

The Aesthetics of Catastrophe Time: Constructing Transhistorical and Artistic Archives of  
Disaster in Haiti and the Gulf Coast

Stephanie K Hankinson

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2023

Reading Committee:

Laura Chrisman, Chair

Richard Watts

Habiba Ibrahim

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

©Copyright 2023

Stephanie K Hankinson

University of Washington

**Abstract**

The Aesthetics of Catastrophe Time: Constructing Transhistorical and Artistic Archives of  
Disaster in Haiti and the Gulf Coast

Stephanie K Hankinson

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Laura Chrisman

Department of English

This dissertation explores the intertwined relationship between catastrophe storytelling and history-making, arguing for their inherent connection. Through an examination of the complex nature of catastrophes, this project delves into narrative archives of catastrophe spanning diverse art forms, including dance, film, music, visual art, novels, drama, and live performances. These artistic mediums serve as crucial avenues for perceiving and comprehending the recurring patterns within catastrophe histories, bridging the gap between environmental contexts and artistic expression.

By emphasizing the legacies of coloniality and enslavement as foundational elements of each examined catastrophe, this dissertation urges a reevaluation of how we metabolize and comprehend such incidents and their impacts on the modern world. Employing catastrophe time as a heuristic, in conjunction with alternative historical and artistic archives, opens a new

dialogue that recognizes storytelling as the central mechanism for truth-telling, cultural reclamation, and the reinterpretation of catastrophes as spaces imbued with radical transformative social, cultural, and political possibilities.

The heuristic of catastrophic time encompasses both the enduring aftermath of colonialism and slavery and the potential for envisioning futures that surpass historical constraints and material realities. Marginalized communities, often bearing the brunt of catastrophes, experience catastrophe time most acutely. This invites artistic interpretations that foster a necessary double-consciousness of catastrophe—an understanding of the immediate and visceral effects of catastrophic events, combined with a recognition of alternative modes of embodied, historical, and psychological experiences that transcend the limitations of conventional historical time.

This dissertation analyzes alternative historical and artistic archives of catastrophe that extend beyond immediate events and linear timelines of progress commonly favored by modernity's frameworks. The project acknowledges the significance of artistic archives, particularly literature, theater, film, and the performative aspects of religion tied to land and ancestral practices, as potent tools that validate the profound humanity, suffering, and cultural reclamation inherent in minoritized stories and experiences of catastrophe.

Through an exploration of these alternative archives, the dissertation aims to reshape our understanding of catastrophes, unveiling their broader historical, environmental, and political implications. Recognizing the transformative power of artistic narratives in reclaiming and humanizing marginalized experiences, this dissertation honors storytelling as a crucial means of cultural and historical reclamation, underscoring catastrophe narratives as texts ripe with radical possibilities for communal transformation and cultural healing.

## Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support and care of my incredible mentors, colleagues, and community. Laura Chrisman, my trusted dissertation advisor and guide, has been a crucial source of encouragement and inspiration throughout my time at UW and beyond. Her patience, unwavering faith, and keen critical eye have helped me develop a project which I'm proud to share with the academic world. Everyone should be so lucky to have a chair, advocate, and friend like Laura – though few will have the privilege. I look forward to a lifetime of collaboration in artistic, creative, and scholarly pursuits with you beyond the scope of this work.

I am also indebted to my incredible dissertation committee: Rich Watts, Habiba Ibrahim, and Ileana Rodriguez-Silva. Rich developed my love of all things Francophone-Caribbean and spent countless hours discussing theory, literature, and film with me. I'm grateful that you were swayed to take me on as an independent study student all those years ago (especially since neither one of us expected the importance of our work together in support of this dissertation)! I am so thankful for your time, focused attention, and the many conversations we've shared. Habiba, you've served as the committee member who most consistently encouraged and challenged me to elevate the rigor of my methodology and critical approach. Through many twists and turns of my evolving perspective on the work you were a true north star which brought my work into focus time and again. Ileana, I can't imagine this project without your tireless advocacy and engagement throughout. You've served as much more than a GSR and the dissertation, as well as my thinking, is better for it. Finally, though not on the latest iteration of the dissertation committee, I must thank Louis Chude-Sokei. Louis, you're all over this project – literally and figuratively. You've inspired me to think in new ways, challenged me to be brave as a scholar, and served as a wonderful mentor in our work together. I'm grateful for your energy, brilliance, and good humor.

Finishing a dissertation after achieving tenure at a 2-year college is a strange challenge, and it wouldn't have been possible without the support of my colleagues and friends at South Seattle College (and those who have escaped). A special thanks to Mel King, Eileen Jimenez, Tish Lopez, Larry Cushnie, Caitlin Carle, Jes Pikul, Ben Machado, Amiko Matsuo, Paul Kikuchi, Denise Grollmus, Julian Barr, Charlotte Brun, Paige Talbot, Kathy Whitham, and Tim Walsh for their continued care and interest in my scholarship. You've all given me so much grace when my brain was split between the dissertation and our work together at SSC. I have the best colleagues in the world.

I am grateful to all the friends and family who cheered me on from near and far. Mom and Dad for supporting my career in higher ed and every other big dream I've had along the way. Taylor, for always reminding me I'm only useful in a literary emergency. I'm especially thankful for those friends who have engaged and critiqued my work throughout the years: Max Rosenthal, Alex Smith, AJ Burgin, Brianna Owens, Hannah Levintova, Liz Janssen, Emily George, and my graduate cohort. Thanks to the Coven for reminding me what really matters. Liz, for teaching me about work-life balance. Katie, Gary, and Mark – thank you for getting me to out to trivia when I was a writing troll. And finally, an enormous thank you to Greg and Ollie. Ollie, for being excellent, albeit occasionally barky, office staff. And Greg for the patience and kindness of 10,000 spouses – as well as his proofreading prowess (which remains unmatched).

## Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	8
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	
<b>The Fractured Eco-Narrative of Deforestation, Debt &amp; Land-Use in Haiti</b> .....	42
Three Revolutions, International Trade Pressures, and Haiti’s Independence Debt.....	43
Louverture’s Plantation Economy Vision: Land-Ownership Debates of the 19 <sup>th</sup> century.....	48
Ecological Dominos of Land Use Policies: Deforestation, Erosion, and Floods.....	55
The Creeping Destruction of Colonial Debt, Charcoal, and Hispaniola Border Myths.....	61
International Agricultural Humanitarian Aid and the Loss of Food Sovereignty.....	65
Fiction’s Impact on Historical and Ecological Archives.....	69
Haitian Forests and Spirituality: Loss of Forest, Loss of Culture.....	72
C. L. R. James’s <i>Toussaint Louverture</i> : Enlightenment Hero and Environmental Irony.....	77
Jacques Roumain’s <i>Masters of the Dew</i> : Optimism in the Face of Environmental Crisis.....	93
Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s <i>Fonds des Nègres &amp; Amour</i> : Healing the Land and the People.....	101
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	
<b>Blending Literary and Historical Archives in Haitian Earthquake Novels</b> .....	112
Non-Linear Theories of Caribbean Time and History.....	115
Fractured Memory, Identity, and Time in the Haitian Earthquake Literature.....	121
Approaches to Catastrophe Temporality in the Novels of Léger, Orcel, and Chancy.....	124
Dimitry Elias Léger’s <i>God Loves Haiti</i> : Embracing Catastrophe Temporalities.....	124
Makenzy Orcel’s <i>The Immortals</i> : Memorializing Women of the Grand Rue Brothels.....	135
Myriam J. A. Chancy’s <i>What Storm, What Thunder</i> : Aid, Diaspora, and the Future.....	149

<b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	
<b>Re/Constructing New Orleans: Colonialism, Afro-Louisianan Geographies, &amp; Katrina Theater</b> .....	160
Colonizing the Louisiana Territory & the Chaos of French Rule.....	167
The Louisiana Purchase: Ungovernability and Rejection of “American” Ideologies.....	181
Aesthetic Possibilities & Imagined Futures: the Katrina Theater Archive.....	190
The Power of the Audience: Documentary Katrina Theater & Bearing Witness.....	195
Katrina Theater By/For New Orleans: <i>The Rising Water Trilogy</i> .....	209
Art-as-Aid: Paul Chan’s <i>Waiting for Godot in New Orleans</i> .....	222
<b>CHAPTER FOUR</b>	
<b>Rising Tides &amp; Rural Experiences of Catastrophe in Narratives of the U.S. Gulf Coast</b> .....	228
Freedom, Invisibility, and Precarity of Living on the Margins.....	233
Contextualizing Katrina as One Disaster Among Many.....	238
Repurposing Medea: Esch’s Use of Storytelling to Reclaim Agency.....	243
Evolution of Representation from <i>Juicy and Delicious</i> to <i>Beasts of the Southern Wild</i> .....	252
<i>Beasts of the Southern Wild</i> : From Katrina to Climate Catastrophe.....	258
Displacement of Isle de Jean Charles Native Communities.....	277
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	283
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	287

## Introduction

The irony of completing a dissertation about catastrophe time and art during a global pandemic does not escape me. Here in the U.S., our relationship to time, place, and each other has been forever changed by COVID-19. Many of us have experienced and borne witness to economic devastation, racial inequities, insecurity of healthcare systems, the violence of failing political systems, and the worn-thin fabric of American Democracy in new ways. Time is casually marked in "before" and "after" COVID. At present, the spring of 2023, no one is quite sure what the "after" COVID world will look like. Is an "after" COVID even possible? Artists, writers, and activists are on the cultural front lines of helping us understand the melding of "before-time" of COVID with the possibilities of the future by processing collective traumas through art-making: film, music, performance (of course all available online to stream from the relative safety of our homes). We must hold two things together as we consider the resonances of catastrophe: 1) art's role in the processing of collective trauma of catastrophes and 2) humanity's resilient impulse to tell stories (even in the midst of catastrophe) to make sense of catastrophe time (the bleed between before/after of the "punctual" event).

This dissertation argues that catastrophe storytellers and history-makers are one and the same. Understanding the complexity of catastrophe, to process collective trauma, we turn to narrative archives: dance, film, music, visual art, novels, drama, live performance, etc. Without storytelling, without seeing and feeling the recursive patterns of catastrophe histories, without drawing connections between the environment and artistic production, the legacies of catastrophe have little resonance for the present or the future.

Natural and decidedly unnatural catastrophes have marked the timeline of my life. I was born in one of Oklahoma's worst ice storms on record in February of 1987 in a Tulsa hospital on

Muscogee (Creek) land. My childhood was one filled with regular cycles of tornadoes and water in the farmland flood plain east of Oklahoma City, a city founded during the settlement of "unassigned lands" in 1889. My family moved to Illinois when the Mississippi and Missouri rivers breached their banks in the Great Flood of 1993. I remember visiting the swollen riverbanks with my parents as a voyeur or maybe as volunteers. I do remember wondering what happened to the families whose houses were floating down the river like boats. Why did they live so close to the water, and would they get to build their homes again? I can't remember if we packed sandbags or maybe my folks just donated to relief efforts.

The fall of my freshman year of college at Boston University began in August 2005. Hurricane Katrina, and more importantly, the ripples of Katrina on New Orleans brought Tulane students to BU as "temporary students". The stories, histories, and questions generously shared by my new "Katrina" classmates sowed the seeds of my scholarly interests in environmental aesthetics, my orientation towards storytelling production/consumption, and my evolving social justice consciousness that would eventually inform my teaching practice. These threads brought me to New Orleans and the Louisiana bayous to learn from artists and storytellers holding the weight of cultural memory of Katrina, as well as the layered chronologies of catastrophe emerging from colonialism, the afterlife of plantation slavery, and rising tides through climate change.

This project evolves from a familiar starting place as many dissertations in the Environmental Humanities: with Rob Nixon's theoretical approaches to time and violence in the seminal *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Nixon explains the visibility of presentist disaster versus what I interpret as the invisibility of shadow timelines of catastrophe, writing:

Politically and emotionally, different kinds of disaster possess unequal heft. Falling bodies, burning towers, exploding heads, avalanches, volcanoes, and tsunamis have a visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power that tales of slow violence, unfolding over years, decades, even centuries, cannot match. (3)

The most compelling application of Nixon's theory of slow violence, I will argue throughout this dissertation, is not to a punctual "disaster" event such as a hurricane or earthquake itself. Rather, a more fruitful application of the theory of slow violence is to the shadow chronologies of catastrophe time, which necessitates a radically reframed temporal and aesthetic approach to interpret catastrophes in their totality. Moreover, to responsibly represent the experiences and stories of catastrophe, the often-unchallenged structures of linear time themselves must be critiqued with an eye towards a plurality of experience.

Catastrophe time is experienced both as the inherited afterlife of colonialism and slavery, and as the potential for futures reaching beyond the constraints of historical legacy or the material realities of the present. Catastrophe time, felt most acutely by marginalized communities, invites artistic interpretations which posit a necessary double-consciousness of catastrophe: a simultaneous understanding of the immediate and visceral impacts of catastrophe events coupled with the recognition of an alternative mode of embodied, historical, and psychological experience to understand the past and present outside of the constraints of historical time.<sup>1</sup> In this way catastrophe time, and the inheritances of coloniality and enslavement

---

<sup>1</sup> This borrows from W. E. B. DuBois's foundational theory of double consciousness: the sensation of internal conflict experienced by subordinated or colonized groups living within an oppressive society (38). Essentially, those experiencing the double consciousness of catastrophe time are both acutely aware of the material realities of the present manifestation of the catastrophe (fallout from the failure of the New Orleans levee system, for example) as well as the invisible impacts of white supremacy and colonialism on the psychological and affective dimensions of a catastrophe time which spans centuries.

which underpin each catastrophe in this project, invite us to reframe the very nature of how we metabolize and understand catastrophic incidents and their impacts on the modern world. Catastrophe time, as a heuristic, paired with alternative historical and artistic archives of catastrophe, invite us into a new dialogue around catastrophe which honors storytelling as the central truth-telling mechanism for cultural and historical reclamation of catastrophes as a space of radical possibility.

The alternative historical and artistic archives of catastrophe that I analyze in this dissertation consider a historical, environmental, and political scope beyond the immediate catastrophe event, or arguably, the linear timelines of progress and cause/effect privileged by the heuristics of modernity. This project takes seriously the idea that artistic archives of catastrophe – primarily literature, theater, film, and the performance of religion in its connection to land and ancestral practice – are powerful tools which validate the deep humanity, suffering, and cultural reclamation of minoritized stories and experiences of catastrophe.

My analytic of catastrophe time is inspired by Nixon’s theorizing of slow violence which requires “that we complicate conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because it is event focused, time bound, and body bound” (3). We must reframe our thinking to understand catastrophe in a way that accounts for the temporal dispersion of slow violence, which for the purposes of my project requires a catastrophic imagination and dispersal of trauma far before and long after the disaster event itself. Perhaps most useful here is Nixon’s interpretation of Fanon’s understanding of subjugation and the overthrow of colonial powers in dialogue with the aftermath of this violence on the post-colonial environment. He argues that Fanon’s focus on independence and self-determination foregrounds “land as property and as [founded on] native dignity”, yet fails to recognize the risks and ecological violence that are

embedded within the fabric of colonial occupation and overthrow (7). The slow violence of empire is present long before Fanon's "searing bullets and bloodstained knives ... [and the] murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists" that many theoretical and cultural narratives choose to dramatize (Fanon 36-37).

The same is true for the cultural narratives of catastrophe; however, we can mine these narratives for the ways that the shadow-timelines make themselves visible not only over "space, or bodies, or labor, or resources, but also over time" (Nixon 8). A narrative of catastrophe, consciously or unconsciously, invites the audience to consider a historical, environmental, and political scope beyond the immediate catastrophe event. Sometimes the shadow-timeline demands political action. Sometimes it provides a cathartic experience of inherited or intergenerational trauma. Above all, this project's analytic of catastrophe time interprets the various catastrophe narratives presented to interrupt presentist notions of catastrophe as immediate, or fixed to a particular event. This project operates within the fractured space of memory (historical, cultural, and environmental) and seeks to make visible the repercussions of catastrophe that cannot be easily mitigated by disaster planning; I argue that art, image, and performance deserve as much attention as scientific study if we are to truly understand and cope with the traumas of disaster in the U.S. Gulf and Haiti, especially including: deforestation, hurricanes, earthquakes, and rising sea-levels. This project rethinks catastrophe through its cultural and historical dimensions as a point of ecological transition, as a crucible for artistic innovation, and on a scale of human costs.

As my chapter outlines below show, this dissertation is eclectic in terms of genre and includes literature, film, interviews, poetry, drama, and interdisciplinary performance. It also spans a variety of academic disciplines: environmental studies, sociological and historical

approaches, literary studies, cultural geography, performance studies, and disaster studies.

However, my methodological approach was developed within the broad field of cultural studies, as the aesthetic and contextual dimensions of cultural texts are considered in relation to power.

Put simply, all the catastrophe archives explored in this dissertation, regardless of specific genre or historical context, reveal new ways to consider the function of power in places and communities impacted by disaster. In this way, catastrophe time is an analytic which allows me to interpret the functions of power across Haiti and the U.S. Gulf Coast through the transhistorical and artistic archives of disaster.

### **Haiti and the U.S. Gulf Coast: Shared Histories and Cultural Influences**

I have selected Haiti and the U.S. Gulf Coast as my sites of study for this dissertation because of their shared economic, political, and cultural legacies of catastrophe. As I will explain in my historical analysis in Chapters One and Three in detail, the connection between Haiti and the U.S. Gulf Coast is foundational in my theories of catastrophe time within the transhistorical and artistic archives I explore. In tying together these two geographic locations in my exploration of interdisciplinary catastrophe archives, I seek to expand the theoretical and methodological avenues used to rethink the U.S. South, outside of the context of the United States in service of a broader historical, cultural, economic, and literary relationship with the Caribbean, and vice versa. I argue that the U.S. Gulf Coast and Haiti are best understood in relation to each other, as a broader zone of contact: as an open, creolized, relational space spreading across linguistic, cultural, and national borders. I wholeheartedly embrace the paradigm of “contact” between the U.S. South and Caribbean which underpins the work of writers such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Aimé Césaire, J. Michael Dash, Édouard Glissant, and Antonio Benítez-Rojo. The seminal texts

of these five Caribbean Studies scholars in particular helped form the boundaries of my geographic and historical field of study.<sup>2</sup>

Historically and economically, both the U.S. Gulf Coast and Haiti have been deeply impacted by the legacies of European colonialism. Haiti was a French colony known as Saint-Domingue until it gained independence in 1804, becoming the first independent nation in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Gulf Coast of the United States, particularly Louisiana, was also under French control before being transferred to Spain and eventually sold to the United States in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, which I will explore in depth in Chapter Three. In chapter One I explore arguably the most significant event that binds the two regions together: the Haitian Revolution. This dissertation explores the transhistorical and artistic archives of catastrophe which strengthen the historical, cultural, and economic relationship between Haiti and the U.S. Gulf Coast.

### **Chapter Summaries: Deforestation, Earthquakes, Hurricanes, and Rising Tides**

Chapter One investigates the interconnected issues of land misuse, environmental systems collapse, farmers' economic and agricultural autonomy, and colonial legacies in Haiti. By employing a catastrophic temporality framework, the study reveals the long history of Haiti's

---

<sup>2</sup> Specific works that are vital to my project in terms of geographic and historical location are Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Antonio Benítez-Rojo's *The Repeating Island* (1996), Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997), Monique Allewert's *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (2013), Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985), and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995). This list is not exhaustive, but without these authors and their contributions to the interdisciplinary field of Caribbean Studies "catastrophe time" and my interest in the aesthetic archives of Haiti and the U.S. Gulf Coast would not exist.

catastrophe from colonial occupation to the present, emphasizing the inheritance of debt, political instability, and environmental devastation. Through a multidisciplinary approach encompassing ethnographic, historical, literary, and anthropological narratives, the chapter highlights the pervasive violence of deforestation and soil erosion, which often goes unnoticed as a form of slow violence. The chapter focuses on the environmental, political, cultural, and economic violence endured by rural Haitian farmers, tracing its origins to the lasting effects of French and Spanish colonialism.

The latter half of the chapter delves into Caribbean literature and drama as media for representing the failures of Haitian leadership, the mythologization of Haitian freedom and self-governance in relation to the forest and land use, and the complex intersection between environmental and man-made catastrophes. By analyzing selected works, including C. L. R. James's play *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* (1936), Jacques Roumain's novel *Masters of the Dew* (1947), and Marie Vieux-Chauvet's novels *Fonds-des-Nègres* (1960) and *Amour* (1968), the chapter explores the influence of land-use practices rooted in 18th-century philosophy and the enduring impact of French colonialism on Haiti's 300-year history.

Additionally, Chapter One examines the profound spiritual and communal connections to the Haitian forest and soil, emphasizing the cultural trauma associated with its destruction, which has shaped Haitian environmental writing in the 20th century. This chapter attempts to explain the complex dynamics of land misuse, colonialism, and environmental catastrophe in Haiti, offering insights into the intertwined relationship between historical events, literary representations, and the urgent need for sustainable practices in the region.

The second chapter examines Haitian earthquake literature, focusing on the creation of an aesthetic of catastrophe and the exploration of historical and literary formations of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. It analyzes three novels: Dimitry Elias Léger's *God Loves Haiti* (2016), Makenzy Orcel's *The Immortals* (2010), and Myriam J. A. Chancy's *What Storm, What Thunder* (2021) as representative examples of the genre of Haitian earthquake literature. The novels employ the chaos of the earthquake to shed light on the historical, political, and literary aspects of catastrophe in Haiti. They serve as both artistic and historical archives, presenting a more nuanced and complex representation of Haitian stories and histories compared to the reductive coverage of global mass media.

Chapter Two argues that the Haitian earthquake novels contribute to the field of catastrophe studies by synthesizing the legacies of catastrophe in Haiti and revealing the forms of institutionalized power that shape the lives of Haitians. These works utilize a fractured sense of time, history, and identity to create disruptive historical and non-linear aesthetics. They highlight themes of memory, haunting, hallucination, and dreams as tools for constructing new aesthetic and historical archives of catastrophe within literature.

The chapter emphasizes that these three earthquake novels are not opportunistic or ethically dubious in their use of the disaster as a narrative frame. Instead, they challenge the simplistic portrayal of Haiti as a land of never-ending catastrophes by providing a more comprehensive understanding of Haitian stories and histories. The analysis of Léger, Chancy, and Orcel's works contributes to the interdisciplinary field of catastrophe studies, enabling readers to critically engage with the political, social, and cultural layers of catastrophe. The novels expose the asymmetrical distribution of power and highlight the ongoing struggle for power redistribution faced by Haitians.

The Haitian earthquake novels examined in chapter Two serve as aesthetic and historical archives, intertwining literature and history in the context of catastrophe. These novels not only shed light on the immediate aftermath of the earthquake but also delve into Haiti's historical and literary archives, exploring the impact of colonialism, revolution, and political instability. By analyzing these novels, I offer new perspectives on the formation of a post-quake Haitian literary identity and a deeper understanding of the political, social, and cultural dimensions of catastrophe in Haiti.

Chapter Three shifts the focus of the dissertation to the U.S. Gulf Coast. It applies catastrophe temporality as a heuristic framework to shed light on the far-reaching effects of European colonialism on the Caribbean, the influence of regional plantation economies on Louisiana's distinctive cultural and social dynamics, and the significance of Black performance geographies in shaping the narratives of Katrina theater as a historical archive. Employing both a historical and cultural analysis, the chapter analyzes the connections between the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina and its roots in global colonial legacies, the sugar economy, and the transatlantic slave trade. Chapter Three will analyze three categories of Katrina theater: documentary theater or theater of testimony (as revealed in *Katrina: The K Word* (2006) and *Katrina: A Play of New Orleans* (2010)), commissioned Katrina plays (*The Rising Water Trilogy* (2015)), and art-as-aid productions represented by *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* (2007).

