can you do? Look around you: at the littered roadside; at the polluted stream; the decayed city center. We need urgently to restore the beauty of our land" ("Keep America Beautiful: History and Mission").

[87] Jefferson describes the natural bridge as the "most sublime of Nature's works" and "worth a voyage across the Atlantic" (26, 21).

is a God." In a pantheistic ode to the Mississippi, he proclaims: "I've seen Him all morning and heard Him. I know where He lives and have visited" (Harris 108).

Harris's early days on the river allow him to live out a fantasy of the Mississippi that is at once pastoral and wild. He fetishizes the wilderness, proclaiming contently at the outset of his journey in Minnesota: "I'm totally alone. This is wilderness" (Harris 23). He enthusiastically describes the Upper River as a riverine Disneyland, paradoxically treating pristine wilderness as a commercial zone of simulated fantasy: "This riding of the river is not unlike a ride at Disneyland. Breath-taking spectacle, scenery, excitement, magic, fun" (33). The postindustrial pastoral vision of the Upper River as an amusement park designed to mask any unpleasantries and provide a total retreat from reality for the visitor quickly retreats from his consciousness as he moves south.

By the time he approaches St. Louis, the Mississippi turns from an amusement park to an industrial one, making the underbelly of America more and more visible: "All along the way until past the next bend in the river, the area is commercial. Barge companies and oil refineries. The river looks like a massive industrial park" (Harris 132). With the physical growth of the river and the related changes in its economic production, the communities along its banks start changing as well. Up in northern Minnesota, Harris marvels at the all-American beauty of small river towns, but by the time he reaches the forsaken Caruthersville in southern Missouri, the picture is starkly different: "I felt really and truly and finally in the South and this was the South I had always heard about. Dirty and poor like the Third World, dark like the boonies and decrepit like the urban ghetto" (170). The world Harris is witnessing might be new to him, but the language he uses to describe it is not. Stereotyping the U.S. South, the Global South, and the segregated urban neighborhoods of American cities in one sentence—all areas with large non-

white populations—his language fixates on the outward appearance of poverty instead of the structural conditions that create it, reflecting once again the era of Reaganomics.

Up until the racist encounter discussed earlier, the memoir displays a surprising and confusing degree of nostalgia for the Old South. Harris himself acknowledges the irony of being a Black man swayed by images of antebellum glory when he suddenly interrupts his narrative with an italicized aside: "*I hope to God I'm not out here because I miss the Good Old Days*" (29). Still, he maintains unironic faith in the goodness of America, identifying with the white majority and their rhetoric of Southern hospitality to drown out his own voice telling him there is more under the surface. In response to the "bad press" the South often receives, he utters this reassurance: "This is still America I'm running through. These people are still *my* people. […] There is no friendlier lot in the world than these Americans, none more generous and I'm going South where hospitality, not cotton, is king" (Harris 142).

The chapter that follows opens with a cinematic vision of the river pastoral as Harris officially reaches the South and overlooks the river from a ridge in Kentucky, carried into the past by his solitary musings:

> My old Kentucky home. Plantations. Acre after acre of ripening cotton. The hot sun drying the fine golden silk of the corn tops and turning them rough and brown. Lemonade in the shade of porches and elm trees. Bourbon over shaved ice. Perhaps a sprig of mint. Riders cantering down the lanes. Lazy days in the heat and cool nights.
>
> (Harris 157)

The invocation of "My Old Kentucky Home" refers to a ballad written by Stephen Foster, a nineteenth-century white songwriter made famous by his minstrel productions. The song, which initially started with the lines "De sun shines bright in de old Kentucky home/ 'Tis summer, de darkeys am gay," written in the voice of a slave, was inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852

anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Railton).[88] It later became the official state song of Kentucky, eventually changing the racialized term to 'old folks.' Harris's vision of minstrel tropes, mint juleps as fetishized symbols of Southern hospitality, and shady white porches amounts to another version of moonlight and magnolias, in which Black people are either enslaved or absent.

The many tonal ambiguities in *Mississippi Solo* reveal a constant vacillation between a conservative defense of the status quo and a whitewashing of history on the one hand and an inevitable sense of irony on the other.

> I can feel the laziness and the peaceful simplicity and the glamour of the images of the Old South without its ugliness. The gallantry, the courtesy, the hospitality, the surface of gentility. If only they'd been smart enough to pay those poor slaves and give them the freedom of choice. Would it then have been much different than the assembly line, or being a maid or a janitor? Probably not, and a way of life might have been preserved. Then again, the slaves would surely have organized, stricken and become unionized, wages would have risen and the living conditions improved, prices would have necessarily shot up and plantations would have found no way to remain profitable. The aim to hang on to a genteel way of life would have missed the mark just the same. And the honesty of the bucolic world would still have been compromised and squandered and sold to industry.
>
> (Harris 158)

Like the rest of the narrative, the passage is ripe with contradictions. Harris acknowledges the ugliness of plantation history and talks of gentility as a surface façade rather than an actual condition. But if the first part sounds like a parody of conservative white Southern tropes, the suggestion of reforming slavery into wage labor to preserve "a way of life" slips again into race-neutral neoliberal libertarianism.

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[88] Foster first titled the song "Poor Uncle Tom" in response to Stowe's novel, using language that suggests the voice of a slave. He never published this version, but as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was dramatized for the stage, the song was included as "My Old Kentucky Home." It was performed by the novel's other prominent enslaved characters, George Harris or Topsy, rather than Tom himself (Railton).

Skeptical of unionization, Harris frames plantations as legitimate economic models, downplaying the exploitation of labor on which they were built. He goes as far as to describe the pre-industrial Southern plantation world in true pastoral fashion as bucolic and honest, contrasting it with the industrial system of the North. He then immediately questions his own rhetoric and turns the whitewashed vision of Kentucky on its head with a corrective: "Funny, isn't it, how images stick in your sight and blind out the harsh realities, confuse your perceptions and expectations" (158). Wondering what the South will hold for him, he asks himself: "*How much luck can one man have*?" (158). At this point, his language still seems to be struggling with rejecting fully the unconscious idealizations that are so prevalent in popular culture, but his encounter with blight and racism in Arkansas soon complicates things, pushing his experience of the Mississippi further away from the Disneyland that marked the beginning of his trip.

The narrative shows the Lower River as a center of global capitalism, a meeting point of different markets and commodities as well as of lax labor and environmental regulations. Marked by the geographical proximity of the Gulf of Mexico, Southern Louisiana, in Harris's words, is "a different world altogether, the world of supertankers and tugboats" (238). There, Harris comes face to face with the transnational Mississippi. Among the giant ships he meets are the Norwegian *Hoegh Forum*, the Soviet *Professor Kostiukov*, and the Japanese-owned *South Fortune,* which, like most tankers he passes, is registered in Liberia (239-240). Although Harris is initially suspicious of the men on the *Professor Kostiukov*, thinking they envy his freedom or regard him as a spy, he lets his Cold-War anxieties dissolve into a celebration of brotherhood that could turn Melvillean if he were to ever get on board, the water washing away their

perceived differences: “We were brothers on the water, rivermen, seafarers, sailors all” (Harris 240).[89]

The scene he witnesses says more about neoliberal globalization and corporate evasion of responsibility in pursuit of profits than it does about the bottom-up global brotherhood Harris envisions. The Liberian banner is a so-called flag of convenience: by the early 2000s, about sixty-four percent of the world’s international cargo ships were registered in states which do not require owners, captains, or crewmembers to be citizens in order to register ships. These countries deliberately keep down taxes and fees “by having lax, or poorly enforced environmental, safety, and labor standards (DeSombre 3-4).[90] Harris’s Lower River encounter indicates the embeddedness of the Mississippi in global capital, a theme on which Eriksen’s memoir expands three decades later. Although Harris’s quest destabilizes the myths of rugged individualism and American wilderness, his narrative always swerves back toward the river pastoral, returning to the Mississippi of the American literary imagination.

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[89] In one of Melville’s most utopian moments in *Moby-Dick* (1851), Ishmael erupts in a democratic rhapsody celebrating his unity with co-laborers as they squeeze sperm oil from a whale and join hands: “Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness” (Melville 323).The sudden rush of affinity for the men Harris perceived moments ago as political enemies is another manifestation of what he describes as the unifying power of the Mississippi: “A strange kind of cleft, one that strangely unites instead of dividing. A river that unifies north and south the same as it connects east and west—rather than creating an impasse—even though this linking bridge is two thousand miles long and a great distance across” (Harris 66).

[90] The practice came into widespread use in the 1920s; the first country to create such a registry was Panama, which still leads in terms of numbers, followed by Honduras and Liberia. The revenues from such business account for a significant portions of these states’ national budgets (DeSombre 71, 78). The U.S. and other major maritime states are highly complicit in the process—the Liberian open registry, for instance, was established by Edward Stettinius, an American businessman and former Secretary of State, and “was seen initially as a fleet of neutral ships the U.S. could call on in the case of Soviet aggression” (DeSombre 73). Although the Jones Act of 1929 bans foreign-registered ships from American waterways, a stretch of the Lower River in Southern Louisiana is exempt from this regulation. The Jones Act applies to any trade between two U.S. ports, but the Port of South Louisiana is an international one. It is the largest tonnage port in the Western hemisphere, providing immediate access to oceans, inland rivers, highways, railways, airways, and pipelines and acting as the main gateway for U.S. imports and exports. With headquarters in LaPlace, Louisiana, the Port of South Louisiana spans fifty-four miles along the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. It is located in convenient proximity to the state’s Petrochemical Corridor and functions as a logistically convenient extension of the Gulf of Mexico.

Wilderness Pastoralism in the Age of Fossil Fuels

Marcus Eriksen's *My River Home: A Journey from the Gulf War to the Gulf of Mexico* (2007) alternates between its ex-Marine-turned-environmental-scientist author's time serving in the desert of Kuwait in 1991 and his raft trip down the Mississippi on a homemade plastic bottle raft called the *Bottle Rocket* in 2003, during the early days of the Iraq War. Connecting the history of European colonialism and Manifest Destiny to contemporary U.S. global military presence, as well as to society's attempts at conquering the natural environment, the narrative promotes an anti-imperial agenda. *My River Home* criticizes globalization from above—"neocon style," as Eriksen calls it (190)—that exploits and extracts globally, both from people and from nature. At the same time, it engages in rhetoric that confines Indigenous peoples to a romantic past and replicates American imperialism domestically even as it denounces it internationally.

In *My River Home,* tropes of wilderness pastoralism and American exceptionalism quickly come into conflict with the shared reliance of the U.S. and the Middle Eastern economies on fossil fuels. The idealized memories of the river Eriksen invokes early on are complicated by his experience of class and war along the river's banks, but also by increasing environmental degradation as he moves South. The Mississippi has long been a conduit for idealized projections of America's past and future, but contemporary environmental and socioeconomic conditions along the Middle and Lower River work to dispel those visions. Paradoxically, Eriksen's quest to mentally escape the oil-fueled Gulf War and retreat into the American wilderness brings him in the midst of the multinational petrochemical industry of the Lower Mississippi:

> There is more industry—chemical plants, refineries, and grain elevators—on the river between Baton Rouge and New Orleans than between northern Minnesota and southern

> Mississippi. Days ago, as Dave and I passed Baton Rouge, we floated by a barge being emptied of an unknown chemical that hovered on the surface of the river, creating a hazy mirage. With no place to hide, we covered our mouths and noses, but still suffered headaches and nausea for hours. The common designation of this stretch of the Mississippi River as "Cancer Alley" is easily understood.
>
> (Eriksen 226)

In this bleak, anti-pastoral description, the petrochemical business looms large, refineries and pipe webs are an established part of the landscape, and toxic chemicals cause direct damage to the natural environment as well as the health of Eriksen and his brother. Cancer Alley is where the consequences of the country's oil economy and structural discrimination play out on the surface (Orff and Misrach 115). Beneath the pipelines and the polluted water lurk other layers of national pathologies and histories of labor exploitation.[91] In the words of Arlie Hochschild, "the new cotton is oil" (210).[92] The natural resource the nation depends on may have changed, but the Gulf South and the Lower Mississippi River remain sites of extraction that could not be further removed from the wilderness of *Huckleberry Finn* imagined by travelers who embark on their Mississippi River journeys. Although they are an essential feature of the Lower Mississippi, petrochemical plants hardlly penetrate the national imaginary surrounding the river, except for when they make fleeting headlines in times of disaster. As Eriksen shrewdly points out when he

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[91] The landscape of the Lower Mississippi in Louisiana is examined in detail in *Petrochemical America* (2012), an innovative combination of photography and environmental scholarship by Kate Orff and Richard Misrach. Misrach's photographs teem with juxtapositions, defied expectations, and reminders of historical continuities: a misty sugar cane field with a massive refinery in the background; a lived-in trailer home, guarded by a reposing dog and overshadowed by natural gas tanks; an empty basketball court in Norco, Louisiana, bordered by a Shell refinery on one side and an African-American residential community on the other; and a Black tour guide, bathed in ghostly light, looking out from the restored Nottoway Plantation, which markets itself as the biggest Southern antebellum mansion still standing.

[92] Says Hochschild: "The new cotton is oil, but the plantation culture continues. […] Like cotton, oil is a single commodity requiring huge investment and has, like cotton and sugar, come to dominate the economy" (210). Orff points to another similarity, the fact that the raw material of oil mostly benefits people living far away, which mirrors "the export economy of cotton and cane in a rather obvious historical parallel" (Orff and Misrach 157).

spots the Norco refinery in Southern Louisiana: "Once in a decade or so, Norco makes TV news when it blows up" (Eriksen 228).[93]

Structured in the form of dated journal entries, *My River Home* alternates between accounts of Eriksen's time serving as a Marine in the Gulf War in the early 1990s and his riverine raft trip in 2003. The temporal cuts reveal similarities between two settings meant to be juxtaposed. In both cases, there is a pronounced gap between fantasy and reality: as Eriksen moves down the river, the narrative documents a parallel shattering of myths surrounding the Gulf and Iraq wars and the Mississippi River. The vision of the Mississippi *My River Home* initially outlines is a romanticized memory. The narrative opens with the desert of Kuwait, where Eriksen dreams of his New Orleans home by the Mississippi and fantasizes about the freedom associated with floating down the river: "I am farther from Southern Louisiana than imaginable, far from the bank of the cool Mississippi River that shaped my youth," he tells us. Trying to escape "this graveyard in the desert," he and another Marine fantasize about a quintessentially American raft trip: "Lost in the idea of an American adventure down the Mighty Mississippi, we waste away the hours of fire watch. Despite the heat and wafting stench, our minds float free

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93 Norco (New Orleans Refining Company), home of a Shell petroleum refinery, is located along the banks of the Mississippi in St. Charles Parish of Louisiana, whose swamps Eriksen wistfully imagines in Kuwait. An unincorporated place defined only for statistical purposes, Norco is one of the most polluted places in the country, was home to about three and a half thousand people according to the 2000 census. Once called Sellers, the town was renamed to Norco in 1934 by the Shell Oil Company after the New Orleans Refinery Company that originally owned the refinery. In 2002, after years of lawsuits, Shell paid for the relocation of most of the area's residents (Orff and Misrach 76). While one half of Norco has been cleared for industry, the other half remains residential, complete with churches, schools, restaurants, a post office, and the petrochemical industry two blocks over. The explosions Eriksen is referring to occurred in 1973 and 1988. In *Roadtrip with a Raindrop* (2014), Gayle Harper describes the Petrochemical Corridor between Baton Rouge and New Orleans in the following way: "Refineries and chemical plants butt up against each other on River banks. Trees and marshlands have been replaced by bizarre conglomerations of colossal holding tanks and strangely-shaped metal structures fed by miles of gargantuan metal pipes" (202). The images accompanying the text, however, show none of this, focusing instead on the opulent interior of the Nottoway Plantation. This Louisiana plantation built on conquered Native land was named after the Nottoway region in Virginia—home of the Nottoway Indian Tribe—where the owner, John Hampden Randolph, was born. Harper's imagery contradicts the text by focusing on a wedding taking place in Nottoway's gardens, leaving the river out altogether, except as a distant backdrop to the imposing structure.

under sweet-smelling skies, down a cool, flowing river" (xii). His language juxtaposes verdant Southern scenery with the barren deserts of the Middle East—in essence, the perceived freedom of America with war-torn conflict zones. "The expectations I had of the Marine Corps at the age of seventeen are as inconsistent with the reality of the Gulf War as the Kuwait desert is from the swamp in St. Charles Parish, where life exists in every drop of water" (Eriksen x).[94]

But the reality he encounters once he returns to the river betrays the memory of his childhood Mississippi. The further Eriksen gets on his retreat into America's heartland, the more veterans of the nation's foreign wars he encounters; regionally, the South has the highest military enlistment rates in the country.[95] In the afterword, Eriksen writes about his anti-war activism, which began in earnest only after his 2003 river trip. In 2005, he toured campuses in the South in order to present students with a different perspective on war than the one promoted by recruiters.[96] On these visits, he planted crosses marking American deaths in Iraq in plain sight, regularly updating the rising numbers. On April 17, 2005, he recorded the number 1557 at the

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[94] The trope also comes up in a 2012 song by the popular Americana band, Old Crow Medicine Show. Written by Ketch Secor, "Levi," a song about a Blue Ridge boy "baptized on the banks of the New River" who gets shot down "ten thousand miles from a southern town," presumably in Iraq, declares that "a country boy [..] don't belong in the desert anyway."

[95] More specifically, this includes the South Atlantic, East South Central, and West South Central regions, which cover Delaware, Maryland, D.C., Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas. The leading states in terms of the enlisted percentage of the population are Texas, Florida, and Georgia. According to data from 2013, forty-four percent of all recruits came from the South, "despite it having only 36% of the country's 18-24 year-old civilian population" (Bender et al.). The only Southern states that fall under the national average in this study are Kentucky and Louisiana, Eriksen's home state (Reynolds and Shendruk).

[96] Having joined the Marines to get access to education and to serve the ideals of his country, Eriksen grows increasingly critical of the American imperial project the more first-hand experience in military operations he acquires: "What I knew about the Gulf War left only bitterness. What I knew was that no one fought for democracy. No one fought for human rights" (159). In a characteristically unsparing passage that serves as a critical step in his quasi-conversion, he asks: "Was I a sucker? Was I their mercenary for the bribe of a college scholarship—a little 'yes, Sir' bitch, doing what I was told? I thought I was a warrior. I was only a good marine, obedient to the government, expandable for national interests, answering to everyone but myself. I was not a warrior at all" (161). The dichotomy between the hyper-masculine "warrior" and the feminized "'yes, Sir' bitch" points to the highly gendered fantasy America is selling him—one he does not always question. Disillusionment over the start of a new war in Iraq, however, compounds his existing criticism of American foreign policy.

University of New Orleans: "Little did I know that in four and a half months, nearly fifteen hundred people in the city will drown when homes are torn apart and levees fail" (Eriksen 243). Like the aggressive military recruitment on the campuses of state colleges and universities in the U.S. South during the Iraq war, Katrina impacted poor communities and people of color more than it did the city's wealthier and whiter inhabitants. The structural inequalities stemming from slavery and continuing into the present, in other words, increase both the likelihood of dying in war and of dying in a natural disaster—in 2000, Blacks made up the most overrepresented racial group in the U.S. military.[97]

Outside of Eriksen's nostalgic memory, class and economic imperatives have a pronounced impact on the freedom he initially imagines along the river. The impoverished and economically abandoned places in the Mississippi River Corridor provide few employment opportunities, the job scarcity pressuring many young people from the area and other forgotten regions to enlist and fight the nation's foreign wars. As Eriksen concludes when he encounters a wealthy yacht skipper and his young son in Keokuk, Iowa, contrasting them with a father-son pair he met four days earlier in Oquawka, Illinois:

> Skipper's son likely doesn't need a bribe of school tuition, job training, three meals a day, or free health care./ Skipper's son likely will not serve for the sake of patriotic duty. There's too much to lose and too little to gain. Skipper's son will join the many clubs that other skippers' sons belong to, where they learn to nurture fortunes and barter influence.

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[97] While whites represented the largest portion of the military at the time of Eriksen's river trip (in 2000, they accounted for 65.9% which is more than their 63.1% share of the general military-age population), African American participation went up from 7.7% in 1990 to 19.8% in 2000, even though Blacks only account for 13% of military-age general population, making them the most overrepresented racial group. The same study shows Native Americans as slightly overrepresented, Asian Americans as slightly underrepresented, and Hispanics as the most underrepresented, with 7.9% serving the military—a significantly lower number than their 16.5% share of the general military-age population (Lutz 177). Unsurprisingly, statistics change based on the questions asked and the people posing them. In a report published by the conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation in 2008, the authors insist that economic necessity is not a driving force behind military enlistment, emphasizing that minorities are not overrepresented and that soldiers are less likely to be high school dropouts than civilians (Watkins and Sherk). This report does not, however, offer a breakdown of income and racial distribution among troops as opposed to officers, nor does it distinguish between the Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force, but only looks at the data in the aggregate.

(Eriksen 138)

Skipper's son's class privilege and access to what Bourdieu calls social capital, in other words, allow him to only "go south when it gets cold" and not be swayed into joining the military in order to get access to education (Eriksen 138).[98]

Unlike the pastoral postcards and cookbooks from the previous chapter, Eriksen's perspective does not resort to antebellum nostalgia to make up for the lack of luster in these riverside towns, noting instead that their sharp economic decline came from modernization and globalization:

> The beautiful towns of Princeton and Muscatine in Iowa, and Albany, New Boston, Keithsburg, and Oquawka in Illinois, once earned their vibrancy from the river, and now seem to survive on the nostalgia of better days. Some still live off the railroad; others harbor a factory or two that hasn't yet gone south for cheap labor. And others are near dead, having been weakened by the 1993 flood, a Wal-Mart or a casino.
>
> (Eriksen 135)

One of these towns, Muscatine, Iowa, became the so-called "Pearl Button Capital of the World" by the early twentieth century, producing thirty-seven percent of the world's buttons ("Pearl Button Capital of the World"). The freshwater pearl industry along the Upper Mississippi and its tributaries started to decline in the 1930s as Japan provided cheaper labor and seashell material, taking the lead even before plastic materials replaced mother-of-pearl manufacturing (Hurd 401). But with the rise of the Japanese cultured pearl industry in the second half of the twentieth century, the demand for Mississippi River clam shells went up again. Their beads are less likely to be rejected by oysters, providing "the irritant necessary to produce a cultured pearl" (Hurd

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98 See Bourdieu (16-21). Confirming Eriksen's observations, a 2006 Princeton University study looking at class and enlistment during a time of war found that "voluntary military enlistment during wartime is associated [with] college aspirations, lower socioeconomic status, and living in an area with high military presence" (Kleykamp 272). Similarly, a 2008 Syracuse University study focusing on race, class and immigration status in the military concludes that "significant disparities exist only by socioeconomic status," emphasizing that "the all-volunteer force continues to see overrepresentation of the working and middle classes, with fewer incentives for upper class participation" (Lutz 167, 185).

410-411). As Eriksen's reflections demonstrate, the twentieth century brought major changes to towns like Muscatine: river commerce was largely replaced by the railroad; industries like button making became extinct; globalization and lax regulation in the Global South started moving factory jobs wherever labor is cheapest; big corporations expanded and thwarted local businesses; and environmental disasters caused more economic damage to an already impoverished area.[99]

Holding on to the past that is marketable to the rare tourist, such riverine towns cling to the nostalgia of Twain's steamboat glory days. "The towns themselves are museums," Eriksen asserts, "struggling to hold on to their culture, while shops close and buildings fall to ruin. They defend their heritage with futile care while the present engulfs a collapsing way of life" (136). Amidst the narrative of bygone days, industrialization, economic decline, and diminishing natural diversity emerges the *Mississippi Queen*, a "faux paddlewheeler" and an embodied engine of nostalgia whistling such Southern standards as "Dixieland" and "Oh Suzanna," nearly running Eriksen over (127). If his perspective from the *Bottle Rocket* gives Eriksen a nuanced perspective on the Mississippi River, the tourist steamboat experience, in contrast, is designed solely to entertain, the music drowning out everything but the antebellum vision it markets. Eriksen remains unimpressed with the boat's façade and its arrogant monopolizing of the waterway.

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[99] Although the factories may have closed a long time ago, traces of the past remain ingrained in the landscape. Says Eriksen: "In the morning I discover that we've set up camp on an ancient landfill. Broken bits of ceramics, purple glass, and globs of rusted metal dot the shoreline. Hundreds of clamshells litter the beach, with perfect, circular holes cut out of them" (Eriksen 136). Humankind has imprinted itself on the shores of the river, and bits and pieces of it have found a new life elsewhere. The holed clams Eriksen describes are leftovers of globally exported pieces of the Mississippi; at one point, Eriksen meets a clam diver who used to collect "large mussel shells from the river bottom to be cut into pea-sized spheres and then slipped into live scallops in Japan, to make pearls" (126).

The class component in *My River Home* makes it clear that no one's choices are entirely their own, but are instead embedded in larger political, socioeconomic, and environmental conditions. For Eriksen, the river symbolizes this connectivity and people's responsibility to one another: "Slowly I began to feel that I was part of the river, part of a system, and not an entity of my own. Mortal, yet infinite in the current of life" (128). Throughout the narrative, he emphasizes collectivity over individual freedom, challenging "foolish notions of independence" and insisting that barely anything one does "is really a solitary accomplishment" (90). Even his river trip is completed in tandem, rejecting the myth of self-sufficiency America is so invested in promoting. Jenna, a journalist and a former girlfriend, joins him around Dubuque, Iowa, staying with him for most of the journey until his brother Dave replaces her on the Lower River.

Documenting the economic decline of river towns, Eriksen also highlights the environmental component of profit-driven globalization. He exposes the ways in which the desire for profits and market domination translates to the exploitative ways the U.S. treats the natural environment. The memoir critiques unbridled capitalism and neoliberal politics that exploit people and natural resources alike to gain a powerful few, not caring about long-term implications and the destruction this leaves in its wake.[100] If nineteenth-century Manifest Destiny relied on imagery of wide-open spaces and the wilderness trope, its 21st-century version is less centered on territorial expansionism than it is on power and profit. In *My River Home*, Eriksen's representation of the river catches up with these changing realities.