The historical context reveals Louisiana's unique position within the United States, marked by a fusion of European and Caribbean influences, and highlights the emergence of site-specific performance as a means of processing trauma stemming from the exploitative systems of sugar-plantation slavery. The chapter then examines specific examples of Katrina theater,

showcasing how these artistic responses serve as acts of community resistance, challenging dominant narratives of disposability imposed upon black communities and culture.

Rather than focusing on the well-documented failures of governmental response, this chapter utilizes plays as primary texts to uncover new insights into the transformative potential of theater, temporal innovation, and the collective processing of the enduring legacies of plantation slavery and colonialism on the people of Louisiana. By contextualizing the Louisiana territory within the broader historical and political landscape of the Haitian, French, and American Revolutions, the chapter further illuminates the marginalization experienced within the region and the subsequent cycles of neglect and artistic resistance. This analysis contributes to the fields of Black geographies, Caribbean studies, and the understanding of catastrophe by offering fresh perspectives on the significance of time, the cultural archive, and the potential for new affective responses to historical traumas.

Chapter Four examines the artistic representation of catastrophe in rural coastal communities of Southern Louisiana and Mississippi, focusing on the impacts of land loss, cultural loss, environmental racism, and displacement caused by climate collapse, superstorms, and rising tides. By analyzing Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and Benh Zeitlin's film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), the chapter investigates how these narratives contribute to the artistic archive of catastrophes, highlighting the resilience and resistance of marginalized communities facing historical and cultural erasure. These rural coastal settings, often overlooked in national perspectives, confront the frontlines of climate change with less visibility than their urban counterparts in New Orleans.

This chapter explores the concept of catastrophe time on an expanded scale, emphasizing the creative possibilities for imagining futures where vulnerable coastal populations reclaim

agency. By examining the impact of climate collapse on Louisiana and Mississippi coastal communities, this analysis extends the limits of catastrophe time, shedding light on the potential climate refugee crisis.

The final chapter analyzes how the narrators of *Salvage the Bones* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* reinvent mythology and allegorical narratives, generating unique forms of magical thinking as cathartic acts. These narratives contribute to new artistic archives of catastrophe, representing the experiences of often-forgotten rural communities in the vulnerable U.S. South, subject to rising tides and climate change effects. Examining the characters of Hushpuppy and Esch as representatives of their rural communities, the chapter explores the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of their creative processes in reclaiming agency in the face of catastrophe. Chapter Four also investigates the psychological dimension of catastrophe literature, suggesting that the act of artistic creation serves to fix and interpret the trauma of catastrophes. In addition to analyzing the role of narrators in both primary texts, chapter Four explores the symbolic role of animals in both narratives, demonstrating how storytelling creates space for alternative narrative possibilities of catastrophe beyond human experience and knowledge.

Highlighting the transformative power of catastrophe literature and film, the final chapter argues against the perception of catastrophe as a punctual event. Instead, it portrays catastrophe narratives as engaging with environmental catastrophes within the broader context of inequitable social systems and their impacts on vulnerable populations. The chapter also analyzes the representation of characters coping with intimate catastrophes within these social systems and catastrophe environments.

This final chapter contributes to the understanding of catastrophe art, amplifying the voices and experiences of rural coastal communities while highlighting their resilience, resistance, and agency in the face of intersecting catastrophes and climate change.

### **Definitions of Catastrophe & Disaster: Expanding the Scholarly Approach**

For the purposes of this project it is necessary to radically reconsider what counts as catastrophe and what types of environmental events might be most commonly associated with the assumed “act of god” or “natural disaster” designation. An obvious example to highlight this contradictory terminology is something like rising tide levels as a result of climate change. Are global climate change, and the resulting prospect of rising tides, disastrous to both natural and human environments? Certainly. Are climate change and rising tides an “act of god” and easily interpreted as natural phenomena? Certainly not. To radically expand and upend popular conceptions of what counts as a catastrophe, and often who is counted or remains invisible as victims of catastrophe events, I plan to use the term “catastrophe” as broadly as possible in my research.

Catastrophe in this project encompasses all environmental events or phenomena, which may operate as dramatically punctual or as slowly creeping infiltrators, to disrupt or demonstrate disastrous consequences to “natural” modes of existence (in regard to both ecological and human concerns).<sup>3</sup> We might consider cultivation of a cash crop such as sugar cane to articulate the above point. On the scale of the individual private farm, the production of sugar, alternated with other crops, poses no devastating or lasting effect to the environment. This might even be

---

<sup>3</sup> I recognize and embrace the problematic term “natural” here as a key component of how I will write about each of the disaster sites and events in my archive. Terms like “natural” and “environment” are politically and academically loaded terms but help to justify my goal of testing the connection between “nature” and “culture” through engaging narratives of catastrophe.

considered a “natural” mode of existence – small-scale rotational farming without the overuse of pesticides as a way to make a living. However, on the massive scale of corporate industrial sugar production, crops are not rotated, harsh pesticides and chemicals are regularly used, and the goal of economic gain overwhelms the interests of fair labor practices or environmental concerns. This corporate-industrial farming practice might be read as an (un)natural catastrophic phenomenon which, though not obviously punctual like a hurricane or earthquake may appear, causes devastating environmental, social, and cultural impacts.

Throughout this dissertation I’ll primarily be using “catastrophe” rather than “disaster” to describe the dissertation’s case studies (deforestation/soil erosion in Haiti, Haiti’s 2010 earthquake, Hurricane Katrina, and land loss in the Gulf Coast). All qualify conceptually as catastrophes based on guidelines shared by most government, aid, and environmental research institutions. Ron Perry and E. L. Quarantelli, two of the leading social scientists who theorize about the distinction between disaster and catastrophe for disaster research and response, succinctly describe the short list of requirements to designate a catastrophe:

- 1) Most or all of the community-built structure is heavily impacted
- 2) Many facilities and operational bases of emergency organizations are unable to cope with the fallout
- 3) Governments or civic organizing structures fail (temporarily or over an extended period of recovery)
- 4) Assistance from nearby communities cannot be provided as a result of regional impact
- 5) Everyday community functions are interrupted beyond repair
- 6) The mass media system socially constructs catastrophes and creates a dominant narrative for a global audience which radically impacts a humanitarian response. This

often reinscribes and validates damaging socially constructed beliefs regarding colonialism, racism, and other forms of systemic oppression for those in power (Quarantelli, “Catastrophes Are Different from Disasters”).

Though there are continuing scholarly conversations regarding the differentiation between disaster and catastrophe, the designations are most significant in the aid distribution sectors of both local and national governmental organizations.

The touchstone event which shifted much of the disaster studies discourse into a collective conversation about the limits of catastrophe was Hurricane Katrina. Quarantelli explains: “Hurricane Katrina has reinforced the view ... that the scale of any collective crisis has to be taken into account in any analysis ... just as ‘disasters’ are qualitatively different from everyday community emergencies, so are ‘catastrophes’ a qualitative jump over ‘disasters’” (Quarantelli, “Catastrophes are Different from Disasters”). It is, in essence, a matter of scale and impact. For the purposes of this project, focused as it is on the historical and aesthetic dimensions of catastrophe (and the storytellers and communities represented in the archives), there is little functional difference between the terms. The idea of using multiple genre and artistic media of expression is crucial to understanding the kaleidoscope of the “feeling” of the sense of the past, present, and future within catastrophe archives. The aesthetic choices made in the catastrophe literature, drama, films, religious rites, poetry, and documentary storytelling analyzed throughout this dissertation reveal new paths to understand the fractured and multifaceted nature of colonization’s impact as it is inscribed in the bodies, stories, and environments of all who have experienced empire and its ripples.

When constructing my archive of catastrophe narratives, I have selected texts which self-consciously construct themselves as writing from the “outside” position of the margins within

the context of catastrophe and history. Each work within the archive offers a new perspective on catastrophe time. The artistic archive in this dissertation is dedicated to “the need to tell stories not only from the inside of the ‘modern’ world but from its borders, ... forgotten stories that bring forward at the same time a new epistemological dimension, an epistemology from the borders of the modern colonial world system” (Mignolo, *Local Histories* 17). My analysis of these artistic works seeks to offer an alternate historical geography of catastrophe time by exploring how the catastrophe narratives personify spaces, the environments, and the cultural performances of those communities commonly erased and ignored in media coverage and dominant discourses of modernity.

Importantly, the interdisciplinary field of disaster studies does not limit catastrophes to the era of globalization. Catastrophes are, in the broadest sense, defined by their capacity to highlight how ethnically/racially, economically, and geographically minoritized communities disproportionately suffer the impacts of the catastrophic events. This kaleidoscope of historical, social, and economic factors at play in studying catastrophe from a social science perspective are centuries old. Leaders in disaster studies, from an interdisciplinary social sciences perspective argue that catastrophes, “disasters, and crises are as old as when human beings started to live in groups. Through the centuries, new types have emerged while older ones do not disappear ... the newer catastrophes, disasters, and crises are additions to the older forms; they recombine elements of old threats and new vulnerabilities” (Rodriguez et al xxxiv). For example, the COVID-19 global pandemic is the example du jour of how catastrophes invite disaster studies scholars to grapple with the historical layers of cultural complexities catastrophes present on a global scale. Catastrophic historical touchpoints (e.g., The Black Death of the mid-1300s, cholera pandemics of the 19th century, and The Spanish flu of 1918-1919) all offer complex

layers of historical, artistic, sociological, and cultural archives which enrich the analysis of a catastrophe like COVID-19.

### **Challenging Colonial Logic and Embracing Ever-Present Histories**

Particularly useful to my project is Walter D. Mignolo's distillation of the "rhetoric of modernity" made clear through the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup> This theoretical approach to the challenge of contextualizing the impact of the global pandemic within the hierarchical contexts of modernity easily translates to the spaces and temporalities of catastrophe explored in my project. Mignolo explains that the contours of the "rhetoric of modernity":

...is a rhetoric of salvation by conversation, by progress and civilization, by modernization and development and by market democracy. The rhetoric of modernity rationalizes, legitimizes, and naturalizes all actions, projects, and innovations that constitute the rhetoric of salvation. Simultaneously, the constitution of modernity enacts the destitution of all that doesn't fit the desired designs ("The Logic of the In-Visible" 216).

This perfectly describes the logic of coloniality present in the spaces and case studies explored in this dissertation. Exploring the possibilities and potential of catastrophe time, made visible through the aesthetic dimensions of catastrophe narrative archives, creates opportunities for theorizing new formulations of historical and ideological power for marginalized populations of Haiti and the Gulf Coast.

David Scott's 2014 *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory and Justice* provides another helpful theoretical framework for how I will apply the catastrophe temporality in the

---

<sup>4</sup> While Mignolo is writing specifically about a post-pandemic reality (in the wake of COVID-19) the logic of his thinking easily translates to the catastrophes in Haiti and Louisiana analyzed in this dissertation.

artistic archives of catastrophe narrative throughout this dissertation. Scott focuses his critique of postcolonial temporality and his analysis of the end of the Grenada Revolution using a three-part definition of temporality. He defines temporality as “the lived experience of time passing — the social relation, more precisely, between the past (the time of memory), present (the time of conscious awareness), and future (the time of anticipation)” pointing to what he argues is a move beyond simply reading an unfolding of historical time (Dav. Scott 1-5). He attributes the linear notions of temporality, i.e., the historical time of the nation-state, as derivative of Enlightenment ideals to the effect that change is periodically enacted around achieving political or social improvement (5). The important flaw in the Enlightenment-derived temporality he describes is the assumption that history and time are one and the same.

Scott draws on Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, explaining that Benjamin’s impulse to read an “out-of-jointness of time in history, or of time *with* history,” is a way to make sense of the “uncanny sense of divergence between the *experience of time* and the *expectations of history*” and, going one step further, “the hegemonic *occlusion* of temporality by rigid conventions of historicity” (7). I am particularly interested in Scott’s careful attention to the context of catastrophe, the Vichy regime of 1939 France, in which Benjamin is writing. For Scott, it is impossible to divorce Benjamin’s theories of disconnect between time and history from his political context of revolutionary failure and socio-political catastrophe (9).

In other words, the trauma of Benjamin’s catastrophe context serves as the catalyst for his melancholic rejection of unified historical time.<sup>5</sup> The context of catastrophe offers a fractured understanding of existence: “a past that will not go away, a past that returns, unbidden,

---

<sup>5</sup> Scott uses “melancholic” in the Freudian sense of a displaced memory as an aftermath of trauma. Scott is explicitly discussing the group of Grenadian students who investigated the death of Maurice Bishop, leading to the subsequent U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983.

involuntarily, to haunt or unsettle or somehow mangle the present” (13). This embrace of repetitious haunting of memory, moving beyond melancholy and stalled historical time, suggests that catastrophic contexts can serve as productive ruptures to be held in tension with the present in order to spark political and social action. In other words, the uncanny “sense of temporal rupture and collective disorientation” brought about by a catastrophe event does not have to be a reliving of “post memory” or generationally inherited traumas, but can rather be a reminder that “our responsibility to remember the traumatic past and our moral obligations to the dead can be worked out, worked through, with fidelity, with agnostic respect, and with cautious hope” (126).

### **Brief Literature Review on Theories of History, Time, and Catastrophe in Haiti**

Before delving into the dense historical analysis which begins Chapter One, I provide here a brief overview of the scholarly work that has most informed my thinking in regard to theorizing about the relationship between history, time and catastrophe in Haiti. While this is not an exhaustive literature review of this sub-field of time/history in Caribbean Studies, each of these texts significantly impacted my methodological approach in Chapters One and Two. I have divided the literature reviews related to Haiti and the Gulf Coast into two sections for ease of interpretation. It should be noted, however, that my dissertation’s application of catastrophe time as an analytic used to explore the aesthetics of the transhistorical and artistic archives of disaster in Haiti and the U.S. Gulf Coast freely blends both the Caribbean Studies and American Studies approaches to the intersection of history, time, and catastrophe in my regions of study.

Turning to a specifically Haitian context, while still building on David Scott’s 2014 *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory and Justice* and his reading of catastrophe fiction, I

make use of *Tropical Apocalypse* and *Writing on the Fault Line*, both by Martin Munro.<sup>6</sup> *Writing on the Fault Line* and *Tropical Apocalypse* are Munro's most recent explorations of what structures the modern Haitian imaginary, in particular, the connection between lived experience, inherited political and social trauma, catastrophe (or "apocalyptic narratives"), and the difficulties of reconciling the linear expectations of unified time/experience temporalities with a decidedly non-linear Haitian consciousness represented in literary discourse.

*Tropical Apocalypse*, perhaps the more critically challenging and historically robust of the two texts, offers a four-chapter study on the possibilities of imagining apocalyptic futures through Haiti's problematic relationship to linear time, which it largely denies, as a way to open "a window onto all our apocalyptic futures" (*Tropical Apocalypse* 199). He examines post-apocalyptic thinking within the literary discourse of the Haitian imaginary. The four chapters, corresponding to the four riders of the Caribbean apocalypse, are (i) ecological disaster, (ii) systems of slavery, (iii) the inherited structure of color and class hierarchies as a result of plantation slavery and European colonization, and (iv) the crisis of criminality in the region (3-7).<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Munro's texts share much in common with the theoretical frameworks of other Francophone Caribbean scholars regarding what I argue are some foundational elements of catastrophe temporality: Haitian cultural formations and political attunements to questions of Caribbean subjectivity under colonization. I am thinking specifically of Nick Nesbitt's *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature* (2003), J. Michael Dash's *Haiti and the United States* (1988) and *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context* (1998), and David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Drawing on Slavoj Žižek's theories from *Living in the End Times* that the apocalyptic collapse of the contemporary globalized world is inevitable, an idea that the world generally tries to ignore, Munro sees apocalyptic certainty as an opportunity to "do away with the old order and create what [Žižek] calls an 'emancipatory subjectivity'" (Munro, *Tropical Apocalypse* 3).

Munro's *Tropical Apocalypse* provides a baseline assessment of how considering the positive potentialities of apocalyptic thinking (or, for my project, catastrophe temporality) makes visible the interconnected nature of human failures (the afterlife of plantation slavery, color and class divisions) with seemingly natural phenomena (ecological crisis and natural disasters) in "a cause and effect way, and in a more complex circular, reciprocal relationship that perpetuates the apocalyptic cycle" (6-7). Munro points to a potential positive in something like the theoretical "year-zero" in a future-looking perspective in apocalypse narratives. He writes: "this apocalypse," a period of great disorder, "has ... a redemptive quality; it is a narrative with a teleology and built-in process that takes the subject and the society from one state considered to be undesirable to another that is seen as being ideal, almost utopian in its emancipatory potential for the individual living freely" (3). While Munro isn't interested in the global apocalypse that Žižek envisions, he makes use of Žižek's apocalyptic thinking to make sense of the history and cycles of catastrophe in the modern Caribbean.

There are many similarities between Scott's nexus of time, history, and catastrophe experience and Munro's Haitian apocalyptic time. For Munro, the ancient Greek definition of *apocalypsis* "refers to a revelation, the uncovering of something hidden," which is an especially helpful concept when dealing with the question of how narratives of catastrophe are formed (1). Munro explores the multiple potential meanings of apocalypse narratives, arguing that the term could be used "symbolically, as a narrative tool to think of human and societal relationships to time and place ... the lived reality and narrating of disaster ... [or] as an ideologically charged concept" to make sense of Haiti's reputation as a failed nation-state, constant disaster zone, and

politically unstable country (1).<sup>8</sup> With these multiple meanings in contemporary usage, for Munro, the prevailing sense of Haitian apocalyptic narrative is “generated as it were from the inside, as a means of understanding (and surviving) the particular movements of history that have created the disasters of the present” (2).

Munro makes the connection between literary representations of apocalyptic thinking and the historical reality of the region, arguing that both are “characterized by silence and forgetting; and yet at the same time and in the very silence history is everywhere perceptible” (7). He argues that Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* is organized around a modified version of Kubler Ross’s five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). However, Césaire’s apocalypse does not require a denial stage, as his apocalypse “has already taken place and is ongoing ... the reality ... makes it impossible to deny that the apocalypse has occurred and its effects are still being felt” (7-8). Throughout Césaire’s poem Munro tracks the recurring idea of a new beginning, or perhaps more specifically, cycles of the potentiality for beginning anew as a virtue of apocalyptic thinking. Césaire writes: “one must begin somewhere. Begin what? The only thing in the world worth beginning: The End of the world of course” (qtd. in *Tropical Apocalypse* 9).

Munro expands this idea of positive potentiality in apocalyptic thinking to other Caribbean writers using the apocalyptic aesthetic. Munro discusses Derek Walcott’s historical amnesia and its effects on New World Poetry from *What the Twilight Says*. He also spends time exploring Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s writing on the plantation as the primary apocalyptic site. Munro’s most important theory highlighting the connection between apocalyptic thinking and

---

<sup>8</sup> Munro also notes that Haitian authors have written against these formations of apocalypse in narrative, writing “anti-apocalyptic narratives of time, place and nature” (*Tropical Apocalypse* 2).

literary or poetic creation comes from Édouard Glissant's interpretation of historical ruptures in the Caribbean in the face of modernity. Munro argues that "Glissant's interpretations of both history and the present do not so much reject outright the notion of the Caribbean apocalypse as see in it the potential birth of something new: in trouble and chaos he sees the emergence of new ways of being and relating, in the Caribbean and across the entire world" (14).

What makes Munro's use of Glissant to trace the positive possibility of apocalyptic thinking so compelling is that he points to Glissant as fundamentally out of step with the other apocalyptic Caribbean writers. Glissant's world vision of positive interconnectedness and potential for cultural hybridity and literary creation is fundamentally opposed to the loss of control of national economies as a result of globalization, and therefore the lost control of destinies of the Caribbean, described in David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity* (15). Scott argues that Caribbean narrative form must move beyond romantic versions of anticolonial writing and embrace "tragedy as a narrative that may offer a more appropriate means of interrogating the troubled present" (qtd. in *Tropical Apocalypse* 15). For Munro, and indeed for my own reading of catastrophe narratives in this dissertation, the takeaway from considering both Scott and Glissant – inasmuch as they both speak to the connection between literary creation and catastrophe experience – is that literary narrative is crucial to constructing a catastrophe temporality that reconciles the Haitian experience of modernity with seemingly punctual catastrophe events. Literary representations of catastrophe in Haitian literature make use of Munro's *apocalypsis* – to unveil or uncover – making possible an exploration of catastrophe temporality which "unveils personal and societal truths that time has obscured which only now ... emerge from memory and are brought into plain sight" (19).

Munro's *Writing on the Fault Line* focuses on extensive close readings of Haitian earthquake fiction to highlight the way that Haitian authors engage the far-reaching psychological and material effects of disaster. In offering excellent close readings from the staples of the contemporary Haitian literary scene (Saint-Éloi, Lahens, Danticat, Laferrière, Lyonel Trouillot, etc.), Munro takes seriously Michel-Rolph Trouillot's contention that historical knowledge "involves both the social process and the narratives of that process, that the theories of history ... rarely examine in detail the concrete production of specific narratives" (*Fault Line* 9). Munro works across poetry, novels, and the Haitian essay to offer a robust catalog of earthquake narratives penned by Haitians themselves. What is particularly admirable about Munro's efforts in *Writing on the Fault Line*, and to some degree what motivates my reading of the three earthquake novels at the end of this chapter, is his insistence that Haitian writers are the focus of his project where their work speaks for itself in self-narrating a vast range of literary representations of earthquake perspectives. So much of contemporary scholarship on Haiti, like recent texts by Amy Wilentz, Jonathan Katz, Laurent Dubois, Mary Renda, or Paul Farmer's foundational *The Uses of Haiti* (1994) with introduction by Noam Chomsky, serves to narrate the Haitian experience or Haitian imaginary from the outside, primarily from the U.S.

Munro's careful attention to foregrounding Haitian writers and thinkers to voice their own perspectives deserves praise.<sup>9</sup> Munro characterizes his project as laying the foundation for future scholarship on post-earthquake Haitian literature and recognizes that "future studies will

---

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that Haitian nationality or heritage somehow grants a free pass to appropriate or to narrate the experience of catastrophe writ large. As Edwidge Danticat writes in *Create Dangerously* and Danny Laferrière in *Tout bouge autour de moi*, the question of creative legitimacy in the face of national catastrophe gave them both pause in deciding how to write about the event. They both ultimately construct deeply personal catastrophe narratives. Perhaps both Danticat and Laferrière's impulse to construct such intimacy in their narratives is related to temporal proximity from the event itself.

no doubt analyze the earthquake in a broader time frame” (*Writing on the Fault Line* 18). My project of reading catastrophe narratives across Haiti and the U.S. Gulf Coast is deeply indebted to Munro’s work, which helps us understand the “relationship between catastrophe and human creativity and the worth of literature in the time of disaster” by reading those authors who occupy and narrate the temporalities and contradictions of catastrophe spaces in the contemporary moment (17-18).

### **Katrina, Plantation, Deep Southern, and Catastrophe Time in the U.S. Gulf Coast**

The remainder of this literature review turns attention to the U.S. Gulf Coast and various theories of time primarily, though not exclusively, applied to U.S. contexts. Much as the brief literature review of approaches to the intersection of time, history, and catastrophe in Haiti in the above section, this overview will outline different approaches to the study of alternative temporalities which inform my approach to catastrophe time in the third and fourth chapters of the dissertation.

First and perhaps most significant to the representation of catastrophe time in the Katrina theater archive of Chapter Three is Anna Hartnell’s three separate modes of temporal study: “Katrina time,” “American time”, and “New Orleans time” in *After Katrina: Race, Neoliberalism, and the End of the American Century* (2017). Katrina time is described as a period of unbounded time when New Orleans residents, specifically black and poor New Orleanians, were imprisoned within the city’s boundaries of black neighborhoods. Hartnell’s exploration of Katrina time is ultimately a critique of the neoliberal state and characterizes its unraveling as a rejection of the state’s duty to protect its citizens. The state’s abandonment of responsibility for post-Katrina New Orleans is indicative of “the unsustainability of a system that prioritizes profit over people, privatizes the public commons, and privileges an ideology of

individualism at the expense of our collective futures” (2). For Hartnell, the disruptive temporality of Katrina time made visible through the case study of a post-Katrina New Orleans challenges a consistent U.S. national narrative of unity. Katrina time, characterized by a dystopian liminality, serves as a microcosm for contemporary America and, as Hartnell argues, an end to the fantasy of an “American Century” which promotes a narrative of economic and political progress (2-3). What is most useful in Hartnell’s Katrina time to my analysis are her descriptions of dystopian liminality and unbounded time which we’ll see represented across both the artistic and historical archives from Haiti and the Gulf Coast.

Where our modes of temporal study deviate stems from Hartnell’s focus on New Orleans of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a tourist-branded “culturally backward-looking ‘museum’”, as well as an excessive “party town” as she explores representations of New Orleans as such in literature, television, and the tourism industry (3). She equates Katrina time directly with the time of neoliberalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and frames stereotypes of New Orleans as haunted by nostalgia and death as disrupted by the material realities (i.e., literal death and destruction) post-Katrina. Hartnell asserts that Katrina created a New Orleans that was a “mythologically blank slate of the national imaginary” which threatens an erasure of history through a national American response to trauma à la 9/11 (12-19). While I appreciate Hartnell’s approach to Katrina as a non-singular disaster event, I argue that her focus on the 20<sup>th</sup> century does not delve into the extended catastrophe time of Katrina and the region deeply enough. Catastrophe time, as I’ll explore in Chapter Three, reveals an alternative history and archive of stories which have been subverted and silenced through U.S. national projections of New Orleans as the “Other” stretching back to colonization, not merely to the limits of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

However, I am compelled by Hartnell's theories of "New Orleans time" as a future-facing interruptive temporality which challenges the linear progress of "Katrina time" or presentist, neoliberal time, as well as "American time", which is a backwards-looking temporality of American nationalism. Her organization of these three temporal modes as historical, presentist, and future-looking is a significant distinction between our heuristics. Importantly for Hartnell, "New Orleans time" is situated as diametrically opposed to "American time" which is organized by the engines of American capitalism and American imperialism. My heuristic of catastrophe time, applied to the literary and historical archives of this dissertation, is also organized by capitalism (specifically as it manifests in the plantation economy). However, the system of oppression underpinning the catastrophe time I analyze within the chapters of this project is decidedly a global and regional colonialism rather than Hartnell's emphasis on American imperialism's role in shaping New Orleans.

I argue that Hartnell's approach to a temporal distinction between past, present, and future (contained within the three temporalities) attempts to organize the artistic and historical archives of catastrophe in ways that tie trauma or lived experience to specific time periods or projections of historical memory. To me, this runs counter to the heart of Hartnell's project which, like mine, offers an eclectic approach in terms of constructing an archive or methodology which necessarily blends and distorts the imaginary lines of past, present, and future in provocative ways.<sup>10</sup> I'm deeply indebted to Hartnell's approach to analyzing the various temporalities revealed through Katrina, and recognize that catastrophe time is necessarily

---

<sup>10</sup> Though Hartnell does characterize "New Orleans time" as imbued with historical memory, she leans towards this temporality as primarily future-oriented. History, in other words, exists largely as a specter in her analysis of literary and documentary texts, rather than something that is co-created and reinscribed by storytelling made alive through artistic narrative.

expanded in my own work to suit both Haitian and U.S. Gulf region case studies of catastrophe and its aesthetic modes.<sup>11</sup> Hartnell's work inspires me to press beyond the bounds of her temporalities and provides me with the foundation to deeply explore the theatrical archives of catastrophe time which, I argue, create alternative histories and futures.

Katherine McKittrick's theories of plantation time/futures also inform my choice to analyze theater, films, and novels set within the heart of the U.S. plantation economy. The catastrophe time of plantation ideology and colonial materiality are made visible through each of the catastrophe storytelling examples in their use of space and time.<sup>12</sup> For McKittrick, the land itself (in her case study, the African Burial Ground site) creates an opening for plantation futures: "a conceptualization of time-space that tracks the plantation toward the prison and the impoverished and destroyed city sectors, and consequently, brings into sharp focus the ways the plantation is an ongoing locus of antiblack violence and death ... plantation futures demand decolonial thinking that is predicated on human life" ("Plantation Futures" 2-3).

Importantly, I'm relying on McKittrick's perspective that the idea of the plantation is migratory, and that plantation time operates outside of a temporality consistent with modernist logic or historical projections of consistent progress and development. McKittrick, Woods, Dash, and Chrichlow all theorize modes of survival which manifest as the blues, creolization, maroonage, or revolution. I argue that the mode of survival manifesting in this dissertation's

---

<sup>11</sup> Hartnell's perspective is also attached to a particularly Americanist approach to understanding historical memory, trauma, and ruins where the case study of 9/11 looms large.

<sup>12</sup> McKittrick, along with Anna Hartnell, Clyde Woods, J. Michael Dash, Michaeline Crichlow, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, all rely on George Beckford's theories from the 1970s which outline how plantations are linked to a broader global economy of colonial subjugation. Beckford's plantation thesis, or the plantation economy thesis, argues that the effects of plantation life lingered long after the emancipation and independence movements in the Americas and generated both economic and racial histories still impacting black life (Beckford 210).

artistic and historical archive operates across colonial and post-colonial spaces and “must be understood alongside complex negotiations of time, space, and terror” (3).

What I find most useful in McKittrick’s work is her geographical approach to outline the function of dispossession within plantation time and space while also arguing that the plantation, as a location and idea, creates an opportunity to understand “black *life* within the context of contemporary global cities and futures” (5). The same willful disruption of temporal and spatial logic, as a response to the racialized and colonized logic of the plantation, underpins my approach to catastrophe time within the context of both U.S. Gulf Coast and Haitian texts.

McKittrick argues that the radical act of tracing the past to the present and the present to the past through time geography is in racially condemned spaces. She argues that tracing the geographies in the “lands of no one” is possible because the land itself is deemed unlivable, toxic, dying, occupied, endangered, unproductive, and ungovernable through its historical constitution (6-7). I’m compelled by McKittrick, and other black geographers’ approach, to analyze the spaces of catastrophe in Louisiana and Haiti as inextricably linked to structures of racism and classism which systematically deny humanity of those living in these spaces. For McKittrick, these spaces are linked to the present as spaces of the racial “other”. Further:

... in our present moment, some live in the unlivable, and to live in the unlivable condemns the geographies of the marginalized to death over and over again. ... Life, then, is extracted from particular regions, transforming some places into inhuman rather than human geographies. Or, those who have lived outside of what is considered normal and those who continue to inhabit the uninhabitable are so perversely outside the Western bourgeois conception of what it means to be human that their geographies are rendered ... inhuman, dead, and dying. ... This suggests that the spaces of otherness have

hardened through time, often with black, “wretched” bodies occupying or residing outside the lowest rung of humanness and thus inhabiting what most consider inhuman or uninhabitable geographies. This is the mutual construction of identity and place writ large. (7)

The lived experience of time and space is crucial in construction of the social and cultural worlds and informs the possibilities of who counts as human. It is crucial to consider how the Western (or Capitalist/white supremacist) time of progress and advancement is at play within the relationship between temporal dimensions and physical environments of catastrophe.

The unequal distributions of power, labor, and capital are always linked to a race- and class-based hierarchies which determine who is given the tools needed to progress, develop, or leave spaces of catastrophe. Considering the constraints and possibilities of plantation logic, both material and psychological, as layered onto the spatial work of racism within a context like post-Katrina New Orleans it is easy to understand why historical erasure dominates the discourses of those in power. The plantation “moves through time, a cloaked anachronism, that calls forth the prison, the city, and so forth” and creates an analytical framework that “attempts to erase the ways antiblack violence is enacted into the present” (McKittrick 9). This is exactly the analytical framework at play in the narratives of catastrophe throughout this dissertation; historical erasure and clear demonstrations of the disposability of black lives in the wake of state failure were visible in acts of violence as well as acts of neglect. What catastrophe time reveals in the case of Katrina’s aftermath for the mostly black and economically underprivileged residents of New Orleans who were forced to remain in the city is the weight of simultaneous understanding of the immediate material impacts of catastrophe events coupled with the recognition of the cyclical

modes of embodied, historical, and psychological violence at play from the twin catastrophes of plantation economies and colonial domination.<sup>13</sup>

The Katrina theater archive of Chapter Three grapples with the nexus of entanglements between race, the state, and the environment made hyper-visible through catastrophe and invites audiences to question the categorization of Katrina as a “natural” phenomenon. McKittrick and Woods succinctly summarize what Katrina reveals about the relationship between race, the state, and the environment, writing:

Hurricane Katrina was deemed a “natural disaster,” but the language that propped up this supposed naturalness only served to naturalize poor and black agony, distress, and death. Indeed, the history of the region provides a different narrative. Given the history’s firmly stitched pattern of formal and informal racial segregation, socio-economic differentiation, and long-standing environmental neglect, the human suffering caused by Katrina was hierarchically distributed: the privileged residents of New Orleans, a largely white population ... were able to escape. ... [the predominantly black populations] living in areas with insufficient socio-economic services and low-income housing, suffered the brunt of the effects. (2)

Katrina pushed the consequences of racial capitalism, the racial state, and plantation economies to the forefront of the conversation regarding the destruction of black New Orleans; however, the practice of naturalizing disasters through the dominant storytelling of mass media cycles erases

---

<sup>13</sup> This idea translates to the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti just as easily as it is applied to New Orleans and Katrina.

the structural impacts of white supremacy and settler colonialism from the dominant narrative.<sup>14</sup>

Keith Cartwright's theory of "Deep Southern Time" is particularly useful in its regional study of the Caribbean and Deep South as a shared temporal space where "Blacks in the New World were among the first orphan initiates and self-conscious subjects of a globalizing modernity" (Cartwright 6). Cartwright expands on Wai Chee Dimock's analytic of "deep time" to argue how the survival of Afro-creole identity and personhood disrupts the time and space of "clock time and chronology" as well as the "normative violence of the white-supremacist plantation economy" (6). The book's title, *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways*, references Wilson Harris's conception of cross-cultural community found in the forms of creolization generated in and by the black Atlantic. The limbo gateway, for Harris, much like the variations and performances of Vodou in Haiti and Louisiana, creates a reassertion of a social and symbolic order from within the plantation economy and spaces which deny agency and personhood (7). Expressions of Harris's limbo gateway blur the line between artistic performance and religious rite, creating a political, historical, and psychological act of healing and cultural retrieval for Afro-creole individuals and communities.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Political theorist Cedric Robinson coined the term "racial capitalism" to explain how the expansion of capitalist society followed the same racial directions as social ideology. Robinson writes: "As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism. ... 'racial capitalism' [refers] to this development and to the subsequent as historical agency" (2). The concept of racial capitalism can help clarify the full context of disasters so we can better understand the functions of the racial state in reproducing the historical conditions of settler colonialism and white supremacy in Louisiana, rather than erasing the connections to climate change and the shadow timelines of catastrophe.

<sup>15</sup> The limbo gateway takes many forms which may not be categorized cleanly as artistic or religious expression. Cartwright makes the argument that the preparation and serving of a gumbo serves as a limbo gateway (Cartwright 7). There is a feeling, or affect, associated with all limbo gateways which invites a response from those who understand the deep roots of the practice, performance, or behavior.

Cartwright's characterization of Louisiana, specifically New Orleans, as an "exceptional receptacle city or *govi* (ancestral spirit-post) and a rather ordinary Atlantic rim location critical to re-imagining America(s) in relation" is especially helpful in linking the catastrophe time of Haiti (Saint-Domingue) and Louisiana within my project. Following in the scholarly footsteps of authors like Paul Gilroy and Joseph Roach, Cartwright anchors his study of the submerged networks of ritual performance, writing, intercultural history, and migration circulating between the U.S. South and Caribbean to the Atlantic world more broadly. He plays loosely with historical and national histories and configures a temporality of "Deep Southern Time" which advocates for a reassertion of alternative symbolic orders and modes of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> What I appreciate most about Cartwright's contribution to the interdisciplinary field is his expansive regional connections; he is not contained to one artistic mode of expression. His archive treats novels, religious rites, travelogs, ethnographic research, oral storytelling, and poetry as part of the relational play between his Caribbean and U.S. Gulf spaces.

### **Summary of Dissertation Goals**

In each of the four chapters, this dissertation explores the intertwining of catastrophe, time, and art in the regional context of Haiti and the U.S. Gulf Coast. Artists, writers, and interdisciplinary creatives play a crucial role in helping the public process collective traumas and envision a future which emphasizes the potential to adapt and thrive, even in the face of catastrophe. By examining various forms of artistic expression, the dissertation aims to understand the ways in which storytelling and art-making contribute to the comprehension and reinterpretation of catastrophic events. This project emphasizes the significance of narrative

---

<sup>16</sup> Cartwright, like so many U.S. Southern and Caribbean scholars writing about Louisiana, focuses on Vodou and jazz as the primary markers of cultural agency and Afro-creole authority in the region (in direct response to racialized traumas of plantation systems).

archives and the resilience of human storytelling as a way to construct histories which speak to the experiences of the most marginalized communities.

Drawing on historical and artistic archives of natural and unnatural catastrophes in Haiti and the U.S. Gulf Coast, I will demonstrate the importance of exploring the shadow chronologies and hidden dimensions of catastrophes to foster a deeper understanding of their long-lasting effects. The dissertation adopts an alternative historical and artistic approach to catastrophe, challenging linear timelines and privileging marginalized perspectives. Ultimately, I hope to highlight the transformative power of art and storytelling in reclaiming cultural memory and envisioning new possibilities in the face of catastrophe.

## Chapter 1: The Fractured Eco-Narrative of Deforestation, Debt & Land-Use in Haiti

“All misfortune comes from the cut trees, they have cut them down, even the calabash trees, even the trees of Ogou” – Marie Vieux-Chauvet, *Fonds des Nègres*

This chapter focuses on the nexus of land misuse, environmental systems collapse, farmers’ economic and agricultural autonomy, and colonial legacies to trace the long history of Haiti’s catastrophe from colonial occupation to present. This chapter is not solely about statistics of rural poverty in Haitian farming communities, but rather about the inheritance of debt and political instability (the afterlife of colonialism – a human-driven catastrophe) that has created environmental catastrophe (commonplace deforestation practices and abusive systems of monoculture farming). I use catastrophic temporality as a heuristic to make visible the hemispheric histories of colonialism, capitalism, race, and environment through ethnographic, historical, literary, and anthropological narratives. This chapter’s focus on deforestation and soil erosion from colonial times to present, perhaps more than any other chapter, reveals the slow violence of environmental catastrophe in Haiti that Rob Nixon imagined in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. The violence of deforestation and soil erosion is “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2). This chapter focuses equally on environmental political, cultural, and economic violence inflicted on the rural Haitian farmers because of the long afterlife of French and Spanish colonialism in Haiti.

The second half of the chapter focuses on the various ways that Caribbean literature and drama respond to this catastrophe by representing the failures and complexities of Haitian leadership and the mythologizing of Haitian freedom, autonomy and self-governance as

connected to the forest and land-use. I explore the intersection between environmental and man-made catastrophe by analyzing C. L. R. James's *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* (2013) and the environmental critiques running through Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* (1947), Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Fonds-des-Nègres* (1960) and *Amour* (1968).<sup>17</sup> I use these fictional and dramatic works to test the broadest limits of the catastrophe heuristic by reading modern day agricultural catastrophe and deforestation back onto the 18<sup>th</sup>-century philosophical underpinnings of land-use practices, to explain the influence of French colonialism on Haiti's 300-year history. Also foundational is an exploration of how spirituality and community values are tied to the Haitian forest and the soil itself. The cultural trauma related to the destruction of Haiti's forest becomes central to Haitian environmental writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Three Revolutions, International Trade Pressures, and Haiti's Independence Debt**

Before delving too deeply into the history of deforestation, soil erosion and agricultural failure in Haiti, it is important to understand the timing of the Haitian revolution in relation to the American and the French revolutions. Haiti's economic importance to the French — first as the most productive French colony in the West Indies, and later as a source of tax revenue — combined with the United States' interest in trade and territorial expansion to lay the foundation for Haiti's economic dependence on other nations. In 1825, Haiti negotiated an independence agreement with the French that required Haiti to pay France 90 million francs for the “value of income and property lost from the revolution, meaning slave labor and land,” instating what became commonly known as the “independence debt” (B. Bell 29). Haiti was forced to repay

---

<sup>17</sup> C. L. R. James originally wrote *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* in 1934. It was presumed lost until a draft copy was discovered in 2005.

France to receive diplomatic recognition, avoid a French blockade, and prevent being diplomatically isolated from all other major powers, which would slow Haiti's import/export-based economy to a halt. (Plummer, *Haiti and the United States* 10-12). The French also demanded a 50 percent discount on exports from Haiti to France through most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It took Haiti until 1947 to pay off the interest associated with the independence debt.<sup>18</sup>

At the start of the uprisings in Saint Domingue in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the US government actively tried to suppress the slave revolt, leading to a volatile, often antagonistic relationship with Haiti that continues to the present day. The Haitian slave revolt concerned the Washington administration for three primary reasons: 1) a successful uprising would threaten US commerce relations with Saint Domingue 2) Franco- and Anglo-American relations would be complicated, and 3) the revolt would inspire a similar slave-led revolution in the US South (Matthewson 321). Southern plantation owners feared that the revolution would inspire the slaves in the US to revolt against their owners, which would fundamentally undermine the agricultural economies in the South. Plantation owners from the US South placed significant political pressure on the federal government to financially back white planters in Saint Domingue to suppress uprisings. Charles Pinckney, the Governor of South Carolina, warned Washington that the revolt would become a "flame which will extend to all the neighboring islands, and may not prove a very pleasing or agreeable example to the US Southern States" (324). Prior to the decisive French planter defeat in June of 1793, from 1791-1793 the Washington Administration loaned an estimated \$726,000 to assist French planters and suppress the slave rebellion (321). The US government, partnered with US merchants who had significant stakes in uninterrupted trade with Saint Domingue, delivered significant supplies of arms and

---

<sup>18</sup> See Alexander, "A Pact with the Devil? The United States and the Fate of Modern Haiti".

ammunition to the French planters throughout this period. Due to internal national conflicts, expense, and geographical distance from Saint Domingue the French, English, and the US never mounted a coordinated effort to suppress the slave rebellion.

As the Haitian Revolution evolves, and the US leadership transitions from the Washington to Adams administration, President Adams realizes that a victory for the rebels against the French would serve as a check against French expansionism and open potentially lucrative new trade markets. The US was concerned by Napoleon's ambitions to claim more land in North America beyond the Louisiana Territory he acquired from Spain in 1800. (Reinhardt 247). Adams, wary of French military occupations in the Western Hemisphere, aided Louverture with the hope that this would slow French economic and territorial expansion.<sup>19</sup> But Napoleon's dream of expansion beyond the borders of the Louisiana Territory was squashed by the persistence of the slave revolt in Saint Domingue. After two years of the Saint-Domingue revolution and almost 60,000 dead French soldiers, Napoleon abandoned plans for a transatlantic France and expansion of the Louisiana Territory (247).

The Haitian revolution was a great boon for the post-revolution US economy as it ultimately resulted in the purchase of the Louisiana territory as well as allowing US interests (government and private sector) to dominate the major import/export channels of the Haitian economy. Under the Jefferson government, US emissaries James Monroe and Robert Livingston were sent to Paris to negotiate a plan for US trade to export goods in New Orleans and purchase

---

<sup>19</sup> See Alexander, "A Pact with the Devil? The United States and the Fate of Modern Haiti".

Florida, then under French control. They returned home with an offer for the US to buy the entire Louisiana Territory, which doubled the size of the United States in 1803 (247-248).<sup>20</sup>

Despite France's significant withdrawal from North America the United States remained wary of politically recognizing a newly independent Haiti for continued fear of inspiring a slave revolt at home. After Haiti declared independence in 1804, many refugee mulattos and freed ex-slaves who had played crucial roles in the revolution began arriving in the US South (Matthewson 328). This influx of Haitians fueled US plantation owner fears of a successful slave uprising in the US.

Despite these fears and xenophobia around Haitians in the US South, trade was on the mind of both US and Haitian leaders during the early days of independence and Haitian President Jean-Pierre Boyer continued to make a case for the common history between the United States and Haiti as a catalyst for political and trade relations<sup>21</sup>. Boyer was in constant communication with the United States to maintain trade relationships and gain recognition of Haiti's sovereignty. He corresponded with President Monroe in 1822, writing, "The Haitian people do not think that the American people, who in another epoch found themselves in the same situation and felt the same need, can refuse them the justice that is due them" (Dubois, *Haiti* 139). US trade continued with Haiti throughout the period of unrecognized sovereignty directly following the revolution, lasting to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (139).

---

<sup>20</sup> The price of the Louisiana Purchase to the US was 15 million USD for roughly 868,000 square miles (or approximately 4 cents per acre. Thomas Fleming projects that this is approximately 750 million USD in today's currency, or 2 cents per acre (134, 141).

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Pierre Boyer was President of Haiti from 1818-1843. One of the leaders of the Haitian Revolution, Jean-Pierre Boyer was originally aligned with Pétion and Dessalines and returned to Haiti from exile in France under General LeClerc in 1802. Pétion appointed Boyer as his successor in the south. Boyer is most known for reuniting north and south into the Republic of Haiti as well as the annexation of Spanish Haiti (Santo Domingo) which centralized Hispaniola's government until 1843.

Though the US did not formally recognize Haiti's sovereignty until 1862, it continued to import Haitian agricultural products and export US goods to Haiti without reservation.<sup>22</sup> Paul Farmer's seminal *Uses of Haiti* explains that Haiti and the United States, the only two independent republics in the Western Hemisphere, were each other's primary trade partners. In 1851, the United States sold more goods to Haiti than it did to "any other Latin American country, including Mexico" (51); before 1900, the number of US ships docking in Haitian ports exceeded the number reaching all of Europe (Trouillot, *Nation, State and Society* 57). While the United States adopted unfavorable trade policies for Haitians Haiti had few choices but to trade with any nation that would accept its agricultural exports to pay back its post-revolution debt.<sup>23</sup>

The initial burden of repaying France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has shaped the Haitian economy and its legacy of indebtedness into the 20<sup>th</sup> century through continued military and economic intervention of the US and international community. Political and economic power are often linked, but in Haiti, these two are one and the same. This connection is particularly resonant in the example of the US occupation of Haiti; in 1915, the US Marine Corps invaded Haiti and remained for almost 20 years. This military occupation strengthened the US economic dominance of Haiti's export/import markets. As Plummer explains, the United States attempted to revitalize mercantilism in the Caribbean during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. That policy has had devastating results for Haiti, modeling how "foreign trade...can foster socioeconomic decline" (*Haiti and the United States* 40). From 1957 to 1986 the Duvalier family ruled Haiti and accumulated enormous international loans. In 2000, those loans made up 40 percent of Haiti's total debt. Much of that money was provided by the US, strengthening its

---

<sup>22</sup> The United States did not fully recognize the Haiti's sovereignty until 1862, after the South seceded from the Union.

<sup>23</sup> See Crawford-Roberts, "A History of United States Policy Towards Haiti".

political and economic control over Haiti. In the 1980s and 1990s, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) “compelled the Haitian government to lower tariffs on food imports as a condition for receiving loans” (B. Bell 27). US commodities flooded into Haiti, which lowered food prices below what Haitian farmers could match.