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[100] Eriksen's river education solidifies his position as an anti-war and anti-plastic activist, the latter becoming an all-encompassing professional mission he continues to work on today. Having already completed his PhD in Science Education by the time he set out on his raft trip, Eriksen hardly needed convincing about the perils of industrial and plastic pollution. Eriksen co-founded the Leap-Lab science center and the 5Gyres Institute, both of which fight plastic pollution and promote sustainable ways of living. His work focuses on ecological impacts of plastic marine pollution. In 2017, he published his second book, *Junk Raft: An Oceanic Voyage and the Rising Tide of Activism to Fight Plastic Pollution*, in which he documents his Pacific journey from California to Hawaii on another plastic bottle raft.

The narrative replaces the wilderness ideal with anti-pastoral images of the Lower Mississippi as a sewer. The age of fossil fuels and endless consumerism leaves no room for wilderness pastoralism, triggering a change in Eriksen's rendering of the environment and prompting him to describe the Lower River as a twenty-first century wasteland: "The Mississippi River is a sewer. Cans, bottles, millions of pieces of foam, and other bits of plastic debris are everywhere, as well as the occasional zip-lock bag of yellow liquid" (Eriksen 226). In Eriksen's description, consumer waste is so prevalent as to be absorbed by the landscape: "Abandoned refrigerators, stoves, washers, and dryers sit beneath the green vegetation that tries vainly to camouflage their white carcasses" (226). The ecological problems of the twentieth century go far beyond littering, however. In his article on plastic pollution in the *Tulane Environmental Law Journal*, Eriksen criticizes the emphasis on "consumer behavior as the principle source of litter," arguing instead for extended producer responsibility, which would require plastics manufacturers to "demonstrate a successful system of material recovery after consumer use" or use "an environmentally harmless alternative" (153).[101]

My River Home highlights the continuity of an American imperial project that extends from European colonization to Manifest Destiny to recent military operations in the Middle East to global consumerism and commerce and the pollution and waste they leave in their wake. The narrative connects the urge to dominate people and places to the ways we treat the natural environment. The damaged Lower River thus reflects Eriksen's disillusionment with the nation's foreign wars and the empty rhetoric of freedom and democracy, often used to mask imperial pursuits. Following the changing conditions of the river as Eriksen moves South, the narrative's

[101] The article focuses on plastic pollution in aquatic environments like the Mississippi, the Great Lakes, and the global ocean (153-154). In Eriksen's words, the Anthropocene "can be defined stratigraphically by our uniquely manufactured index fossil: synthetic polymer plastic" ("Plastipocene" 155).

representation of the Mississippi shifts from the mythologized American wilderness of his initial memories to a multinational wasteland in the service of global capital.

The memoir uses Lewis and Clark reenactors to critique the twenty-first century version of Manifest Destiny, neoliberal globalization. At Cairo, Illinois, the famous spot where the Mississippi meets the Ohio and where Huck and Jim missed their turn toward freedom and unwittingly got carried deeper into the slave-holding South, Eriksen meets a group of reenactors on their westward journey. "Thomas Jefferson's belief in Manifest Destiny was the driving force supporting the Lewis and Clark expedition. Do you think the United States has a Manifest Destiny today?" he asks (Eriksen 184). Jefferson, a founding father with a famously problematic relationship to the freedom he liked to promulgate, commissioned the Lewis and Clark expedition into the newly acquired territory of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. The voyage started the nineteenth-century U.S. expansion West that prompted many acts of Native American removal. After 1845, the mission gained currency under the camouflaged rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. Eriksen draws conceptual links between this nineteenth-century doctrine and the American foreign policy of his own time. Only getting an embarrassed nod to his earlier question, he provides a longer answer himself:

> Globalization, neocon style, is a Trojan horse that rationalizes preemptive war, free trade, and the exploitation of people and resources. It is not sustainable./ There it is. Young Americans with love of country in their hearts are sent to spill their blood, not for freedom, democracy, or protection of the homeland, but for the profit and political survival of a powerful few./ There's your Manifest Destiny.
>
> (Eriksen 190)

Although he stops short of naming it, Eriksen identifies the narrative of American exceptionalism that justifies the expansion of the American empire, masking the pursuit of capital and global power in the language of freedom and democracy. As the American Studies

scholar Donald Pease explains, American exceptionalism is a discourse constructed in opposition to Cold-War Soviet imperialism; a narrative that allows one to ignore "the contradiction between the nation's democratic ideals and subsequent imperial practices in the discourse of exceptionalism" (63).[102] Emphasizing Jefferson's phrase "Empire for Liberty," which was used to describe Western expansion as an exception to Old World imperial aggression, Pease shows that the U.S. has in fact "been in the process of imperial state formation from the time of its founding" (63-64, 67). *My River Home* reveals such a genealogy in plain terms; moreover, its use of the word 'sustainable' points to both the inevitable collapse of such a system and to the devastating environmental implications of practices that are built on the exploitation of labor and natural resources.

However, the military language of *My River Home* reenacts the colonial errand into the wilderness, never acknowledging the U.S. occupation of Native lands on home turf as it critiques overseas invasions. Recounting his experience canoeing past Indigenous people harvesting wild rice on the Upper Mississippi, Eriksen remarks: "I leave them to their traditions. I have no other business here. […] I am an intruder into the headwaters, not the first nor the last, but I invade a wilderness that is indifferent and unforgiving" (Eriksen 41). The verb choice highlights the connection between the settler colonial takeover of Indigenous lands and the U.S. invasion of Iraq and could be read as a type of land acknowledgement. Regardless of this awareness, Eriksen

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[102] Although the language of American exceptionalism is primarily associated with the Cold War era and the American studies scholarship that emerged during that period, the seeds of it go all the way back to Alexis de Tocqueville's 1835 *Democracy in America*. In it, de Tocqueville describes the position of Americans as "quite exceptional" and identifies the origin of their society as "strictly Puritanical" (122). The term 'American exceptionalism,' however, did not find its way into scholarly jargon until the 1920s when Joseph Stalin used it to describe the deviation of a faction of the American Communist Party from the established orthodoxy (Pease 58). "If the doctrine of American exceptionalism derived its authority from the account of the United States' unique place in world history that it authorized," Pease explains, "it drew its structure out of its difference from the social imaginaries that it attributed to Europe" (59).

dismisses the people near the headwaters, confining them to a pre-modern past. He uses the concept of wilderness to describe a space which includes both people and economic activity. His rhetoric echoes early colonial accounts in which Native people do not interfere with the land's perceived emptiness as well as Romantic notions of the 'noble savage.' As Nash points out, prior to settlement, the New World was seen as a wilderness "because Europeans *considered* it such," regarding Native tribes as "a form of wildēor whose savageness was consistent with the character of wild country" (7).

As the memoir recirculates such colonial narratives about land, Eriksen's gaze replicates the imperialist project. His description of Native people stereotypes them and confines them to history; his projection functions as another vehicle of frontier-day nostalgia. In the words of literary scholar Melanie Benson Taylor, one of the most common stereotypes about Native Americans is "the wise, romantic, ecological anticapitalist Indian who safeguards the spirit and memory of our deepest national values at the moments we seem to be in acute danger of forgetting them" ("In Deep" 68). In a narrative about the industrial waste of modernity, the rice harvesters at the Headwaters invoke the Keep America Beautiful "Iron Eyes Cody" commercial from 1971. The ad features an Italian American actor who poses as Native American; he is seen paddling among huge ships down a river filled with litter before surveying the scene and shedding a single tear. Proposing to leave the rice harvesters "to their traditions," Eriksen places them outside of the polluted, commercial modernity he inhabits. The narrative represents the river's geographic and temporal progression in tandem; it confines Indigenous people to the past at the river's source, ignoring both ongoing forms of dispossession and the fact that their displacement was a structural component of the system of American capitalism Eriksen sets out to critique (Baker 24). River tourism, as the previous chapter shows, is deeply implicated in the

national project of the United States and therefore complicit in practices of colonialism—even the possessive pronoun in the book's title, *My River Home*, signals the traveler's reappropriation of Native space for himself.

High Water Everywhere

Figure 9: Tom Lee Park in downtown Memphis, Tennessee, the tip of the Mississippi Delta, with a swollen Mississippi in the background. Lee used his twenty-eight-foot skiff to save thirty-two people from drowning in the Mississippi when the M.E. Norman steamboat capsized in 1925 (Photo by author, 2019).

3. Overflow: Flood Literature

"The grandmothers were right/ about everything," asserts Nikky Finney's poem "Left" from her 2011 collection *Head off & Split* (15). Focusing on the aftermath of ruptured levees, which caused New Orleans to flood after the 2005 Hurricane Katrina, the poem situates the deluge in the historical cycles of anti-Black violence and the repetitive displacement of the Black diaspora.

> People who outlived bullwhips & Bull
> Connor, historically afraid of water and routinely
> fed to crocodiles, left in the sun on the sticky tar-
> heat of roofs to roast like pigs, surrounded by
> forty feet of churning water, in the summer
> of 2005, while the richest country in the world
> played the old observation game, studied
> the situation: wondered by committee what to do;
> counted, in private, by long historical division;
> speculated whether or not some people are surely
> born ready, accustomed to flood, famine, fear.
>
> (Finney 16)

The poem critiques the discriminatory politics of rescue and recovery after Katrina, emphasizing the government's racist calculations about which lives matter and which ones are worth saving. "*Eenee Menee Mainee Mo!,*" as Finney's riff on the well-known children's rhyme inserted between the stanzas puts it (13-14). The verses above invoke both the whips used by overseers, characterizing plantation slavery, and the segregationist policies of the Alabama Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene "Bull" Connor, who authorized fire hose and police dog attacks on Civil Rights activists in the 1960s. Finney carries the state's degrading treatment of African Americans into the twenty-first century. In the wake of Katrina, the poem reflects the cumulative trauma caused by government-sanctioned violence against Black Americans and triggered by water.

In this chapter, I draw on Thadious Davis' theory of Black literary reclamation of the South in *Southscapes* (2011) and Kimberly Ruffin's uncovering of Black literary

environmentalism in *Black on Earth* (2010) to read texts that simultaneously claim Black regional, political, and environmental belonging in the South.[103] I examine how natural disasters, made worse by engineering and patterns of settlement and agriculture, rupture idealized pastoral depictions of the Mississippi River and odes to modernity I discuss in previous chapters.

The worst environmental disasters in the Mississippi River Valley and along the Gulf Coast resulted from flooding. The Mississippi Flood of 1927 along the Lower River and the 2005 Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast both caused great human suffering and death. They induced literary outpourings that grapple with their many consequences and the racial and social inequalities they exacerbated. The historic rhythm of flood literature itself acts as a rapid deluge, causing an overflow of texts clustered around the 1927 flood and Katrina. Both waves of flood literature give voice to Black Southerners' experiences of environmental danger and historical waves of displacement.

Although not restricted to works authored by Black Southerners, flood literature centered on the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico is most prolific in African American letters, which produced the highest number of these texts. In describing the conditions of flooding, early blues music and 1930s Black literature both highlight the role of labor and represent the environmental conditions of the river while resisting pastoral tropes. In doing so, they write against the influential group of white Agrarians writers, who glorified the pre-industrial life of the Old

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[103] In *Southscapes*, Davis focuses on the legacies of racial segregation, analyzing how Black Southern writers articulate a complex regional identity in a society marred by Jim Crow and its aftermath. For her, the post-1970 Black migration back to the South is "a major grounding for identity" since it allows Black Southerners to collectively position themselves "within the landscape of the South" and articulate Southernness as well as Blackness (Davis 35, 26). Ruffin, on the other hand, explores environmental aspects of Black identity, highlighting the relationship between Black Americans' "ecological burden," which results from economic and environmental inequalities, and their experience of "ecological beauty" (2-3).

South, blatantly erasing slavery and obscuring the labor on which white wealth was built.[104] The shift in emphasis in Black flood literature from the largely parochial Agrarian preoccupation with land to fluid bodies of water disregards the artificial boundaries of counties and states, articulating a regionalism that is not isolated, but is instead embedded in the larger nation. Black Southern literature that engages the landscape of the river does so within a space that has traditionally disenfranchised Blacks, claiming an ecological as well as a political voice in the region. As Ruffin argues, such texts assert ecological citizenship, defined as a political claim to "ecological belonging within the context of a nation" (167).[105]

Black Southern flood writing shifts the traditional literary focus on land to center water and floods, thus claiming an ecological citizenship that emphasizes these writers' place in the South and the South's place in the nation. The authors envision a form of diasporic community that reflects the fluidity of water and emphasizes the interdependence of different parts of the

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[104] Southern literature of the 1930s was dominated by the white Nashville Agrarians and their 1930 collective manifesto "I'll Take My Stand" and accompanying individual essays. The collection resists the industrialization of the North and proclaims "genuine humanism" to be "rooted in the agrarian life of the older South" (4). The twelve authors of the manifesto are John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Frank Lawrence Owsley, John Gould Fletcher, Lyle H. Lanier, Allen Tate, Herman Clarence Nixon, Andrew Nelson Lytle, Robert Penn Warren, John Donald Wade, Henry Blue Kline, and Stark Young.

[105] White writes like James Agee have written against the Agrarians as well. In *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) about Depression-era Alabama, Agee exposes exploitative labor practices by linking the children of white tenant farmers —"auxiliary instruments of labor" (49)—to Black slaves. Southern plantation slavery structures his thinking about the white tenant farmer, who is "slaved and ordered by a crimesoaked world" (90-91). The analogy invokes sympathy for poor white farmers while largely ignoring the plight of their Black counterparts. Historically, the majority of tenants and convict laborers were Black, but "during the Depression more poor whites found themselves swept up in the system," accounting for as much as two-thirds of the South's tenant farmers (Isenberg 207, 214). Due to poll taxes, many of them were unable to vote, and their exclusion from governmental programs like the New Deal's Social Security—which did not apply to farm laborers—put them, at least temporarily, in a very similar position to those of Southern Blacks (Isenberg 217, 223). Agee's vision of a "crimesoaked" world reveals his aversion to the Agrarian pastoral, describing fields as "workrooms, of fragrant but mainly sterile workfloors" (112). He connects Southern field work to the industrial labor of the North, refusing to separate them, as the Agrarians tended to. He also foregrounds the land's sterility, the opposite of the Agrarian ideal of bountiful pastoral red clay, speaking instead to the reality of depleted soil and dismal material conditions.

river and diverse segments of society.[106] Invoking the history of labor and engagement with the landscape of the river instead of land ownership, this literature articulates a rhetoric of belonging, voicing a political stake and focusing on survival, which opens up space for a new, post-apocalyptic order. I draw here on the work of Kimberly Ruffin, who posits that literature can play a major role in articulating a nuanced Black environmentalism, which wrestles with centuries of environmental injustice on the one hand, and "a desire for environmental belonging" on the other (10). Just as floods have the power to remake the landscape, writing that draws on collective memory expressed in the tradition of Black flood literature imagines new and more equitable forms of regional and national belonging.[107]

The African American texts examined in this chapter, the 1930s blues music and poetry of Charley Patton and Sterling Brown, Jesmyn Ward's 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones*, and Kiese Laymon's 2013 novel *Long Division*, are all set in the state of Mississippi. They represent, critique, and try to reimagine the forms of extraction, environmental destruction, and dispossession that led to the 1927 flood and the inundation that followed Katrina. By drawing on Black literary genealogies from the state of Mississippi and the local landscapes of the Mississippi Delta and the Gulf Coast, post-Katrina writings highlight the ways in which racism and environmental disasters falsely labeled as natural are related. They envision a reconstituting of the Southern landscape with Black people at the center instead of in the margins.

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[106] For Black writers, as literary scholar Sonya Posmentier argues, the flood reproduced the conditions of diaspora. Their lyrical responses resist the alienation of displacement by "voicing a poetics of survival, repair, and generation," which forms "one basis for Black modernity in the twentieth century" (3,15).

[107] In her exploration of the Mississippi in African American imagination, historian Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted describes three lenses through which Black expressive arts represent the river: "the river as refuge and sustenance, the river as labor, and the river as a cultural icon." She argues that all three draw on history that then gets "transformed into a mythology or collective memory that informs identity as well as lends agency to the river" (88).

Reflecting the fluidity of water, Black flood literature draws on various literary forms—song, poetry, novels—to use anti-pastoral images of the specific geographies of the Mississippi Delta and the Gulf Coast and represent the river and flooding in relation to heightened environmental risk and histories of displacement and labor. The genre looks at the historical causes of contemporary disasters and rewrites the quiet violence of forgetting by bringing the past and the present side by side; the highlighting of these continuities stakes a claim to Black people's ecological citizenship. The Mississippi, whose flood waters recede only to inevitably overflow again, symbolizes the influence of the past on the present and visualizes its overwhelming repetition. This body of work oscillates between displacement and belonging. On the one hand, the texts invoke the painful historic experience of the Black diaspora; on the other, they convey a connection to land that comes with generational family ties and investment through labor and other relational practices. As literary scholar Sonya Posmentier points out, rootedness in Black environmental knowledge is less about establishing nativity than it is about providing "the networks through which we move in place and time" (101). While Black flood literature exposes racialized social inequalities and environmental possibilities, it focuses on survival, opening up space for renewal and a new, post-apocalyptic order. It shows nature as a site of belonging and potential rebirth, reflecting a blues ethos, or an "attitudinal orientation toward experience, a sustaining philosophy of life" (Gussow).

Ward and Laymon draw on a genealogy of Depression-era Black Southern nature writing. They position themselves as Black Southern writers, challenging the traditional divide between race and region in African American and white Southern literatures. They reject formal practices of segregation that persisted in the literary canon long after the official fall of Jim Crow, as well as twenty-first century trends that aim to transcend race and region. Post-Katrina

writers highlight regional experience and the Southern landscape as part of their Blackness and their environmentalism. They offer a critique of the South and the larger national body of the United States by exposing the raced and classed dimensions of environmental disasters, articulating an environmentalism that is both Black and Southern and imagining a future built on the principles of racial equity and environmental responsibility. While they might be geographically localized, they speak to issues that exceed regional frameworks, engaging in urgent national conversations about environmental perils and their disproportionate impact on economically disadvantaged and often non-white populations.

I. When the Levees Break

Literary production about the Mississippi has proliferated in times of disasters high in human cost. The Flood of 1927 and the 2005 Hurricane Katrina in particular produced an unparalleled literary and musical outpouring in African American representations of natural disasters, coalescing in the regional cultural imagination.[108] Black flood literature of these two historical clusters highlights the instability of flood protection engineering and the disproportionate effect of these structures' failures on African American communities.

Since European colonization, whites regulated the Mississippi River to serve their interests and reinforce their hegemony, but early efforts were less centralized than those of the twentieth century. During French and Spanish colonial rule, levees along the Lower River were

[108] With the death toll at 1,836, mostly in New Orleans, Katrina is the third deadliest hurricane in U.S. history. It was surpassed only by the Galveston Hurricane of 1900 and the Okeechobee Hurricane in Florida in 1928, which served as inspiration for Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). In comparison, the economically devastating but less lethal Upper River flood of 1993 did not produce the same type of literary attention. The 1969 Hurricane Camille was dramatized in Barry Hannah's 1973 novel *Night-Watchmen*. Destructive prior storms have made a comeback in the post-Katrina literary landscape.

an obligation of land ownership; when the United States took control of the area with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the government took an even less active role, making all efforts at flood control private and localized, carried out by individual plantation owners. Before and during the Civil War, enslaved and freed Blacks were the ones tasked with building these levees, first for planters and later for the U.S. Army (Morris 140-148).

After the war, the U.S. government provided a unified response to flood control along the Mississippi, aiming to strengthen the newly emerging empire. A levee failure which caused severe flooding of New Orleans in 1849 already triggered debates over river regulation; following the disruption of the Civil War, Congress established the Mississippi River Commission in charge of federal flood control in 1879 (Morris 140-143). River engineering, as environmental historian Donald Worster shows, was central to the American imperial project. While the "hydraulic society" of the American West that Worster describes found a way to bring water to an arid setting, the swampy Mississippi Delta faced the opposite problem of an overflow of water that threatened to destroy agricultural production. In both cases, however, American rivers were manipulated on a large scale, reflecting "a culture and society built on, and absolutely dependent on, a sharply alienating, intensely managerial relationship with nature" (Worster 5).

A manipulated river does not serve everyone equally, however. As the federal government started managing the Mississippi after Reconstruction, environmental historian Christopher Morris argues, the waterway itself "became the possession of whites, who used federal resources to act against the interests of many black residents of the Mississippi Valley" (160). Levees aimed to protect white plantations; they destroyed the wetland edges inhabited by formerly enslaved Blacks in order to render the land suitable for cotton cultivation. With "no

place left to hide, hunt, and fish," says Morris, "laborers had to work on plantations." The levees were built mostly by Black men, but it was white men who owned the majority of land protected from flooding (Morris 161). Although the Flood of 1927 pointed to the failure of the Army Corps of Engineers' decades-long levees-only policy, Congress authorized unprecedented funds for Project Flood the following year. The large-scale reconstruction of levees along the Mississippi succeeded in curtailing flooding along the main branch of the river, but it exacerbated the problem along the river's backwaters and tributaries (Morris 165-166).[109]

Flood protection has been tied to wealth and political power throughout the long twentieth century. The disaster in New Orleans in the summer of 2005 was itself a flood caused by catastrophic levee failure, not the hurricane. Without human intervention, as Morris argues throughout his study, the Lower River Valley would be a muddy space where land and water mix. The fact that engineering efforts have tried to artificially separate the two only ensures that human and material costs are that much higher when flooding inevitably topples the constructions meant to prevent it (213). Morris emphasizes the many ways in which Katrina was a human and not a natural disaster, caused by the destruction of the coastal environment and an economic system that forced the development of low-income housing in low-lying districts (205). As environmental policy scholars Robert Bullard and Beverley Wright's research shows, the inequitable politics of recovery and lack of access to quality insurance also meant that African Americans were more likely to be permanently displaced by the flood than white New

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[109] Backwater, as historian Richard Mizelle explains, refers to "vulnerable landscapes" between various streams and tributaries away from the main Mississippi River channel, which were usually afforded lesser levee protection—if any. The term also encompasses a "backwater identity," the complicated historical relationship with the Mississippi River based on the "disciplining of poor people and African Americans into neglected spaces that, later in the century, would become defined as environmental racism" (Mizelle 9). In the words of a 1937 study of caste and class in an anonymous Delta town, the terrain of the area is "flat as a tennis court but with a bit of a tilt, the white people living in the upper half. Should floods come, the Negro quarter would be first under water" (Dollard 2).

Orleanians (30).[110] While the Mississippi Gulf Coast did not face a similar levee problem, the winds and flooding brought by Katrina were exacerbated by the appropriation of the protective coastal wetland ecology for tourist purposes. In the aftermath, structural racism and poverty ensured the inequitable redistribution of rescue efforts and recovery funds.[111]

II. 1927: The Mississippi Delta

Not to be confused with the delta of the Mississippi River in Southern Louisiana, what we think of as the Mississippi Delta is a rich farm region in the floodplain between the Mississippi and the Yazoo rivers in the state of Mississippi. In the nineteenth century, longstanding human impact on the area expanded into a boom of commercial logging, agricultural clearing, and levee building. This transformed the Delta from a heavily forested region to an environmentally depleted cotton kingdom. European settlers started the project of segregating land and water in the Mississippi River Valley and building towns and plantations in an essentially wet place, which required evermore engineering to maintain (Morris 3,7). Levee building proliferated in the second half of the nineteenth century, but it failed to prevent catastrophic flooding and caused severe draught. The response was to build more levees, drain, irrigate, and use DDT and other chemicals,

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[110] Lack of insurance barred thousands of low-income non-white residents from participating in the reconstruction that took place after the storm. While the Black population fell by 57% after Katrina, the white population decreased by 36%. Studies have found that regardless of economic status, "if you are a black resident of New Orleans, you are less protected and you have received less increased flood protection from the federal government than the more white and affluent community" (Bullard and Wright 19, 30, 39).

[111] In her non-fictional landscape memoir *Beyond Katrina* (2010), Natasha Trethewey focuses on man-made beaches and accompanying casino developments. She examines both the literal wetland depletion and the metaphorical erosion of cultural heritage from the area's character (13). She points out that land usage and development tripled in the second half of the twentieth century, causing a massive loss of wetlands, ecosystems responsible for "cleansing polluted water, recharging groundwater, and absorbing storm wave energy." This made the coast more susceptible to the devastation caused by hurricanes (Trethewey13). In New Orleans, wetlands in the river's delta similarly shrunk because of the construction of pipelines and shipping canals, destroying natural buffer areas that would protect the city from the storm (Schwartz, *Sea of Storms* 321).

essentially treating "the symptoms of the pathology, rather than the pathology itself" (Morris 141, 170, 178). By 1932, sixty percent of the Delta was being used for agricultural cultivation, mostly cotton, and only two percent of the land classified as old-growth forest by 1934 (Saikku 2-3, 222).

These changes did not go unnoticed in literature of the 1930s and 1940s. In William Faulkner's "Delta Autumn," for example, Isaac McCaslin, a complex figure representing a lost white agricultural and slave-owning past, ties humankind's overexploitation of the region's abundant natural resources to slavery. He describes the Delta as a land "*man has deswamped and denuded and derivered in two generations so that white men can own plantations* […] *and black men own plantations*," a land where "all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say which one is which nor cares" (347). The excerpt misrepresents plantation slavery as an economic system benefitting Black as well as white landowners, going against historical facts by inventing Black plantation masters. McCaslin conflates the dangers of deforestation with the perceived immorality of racial mixing in which his ancestors have engaged, predicting that nature will "accomplish its revenge" through the actions of the people who have destroyed it (Faulkner 347).

The most damaging environmental event in the Delta occurred in 1927, when a long period of heavy rains caused the Mississippi River and its many tributaries to swell with water, inundating the South.[112] By late spring, flooding crushed over a hundred and twenty levees and

[112] I read the 1927 Flood through the lens of Susan Scott Parrish's cultural history, in which she makes the case for the centrality of the event to American conceptions of modern "eco-catastrophe." Parrish argues that the lived experience of plantation laborers in the South gave them "a longer history of seeing modernity's limitations, costs, and dangers," crediting the flood with bringing ecological catastrophes into discussions of modernity (3,9). Parrish shows that the Southerners who lived in the floodplain understood the flood as anthropogenic rather than divine or natural before anyone else did. They implicated the entire watershed (i.e. the North) in the flooding, not just the most affected areas in the South (99).

caused forty-two large crevasses, overflowing about 1,100 square miles between Cairo, Illinois and the Gulf, displacing millions of people (Mizelle 8). Morris characterizes the 1927 flood as "the most severe symptom of the pathological landscape that the dried lower Mississippi Valley had become" (179).