Between 2004 and the present day there have been numerous efforts to get France to repay the 90 million gold francs—the independence debt—which would serve as reparations for Haiti’s revolution-related debt. The question of Haiti’s debt legitimacy remains a complex issue, made even more complex by the 2010 earthquake and resulting further global financial entanglements. For example, in 2010, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Inter-American Development Bank, along with independent nations, worked to forgive large portions of Haiti’s debt (unrelated to the Haitian Revolution) to help kickstart reconstruction efforts after the earthquake.<sup>24</sup>

Although there have been instances of international political or economic pressure to seek reparations from France, the legacy of colonial debt still casts a long shadow. Bell distills this legacy of inherited debt, political instability, and economic corruption from the time of the revolution, writing, “many Haitians say they are still being punished for challenging slavery, white colonialists, and French empire, and the hegemony of the United States and other powers. One Haitian told me, ‘The war against us, from back when we fought for our independence has never ended’” (B. Bell 30).

### **Louverture’s Plantation Economy Vision: Land-Ownership Debates of the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

To understand the full story of Haiti’s debt and its environmental legacy, we must also explain how monoculture crops came to dominate the country’s export economy. In the 18<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> See J. Duval, “Haiti: From Trafficking to Debt”.

century, French sugarcane, coffee, indigo, and tobacco plantations transformed the once-forested landscape of Saint-Domingue (Dubois, *Haiti* 4). The move to Monoculture farming “consumed the landscape: observers at the time already noted that alarmingly large areas of forests had been chopped down for construction and for export of precious woods to Europe” (4). These colonial land-use practices eventually evolved into the soil-erosion and deforestation crises that plague Hispaniola today.

Haiti’s primary function in the global economy, both under French rule and immediately following the revolution, was to produce crops for export. In 1825, Haitian president Boyer took out enormous loans from the French government to pay the first installments of the independence debt, which significantly increased Haiti’s overall debt. Facing the new pressure to repay France, Haiti turned to two primary economic exports: coffee (now the country’s primary monoculture crop) and dyewoods and old-growth forests (the most readily available resource of the mountainous Haitian landscape). The increased production of coffee and timber reshaped the landscape, leaving most of the western coastline and rural mountain communities vulnerable to dangerous soil erosion and landslides.<sup>25</sup> The debt, which Haiti paid to free itself from colonial occupation, served as the catalyst for the economic and environmental catastrophe of the next 200 years.

At the same time, Haitians were increasingly interested in autonomous access to their land. They began to see land use as a right for all Haitians, not only the elite few accommodated by Louverture’s vision. Louverture’s position on monoculture farming for export was to keep the colonial plantation system in place and continue producing sugar and coffee while removing the French landowners and abolishing slavery. Dubois explains that:

---

<sup>25</sup> See Dubois, “Who Will Speak for Haiti’s Trees”.

...the men who first ruled the fledgling country – among them several ex-slaves – saw the reconstruction of its plantations as the only viable economic course of action. What else was there to sell besides sugar and coffee, after all, in order to buy the goods and the guns they needed to survive? (*Haiti* 6)

Louverture's success relied on maintaining a functioning plantation economy to fuel the export markets. The Louverture regime's initial policy that former slaves should remain on their plantations as free people and continue to work for 20% of the crops was unsuccessful. The insurrections in the north led to two massive waves of refugees moving first in Cuba and settling in port cities of the United States Gulf Coast: the first wave in 1791 and the second in 1793. Whites, slaves, and free people of color began an exodus from Haiti (particularly the north) seeking greater political and economic stability leaving many plantations without leadership or a workforce. Many Saint-Domingue immigrants settled in New Orleans, which doubled the city's population in the first years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Louverture's regime, in an effort to maintain civil order and reap the benefits of a robust export economy, reversed course and invited many of the planters who had fled between 1791 and 1793 back to their plantations to reestablish control over the monoculture systems of production. Coffee production flourished under Louverture's leadership, and the landowning power was split between former masters and former slaves in the new order (Dubois, *Haiti* 34). That class division between the political elite and the rural masses instituted a new form of slave labor. Though plantation slavery as it was known during the French occupation had ended, the

9/10 of the population made up of former slaves continued to work plantation land with little control until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup>

Haiti gained independence in 1804 and Louverture's former lieutenant Jean-Jacques Dessalines became the first leader of an independent Haiti. After a brief period of unification ending with Dessalines's death, the two remaining revolutionary leaders (Henry Christophe and Alexandre Pétion) entered a political power struggle that would split the new nation in two: the Kingdom of Haiti in the northern half of former San Domingue, ruled by Christophe, and the Republic of Haiti in the south, under Pétion's control. Before the split, Christophe was elected as a figurehead president of a unified Haiti, to satisfy the black majority, while Pétion was the head of the legislature and controlled the true mechanisms of power in Haiti. The electorate was dominated by the mulatto elite and backed Pétion's government which attempted to establish the system of representation known as *politique de doublure* (politics by understudies) using Christophe as a symbolic leader where the mulatto elites controlled the legislature (Bellegarde 167). Christophe, dissatisfied with his figurehead role, gathered forces and attempted to overthrow Port-au-Prince, which failed miserably because of Pétion's strong artillery. In 1811 Christophe and his remaining forces marched north of the Artibonite River and established Cap Haïtien (later Cap Henry) was the capital of the Kingdom of Haiti (168).

After the north/south division, two post-independence land policy systems were established and practiced simultaneously in their respective areas of Haiti: Christophe's Code Henri in the Kingdom of Haiti (which remained under Christophe's rule until his suicide in 1820)

---

<sup>26</sup> This process of shifting from the French-originated plantation system to the combination of subsistence farming and export-based monoculture production is further described in Jean Casimir's *La culture opprimée* (2001) and Gérard Barthélemy's *L'univers rural haïtien: Le pays en dehors* (1990). Casimir describes the post-revolution land- use shift as a "counter-plantation" system.

and Pétion's system in the Republic of Haiti, where Pétion ruled until his death in 1818. Post-independence land policy went through two crucial early evolutions: sharecropping and taxation (métayage) under Pétion, which increased peasant reliance on monoculture production to turn a profit; and Christophe's Code Henri system, first enacted into law in the newly established Kingdom of Haiti ruled by Christophe in February of 1812, which garnered fewer profits for the state through taxation but moved towards democratizing Haitian soil for peasants (Christophe 1).

Regarding Pétion's land policy: by 1807, the ruling mulatto class allowed a shift to a combination of subsistence agriculture and the production of some crops for export. However, as Pétion's government gained total control of the state's import-export systems, it began heavily taxing the goods produced by small-scale farmers and thereby reinforcing the economic divisions between classes (Trouillot, *State Against Nation* 16). These small-scale farmers, many of whom were former slaves, were originally not allowed to leave their properties or move freely throughout the country. Pétion's control eventually softened and evolved into a sharecropping system known as métayage which continued to economically exploit while offering greater political and social autonomy. Like some post-slavery sharecropping practices in the United States métayage was an arrangement in which:

...a landowner essentially handed over the cultivation of a property to those who worked on it, surrendering day-to-day control over their tasks. In return, the laborers gave the landowner half of what they produced each year...the new setup allowed the laborers to control the rhythms of their works and gave them the choice of what crops to grow from season to season. (Dubois, *Haiti* 59)

The Pétion government also simplified the tax system, which improved lives for rural laborers in the short term because they were seeing larger profit margins on monoculture production than

they had ever seen before. Instead of a tax on individual plantations, the government instituted a territorial tax that was specifically intended to be applied to the growing percentage of coffee exports Haiti was producing. The territorial tax system, as opposed to a residence-based tax system, was applied only to Haitian crops sold in-nation, rather than those shipped and exported abroad. This allowed the farmers to see larger profits on their harvest of rotating cash crops bound for export; and, in turn, incentivized farming for export rather than subsistence farming because of higher profit margins and lower taxes overall. Global demand for coffee was growing and the Pétion government, as well as the rural farmers, wanted to capitalize on this easy-to-produce and easy-to-transport commodity. The new tax regime was an improvement for rural laborers, who enjoyed larger profit margins on monoculture production than they had ever seen before. Versions of the territorial tax system persisted through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but when coffee exports fell during Jean-Claude Duvalier's regime (Trouillot, "Haiti's Nightmare"), the system placed financial pressure on Haitian laborers, now largely in control of their own crop production and selection, to favor coffee production instead of rotating crops to preserve sound soil revitalization practices.

Though many rural laborers supported the Pétion government because of the increased profits from coffee exports, land-use policies shifted when Pétion began to use land in lieu of cash to pay his troops. He restricted land sales to parcels of 30 acres or larger to hold the plantation farming systems in place; as a result, rural farmers working smaller plots of land weren't generating enough income to purchase the 30-acre (or larger) land parcels. This further disenfranchised the poorest laborers and solidified power for the political and military class; this also insured that Pétion could maintain political control over his military without destroying his

budget.<sup>27</sup> Though Pétion's land use policies did not explicitly discriminate against blacks, the mulatto elite's control of commerce more broadly, maintained economic inequality for blacks.

In the northern Kingdom of Haiti, after the 1811 division, there was a short-lived renaissance of environmental preservation practices that were put into law in the north. Dubois explains that the nearly 800 pages of the "Code Henri" included some forward-thinking regulations aimed at preventing deforestation: "no one who rented a plantation...was allowed to cut down more than one-third of the trees on the property, and they were also told to avoid cutting down trees on the 'summits of mountains'" (*Haiti* 65). Of course, these regulations did not apply to the property owners themselves, though they were encouraged to participate in food-security and sustainability practices.<sup>28</sup>

Though plantation labor practices under Christophe in the north functioned similarly to the French system of Code Noir, the Kingdom of Haiti enjoyed a degree of self-governance that, for the first time in San Domingue's history, was not structured by a racial hierarchy. Blacks in Christophe's government were given control of large tracts of land and tasked with managing the estates (the Pétion government sold land plots to anyone who could afford them, which largely restricted landownership in the southern Republic of Haiti to whites and mulattos). After Christophe's suicide in 1820, however, General Jean-Pierre Boyer was selected by the mulatto-controlled southern legislature to reclaim the Kingdom of Haiti for the Republic of Haiti. Only a

---

<sup>27</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin's *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (2010) explains Pétion's motivations, and the biased land-distribution processes, in further detail and sees this decision as the origin point for the political kickbacks and corruption that ties together Haitian politics and land-use practices in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>28</sup> There are sections of "Code Henri" requiring property owners to plant large numbers of mango, palm, breadfruit, and banana trees to increase food security on the island (Christophe 10-14).

few weeks after Christophe's death, Boyer unified Haiti and the southern legislature's land use policies spread to the north.

### **Ecological Dominos of Land Use Policies: Deforestation, Erosion, and Floods**

In 1993, The Haitian Collective for the Protection of the Environment and an Alternate Development (COHPEDA) outlined the factors leading to deforestation and soil erosion from the colonial period to the present day. The colonial period marked the shift to European monoculture farming (brought by the French and Spanish), destroying the virgin forests of Haiti (Arthur and Dash 100). Regarding the period of 1804-1915, the report details the land-distribution process which favored those in political and military power, pushing the poorest Haitians to clear-cut the mountains to carve out spaces for farming. These small-scale farmers engaged in the "practice of seasonal cultivation (necessitating a periodic and repeated use of the soil) most often on fragile land (the thin layer of arable soil) and on the very steep slopes [which] brought about the erosion" that we see today (100). We can further analyze the evolution of Haitian land use policy, the move away from seasonal and cooperative farming, and the overreliance on clear-cutting to access arable land as three primary driving forces leading to the current deforestation and erosion tipping point identified in the COHPEDA report.

After reunification in 1820, and the reestablishment of land-use policies in the north that allowed for the purchase of large plots of land, small-scale farmers began migrating further into the mountainous areas to preserve their autonomy and access to arable land. As a result, the forced agricultural expansion into the mountains fueled the dual-environmental catastrophe of deforestation and soil erosion that followed. Limited access to land ownership in the north Haitian reliance on monoculture crop production for export served as the catalyst for government abuses of taxation systems that kept rural farmers in a cycle of deforestation and monoculture

production because they could not afford to rotate crops sustainably. However, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, farmers, both black and mulatto, were finally gaining true legal ownership of the land their enslaved ancestors farmed. The coupling of colonial land-use practices with faux-egalitarian government mismanagement of land distribution led to a disruption of local communities and stunted the budding culture of sustainability within traditional Haitian agricultural practices; the legacy of deforestation and soil erosion still resonates today.

Despite their differences, Louverture, Christophe, and Pétion's policies had fought against the complete dissolution of the plantation economy because of its economic taxation benefits. However, the Pétion and Boyer administrations began the process of distributing land ownership to a far greater population than the French plantation system: "[The Pétion and Boyer governments] distributed a little more than 15 hectares of land to each of some ten thousand beneficiaries" (Montgomery 229). One distinctive mark of the Haitian public's impulse for community-driven agricultural practices is the system of the lakou. It was developed in 1804 in the absence of a strong central government and persisted until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as the primary form of rural community organization between rural families. The lakou has its roots in African traditions of shared social, religious, and economic space between families in clustered housing around small-scale, individually owned, agricultural plots. The members of a lakou worked cooperatively and provided for each other by offering collective child-care, social, and economic support (LaRose 482). Rural communities essentially self-regulate and navigate a hyper-localized system founded in the principles of individual family landownership within the lakou. The self-regulation extended to land-rights disputes, often settled by the authorities within the local communities rather than at the regional or national level.

However, the lakou system presented a taxation problem for the Boyer government because much of the commerce was conducted by bartering. The hyper-localized system also challenged the notion of political and economic control from a centralized national government. As such, although land distribution was initially envisioned as more egalitarian (black, white, and mulattos could all own property), a complicated legal system of subdividing and inheriting land was established during the Boyer period (1820-1843) and began to significantly reduce the size of plots for the small-scale farmers with each generation over the next 100 years:

...land holdings generally were divided upon inheritance and several centuries of population growth gradually reduced the size of the average peasant farm to [less than 1.5 hectares by 1971]. With an average of between 5 and 6 people per household, this comes to about 0.25 to 0.3 hectares per person. ... This is Ireland all over again, this time without the landlords. (Montgomery 229).

The legal practice of subdividing land among families, and the convoluted process of determining ownership that persisted after the Boyer regime and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, further fueled the migration into the mountains for new ground to farm.

The COHPEDA report also summarizes the period of US occupation from 1934 to present as the emergence of international companies practicing monoculture farming on the best

available land and the reestablishment of the *corvée* system.<sup>29</sup> The *corvée* system was the forced labor described earlier in this chapter where laborers were tied to particular plots of land or rented land from a landowner with ties to the military and government. The US revived this system, largely as “a means of securing labor for road-building and other infrastructural projects” (Arthur and Dash 101). The further crowding “accelerated the process of movement of the poorest peasant sector towards the mountains and the anarchic clearing of the land” (101). This cultivation of the steepest mountain slopes made the landscape more vulnerable to floods, increased soil salinity, and the new agricultural landscape (now cleared of trees) became susceptible to drought on both long-term and short-term timelines.

By the 1940s, the rural farms, after nearly a century of sub-dividing through inheritance, had become too small to farm and the poorest families began to clear steeper hillsides. This cycle of subdividing without organized soil revitalization efforts, egalitarian as it may be, has left

---

<sup>29</sup> The US occupation of Haiti was carried out as one of the many US military and political interventions into Central American and Caribbean nations as part of the “Banana Wars” which followed the Spanish-American War which ended in 1898 (Langley 3). On President Woodrow Wilson’s orders, US Marines landed in Port-au-Prince in July of 1915 after the murder of President Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam. Sam’s murder was the last in a string of political coups Wilson justified US military intervention on two points: 1) the fear that Sam’s political rival Dr. Rosalvo Bobo would take power and Bobo opposed the expansion of strategic and economic ties with the US and 2) that Germany would use the political unrest in Haiti as an opportunity to occupy Haiti and further control the international export market limiting US access to the island’s resources. Hispaniola was of strategic military and economic importance in the leadup to WWI and the relatively small German community in Haiti at the time had amassed a good deal of economic control. The German merchants controlled an estimated 80% of international commerce leaving Haiti in 1910; many Germans had married into Haitian families to circumvent the policy which barred foreigners for occupying Haitian land (Plummer, “The Metropolitan Connection” 135). The US remained in Haiti until August of 1934 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt recalled the final remaining Marines and transferred full authority to the *Garde de’Haïti*.

many of Haiti's most vulnerable populations with infertile, arid farmland.<sup>30</sup> Scholarly conversations about Haiti's growing environmental crisis began surfacing in the late 1950s in several crucial ethnographies explaining the consequences of deforestation and soil erosion in rural Haiti.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the most useful case study of erosion and the Haitian lakou system was written by US anthropologist Sidney Mintz. Mintz visited Fonds-des-Nègres in 1958 and summarized the lakou system as a village built around a shared community garden with living fences to delineate each family's plot of land (Mintz 101).<sup>32</sup> He characterized the landscape as positioned in an area "where deforestation has proceeded apace – particularly where charcoal-making is economically important" and where there was no preventative plan to mitigate erosion, although "run-off [on the slopes] is likely to be considerable, unless there are stands of coffee with their protective cover of fruit and other trees" (105). Mintz argued that the living fences, a foundational part of the traditional lakou system, were a culturally specific way to combat catastrophic soil erosion. But as the lakou systems began to fail, largely due to migration abroad and to the urban centers, the living fences were abandoned.

Importantly, Mintz described how the small land plots, after a century of subdivision, could not be left fallow to reinvigorate the soil (Paravisini-Gebert "All Misfortune" 78). Farmers had little oversight or regulation due to the lakou system and did not practice terrace farming, rotation, fallowing, or contouring to keep the soil productive. Meanwhile, Mintz noted, the Haitian government had placed no erosion mitigation measures or planting best practices in

---

<sup>30</sup> In 1940, George Eaton Simpson wrote *Haitian Peasant Economy*, which outlined the corrupt and "Byzantine system of inheritance laws" which has resulted in the current soil erosion and deforestation crisis in rural Haiti (Arthur and Dash 96).

<sup>31</sup> This includes Paul Moral's *The Haitian Peasant: Study of Rural Life in Haiti* (1961) and Rémy Bastien's *The Haitian Peasant and his Family* (1951).

<sup>32</sup> These 'living fences' are made almost entirely of plant life. Occasionally they will begin with man-made structures and the plants are allowed to grow around these.

planting put into law. Instead, it was concerned with protecting the coffee trees that populated the region. Haitian law “forbids the cutting of coffee trees” to protect the main source of export taxation (despite a decline in the value of coffee production due to global economic trends and Haitian taxation systems), but the coffee growth itself was limited by the soil infertility and erosion because of deforestation (Mintz 104-105).

The misuse of arable land and rampant soil erosion continued to escalate in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By 1986 the U.S. Agency for International Development reported that about a third of Haiti was “extremely eroded and practically sterile from soil loss” (Montgomery 229). David Montgomery’s *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* explained that many upland coffee and indigo plantations could provide only “three years of productive crops from the upland fields” because of soil erosion, leading landowners to continually carve out new land for coffee production (228). Montgomery outlined the difficulty of dealing with erosion in the highlands, arguing that many of the common erosion control measures, like piling soil into mounds or using stakes and contoured terraces, could not be put to practical use in Haiti because of the steep slopes, rainy seasons, and frequent storms that batter the west side of the island (228).

Another environmental challenge facing the nation is the topsoil loss from hurricanes and severe storms. Topsoil is the very upper layer of soil, the first 2-8 inches, where most plant roots find their nutrients from the high concentration of organic matter and other microorganisms present in the soil. Only the largest trees have roots that extend below the topsoil. As Paravisini-Gebert writes, “in Haiti, the loss of topsoil due to deforestation has led to the loss of almost 50% of potential farmland” (“All Misfortune” 85). With a storm like Hurricane Hazel, the topsoil is swept from the mountainsides, through the city streets, and into the ocean through devastating floods. Montgomery characterizes this level of topsoil loss as, “crippling...soil loss from the

uplands in the rainy season is so severe that bulldozers function as tropical snowplows to clear the streets of the capital, Port-au-Prince” (229). The loss of topsoil is essentially the loss of economic prosperity for rural Haitians. Without the topsoil, no crops will survive and the land is left vulnerable to flooding and further erosion.

### **The Creeping Destruction of Colonial Debt, Charcoal, and Hispaniola Border Myths**

To pay back Haiti’s colonial debt, much of the capital brought in by Haiti’s export taxes was earmarked for repayment instead of public programs or establishing a system of internal aid to help support the lives of impoverished Haitian farmers. Once soil erosion and deforestation on the island reached their peak in the 1960s, charcoal production became the only way for rural farmers to produce income. Sustainable farming practices in Haiti took a backseat to the quick benefits of relying on charcoal production. Many of the farming descendants of Haitian plantation workers, who inherited once-fertile lands, were forced to “[fell] the last remaining trees to sell as charcoal to buy food” and peasants migrated to cities, creating huge slums which “fostered the insurgency that toppled the government in 2004” (Montgomery 229). While the Dominican Republic has offered sustainability subsidies to incentivize the switch to propane, Haiti continues to cook with charcoal: The United Nations reports that 92 percent of Haitian households still relied on charcoal for cooking in 2012 (Ferris and Gronewold, “How the Caribbean’s Charred Forest”). In 2012 UN peacekeepers began instituting a program in Haiti to use paper-based “briquettes” instead of charcoal but when the program was handed over to Haitian authorities the initiative stopped.

*A Haitian Anthology: libète* includes several interviews with charcoal makers from the 1990s and 2000s that provide a contemporary perspective on the importance of charcoal production as a substitute for monoculture income. In Leah Gordon and Anne Parisio’s

interviews from 1996, charcoal maker Jean Rabel explained how deforestation, drought, and soil erosion COHPEDA forced the farmers in Haiti's northwest region to turn to charcoal making:

You can see this earth doesn't want to give birth to anything. We keep going at it to try and get a little corn and beans, but if there's no rain, you can't plant and the earth won't give anything. ... We've only got little trees left, so we can only make a little amount of charcoal from them. As soon as you have eaten up the money from the last sack, you are having to make another one. The same day you have cut the trees, you've already eaten the money. (Arthur and Dash103)

As much as 60% of Haiti's domestic energy production comes from charcoal, and the fight for raw product has become a violent struggle for many (Kheel, "The Charcoal War") — one that has spread across Haiti's border with the Dominican Republic. Many recent confrontations at that border have been sparked by the often illegal and rapidly growing competition over the cutting trees for charcoal production (Gronewold, "Environmental Destruction"). Though the Dominican Republic banned the production of charcoal to protect its forests in the 1980s, Haitian traffickers have expanded their range to Dominican forests.

As increased reliance on charcoal production has exacerbated of deforestation and soil erosion in Haiti, environmental writers have used Haiti as an example of a failed environmental state to highlight the relative conservation successes in the neighboring Dominican Republic. Most famous of these problematic comparisons comes from Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2011). If anyone outside of scholarly circles knows about the deforestation crisis facing Haiti, there is a good chance they learned about it from Diamond's book.

In *Collapsed*, Diamond explained that “the Haitian side of the island was less well-endowed environmentally” due to the challenging mountainous terrain “but developed a rich agricultural economy before the Dominican side ... Haiti’s burst of agricultural wealth came at the expense of its environmental capital of forests and soils” (339). He blamed much of Haiti’s environmental instability on the colonial legacy left by the French plantation system with a substantially larger population versus the Spanish economy in the east, dedicated primarily to cattle ranching for hides (339-341). The stark differences in population, more specifically the high concentration of enslaved blacks in Haiti – 700,000 in 1785 on the French side versus 30,000 on the Spanish side, is the necessary precondition for Diamond’s narrative of Haitian environmental instability. He did not explore the historical details of the reactionary – and problematic – land-use practices and property-ownership laws that set Haiti up for agricultural failure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that I have outlined above. Diamond argued that Haiti and the Dominican Republic’s chances at environmental and economic revitalization remain inextricably tied together, but that political, cultural, and linguistic differences make cooperation between the two nations challenging (356-357).

Diamond’s comparative study of deforestation and conservation in Haiti and the Dominican Republic paints a somewhat skewed picture of Haiti’s environmental and political failures versus Dominican successes. But his work helps broaden the scope of the environmental conversation beyond a purely national issue. Sherrie Baver challenges Diamond’s comparison, arguing that his book, along with portrayals in the international media, have perpetuated the stereotype of Haiti as the “‘bad’ side of the two-nation island of Hispaniola”, and suggested that Haiti’s economic, political, and ecological failures are “due to collective self-delusion” among both the country’s leadership and the broader population (Baver 648). Baver argues that

Diamond's book presents a false dichotomy in his portrayal of Dominican environmental successes holding them up as "environmental paragons" and characterizes Haitians as victims of their own negative ecological, political, and historical circumstances (649).

Diamond also misses perhaps the most crucial piece of the environmental puzzle: Haiti's environmental catastrophe arose from its colonial debts. The nuances and historical contingencies of Haiti's debt to France are the ultimate development challenge facing Haiti, not the paradoxical question of how Haiti failed ecologically where the Dominican Republic succeeded. My response to Diamond's narrative, along with Bayer, Dubois, and Paravisini-Gebert, is: we cannot underestimate debt, as well as ecological and demographic differences when telling the story of Haiti's environment.

My strongest critique of Diamond's book is that it erases indigenous and rural people from his study of Haitian deforestation and Dominican environmental story. His arguments, like those of many environmental writers from the West, treat the environment as divorced from the lives of the people inhabiting the land. For example, Diamond does not address the top-down structure of the Dominican government's environmental protections, which complicates his vision of how the policies shaped the lives of the rural poor (Bayer 656). However flawed Diamond's comparative study may be, it remains valuable as a piece of the larger puzzle explaining how deforestation, soil erosion, and land-use practices led to the environmental catastrophe in Haiti following the 2010 earthquake. The relative lack of attention to the human factor in popular environmental writing can be addressed through the intervention of literature: Fiction and drama tell the stories of the people living and working on the land with an intimacy and attention to spiritual and cultural detail that is often glossed or erased in environmental writing.

## **International Agricultural Humanitarian Aid and the Loss of Food Sovereignty**

Returning the focus of Haiti's environmental crisis back to the lives of rural farmers, this chapter argues there is a direct link between the plight of Haitian farmers forced to reject sustainable land-use practices and the insidious effects of international agricultural humanitarian aid that resulted in Haiti's loss of economic food sovereignty. Haiti was once mostly self-sufficient in its rice production; by the Clinton era it had become the third-largest importer of US rice worldwide (B. Bell 127).<sup>33</sup>

The problem of providing food aid to Haiti is not that the international community is attempting to offer relief for the most vulnerable local populations; it is the ways in which the Haitian government establishes its policies and puts the domestic agricultural sector further in jeopardy in the long term. Put another way, the dependence on international food aid is a direct effect of Haiti's colonial legacies of debt, deforestation, soil erosion, and soil infertility. Bell, Dubois, Katz, Mintz, and Farmer all argue that the international food aid funds must be used to support the expansion and security of domestic production and that imported food should only be used as a stopgap measure. Healing the broken agricultural sector requires restructuring Haiti's farming practices to make them environmentally sustainable, and viable without foreign intervention. Current aid policies achieve the opposite.

Historically, many Haitians rejected the idea of US food aid. Criticism of food aid—, called “manje sinister” by some Haitians, “exploded in the aftermath of Duvalier's fall in 1986” (Arthur and Dash 118). Many saw food aid as a way to pacify rural farming communities and maintain

---

<sup>33</sup> Clinton has since apologized for the policies of importing rice to Haiti. He spoke to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2010 saying, “It may have been good for some of my farmers in Arkansas, but it has not worked. It was a mistake...I had to live everyday with the consequences of the loss of capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people because of what I did; nobody else” (Katz, “With Cheap Food”).

political and economic control of the country instead of investing in new ways to help Haitians produce sustainable crops for themselves. In the 1990s, the Clinton administration, with permission from the UN, sent troops to Haiti when Aristide returned to the presidency.<sup>34</sup> The peacekeeping mission took an economic toll on Haiti as Aristide “[followed] the neoliberal economic doctrine and [removed] all protectionist tariffs” for many in the agricultural sector. Removing these protections devastated Haiti’s rice growers and deepened the country’s dependence on imported food aid (Dubois, *Haiti* 363). As a result of deforestation and soil erosion, 1997 brought drought and famine to Haiti, further increasing the dependence on outside aid for survival. The Haiti Briefing from *Famine and Food Aid* explains that the “unrelenting process of deforestation, [is] catastrophic for peasant farmers, particularly those living in areas such as the Northwest that lack irrigation systems” making these populations most dependent on foreign food aid (Arthur and Dash 117).<sup>35</sup> The intervention of the UN and foreign NGOs during and after Aristide and Préval’s presidencies slowed many Haitian governing and economic systems to a halt. Of course, after the 2010 earthquake, Haiti’s ecological and humanitarian catastrophes came into clearer focus around the world.

---

<sup>34</sup> This military intervention, Operation Uphold Democracy, was authorized in September of 1994 and continued until March of 1995. Democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide had been removed from office in a coup d’état in 1991. After a series of diplomatic conversations initiated by former President Carter and Colin Powell, General Joseph Raoul Cédras, de facto leader of Haiti after the military takeover, was given an ultimatum: honor the will of the people and the election of Aristide or face hostile US military intervention (Dowd, “Despite Role”). Operation Uphold Democracy formally shifted to a UN peacekeeping mission in 1995: United Nations Mission in Haiti (UNMIH), with continued US military participation until 2000.

<sup>35</sup> This report goes on to explain that famine in the northwest, due to no significant rainfall in 1997, resulted in 350,000 people facing starvation (Arthur and Dash 117). Peasant farmers were eating dog meat, government-provided seeds, weeds, and roots to survive.

Foreign intervention in the form of international humanitarian agricultural aid, has exacerbated the environmental crisis in Haiti's agricultural sector. Haiti's food insecurity is not simply a result of farmers refusing to transition to sustainable farming practices; it is large part because internationally funded interventions into Haiti's agricultural sector have increased the vulnerability of Haitian farmers and their crops. The fake humanitarianism of companies like Monsanto, which works in collaboration with the Haitian government to shift seed use away from native seed varieties to Monsanto-branded GMOs, increases the Haitian agricultural sector's reliance on Monsanto seeds year after year. Once Haitian farmers begin using Monsanto's genetically modified GMO seeds, many of which are created to be drought-resistant, native seed crops become less desirable. As a result, farmers must either continue to purchase Monsanto seeds, —impossible because of their high cost— or rely on the government's continued aid agreements with international agriculture companies to maintain subsidies or donations. The farmers, largely at the mercy of the government's decisions, are forced to adapt to new production cycles and products, fundamentally reshaping the agricultural sector into one on foreign aid instead of creating home-grown solutions with creole seeds and indigenous farming practices.

The most recent battle between Haitian farmers and the international agriculture industry centers on the introduction of hybrid and genetically modified seeds in the form of donations. In 2010, only six months after the earthquake, Monsanto donated 505 tons of hybrid corn and vegetable seeds to Haitian farmers (B. Bell 124). Monsanto expected this donation to be a welcome relief for rural Haitians struggling to rebuild the agricultural sector after the disaster, but the donation was met with stark resistance from the farmers of the country's Central Plateau region. Ten thousand peasants marched in protest against the Monsanto seed donation of 2010

and protest signs referred to the intervention as a “second earthquake” that would undermine agrobiodiversity, the cooperative distribution economy, and the long-term stability of peasant farmers’ livelihood (Greenhalgh, “Haitian Farmers Reject”).<sup>36</sup> Doudou Pierre, a representative of the Haitian National Network for Food Sovereignty explained that most Haitian farmers are in favor of “seeds that have never been touched by multinationals. We say that the seeds are the patrimony of humanity. No one can control them” (124-125). The Monsanto seeds, both hybrid and genetically modified, were treated with a “chemical fungicide so toxic that the EPA banned its purchase for home use in the United States” (124).<sup>37</sup> The chemicals and foreign seed stock were not the only worries of the Haitian farmers: The RENHASSA group argued that accepting the donation of the Monsanto seeds would lead to further dependence on the international agricultural community and the expansion of destabilizing planting practices in Haiti.

Monsanto’s efforts were framed as a purely humanitarian to “support recovery efforts” because farmers “may not have had sufficient seeds to plant [in 2010] after the earthquake” (125). However, when Fondasyon Men nan Men (a coalition of farmer groups from the Central Plateau and international scientists) conducted its own study, it showed that there were ample native seed stocks available. Haitian farmers simply lacked the money to purchase the creole seeds independently. The findings of the FONDAMA study revealed Monsanto’s donation to be self-motivated instead of altruistic. Bell describes the growth of Monsanto’s global empire and control over product distribution, explaining that Monsanto’s humanitarian initiatives are always

---

<sup>36</sup> The cooperative distribution economy refers to a cooperative system where agricultural workers share leadership, labor, and distribution of profits from sales as a community. Monsanto’s seed donation threatened the co-op model because of the disruption to native seed stocks, profit sharing, and harvest patterns.

<sup>37</sup> The tomato seeds Monsanto donated to Haiti in 2010 were treated with Thiram, a chemical banned in large-scale agricultural use in the US.

tioned to the purchasing of local and national seed companies as a way to control supply chains (126-127).

Accepting disaster aid in the form of food also throws the Haitian marketplace into chaos. Rony Charles, a leading member of the RACPABA, reported that the arrival of disaster aid in Haiti made the cooperatives unable to sell the crops purchased before the earthquake (B. Bell 129).<sup>38</sup> As a result, since there was no income from sales of previous rice crops, the co-ops could not afford to purchase future crops from recovering farmers. Essentially, because of the distribution of food aid, those farmers who were able to produce viable crops had no local consumers or cooperatives to purchase their products. This led to a substantial waiting period in which farmers and the RACPABA cooperative earned comparatively little from the post-2010 earthquake crops, which resulted in sales amounting to 2/3 of what “should have been brought in before the earthquake: US\$13.27 a sack versus US\$20.77” (130). The reoccurring question for food aid in Haiti is how the most vulnerable populations will survive if the land-use practices, politics, and cultural concerns remain unaddressed. The path to long-term recovery for Haitian farmers, one that leads to a sustainable food-security future and autonomous planting and harvesting, remains unattainable because of international food aid and foreign intervention.

### **Fiction’s Impact on Historical and Ecological Archives**

The second half of this chapter explores intersecting literary and dramatic representations of Haitian culture and identity. It focuses on the losses experienced from environmental and land-use policies and Haiti’s expanded catastrophe timeline of deforestation, soil erosion, and

---

<sup>38</sup> RACPABA is the acronym for the Cooperative Farming Production Network of the Lower Artibonite (Rezo Asosyasyon Koòperatif pou Komès ak Pwodwi Agrikòl Ba Latibonit) (B. Bell 129). Much of this 2000-member collective is made of regional marketing corporations and their employees who help with the sale and distribution of agricultural products both domestically and abroad (129).

food insecurity. The analysis of each fictional work follows the same historical and environmental development I have outlined in the first part of the chapter: the texts move from the colonial period and Haitian independence into the Duvalier period and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I begin with a play, C. L. R. James's *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* (1934), to emphasize how the significance of forest space, Vodun spirituality, and the Enlightenment values of freedom and liberty clashed with Toussaint Louverture's leadership and economic policies to set the stage for Haiti's current environmental catastrophe.<sup>39</sup>

I then move to Duvalier-period novels to explore the significance of deforestation and land use in Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* (1941) and Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Fonds des Nègres* (1960) and *Amour* (1968).

I begin with James's play because his work addresses the colonial period and the seeds of independence so crucial to establishment of the land-use practices which resulted in the environmental catastrophe explored in Vieux-Chauvet and Roumain's novels. In addition to James's invaluable contribution to the historical timeline of Haiti's independence, the medium of drama allows for a new perspective on the land-use policies that set the stage for deforestation and soil erosion. Drama allows for a unique blend of text and embodiment of history and character—in the performance itself, the stage directions, and the web of supplemental materials produced by directors, actors, playwrights, audiences, and critics. The proliferation of possible interpretations of history, policy, and the environment offers up new avenues to situate the

---

<sup>39</sup> The 1934 script of James's *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* was lost until 2005 when Christian Høgsbjerg found the manuscript in the archives at Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull while researching for his dissertation on C.L.R. James (Høgsbjerg 1). I almost exclusively use the 1934 script in this chapter, but include one scene from the 1936 Paul Robeson version, which Høgsbjerg includes in his supplemental materials. There is not a complete script from the 1936 mounting of the play as the text was never copywritten or published by James.

complex influences and players in a problem like Haiti's deforestation and soil erosion catastrophe. There is a unique and fleeting temporality to dramatic performance, as well as the resonances of dramatic texts, that offers great potential for authors, artists, and activists who are drawn to catastrophe and require a medium built for both immediacy and enduring artistic legacy. Drama, unlike fiction, can be produced and consumed quickly, and with a required intimacy and attention to geographic location. As the third chapter of this dissertation argues, drama is the artistic medium of immediate response to catastrophe events with the potential for infinitely fractured interpretations as time progresses. The production of catastrophe drama also requires the physical embodiment of trauma that shapes the audience's relationship to the content in a visceral and tangible way.

Conversely, the extended time required to produce fiction, particularly novels, attends to catastrophe events with a macro-perspective that allows for a different set of interpretive possibilities and priorities. For example, both Vieux-Chauvet and Roumain use the environment of their novels as an avenue for political critique of the Duvalier regime and the growing environmental crisis in the 20th century, which increased the vulnerability of rural Haitians. I am interested in how both Vieux-Chauvet and Roumain focus on the rural lives of Haitian peasants and their connection to the land through their spirituality. Both writers address deforestation and the political and economic threats to Haiti's community-based agricultural systems as a loss of culture and spirituality. I am most interested in tracing the historic catastrophic timeline of deforestation, soil erosion and food insecurity in Haiti through literary and dramatic works related to these periods. This chapter's exploration of how the extended timeline of environmental catastrophe functions in these texts demonstrates how these invisible consequences work their way into the cultural archives of Haiti's history. My analysis of these

works seeks demonstrate the inextricable connection between environmental catastrophe and the vulnerability, or loss, of rural Haitian culture.

This chapter uses the extended timeline of catastrophe to contribute to the debates of what constitutes an archive. It argues that new forms of archival work—combining history, ecology and literature together—can help fill the gaps and silences that Trouillot emphasizes in the colonial archive of Haiti (Trouillot, *Silencing* 55-57). The work of this chapter builds on Laurent Dubois’s dialogue between Guadeloupean novelists and historians to create new formations of “archives within the fiction”, treating the literary forms as an archive where history can be reinterpreted and recontextualized (Dubois, “Maroons in the Archives” 295).

Like Dubois, I argue that the plays and novels I have selected for this chapter rely on historical accounts and documents to inform the way that they engage history (both of the Haitian Revolution and of the Duvalier period). However, my work goes one step further in its emphasis on environmental and ethnographic influences as equally foundational in the creation of the fiction, which helps generate a “different relationship to the question of evidence and a different sense of how to imagine the relationship between present needs and the facts of the past” (292). This is why I opened this chapter with an extended historical and ecological interpretation of Haiti’s deforestation and land-use practices. But history and statistics do not provide a full picture of the link between deforestation and culture in Haiti; an analysis of literary and dramatic texts can fill this archival gap. Fiction both critiques and supplements the traditional historical archive.

### **Haitian Forests and Spirituality: Loss of Forest, Loss of Culture**

Nonfiction, literary, and poetic representations of deforestation in Haiti emphasize the slow violence of this catastrophe in both material and symbolic ways. Manuel Moreno Fraginals

points to the pre-colonial period, writing, “before sugar, before tobacco, before livestock, precious woods were the very symbol of the Far Antilles” (qtd. in Funes Monzote 20). Writers like Émile Nau, Anténor Firmin, and Louis-Joseph Janvier use the forest, or lack of forest, as a symbolic space that emphasizes the connection between the landscape and political and spiritual power (Munro 56-57).<sup>40</sup> This runs counter to the white-colonial culture of nature writing about the Caribbean forests, which romanticizes the natural world as a resource to be exploited and erases indigenous ways of being from the landscape (Paravisini-Gebert, “Deforestation” 100).<sup>41</sup> Paravisini-Gebert describes deforestation as perhaps the most destructive consequence of colonial expansion, writing that this exploitation “[emerges] in the literatures of the Caribbean as both tangible presences and multivalent, protean symbols – as New Edens, as alternatives to the sugar plantations, as vital elements in environmental sustainability, as sites of indigeneity, or as ghostly remnants of ancestral presences” (100-101).

As early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, taxonomists and natural historians like Martinican Moreau de Saint-Méry (1750-1819) chronicled the boom in sugar production and the deforestation of Haiti that set the stage for the soil erosion and further ecological degradation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Saint-Méry critiques the plantation system of cultivating coffee in the Haitian mountains as a precursor to the droughts and soil infertility challenges, writing, “[the plantation owners] have cut down

---

<sup>40</sup> Émile Nau (1812-1860) was a Haitian historian most famous for his history of the Caciques, indigenous people, of Haiti. Anténor Firmin (1850-1911) was a Haitian anthropologist and journalist. His work, specifically *On the Equality of Human Races* (1885), refuted the white colonial argument for the inferiority of black Haitians. Louis-Joseph Janvier (1855-1911) was a Haitian journalist, diplomat, and novelist whose novels focused on the lives of everyday Haitians.

<sup>41</sup> A particularly famous example of this white-colonial nature writing about the Caribbean is James Grainger’s georgic poem *The Sugar Cane* (1762). Grainger lived on St. Kitts and managed his family’s sugar plantations. His poem focuses on the exoticism of the environment, the beauty of the natural and agricultural spaces, while maintaining an ambivalent tone when referencing slavery and plantation economies.

even the trees what covered the summits of the mountains and attracted the rains, insomuch that a diminution of the rains is now perceivable in the French part [of Hispaniola], where they were formerly very considerable and regular” (qtd in Paravisini-Gebert, “Deforestation” 108). The representations of the Haitian forests in work from Moreau de Saint-Méry, and other natural historians, laid the foundation for the poetic and literary descriptions of those forests in the time before colonial monoculture arrived as the heart of the nation’s environmental and spiritual culture.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps the most famous example is Haitian poet Oswald Durand’s collection of poems *Rires et pleurs* (1896). Durand’s work, along with that of his Haitian contemporaries, is closely linked to European romanticism and makes a strong connection between the “romantic notions of nature and society,” as seen in the poetics of Victor Hugo blending them with the foundations of Haitian nationalism and religious practices as tied to the forest (Munro 60-63).

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the poetic and literary tradition that idealized the space of the forest in Haiti, which was being decimated by expansion of export agriculture, became tied to the celebration of the free nation-state. For Haiti, Romantic sensibilities were connected to “the process of national definition”, which runs counter to the policies and systems of land use that were destroying the same forests being idealized as foundational to a free Haitian identity (Paravisini-Gebert, “Deforestation” 108). Like literary trends in the U.S. South that idealized the natural world of plantation life and adjacent wilderness spaces, white colonial fiction describing 19<sup>th</sup> century Haiti began to use the forest as a symbol of a precolonial space was untainted by the colonial legacy. This trend in fiction runs counter to the political and economic impulses to continue colonial land-use and deforestation practices, which I will return to in the analysis of

---

<sup>42</sup> Connections between the revolutionary heroes of Haiti and the sacred rituals of vodou taking place in untamed, indigenous forest spaces of Haiti can be found in poems like Antoine Dupré’s “Hymne à la liberté” (1821) (Munro 58-60).

James's play by examining the heavy influence of French Enlightenment philosophy on Toussaint Louverture.

This imagined, "authentic", and often-indigenous space of the forest was also tied to the spiritual practice of Vodou. The poetry of Alcibiade Fleury-Battier (1841-1881) initiates the concept of the musical tree in Haitian fiction. In his 1881 work *Sous Les Bamous: Poésies* he references the ancient mapous, sacred trees in Haitian Vodou (108).<sup>43</sup> The musical tree theme is echoed in Massillon Coicou's poem "Vents et Flots" (1908) when he writes, "his path / vibrates, in endless hymns, the wild music / of the trees, of the birds, of all the voices / that make up the dazzling fanfare of the forest" (Coicou 95). Many of the "musical tree" poems of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were later referenced and integrated into the novels of the same period. In 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, particularly those of Roumain and Vieux-Chauvet that I explore in this chapter, the musical trees are destroyed and referenced only as a nostalgic longing for the past.

Regarding the historical and religious importance of the mapou tree, the tree represents the embodiment of heroes in Haitian culture, as well as the connection between forest space and Haitian independence (Clerici and Wall, "Vodou is elusive"). Explaining the place of trees within the symbolic framework of Haitian culture, Mimi Sheller writes, "trees have long been at the center of social and political struggles in the Caribbean. In Bwa Kayiman, Haiti, a great mapou tree stands where the ceremony was held in 1791 inaugurating the slave uprising that sparked off the Haitian revolution" (201). The mapou trees also serve as material representations of the crossroads in Vodou. Each tree in the forest, the mapou trees perhaps the most important, becomes a symbolic point of intersection between the physical (horizontal) world and the spiritual (vertical) world. The crossroad space, at the base of the tree between the physical and

---

<sup>43</sup> Mapou trees are also known as matipo or kapok trees depending on the region.

spiritual realms, is guarded by Legba, the lwa of the crossroads, and can open the gate between the worlds for Vodou priests and devotees. A tree's base creates a ceremonial space where worshipers can direct prayers and leave offerings at various rituals. Mapou trees are revered as powerful conduit of spiritual energy, both good and evil, making the felling of a mapou tree particularly significant. Mapous are not the only sacred trees in Haitian Vodou": the banana and fig trees are also commonly used in Vodou ceremonies. These trees are often used as ritualized space to blend Vodou practices with Christian rebirth myths (Rigaud 98-101). The importance of trees as part of Vodou ritual, the home of the Vodou spirits, and indigenous healing continues in the fiction and poetry of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, as fewer Haitians regularly practiced Vodou openly after the US occupation of Haiti from 1914 to 1934, the mapou trees became a target for removal. In the 1940s, as part of the Vodou eradication efforts of the Catholic Church, many of the oldest, most sacred mapou trees were cut down (Dubois, "Who Will Speak").

In 20<sup>th</sup> century Haitian literature, the forests shift from being a reference to a pre-colonial relationship to the land and spiritual practice into a more overtly political dimension through authors like Vieux-Chauvet and Roumain. The US occupation from 1914 to 1934 resulted in unlikely partnerships between Haitian elites (who owned most of the land) and foreign investors. During this period, the forests became both an international commodity, continuing to supply the international marketplace with old-growth wood for construction, and a domestic commodity, charcoal, became the number-one fuel source of Haiti. Wes Jackson, the founder and president of the Land Institute, characterizes the resulting loss of topsoil as devastating to Haitian food security and the rural agricultural sector, explaining topsoil's value as a resource: "the plow has

destroyed more options for future generations than the sword ... soil is more important than oil and just as nonrenewable” (Bittman, “Now this is Natural”).

The literature responding to topsoil loss, deforestation, and food insecurity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has focused on the turn to collective political action “against exploitative governments as a path toward environmental safety, focusing on the state’s inaction as evidence of the slow violence of environmental neglect” (Paravisini-Gebert, “Deforestation” 109). While I am interested in James’s play primarily for the political and economic dimensions of his environmental sensibilities, I will closely read Vieux-Chauvet and Roumain’s novels as examples of how literature intervenes to tell the stories of Haiti’s rural farmers at the height of Haiti’s deforestation and soil erosion catastrophe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What James, Vieux-Chauvet, and Roumain share, to varying degrees, is a focus on the spiritual connection rural Haitian farmers have to the forest and the soil. They all rely on the Vodun use of the forest as sacred space and emphasize the spiritual practice of key characters in the narrative as a device to politicize or critique the rural population’s historic, economic, and spiritual relationship to the soil and forests.