Material transformations in the Delta are inextricably linked with social conditions. Drying Delta mud and wetlands and building levees required hard physical labor, which was usually forced and often performed by Black people. The labor practices which separated water from land thus also propelled racial segregation (Morris 6-7). Because African American communities lived in the environmentally more vulnerable low-lying backwater areas, they were the most exposed to the damage of seasonal floods (Mizelle 9-15). On the one hand, the blues of Charley Patton and Sterling Brown emphasize the suffering of Black sharecroppers and highlight labor exploitation and racially inequitable conditions in the Delta. On the other, they draw on the lyric subjects' experience of interacting with the landscape of the river to articulate agency and belonging, providing an important counternarrative to official white discourse surrounding the flood. At the time, even the more progressive whites like William Alexander Percy routinely resorted to condescending paternalism. Percy was repulsed by white supremacy, describing the Klan as "the very spirit of hatred," but still treated African American sharecroppers as children in need of control and guidance (233). Southern paternalism forms another version of the river pastoral discussed in previous chapters; it maintains the status quo and prevents Southern Blacks from receiving the kind of education and resources that would elevate them from poverty and ensure self-sufficiency.[113]

[113] While at times, Percy displays an acute understanding of the power structures and failures inherent in the sharecropping system, he also advocates for it: "Share-cropping is one of the best systems ever devised to give security and a chance for profit to the simple and the unskilled. It has but one drawback—it must be administered by

Mainstream accounts from the 1930s minimize and misrepresent Black experiences of the flood. As chairman of the Flood Relief Committee and the local Red Cross during the Flood of 1927, Percy admits that "none of us was influenced by what the Negroes themselves wanted." He insists on a patronizingly racist view of Southern Blacks as having "no capacity to plan for their own welfare," insisting that "planning for them was another one of [white men's] burdens" (258). Says Percy: "the black man is our brother, a younger brother, not adult, not disciplined, but tragic, pitiful, and lovable" (309). While Black commentators like W.E.B. Dubois in an article for *The Crisis* linked Red Cross camps to slave ships, Percy had his own interpretation of the conditions, describing the set-up of the early days of the flood as well-suited to Black sharecroppers' temperaments: "There was nothing for them to do except unload their rations when the boats docked. The weather was hot and pleasant. Conditions favored conversation. They worked a little, talked a great deal, ate heartily of food which somebody else had paid for, and sang at night" (264).[114]

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human beings to whom it offers an unusual opportunity to rob without detection or punishment. […] The Negro is no more on an equality with the white man in plantation matters than in any other dealings between the two. […] the Negro's redress is merely theoretical. […] Property is a form of power" (Percy 282-283).

[114]An archival image from the W.E.B. DuBois Archives at the University of Massachusetts Amherst of the front page of DuBois's 1928 *Crisis* article and an image titled the "Slave Ship, 1927" appear in Posmentier's *Cultivation and Catastrophe* (133). A similar racialized discrepancy in perspective becomes apparent if we compare Charley Patton's account of the flood to William Faulkner's 1939 novel *The Wild Palms*, which goes back and forth between two escaped white convicts who worked on the levee during the 1927 flood in the Delta and a 1930s illicit love story anchored in New Orleans and on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. In the novel, one of the prisoners complains about rescue efforts that excluded him: "I saw that launch and them boats come up and they never had no room for me. Full of [racial slur] and one of them setting there playing a guitar but there wasn't no room for me. A guitar!" (67). Patton's blues present a mirror image of the situation, more accurately reflecting the statistics of rescue efforts and the widespread measures to protect white property (Evans, "High Water" 12). Richard Wright's novella "Down by the Riverside" (1938) shares a similar perspective: "they were talking about bringing in soldiers, too. They were afraid of stores and homes being looted." Wright notes that in times of disaster, white people will shoot a Black person down "jus lika dog n think nothing of it" (Wright 64).

Flood Blues and Regional Belonging

Because of the differences in lived experiences, literary responses to the flood vary considerably across the color line. As historian Richard Mizelle notes, in the absence of Black perspectives in official archives, blues songs in particular offer a window into the lives of African Americans from the Delta (11). Whites and Blacks coded the 1927 flood as diverging and conflicted strands of painful histories; to some whites, the invading waters from the north brought back memories of the Civil War; to Blacks, the conditions of forced labor in evacuee camps evoked slavery (Parrish 14).[115]

The unique musical genre of the blues was developed in the early days of the twentieth century by Black Delta sharecroppers and levee workers, who performed largely the same labor as their enslaved ancestors, but possessed a degree of geographical mobility, although their freedom of movement was considerably constrained by the Jim Crow laws.[116] As the numerous "Levee Blues" and "Levee Holler" titles show, many early blues musicians worked in the newly emerging itinerant labor force in levee camps all along the Mississippi. These were often

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[115] Similarly, Evans notes that while most whites saw the flood as a tragic natural disaster, African Americans tended to have a different understanding, seeing it as "a sign of God's wrath against the sins of man," wiping the slate clean and making the Delta a new land: "The soil that had been on the old plantations had been washed away and deposited elsewhere. It was now time to leave the plantations and head north for better opportunities" ("High Water" 9). This reveals a typological interpretation of the landscape in African American expressive arts, in which god's wrath at human sin and depravity materializes in flooding. In the Book of Genesis, god plans to destroy the world but saves the righteous Noah by instructing him to build an ark for his family and pairs of animals to reconstitute the postdiluvian world.

[116] The blues were born in the heart of the Delta, moving up and down the river via steamboats and railroads and making its way into cities like Chicago. Rock and roll came out of the city at the northern tip of the Delta, Memphis, Tennessee. As historian Michael Allen points out, "the geography of early rock encompasses the entire Mississippi River Valley," which produced figures like Fats Domino (New Orleans, Louisiana), Johnny Cash (Kingsland, Arkansas), Elvis Presley (Tupelo, Mississippi), Chuck Berry (St. Louis, Missouri), and Bob Dylan (Duluth, Minnesota) (103-104). In his memoir, Dylan highlights this influence, claiming that the blues are in his veins: "The Mississippi River, the bloodstream of the blues, also starts from up in my neck of the woods. I was never too far away from any of it. It was my place in the universe, always felt it was in my blood" (240). Near the river's delta in Louisiana, the New Orleans mixture of the blues and ragtime, a musical style characterized by syncopated rhythm, gave birth to jazz in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. After World War I, jazz "began a water-borne journey outward," spreading "an exotic new music labeled riverboat jazz to the nation's inland waterways" and influencing the production and popularity of over 250 jazz and blues river songs and tunes (Kenney 1, 184-191).

difficult to distinguish from prison farms, where Black laborers were incarcerated by white authorities as a result of minor and perceived infractions such as vagrancy.[117] The very structure of the blues lends itself to representations of the flood, Posmentier argues, reflecting the "accumulative structure of the floods and of Black diasporic experience in the flood plain" (152). Like the water that keeps returning and causing variations on the theme of displacement, Delta blues verses consist of two repetitive lines, which build up and culminate in a third one that answers them in a call and response pattern (Palmer 18).[118]

The flood coincided with a boom of early blues recordings between 1925 and 1930, boosted by new recording technology and the mass marketing of phonographs (Denning). The disaster affected African Americans disproportionately, both because the population of the Delta was predominantly Black and because residential segregation and environmental vulnerabilities exposed them to the flood and ensured they suffered the worst consequences. As Posmentier contends, the flood "captures the continuing catastrophe that is the shape of Black historical experience" (147). As a result, many blues recordings from the period deal with flooding; they

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[117] The line between freedom, however nominal, and re-enslavement was very thin due to the numerous vagrancy laws and the convict leasing that profited off of them (Blackmon 1-10). In Alan Lomax's documentary *The Land Where the Blues Began* (1979), one of the interviewees describes the levee camp experience in the following way: "You wasn't locked up, but otherwise it was just like the penitentiary. They paid you what they wanted, they gave you what they wanted you to have. If you didn't do it, somebody would beat you up." The Delta, the hotbed of prison-plantations and the birthplace of the blues, remains materially impoverished today and continues to be a breeding ground for the twenty-first century prison industrial complex and privatized incarceration, the system that Michelle Alexander dubs the New Jim Crow. The history of prisons and the blues is very closely intertwined: blues recordings have been made at Parchman and Angola, two maximum-security prison farms with plantation roots. The prisons provided a time capsule for the preservation of older musical forms and were of great interest to folklorists like Alan Lomax, who recorded at Parchman in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s (Lomax 261).

[118] Music historian Robert Palmer defines the blues as a "refined, extremely subtle, ingeniously systematic musical language" which relies on subtle variation in pitch gradation and vocal timbre. Cords are limited to three or less, "melodies are circumscribed, rhythms are propulsively straightforward" (18-19).

provide a window into experiences absent from official historical records and work against the nostalgic representation of the Mississippi in earlier songs.[119]

One of the most influential figures of the Delta blues was the mixed-race Charley Patton, who grew up with Black and Choctaw cultural influences. Patton knew the Delta intimately. His familiarity with the area reveals itself in his 1929 Paramount Records hit "High Water Everywhere," one of the best early blues recordings about the flood of 1927.[120] The song responds to events that Patton in all likelihood experienced himself. By sharing his version of the flood with the nation, Patton provides a corrective to narratives like Percy's. He claims regional belonging in a space that has traditionally silenced the voices of African Americans and erased Native Americans, the cultural and historical experiences of both of which were formative to his Delta blues. By moving from the floodplain and segregated relief camps toward the higher mounds of Patton's youth, the song embeds the bluesman in the network of his ancestors, emphasizing his relational ties to the Delta instead of focusing on dispossession. "High Water Everywhere" ends on a note of hope as the waters cover the town of Vicksburg, the last bastion of the Confederate South, metaphorically wiping the slate clean and purging the region of its white supremacist politics.

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[119] The flood changed the perception of the river, moving representation away from the river pastoral discussed in Chapter One. In his survey, Evans lists twenty blues songs that deal directly with the event, as well as a gospel song, a sermon, and three songs recorded in hillbilly style by white artists ("Conscience" 100).

[120] As Dick Spottswood explains in his notes on transcriptions of Patton's lyrics, the singer's Mississippi Delta accent from almost a century ago is very difficult to decipher; Patton's raw singing style and the quality of the recordings do not make the job any easier (56). Blues musicians would normally vary their wording from performance to performance, but even though there exists only one recording of Patton's "High Water Everywhere," transcripts differ in minor as well as significant details. I am basing my readings on those published by musicologist David Evans, the foremost authority on Patton. For reference, I also consulted the 2003 transcripts by Spottswood, who built on the efforts of Evans and others to come up with what he thinks is the most likely wording (he uses parenthesis for educated guesses and words that are implied), and the 1967 transcripts published by Samuel Charters. These differ in key points from Evans's, lacking key regional and cultural specificity.

As a geographically mobile musician, Patton enacted a freedom of movement not commonly available to African Americans during a time of vagrancy laws and a forced system of penal labor—even less so during the national emergency of the flood. In Mizelle's words, "Patton is claiming the right to move […] without being forced into a charity camp that was really a labor camp" (41). The song takes us around Sunflower, Bolivar, Sharkey, and Issaquena counties and various Mississippi Delta towns around Dockery Plantation, Patton's home base. From Sumner, a small town on the Little Tallahatchie River to towns further south like Drew, Leland and finally the larger Greenville, the speaker lists place names overflowing with creek water. As the levee breaks at Greenville, the singer is forced to reroute yet again. Reporting rumors of flooding in the upriver Rosedale and the backwater Shaw, he finally decides to head toward Vicksburg, the southernmost tip of the Delta. In an act of historical preservation, he presents his activity as a particular type of labor that befits an itinerant musician as he vows to "tell the world" about the situation in the Delta.

The river structures the space of the song; Patton's familiarity with the Mississippi-Yazoo floodplain conveys his rootedness in the Delta. Part I of "High Water Everywhere" opens with the following lines:

> The backwater done rose all around Sumner, Lord, drove me down the line.
> Back water done rose at Sumner, drove poor Charley down the line.
> And I'll tell the world the water done struck Drew'ses town.
>
> (Patton qtd. in Evans, "High Water," 101)

The verses do not rely on an end rhyme of "down" and "town;" the addition of "the line" acts as a surplus that interrupts a more traditional fulfillment of the rhyme structure. Instead, the repetition makes "the line" float through the song itself, reflecting its mobility in tandem with the speaker as he follows the river south. The image of being driven down the line conjures up

temporal, geographical, as well as racial connotations—the color line, after all, both influenced backwater environmental vulnerabilities and operated in racially segregated relief camps, shaping the politics of recovery. The river serves as the central line in the space of the song, prompting the speaker's movement as he searches for dry land and seeks freedom from the structures of white supremacy in the Delta.

In voicing his own experience of events, Patton's account exposes the government's preferential treatment of whites, showing that social and environmental ills are intertwined for "poor Charley." The conditions of the mostly Black Red Cross relief camp in Greenville and the mostly white one in Vicksburg varied greatly. In part, the discrepancy could be attributed to the fact that Vicksburg's position atop a high bluff spared it from the worst flooding, but it also speaks to the discriminatory politics of assistance across the color line (Mizelle 34). "I would go to the hill country, but they got me barred" (Patton qtd. in Evans, "High Water," 101), Patton sings, most likely referring to the safer and less overwhelmed Vicksburg and its surrounding areas, from which he would have been precluded on account of his race (Mizelle 41). If Part I provides a panoramic view of the flooded Delta, Part II of "High Water Everywhere," which describes a 1929 flood and focuses on the towns of Blytheville and Joiner on the Arkansas side of the Mississippi, turns such observations into a critique. The song focuses on the suffering of Black families displaced by the flood, with Patton commenting on the indifferent official response to Black victims:

> Back water at Blytheville, backed up all around.
> Back water at Blytheville, done struck Joiner town.
> It was fifty families and children. "Tough luck, they can drown."
>
> (Patton qtd. in Evans, "Conscience" 105)[121]

[121] In Spottswood's transcript, the final line reads as "It was fifty family *an' chil'ren* (some a them sink and drown)" (63), while the one published by Charters translates it into "some left dead and drowned" (41).

Although there is some ambiguity around the exact wording of the final line, the message is clear: people are dying in droves and official assistance and rescue efforts are limited, especially for the Delta Blacks. As Mizelle points out, the floods' official death tolls were greatly understated and reflected the racism of their time, as African American bodies were systematically excluded from the official count (8-9). In a line eerily familiar to post-Katrina audiences, Patton's speaker sings that while the water was rising, "airplanes was all around." His interlocutor agrees, confirming in spoken word: "Boy, they was all around" (Patton qtd. in Evans, "Conscience" 105). This culminates in a final "chilling stanza" of no life anywhere, which Evans describes as "one of Patton's greatest musical moments and one of the greatest in all recorded blues" (qtd. in Evans, "Conscience" 106):

> Oh, Lordy, women is groanin' down.
> Oh, women and children sinkin' down.
> *Spoken:* Lord, have mercy.
> I couldn't see nobody home, and wasn't no one to be found.
>
> (Patton qtd. in Evans, "Conscience" 105)

When the levee breaks at Greenville in Part I, Patton's interlocutor comments on the speaker's inability to stay in the area: "*Spoken*: Boy, you can't never stay here" (Patton qtd. in Evans, "Conscience," 101). The addition of the adverb, whether with the vernacular 'never' or the standard 'ever,' speaks to the endless repetition of displacement, suggesting that forces other than the flood are at play.

The song claims the speaker's relational belonging to a region whose history is marked by various waves of displacement. While the flooding brings up the pain of the African diaspora, isolated mounds in the Delta stand as reminders of the mass removal of Southeast Native tribes west of the Mississippi. Patton's "High Water Everywhere" speaks to the entanglement of African American and Native American histories in the U.S. South. The song expresses the

longer historical pain caused by settler violence as well as productive forms of collaboration and cultural exchange. Although the second stanza informs the listener that the speaker got barred from the hill country, the fifth one announces his intent of finding a higher mound in Vicksburg:

> Lord, the water now, mama, done struck Shaw'ses town.
> Well they tell me the water done struck Shaw'ses town.
> *Spoken*: Boy, I'm going to Vicksburg.
> Well, I'm going to Vicksburg on a high[er] mound
>
> I am going on dry water where land don't never flow. [sic]
> Well, I'm going on a hill where water, oh, it don't never flow
>
> (Patton qtd. in Evans, "Conscience," 101)

There is some ambiguity as to whether Patton is in fact saying the word 'mound;' in the transcription published by Charters in 1967, for example, the line reads "Well, I'm going to Vicksburg on that high o' mine" (41). Spottswood corroborates Evans's version, indicating that the words are only implied and represent an educated guess (63). If neither sounds quite right to today's ear, the guess is reinforced by historical research as well as the context of the song. The next lines continue to describe hills and dry land. As Choctaw and Chickasaw territory, the Delta was full of burial and platform mounds, many of which still exist today—the Mississippi Mound Trail identifies thirty-three marked sites—but numerous others have been destroyed in recent decades.

Patton's blues reflect not only African American but also Indigenous songs, melodies, rhythms, and concerns; they reflect experiences of floods and imagine a postdiluvian world in which power structures are revised. On the one hand, the mounds referenced in Patton's song point to the way Native past, erased from settler accounts, remains visible in the landscape. On the other, the fact that Patton as a person of mixed African and Choctaw descent invokes them points beyond narratives of pastness, highlighting the continued legacy and presence of

Southeast tribes in the Delta despite the government's efforts to eradicate them. The presence of these mounds in the land where the blues were born speaks to the complex cultural origins of the musical genre. It was while excavating mounds outside of Clarksdale, Mississippi, after all, that archeologist Charles Peabody ended up witnessing and documenting one of the earliest instances of the blues.[122] Other writings about the flood are full of references to mounds, which often served as the only dry points in the inundated landscape. In Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*, for example, an escaped convict finds refuge from water "upon the quarter-acre mound, that earthen ark out of Genesis" (194). In his memoir, Percy describes levees and Native mounds in a similar fashion: "The only islands in it were eight or ten tiny Indian mounds and the narrow spoil-banks of a few drainage canals. Between the torrent and the river ran the levee, dry on the land side and on the top" (249).

Elsewhere in his music, Patton, who was close to his Choctaw grandmother as a child, also expresses what literary scholar Jodi Byrd calls "the impossible triple binds of his own history" (145). This is most obvious in "Down the Dirt Road Blues," a song that makes an

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[122] Despite the difficulty of recovering this history and finding indisputable proof of the origin of the blues, it seems possible that Native American musical expression had an influence on the African American development of the early blues—the two groups, after all, often lived together. In her chapter on Cherokee Freedmen, Jodi Byrd discusses one of the earliest descriptions of the blues. During his 1901 excavation of Southeastern Indian mounds at the Dorr and Edwards sites south of Clarksdale, Mississippi, archeologist Charles Peabody documented the unique singing of African American forced laborers. For Byrd, the theory that the music invoked Southeastern Indian stomp dance songs as well as African traditions—both use call and response—is less important that the fact that it emerged from desecrated geographies which actively brought together different histories of colonialism and different forms of solidarity. In her reading, the singing resists the violence of forced labor, surveillance, and disturbed burial sites, which suggests "a radical reimagining of how peoples exist relationally within the place-worlds located in the stories we tell and the songs we sing" (119-120, 122). Regardless of its origins, the blues have been experiencing a revival in some Indigenous cultures. In her paper on Indian blues, M. Celia Cain discusses Sherman Alexie's novel *Reservation Blues* (1995), in which African American blues legend Robert Johnson walks onto a contemporary Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington State. She also notes the 1990s popularity of "Rez Blues" in Toronto, a "specifically Native sub-genre of the blues" that promotes "the Native roots of the blues, and see[s] this connection as a defining component" (2).

explicit reference to the Nation, also known as Indian Territory in Oklahoma.[123] Patton's African American, Native American, and Caucasian ancestry and mixed cultural background defy Black and white narratives of the Delta. According to several people who knew him, Patton claimed his Native ancestry and upbringing. One such acquaintance, Beatrice Giddens of Lula, Mississippi, describes him in the following way: "I guess he was about five—six. And he was light brownskin. His face was full, but he had clean teeth at the time I knew him. He had kind of dark, sandy hair, but he would have a nice haircut. He said he had Indian in him" (qtd. in Evans, "Conscience" 37). The liminality of his mixed ancestry and his verses about the impossibility of finding refuge in Indian Territory of Oklahoma speak to the singer's broader pre-occupations, which permeate his music beyond "Down the Road Blues." [124]

The melodic quality of Patton's music itself suggests an engagement with Native traditions. Pura Fé (Tuscarora), an Indigenous blues singer, comments on Patton's 1929 "Down the Road Blues:" "when I hear this, it's Indian music to me, you know… and that rhythm [claps along]. I love Charley Patton, his spirit and his music, it just connects me right back to where I come from, you know; I can hear all those old traditional songs" (qtd. in *The Rumble*).[125] Ron

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[123] Recorded in June 1929 in Richmond, Indiana (Paramount 12854), the song states: "I've been to the Nation, mmm, Lord, but I couldn't stay there," adding that "Some people say them overseas blues ain't bad," but "Every day seem like murder here" (Patton qtd. in Evans, "Conscience" 90). The Nation refers to the post-removal Indian Territory west of the Mississippi in Oklahoma. In his essay "Going to the Territory," Ralph Ellison explains that the Nation signified freedom and the opposite of being sold downriver for many enslaved Blacks, making it "no accident that much of the symbolism of our folklore is rooted in the imagery of geography" (131). In Byrd's analysis of Cherokee Freedmen's historical exclusion from the territory, the song seeks community "through musical structure and the call and response that arise out of the confluence between slaves and Choctaws within the Mississippi Delta where [Patton] was born" (145).

[124] Patton's background seems to have been mixed on both sides of the family. His mother Annie Patton was described by family members as "a short, brown-skinned woman with straight hair, of partial Indian ancestry" (qtd. in Evans 33). It was on his father's side, however, that the Native cultural influence is best documented. Patton's paternal grandfather Bill Patton was described as "a white man from Vicksburg […] 'married' to a 'black Indian' woman named Rose," a woman of mixed African American and Native American descent who was reportedly very close to her children and grandchildren (qtd. in Evans 34).

[125] The Frances Densmore Collection of Choctaw cylinder recordings from 1933, housed at the Folk Life Archive of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., contains stomp dance and shell shaker recordings that are very much

Welburn, a musicologist working in Indigenous and American cultures, confirms this, arguing that the main Native American contribution to the blues is melodic.[126] Given the political context of his time, the fact that Patton seems to draw on Choctaw as well as African American expressive culture and traditions is especially subversive. Patton's lifetime coincides with the era of assimilationist federal Indian policy, during which the U.S. government strove to destroy tribalism in any form, withholding citizenship from those who were non-compliant. According to music historian John Troutman, Office of Indian Affairs officials saw what they called "Indian dances" as "a breach in the cultural requirements of citizenship and sought to suppress dances on these grounds" (7-8).[127]

"High Water Everywhere" expresses Patton's resolve to claim regional belonging and go toward the richer and whiter Vicksburg from which his race would preclude him. Since he seeks refuge on ancestral land, he has more of a claim to the dry higher mounds in the area than the privileged white townspeople. It is hard to determine whether Patton's song refers to any specific mound since many of them were destroyed during the course of the twentieth century, or if he is using metonymy to describe the bluff-perched Vicksburg.[128] In either case, the use of the word invokes Native presence in the Delta and speaks to Patton's investment in that fact. While

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distinct from the blues, but songs like the "Tick Dance Song" share similarities in rhythm and resemble the kind of melodic patterns of vocal intonation heard in Patton's music.

[126] "Comparisons of Native call-and-response cadences and rhythmic inflections with African American work and prison songs suggest a syncretism of indigenous and African-derived style, yet reveal differences in how Indian response patterns melodically repeat or slightly vary the line of the caller or are expressed in shorter lengths" (Welburn 202).

[127] The period, which lasted throughout the 1920s, is generally classified as starting with the passing of Senator Henry Dawes' General Allotment Act of 1887, which broke apart collectively held Indigenous lands in order to facilitate sham sales (Dunbar-Ortiz 157-158).

[128] While there is no record of mounds in Vicksburg proper during Patton's time, Glass Mounds and Haynes Bluff Mounds still remain in the larger Warren County, with the biggest ones measuring 30 feet in height. As the state historical markers erected by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History point out, only one of the five Glass Mounds remains undamaged and two out of four Haynes Bluff Mounds were bulldozed in 1967 ("Mississippi Markers").

possibly the result of the single-take recording of the song, the transposition of water and land in the line about going "on dry water where land don't never flow" suggests a metaphorical place where land can no longer be taken away, a refuge from flooding as well as the white settler land grab.

For Patton, one positive outcome of the flood is that the water that sweeps over Vicksburg wipes the slate clean, covering the former Confederate city and undermining white power structures, creating a possibility for a different South. Among all the town and county names listed in Part I of "High Water Everywhere," one geographical designation stands out because of its specificity and particularity: Jackson Road.

> Lord, the water done rushed all over that old Jackson Road.
> Lord, the water done raised up over the Jackson Road.
> *Spoken*: Boy, it got my clothes.
> I'm going back to the hill country. Won't be worried no more.
>
> (Patton qtd. in Evans, "Conscience," 102)

The historic road leads from Vicksburg to Jackson, which was founded in 1821 as the site of the new state capital. The city was named after the still living Andrew Jackson to honor his role in the War of 1812 and the Battle of New Orleans, which occurred years before he signed the notorious Indian Removal Act of 1830. Present-day maps as well as those from the 1930s show Jackson Road cutting across the Vicksburg National Military Park. The park was established in 1899 to commemorate the 1863 Civil War Battle of Vicksburg, in which Union soldiers managed to gain control of the Mississippi River after a long siege.[129] Although the site technically commemorates Union victory, the fact that Vicksburg was once a key Confederate river port also ensures the city's mourning of the South's loss. Vicksburg fell on July 4, 1863,

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[129] Jackson Road can be seen on this 1930 map of Vicksburg: http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/series/maps/detail/191427

and as the popular Civil War historian and Lost Cost apologist Shelby Foote points out in a conversation with Tony Horwitz, the memory of the war was still so hurtful in the 1920s and 1930s that Mississippians in his hometown of Greenville and beyond refused to observe Independence Day (Horwitz 148).[130]

Symbolically, the flooding of Vicksburg strikes a blow to the South's system of Confederate memory, allowing the speaker of Patton's song to return to the hill country of his youth and be "worried no more." The move implicitly creates space for a different future in which old centers of power cease to carry their former weight.[131] "High Water Everywhere" describes the localized geography of the Mississippi Delta marked by flooding and racial segregation, rejecting pastoral tropes by focusing on disruptions to bucolic visions of the river. It represents water as threatening the lives of Black people on the one hand and overflowing towns created by white power structures on the other, concluding with the mounds and hills of the singer's childhood as the only islands of hope. This return to Patton's native soil and culturally mixed ancestry claims his place in the Delta and works against the various waves of displacement and political and narrative acts of exclusion.

Labor and Rootedness

In his folk poetry written in the Black vernacular and influenced by the blues, Sterling Brown takes the structure and subject matter from Black blues musicians in the Mississippi Delta and

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130 In his cultural history of the war, Horowitz concludes that "post-War Vicksburg hallowed the Cause and disdained the national battlefield as a 'Yankee park,'" with white townspeople framing the surrender as a "cessation of hostilities" as late as during the 1950s (198).

131 The hill country probably refers to Patton's original home in the hills about twenty-five miles east of Jackson (Evans, "High Water" 102). Pocahontas Mounds remain in the Jackson area today.

gives them a place in literature. He documents their voices and perspectives in the written medium while paying tribute to oral and musical genealogies. Brown's poetry presents a version of Black nature writing that relates to the natural world through labor, claiming regional and political belonging via this investment. Brown highlights the crucial role of Black labor in building white wealth and essential infrastructure from roads to levees—work that brought the South into modernity but excluded African Americans from material rewards and flood protection.

The title of Brown's 1932 collection *Southern Road* already announces its anti-pastoral impulses, and the poem of the same name only reinforces the work's ideological stance. Not only does the presence of the road as a vehicle of industrialization disrupt the bucolic vision of an Agrarian South; the cover of the 1974 Beacon Press edition also features a drawing by E. Simms Campbell of a Black chain gang building the road in question. The illustration puts the bodies whose labor built the South at the front and center, claiming that labor in the process. The names of the first two sections in the collection, "Road So Rocky" and "On Restless River," connect backbreaking labor to environmental vulnerabilities brought on by precarious living conditions, which become especially evident in flood times.

By challenging the Agrarian pastoral through an emphasis on labor and exploitation, Brown draws on earlier African American literary works like Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), in which the ghost of slavery haunts pastoral fields. His focus on engaging with the environment through labor represents an important step in the evolution of Black nature writing, which Brown develops in several poems that focus on tornados and Mississippi River floods. In "Ma Rainey," for instance, a poem about the famous blues performer Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Brown quotes her

rendition of "Backwater Blues," a blues and jazz standard written in 1927 about the flooding of the Mississippi.[132]

Brown shows that environmental disasters do not affect everyone equally. In "Children of the Mississippi," Brown refers to Blacks as the river's "stepchildren" (69). In a pun that plays on the aural ambiguity of speech, we are told: "Black water creepin'/While folks is sleepin'" (68). If we read this in conjunction with the line from "Tornado Blues" that tells us that the black winds "got some ofays, but they mostly got de Jews an' us" (71), we can easily imagine 'While folks' being heard as 'White folks.'

Brown's poems explicitly articulate the disproportionate impacts of natural disasters across class and race, moving gradually away from Biblical explanations for the calamities of floods and tornadoes. Structured as a debate between two voices with competing worldviews, "Children of the Mississippi" alternates between the unmarked stanzas delivered by the speaker and the indented and italicized vernacular speech of the people he is describing. At first, their voices are filled with religious explanations that the speakers' own voice never invokes, but increasing doubt starts creeping into the lines as the poem progresses: "These, for all their vaunted faith, know doubt/ These know no Ararat" (Brown 67). The invocation of the mountains of Ararat, which the Book of Genesis credits with providing refuge for Noah's Ark after the Great Flood, runs directly against William Percy's experience of the Flood of 1927. A property

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[132] "Backwater Blues" was actually written and recorded by Bessie Smith in 1927 during the early days of the flood. It is unclear whether Ma Rainey also performed the song or whether Brown chose her because her last name reinforces the theme of flooding (Marcus 315). In "Ma Rainey," the speaker recounts his conversation with "a fellow" who tells him that "She jes' gits hold of us dataway" (Brown 64). Quoted, italicized, and indented, the following words then appear: "'*It rained fo' days an' de skies was dark as night,/ Trouble taken place in de lowlands at night./ 'Thundered an' lightened an' de storm begin to roll/ Thousan's of people ain't got no place to go*" (64). The embedded citation of "Backwater Blues" draws attention to both the plight of poor Black farmers and the power of the blues to voice their experience. Brown also gets at the difficulty of representing the blues in poetic form. The traditional blues repetition of the first line gets dropped; writing, after all, cannot convey the subtle changes in voice, timbre and enunciation that singing can.

near the old Percy plantation, we learn, is named Ararat because of its position on the high banks of Deer Creek, which saves it from most flooding (Percy 245).[133] As the river's stepchildren, the Black inhabitants of the Delta do not share this privilege, and all they are left with is a rotten, dank, hostile wasteland.

Brown's interrogation of the disaster and its causes allows him to take up the questions of labor and highlight Black men's role in constructing key infrastructure, Southern roads and the levees that protect them. Levees, designed to prevent flooding, provide a false sense of security; having fueled the spread of river towns and agriculture, they exacerbate damage when they fail. Brown shows the paradox of Blacks simultaneously being the group whose labor produced and protected white wealth of the South and the one most economically and environmentally vulnerable.

By foregrounding chain gang labor, Brown goes against Percy's description of Blacks as shiftless quoted earlier to assert African American belonging and political voice in the South. "Southern Road" starts with a repetition of "Swing dat hammer– hunh–/ Steady, bo'," creating a rhythmical structure reminiscent of the blues as well as a chain gang. An image of the latter finally appears in the fifth stanza: "Doubleshackled–hunh–/ Guard behin';/ Ball an' chain, bebby,/ On my min'" (Brown 46-47). The punctuation mirrors the breaks in the movement of group labor, creating a striking visual and aural impression of the men working in unison. The image then gets expanded in the poem "Strong Men," in which the coerced work of this legalized

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[133] The two plantations are situated about ten miles east of Greenville in what is now the town of Leland. While his father is telling him stories of "old times," repopulating them with "the rash amazing folk by whom it had been settled," the young Percy seeks "refuge from the dreary present in the thrilling pages of *The Last of the Mohicans*" (245). Percy is engrossed in James Fenimore Cooper's fantasy of Native American extinction while touring the setting of his family's old plantation, the source of their wealth, which is itself predicated on Native removal and the exploitation of Black labor.

form of post-Emancipation slavery gets connected to the antebellum plantation variety, as well as the Middle Passage: "*They dragged you from homeland,/ They chained you in coffles,/ They huddled you spoon-fashion in filthy hatches,/ They sold you to give a few gentlemen ease*" (Brown 51). The last line speaks directly to the false gentility of Southern aristocracy, revealing the exploitation and cruelty upon which its leisure and regional pride were built: "*They point with pride to the roads you build for them,/ They ride in comfort over the rails you laid for them*" (Brown 52).

The poem effectively restores that pride back to the rightful owners of the labor in question, the Black men who built Southern roads and who will eventually break the shackles: "*One thing they cannot prohibit–/* The Strong men . . . coming on/ The strong men gittin' stronger./ Strong men . . ./ Stronger. . . ." (Brown 53). Brown places work songs at the heart of the poem as a symbol of resilience—the four different variations of the 'strong men' refrain are all part of sections marked as sung and are also the only lines in the poem not italicized. Their unmarked font formally indicates a break from the past; at the same time, the piling of ellipses shows that the men will inevitably break the chains, ushering in an era of Black freedom.

III. 2005: New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast

Natasha Trethewey's four-part series of poems titled "Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi" from *Native Guard* (2006) includes some of the same settings, historical events, and tropes as the poetry of Sterling Brown: the Mississippi Delta, the Flood of 1927, and King Cotton.[134] Trethewey uses an image of a barge with Black occupants displaced by a flood to

[134] The poems, in what appears to be chronological order, are "King Cotton, 1907," "Glyph, Aberdeen 1913," the undated "Flood," and "You Are Late." Several of Brown's poems in *Southern Road* deal with the 1927 flood, while many others focus on the experiences and perspectives of Black sharecroppers, including one called "King Cotton."

connect the milieu of Brown's poetry to the post-Katrina moment. The third poem of the series, "Flood," is based on a photograph of people identified as "black refugees" trying to escape the rising waters. Since the title does not specify the event, the words immediately invoke Katrina, which devastated New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast the year before the publication of Trethewey's collection. The poem describes a scene in which "the National Guard hunkers/ on the levee; rifles tight in their fists,/ they block the path to higher ground," a stark image visualizing the divide between Black people and the state (Trethewey 23). It is only in the third and last stanza that the photograph the poem describes is revealed to have been taken during the Flood of 1927. Referring to the moment as an "aperture" and a "chasm in time," Trethewey tells us: "Here, in the angled light/ of 1927, they are refugees from history:/ the barge has brought them this far;/ they are waiting to disembark" (23).

The image brings the barge of 1927 into the twenty-first century. Its occupants flee the weight of history, but they also represent a continuity of African American displacement that stretches from the Middle Passage to the Flood of 1927 to Hurricane Katrina. Water is a key factor in all three events, either as the agent of flooding or as a facilitator of transatlantic and inland slavery routes. The people in the poem wait to disembark, wait to be treated as citizens, and wait for their lives to matter. In blues music and in poetry, the river carries histories of extraction and dispossession, but also of resistance and relational ties to the landscape of the Mississippi. Trethewey's poem expands on the image from the Mississippi Delta by bringing it into New Orleans and the new millennium.[135]

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[135] Trethewey elaborates on Hurricane Katrina in her 2010 non-fictional meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, *Beyond Katrina.* Her attention to the processes and structures that create Black poverty and environmental vulnerability in Mississippi reflects her project in *Native Guard* of reclaiming the Black South by uncovering suppressed histories and archives and building textual monuments to the erased.

Two post-Katrina novels from Mississippi, Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and Kiese Laymon's *Long Division* (2013), draw on lived experience of structural racism and environmental vulnerability and on 1930s Black environmental writing and its blues ethos of survival. The two works both engage with regionalism and the past, but in a way that is decidedly different from the Agrarian glorification of Lost Cause mythology. The novels highlight the importance of Black literary traditions in the (rural) South in addition to those in the (urban) North. They reinforce their position in the African American tradition and claim space in the Southern literary canon.[136] Their focus on the localized landscape of the Mississippi Gulf Coast allows the authors to simultaneously assert ecological citizenship and regional belonging, claiming their native land and their own place in it as Black Southerners, which allows them to critique the perpetuation of past and present injustices and inequalities. They rewrite Mississippi as a twenty-first century space that is at once Black and Southern, rural and modern, and deeply engaged in environmental issues of the new millennium. While *Salvage the Bones* lingers in the moment of possibility in the rubble of the Gulf Coast immediately following Katrina, *Long Division* tries to imagine a different future via the book's materiality, providing a literal blank page on which to start imagining the process of rebuilding.

When Katrina made landfall in August 2005, it left behind unprecedented destruction, devastating New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The levee breeches in New Orleans did

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[136] Traditionally, Black writing was excluded from the Southern literary canon, but writing about the rural South was also excluded from African American letters. This debate reached its heights in the early 1990s in conversations between African American Studies scholars Hazel Carby and Addison Gayle. Gayle, once a highly politicized leader of the urban-centered Black Aesthetic movement, contradicted his previous beliefs and endorsed the turn South shortly before his death. Carby argues that the literary turn to the African American rural Southern past neglects "the contemporary crisis of black urban America" (119), creating a "discursive displacement of the historical and cultural transformation" of the Great Migration, as well as "a folk who are outside of history" (122). Gayle, on the other hand, promotes Black writers' "return to the intellectual past, to undertake the odyssey back into one's cultural heritage" (559).

not technically occur on the Mississippi River; the waters that flooded Crescent City mostly came from the Gulf and Lake Pontchartrain. Nevertheless, the disaster is rooted in the engineering of both the river and the coastal ecology of the delta. The excessive leveeing of the river, especially after the 1927 flood, prevents river overflow and sediment deposit. This has caused massive land loss in Louisiana over the past century, stripping the state of its protective wetland environments that naturally absorb hurricanes. Manmade industrial canals like the 1960s New Orleans Industrial Canal and the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, which provides a shortcut between the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico, acted as conduits for surging storm waters. These canals were the primary sites of levee breaches that flooded the city, including the now infamous Lower Ninth Ward, a predominantly Black low-income neighborhood at the time of the storm.[137] Along the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the impact of the hurricane was exacerbated by the manmade beaches and tourist developments that have drained coastal wetlands that could help absorb the storm surge. Human domination of the Gulf Coast environment, in other words, played a major role in both locations. Structural racism ensured the racially uneven distribution of impacted areas and recovery efforts. As the editors of *Katrina's Imprint* point out, the "problems that Katrina highlighted are not new; rather, the storm was merely the latest

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[137] Additionally, as environmental historian Ari Kelman points out, the fact that Europeans built a permanent city in the wetlands between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain was an act of folly from an environmental standpoint: "Bienville chose New Orleans's location based on this felicitous reading of the river system, which he saw as the city's greatest asset, but his enthusiasm for the river's commercial benefits blinded him to many of the challenges of building a city in the delta" (5). Likewise, Morris explains that "New Orleans may be sinking because of short-sighted engineering projects, but with or without them the city would be sinking, or sunk, anyway. The Louisiana Coast is a graveyard of dead and buried deltas" (207). Official reports by the U.S. Geological Survey grant that while Louisiana's coastal erosion and wetland loss—almost thirty square miles a year, according to official government sources—occur in part because of natural processes and the shifting course of the Mississippi, human activity has contributed significantly to the extent of the damage. Dredging wetlands for canals and interlacing the area with oil pipes has had a considerable effect on their shrinking as it has brought saltwater into brackish and freshwater areas, causing such environments to die off; rising sea levels have also played their part in this process. Because of the extensive leveeing of the Mississippi, the "seasonal flooding that previously provided sediments critical to healthy growth of wetlands has been virtually eliminated," preventing the built-up of sediment that could in any way counter these changes (United States Geological Survey).

manifestation of a set of patterns whereby poverty and other varieties of inequality come suddenly—and fleetingly—into view" (Wailoo et al. 1).

Post-Katrina literature engages larger national conversations about cultural erasure and domination, structural and environmental racism, climate change, and the unsustainability of the American oil-based economy, all of which come to a head along the Lower Mississippi and in the Gulf South. Black Southern literary environmentalism of the twenty-first century shares its tenets with the environmental justice movement, which emerged in the 1990s in response to omissions made by mainstream white middle-class environmentalism.[138] In the US context, environmental justice initiatives emphasize environmental racism, focusing on the disproportionate effect of technological and environmental risks on women and people of color (Heise 386). Such efforts focus on economically disadvantaged communities in order to secure their "right to live un-threatened by the risks posed by environmental degradation and contamination, and to afford equal access to natural resources that sustain life and culture" (Adamson et al. 135-136). While many documentary films, pieces of popular music, and critical articles focus on the causes and aftermath of the manmade levee disaster in New Orleans, Ward and Laymon both seek to bring attention to the less publicized but nonetheless crucial narrative

[138] The discourse of environmental justice has always had people of color at the center. In 1991, activists at the National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit drafted and adopted a seventeen-point manifesto that starts with a preamble modeled on that of the US Constitution. "We the people of color," it begins, naming the group that was excluded for all intents and purposes from the seemingly inclusive phrasing of "We the people of the United States." While the 1787 document foregrounds military defense and conquest in order to secure liberty and justice, the 1991 anti-colonial rewrite goes directly against this logic of claiming and subduing, committing instead to "fight the destruction and taking of our lands and communities." As principle number fifteen of the manifesto proclaims: "Environmental justice opposes military occupation, repression and exploitation of lands, peoples and cultures, and other life forms" ("Principles of Environmental Justice").

of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where the drastically altered coastal ecology contributed to the destruction of the hurricane.[139]

Reconstituting the Southern Landscape

Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* recounts the twelve days preceding and immediately following Katrina's landfall in the August of 2005. It is narrated by Esch, a 15-year-old Black girl from the fictional town of Bois Sauvage on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, who grows up surrounded by men: her father, her three brothers, and their friends. At the outset of the novel, she realizes she is pregnant by one of them, a young man named Manny, and she grapples with her secret as the family starts preparing for an incoming storm. The novel shares superficial plot points with Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), a novel about a poor white family in Mississippi during an unnamed flood, but by giving voice to a young Black girl from rural Mississippi, it highlights a perspective absent from both Faulkner and much of canonical Southern literature.[140]

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[139] Some literary responses to Katrina that focus on New Orleans are Nikky Finney's poem "Left" from her 2011 collection *Head Off & Split;* Chris Rose's collection of on-the-ground *Times-Picayune* columns, *1 Dead in Attic: After Katrina* (2007), which documents the days and months after the disaster and portrays the utter despair and depression that followed in its aftermath; and Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun* (2009), based on the experience of Abdulrahman Zeitoun, a Syrian-American resident of New Orleans who gets sucked into the abyss of the unconstitutional post-Katrina carceral system as a result of post-9/11 racial profiling. Among the many Katrina documentaries are Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), and Tia Lessin and Carl Deal's *Trouble the Water* (2008), while the most notable and popular song that was used to raise awareness and funds for disaster recovery is Mos Def's "Dollar Day/Katrina Clap" (2006).

[140] Other critics have already noted these similarities. Some of the parallels include flooding, rural poverty in Mississippi, pregnant teenage characters surrounded by brothers, dead mothers whose presence permeates the novels, and physically present but otherwise resigned fathers. Overtly recognizing Faulkner's influence, Ward has Esch reading *As I Lay Dying* for a school assignment in the opening pages of the novel; we are informed she made an A because she "answered the hardest question right: *Why does the young boy think his mother is a fish*?" (Ward 7). In Faulkner's novel, the confusion of the Bundren family's youngest son Vardaman over the death of his mother and the presence of a cut-up fish culminates in a chapter that consists of a single sentence: "My mother is a fish" (Faulkner 84). Sinéad Moynihan calls Ward's text a politicized revision that capitalizes on the canonical status of *As I Lay Dying* "in order to confer on the characters in *Salvage the Bones*, through their association with Faulkner's, a dignity denied them in the post-Katrina moment" (551).

By paying tribute to Zora Neale Hurston in particular and invoking William's Faulkner's flood writing, Ward establishes parallels between past and current events, drawing on Black literary genealogies and writing back to the white Southern canon.

The nature imagery which runs through *Salvage the Bones* is distinctly Southern, but Ward uses it in a way that destabilizes stereotypical tropes that fuel antebellum nostalgia, associating it instead with the gothic and the 'strange fruit' of racialized violence. Repeatedly using geographic and natural features to connect bodies to the landscape they inhabit, Esch describes her older brother's gauze-wrapped wrist as "a webworm moth nest wound tight in a pecan tree, a yarn of larvae eating at the ripe green leaves beneath to burst forth in black-winged flurry in the throat-closing heat of fall" (Ward 132). The traditionally Southern pecan tree is at the center, but it is being eaten by the parasitical insect that thrives in the oppressive heat of the fall. Preparing to verbally confront Manny about her pregnancy and hold him responsible, Esch describes his turning face as a "magnolia flower tossing in the wind, his eyes the bright yellow heart. Now I see it, now I don't" (Ward 202). With its play on color contrasts and the hot and cold attitude of the boy she loves, the image conveys beauty and cruelty simultaneously. The latter comes both from the ways in which the flower as a literary trope has been used to mask racial violence in the South and from Manny's violent dismissal of Esch.[141]

The local geography of the Gulf Coast reveals itself throughout the novel, structuring Esch's language and imagination. Her intimate knowledge of the land conveys her belonging to the region and lingers between the sense of ecological beauty and burden that Ruffin outlines in her work. It expresses an ambivalent environmentalism that is attuned to the processes of nature

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[141] In Faulkner, magnolias evoke light-skinned mixed-race women sexually involved with Southern aristocrats, suggesting promiscuity. At the funeral of Charles Bon, Sutpen's illegitimate son in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the deceased's "octoroon" mistress is described as "magnolia-faced" (157).

and the extraction that takes place there. To Esch's mind, there is a continuity between bodily fluids and the swampy marshes of the Mississippi Coast. The smell of blood brings to mind "the Gulf when the tide's low" and the public bathroom in which Manny abandons her after he feels her pregnant stomach smells "like the salt of marsh mud, like tadpoles dying in their shrinking shallows" (Ward 131, 146). Esch's personal pain is wrought together with the dying Gulf and the disappearing wetlands. In contrast to her, girls like Manny's official girlfriend are "Centered as if the love that boy feels for them anchors them deep as a tree's roots, holds them still as the oaks, which don't uproot in hurricane wind" (Ward 119). Without such attention, Esch feels like the eroded, unprotected coast, susceptible to the damage caused by seasonal storms.[142]

In articulating an environmentalism that is at once personal and rooted in historical structures, Ward draws on Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston's Black feminism emphasizes the natural world and takes into account the issues of Black people's heightened environmental vulnerability; her narrative shows that environmental disasters are likely to affect Blacks differently than whites. The freedom of the Blacks who work alongside Janie and Tea Cake in the Everglades, for example, is limited by the racially influenced hierarchies of the workplace and the precarity of the work itself. This fact is symbolized by the liminal position of the Muck as an ecosystem caught between water and land; the coming of the storm only makes this more apparent.

Even with the widespread death caused by the hurricane in Hurston's novel, white authorities still focus their energies on segregating bodies, putting them into separate cemeteries

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[142] She recognizes the protective efforts of Big Henry, the friend who looks after her as she tries in vain to win Manny's love. In contrast to Manny's, his hands are "slow-moving as the sheaves of the stunted palm trees planted at odd places along the beach, alien to the Mississippi Gulf, as they bear the dragging wind made slow by the barrier islands" (Ward 143).

and providing cheap coffins for the whites and nothing at all for the Blacks. One critic sees nature, not whites, as taking the upper hand, with "Apparent racial differences […] erased by the ravages of death" (Stein 78). In this scene, workers are indeed forced to rely uncertainly on the appearance of hair in order to discern the race of the bodies whose physical characteristics have been distorted by water. Despite this unsettling of race, however, the fact remains that efforts to preserve segregation persist. As Tea Cake remarks ironically: "They's mighty particular how dese dead folks goes to judgment […] Look lak dey think God don't know nothing 'bout de Jim Crow law" (Hurston 228).[143]

In a passage that invokes Hurston, Ward paints a scene of animals fleeing directly before the hurricane.[144] As Esch tells us: "There are no chattering squirrels, no haunted rabbits, no wading turtles in the woods. I don't know where they have gone, but there are none here. I see birds in great flocks that would darken the sun if we could see it through the thickening clouds. They are all flying away, all flying North" (Ward 206-207). If the whites on Hurston's Muck

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[143] In her reading of Hurston's novel, Rachel Stein claims that if "the muck exemplifies a beneficent Voodoo disruption of the white culture's false oppositions," then "the hurricane enacts a destructive rupture of the colonial order" (77-78). While she is right in claiming that the hurricane's destructive power has a certain leveling force, Hurston's novel shows astute awareness of the different outcomes of such disasters, making the relationship between African American workers and the natural world an integral part of her narrative. "So they reached the bridge at Six Mile Bend and thought to rest. But it was crowded. White people had preempted the point of elevation and there was no more room," Hurston tells us. "They could climb up one of its high sides and down the other, that was all. Miles further on, still no rest" (218). It is very clear from this short comment that while the hurricane might hit both Blacks and whites alike, safe spaces and resources are limited and never get evenly distributed, something that remained evident in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

[144] As the hurricane approaches in the pivotal scene of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, animals big and small start escaping from the scene in a steady procession: "Some rabbits scurried through the quarters going east. Some possums slunk by and their route was definite. One or two at a time, then more. […] Snakes, rattlesnakes, began to cross the quarters. […] big animals like deer. Once the muted voice of a panther. Going east and east" (Hurston 206-207). The animals can clearly read the signs of an impending disaster, moving to safety before the hurricane hits. Acquainted with the land and the ecosystem they inhabit, Native American Seminoles start passing by the muck and leaving the area as well, but most of the Black workers are torn between the signs they are witnessing and the trust they place in white man's domination of the land and the promise of pay. Hurston's awareness of the outcome colors Tea Cake's dismissive comments—"Indians don't know much uh nothin', tuh tell de truth" (Hurston 208)—with a hint of irony. She reveals the capitalist white supremacist ideology that subsists on the exploitation of Native land and Black labor as both morally corrupt and shortsighted, unaware of the dangers posed by the altered environment.

lacked the foresight to run, this is no longer the case in Ward's novel. Drawing attention to who gets to leave and who gets left behind, the narrative creates parallels between the flocking animals and the abandoned houses of whites. Comparing the scene to her previous visit, Esch notes: "There is no blue truck, no white man or woman, no chasing dog. The windows of the house and the barn have been boarded over with thick pieces of plywood" (Ward 207). Shortly after this, Esch receives a government call ordering mandatory evacuation, an order that instructs residents to relocate without providing the material means for the vulnerable members of society to do so. Those left behind are left with no choice but to try to weather the storm, grappling with the realization that "No one is coming" (Ward 250).

Although the writings of both Hurston and Ward suggest that natural disasters can quite literally level the field, both writers also show that their effects are often felt differently by people on opposite ends of the economic ladder. Ward emphasizes historical continuities that have shaped the disaster that is Katrina. At the very beginning of the novel, Esch tells us:

> and when it's summer here, there's always a hurricane coming or leaving here. Each pushes its way through the flat Gulf to the twenty-six-mile manmade Mississippi beach, where they knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses before running over the bayou, through the pines, to lose wind, drip rain, and die in the north.
>
> (Ward 4)

The narrative names human complicity in the making of the disaster as it describes the long manmade beach, an appropriation of the natural wetland ecosystem in the service of accommodating luxurious summer mansions. Esch connects the wealth on display to the slaveholding South as she describes the slave galleys turned guesthouses, an image that invokes both the Middle Passage and Deep South plantation slavery. Mediterranean galley slavery on oar-powered flat vessels was not on American institution, but the term implies a particularly perilous form of slavery since the shackled galley slaves would always go down with the war

ships they were ordered to row (Black 5). Since 'galley' has also come to denote a kitchen on a ship, the image conjures up separate slave quarters that would have been transformed in the service of the tourist economy. Right from the start, the novel establishes a lingering connection to the region's fraught history, the legacies of which continue not only through the shared geography but also through the continuation of economic practices that exploit and negatively impact African Americans in a disproportionate manner. The landscape functions as a palimpsest of the past, environmental and otherwise.