### **C. L. R. James’s *Toussaint Louverture*: Enlightenment Hero and Environmental Irony**

Before offering close readings of Roumain and Vieux-Chauvet, I want to return to the period of the Haitian revolution and the figure of Toussaint Louverture to better understand how 20<sup>th</sup>-century drama has been used to represent the ideological and philosophical underpinnings of post-revolutionary land-use policy. There have been many plays written about the Haitian revolution, but C.L.R. James’s *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* offers a level of attention to historical, political, and economic detail that is

absent from other dramatic renderings of the revolution.<sup>44</sup> As Laurent Dubois explains in his forward to the 2013 publication of the play, “this is a drama that, remarkably, seeks to tell the whole story of the Haitian revolution, of the international imperial rivalry, of the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness, and of the creation of both a nation and a people” (viii).

James wrote *Toussaint Louverture* and *The Black Jacobins* (1938) shortly after emigrating from Trinidad to imperial Britain. In response to those who were surprised by his choice to write a play instead of a second novel he explained, “Fiction-writing drained out of me and was replaced by politics” (Høgsbjerg 8). James steeped himself in the history of the Haitian Revolution as his involvement in anti-colonialist and communist political activism was growing.<sup>45</sup> He campaigned for West Indian self-governance in Britain and continued his study of the Haitian revolution at the archives in Paris. While in Paris, James witnessed a worker’s strike against the threat of a fascist coup that solidified his transition into a revolutionary Marxist (9-10).

I have selected this particular revolutionary drama because of James’s interest in Toussaint as the ideal Enlightenment-era rationalist—perhaps even the ideal French revolutionary—in contrast with the portrayals of both Boukman and Dessalines that are representative of the revolutionary consciousness that Dubois describes. Throughout this section I will refer to Toussaint Louverture as Toussaint instead of Bréda or Louverture to honor James’s choice in the script.<sup>46</sup> Understanding the figure of Toussaint as a case study on the black male

---

<sup>44</sup> Several other prominent Haitian revolution plays are Derek Walcott’s *Henri Christophe: A Chronicle in Seven Scenes* (1949), Aimé Césaire’s *King Christophe* (1963), and Édouard Glissant’s *Monsieur Toussaint* (1961).

<sup>45</sup> James was connected with George Padmore, Malcolm Nurse, and other leaders of the Pan-Africanist movement.

<sup>46</sup> This also helps to avoid confusion between Toussaint’s pre-revolutionary surname (Bréda) and the transition to L’Overture/Louverture in 1793.

hero of the Caribbean, especially of interest to Césaire, Glissant, and Walcott, is not the primary focus of my critique, but I will explain how other scholars read James's representations of Toussaint, both in *The Black Jacobins* and *Toussaint Louverture*. Rather, the primary goal of this section is to highlight elements of James's critique of Toussaint's leadership (while holding him up as the tragic hero) and the environmental and philosophical dimensions of the play, which speak to the inter-Haitian conflicts of land use and underlying spiritualism that shapes the contemporary challenges facing Haiti's agricultural sector. The play's emphasis on the masculine, tragic black hero driven by Enlightenment-era rationalism sits uneasily with the spiritualism/Vodun practices that govern daily life for the enslaved masses. This legacy of the black hero also extends to Roumain's protagonist Manuel, which has a direct tie to romanticizing the natural environment of Haiti. However, this legacy is disrupted by Vieux-Chauvet's anti-heroes and female narrators.

Many who study James's work on the Haitian Revolution have ignored the play entirely partially due to the prominence of James's *The Black Jacobins* (1938). Laurent Dubois admits to originally judging the play as an "unsuccessful prequel" to James's "legendary work of history" (viii). However, I argue that the play brings the transatlantic histories, Caribbean environment, and agricultural economies together in a salient and compelling study of Toussaint's leadership and the birth of Haiti as an independent nation. It should be read as a companion piece to *The Black Jacobins* that offers original historical, cultural, and political insights on the period that are not captured in his later work. The play condenses the history of the Haitian revolution into a series of dramatic events, including the abolition of slavery by the French National Convention in 1794, that culminate in Haiti's independence. The play also offers us a portrayal of Toussaint at the height of his adherence to the rationalist beliefs associated with the European

Enlightenment. Though James's play is not environmental fiction per se, it outlines the policies and ways of thinking that set Haiti on its course to environmental catastrophe. In this section of the chapter I contrast Toussaint and Boukman/Dessalines, both in their relationships to the land and forest and in how their spiritualism and philosophies lay the foundation for land-use and agricultural trade policies after the revolution. Telling the story of the revolution through drama gives the history a vibrancy that other forms of art and non-aesthetic prose lack, but it also presents a unique space to tell the story of the policies and practices that set the path for Haiti's environmental future.

The original manuscript for the play was lost shortly after the famous 1936 performance starring Paul Robeson in the title role. The production was mounted at the Westminster Theater in London, marking the first time professional black actors performed on the British stage with work written by a black playwright (Osborne 21). The play, which garnered heightened international interest thanks to Robeson's involvement, is perhaps the best example of anti-imperialist drama from the interwar period. The 1936 *New Leader* review of the play writes:

The whole play cogently puts the problem of empire with its exploitation and slavery of the coloured people. The "civilizing" missions of the Capitalist Governments, their promises solemnly made and lightly scrapped, their trickery, makes a pretty picture for an audience whose rulers have the largest empire in the world under their domination. ...the large cast, many of them Negroes, succeeds in convincing the audience that an Empire is nothing of which any white civilization can be proud.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Quote was sourced from the 20 March 1936 review of the play in the *New Leader*. Reviews in the *New York Times*, *The Sketch*, the *Sunday Referee*, and other major publications echoed the success of the anti-imperialist message of the play. Robeson had just finished filming *Showboat* (1936) before the production of Toussaint Louverture, which fueled the international media attention on James's play.

After the play closed in London, James and Robeson continued discussions about how to commercially expand the play's reach (Høgsbjerg 26). *Toussaint Louverture* was never reproduced in the original form during James's lifetime but, in 1967, with the help of Dexter Lyndersay, James adapted *The Black Jacobins* into a play that was performed at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria during the Nigerian Civil War (27). The structure of the new play remained the same, but the revised *The Black Jacobins* cut back on some of the historical and political detail in favor of a more streamlined narrative. The new script also lost some of the original scripts' richness of character, especially regarding Toussaint and Dessalines's relationship, which was motivated by James's desire to make the play relevant for a new generation of anti-imperialist activists outside of the Caribbean.

The original script consists of 11 scenes broken up over three acts that dramatize the Haitian Revolution between 1791 and 1803. Act 1 is set between 1791 and 1794 as the mulattoes of Saint-Domingue, inspired by the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity of the French Revolution's second year, have begun demanding expanded political rights to equal those of white planters. The first act oscillates between scenes of Monsieur Bullet, President of the colonial assembly of Saint-Domingue, who is strongly opposed to equality for the mulattoes, and Toussaint's organization of enslaved blacks. The enslaved blacks were drawn into the conflict to abolish slavery and claim ownership of the land and natural resources of the island. The first act concludes as Toussaint forms an alliance with the French Jacobins, after being courted by the Spanish and the English, because "[he feels] that the only European government which will do its duty by the Negroes is the Government of the Republic" (James 79). As the action moves in the second act, the political conflict and unrest within Toussaint's leadership begin to expand. Set five years later, in 1799, this act focuses on Napoleon's response to Toussaint's extensive control

over Saint-Domingue and the growing concerns that France will restore slavery once Toussaint has suppressed the various factions of white planters and mulattoes still vexing the island's economic production. The final act returns the action to Saint-Domingue in 1802, when General Leclerc, the commander of the French Army and Napoleon's brother-in-law, returns with Toussaint's sons and 40,000 French soldiers, intent on restoring slavery. Toussaint's troops are struggling to survive and Toussaint is eventually forced to negotiate with the French royalists. However, he is betrayed by his generals and taken to prison in the French Alps, where he dies.<sup>48</sup> Dessalines takes over leadership of Toussaint's troops and defends Saint-Domingue against Leclerc, declaring independence for Haiti in the final scene of the play.

Psychologically, the play focuses on what it means to be a former colonial subject who strategically frees oneself, or attempts to free oneself, from the economies, ideologies, and values that no longer serve a burgeoning modernity. Though this is not directly linked to my reading of Toussaint, the question of how Toussaint and the Haitian Revolution are positioned within the larger scope of Western Modernity has been the primary point of interest for many leading postcolonial scholars interested in black leadership. Louis Chude-Sokei argues that James was “[committed] to the revolutionary aspects of Western Modernity” (52), saying that James was drawn to the “abolitionism, the socialism, and the anti-capitalism that emerged and spread alongside slavery and capitalism [in Western Modernity] ... Toussaint, like James, was a man of the West” (52). David Scott contextualizes *The Black Jacobins*, saying that “modernity was not a choice New World slaves could exercise but was itself one of the fundamental conditions of choice ... I suggest, Toussaint and his colleagues were conscripts – not volunteers – of

---

<sup>48</sup> The stage directions in Toussaint's final scene simply read, “he falls on the floor” so the choice of whether the audience witnesses Toussaint's death is at the director's discretion, but Verny delivers the news that “Toussaint is dead” in the next scene (128, 131).

modernity” (19). Scott understands the problem of modernity in a Foucauldian sense as “a positive structure of power, a historical formation of certain constitutive and productively shaping material and epistemological conditions of life and thought” (106). Scott relies on Talal Asad’s idea of “conscripts of modernity” as importantly linking power and historical change, which creates a productive space of intervention for understanding the postcolonial present (107). The argument that Toussaint is a conscript and not merely an agent of modernity creates new ways of interpreting his actions when it comes to his relationship to the plantation slave system and the conceptualization of freedom. Toussaint’s complicated gestures towards entering into modernity, for Scott, is partially motivated by external forces. But he argues the focus should not be on what restricts Toussaint but on the ways in “modern conditions [created by the regime of slave plantation power] ... positively shaped the way in which language, religion, kinship and so on were constituted” (115).

I am taking a cue from Scott’s recuperative perspective on *The Black Jacobins* in that neither of us discount the significance of the work because of its elitism or Eurocentrism. In many ways, the play suffers from similar issues of stereotyping and essentializing along lines of race and class: Boukman, Dessalines, and the other generals are often characterized as savage, impulsive, and violent in contrast with Toussaint’s cool rationalism. *The Black Jacobins* contains a wonderfully strange scene in the forest in which Vodun rituals serve as the binding mechanism for collective revolutionary action; unsurprisingly, the devoutly Catholic Toussaint is quite uncomfortable. However, I argue that the end of the play, Toussaint’s response to capture, his prolonged death in the Alps, and Dessalines’s final scene validate James’s impulse to focus on the masses rather than on the mythical figure of Toussaint. Looking back on the play as a whole, James’s success at foregrounding the enslaved is not fully realized in the script; however, the use

of the environment and land-use policies gestures to a future where the descendants of the enslaved will become inheritors of Toussaint's flawed economic and political vision (shaped by his role as conscript).

Elitism and Eurocentrism set Toussaint up for tragic failure in the play. He sees freedom as an abstraction largely due to the influence and spread of Enlightenment-era writings (Dav. Scott 101; Chude-Sokei 51). In Act 1, Scene 3 Toussaint reads *Philosophical and Political History of the Establishments and Commerce of the Europeans in the Two Indies* (1770), written by Enlightenment-era philosopher Abbé Raynal. Raynal argues that Haiti's underclasses need a leader to overthrow the French colonial forces in Saint-Domingue. Toussaint reads from Raynal's book, saying, "Everywhere people will bless the name of the hero, who shall have re-established the rights of the human race" (James 70). In this scene, Toussaint sees himself as the leader who will end slavery, and he delivers a soliloquy, saying, "White men see Negroes as Slaves. If the Negro is to be free, he must free himself. We have courage, we have endurance, we have numbers... Thou hast shown me the light, oh God! I shall be that leader." (70). James uses Toussaint's heroic ambitions to reveal the complexities of a leadership style motivated by Enlightenment thinking. Toussaint's reluctance to push for full independence comes from a recognition that France's institutional systems (education, language, culture, religion) organize Saint-Domingue and that keeping these systems in place will maintain a degree of order after freeing Saint-Domingue's slaves. For James, this was Toussaint's tragic flaw: He chose French culture and values over black independence. In the final lines of the play, as he is being captured by the French, Toussaint laments, "Oh, Dessalines! Dessalines! You were right after all" (128). He reminds the audiences that Dessalines's hard line against the French and preference for a more dramatic form of national and economic autonomy were the path to lasting freedom.

James's Toussaint grapples with his split consciousness of European and Caribbean/African ideologies, but James constructs this struggle to be the nexus for interrogating Toussaint's political and social inconsistencies. The character of Macoya, the Spanish general, helps to foreground the understated role of the African-born majority in the play.<sup>49</sup> Macoya embodies a fully creolized consciousness; he says, "I am the subject of three kings. The King of Congo, who is the father of the blacks, the King of France, who is my father; and the King of Spain, who is my mother" (64). Macoya's lengthy introduction, which he repeats any time someone addresses him, becomes a moment of dark comedy when Monsieur Bullet, the president of the Colonial Assembly of Saint-Domingue, finally lashes out, saying that the Spanish are using Macoya to get leverage against the French. "As soon as you have served your purpose they'll drag that uniform off you and drive you back to the fields where you belong," Bullet yells (66). As Africanist historian John Thornton explains in his work about Africans in the Haitian Revolution, James's choice to include Macoya in the play (and not in the historically focused *The Black Jacobins*) suggests that the influence of African royalism shaped the trajectory of the Revolution as much as Enlightenment thinking from Europe (183-184). Toussaint, as well as many other revolutionary leaders, was not as connected to African culture and spirituality as many of the slaves who had been born in Africa and brought to the Caribbean (183). Although Macoya's small role serves as comedic relief in a tense scene of negotiation, his repeated introduction reminds the audience that Toussaint's inner conflict with his identity as

---

<sup>49</sup> James himself had to step in and play the role of Macoya during a matinee performance of the 1936 London production of the play. Rufus E. Fennell, the actor cast in the role, needed a stand-in and James explained, "I was in it by accident ... I wanted to sit in the back and watch the play ... not to be mixed up in it" (Høgsbjerg 25). Unsurprisingly, James goes on to explain that he remembers Paul Robeson stealing the show.

French subject and revolutionary leader of African slaves represents the challenges of understanding the contradictory nature of creolized identity.

Toussaint's reluctance to renounce what he sees as his duties as a loyal French subject is most obvious when he encounters what he considers the material and spiritual backwardness of Haiti. In Act 1, Scene 2, Boukman leads a group of slaves in a Vodun ceremony to the beat of drums. As James writes in his stage directions at the opening of the scene, "They, the Negro slaves, are the most important characters in the play. Toussaint did not make the revolt. It was the revolt that made Toussaint" (54). The scene sets in motion the conflict of leadership between Toussaint and Boukman/Dessalines. It takes place "in the depths of the forest," situating the heart of revolutionary action in the most sacred space for Vodun and freedom from white oppression. The drums, which are used to further the effect of a Vodun ceremony, gain intensity throughout the scene as the crowd cheers for Dessalines and Boukman. From the start, the audience sees Boukman and Dessalines as translators of—or mediators for— Toussaint's message. Dessalines's charisma resonates with the slaves, while Toussaint seems calculated and uncomfortable in his actions. The stage directions read: "Dessalines leaps down from the platform and takes his place in front of the slaves. Toussaint walks down two steps and stands midway between the mass and the leaders" (55-56). Boukman then gives his speech renouncing the Christian god, the white god, which anchors the scene in the revolutionary spirituality of Vodun. He preaches:

The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. . . . The god of the white man inspires him with pride, but our god who is good orders us to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who have so often

caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks to us through our hearts. (56)

Boukman's emphasis on the natural world parallels his call for the slaves to follow their instincts to revolt, seek revenge, and be free. His framing of the white god as unnatural, filling the whites with pride, is juxtaposed with the black god's connection to the natural world. The sun, waves, and storms all serve as reminders that Boukman's spirituality, the spirituality of the slaves, is directly tied to the natural environment of the island. He rips the cross from his neck and many in the crowd follow suit. An unnamed slave emerges from the darkness and offers a "vessel" filled with blood (56).

This final ritual shows the blending of Roman Catholicism's Holy Communion sacrament with the Vodun practice of blood sacrifice. As Boukman, Dessalines, and the slaves drink the blood from the vessel the drums beat more frantically, and the crowd begins to chant "Liberty! Liberty or death!" (56). James uses the Vodun rituals of possession and blood sacrifice as the framing action for the scene, but the slaves all perform their possession as the desire for freedom, which further links the idea of a black god, the Lwa, and the ancestors with abolishing slavery and seeking revenge for their suffering. In this crucial moment of spiritual ritual and revolutionary solidarity Toussaint "hesitates" when Boukman offers him the vessel. He urges Toussaint to drink and yet Toussaint "remains motionless." The others drink one by one, but "Toussaint still hesitates" (56). Finally, at the behest of the "kneeling Negroes" begging him to drink, he agrees. Toussaint's Catholicism, symbolic of his French-ness, separates him from the enslaved in this pivotal moment. Although, under duress, he agrees to drink the blood, the crowd leaves chanting and the drums become inaudible as "Toussaint remains on the steps alone, his head bent" (56). Toussaint's posture and motionlessness speak to his cultural and spiritual

removal from the masses he will lead. He does not embody the spiritualism of the slaves, he is uncomfortable in the space of the ritual, and he does not participate in the chanting of “liberty or death!” Participation in the Vodun ritual should serve as affirmation of Toussaint’s connection to the African ancestors and the revolutionary community, but James chooses to highlight Toussaint’s hesitation and uncertainty rather than his commitment to the newly forming revolutionary consciousness.

The function of class and economic freedom in the play cannot be overlooked. Toussaint enjoys a degree of privilege while Saint-Domingue is under French control: he was freed from slavery in 1776 and was responsible for daily operations on the Bréda plantation. Free for almost 20 years before the revolution, Toussaint acquired funds to rent land for a coffee plantation and expanded the number of slaves under his employ before the revolution (de Cauna 63-65). Once the rebellion begins, Toussaint quickly acquires more land at Ennery and more slaves, and he shares these spoils of war with his generals (M. Bell, *Toussaint* 72-73). However, Toussaint rhetorically aligns himself with the enslaved masses when it is convenient.

In the beginning of the third act, as his troops are losing ground, he gives two monologues. The first explains, “We shall burn Port-au-Prince. We shall destroy San Domingo – make it a desert. Our bones will be your slaves” (James 115). Toussaint’s use of “we” strikes a tone of unity for the audience, where in previous acts he more often references to “the enslaved” or “people of San Domingo”. As the play progresses, James pronounces Toussaint’s connection to the land itself, contrasting the agricultural productivity and richness of Saint-Domingue’s soil with Toussaint’s threat to “make it a desert”. The third act’s second monologue shows a marked shift in Toussaint’s connection to the lower classes of former slaves. He laments:

The whites will never leave us – never. Black skin cursed by God – white God, black God. Same flesh, same blood, but black skin – born to be slaves. Oh, my people! To sweat in the sun in the white man’s field – to cook the white man’s food – to groom the white man’s horse – to clean the white man’s shoes. They will never leave us – never.

(115)

Perhaps the most reflective and transparent realization for Toussaint is his understanding that colonial control, white control, will never leave the island by choice. His focus on labor, both in the plantation fields and in the plantation homes, draws the audience’s attention to the plight of the enslaved worker and not to Toussaint himself. In his final scene as a free man, Act 3, Scene 3, James uses the rhetorical connection between Toussaint and the black underclass to align their interests for the audience. Toussaint is no longer the same leader who pledged loyalty to France: he has come to the realization that economic forces drive colonial occupation of Saint-Domingue. He surrenders and goes to Leclerc to sue for peace.

Toussaint’s final scene in Saint-Domingue before his imprisonment in the French Alps continues to foreground agricultural production as well as the spiritual importance of the soil and trees. When Delafosse, an officer of the French army, asks Toussaint how he wants to spend his retirement, he replies, “Farming. I shall superintend the work in the fields, repair buildings, cultivate the land, and improve the plantation” (121). Before this scene, there is no reference to Toussaint’s plantation, nor his desire to work the soil. However, James shifts the audience’s attention to the idea of working the land as one imbued with true freedom and autonomy. In this moment, Toussaint’s desire to labor as one of the masses to improve the production of his plantation, which serves as a symbolic stand-in for Saint-Domingue, recuperates his earlier choices that exploit the workers.

Finally, as he is arrested by his treasonous officers, Toussaint uses the image of a tree to symbolize the regenerative power of the black freedom movement he leads. Toussaint says, “you cannot deceive those hundreds of thousands who have won their freedom. Do with me what you will. In destroying me you destroy only the trunk. But the tree of Negro liberty will flourish again, for its roots are many and deep” (122). The tree, alluding to the sacred trees from the first act, is imagined here as resilient in the face of destruction. Although Toussaint himself cannot continue the fight for freedom, the roots of the tree—the people and ideals that have grown beneath the native soil of the island—will stand strong. In this short passage, James unites Toussaint’s political vision (one of freedom) with the spiritual resonance of Saint-Domingue’s trees for the practice of Vodun as well as the practical importance of trees for the future of national agricultural viability.

James’s play also addresses the specifics of land use and international trade during this period in Act 2, Scene 2. Interestingly, James only includes one scene where Toussaint and his generals explicitly discuss the details of their land-use or trade policies. Rather, James critiques the policies through a scene between Bonaparte and Vincent, a French army officer. When Bonaparte asks Vincent why Toussaint’s leadership is so successful, he explains, “First among the rulers of the world he has introduced into his country the economic system of free trade, so that the commerce of the country leaps beyond all expectation” (98). However, Vincent explains, this free trade that benefits France more than the people of Saint-Domingue. Toussaint established open trade relationships directly with Britain and the United States, but the taxes collected on the export of agricultural goods were still being funneled back to France (Crawford-Roberts, “A History of United States Policy Towards Haiti”). Of course, once Haiti claims its independence in 1804, international trade with exorbitant tariffs becomes necessary to preserve

political autonomy. The reliance on an agricultural export economy, regardless of taxation levels, sets Haiti on the path to indebtedness, which characterizes the economic problems of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Environmental catastrophe, through the progression of deforestation, soil erosion, and soil infertility, is a direct consequence of the colonial debt.

Bonaparte also inquires how Toussaint is controlling the newly freed slave population. Vincent replies by outlining Toussaint's land-use policies: "Toussaint has pacified the laboring classes by a scheme as simple as it is bold. They are not paid in wages, but they get a quarter of whatever they produce. If they are left in peace they will never revolt again" (99). Perhaps the most ethically compromised policy of Toussaint's reign was to continue the use of plantations and the slave economy, using agricultural products as payment for their labor. In the abstract, the slaves were free; in practice they were still required to labor on the same plantations, often under the same masters they unwillingly served before the revolution. Toussaint and his generals occupied plantations where planters had fled while the slaves, many of whom fought for freedom, were still laboring in the fields. Bonaparte and the French leadership were satisfied with Toussaint's land-use and labor policies because this meant restoring slavery in Saint-Domingue would be a simple task. Toussaint's land-use policies were later refined, both as Pétion's metayage system and as Christophe's "Code Henri" which emphasized a need to rebalance the responsibilities of the landowners with the laborers (DuBois, *Haiti* 65). The new law organized people into three groups: property owners, tenant farmers, and field workers. The property owners largely comprised the political class, Christophe's supporters. Tenant farmers, mostly those who had severed in the military, enjoyed a degree of independence, but the field workers were always 'attached' to a particular plantation and were paid for their work with one-quarter of their plantation's yearly production (Dubois, *Haiti* 66). Similar to the French Code

Noir there was a requirement that owners provide health care and food for the field workers, but it is not clear how frequently this requirement was followed. Toussaint's faith that the French would not seek to restore slavery in the colony, combined with his fear of disrupting agricultural production outside of the plantation system, laid the foundation for Haiti's oppressive land use policies for the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Toussaint's relative silence on land-ownership policy in the play is set in stark contrast with the French discussions of his actions; Toussaint's vision of land ownership benefitted only the elite few and helped to maintain the economic systems of power benefitting France, not the masses he led in the revolution.