Legacies of extraction are even on display in the family's own backyard. The geography of the pit, as the gaping hole behind Esch's house is referred to, itself becomes a metaphor for the larger economic processes eroding the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

> It was Papa Joseph nicknamed it all the Pit, Papa Joseph who let the white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundations for houses, let them excavate the side of a hill in a clearing near the back of the property where he used to plant corn for feed. Papa Joseph let them take all the dirt they wanted until their digging had created a cliff over a dry lake in the backyard […]"
>
> (Ward 14)

With the description of how the pit came into existence, Ward offers an implicit critique of capitalism and its exploitation of the economically vulnerable and, in the US context, often non-white citizens. The soil that was primarily used to grow corn for feed, thereby performing a nutritious function, literally gets undercut. From economic necessity, Esch's grandfather lets white men excavate clay from underneath the land owned by him and his wife in order to build foundations for other people's houses, building white wealth. Echoing the extraction in the Delta, the depletion of the pit's natural resources lasts until the grandfather starts fearing that "the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp," at which point he stops "selling earth for money" (Ward 14). The kind of parasitism on

display here connects to the gothic trope of slavery at once upholding and undermining American domesticity found in much of earlier American literature; but it also points to the devouring nature of capitalism, as well as to the masculinity underlying the plundering of nature.

Ward brings an awareness of racialized extraction to her feminist ecocriticism, which examines the connections between the patriarchal oppression of women and man's exploitation of the environment (Vakoch 2). By drawing directly on Hurston, Ward places herself in a longer trajectory of Black feminism and nature writing that explores the interconnectedness of capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and environmental exploitation. Ward's environmentalism is rooted in history but also deeply personal. The novel claims regional belonging and presents environmental concerns as integral to Esch's experience of the world as a young Black woman from the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The sense of belonging also feeds the ethos of salvaging, reconstituting, and rebuilding present throughout the novel.

For Ward, salvaging is both a way of rooting her writing in Black Southern genealogies of nature writing and of surviving and redefining the relationship between herself and her native shore. As Cameron Leader-Picone argues, for Esch, the trauma of Katrina gives birth to a new self (72). "*Tomorrow*," Esch thinks in anticipation of the hurricane as Manny insults her and pushes her away in denial of his paternity, "*everything will be washed clean*" (205). Esch ends her story by zooming in on the houses of the wealthy that lined the coast in the opening pages of the novel, now completely erased by the hurricane: "The gas station, the yacht club, and all the old white-columned homes that faced the beach, that made us feel small and dirty and poorer than ever when we came here with Daddy, piled in his truck, for gas or chips or bait on our swimming days, are gone. Not ravaged, not rubble, but completely gone" (Ward 252-253). While Ward's novel ends on a leveling note, the actual rebuilding efforts and politics of recovery were

much more skewed.[145] Lavish vacation homes would be the first to get rebuilt and practically the only ones to make a full recovery. As Trethewey's research from *Beyond Katrina* shows, the federal money that was supposed to help rebuild the coast mostly went toward helping insurance companies and the economically more well-positioned homeowners, leaving out renters and lower-income homeowners who could not afford insurance (22).

Instead of focusing on the inequitable politics of recovery that followed, Ward lingers in the moment of possibility immediately after the storm and suspends the novel in a moment of rebirth. Esch, who has come to accept her own impending motherhood, attributes maternal qualities to Katrina:

> the murderous mother who cut us to the bone but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun-starved newly hatched baby snakes. She left us a dark Gulf and salt-burned land. She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage.
>
> (Ward 255)

The moment of leveling, in other words, presents itself as one of regeneration, expressing the ethos of survival and rebuilding. The image of the dark Gulf and the somber land left after the saltwater has receded ensures that Blackness is at the center of this vision.

Futurity as a Blank Page

Kiese Laymon's post-Katrina, post-BP oil spill novel *Long Division*, which is also set on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, similarly keeps engaging the past but remains most focused on the

[145] Elsewhere, Ward is also interested in the leveling brought by past hurricanes. We learn that the local elementary school housing Katrina survivors "used to actually be the black school for the district before the schools were desegregated in 1969, after the last big hurricane, when people were too tired finding their relatives' uprooted bodies […] to still fight the law outlawing segregation" (140). Although public resources were not distributed equitably even after the end of legal segregation, Ward emphasizes the wave of change brought by the shock of the storm.

future. The title refers to the act of explaining the various stages of a story rather than simply cutting to the chase. As one of the teenage protagonists complains to the hero: "City, speed that up. Why you gotta be so long division? For real, you don't have to tell me all the background. This story doesn't have to go on and on and on" (Laymon 56). At the same time, the phrase refers to the weight of history working against the characters of the novel, signaling toward the fact that each major plot point and adverse circumstance is rooted in a longer history of racial and environmental violence.[146]

Long Division literalizes the ways the past persists into the present. In the novel, different historical layers exist contemporaneously, and the same characters can pass from one time period into another and back. Set in the fictional Malahatchie on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the novel plays with geographic and temporal palimpsests in a place that reflects the cumulative effects of Klan-style racial violence, ongoing structural neglect, and catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill. Although set off by the rupture of Katrina, *Long Division* moves beyond the flood and the cycles of violence to imagine a path forward, suggesting literature might play a role in the process.

With his descriptions of the same locales through different time periods and environmental transformations, Laymon overcomes the representational challenges of Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, whose gradual progression makes it invisible to the naked eye. In the novel, this violence is both social and environmental.[147] Despite excursions into 1985 and

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[146] In the poem "Left," which opened this chapter, Finney uses the phrase "long historical division," to emphasize the government's racist calculations about which lives matter and which ones are worth saving.

[147] Literary scholar Cameron Leader-Picone reads Ward's and Laymon's novels through the lens of the slow violence of structural anti-Black racism, which ensures the invisibility of Black Gulf Coast communities except for "in the context of their differential vulnerability to the violence of the natural environment, and only then through the spectacle of their exclusion from the body politic of the larger state" (69).

1964, the 2013-set novel is distinctly future-oriented, positing that imagination, literature, and love can shape the outcomes of the past and ensure a more fair and sustainable future. By showing the same coastal town in the 1960s, 1980s, and 2010s, *Long Division* is able to represent the rising pollution and extreme-weather susceptibility caused by exploitation and coastal over-development over a longer time period. Joining three distinct time periods that span four decades, *Long Division* makes legible the environmental damage that has affected Malahatchie but cannot be measured from a fixed point in time. City's time travel, in other words, provides a concrete visualization of the changes the area has undergone with global warming, Hurricane Katrina, and the BP oil spill.

Katrina is only ever invoked in passing, but is nevertheless at the heart of the conflict that propels the story: In 2013, the main character, the teenage Citoyen 'City' Coldson, finds an authorless book called *Long Division* in which he reads about another boy named City Coldson, who is conspicuously like him, but lives in 1985. When City '85 travels to 2013 with his crush, Shalaya Crump, he befriends Baize, a teenage girl whose parents died during the 2005 hurricane. During their joint time travel between the two periods and 1964, City realizes that Baize is his and Shalaya's daughter and that the reason the pair cannot find themselves in 2013 is because they disappeared eight years earlier, killed in Hurricane Katrina.

However central it might be to the plot, Katrina remains largely absent from the novel. This avoids the kind of overreliance on decontextualized images of destruction and Black suffering in which the white mainstream media often engages with images of Black people in the flooded streets of New Orleans. *Long Division* offers a potent critique of the discourse of post-racialism on the one hand and the racist representation of Katrina victims as refugees on the

other. Describing the setting of the regional spelling contest in which he competes along with another classmate, City notes:

> In the backdrop of us walking were old images of folks in New Orleans, knee deep in toxic water. Those pictures shifted to shots of Trayvon Martin in a loose football uniform, then oil off the coast drowning ignorant ducks. Then they finally replayed the footage of James Anderson being run over by those white boys over off Ellis Avenue.
>
> (Laymon 9)

The backdrop of Black suffering and SNCC Civil Rights images is meant to underscore the contrast between past injustices, however recent they may be, and City's and LaVander Peeler's presence at the state-sponsored event. The fact that two Black children have placed in the finals is inserted into the larger narrative of racial progress and reconciliation. The images in the background clearly cast them in this performance. If the juxtaposition is supposed to remind viewers of how far the country has come, the narrative's sardonic tone undermines that projection—the drowning ducks are described as ignorant—and implies that the audience is getting both a sense of superiority and a perverse pleasure from the images and footage. Through crass repetition, the violence is replicated once again. As Laymon points out in an interview, the passage invokes Ralph Ellison's 'Battle Royal' scene from *Invisible Man* (1952) and the kind of expectations of blackface minstrelsy Eric Lott outlines in *Love and Theft* (Brown and Laymon 187).

Realizing they were sent to the contest not to compete as token figures but to win and alleviate white guilt, City and LaVander are unprepared for "what it would feel like to not be given a chance to really lose." The contest organizers do not believe the two to be capable of competing (Laymon 43). "Times are a-changing and you, you exceptional young Mississippian, are a symbol of American Progress. The past is the past and today can be tomorrow," the hosts announce in response to LaVander's victory with the correct usage of the word 'chitterlings.'

Realizing what has transpired and refusing to partake in the charade, LaVander, covered in tears, shifts his correct definition from "pig's intestines" to "children of hogs," forfeiting his first place in the contest (43-44).

The scene above points to the problems with contemporary discourses surrounding race in popular media; *Long Division* also exposes the issues with white Southerners' idealization of the past. When City '85 travels through time to 1964, the novelty wears off as soon as he realizes what that means: "*Damn. Damn. Damn.* I was in 1964 all by myself" (Laymon 145). 1964 was the year of the Freedom Summer voter registration drive in Mississippi, which notoriously culminated in the Ku Klux Klan murder of one Black and two Jewish white civil rights volunteers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. With a focus on the violence of segregation and the psychological and physical terror of the Klan, the novel exposes the politics behind the Agrarian desire for a return to a hypocritically idyllic rural past. At the same time, racist incidents that occur in 2013 put the falsity of the post-racial discourse at the spelling contest in high relief.[148]

Although socially toxic, the novel shows that the Malahatchie of 1964 was less environmentally depleted than it is in 2013. Extraction and environmental destruction have a long history that reaches beyond the 1960s, but the decades of rapid industrialization beginning with the 1970s greatly exacerbated problems along the Lower River and the Gulf Coast. *Long Division* emphasizes this deterioration with its constant comparisons between the three time periods, a technique that visualizes the slow violence of human-induced environmental change. At the center are Katrina and the altered wetlands of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, but the novel

[148] City gets physically and verbally assaulted by a group of white men, one of whom his grandmother then locks in her shed.

also makes several references to the BP oil spill of 2010, as well as to the more general depletion of forests and the changed air quality resulting from greenhouse effects. Commenting on all the "crazy black" water saturated with oil, Baize notes that it is "all so blue, too, because of the black," playing with color imagery to convey the affect of loss and recall the legacy of the blues—Baize is, after all, an aspiring rapper who continues the tradition of African American social critique within expressive arts (Laymon 220).

Just as Katrina was less an isolated occurrence than a culmination of historical neglect and social as well as environmental violence, BP and the oil spill are not the sole culprits for the dying of the Gulf. The larger society and its extractivist mindset are implicated as well. In *Shadows on the Gulf*, journalist Rowan Jacobsen shows that as detrimental as the oil industry has been to the health of the Gulf and Louisiana's wetlands, it pales in comparison to the damage from the chemicals the entire country sends down the Mississippi River and into the Gulf every single day. From seemingly harmless household products and cosmetics to soaps, ink, paint, herbicides, fertilizers, and other agricultural runoff, all these substances contribute significantly to the so-called 'hypoxic zone' in the Gulf of Mexico (Jacobsen 140-142). In popular discourse, this term describing an area in which there is not enough oxygen to keep aquatic species alive is usually replaced by the catchier if less accurate 'dead zone.' Environmental historian Jack E. Davis confirms Jacobsen's assessment: "Every day in the Gulf is an environmental disaster, originating from sources near and far, that eclipses the spill" (10).

While *Long Division* does not track such environmental networks, it demonstrates that social and environmental ills are intertwined, urging us not to see any event in isolation. As soon as he enters 2013, City '85 notices unseasonal heat, the fact that the woods are "green like the Hulk's chest instead of green like a lime," and that the woods-to-pavement ratio has changed:

"You could see the bigger slithers of dark road from where we were in the woods, like the woods had gone on a diet." He immediately starts coughing, which prompts him to worry he has asthma (Laymon 61). As he pushes open the door to 1964, however, he has the opposite experience: "the air was thin and I couldn't even see Old Rye Road because everything was so thick and green" (62, 136).

The lost greenery does not warrant a desire for a return to a pastoral past that was never there, however, and *Long Division* ends by opening up the possibility of time travelling into a different future instead. Reinforcing this idea, the novel's cover carries an image of a broken chain, fulfilling the prophecy of Sterling Brown's "Strong Men." The air of 1964, along with blooming magnolia trees and verdant greenery, causes a nosebleed in the 2013-based Baize. This reflects the fact that altering the past is making her disappear, but it also shows that the social toxicity of the 1960s South goes against the period's less degraded environmental state; City is, after all, looking for Klansmen in that same scene (Laymon 192-193). The novel suggests that all these time periods are toxic on different levels.

Long Division offers a critique of the nationally, regionally, and locally uneven distribution of economic investment—a disparity that only gets exacerbated by natural disasters and the racially discriminatory politics of recovery. As the City of 2013 puts it, complicating the time theme of the novel: "I know Malahatchie was only a bus ride away, but it felt like a time warp. It always felt like it was behind whatever time we were up in Jackson, but after Hurricane Katrina, it's like time went fast in reverse instead of just slowing down" (Laymon 83).

Questioning the equating of technology and progress, *Long Division* exposes the absurdity of the spread of consumer goods on the one hand and the lack of basic amenities on the other. Says City '85: "I'd seen when I went into their bathroom earlier that there wasn't a

shower. Couldn't understand how they had all the technology to get over 200 channels and make the TV sound like life, but they didn't have technology to make their tub go from brown of a double-yolk egg to a somewhat regular white" (177-178). Poverty, in other words, has not left Malahatchie; it just wears a different guise. The laptop that constantly occupies Baize was purchased by the authorities "with the last of that Katrina money they sent us after all them tornadoes hit us again," we learn (Laymon 67). The gesture was meant to placate the people affected by the storms while avoiding any real structural changes or significant recovery aid.

Unlike much of white Southern literature, which is often fixated on the past, *Long Division* is set on the future. Writing and literature, the novel suggests, can help imagine and enact a different path forward. In meta-narrative fashion, both Citys are seen reading an authorless novel called *Long Division*. Toward the end, City '85 starts adding his own writing onto its blank pages: "the more I wrote and erased, the more I felt Baize and other characters slowly—word by word, maybe even sense by sense—coming back" (Laymon 261). Written for and about Black Southern teenagers who do not often see themselves represented in literature, the novel aims to empower them by bringing the written word and the imaginative possibilities it unlocks closer to them. "I loved that someone with the last name 'Crump' was in the book," City notes. "Sounds dumb, but I knew so many Crumps in Mississippi in my real life, but I had never seen a Crump in anything I read" (29). As one of the true/false statements on an unorthodox test City is given in school states, "Only those who can read, write, and love can move back and forward through time" (15).

Once City '85 realizes the potential of imagination, he is able to travel to a different future:

> I couldn't tell where I was because the air was as thin as it had been in 1964 and the forest was only a little less lime green than it had been in 2013. Before heading to the Freedom School, I looked across the road where the Co-op and Mama Lara's house were. There were sidewalks where the ditches were and lots of black folks and Mexican folks of all ages walking down the sidewalks talking and laughing out loud. Across the road were these cool-looking trailers on wheels. Each trailer had a different shape and a huge garden in the front yard. Down the road was a huge grocery store called Shepherd's Co-op.
>
> (Laymon 255)

In this alternative future, the connection between racism and environmental malaise is drawn out. The scene shows improvements in quality of life that demonstrate that social and environmental progress go hand in hand. The negative changes in air and forest quality seem to be reversing; sidewalks that have replaced ditches indicate urban planning instead of neglect; African Americans and Mexicans are not pitted against each other as we saw in the spelling contest that opened the novel and can enjoy common spaces together; and the gardens in front of each trailer as well as the Co-op grocery store show that people are able to enact food sovereignty and have access to healthy foods. Engaging in the act of writing and creating *Long Division*, the mysterious meta-novel-within-the-novel which connects the different time periods, and learning to care for one another enables City and his loved ones to break from the past: "Hand in hand, deep in the underground of Mississippi, we all ran away to tomorrow because we finally could" (Laymon 263).

The answer turns out to be in the book. Back in 2013, City gets in the time-travel hole with LaVander and they start rereading *Long Division*: "all we needed to know about how to survive, how to live, and how to love in Mississippi was in our hands. The sentence had always been there" (Laymon 267). There is no period ending the last sentence of the novel, leaving it open ended. This is only reinforced by the ellipsis on the following nearly blank page, echoing Brown's poem once again. As Baize points out earlier in the novel, "the ellipsis always knows

something more came before it and something more is coming after it" (245). The temporal palimpsest the novel outlines shows not only that the past is part of the present, but that the future is already embedded in it as well. Ending on a restorative note of optimism, *Long Division* suggests that an alternative to doom is still possible, but only if we deconstruct the mindset that sees people and natural resources as endlessly exploitable. Laymon's environmentalism insists on the interconnections between the environmental, the political, and the personal. The process of redressing the long legacy of racism and cycles of violence and abuse on the level of the family, community, and the state starts with storytelling.

Haha Wakpa

Figure 10: Bdote, a Dakota place of origin at the confluence of the Mni Sota Wakpa and the Haha Wakpa rivers, the Minnesota and the Mississippi, on the edges of the Twin Cities metro area (Photo by author, 2018).

4. Sediment: Remappings

In 2017, visual artist Andrea Carlson (Ojibwe) projected an image of Spirit Island, a sacred Dakota site which the Army Corps of Engineers had destroyed about half a century earlier, onto a Mississippi River lock and dam in downtown Minneapolis. The words "Dakhóta Makhóčhe," Dakota Land, appeared in bold white letters over orange lighting, first in Dakota, then in Anishinaabemowin and English.[149] Since the late nineteenth century, the physical island had been diminishing in volume as settlers extracted its limestone, using it in buildings in the Twin Cities and beyond. Spirit Island vanished in 1963 as the U.S. Corps of Engineers removed it to make room for boat traffic bound for the Upper St. Anthony Falls Lock and Dam (Carlson 64-65). Carlson's installation, *Uncompromising Hand*, responds to the destruction of Indigenous sacred sites in the name of urban development. Her work challenges conceptions of technological intervention as progress, focusing on the destruction engineering leaves in its wake.[150]

Carlson's projection brings a physically erased past into the present by relocating it in place; the work also highlights the role of contemporary Indigenous art and activism in countering the omissions of colonial maps and narratives. On one level, Carlson explains, the

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[149] Images and a video of Carlson's installation can be viewed in the *Open Rivers* journal at: https://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/on-the-uncompromising-hand-remembering-spirit-island/#:~:text=Carlson%2C%20Andrea.,9.

[150] A series of quilts by Gwen Westerman, an enrolled member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota Oyate, similarly focuses on the transformation of the spiritually significant St. Anthony Falls into a concrete overflow spillway in the late nineteenth century. Through the traditional tactile medium of quilting, her work first reconstructs and visualizes the natural falls and then shows the changes they underwent with industrialization. The first quilt, "Otokaheya" (*In the Beginning*), imagines the falls in their full force as they might have appeared ten thousand years ago. The second, "Owamni Omni" (*Whirlpool*), reimagines a 1780 colonial engraving, using the Dakota word for the falls, and the third, "Anpetu Sapa Win" (*Dark Day Woman*), portrays the industrialized landscape of the spillway that replaced the natural falls, borrowing its motif from a story about an abandoned woman and her child who capsized at the site. In Westerman's own words, the piece "depicts the degradation of the river due to the betrayal of industrialization and the environmental impact of 'progress'" (Westerman, Luarca-Shoaf, and Turner Igoe). Images of Westerman's quilts can be viewed in the *Open Rivers* journal at: https://editions.lib.umn.edu/openrivers/article/depicting-the-power-of-water-in-art-and-poetry/

hand in the title refers to the hand of the person who first decided not to draw Spirit Island on a map, arguing that "leaving [the island] out was the first step in imagining its absence" (64). On another level, the hand is representative of future actions that will protect Native homelands instead of destroying them. Says Carlson: "liberation from perpetuating settler mentality in our current actions is how drawing can show us endless proposals for the future" (72).

Carlson's video installation might be spectral and ephemeral, but the public nature of the space in which the artist projects it and its alignment with the original location of Spirit Island ensure a lasting impact. Locating and visualizing the island in Indigenous time and space, Carlson reclaims the area spatially and linguistically, reversing the erasure of the Dakota from their lands. Her work shows that Indigenous art counters colonial erasure inherent in conventional mapping. *Uncompromising Hand* works hand in hand with Jodi Byrd's critique of the all too frequent theorization of Indigenous people as "past tense presences" who remain only "spectral, implied and felt" (xx). Carlson's installation acts as a reassertion of Indigenous past, present, and future along the Mississippi; although rooted in the past, the work is very much a part of the now. The piece counters the widespread omission of Indigenous influences from accounts of the river, confronting settlers with an uncomfortable history and demanding they examine the ways in which the past lives in the present.[151]

Collectively, the Native texts I examine in this chapter rhetorically remap the Mississippi River Valley as Indigenous space, reclaiming sites from which historical accounts often exclude

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[151] Beyond the Twin Cities area, the Mississippi River, whose name derives from the Ojibwe 'Misi-ziibi,' was central to Native American cultures that thrived in the Midwest and the Southeast from roughly the year 800 to about 1600; their earthworks can still be seen all over the Mississippi River Valley from Winterville in Mississippi to Cahokia in Illinois to Aztalan in Wisconsin. Historically, the importance of the river can hardly be overstated, as it both sustained Indigenous tribes with its rich resources and connected them via its tributaries. In his study of Ancient Cahokia and the Mississippians, archeologist Timothy Pauketat explains that the Mississippi shaped landforms as well as peoples, calling it "a major transportation corridor, a political boundary, a rich resource zone, and a living symbol of the Mississippian cosmos" (26).

Indigenous people and highlighting the role of water in Native history and present. I start, however, with white Mississippi writer Eudora Welty's essay about place along the Lower River, "Some Notes on River Country" (1944). Although the essay complicates colonial narratives by bringing the history of the Natchez people to the surface through Welty's attention to landscape, it leaves Native people in the past, demonstrating the kinds of erasures Indigenous writers remap. In Welty's essay like in settler literature more broadly, Native people are only invoked as romanticized prehistoric traces, replaced by European and American colonial society in a teleological trajectory.

Focusing on Indigenous remappings of the Mississippi that respond to such writing, I read two poems, "New Orleans" from the *she had some horses* (1983) collection by the current U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo (Creek) and "Pre-Occupied" (2013) by the Minneapolis-based Heid E. Erdrich (Ojibwe) in its textual and collaborative video poem versions (the latter was created by Erdrich, Vincent Moniz, Jr., and Jonathan Thunder). These works emphasize the sedimentary layers that make up the landscape of the Mississippi, which allows them to visualize Native presence and remember forgotten histories. I contextualize the poems within a wider network of Indigenous art and activism along the river.

Harjo's and Erdrich's geographically grounded poems reject extractive attitudes regarding people and resources. By centering the river whose meandering shape they visually mimic, they emphasize ancestral and contemporary relationships of Native people to the Mississippi. They reveal dispossession and extraction as two sides of the same coin, implicating the structure of capitalism and colonialism in the current state of the environment and theorizing their own version of spatial justice along the river. Spatial justice is a concept developed by critical geographer Edward Soja, who locates environmental extraction and displacement in the

broader socio-political history of dispossession, whether of land and natural resources, as has been the case with Indigenous populations, or of labor and bodies, as was the case with enslaved peoples (Soja 53).[152]

Welty, Harjo, and Erdrich all highlight landscape features—the Mississippi River and the Natchez Trace, both of which served as important commerce routes—to articulate Native presence in the South and in the interior of the continent. While Welty is focused on the past and a bounded river country in Mississippi, Harjo and Erdrich transcend regional boundaries, expanding and reinforcing the notion of Indigenous homelands through their centering of the river. Like Natasha Trethewey's poetry discussed in the previous chapter, their poems act as textual monuments to the erased. They imaginatively enable a space of belonging, community, and resistance to dominant narratives on the one hand and cultural visibility and self-representation on the other. They act as written records for future generations, passing on ancestral cultural memory and stories. In the words of Gender and Indigenous Studies scholar Mishuana Goeman, "Native stories speak to a storied land and storied peoples, connecting generations to particular locales and in a web of relationships," strengthening communities (*Mark My Words* 37). Harjo's and Erdrich's remappings reinscribe Indigenous stories and memory onto representations of the Mississippi River, the body of water that once served as a boundary between two parts of the U.S. empire and facilitated violent acts of Native removal. The stories embedded in their poetic remembering and remapping participate in the project of decolonization by enabling an imagining of Indigenous futurity tied to ancestral homelands along the Mississippi.[153]

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[152] I draw here on cultural theorist Imre Szeman (444).

[153] In their essay "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," theorists Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang worry that the focus on decolonizing the mind acts as a "settler move to innocence" because it allows "*conscientization* to stand in for the

These remappings restore Native lands in memory and on the page. The poems claim and build Native space textually even as Indigenous lands are being flooded and interlaced with leaking pipelines, ensuring a form of survival through remembrance and the active creation of a contemporary body of Indigenous literature that defies narratives of pastness and imagines different futures. While Erdrich moves away from colonial centers of power on the East Coast by turning inland to the Indigenous Mississippi, Harjo's poem reroutes its attention from New Orleans as a settler city to the river that made it. Thinking in terms of mud, layers, and blood, Harjo connects the Lower Mississippi to post-Removal Oklahoma via embodied memory. In both poems, the river becomes a "memoryscape," a landscape that acts as a "conduit[] connecting past, present, and future" (DeLucia 18). The poems represent the Mississippi as a vehicle of Indigenous memory, which is the "last bastion of indigenous resistance" to colonization and assimilation according to literary scholar Chadwick Allen. As he demonstrates in his work on blood narrative, "'Memory'—rather than pure bloodlines or the uninterrupted continuance of indigenous languages or specific lifeways—has ensured the survival of distinct, indigenous peoples into contemporary times" (205-206).

In the works examined in this chapter, sediment provides access to memory not preserved by colonial monuments and history books. The sediment in Welty's river country and the Mississippi mud and riverbanks in Harjo's and Erdrich's poems act as depositories of Native histories. Sediment is also at the heart of some of the most pressing environmental issues plaguing the Mississippi River Valley, and as Carlson's work shows, the artificial structures that

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more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land" (19). Harjo's and Erdrich's poems, however, go beyond conscientization by making land central to their poetic remappings, artistically rendering the Mississippi in Indigenous time and space.

precipitated the crisis were predicated on Indigenous erasure. The many locks, dams, and flood control structures along the Upper River, which were built to make the stream navigable for commercial purposes, displaced sacred Indigenous islands, caves, and mounds. In doing so, they altered the ecosystem in dramatic ways, reducing biodiversity and destroying aquatic habitats with excessive sedimentation (Fremling 368-369). Trapped sediment is the greatest threat to the heavily dammed Upper River, which is starting to act like a lake, suffering from enhanced ageing or eutrophication. As biologist Calvin Fremling explains, while "rivers are virtually immortal, lakes are mortal" (372-373). Conversely, the consistently leveed Lower River suffers from a lack of sedimentation, contributing to Louisiana's devastating coastal erosion and wetland loss, which currently stands at almost thirty square miles a year.[154]

This rapid and extensive land loss, unprecedented in North American history, continues the cycle of Indigenous displacement. The bayou lands of the United Houma Nation, pushed from the banks of the Lower Mississippi to the fringes of Louisiana to make room for antebellum plantations, are now being swallowed by the sea. The legacies and consequences of colonialism, industrialization, extraction, and environmental displacement are deeply intertwined, with patterns of dispossession persisting into the present in very real ways, as the case of the Houma clearly shows.[155] Welty's, Harjo's, and Erdrich's work insists on the permeability of layers within Indigenous and colonial histories. They reveal the ways in which the past is always part of

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[154] Although the extensive leveeing of the Mississippi contributed to the extent of the problem, coastal erosion in Louisiana is caused primarily by dredging wetlands for canals and interlacing the area with oil pipes (United States Geological Survey).

[155] For more information on the predicament of the Houma, see Monique Verdin's 2013 "Southward into the Vanishing Lands" and Adam Crepelle's 2018 "Standing Rock in the Swamp: Oil, the Environment, and the United Houma Nation's Struggle for Federal Recognition."

the present and re-center the landscape, showing that the history erased from official maps and accounts is preserved in the shape of the river and its layers of mud.

I. Indigenous Remappings

In her theoretical approach, Mishuana Goeman defines mapping as a patriarchal form of settler geography that erases Native people from historical memory and marks communal land as private property. As legal scholar Robert Miller demonstrates, colonial exploration, the precondition for colonial map-making, was driven by the Discovery Doctrine, which established under international law that so-called discoverers "immediately and automatically acquired property rights in native lands," gaining rights over Indigenous inhabitants without their knowledge or consent (1). Rivers played a major role in this process as the doctrine dictated that the "discovery of the mouth of the river gave the discovering country a claim over all the lands drained by that river." This made inland waterways a primary vehicle of colonization, a fact that sheds new light on Thomas Jefferson's imperial ambitions and his sponsoring of the 1804-1806 Lewis and Clark Expedition into the Louisiana and Pacific Northwest territories via western rivers (Miller 4, 99).

In direct opposition to colonial mapping and its logic of conquest, Goeman's concept of Indigenous "(re)mapping" uses stories and remembering to highlight tribal continuity and the connections between stories, peoples, and places, promoting Native sovereignty and creating a space in which cultural memory and land come together. This Native feminist approach describes geography not in terms of ownership but relationships—to the land and to each other,

to the past and to the future (Goeman, "(Re)Mapping" 297-301, "Tools" 89, 104). Remapping thus applies an Indigenous feminist lens to Edward Soja's concept of spatial justice.

By centering their remappings on rivers, Harjo and Erdrich imaginatively undo the Discovery Doctrine and reclaim Indigenous waterways as conveyors of Native memory. As connective highways, rivers both predate colonization and evade private ownership and state control; they are also filled with stories and ancestral memories that bridge millennia, which makes them the perfect vehicle for the kind of Native cartography and poetic remappings Goeman writes about. The Mississippi connects two seemingly disparate contemporary and historical Indigenous hubs in the Great Lakes Region and the Gulf South, Minneapolis-St. Paul and New Orleans; reading the two poems together emphasizes the relational aspects of both poems and shows how distinct histories and memories come together via the waterway that connects them.[156]

To draw out parallels between processes taking place along the entire length of the river, this chapter discusses texts and projects relating to sites near its source (Minneapolis) and its delta (New Orleans), highlighting the persistent links between the dispossession of Indigenous people, the oppression of African Americans, and the colonial control of rivers. Reading "New Orleans" and "Pre-Occupied" together bridges the gap between the Upper and the Lower River and connects the three decades of Indigenous art and activism between the publication of each poem and the more distant historical periods they invoke. This highlights the river-like continuity

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[156] To see how Chicago, another major Indigenous hub in the Midwest with ties to the Mississippi fits into this network, consider the earthworks of Indigenous Futurism artist Santiago X (Koasati & Chamorro). His serpent and coil mounds, which connect the Chicago and Des Plaines rivers (both empty into the Illinois River, a Mississippi tributary), are the first contemporary instances of Indigenous mound building. Members of over a hundred tribal nations represented in Chicagoland have been invited to contribute earth from their respective ancestral and tribal lands for the mounds. The projects are meant to visually mark Native heritage and continued presence in the area and reclaim it as Indigenous, but also to celebrate the urban coming together of many different tribes from all over the continent.

and interconnectedness of different temporal and geographical layers in Indigenous remappings of the Mississippi. The poems show colonial violence and its effects on bodies and lands as ongoing rather than confined to the past. The metaphor of the ancient, continuously regenerating river connects seemingly remote histories of removal to the contemporary realities of land loss and environmental contamination, but it also emphasizes Indigenous perseverance.[157]

Refocusing on waterways and placing the Mississippi at the center of my remapping, I talk about memory, place, and Indigenous resistance along the Upper and Lower River. I discuss Welty's tracing of Indigenous history and the poetic remappings of Harjo's and Erdrich's poems, which range from the linguistic to the formal to the conceptual. While linguistic remappings revive Native place names and languages in a concrete instance of rhetorical reclaiming, the poems' formal mimicking of the shape of the river draws connections between language and the environment, between memory and physical space. The conceptual remappings of the poems act as a practice of resistance that works directly against the logic of colonial mapping so central to dispossession and extraction. Harjo and Erdrich articulate the deep-reaching ancestral and contemporary relationship of Native peoples to the river, rewriting the history of this contested space. The poems play with visual and sonic blending and superimposition to reveal a historical, spatial, and environmental layering of Indigenous presence along both parts of the river.

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[157] Debates over the rights of rivers have gained publicity as the Māori tribe of Whanganui in New Zealand has achieved protected status for the Whanganui River in 2017. The rights of land and waterways are crucial to the rights of Indigenous peoples in the United States and elsewhere as extraction and environmentally hazardous infrastructure projects continue to plague their territories. The Dakota Access Pipeline and the 2016-2017 protests by the Standing Rock Sioux, whose reservation is bounded by the Missouri River, a major tributary to the Mississippi, form the most publicized example. On the other end of the river, the infamous Petrochemical Corridor on the banks of the Mississippi in Southern Louisiana, which cropped up in the place of antebellum plantations built on Native removal, fueled the displacement of many people of color living in former Freedmen's towns. Andrew Nikiforuk links the antebellum slave-holding economy to contemporary petro-capitalism, arguing that although "the power generated by the steam engine made slavery redundant," the South did not stop relying on human energy until the rise of the oil industry in Louisiana, Texas, and Oklahoma in the 1940s (20-29).

Focusing on the river's sediment, they build textual space that counters the erosion of Indigenous lands through memory.

II. Historical Traces in River Country

Much of the early theorization about the sense of place in Southern literature comes from these lines: "I have never seen, in this small section of old Mississippi River country and its little chain of lost towns between Vicksburg and Natchez, anything as mundane as ghosts, but I have felt many times there a sense of place as powerful as if it were visible and walking and could touch me" (Welty 7).[158] They come from Eudora Welty's 1944 essay originally published in *Harper's Bazaar*, "Some Notes on River Country." A landscape memoir, the essay contemplates the history of a string of now largely abandoned Mississippi river towns with "place *then* and place *now*" as its theme (Cole 57-58).[159] Welty focuses on Rodney, Mississippi, a town that thrived in the early nineteenth century due to its position along two important trade routes: the Natchez Trace and the Mississippi before it changed its course. The town declined after the Civil War and had become a ghost town by the time of Welty's writing.[160] While the 1980 official nomination of the Rodney Center Historical District for the National Register of

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158 For more recent work that tackles the role of place in Southern letters but moves beyond the fixed and foreclosed categories of the South as a bounded white space present in earlier scholarship, see Scott Romine's "Where Is Southern Literature? The Practice of Place in a Postsouthern Age" (2002) and Martyn Bone's *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (2005). Welty herself elaborated on the significance of place in a 1956 essay, "A Place in Fiction," in which she deemed it "one of the lesser angels that watch over the racing hand of fiction," although she conceded that "the sense of place is as essential to good and honest writing as a logical mind" (781, 792).

159 In contrast to Twain, who "anchors himself in the river," Welty "roots her characters on land," writing about the Mississippi's banks and tributaries, Pearl Amelia McHaney argues (63).

160 Thanks to its strategic position along the Mississippi River and the Natchez Trace, Rodney was an important commercial center in the nineteenth century. Incorporated in 1828, the town thrived until the Civil War and started a rapid decline in the 1870s. Among the main factors in this shift were the river's change in course; an 1869 fire; and the construction of the railroad, which made river towns obsolete (National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form 3).

Historic Places starts the history of the area with European claims to the land in the eighteenth century, Welty traces Native American presence and influence by refocusing from historic buildings to the landscape.[161] She reveals the layers of sediment that make up the River Country, which allows her to visualize and remember the erased histories of the Natchez.

Written three and a half decades before the Rodney historic nomination, "Some Notes on River Country" is keenly aware of Native history. As Welty writes of the Natchez, an Indigenous nation that established five villages in river country in the seventeenth century: "The town of Natchez was named after this nation, although the French one day, in a massacre for a massacre, slew or sent into slavery at Santo Domingo every one of its namesakes, and the history of the nation was done in 1773" (17-18). As the quote shows, removal and enslavement were directly intertwined for Native people in the Southeast; after a series of conflicts, a large number of the Natchez were captured and sold into slavery to the French colonies in the Caribbean, reversing the triangular trade route that would later bring Caribbean slaves to the United States.[162] The rest escaped and blended with other Native peoples, especially the Chickasaw, the Cherokee, and the Creeks (Barnett 130-132 and Milne 207). Despite the violence and disruption of these eighteenth-century massacres, the Natchez survived as a political entity into the present day, with tribal governments now operating in South Carolina and Oklahoma.[163]

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[161] Says the report: "Known as Petit Gulf during the eighteenth century, the settlement was claimed by France, Great Britain and Spain, respectively, and ultimately by the U.S. government after the establishment of the Mississippi Territory in 1798. Early settlers here included Dr. Rush Nutt, a prominent agricultural scientist, and David Hunt, wealthy landowner. Hunt and Nutt were instrumental in the founding of Oakland College five miles north of Rodney in 1832" (National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form 3).

[162] In May of 1731, two hundred and ninety-one of the Natchez were sent to Santo Domingo aboard the Venus, but only one hundred and sixty survived the voyage (Barnett 126-127).

[163] In 2020, the Natchez have no federal recognition, but South Carolina's Natchez Tribe (Edisato Natchez Kusso Tribe of South Carolina) is recognized on the state level. The Natchez Nation in Oklahoma, a treaty tribe of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation still practices traditional government and maintains relationships with the Natchez tribes of South Carolina. During the removals of the 1830s, the U.S. government pushed the Natchez west of the Mississippi along with the Muscogee, the Seminole, the Chickasaw, and the Cherokee. According to the tribe's

In settler accounts of Southern history, however, Native Americans occupy the realm of the present only in the form of place names. As historian Jean O'Brien points out in her study of nineteenth-century New England, the "selective retention of Indian place-names is meant to commemorate Indian peoples and practices that are asserted as extinct" (xxiv). Natchez, Mississippi, once the town with the highest concentration of plantation-driven antebellum wealth, and the Natchez Trace, a former trade route that goes from Natchez to Nashville, Tennessee via Jackson and Tupelo in Mississippi, are both named after the Natchez people who lived and traded in the area.[164] Today, the 444-mile Natchez Trace Parkway roughly follows the Old Natchez Trace, which Welty describes as "sunk out of use" and "deep in leaves" (7). The trade route crosses Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi, connecting Natchez, Choctaw, and Chickasaw territory. The Mississippian earthen structures still standing today like Emerald and Mangum Mounds are powerful reminders of this history.[165]

For the Natchez, however, the term 'trace' is itself loaded. 'Natchez Trace' refers both to the pathway the Natchez first carved out and to the historical vestiges they left behind. The naming is a romanticized way of seemingly paying tribute to the tribe but actually masking the

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webpage, "Many Natchez are currently citizens or eligible for enrollment in each of these federally recognized nations in addition to their Natchez citizenship" ("About Nvculke Wvlt Tvluen Mvnv Pumpeyv").

[164] Like place names, the naming of the Cherokee Rose (rosa laevigata), the state flower of Georgia, signals a similar hollow tribute. The flower captures the attention of Welty, a keen and knowledgeable gardener: "All over the hills the beautiful white Cherokee rose trails its glossy dark-green leaves and its delicate luminous-white flowers. Foliage and flowers alike have a quality of light and dark as well as color in Southern sun" (20-21). Known scientifically as Rosa laevigata, the Cherokee rose is a non-native flower species that was introduced into the Southeastern United States from Southern China and Southeast Asia. In 1918, the Cherokee rose became the official flower of the state of Georgia. Patriotic organizations like the nonprofit State Symbols USA describe the flower's name as deriving from "the Cherokee Native American tribe, who widely distributed the plant" in a classic example of historical whitewashing. The symbolic flower represents another empty gesture of diversity that masks the bloody events of history.

[165] Emerald Mound, the second largest Indigenous earthwork in present-day United States after Cahokia Mounds in Illinois, is located about fifteen miles south of Rodney and became a National Historical Landmark in 1989. The Mississippian mounds in river country had probably been abandoned by the late 1600s, with the Natchez having moved south to the Grand Village of the Natchez, which is where European colonists supposedly first encountered them before driving them out of the area after a series of violent conflicts (Barnett 13, xvii-xviii).

history of European conquest and detracting from the fact that the route was usurped to serve the purposes of the American empire. As African American writer Anthony Walton describes it in his travel memoir, the Natchez Trace became a road "carrying civilization and slaves into the wilderness" (11).[166]

The colonial retention of Indigenous place names is often closer to an act of cultural appropriation than to one of paying tribute or countering erasure.[167] In the words of environmental scholar Lauret Savoy: "To become oriented, to find their way and fill their maps, venturers from Europe needed Native peoples' knowledge of the land. Maps and names would then obscure that knowledge from its context, as Indigenous people themselves were removed from the land" (76). Names remain in what is nothing more than an empty tribute, in other words, while the people themselves get killed in warfare, removed from their lands, and erased from memory and settler-defined history. For Savoy, American historical sites and their landscapes of memory "convey both remembrance and omission, privileging particular arcs of story while neglecting so many others" (112-113).

Even when institutional attempts to commemorate Indigenous presence in the South do occur, as in the Grand Village of Natchez Indians on the outskirts of Natchez, state-curated

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166 Walton elaborates: "because of the latter, I could not romanticize it. […] The thick vegetation around the lower Trace had been the ancestral home of the Choctaw, Chickasaw and Natchez nations, removed to make room for the great wave of American expansion" (11).

167 Observe, for instance, Walt Whitman's enchantment with the "savage and luxuriant" nature of Indigenous names in his essay "An American Primer" (1904):

> What name a city has – What name a State, river, sea, mountain, wood, prairie, has – is no indifferent matter. – All aboriginal names sound good. I was asking for something savage and luxuriant, and behold here are the aboriginal names. I see how they are being preserved. They are honest words – they give true length, breadth, depth. They all fit. Mississippi! – the word winds and chutes – it rolls a stream three thousand miles long." […] / "Names are magic. – One word can pour such a flood through the soul.
>
> (Whitman 17-18)

George R. Stewart, an early historian of American place names, takes issue with this view. He contends that the romantic mind "desired musical names, but the Indian names were harsh and unmelodious." Stewart can "hardly imagine any words less musical" and complains about the dishonesty of the Romantics, who took Native languages and "selected the least ugly forms," shifting consonants "as they preferred" (278).

memory clearly prioritizes settler history. The site has been engulfed by sprawling suburbia and the memory of the Natchez has been paved over and overwritten by street signs bearing the names of Confederate heroes. As Walton describes it: “All that remains 250 years after their demise is the mounds, which at this late date and in this bright light look like nothing so much as parts of a golf course in the middle of suburbia at the end of Jefferson Davis Boulevard, where it is so quiet you can hear only the droning whir of lawn mowers trimming the grass on graves in the distance” (19). Settler memory and place names thus perpetuate a narrative of disappearance that does not align with the contemporary presence of the Natchez as a political entity.

Welty, on the other hand, takes these place names as a point of departure to access the history of the Natchez. For her, historical traces are embedded in the landscape more than anywhere else. She sees the land itself as an agent that documents and remembers cycles of historical change. This process is symbolized by loess, a type of sediment formed by the accumulation of wind-blown silt: “The loess soil is like a mantle; the ridge was laid down here by the wind, the bottom land by the water. Deep under them both is a solid blue clay, embalming the fossil horse and fossil ox and the great mastodon” (9). The fossilized animals deep under many layers of sediment are concrete remnants of different historical periods and prompt Welty to think about the layers of human history that are also embedded in the landscape.

Simultaneously, the layering of history perpetuates a Western notion of progress for Welty. Using the Romantic trope of the noble savage, she characterizes the Natchez as “remnants surely of medievalism” in Mississippi: “They were proud and cruel, gentle-mannered and ironic, handsome, extremely tall, intellectual, elegant, pacific and ruthless” (17). The contradictory descriptors conform to common stereotypes. “To light up the nights there are no mansions, no

celebrations," Welty says to describe the postbellum decline of plantations in river country. "Just as, when there were mansions and celebrations, there were no more festivals of an Indian tribe here; before the music, there were drums" (8). In her conception of history, the past persists in faint natural traces, but the people themselves are seen as extinct. The Eurocentric distinction between music and drums reveals an understanding of time and change as linear and progressive. For Welty, European settlement marks a line between pre-modernity and modernity.[168]

Drawing on Welty's language of savagery and nobility to describe the Natchez, critics have suggested that a character in one of her short stories is portrayed as a descendant of the Natchez. In an essay from 1987, Mary Hughes Brookhart and Suzanne Marrs claim that Welty uses the same imagery to describe the character Billy Floyd in her story "At the Landing," published in *The Wide Net and Other Stories* (1943), as she does to describe the Natchez in "Some Notes on River Country." In their reading, Floyd is "godlike in his primitive vitality," a survivor, a person who "has somehow kept kindled a fire thought to have gone out," and "a mythic figure who transcends time" (90). He is also a rapist who "violates" the main character, Jenny Lockhart; the speculation about his Natchez ancestry is based on this (ig)noble savage characterization (*At the Landing* 304).[169]

Whether or not Floyd might be Natchez is less significant than the fact that it is his violent characterization that leads the town to this theory. The history of the Natchez and the myths in circulation clearly inform Welty's storytelling. One of the two paintings by Jenny's

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168 O'Brien argues that on a local level in particular, the narrative of Native extinction boosted the perception of settlers' modernity: "Romanticized constructions of generalized Indians doomed to disappear were one thing; it was quite another to contemplate "the extinction" of Indian peoples who might instead have been your very neighbors" (xiv).

169 Recent criticism like Rebecca L. Harrison's "Altering the Course: History, Romantic Nationalism, and Colonial Signifiers in Welty's Natchez Trace Fiction" (2015) sees Welty's *The Wide Net and Other Stories* as a "critique of a national historical consciousness rooted in colonization, empire, and destructive individualism, whose toxic consequences still resonate" (46).

deceased mother, we learn, is called "The Massacre at Fort Rosalie;" it depicts the successful Natchez revolt against the French in 1729. What Brookhart and Marrs neglect is that Welty's narrator presents any talk of Natchez blood as hearsay. In fact, the old women who speculate about Floyd's background come to Jenny "to celebrate her ruin," forfeiting their reliability (*At the Landing* 307). The descriptions of Floyd as "the wild man" or a "Gypsy" are all in quotation marks, marking the perspective of the women. The narrator remains skeptical, noting that it is the lady who is "a little crazy" who comes up with the Natchez theory (*At the Landing* 308-309). The narration that ensues discredits the three ladies as town gossips hungry for scandalous speculation. Even if Welty revels in the aura of mystery that the tribe's history brings, the attribution of Natchez ancestry to Floyd comes from the untrustworthy townswomen.

Instead, "Some Notes on River Country" accesses Natchez history through the landscape.[170] In Welty's account of this territory, nature always reclaims marks left by people, but it also leaves traces of those very groups and individuals. She speaks, for instance, of the longevity of live oaks, which "give far more feeling of history than any house or ruin left by man" (22). Whereas the various stages of civilization all perish and get replaced, nature persists: "Today Rodney's landing wears the cloak of vegetation which has caught up this whole land for the third time, or the fourth, or the hundredth" (19). Welty's textual and photographic images of

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[170] While Welty deals with historical accounts and landscape traces rather than embodied presence, Choctaw writer LeAnne Howe's novel *Shell Shaker* (2001) focuses on the transformations and relocations that have kept peoples and traditions alive. One of the characters remembers his great-grandmother's stories about the Natchez, which recount how "the Choctaw helped the Natchez move in with the Ouachitas," reframing colonial allegiances and intertribal conflict from an Indigenous perspective. The story ends with an important moral: "Now you know how a people in the swamp can slip into another name as easily as food slips inside your mouth. But the real truth of my stories is that nothing ever dies" (79). In the novel, the kneading of bread triggers ancestral memories, transforming white dough into dark Mississippi mud and connecting pre- and post-Removal lands and traditional practices over time. Kirstin Squint calls this "a therapeutic move toward healing the wounds of nineteenth-century removal" (53). In an interview with Squint, Howe talks about how the Choctaws took earth from their mother mound in Mississippi and brought it to Oklahoma during the Trail of Tears: "When we brought our earth, when we brought our people, the names came with us. […] And that's to remind us, and remind the people who live in our territories today, who are newcomers, that we are from ancient places; we are people who sprang up out of the Lower Mississippi Valley" (223).

ruins "reveal the persistence of place asserting its identity, of the land reclaiming itself as decay redeems the rough past from taming ways of civilization" (Cole 58).

The traces of past events, the cumulative history of the land shaped by the Mississippi, and the people who engaged with this terrain are what creates Welty's sense of place:

> Indians, Mike Fink the flatboatman, Burr, and Blennerhassett, John James Audubon, the bandits of the Trace, planters, and preachers—the horse fairs, the great fires—the battles of war, the arrivals of foreign ships, and the coming of floods: could not all these things still move with their true stature into the mind here, and their beauty still work upon the heart? Perhaps it is the sense of place that gives us the belief that passionate things, in some essence, endure. Whatever is significant and whatever is tragic in its story live as long as the place does, though they are unseen, and the new life will be built upon these things—regardless of commerce and the way of rivers and roads, and other vagrancies. (Welty 24)

Welty's Whitmanesque catalogue of people ranging from common men to corrupt politicians and everyone in between and her characterization of historical figures and events as "passionate things" might display romanticizing tendencies, but all of these elements also persist into the present and have power over it—they "still move" into the mind and "still work upon the heart" (24). They endure. Welty represents Native tribes as extinct, but she also uses them to access a history beyond colonial occupation and give a sense of deep history to the River Country, insisting that the past always remains present, permeating place.

Past and present also coexist in Welty's iconic photograph, published together with her river essay. Taken in 1942, the image shows the charred ruins of Windsor Plantation and the photographer's shadow, which is visible at the bottom.[171]

[171] The Ruins of Windsor have become an iconic image of the South. Clarence John Laughlin, known for his surrealist photos of the South, shot his "Enigma" photograph there in 1941, a year before Welty, while Sally Mann, the most famous contemporary photographer of the South, shot her "Deep South, Untitled (Valentine Windsor)" photograph there in 1998.