Finally, it is important to discuss James's contrast between Dessalines's and Toussaint's political, cultural, and economic visions for Saint-Domingue to fully understand the embedded critique of land use and slave labor in the play. In the 2015 republication of *Toussaint Louverture*, Høgsbjerg includes an extended version of the conversation between Dessalines and Toussaint from Act 2 Scene 1 (which first appeared in the 1936 Robeson production of the play) in Høgsbjerg's supplemental materials. After failed negotiations with the British, Dessalines urges Toussaint to take the British offer and name himself king to free Saint-Domingue's slaves. He opens his shirt, revealing scars from the overseer's whip, and argues that Toussaint's welcoming back of the white planters will perpetuate slavery. Christophe seconds Dessalines's argument by saying, "I remember when Dessalines said, 'Freedom for all,' and you said: 'No, all the slaves are not fit to be free.' Dessalines was right then. Perhaps Dessalines is right now" (James 148). Toussaint ignores their pleading and tells Maitland and Lear (the British and American representatives) that he cannot accept their offers and that he will remain loyal to France. Dessalines offers a haunting critique of Toussaint's loyalty to France, saying, "Toussaint, you are too soft with these people. You will pay for it one day. Land for plantation – and slaves

to work. That is their word, that is their God, that is their education, that is their religion” (149). In this final rejection of Toussaint’s pro-French ideology, Dessalines highlights France’s primary investment in Saint-Domingue: a prosperous international export system, fueled by the plantation slave economy. James’s extended version of Act 2 Scene 1 sets the stage for Dessalines’s ascent to power in the play. James’s rewrite of this scene is likely due to Robeson’s casting as Toussaint in the 1936 production; the expansion of Toussaint’s speeches provides more time on stage for Robeson to emphasize and foreshadow Toussaint’s inevitable fall from power. Taking over after word of Toussaint’s death, Dessalines declares independence from France and unites the revolutionary vision with Pétion and Christophe beside him. Dessalines’s revolutionary consciousness, more enlightened than Toussaint’s, serves as the catalyst for the birth of an independent Haiti. Ultimately, Toussaint’s vision of freedom is incomplete: blacks will labor in the same fields and the French economy will remain intact. Dessalines’s vision of freedom requires severing the ties with the French and carving out ideological space for a new, Haitian future.

### **Jacques Roumain’s *Masters of the Dew*: Optimism in the Face of Environmental Crisis**

One of the pillars of Haitian literature, Jacques Roumain’s *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944) (*Masters of the Dew* in English) tells the story of Manuel, the son of peasants who has returned to Haiti after spending fifteen years working the Cane fields of Cuba. Roumain’s work focuses on the lives of rural Haitian farmers suffering from deforestation’s consequences:

extreme drought and soil infertility.<sup>50</sup> Roumain's choice to place the rural farmers at the center of his novel foregrounds a population who was politically, socially, and economically condemned to the margins of the Haitian narratives (Dubois, *Haiti* 309). The novel's ironic title evokes a sense of the lack of agency held by the rural farmers: they are masters of the dew but had power over nothing else. At the end of the US occupation, rural Haitians had begun to feel the effects of deforestation and soil erosion across the countryside. This was compounded by the massacres at the Dominican border in 1937 and the religious persecution of Vodou in 1941. Much of the political and religious violence in the period leading up to the publication of *Masters of the Dew* remained a rural problem in the minds of the Haitian leadership; the urban elite continued to exploit the environment and the working poor for their own gain with little acknowledgment of the challenges of rural life. Roumain's political and literary legacy is one marked by trying to bridge the divide between classes through educating the urban elite to the life and spiritual culture of the rural poor who made up the majority of Haiti's population in the 1940s.

Roumain's novel, much like Jacques-Stephen Alexis's *Les Arbres musiciens* (1957) and *L'Espace d'un cillement* (1959), is a peasant novel which emphasizes the plight of the proletariat and Roumain's Marxist vision to elevate the status of the working poor through revolt. While I will not focus explicitly on Roumain's Marxism, it has shaped the scholarly treatment of his work. Roumain He was a dedicated Marxist who believed that "religion in general was an obstacle to human progress", which makes his relationship to the practice of Vodou, both in his

---

<sup>50</sup> Roumain was born to a wealthy family in Port-au-Prince in 1907. He founded the Haitian Communist Party in the 1930s and was active in the resistance against US occupation. The founding of the Communist Party led to Roumain's arrest and exile. While abroad he worked closely with Langston Hughes (who translated *Masters of the Dew* into English) as well as other Pan-African artists and intellectuals. Roumain trained to work as an ethnographer and sociologist which informs his perspective on the labor of the rural poor and agricultural practices in Haiti.

political life and fiction, particularly interesting (308). He spoke out against the Catholic Church's anti-Vodou campaign in 1941 and argued that if the government addressed poverty, health, and sustainability issues for the rural poor, they would not need to rely solely on Vodou.

Michael Dash argues that the novel fits into the tradition of anthropologically informed fiction and "provides a glimpse at how cultural expressions associated with the Haitian countryside are often encoded with traditional ecological knowledge and at how ecological observation in Haiti is often centered on loss and degradation" (Dirksen 45). The plot of the novel is built around confrontations between the traditional village practices and the pressures of modern life in Haiti; for example, the clear-cutting of trees, despite their importance to Vodou, to produce and sell charcoal which exacerbates the problem of soil erosion and food insecurity. The novel is about loss: loss of history, of self-autonomy, of productive land, of trees, of water, and of culture. The land and the trees serve a dual symbolic purpose in the novel. First, they connect the villagers to the productive history of the land (the soil), and second, they serve as a reminder of the metaphysical connection to the lwa, and to Africa. One of the most significant trees in the novel is the calabash tree:

[The calabash tree] ... possesses an extensive root system, a relation of visible and invisible constituent parts that has been compared to an iceberg, as what is below ground dwarfs the trunk and branches above ground. The natural architecture offers unexpected fortitude during times of heightened stress: the calabash tree may lose all its branches in a hurricane, for example, the trunk has a remarkable capacity to regenerate new ones (52).

The calabash tree sits at the center of the village and Roumain makes strategic reference to the tree as a way to connect to a time before the village feud and drought. At the close of the novel,

after the villagers set aside their differences and band together to dig the canal, Bienaimé is sleeping peacefully under the calabash tree (Roumain 159).

The connection between the Vodou traditions which rely on trees for their symbolic and material functionality is also an ecologically important factor in the village's soil erosion crisis. As Manuel explains early in the novel:

... [The] earth's just like a good woman: if you mistreat her, she revolts. I see that you have cleared the hills of trees. The soil is naked, without protection. It's the roots that make friends with the soil, and hold it. ... otherwise the rain carries away the soil and the sun bakes it, only the rocks remain. That's the truth. It's not God who betrays us. We betray the soil and receive his punishment: drought and poverty and desolation. (20-21).

Manuel understands the connection between the arid soil and the loss of the trees. The soil aridity (as a result of deforestation) described in the first pages of the novel are a consequence of the village's rejection of traditional agricultural and spiritual practices. The villagers understand the crisis as a crisis of faith rather than environment; the gods won't bring rain. While they understand the crisis of soil erosion as a consequence of the gods' will they do not recognize the economic and political dimension of the environmental catastrophe. For example, charcoal-making plays a prominent role in the novel as villagers are forced to cut down trees and sell charcoal to make up for the loss of their cash crops and provide cooking fuel; however, since the villagers see their environmental problem as having supernatural roots, there is no sense of responsibility around preserving the trees for long-term environmental gains. Manuel brings his scientific and environmental knowledge to the village as an offering which can help bridge the community's traditional spirituality with the changes required for a sustainable agricultural

future. Roumain's novel, through Manuel, inextricably ties together the human, spiritual, and environmental crises facing rural Haitians as interconnected problems.

Roumain's somewhat ambiguous relationship to the virtues of Vodou for the Haitian people makes the sustained connection between the Vodou gods and the land in the novel quite interesting. As Dayan argues, "Roumain's story begins and ends with the spirits", which suggests some reverence towards their power in the narrative, and over Manuel's death at the end of the novel (84). Manuel's father explains that Manuel has forgotten the Vodou customs when Manuel forgets to make an offering to the earth before he drinks, and Dayan translates, "You do not care about the dead; they are also thirsty" (84). This indictment of Manuel's willful forgetting, both of history and spirituality, changes as the novel progresses. He embraces the lwa's prophecy as well as the important role his sacrifice plays in the environmental rebirth by settling the historic village feud.

When he first returns to Fonds Rouge Manuel sees that his family and community are desperately praying to the gods to bring rain to the village. The very first scene of the novel establishes the connection between spirituality and the soil. Roumain writes:

"We're all going to die," said the old woman. The dust slipped through her fingers, the same dust that the dry wind scattered over the high hedge of cactus eaten by verdigris, over the blighted thorn acacias and the devastated fields of millet ... She repeated, "We're all going to die," and she called on the Lord. (1)

Roumain's description of the ravaged landscape and the prayers of the elders continues when the community calls on the lwa and Manuel rejects this as a solution to the village's drought because of his atheism.

Subsequently, Manuel's trajectory is heavily influenced by the Vodun rituals of his community. The service to Legba, which Manuel is observing as a voyeur, is interrupted by the god Ogoun, whose prophecy tells that Manuel will die if he brings water back to Fonds Rouge.<sup>51</sup> The reader does not realize that the canal project will ultimately lead Manuel to serve as a blood sacrifice to bring water back to the village. Manuel faces the challenge of the village factions who have been feuding with one another; he tries to create a *coumbite* where they would all work together and dig the canal from a reservoir of water he found in an unexplored valley.<sup>52</sup> With the environmental and spiritual dimensions of the village's catastrophe in mind, Ogoun's prophecy does not explain the role that Manuel's environmental solution of the coumbite to revitalize the land and the spiritual and relational healing his sacrifice will bring; it simply connects the flowing of water and the flowing of blood as Manuel is drawn into the action of the possession dance. The man possessed by Ogoun sings, "We'll dig the canal! Ago! / ... / The vein is open, the blood flows!", Manuel is drawn into the dance and felt a "strange sadness [creep] into his soul. He caught his mother's eye and thought he saw a tear shining there" (46-47). During the ceremony only Manuel's mother connects Ogoun's prophecy of the canal's success with Manuel's role as the blood sacrifice.

Roumain's emphasis on the mystery or ambiguity of Ogoun's prophecy helps to raise the shock value of Manuel's murder after the community meeting. Only Anaise, Manuel's love interest, knows the location of the reservoir. After the meeting, Gervilen, jealous of Manuel and

---

<sup>51</sup> Ogoun, or Ogun, is often symbolic of the power to create and to destroy rooted in rage, and, less commonly in the Haitian context the power to heal. In some ceremonies meat sacrifices are made to appease Ogoun (Brown 68-70; Pemberton III 130).

<sup>52</sup> A *coumbite*, or konbit, is a traditional Haitian collective agricultural effort where neighboring farmers help each other during harvest season and can call on each other to accomplish labor-intensive tasks, like building a canal, which will benefit the whole community.

Annaise's relationship, stabs Manuel as he returns home. Manuel dies in his mother's arms while sitting underneath an altar to Ogoun: "The eternal lamp burned under Ogoun's picture. The god was brandishing his saber and his crimson cloak wrapped him in a cloud of blood" (130).

Manuel's death fulfills Ogoun's prophecy that if he digs for water he will die. The image of Manuel in a *pietà* pose beneath the Vodou alter ties together the threads of blood sacrifice, Vodou ritual, and Catholicism in the novel. The political, environmental, spiritual, and cultural practices of the village culminate in Manuel's death underneath the alter. Roumain's choice to blend the village politics and violence, stemming from the division between Manuel and Annaise's families and the land disputes, while still fulfilling Ogoun's prophecy evokes a spiritual dimension to the village conflict which has devastated the village's agricultural system. Ogoun's prophecy must come true before the feud can be resolved. In other words, Manuel's death (in the form of a blood sacrifice to Ogoun) is essential to gaining village support of the collective *coumbite* project to return water to the fields of Fonds Rouge. The environmental solution relies on a spiritual ritual to solve the political feud.

As Manuel dies, he compares his own sacrifice to the blood-sacrifice of chickens and goats the villagers have offered to the *lwa*. He tells his mother that the cycle of hate and revenge in the village must be broken through collective agricultural practices, and that his sacrifice will work because "what counts is the sacrifice of a man. The blood of a man. ... Tell [Larrivoire] the will of my blood that's been shed – reconciliation – reconciliation – so that life can start all over again, so that day can break on the dew" (133). His emphasis on the *coumbite* and revitalizing the collectivity inherent in traditional agricultural practices shows that Manuel has been shaped by his cultural and spiritual history. He writes himself into the narrative of Vodou sacrifice to bring water back to the land, while simultaneously calling for sustainable land-use practices that

will combat the erosion and drought that deforestation and charcoal-making has brought to Fonds Rouge. Manuel's death bridges the divide between traditionalism and modernism: spirituality is not enough on its own, Manuel's shared knowledge of land-use (both traditional, in the forming of the coumbite, and modern, in the digging of the canal) needs to blend with pure belief and sacrifice to the lwa.

In the final chapter of the novel, "The End and the Beginning", Annaise and Délira, Manuel's mother, sit together and hear the drums and singing from the hills as the men work together to dig the canal. I particularly like Roumain's title for the final chapter, "The End and the Beginning", as it evokes a sense of cyclical time, or a resetting of the clock, which seems hopeful. Dayan ultimately sees Roumain's novel as obsessed with loss rather than as presenting a utopian view of the future (87). However, I read this final chapter as equally optimistic and hopeful as Vieux-Chauvet's ending to *Fonds-des-Nègres*, which is discussed in the next section of this chapter. The tradition of playing drums and singing from the hills evokes a longer history of maroons conducting Vodou rituals in the forests. The final chapter is the fulfillment of Manuel's dream, in some ways Roumain's dream, for a collective laboring towards sustainability and independence from foreign and domestic powers. Importantly, Roumain includes the drums as part of this collective vision for the future; it evokes a deeper history with connections to Vodou and to Haitian freedom. The narrator describes the scene:

The drum rose exultantly. Its rapid beat echoed over the plain ... soon the arid plain would be covered with high grass. In the field's banana trees, corn, sweet potatoes, yams, red and white laurel would be growing. ... A thin thread of water advanced, flowing through the plain and the peasants went along it, shouting and singing. Antoine led them proudly beating his drum. (162-163)

Unfortunately, the utopian future imagined for rural Haiti at the close of the novel did not come to pass. In 2019 rural farmers continue to suffer from the effects of deforestation, charcoal production, and soil erosion. However, Roumain's novel which inextricably, and hopefully, ties together the rural peasants, the land, and the cultural importance of Vodou still resonates as one of the pillars of Haitian sustainability literature in the 1940s-1960s.

### **Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Fonds des Nègres & Amour*: Healing the Land and the People**

Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Fonds des Nègres* (1960), was inspired by her time in the southern Tiburon Peninsula of Haiti. As Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert explains, this is the only one of Vieux-Chauvet's works exclusively set in rural Haiti ("All Misfortune" 74). Colin [Joan] Dayan, in her seminal *Haiti, History and the Gods*, called this novel the "cri d'alarme" ["cry of alarm"] upon discovering "the agricultural problems that explain the peasants' frightful misery" and the root of these problems in deforestation and soil erosion (Dayan 82). As Paravisini-Gebert argues, Vieux-Chauvet was concerned with two key elements of deforestation: first, that without trees and root systems in place, topsoil will be washed away and the landscape of Haiti will be fundamentally reshaped ("All Misfortune" 75). Second, perhaps Vieux-Chauvet and Paravisini-Gebert's primary focus, is the idea that without the "topsoil [what the peasantry in the text understands as the land], the filial, cultural and religious rhizomes that give Haitian peasant culture its character cannot thrive or survive" (75). In essence, with deforestation comes a death of rural Haitian culture along with the ecological and economic catastrophe of soil erosion. The link between environmental catastrophe and the vulnerability (and loss) of rural Haitian culture underpins my analysis of Vieux-Chauvet's fiction. It also explains how Vieux-Chauvet's novels move beyond the foundation of political environmental writing set by James and Roumain, which albeit very different from each other, rely on the concepts of freedom and sustainability as

abstractions. Vieux-Chauvet challenges her readers with scenes and characters facing the gritty realism of environmental catastrophe, thereby furthering the conversation of how political action towards a more sustainable and productive agricultural future remains the goal for the Haitian peasantry in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Vieux-Chauvet's *Fonds des Nègres* (1960) is a coming-of-age story where the city-dwelling protagonist, Marie-Ange Louisius visits her grandmother, who lives in the rural village of Fonds-des-Nègres in the southeastern region of Haiti. She does not intend to stay in the village, but after the death of her mother she is forced to stay, which transforms her relationship to the land and to the practice of Vodou, which she has heard of in folktales. Life in Fonds-des-Nègres is shaped by Vodou and subsistence farming. As such, the novel focuses on living in a new reality where the trees have been destroyed by deforestation and the topsoil (often referred to as *the land* in the novel) has been washed into the ocean through soil erosion. The novel's tone captures this feeling of loss – of culture, land, and religion, as a result of deforestation during the time of the Duvalier regime. Colin [Joan] Dayan describes Vieux-Chauvet's novel as “the most radical fiction about Vodou ever written” (82). Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert argues that the novel is the “most sustained exploration of deforestation and its impact on the rural population to be found in Haitian fiction, one that could arguably be described as Haiti's most consciously environmental text to date (“All Misfortune” 74). Unlike Roumain's prominence in Haitian literature from the 1940s-1960's Vieux-Chauvet has remained a relatively obscure figure.<sup>53</sup>

Vieux-Chauvet continued to refine her critique of the Duvalier regime, and the neglect of rural Haitian farmers and exploitation of the forest, in her 1968 trilogy *Amour, colère et folie*

---

<sup>53</sup> Dayan argues that Vieux-Chauvet's attempt to write a peasant novel, *Fonds des Nègres*, received less attention than the work of Alexis and Roumain because “most revolutionary calls to négritude ... ignored women as agents of reclamation or revolt” (83).

(*Love, Anger, Madness*). I have chosen *Amour* as the representative text from Vieux-Chauvet's trilogy because of the crucial role of deforestation in the novel. Vieux-Chauvet was a member of the Les Araignées du Soir<sup>54</sup> – the spiders of the night, a group of writers and artists who held weekly meetings in their homes to protect each other during a political regime hostile towards any creatives who might offer critique of the government's corruption (Dubois, *Haiti* 312).<sup>55</sup> Vieux-Chauvet sets the trilogy in some unspecified point in Haitian history and there is nothing in the novels that specifically acknowledges François Duvalier or the exact year. However, the novels reference the Duvalier militia forces who traveled throughout Haiti and were responsible for much of the terror spread by the regime. Though she never names Duvalier or the Tontons Makouts, his militia, once Gallimard was set to publish the first printing of the novel, friends and fellow artists became increasingly worried that Vieux-Chauvet as well as her family would be targeted (312-313). As Dubois explains, "when the Haitian ambassador in Paris received an advance copy, he too, said that she would probably be targeted if the book was released ... the new warning had come from an official government figure – [and] asked the press to stop distributing the book" (313). Vieux-Chauvet and her family purchased any copies they could find, destroyed them, and left the country in exile. The trilogy was never published again while Vieux-Chauvet was alive; her self-imposed exile in 1968 marked the end to Vieux-Chauvet's literary career and her work remained largely ignored for almost 30 years (Joseph 13). After a pirated edition of the novel appeared in 2000, the first re-publication of *Amour, colère et folie*

---

<sup>54</sup> Marie Vieux-Chauvet was the only woman member of Les Araignées du Soir. The other members were Anthony Phelps, Villard Denis, René Philoctète, Roland Morisseau, and Serge Legagneur, many of whom were imprisoned or forced into exile during the Duvalier regime (M. Bell, "Permanent Exile").

<sup>55</sup> Three of Vieux-Chauvet's extended family members had been killed by government forces during the 1960s so the safety and anonymity of Les Araignées du Soir was crucial for Vieux-Chauvet to produce her work (Dubois, *Haiti* 312).

sanctioned by Vieux-Chauvet's children was published in France by Zellige in 2005 (M. Bell, "Permanent Exile").

Returning to *Fonds dès Nègres*, it is important to acknowledge the significant role of Vieux-Chauvet's ethnographic field work in the late 1950s, and how this work itself informs the novel's setting and description of the landscape. The "living fences" that Vieux-Chauvet observed as a foundational part of the community agricultural system to prevent further erosion of the topsoil make their way into the novel through Papa Beauville. Papa Beauville is significant not only because of his importance as a Vodou priest, but also because his age makes him a witness to the deforestation of the village and surrounding mountains. Vieux-Chauvet aligns Beauville's personal chronology with the disaster chronology of deforestation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She makes Beauville's role as a witness to deforestation clear when he walks towards the village and the narration describes the mountains as "bleached by erosion", looking like "mangy she-dogs" where the trees all have severed limbs (*Fonds-des-Negres* 130, 3). He was a young man in the 1920s, when Haiti was still 60% covered in forests, and the novel is set in the post-US occupation period during the mid-1950s where the coverage was roughly 20% or less (Paravisini-Gebert, "All Misfortune" 79).

More than simply serving a living witness to Haiti's deforestation, as Paravisini-Gebert argues, Beauville is also a spiritual witness. He provides a perspective for the reader that sets the devolution of Vodun practice in relation to decline of the natural world. The novel often juxtaposes the ravaged mountains of the present with Beauville's memories of the lush gardens and forests of his youth, where the crops flourish and the landscape is green and full. The trees that remain in the novel are described with language of injury or loss. The main calabash tree in the courtyard surrounded by the family houses had one of its biggest limbs cut off. Marie-Ange

associates the calabash tree with Beauville as an embodiment of his strength and endurance even after he's made the mistake of using Vodou for his own financial gain. Beauville sold his land and traveled to Port-au-Prince to become a successful Vodou priest and runs into conflict with some estate owners, which leads to his imprisonment. He returns to the village and continues to tell this story as a cautionary tale. The conflict with the state (wealthy city-dwellers who are representative of the state) continues throughout the novel through the land evictions that are handed out to the villagers of Fonds-des-Nègres.

The injured tree, and Beauville, seem equally mysterious to Marie-Ange, who encounters everything from the outside perspective of a member of the bourgeoisie. As explained above, the calabash tree also serves as a site of Beauville's Vodou ceremonies where he offers speeches that are teeming with themes related to deforestation and loss of culture. The first time that the novel describes Beauville speaking to his devotees he preaches: "Someone touched the calabash tree, my Lord God! ... Someone touched the calabash tree ... someone touched the calabash tree ... You cut down all the trees, and the earth is no longer protected. Look, she's going away and shows you her teeth in revenge" (Vieux-Chauvet, *Fonds-des-Nègres* 7-10). The imagery of amputation and trauma to the bodies of the trees and the land serves as a reminder of what needs to be healed or made whole: the environment and agricultural practices as well as the rural Haitians' relationship to the land.