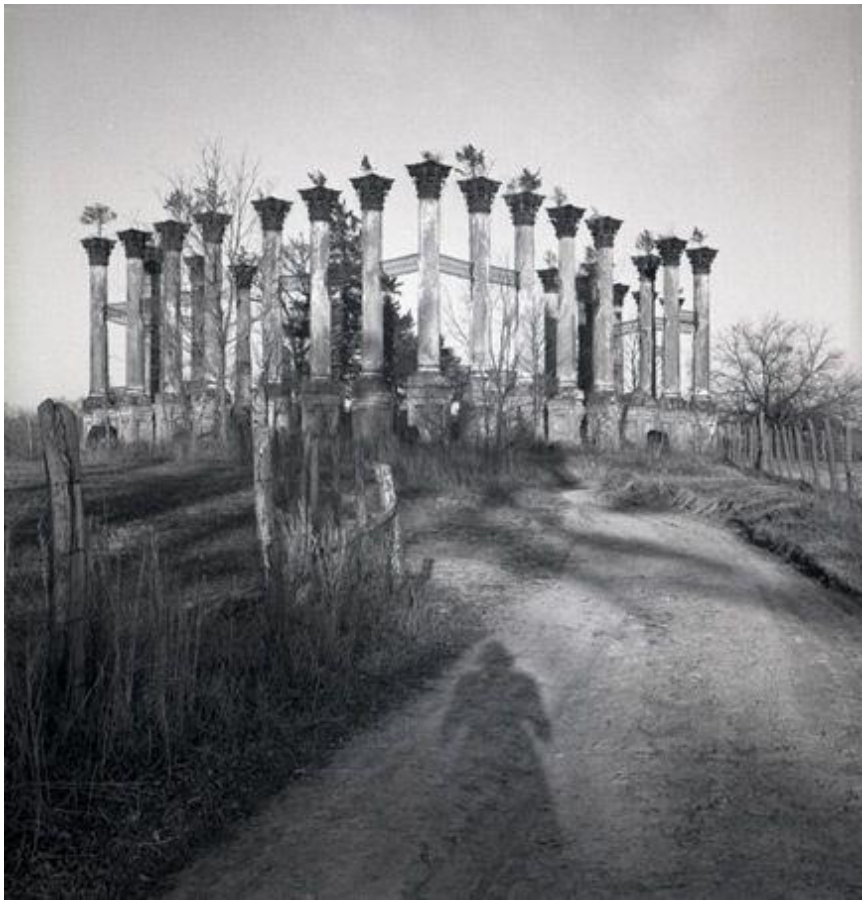

Figure 11: Ruins of Windsor photographed by Eudora Welty in 1942 (Eudora Welty LLC)

Windsor was one of the biggest antebellum mansions in existence at the time of its completion in 1861. Although it survived the Civil War unscathed, having served as a Union hospital, it burned down in 1890; the official explanation at the site states that the fire allegedly started when a party guest dropped a cigar or a cigarette. Whatever the case, all that is left are the mansion's Corinthian columns, with trees and shrubbery having reclaimed what was once the luxurious interior.

Hidden off-stage in the background are the Natchez Trace and the Mississippi River, of which the mansion's roof terrace supposedly offered views. At the front and center is the Greek

Revival architecture that recalls the splendor of the Old World and plantation slavery of the New. Pervading the entire image are the history of the Civil War and the debauchery of Southern aristocracy—the mansion that served as a bellum hospital allegedly burned down during a party. In short, it is the whole of Southern gothic in one photograph, with its high priestess documenting it from the margins and materializing in shadow. The photograph both evokes extinction and suggests coexisting antebellum, post-bellum, and contemporary temporalities. Together with the essay, it brings Southeastern Indian peoples, wars and removal, plantation slavery, and a decaying post-Reconstruction South into a single image, visualizing Welty's famous sense of place. The Confederacy might have burned, but as the poems examined in the next section show, the American empire was built on Indigenous lands and Black labor. The consequences of Native Removal and plantation slavery go beyond an abstract sense of place, manifesting in persistent patterns of dispossession and displacement.

III. The Delta: Bulbancha/New Orleans

Joy Harjo's "New Orleans," published in 1983, rewrites the settler erasure of Indigenous history from the city. The poem centers Native people by focusing on the landscape of the Mississippi, which meanders past the old French Quarter before merging with the Gulf of Mexico further south at the river's delta. Harjo's remapping engages what literary scholar Chadwick Allen calls the "blood/land/memory complex," which highlights the centrality of land to Indigenous minority identities (i.e. blood) and the process of reimagining erased Indigenous histories (i.e. memory) (16).[172]

[172] Allen builds on writer N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa) and his work on "*memory in the blood* or *blood memory*," a trope that "blur[s] distinctions between racial identity (blood) and narrative (memory)" and builds continuity across generations through the process of Indigenous literary production (Allen 1, 162).

The poem was written in the Reagan era; since then, New Orleans has slowly begun reckoning with its Confederate history. Between 2015 and 2017, several major Confederate monuments were torn down.[173] Despite these developments, the city continues to celebrate Thomas Jefferson's 1803 Louisiana Purchase, which prompted the U.S. settler expansion west of the Mississippi, the ethnic cleansing of the Native peoples of the Southeast, and the importation of plantation slavery into the Mississippi River Valley. It also monumentalizes Andrew Jackson, the man who executed these removals (Dunbar-Ortiz 96). This ignores the violence committed against Indigenous peoples and enslaved Blacks in what Melanie Benson Taylor calls "our national amnesia over the uncanny stains on our country's beginnings" ("In Deep" 68). New Orleans does much to celebrate its French and American colonial past, in other words, and little to officially acknowledge its Indigenous history, let alone present.[174] Although Native Americans in Louisiana have made significant strides in visibility and self-presentation since the early 1980s, Jackson's monument still occupies the French Quarter in 2020 despite activist efforts to remove it.[175] Even as mounting political pressure is forcing the city to rethink some of its most prominent symbols of white supremacy, its thriving tourism industry continues to capitalize on antebellum nostalgia and the city's colonial culture.

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[173] In 2017, the city took down the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, which joined the list of other recently removed monuments: the statues of Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard, and the Liberty Place monument, which commemorated a Reconstruction-era attack on the city's integrated police force by white supremacists (Wendland).

[174] French explorer René-Robert Cavalier, sieur de La Salle, who made his voyage downriver from Indiana, claimed the Louisiana Territory for France in 1682. In 1718, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de Bienville, who had been shown the location by a Native American guide about two decades earlier, decided this was the perfect place for the capital of French Louisiana (Kelman 4).

[175] In the years following the publication of the poem, the city made token efforts to acknowledge Indigenous history and culture, usually in ways that celebrate multiculturalism and deflect from the violence of the colonial enterprise: in 1982, the city collaborated with the United Houma Nation to hold the Tricentennial Indian Festival on City Park Stadium, marking La Salle's Mississippi River voyage; in 1983, the New Orleans French Market Board involved the Louisiana Office of Indian Affairs to celebrate the market's bicentennial; in 1987, members of various tribes sold crafts and traditional foods in the city's celebration of the drafting of the US Constitution (Usenr 133-134).

Rewriting the story of place, Harjo's "New Orleans" recasts the history of the city in terms that put Indigenous people and the Mississippi River at the center.[176] The poem opens with an image of Jackson's statue in the square named after him: "Near the French Market I see a blue horse / caught frozen in stone in the middle of / a square." Never naming the man responsible for the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the poem focuses instead on the animal that carries him and through a subtle allusion, invokes Crazy Horse, the famous Lakota warrior who fought against the colonial takeover of Native territory in the Great Plains in the northern part of the Mississippi's watershed: "I know it wasn't just a horse / that went crazy" (Harjo 43). Apart from evaluating Jackson's state of mind, the move from the colonial soldier and statesman to the Lakota warrior rhetorically re-centers Indigenous people north and south, countering their erasure from colonial preservations of history and shifting our collective understanding of place.

In a similar act of reframing public memory, the 2019 issue of the activist zine *Bulbancha Is Still a Place* features a striking archival image from the Louisiana Research Collection at Tulane University of Jackson's decapitated statue from 1938. Lamenting subsequent repairs, editor Jeffery Darensbourg proclaims in his opening remarks that the collective 'we' of Indigenous people in Bulbancha happily claims full responsibility for the act (Darensbourg).[177]

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[176] LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker* (2001) similarly reveals the Choctaw history of New Orleans and reinscribes Choctaw presence, which is obscured by official monuments (Squint 40). The river is central to this remembering: "Across the city is the ancient river, the Mississippi. Being at the earth's edge is where Adair feels most alive. She can't imagine living anywhere else but New Orleans, where so much Choctaw history occurred. Yet there remains no trace of her people. Amazingly, nothing" (Howe 41). "Searching for Indians in New Orleans" (1981) by the Hopi poet Wendy Rose similarly challenges the apparent absence of Native Americans from Crescent City. Listening "for shouts from yesterday/ that quickly turn to mist/ and to the Gulf dissipate," the speaker only finds landscape remnants like the "solid silk of the Mississippi" and powder "left from mountains dynamited/into the streets/ a century ago" (Rose 39).

[177] Explore the zine's website here: http://bulbanchaisstillaplace.org/. As historians Lisa Blee and Jean M. O'Brien show in their work on monumentalization, monuments to settler colonialism also play a part in contemporary debates over history, memory, and the place of historical monuments. Harmful memory work is performed both by statues that overtly revere colonizers like Christopher Columbus and those that offer images of romanticized pre-

Bulbancha is an old Choctaw name for the place now known as New Orleans; it translates as "a place of many tongues," an apt name for neutral territory where different bodies of water and over forty distinct tribes came together (Darensbourg). *Bulbancha Is Still a Place* revives the ancient place name to assert the primacy of Native people in the area as it celebrates contemporary Indigenous culture from Louisiana. In doing so, it promotes Indigenous cultural visibility and self-determination, or what Scott Lyons calls rhetorical sovereignty—a people's ability to tell their history and define their own meaning through writing (447-450). Countering official commemorations of the tricentennial of New Orleans, the zine, first published in 2018, foregrounds the city's Indigenous history and reaffirms Louisiana in general and Bulbancha in particular as vibrant centers of Native art and activism.

Bulbancha was then and is now an Indigenous hub, a meeting place for different Native tribes including the Chitimacha, Houma, Chawasha, Washa, Acolapissa, Tunica-Biloxi, Bayogoula, Natchez, Taensa, and Atakapa-Ishak. The contemporary city is still home to Indigenous people from all over the Americas, which adds to the mix of languages and ideas.[178] According to some sources, "Bulbancha" and its variants were also the names used by the Choctaws and the Chickasaws for the Lower Mississippi, which confirms the historic centrality of the river to this place (Mack 16). Before the various waves of displacement, some West, some South, Bulbancha and the space of the Lower Mississippi served as an Indigenous network space where Native tribes lived and traded. As historian Daniel Usner demonstrates, the New Orleans

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modern Native American archetypes "to underscore frontier mythologies and celebrate the dispossession of the nation's Indigenous inhabitants as a measure of progress" (5, 13).

178 New Orleans has continued to be culturally hybrid, its position on the Mississippi and in proximity to the Gulf giving it an in-built multicultural aspect. As Kirsten Silva Gruesz argues, there is a 'Latinness' to New Orleans. She places the city in the context of the system of the Gulf of Mexico, which encompasses not only Cuba and Hispaniola to the east, but also Mexico and Central America to the west (Gruesz 474). In this light, New Orleans connects Indigenous Peoples not only across North America, but also across the hemisphere.

area has been continuously populated by Native Americans, even as their numbers reduced significantly following Jackson's removal policies of the 1830s. The so-called "vanishing Indian" of popular settler extinction tropes "refused to vanish from Louisiana" (Usner 93, xv).[179]

With its recuperation of the word "Bulbancha," the name of the zine acts as an instance of linguistic remapping.[180] The use of Indigenous names for lands is deeply political, as Darensbourg notes in his opening piece, and as long as the name remains in circulation, the area has not been thoroughly colonized. In fact, reporting on language revitalization projects is a vital part of the zine's 2019 Language Issue.[181] *Bulbancha Is Still a Place* includes diverse material ranging from manifesto-like declarations of cultural visibility and self-determination, to historical reflections and timelines from Native perspectives, to cultural commentary, personal stories and interviews with Indigenous people in the area, to poetry, visual arts, and book recommendations in Indigenous Studies and literature. As the zine's editor puts it in his response to the city's tricentennial celebrations: "Indigenous Peoples recognize that this land has thousands of years of our thoughts, thousands of years of our songs, our care, our living with it,

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179 Remaining mounds and shell middens, ancient refuse heaps, speak to well-documented pre-colonial activities. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Native Americans maintained ceremonial and trade grounds within the settler city "in order to negotiate and even resist colonialism" (Usner 2, 6). In the nineteenth century, however, Indigenous people in New Orleans were both violently expelled from their homelands and narrated into extinction. Even as Choctaw women appeared regularly in pictures of New Orleans market scenes, the "tragic theme of vanishing Indians almost always framed words and pictures that described—albeit in a limited fashion—actual evidence of Indian resilience and resourcefulness" (Usner 94). The official census, which employs questionable methods for recording underrepresented populations, only counted two Native Americans as residents of New Orleans in 1900 but by 1930, the number began slowly but steadily rising. By the 2010s, there was a population of over a thousand Native Americans in New Orleans and over thirty thousand in the state of Louisiana (Usenr 130).

180 The most famous example of linguistic remapping occurs along the Upper Mississippi in Minneapolis, where the name Lake Calhoun was replaced with the Dakota Bde Maka Ska; the case made it to the Minnesota Supreme Court in 2019.

181 The Houma Language Project, for example, connects speakers and learners through technology and rebuilds the language through its better-preserved cousin, Choctaw. This focus on relations and connections aims to restore the Houma language; its revitalization helps build the culturally sovereign terrain from which to fight for land preservation and coastal restoration, asserting a cultural presence in tandem with much-needed environmental activism (Darensbourg).

our caring for it" (Darensbourg). Indigenous people from many different tribes have always been in and around Bulbancha even if the system of colonial monuments in New Orleans conceals their presence.

The zine and Harjo's poem both aim to remap the public memory of Southern Louisiana and create a community space of belonging by highlighting Native memories and histories that official narratives erode and submerge. Harjo's poem does this by rerouting our focus from a city filled with colonial monuments to the river that made it, which compels the poet to think in terms of mud, layers, and blood, connecting ancestral Creek lands along the Lower River to post-removal Creek territory in Oklahoma via embodied memory.

With its varying line length and occasional indentation in short stanzas, the free verse "New Orleans" produces river-like meanders that visually mimic the curves of the river. These swerves signal logical reversals, staging an argument between the speaker's remembering and the rest of the city, which seems intent on forgetting:

> Nearby is a shop with ivory and knives.
> There are red rocks. The man behind the
> counter has no idea that he is inside
> magic stones. He should find out before
> they destroy him. These things
> have memory,
> you know.
>
> I have a memory.
> It swims deep in blood,
> a delta in the skin. It swims out of Oklahoma,
> deep the Mississippi River. It carries my
> feet to these places: the French Quarter […]

(Harjo 43-44)

The movement of people and memory is analogized to the meandering flow of the river, which is non-linear like time itself. The poem's form brings a holistic perspective to time and geography,

emphasizing the continuity between different locations along the river as well as between the past, present, and future. The formal remapping of the textual river as filled with Indigenous voices and embodied memories brings such histories to the surface and offsets the erasures of the urban landscape of downtown New Orleans. As Tracey Watts describes it, the New Orleans of the poem is both "sensuous and animate," harboring "memories of a pre-colonial past that persists into contemporary daily life" (109).

Indigenous presence is embedded in the river's landscape and lives on through the speaker and others like her, who carry layered ancestral histories in an embodied form: "I have a memory. / It swims deep in blood, / a delta in the skin. It swims out of Oklahoma, / deep the Mississippi River" (Harjo 44). These lines present memory as part of the body—not only does it act with agency; it is also transmitted through blood, the fluid that keeps us alive. The visualization of the river insists that we turn away from the settler city and its public monuments to its landscape and the Mississippi itself. Since it predates the colonial architecture of New Orleans, the river is a better vehicle for the memory of Creek presence in this place. At the same time, the image of a "delta in the skin" maps geography onto the body, highlighting Indigenous people's links to the land. The speaker compares ancestral memories encoded in the body to the Mississippi River delta south of New Orleans, a striking landform created by sediment deposition that is etched into the land in a vein-like pattern. The image of the body as land shows the two as inextricably linked, but it also connects Creeks' ancestral lands along the Lower Mississippi River with their post-relocation territory in Oklahoma, expanding the notion of homelands.

The speaker's memory and the poem itself carry forward the voices that the lines describe as buried in the Mississippi mud, contributing to an Indigenous futurity. By giving visibility to

Native presence in New Orleans and claiming lost territory through the act of writing, the speaker resists the erasure and dispossession attempted by relocation and asserts the Creeks' claim to the Southeast. Through the metaphor of the river as blood and vice versa, the poem describes homelands as carried in the body on the one hand, and the landscape as always carrying the memory of former inhabitants on the other. Seeing the Lower Mississippi in relation to the temporally and geographically removed Creeks in Oklahoma remaps the river as Indigenous space.[182]

"New Orleans" formally enacts a layered structure that mirrors the depth of Indigenous presence and ultimately restores Native people to their central status at the surface and not just at the bottom of the layers. In this way, it emphasizes the relations between different time periods and geographical locales, as well as ancestors and posterity, imaginatively enabling a space for belonging and remembrance that ensures continuity and an Indigenous future. The very act of writing contributes to reviving New Orleans as a hub of Native American art and activism, restoring its place on the map of Indigenous roots and routes. "New Orleans" creates a formal visualization of the layered histories along the river: a striking image contrasts the violent history of Native displacement with the ongoing popularity of luxury steamboats like the *Delta Queen* and the *American Queen*:

> There are voices buried in the Mississippi mud.
> There are ancestors and future children
> buried beneath the currents stirred up by
> pleasure boats going up and down.
> There are stories here made of memory.
>
> (Harjo 44)

[182] In anthropology, Renya Ramirez has shown how Native hubs, defined as diasporic urban spaces of intertribal exchange and political organization, function as a "mechanism of cultural and identity transmission." These hubs are sustained by the work of Native women, who connect Native Americans in cities to their respective tribal homelands and to each other (Ramirez 3, 24). Harjo's poetry expands this kind of cultural work by relating the Creek tribal homeland in Oklahoma to their ancestral lands along the Lower Mississippi, claiming New Orleans in the process.

The line breaks reinforce the idea of layering, formally enacting a sedimentary structure that mimics the muddy deposits on the river's banks yet blurs any real separation between the layers. The enjambments visualize the burial in terms of river depth and the passing of time. Looked at in the order of reading, the voices of the past are at the very bottom of the river bed and most deeply buried in the past, persisting despite the many efforts to erase them; the real and metaphorical remains of ancestors and lost future generations are in the prominent middle; the river current and cruise ships are on the surface, ignoring what lies beneath and creating their own narrative; and most crucially, stories made of memory are at the very top, occupying the realm of the present. All these temporal layers are present at any given moment; orality is at the center of the first and the last layers, suggesting that stories and poetry keep this memory and generational persistence alive. What Nancy Lang has called the "ongoing, multilayered and multivocal memories" of Harjo's poems blurs the gap between different temporal levels and the Indigenous people of the past, present, and future (41). The blurring of layers signals the fact that the consequences of removal and erasure persist to this day. It points to the ways in which different forms of nostalgia tourism and official state commemoration build on a distorted partial history that continues to oppress Native people.

The memory that has long lingered in the landscape now exists in a written record as well: "here" on the page and beyond the text in the Mississippi mud; along the banks mirrored by the shape of the poem and along the Lower Mississippi. With the 'here' of the final line, Harjo refers to the context of the poem, but she also alludes to the Monmouth Disaster of 1837, in which hundreds of Creeks died in a Mississippi River steamboat accident just north of Baton Rouge during one of the forced removals to the western territories in what became known as the

Trail of Tears.[183] The deictic word thus serves the dual purpose of marking a concrete historically-significant time and space and pointing to the generative potential of poetry. Furthermore, the opening image of Mississippi mud endows the 'here' with a different history than the frequent colonial accounts of the river that privilege European conquest; according to Creek/Muscogee creation myths, the first human beings emerged from the underground, possibly from clay (Grantham 16). In tying Creek voices to Mississippi mud, the poem claims these origins as well as the physical landscape of the Lower River.

By focusing on the river, Harjo's poem remembers the Creek casualties of American territorial expansionism, locating their bodies and telling their story through the speaker. This exposes the historical omissions over which cruise tourism that capitalizes on antebellum nostalgia tends to glide, highlighting the profound irony of blood being the driving force behind pleasure. By using remembrance as "a means through which to read counter to the stories empire tells itself," to quote Jodi Byrd, the poem's remapping of the Mississippi as Indigenous space also acts restoratively by emphasizing a continuity that ensures a future (xiii). Highlighting survivance, to borrow Gerald Vizenor's famous concept, it counters colonial narratives of erasure and acts as a practice of resistance (vii).

Lamenting the elusiveness of material evidence for Native presence in New Orleans, Harjo's speaker starts looking for the body of the sixteenth century Spanish conquistador credited with discovering the Mississippi, Hernando de Soto, to "know in another way that my memory is alive" (Harjo 45). While colonial sources agree that de Soto died on the banks of the

[183] Although we often think of the Trail of Tears as an overland path of removal, American rivers played a vital part in the process. For more detailed accounts of the role of rivers in the Cherokee removes west, see Diane Glancy's *Designs of the Night Sky* (2002), which includes passages from colonial archival records, as well as her historical novel *Pushing the Bear: A Novel of the Trail of Tears* (1996).

river, there is some disagreement about how the death occurred (Schneider 71). Mainstream historical accounts usually have him succumb to a fever, secretly dropped in the river by his own men. Harjo's poem presents the gold-thirsty plunderer as drowned by the Creeks "so he wouldn't have to drown himself" (45).

On the one hand, the lines above invoke the lopsidedness of historical preservation and the irony of having to look for the colonizer's body to give validity to the memory of one's ancestors. On the other, they highlight the fact that although de Soto might be dead, the legacies set in motion by his conquest persist, and present-day New Orleans bears many markers of colonialism in its architecture and urban layout. The lack of DeSoto's body indicates he may have survived. The speaker posits that de Soto "must have got away, somehow, / because I have seen New Orleans, / the lace and silk buildings, / trolley cars on beaten silver paths, / graves that rise up out of the soft earth in the rain,/ shops that sell black mammy dolls/ holding white babies" (Harjo 45). The poem connects the absence of De Soto's body to the existence of the settler city. The above-ground stone crypts and mausoleums built on swampy ground literalize the persistence of the past into the present.

The lines above widen the poem's perspective on the city's history. Harjo's remapping of New Orleans attends to the intertwined histories of dispossession for African American and Indigenous people. In the early eighteenth century, most Native Americans laboring in the colonial city were "enslaved captives taken during early warfare," accounting for almost a quarter of the city's enslaved population in 1721 (Usner 12).[184] Responding to the city's

[184] Usner cites the 1721 census, which recorded 161 enslaved Indians and 680 enslaved Africans. Before enslaved Indian labor started being used in New Orleans in the 1720s, tens of thousands of Native Americans had been captured and sold elsewhere—some were sent to the French and British colonies in the Caribbean, others to plantations on the Eastern Seaboard (12). As Benson Taylor points out, some members of the Cherokee, Creek,

whitewashed façade, "New Orleans" draws on the tradition of Southern Gothic literature to expose the ways in which the Crescent City of the 1980s paved over much of its history, performing a live burial of sorts. With its French architecture and antebellum statues, the old center at the time of Harjo's writing was a monument to the colonizer's civilization, one that preserved the past only in the revisionist act of "careful remembering and necessary forgetting," to quote Civil War historian David Blight (5). Harjo pulls the curtain on such projections and identifies a different history. She shows the discrepancy between the histories of exploitation and dispossession along the Lower River and the image invoked by Black mammy dolls, sold to tourists as a twisted memento of plantation slavery and the post-Emancipation physical and emotional labor of Black nannies and domestic servants. Although the poem focuses on the Indigenous history of Louisiana, Harjo evokes the interrelation of Native and African American histories.

In her other work, Harjo pays tribute to Black arts and speaks to their importance to her creative expression and experience. In her memoir, *Crazy Brave* (2012), she writes:

> My rite of passage into the world of humanity occurred then, through jazz. The music was a startling bridge between familiar and strange lands. I heard stomp-dance shells, singing. I saw suits, satin, fine hats. I heard workers singing in the fields. It was a way to speak beyond the confines of ordinary language.
>
> (Harjo, *Crazy Brave* 18)

This rite of passage, Harjo explains, occurred when she was too young to have the words for 'jazz' or 'the trumpet.' Still, music and dance—another embodied form of memory—were able to transport her through time and space as she "followed that sound to the beginning, to the birth of sound" (17). For her, music, voice, and poetry create bridges between the past and the present.

Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole tribes later owned enslaved people and plantations—such ambiguities are to be acknowledged if we want to avoid reproducing stereotypical fantasies ("In Deep" 71).

They traverse the geographical distance between the traditional homelands of Southeastern Native tribes and their post-removal landscape of Oklahoma on the one hand and connect African American and Native American cultural expression and lived experience on the other. The bridge between familiar and strange lands to which Harjo alludes works both ways; it is unclear which land is the familiar and which the strange.

In the memoir, the sound of jazz makes Harjo remember stomp-dance shells, which are specific features of the Choctaw, Creek and Cherokee traditions. The sound invokes another forgotten story and the ways in which Native and African cultures mixed in New Orleans's Congo Square, commonly lauded as the birthplace of jazz.[185] Says Harjo: "I see the spirit of New Orleans and hear the singing of the spirit of Congo Square. Congo Square was originally a Southeastern Indian ceremonial ground. It became a meeting ground for tribal peoples, Africans, and their European friends, lovers, and families. They gathered there to dance, to enjoy the music" (Harjo, *Crazy Brave* 21). Not only does the sound of stomp-dance shells invoke an Indigenous hub in the heart of what we now know as New Orleans; it also implies shared cross-cultural experiences.

In the artistic rendering of history in Harjo's poem, the colonial enterprise that includes the settler city and tourist mementoes capitalizing on antebellum nostalgia was embodied in DeSoto and remains present in late-twentieth-century New Orleans and contemporary Americans. The poem ends with a sighting of the sixteenth-century conquistador in the guise of a

[185] In his study of diasporic performance culture, Joseph Roach describes Congo Square in the early nineteenth century as "a convergence of dance and musical forms, clustered feats of daring and invention, which were deeply indebted to Africa but no longer of it […] rising, Phoenix-like, from the ashes of diaspora and genocide on wings of song" (66).

tourist, described with the same adjectives as the "mad and crazy" statue of Jackson's horse with which the poem opens. This connects De Soto to Jackson as well as to the common American:

> And I know I have seen De Soto,
> having a drink on Bourbon Street,
> mad and crazy
> dancing with a woman as gold
> as the river bottom.
>
> (Harjo 46)

Like the last sudden meander of the line breaks, the woman's skin color, associated with both the gold for which DeSoto was searching and the river bottom where he was rumored to meet his demise, suggests a final reversal. With this image, the speaker finds living proof of the "evidence of other Creeks" she sought out in the poem's first stanza, indicating a futurity that goes beyond the earlier wish for "remnants of voices,/ or for tobacco brown bones to come wandering/ down Conti Street, Royal, or Decatur" (Harjo 43).

IV. The Source: Minneapolis-St. Paul

Upriver in Minneapolis-St. Paul, similar processes of colonial erasure and Indigenous rewritings of history take place, revealing a larger pattern of extraction and resistance across the River Valley. Located on the banks of the Mississippi, Minneapolis has the importance of the river encoded in its name, which derives from a Dakota word for water (mni) and the Greek word for city (polis) (Furlan 141). Minnesota was historically inhabited by the Dakotas, Cheyenne, Ho Chunks, and beginning around approximately AD 900, the Anishinaabe or Ojibwe. As literary scholar Laura Furlan points out: "Located within a deeper sense of time, to riff on Wai Chee Dimock's term, Minneapolis is Indian Territory" (132).

Minneapolis became the epicenter of Indigenous activism in the 1960s and 70s, but its national Native organizations date back to the 1920s (Furlan 135-137). The city is the birthplace of the American Indian Movement (AIM), a grassroots movement for Indigenous rights founded in 1968. AIM gained national recognition with the occupation of Alcatraz between 1969 and 1971. This activist history ensured that Minneapolis has a more widespread reputation as a contemporary Native hub than New Orleans. On the literary front, the city is the home base of Heid E. Erdrich and her sister Louise Erdrich, the nationally renowned novelist.[186]

Without the intervention of Indigenous artists and activists, the deep history Furlan talks about remains illegible to settlers. Through the work of Odawa/Ojibwe and Dakota activists/scholars like Roxanne Gould and Jim Rock, the Dakota have gradually regained control over the sacred Wakan Tipi/Indian Mounds Park by the banks of the Mississippi in St. Paul.[187] In their published work on Wakan Tipi, Gould and Rock describe the process of reclaiming the land in question by "reengaging the memory of the Dakota relationship to the place" and reintroducing its Indigenous name. After the Treaty of 1837 took the sacred Wakan Tipi cave from the Dakota, a railroad company dynamited the cave's entrance and its petroglyphs in the 1880s to make way for train tracks. Shortly after, a brewery started using the water to make beer and began storing it on site, gradually transforming it into "a desecrated dumping ground for railroad rubbish, toxic waste and used household goods" (Gould and Rock 225, 230-232). Of the six caves that existed there, four were blown up, and the larger remaining one was renamed after

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[186] Louise Erdrich is also the owner of Birchbark Books, an independent neighborhood bookstore in Minneapolis specializing in Native American books and arts. The bookstore provides a space for Native intellectual life as well as a platform for Native and non-Native writers and artists to read and showcase their work, which can range from quillwork to paintings to jewelry and traditional basketry.

[187] The site is now managed by the Lower Phalen Creek Project, and Indigenous organization whose mission is to honor and care for sacred sites and educate visitors about its cultural value ("Lower Phalen Creek Project – What We Do").

the first European who stumbled upon it, becoming known as Carver's Cave (Westerman and White 219). Additionally, thirty-one out of the thirty-seven surrounding mounds were bulldozed "in the name of development for a better view; the oak savannah was destroyed and the wetlands were drained and poisoned" (Gould and Rock 230).

Such actions are far from isolated anomalies; they reflect processes of settler extraction and destruction of Indigenous lands that unfold all over the continent. As Traci Voyles points out in her analysis of "wastelanding" in the context of uranium mining in Navajo country, "the logic of settler colonialism denies that its 'wastelands' could be sacred, could be claimed, could have a history, or could be thought of as home." Instead, those places are marked as "empty except for Indians" and made into "sacrificial land" (Voyles 26).

Like in Bulbancha/New Orleans, extraction and erasure in Twin Cities work on the material and the rhetorical levels, expunging Native histories from public memory and official state narratives. A particularly striking instance of the violence reproduced by place names can be found at Bdote, a Dakota sacred place where the Haha Wakpa and Mni Sota Wakpa—the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers—meet. Bdote is not just a sacred site but a place of genesis: "We are told that we were brought here to this land from the stars to the place where the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers meet" (Westerman and White 5). Bdote is now officially a part of the Fort Snelling State Park, named after the 1819 U.S. military structure which held the displaced and imprisoned Dakota survivors of the Dakota War of 1862. The tribe had declared this retaliation against the settler government to protect their homelands from invasion. Dakota historian Waziyatawin demonstrates that in the winter following the war, Fort Snelling functioned as a concentration camp, arguing that settlers enacted a "genocidal culture." Waziyatawin shows that the actions undertaken by white Minnesotans and the federal

government satisfy all five internationally agreed-upon criteria for genocide as outlined by the U.N. (455-461, 472).[188] Among the many atrocities the U.S. government, led by President Lincoln, committed against the Dakota after the war of 1862 was the executive order that hung thirty-eight Dakota men at Mankato, Minnesota on December 26, 1862, which remains "the largest, simultaneous mass hanging from one gallows in world history" (Waziyatawin 464). The surviving Dakota prisoners, as historian William Millikan shows, financed much of the growth of Minnesota by being forced or tricked into giving away their scrip, the certificate entitling them to the possession of their lands, ensuring the white takeover of land in the Dakota Territory (Millikan 15).[189]

Sites like Bdote and Wakan Tipi are now being cared for by Indigenous activists and educators who perform material and cultural cleanups to restore the sacredness of these spaces. They educate the public on their significance in defiance of persistent signs of colonial violence. Despite such efforts, the dynamited cave at Wakan Tipi is gone forever, and Fort Snelling remains an active site of oppression at Bdote, lending its name to the area and perpetuating erasure and the celebration of colonial power structures.

Heid E. Erdrich's poem "Pre-Occupied" (2013) addresses such extraction from Indigenous lands along the Upper River and its tributaries and links environmental issues to a

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[188] These include killings and bodily and mental harm to members of the group; calculated efforts at physical destruction; prevention of births; and the forcible separation of children from their families and other group members (Waziyatawin 455).

[189] Says Millikan: "The banished Dakota had given up their lands for federal annuities, lost their annuities and reservation in a desperate war, and then, finally, helped finance the explosive growth of white civilization with their only remaining resource—their scrip" (15). He explains that during the 1830 treaty negotiations at Prairie du Chien, Chief Wabasha "agreed to talk about a land cession only after the United States agreed that the Sioux could 'give a small piece [of land] to our friends the half-breeds'"—many local traders had wives of Dakota or mixed descent. Taken out of Dakota tribal lands, the so-called "Half Breed Tract" escaped subsequent land cessations that made southern Minnesota the property of the United States. It is not clear what the exact mechanism of extracting these remaining tracts of land from inmates at the prison camp was, but profiteers obtained more than 8,000 acres from the fort's inmates by 1863 (Millikan, 8-12).

critique of the Occupy Wall Street Movement and its ignorance of Indigenous forms of dispossession.[190] It insists on the interconnectedness of colonialism and modern capitalism, both of which are based on extraction, whether of land, labor, or natural resources. The poem exists in the textual as well as a video version, which was produced by Erdrich, co-directed by her and Vincent Moniz, Jr., and art directed and animated by Jonathan Thunder. The video poem remaps the river as a site of collaboration, serving as a testament to the vibrancy of Native arts in the contemporary moment.[191] Both versions include a long end note that elaborates on the different material layered in the poem: the Occupy Movement, environmental extraction, and Superman, the all-American hero as he appears in the 1942 cartoon *Electric Earthquake* and the 1991 rock hit "Superman's Song" by the Crash Test Dummies.

"Pre-Occupied" is invested in a recuperation of Indigenous memory; its title already questions dominant historical narratives by pointing to the fact that the North American continent was populated long before Western colonial occupation. Drawing on the irony of the catchy percentages used by Occupy Wall Street activists—the fact that, as Erdrich's end-note to the poem tells us, Indigenous people today comprise about one percent of the U.S. population, making them "more or less, the original 1% as well as the original 100%" (24)—"Pre-Occupied" critiques the omission of Native Americans from the agenda of those the Occupy movement represents as the ninety-nine percent.

The poem names settler colonialism as the link between past forms of dispossession and present instances of extraction, ending in a call for action. Drawing connections between colonial

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[190] Occupy Wall Street started in September 2011 in Zuccotti Park in New York City's financial district in Lower Manhattan to protest widespread economic inequality in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. This initial occupation gave rise to the Occupy Movement in cities across the U.S., including Minneapolis, as well as around the world.
[191] Watch the video poem on Erdrich's website: http://heiderdrich.com/video/pre-occupied/

land theft and the financial crisis of 2008, the poem plays on the ambiguity of the word 'bank,' which denotes the institution at the heart of Occupy's critique as well as the physical landscape of the river. The waterway in the poem comes to stand in for stolen Indigenous lands across the continent. The invocation of a "tent on cement" in proximity to banks, an image that describes the material surroundings of Occupy protesters, brings the image of the ancient river into the twenty-first century.

Central to the remappings of the textual and the video poems is the Mississippi River. The written poem begins with a triple repetition of the word "river," which is identified halfway through as the Mississippi, mirroring its position in the symbolic if not the geographical middle of the continent. In the video version, the poem opens with a Langston Hughes quote about the Mississippi, which I discuss later, and footage of the regulated St. Anthony Falls on the Upper River in downtown Minneapolis. The sound and the imagery ground the video poem in Indigenous deep time and in settler modifications to the landscape from the outset. As Erdrich starts reciting the poem, the animation positions the repetitive "river" into a spiral while Hughes's voice continues to loop in the background.

Erdrich's poem formally mimics a flowing waterway as well as the speaker's many digressions, which visually connect the text to the land:

> River river river
> I never never never
> etched your spiral icon in limestone
> or for that matter pitched a tent on cement
> near your banks
>
> Banks of marble stock still all movement in the plaza
> river walking its message on the avenue
> rallied in bitter wind
>
> Excuse my digression my mind tends . . .

(Erdrich 22)

The triple structure built on repetition, slant rhymes, and wide spacing reproduces on the page the shape of the river flowing between its banks, etching its way into the landscape as it has for millennia. Although a common feature of many poems, the varying line length that produces the undulating right-hand border is drawn out because of the spacing. This approximates the ebbs and flow of a river, as well as the digressive meanders of the speaker's own thoughts, which constantly traverse time periods and geographies.

In its remapping, "Pre-Occupied" tells the story of the interior. Although the poem starts with the story of East Coast colonization via its critique of Occupy, it gradually shifts inward toward the Mississippi, reclaiming the space that served as a marker of Indigenous removal. Instead of dwelling on Dutch colonization via the Hudson in the early 1600s "where all this started," Erdrich focuses on a Mississippi River situated in Indigenous time and space:

> River river river Our river
> Map of the Milky Way
> reflection of stars
> whence all life commenced
>
> 100% of all life on our planet
>
> River in the middle Mississippi
> not the East Coast Hudson where this all started

(Erdrich 23)

The invocation of the Milky Way links the Mississippi and Indigenous peoples to the stars, painting them all as original. As a primordial element, stars figure prominently in Native creation stories; the poem's frequent repetition of the word "consider"—"There is a river to consider" acts as a refrain of the poem—plays on its derivation from the Latin *sidus* for star or constellation.

This longue-durée perspective of Native life along the Mississippi is crucial to the reclaiming and remapping that take place in the poem. The spiral, a recurring motif in the video poem and one of the first images invoked in the textual version, serves as a helpful visualization of the poem's historicized view that is nevertheless focused on the present and continues into the future. In Lisa Brooks' theorization, the origins of the spiral embedded in place "lie in the ancient worlds, but it moves through our own bodies in the present, perhaps with a sense of irony" (309). Like the spiral, rivers serve as both symbolic and material links in that they "connect us and carry our refuse through space and time," providing a narrative through-line (LeMenager 184). Likewise, the video poem connects historical Indigenous presence to contemporary Native art and activism, highlighting the continuity between them. In the words of literary scholar Susan Bernardin, this "riverine mixed-media form," marked by "collaborative aesthetics," is yet another aspect of "the work's riverine metaphor of Indigenous interconnectivity across time and space" (42, 52).

The primacy of the river and forms of collaboration it engenders are reinforced in the video poem, in which the footage of the technologically altered landscape of St. Anthony Falls transitions to a hand-drawn map of star-reflecting water in the same portion of the Upper Mississippi. The image, taken from *Stories from St. Anthony #3*, a 2010 mixed-media piece by Carolyn Lee Anderson (Navajo), appears in tandem with Erdrich's repetition of the word "river" and the phrase "Map of the Milky Way." Like the textual and video poem versions of "Pre-Occupied," Anderson's image asserts the importance of the present and puts the Mississippi and the natural world surrounding it at the center of its micro-universe. It claims the space as Indigenous and resists common stereotypes about Native Americans through this highly personalized modern story. The piece uses a marker, graphite, watercolor, acrylic paint, paper,

and leaves on Masonite. The Milky Way Mississippi runs diagonally across the painting, with the three islands around St. Anthony Falls clearly marking the geography of downtown Minneapolis.[192]

Figure 12: *Stories from St Anthony #3* by Carolyn Lee Anderson, 2010

[192]Both banks of the river are framed by a hand-written personal story about two people who avoid talking about the past, sipping beers and enjoying each other's company and acceptance that is lacking elsewhere. The story starts with an ominous note stating that this is the speaker's last memory of the other person, and an incoming storm that the two seem excited about. The writing curves along the river, embracing it tightly, while drawings of a flower, fish, and bird, overlapping with real tree leaves, fill out the corners (Anderson). In addition to Anderson's work, the video poem also features artwork by Andrea Carlson, whose *Uncompromising Hand* I describe in my opening paragraphs. Her art appears on the covers of Erdrich's poetry collections *National Monuments* (2008) and *Curator of the Ephemera: At the New Museum for Archaic Media* (2017), which includes "Pre-Occupied."

The visual, sonic, and textual focus on the river and the video poem's collaborative aesthetics express the breadth and depth of historical experience along the Mississippi, expanding the poem's reach geographically as well as temporally. The animation overlaps Erdrich's voice with a looping recording of Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes' famous refrain from "The Negro Speaks of Rivers:" "I've known rivers:/ Ancient, dusky rivers.// My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (33). According to Hughes' autobiography, he wrote the poem in 1920 at the age of seventeen after crossing the Mississippi at St. Louis on a train ride toward Mexico to visit his father. As Bernardin points out, the sonic layering of Erdrich's and Hughes' voices and the frequent repetition of the word "river" in the poem convey "the river's role as structuring metaphor and mnemonic device" and signal toward "the deep racial and national histories" invoked by the Mississippi (43). The river, in other words, both possesses a memory of its own and makes others remember.

Hughes' voice adds to the sprawling temporal dimensions of "Pre-Occupied" by zooming out and providing a global perspective on the localized issues of dispossession the video poem addresses. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" connects Middle Eastern, African, and American rivers—and consequently the people of the African diaspora—through time and space in an affirmative ode to Blackness. Within the context of "Pre-Occupied," Hughes' words invoke plantation slavery as another manifestation of Western colonialism, pointing to another layer of exploitation and violence along the lower part of the same river. Hughes recalls the river's role in the slave trade as well as in freedom and emancipation; he explains in his autobiography that the poem was inspired by an article he read about a young Abraham Lincoln's two flatboat trips

down the Mississippi to New Orleans in 1828 and 1831, which allegedly made him vow to end slavery (Hughes 55).[193]

Following the narrative arc provided by the flow of the river, the video poem moves between different forms of dispossession, presenting them all as interrelated. The speaker elaborates on her refusal to provide sustenance for mainstream white society—characterized as the ninety-nine percent—the way Native Americans did for the first settler colonists, stating that she is "a bit pre-occupied" and turning to contemporary environmental extraction from Native lands instead:

> Simply distracted by sulfide emissions tar sands pipelines. Foster care polar bears. Hydro-fracking. And the playlist deeply intoning *Superman never made any money…*
>
> (Erdrich 23)

Quoting the Crash Test Dummies' 1991 hit "Superman's Song," Erdrich contrasts the bleak environmental exploitation of the capitalist state with the performatively altruistic, quintessentially American superhero, who comes to stand in for the state. The poem exposes the clash between America's self-presentation and its long history of removing, displacing, erasing, and suppressing Native Americans and making profits off of their land. On one level, the line break between "foster" and "care" instructs us to pay attention to environmental issues and see them in relation to capitalism. On another, the phrase reminds us that throughout the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the state tried to culturally eliminate Indigeneity by placing

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193 These are the lines from the poem: "I hear the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln/ went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy/ bosom turn all golden in the sunset" (Hughes 55). Geographer Richard Campanella reconstructs the two trips to New Orleans, the future-president's only visits to the Deep South, in great detail. The nineteen-year-old Lincoln undertook the first voyage in 1828 together with boatman Allan Gentry, starting on the Ohio river at Rockport, Indiana. Campanella argues that the event that scarred Lincoln the most was not his witnessing of slave markets in New Orleans but getting attacked in Louisiana plantation country by seven Black men, probably runaway slaves: "one may view the incident as producing not seven culprits and two victims, nor vice versa, but rather nine victims—victims of the institution of slavery and the violent desperation it engendered" (Campanella).

Native children in boarding schools and foster care in the name of assimilation ("About ICWA").[194] Like the state itself, the Occupy movement's critique of capitalism did little to consider Native Americans, upon whose displacement the American empire is predicated.

Indigenous dispossession, Joanne Barker contends, is a "structural component of US economics." It ranges from the defrauding of the Lenape of Manna-hata in 1626 to present modes of dispossession (including but not limited to predatory lending practices, toxic waste disposal, and mineral and oil extraction) to the refusal of Occupy Wall Street to examine its own colonial logic, which is informed by historical amnesia and the language of occupation.[195] It is the space of Manhattan, which was taken from the Lenape in the early 17th century and has grown into one of the most valuable pieces of American real estate, that most clearly highlights the disconnect between Native protesters and the Occupy Movement. The latter's demand for a redistribution of wealth remains blind to the centrality of colonialism to the current state of inequality (Barker 25-31):

> This is not a problem of absence that can be fixed by presence […] It is a politic of epistemology, one broadly reflective of the quasi-liberal discourses about the crisis and its remedies endemic of Occupy that argued the subprime crisis was a deviation from U.S. democratic values and anticipated a form of redistribution.
>
> (Barker 24)

Erdrich's blending of Indigenous origin stories along the Mississippi and of Native people's exclusion from Occupy's inadequate critique of American capitalism makes precisely this point.

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194 In 1978, Congress passed the Indian Child Welfare Act to stop the widespread separation of Native children from their families even when "fit and willing relatives were available." According to statistics provided by the National Indian Child Welfare Association, the U.S. government removed 25-35% of all Native children; 85% of that fraction were placed outside of their communities.

195 Barker, who sees foreclosures as another "method of dispossession," highlights the necessity of viewing dispossession "as a component of the economic disparity not only of Indigenous people but also of others so indentured within/to the state" (34). Her point links the oppression of Native Americans within the U.S. Empire to that of African Americans, who were legally dispossessed of their bodies and their labor during the era of slavery, the cumulative economic consequences of which can still be felt today.

The environmental atrocities listed in Erdrich's poem are a contemporary manifestation of the dispossession and extraction Barker writes about: endless sulfide emissions coming from oil and natural gas extraction and processing; the high-risk practice of hydro-fracking; tar sands and the pipelines that lace the continent in order to connect the production, processing, and consumption of oil and natural gas, often on Indigenous lands and waterways.[196] The way the U.S. government treats the river is rooted in the way it has historically extracted from Native people. Private companies and the settler state keep appropriating Indigenous lands and resources for environmentally hazardous projects like the Keystone and the Dakota Access Pipelines along the tributaries of the Upper Mississippi, and for copper mining and hydro fracking elsewhere. As Erdrich puts it in the endnotes: "This era of alternative energy has become the new land grab, the new water grab. Indigenous activists are thoroughly pre-occupied with the social and environmental issues I mention and more" (24).

Intertwining typical environmental injustice concerns with a discussion of the settler colonial land grab—"Pre-Occupied" cites the 1942 cartoon *Electric Earthquake*, in which an Indigenous scientist proclaims that Manhattan rightfully belongs to his people, only to be thwarted by Superman: "Possibly but just what/ do you expect us to do about it?" (Erdrich 23-24)—the poem makes a broader claim toward spatial justice, showing the continuity between different forms of extraction and dispossession. The extractive practices to which Erdrich alludes take place in the interior of the continent on the lands of politically and economically

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[196] While most pipelines bring oil and natural gas north from the Gulf, the exchange goes both ways, as bitumen from Canadian tar sands in Alberta, Canada is also moved south to the refineries on the Gulf Coast, especially in Pascagoula, Mississippi, by rail. Foytlin et al. outline the dangers of such transportation and the fact that few cleanup plans exist in the event of a spill. Most of the diluted bitumen is currently transported by train via Memphis and the state of Mississippi, but additional rail facilities for its transportation are planned at other points along the Mississippi River such as at Natchez and Baton Rouge (Foytlin 183).

disempowered people, far from centers of power. Their peripheral position propels their invisibility, but "Pre-Occupied" resists this erasure by centering Indigenous lands and peoples via its representation of the Mississippi.

Having walked us through the ebbs and flows of interlocking histories of dispossession via the citation of Hughes, "Pre-Occupied" ends in an activist call to organize and occupy—"Worked for the 99," as the speaker points out. Reversing the narrative of colonial occupation through its representation of the river and the forms of Indigenous perseverance and collaboration it engenders, the poem encourages continued Native American resistance, highlighting some of its most well-known historical examples: "Occupy Re-occupy Alcatraz and Wounded Knee" (Erdrich 23). The line refers to the 1969 Indigenous occupation of Alcatraz and the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee, the site of a heinous 1890 massacre on the Lakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

With this, Erdrich changes the script. Along with other aesthetic artifacts discussed in this chapter, Harjo's "New Orleans" and the collaborative "Pre-Occupied" testify to the vibrancy of Indigenous art and activism along the Mississippi and especially in its major hubs, Bulbancha/New Orleans and Minneapolis-St. Paul. Both poems represent the Mississippi as vehicle of Indigenous memory, imagining Native futures by activating long-held connections to this space, asserting a vital contemporary presence, and expanding the notion of homelands.

Coda: Environmental Activism

If the river serves as a repository of submerged historical memory, it also acts as a site of contemporary environmental activism. Today, Indigenous resistance to ongoing processes of dispossession and extraction is most visible in fights for land preservation and water protection. The most publicized example is the long line of protests against the Dakota Access Line on Standing Rock Sioux territory, which borders the Missouri River, a major Mississippi tributary.[197] Others instances include the Little Creek Prayer Camp in Iowa, which protests the path of the same pipeline under the Mississippi River, and the L'Eau Est La Vie Camp (Water is Life Movement) in the bayous of Louisiana, opposing the Bayou Bridge Pipeline, which starts in Texas and is planned to reach the Mississippi via the basin of the Atchafalaya, its major distributary. Threats to Indigenous lands and sovereignty occur all over the Mississippi River watershed, but so does resistance.

Literature cannot counter the material erosion of Louisiana's bayous and the wetlands along the Gulf Coast, but it can bring hidden histories to the surface, build community, create written records, and imagine an Indigenous future. Art illuminates the relationship between forgetting and structural neglect, between the uncritical valorization of Western progress narratives and the extraction and over-development on which the American empire was built. As a final instance of the links between forgetting and disappearing, consider the case of the United

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[197] In July 2020, after four years of activism by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and other supporters, a U.S. district judge ordered that the Dakota Access Pipeline must be emptied while the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers works on a detailed environmental impact analysis, which is estimated to take more than a year (Wamsley). Toni Jensen's literary essay "Women in the Fracklands: On Water, Land, Bodies, and Standing Rock" provides a stirring account of the damage the pipeline brings to the environment and the sexual violence Indigenous women face in this industrialized landscape: "The influx of men, of worker's bodies, into frackland towns brings an overflow of crime. In the Bakken at the height of the oil and gas boom, violent crime, for example, increased by 125 percent. North Dakota Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem called this increase in violent crime 'disturbing,' and cited aggravated assaults, rapes, and human trafficking as 'chief concerns'" (Jensen).

Houma Nation further south of New Orleans in the bayous of Southeast Louisiana. The Houma were pushed to the fringes of dry land during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from their homelands along the banks of the Lower River to make room for antebellum plantations. Today, their coastal bayous are quite literally disappearing, eroded by rising sea levels. Louisiana's devastating coastal erosion and wetland loss, caused by the Mississippi's blocked sediment, the oil industry, and climate change, currently stand at almost thirty square miles per year (United States Geological Survey). Unprecedented in North American history, the rapid land loss continues the cycle of Indigenous displacement; the Houma's predicament exemplifies the ways in which patterns of dispossession persist into the present.[198]

In an effort to Indigenize knowledge about the region and keep vanishing bayous on the map through remembering and collecting, Houma artist and activist Monique Verdin fights for the narrative and material preservation of her native St. Bernard Parish in coastal Louisiana. Her post-Katrina, post-BP oil spill documentary *My Louisiana Love* (2012) presents the challenge of wishing to remain on the land of her grandparents and maintain their cultural traditions while "inheriting a dying Delta." The disappearance of wetlands contributes to heightened hurricane exposure, while saltwater intrusion and oil pollution threaten the community's traditional reliance on oysters and shrimp. Environmental changes resulting from humankind's interference with Gulf Coast ecology are eroding a way of life: they undermine traditional foodways and

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198 In an essay that draws on historical colonial records and surviving oral histories, Verdin shows how the Houma were forced southward into the Louisiana bayous in the late eighteenth century to make space for antebellum plantations. She traces the Houma back through the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries to land along the Lower Mississippi River, locating them at present-day Angola, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans. Angola is now the site of the notorious Louisiana State Penitentiary, a disproportionately Black maximum-security prison farm with roots in the antebellum Angola Plantation, which was named after the African country from which many of its enslaved people were brought (Verdin 22-230).

displace Native tribes that were already pushed to the margins of dry land following the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 (*My Louisiana Love*).

Bridging the gap between the memory work of art like Harjo's and Erdrich's and activism, Verdin's *Land Memory Bank and Seed Exchange* initiative aims to build a community record of the coastal cultures of Southeast Louisiana. The project "is dedicated to inspiring and actualizing Mississippi River delta preservation, restoration and adaptations through cultural happenings, strategic installations and as a digital archive" ("LMBSE"). The project offers free photographic portraits to community members, digitalizes existing photographic archives of lands, plants, and people, and acts as a depository for native seeds and plants from Louisiana's bayous. The memory bank ensures that cultural traditions and agricultural practices of the Native Southeast can be preserved and restored elsewhere even as some of the lands inevitably flood. Says the online manifesto: "By collecting, educating and dispensing of native species, biodiversity and medicinal plant knowledge will be preserved, food sovereignty strengthened and the natural system will have a chance to be protected, restored and remembered" ("Exchange").

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