Beauville reminds Marie-Ange of the poor who sell "their courage and their sweat' for nothing" and that all in the village have "made promises to the land" to protect and preserve the spaces for the future (Dayan 114). He frames the responsibility towards the land and the revitalization of agricultural practices and the forests as an inherited responsibility, one that stretches back centuries to a time before colonial occupation. Beauville understands more than

the symbolic function of the land; he also acknowledges the ecological crisis from what he overhears from agronomists in Port-au-Prince when he says, “when we kill the trees we kill the land” (Vieux-Chauvet, *Fonds-des-Negres* 45). This is perhaps the most overt critique that Vieux-Chauvet offers: Beauville blends two forms of knowledge: indigenous spiritual knowledge of the importance of the trees and environmental knowledge. Beauville’s emphasis on traditional agriculture, which favors the living fences and the sustainable practice of planting rotating crops within the forests themselves, serves as a direct contrast to the large-scale international monoculture practices threatening remaining forests in Haiti. Dayan describes Beauville’s dual-knowledge, writing, “he respects and does not feel threatened by the agronomist from the city and he appreciates the practical benefits of agricultural technology” because it has helped him understand how planting and harvesting needs to change in the village (92). Beauville understands more than the loss of the trees as a loss of connection to the spiritual realm; he also acknowledges the soil itself as tied to the drums and musical rituals held in the forest as he “bends down, grabs a fistful of earth and lets it slide through his fingers slowly. Then, sniffing as if he were trying to grasp its scent, he says, ‘Do you hear the echo of the drums on the mountains? Well! Back then, we could hear them all the time’” (Vieux-Chauvet, *Fonds-des-Negres* 131).

Importantly, Vieux-Chauvet does not idealize the practice of Vodou in the novel nor does she overtly critique it. Dayan describes the function of Vodou in the novel, writing:

[Vieux-Chauvet] does not deal with Vodou as a metaphor for all that remains vital in Haitian culture, nor does she use a ceremony of god as a symbol for what is “true” or “empowering.” Refusing to take beliefs, services and devotion out of a context of attitudes, ideas, and feelings that are at best ambiguous, Vodou becomes an element in a

network of forces, part and parcel of changing economic, social, and emotional needs.

(90)

I argue that Dayan's reading of Vodun in the novel as incomplete because she does not fully address connection between the environmental and spiritual dimensions of the novel. Vieux-Chauvet offers up the connection between the complicated politics of Vodou and the ravaged landscape as one and the same: neither is perfect, both have suffered under state policies and practices, and both remain crucial for the preservation and survival of rural peasant life. At the close of the novel Beauville leads the peasant strike that demands that the state return the family lands which are rightfully theirs. The striking peasants are not rewarded for their protest; instead, they're imprisoned. The novel ends with second-hand stories and folktales of how Beauville frees the peasants from their cells and they triumphantly return to reclaimed land. Vieux-Chauvet's ending here suggests that there is power in collective action and resistance but that "the power of a heritage reclaimed in Haiti as a legacy of fantasy, gossip, and dream [is] impossible to disentangle from what we call reason or reality", as Dayan explains (117). The reader does not get a clear resolution but has the choice to embrace a new environmental folktale of Beauville's liberation and healed relationship to the land. And, as with any folktale, it is not the truth or authenticity that matters, but rather the interplay between reality and fantasy.

Beauville's final proposition in the novel is to implement agricultural cooperatives as a tool to heal the landscape and increase food security in Haiti, he says, "Let's come together to work the land ... I contribute my part, you also contribute yours, and the others contribute theirs, and the money will be blessed by the fact that it is associated with this" (Vieux-Chauvet, *Fonds-des-Negres* 215). For Vieux-Chauvet, the solution to deforestation and soil erosion in Fonds-des-Nègres is the marriage between community action (resistance against the state-sanctioned land-

use policies) and a renewed relationship with spirituality: the tie between the spiritual and the agricultural or environmental are the path to renewed fertility and prosperity for rural Haiti. Though Vieux-Chauvet's extreme realism does not allow for the vision of agricultural prosperity in Roumain's novel, Vodun's role in healing the cultural landscape of rural Haiti resonates. Communities and cooperatives must come together around the land as a spiritual renewal project and not simply as an ecological one if significant and sustainable change is to be accomplished.

Vieux-Chauvet's 1968 trilogy *Amour, colère et folie* (*Love, Anger, Madness*) is not as overtly environmental as *Fonds-des-Nègres*, however, the traumatic connection between loss of culture and loss of land as well as the importance of community organizing as a form of resistance against a corrupt government continues in *Amour*. Like her imagery of ravaged mountains in *Fonds-des-Nègres*, Vieux-Chauvet directly references erosion in contrast to the land's remaining natural beauty, writing, "devastated as they are by erosion, the mountains are heartbreakingly beautiful. ...the dried-up branches of the coffee bushes take on soothing pastel tones" (*Love* 8). More important, *Love* offers a critique of the economic cycles of abuse facing the peasant farmers whose crops are failing due to soil erosion and deforestation. In a conversation between Jean Luze, Claire's brother-in-law, and the American businessman Monsieur Long the poverty cycle is explained: "The coffee harvest has been so bad that for the last three years we have had to fall back on timber. I'm waiting for an answer from the company. If we don't export wood, we'll have no choice but to close up shop" (21). Jean Luze then asks what will happen to the peasants and their land after they agree to the deforestation. Long replies, "The rain will wash away the soil ...Oh well, that, my dear friend, is their business. They can either agree to sell their wood or we can leave" (21). Vieux-Chauvet's unfeeling portrait of the American capitalist Monsieur Long serves as a reminder that the wealthy Haitians in control of

the timber exports are making profits from the plight of the rural farmers. While the farmers are forced to destroy the forest (to make money), resulting in the erosion of the mountains, Long relies on the cycle of environmental violence for a quick profit.

The environmental crisis generates further poverty and hunger for the peasants who have no way to earn money, which fuels the cycle of indebtedness and reliance on food aid instead of addressing the systemic issues within the agricultural systems and practices. In response to M. Long's argument that the peasants should chop down the forests to make them rich, a peasant says, "if you buy [the timber] at the price of coffee, we'll still be poor ... the money will run through our fingers ... let's leave our trees standing that's all we have left. The vultures have come down on us, caw, caw, caw, and they want to pick the skin off our bones" (26). While the crowd laughs at the exchange between Long and the peasant, *Love, Anger, Madness* does not offer the sense of possibility for community action and resistance that Vieux-Chauvet inspires in *Fonds-des-Nègres*. After Long's company has begun the clear-cutting with the approval of the local government the peasants react, saying, "I said don't do it! Don't do it! .... We should have created a coalition and refused all offers. But black hill folk never stick together. They are weak with the white men and the bourgeois. Here comes the rain again and our land is finished" (46). Long's control of the mountains expands as the novel progresses and he purchases the land, and the wood, at a fixed price which benefits him but not the Haitian farmers.

As the novel continues, more peasants leave the mountains to try to make a living in Port-au-Prince or cutting sugar cane in the Dominican Republic. The peasantry, as well as the Haitian forest, is a cheap commodity in the trilogy. Both are constantly exploited by the government forces and those in control of the export economy. Where *Love* builds on Vieux-Chauvet's environmental critique from *Fonds-des-Nègres* is in the novel's ability to trace and critique the

political and economic forces (specifically from the US occupation from 1915-1934) which led to the deforestation and soil erosion crisis on a grand scale; the regime politics and international economic relationships become active agents in deforestation, soil erosion, and food insecurity. While *Fonds-des-Nègres* is focused solely on the peasant experience and set in exclusively rural villages, *Love, Anger, Madness* cuts across class lines to show a more complete picture of the deforestation and soil erosion catastrophe on Haitian society. The novel describes “the evil genius of Duvalierism [which] was to occupy the consciousness of all citizens, thereby forcing them to collaborate in their own destruction” (M. Bell, “Permanent Exile”). The farmers, though they are left with little choice but to cooperate with M. Long and the American timber export company, do comply and do not form a resistance (as is the case with Papa Beauville in *Fonds-des-Nègres*). Instead, *Vieux-Chauvet* offers a picture of Haitian society where the corruption of the Duvalier regime shapes the environmental actions of even the most vulnerable populations: the peasant farmers.

At the end of the novel the consequences of Long and the peasants’ deforestation play out in dramatic fashion. The narrator explains that Long and the peasants have been clear-cutting the trees and that “for fifteen days, we have heard the whine of M. Long’s electric saw without interruption ... a tree falls every five minutes” (*Vieux-Chauvet, Love* 129). The non-stop clear-cutting hits a tipping point: when the rains come they destroy the mountainside. The apocalyptic picture of the eroding landscape evokes both the shadow and presentist timelines of catastrophe:

Avalanches of soil slid down the mountains and piled around their feet. Coffee is nothing but a memory for all of us. Timber export has replaced that business. When the wood is gone, [Long] will go after something else. The slave trade, perhaps. ... The human trade known as Operation Fight the Famine has begun ... Word has spread and the peasants are

abandoning their bleached bled-dry land ... they've been reduced to eating dogs at Lion Mountain (129).

In this compact summary of the devastation, Vieux-Chauvet moves fluidly between describing the present crisis of soil erosion and hunger and evoking the past and imagined future of slavery. The catastrophic future that replaces the export of Haiti's forests, that Claire imagines, might be a return to the slave trade. The reference to the slave trade comes just before the acknowledgment of Operation Fight the Famine, which alludes to the foreign intervention of international governments and NGOs in collaboration with the Duvalier regime. Vieux-Chauvet presents the problems of deforestation, soil erosion, indebtedness and foreign aid as inextricably linked to one another.

The link between slavery and environmental cycles of failure occurs in James and Roumain as well; however, Vieux-Chauvet's stark realism makes her evocation of slavery's history (and potential future) wonderfully disorienting for the reader. Vieux-Chauvet's realism is confined to the contents of her text, not her style – she continually challenges the reader by presenting scenes of everyday violence (both as language and action of her characters). James and Roumain use slavery or enslavement in their work as more of an abstraction: those who labor without representation under the law, for James, can never be truly psychologically free. Roumain takes a similar position on slavery as an abstraction, mainly in Manuel's overtly Marxist speeches throughout the novel. In other words, in James and Roumain, slavery is not explicitly connected to the Haitian environment; it serves a political or ideological function, whereas Vieux-Chauvet fully explores the nexus of slavery's legacy, 20<sup>th</sup> century agricultural economies, and materiality of environmental catastrophe in Haiti.

## Chapter 2: Blending Literary and Historical Archives in Haitian Earthquake Novels

From now on, there will always be the Haiti of before the earthquake and the Haiti of after the earthquake. And after the earthquake, the way we read and the way we write, both inside and outside of Haiti will never be the same. ... Perhaps we will continue to create as dangerously as possible, but our muse has been irreparably altered.<sup>56</sup>

– Edwidge Danticat

I don't want to write about what everyone sees, and what everyone likes, I'm not interested. I want to be in the underbelly of things. Of letters, of society, of everything. Haiti is a country of shadows, and I draw from the shadows.<sup>57</sup>

– Makenzy Orcel, author of *The Immortals* (2010)

This chapter explores the archive of Haitian earthquake literature, catastrophe temporality within the context of Haiti, and the creation of an aesthetic of catastrophe which blends historical and literary traditions to tell the often-silenced stories of marginalized Haitian people. In other words, literature of the Haitian earthquake is not so much about creating artistic coherence from destruction, desolation, and chaos but rather about using the chaos to explore the historical, political, and literary formations of catastrophe that precede the event itself and continue after the earthquake. The fractured aesthetic of catastrophe time, the experience of liminality, and the symbolic representations of historical memory are well represented in Dimitry Elias Léger's *God Loves Haiti* (2016), Makenzy Orcel's *The Immortals* (2010), and Myriam J. A. Chancy's *What Storm, What Thunder* (2021). While all three earthquake novels this chapter explores make use of the aesthetics of catastrophe in different ways, there is a strong connection among them in

---

<sup>56</sup> See Danticat 162.

<sup>57</sup> "Makenzy Orcel" recipient biography on the *Cité internationale des arts* website

terms of the representations of memory, dreams/hauntings, and characters who are acutely aware of the connection between literature, identity, and catastrophe in the context of Haiti.

All three novels are concerned with creating new forms of historical and artistic archives of catastrophe and all three make use of the earthquake itself as a narrative opportunity to preserve and create stories of the Haitian people. This is not to suggest that the authors are opportunistic or somehow ethically dubious for making use of the earthquake as a narrative frame. A disaster like the 2010 earthquake is often the only coverage of Haiti seen in the world news or that most non-Haitian communities equate with Haiti itself: Haiti as a cycle of never-ending catastrophes that is beyond help. These novels present a more expansive, nuanced, and complex representation of Haitian stories and histories than the reductive coverage of global mass media. The novels explored in this chapter are simultaneously literary and historical archives of catastrophe. I ultimately argue that literary and historical archives are inextricably intertwined in the context of Haitian literature of the 2010 earthquake.

This chapter takes seriously the idea that many authors of the Haitian earthquake make creative use of historical catastrophe as symbolic rupture points in forming the modern post-quake Haitian literary identity. This chapter will explore the underpinnings of shadow temporalities of catastrophe which help construct an exquisitely fractured post-quake Haitian literary identity. The formation of Haitian literary identity (post-2010 earthquake) evolves not only from the disaster of 2010 and the cascade of social and political issues that followed, but also from the twin catastrophes of colonialism and political instability embedded within Haiti's historical and literary archives. The novels explored in this chapter highlight the aesthetic dimensions of a catastrophic temporality deployed in these representative examples of Haitian earthquake literature. This chapter is broken into two main sections: first, a brief exploration of

catastrophic temporality as represented in non-linear theories of Caribbean time and history, which builds on my theories from the introduction. Second, I explore three post-earthquake novels – Dimitry Elias Léger’s novel *God Loves Haiti* (2016), Myriam J. A. Chancy’s *What Storm, What Thunder* (2021), and Makenzy Orcel’s *The Immortals* (2020) – as representative examples of the literary and historical archives of catastrophe in contemporary Haiti.

The linkage between a fractured historical perspective, the formation of Haitian identity through colonization and revolution, as well as the cycles of poverty and precarity Haitians have endured are made hyper-visible in the earthquake literature. I argue that Haitian earthquake literature is a distinct form of catastrophe storytelling which relies on a deeply fractured sense of time, history, and identity which creates a new kind of archive filled with intentionally disruptive historical and non-linear aesthetics. The genre of the Haitian earthquake novel, though vastly different in terms of theme and narrative structure in the three selected examples of Léger, Orcel, and Chancy, is dedicated to representing silenced or marginalized stories from Haiti. Léger’s *God Loves Haiti* (2016) is a story of romance, politics, and religion that traces the fates of three lovers in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and the challenge of creating a collective future from a post-quake existence filled with lost love, lost faith, and a lost sense of national political agency and personal legacy. Orcel’s novel, *The Immortals* (2010), which asks its readers to bear witness to the lives, deaths, and memories of sex workers in Port-au-Prince without judgment or romanticizing the women, offers a visceral blend of history and aesthetic archives of catastrophe. Chancy’s *What Storm, What Thunder* (2021), the most recent contribution to the archive of Haitian earthquake literature, tells stories of the earthquake from the perspective of ten vastly different Haitian narrators before, during and after the quake living both in Haiti and throughout the diaspora. The themes of the chapters I will focus on in this chapter highlight the function of

memory, haunting, hallucinating, or dreaming as a tool to create new aesthetic and historical archives of catastrophe for a global audience.

The purpose of analyzing Léger, Chancy, and Orcel's novels as representative of the larger body of Haitian earthquake literature is to consider their contributions (as both artistic and historical archives) to the interdisciplinary field of catastrophe studies. I am arguing that novels serve as cultural sites from which to theorize catastrophe, allowing readers, both those who have experienced catastrophe events firsthand and those with a distanced or mediated experience, to assume a more critical stance towards the political, social, and cultural layers of catastrophe (Anderson 17-18). The Haitian earthquake novels, in other words, serve the unique function of synthesizing legacies of catastrophe in Haiti and of revealing forms of institutionalized power, shaping the lives of Haitians before, during, and after the earthquake itself. The Haitian earthquake literature allows the reader to simultaneously consider the philosophical implications of catastrophe as well as "highlight the asymmetrical distribution of power and foreground the struggle of the state, corporations and human agency for the redistribution of power" which Haitians continue to grapple with (Button 16).

### **Non-Linear Theories of Caribbean Time and History**

The legacy of Haitian catastrophe is best understood through non-linear theories of time and memory, which articulate alternative historical temporalities. These are made visible through the literary representations of Haitian catastrophe which employ the strategy of resistance against an imposed or anticipated chronological linearity of Haiti, which Glissant theorized as a "detour" (Boisseron 13). Literary representations of catastrophe temporality in Haitian literature are unlikely to present in the same way twice and never return to some authoritative universal representation of the catastrophic event itself. Perhaps Antonio Benítez-Rojo's visual

explanation of imagining the Caribbean as “the spiral chaos of the Milky Way” is useful to understanding this temporality (4). Historical ways of knowing can be imagined like the spiral of the Milky Way, “[sketching] in an “other” shape that keeps changing, with some objects born to light while others disappear into the womb of darkness—change, transit, return, fluxes of sidereal matter” (4).<sup>58</sup> In other words, the literary narratives of catastrophe simultaneously invent new ways of archiving Haitian history, and extend Haitian literary indebtedness to catastrophic memory. New literatures of Haitian catastrophe – for my purposes in this chapter: post-earthquake literature – revisit the past through this flux-filled catastrophe memory. For example, the historical memory of the Haitian revolution and the impacts of colonialism and plantation slavery are a touchstone that assumes new relevance in the literary examples. Similarly, the U.S. imperialist occupation of Haiti between 1914-1934, and the unchecked violence of the Duvalier regime between 1957-1986 both enjoy long afterlives in the Haitian catastrophic earthquake literature.

Exploring the recurring theme of historical memory, which is deeply relevant to the catastrophe aesthetic of Haitian post-earthquake literature, Haitian-born educator and writer Émile Ollivier explains, “we are in what we might call an eternal return, it [seems] to be that Haiti existed in a circular time” (Lambert 155). The concept of an eternal return and a circular time to Haitian existence ties the current cultural and political moment represented in the novels to the historical time of revolution, independence, and cycles of imperial occupation. The theory of cyclical time and subsequent historical creation shares similarities to theories of Caribbean

---

<sup>58</sup> Benítez-Rojo’s constantly changing Milky Way imagery can be closely tied to J. Michael Dash’s defensive reading of Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse*, arguing that willing adaptation is essential to maintaining cultural specificity within the overwhelming expansiveness of postcolonial discourses (*Other America* 14). This adaptation, according to Dash, derives from the impulse to speak back to colonial power through active resistance.

time in the work of Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Benedicte Boisseron, and J. Michael Dash. All these theorists challenge an often-unquestioned modernity which relies on the notion of capitalist progress and linear time. They offer historical, cultural, political and aesthetic frameworks which operate as a fractured, cyclical, and free-flowing pluralism: a counterculture of modernity, as Paul Gilroy argues (4). In other words, these theorists argue for alternative *modernities* rather than a unified experience of modernity across national, cultural, and racial boundaries. Framing Caribbean time as cyclical opens the door to rethinking seemingly punctual disaster events. It also creates an opportunity for understanding catastrophe literature as a tool to process lingering historical traumas, evoking the “tortured sense of time” of the post-plantation environments of the Americas (Glissant *Caribbean Discourse* 144).

The use of catastrophic memory in Haitian literature generates creative space for Haitian writers to explore new combinations of alternative historical temporalities and modes of literary expression outside of the dominant literary canon as well as the reductive narratives of Haiti as a failed state. For example, Kaiama Glover’s 2012 article, “New Narratives of Haiti; or, How to Empathize with a Zombie,” argues that the challenge of generating cultural representations of disaster is that they are always up against the inclination to further a mythology of Haiti as “more or less all earthquake all of the time. It would seem that the island nation is little other than this latest catastrophe” (199). Authors can use their literary products to simultaneously resist the global narrative of the perceived “tragedy of Haitian history,” dating perhaps back to Haitian independence, and to create new literary interpretations of the earthquake itself (Loth 125). With the earthquake literary archive, specifically the three novels explored in this chapter, literary histories and economic, political, and social histories blend into what I argue is an aesthetic of catastrophe temporality.

An excellent example of Haitian literature which embraces intentionally fractured and disorienting catastrophe aesthetics, with non-linear and symbolic approaches to storytelling, is the Spiralist literary movement of the 1960s. Kaiama Glover's 2016 book *Haiti Unbound: A Spiralist Challenge to the Post-Colonial Canon*, argues that Spiralist aesthetics were a structural, syntactic, and narrative literary phenomenon which deserve greater critical attention and should be accepted as a valuable form of Haitian literary expression.<sup>59</sup> For Glover, the need to “emphasize the singularity of the Spiralists’ aesthetic and discursive interventions...enriches contemporary models of literature and theory in the postcolonial Caribbean” (xi). Borrowing from Glissant, Glover focuses specifically on the Spiralist modes of literary expression echoing resistance strategies of the Haitian Revolution, characterized primarily by embracing oral storytelling traditions and using symbolic language that “spirals outward”, which “casts their formal innovation as defiant insistence on Haiti’s particular presence in an increasingly de-particularizing ‘chaos-world’” (xiv). I am interested in the notion that this distinctly Haitian mode of literary expression echoes strategies of resistance (religious, ideological, and political) from the Haitian Revolution. Spiralism is a literary adaptation, of the catastrophe memory of foreign occupation, violent dictatorships, and the Haitian revolution.<sup>60</sup> The non-linear nature of time that Glover and Glissant describe is, of course, echoed in the fractured perspectives and

---

<sup>59</sup> Jean Claude Fignolé co-founded the Spiralism movement with Frankétienne and René Philoctète during the 1960s. At the height of the authoritarian regime of Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier, the Spiralists rejected a connection between exile and freedom in their work. They were committed to symbolic representations of political issues and violence which embraced disorder as an aesthetic in modes which spanned poetry, theater, novels, storytelling, autobiographical sketches, and fiction (Mier, “Becoming Actors in History”).

<sup>60</sup> As Frankétienne writes in his 1968 book *Ready to Burst*, “...Spiralism defines life at the level of relations (colors, odors, sounds, signs, rods) and historical connections (positionings in space and time). ... It is a shattering of space. An exploding of time. ... Spiralism reconciles Art and Life through literature” (2).

narrative modes of catastrophe literature in this chapter by Léger, Chancy, and Orcel. No narrative includes a single, linear plot, nor individual or omniscient narrators to designate clear timelines of catastrophe for the reader. Rather, the polyphonic quality of voices actively resists a unified, easily digestible reading of a catastrophic event.

Returning to the question of how Caribbean time and Haitian literary representations of catastrophe intersect with non-linear histories, Michel-Rolph Trouillot offers a critique of “all non-Westerners as fundamentally non-historical”, writing that this classification is “tied...to the assumption that history requires a linear and cumulative sense of time that allows the observer to isolate the past as a distinct entity” (*Silencing the Past* 7). Instead of understanding past events as divorced from the present, Trouillot emphasizes that the past is “a position” and that the literary representation of a catastrophe event “goes hand in hand with the continuous creation of the past” (15-16). Martin Munro, a celebrated professor and specialist in Francophone Caribbean literature and culture, applies Trouillot’s critique of linear historicity to post-earthquake Haitian literature, arguing that Trouillot’s “pastness,” which is “formed by temporal paradoxes,” is a fundamental tenet of contemporary Haitian literature (*Tropical Apocalypse* 191). While Trouillot’s cyclical time applies most closely to an anthropological, historical or philosophical understanding, the underlying idea is that Caribbean time’s decidedly non-linear return to the past, through manifestation in the present, is fundamental to the current literary archives of Haitian earthquake literature. My argument is that the Haitian literature of the 2010 earthquake serves to offer creative new storytelling perspectives which highlight the complex political, historical and cultural histories of Haiti as well as set a vision for the future.

Trouillot’s critique of linear historicity in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* argues that there is an inextricable connection between identity formation of the

modern subject and history.<sup>61</sup> He explains, through the example of the Haitian Revolution in European historiography, how power ensures the preservation of privileged historical experiences but forces others into obscurity. Gesturing to the function of silence in historical creation, Trouillot writes:

Silences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing ... there is no perfect closure of any event, however one chooses to define the boundaries of that event ... the very mechanisms that make any historical recordings possible also ensure that historical facts are not created equal.

*(Silencing the Past 49)*

Through his analysis of Col. Jean-Baptiste Sans Souci, the African-born slave and revolutionary leader who was murdered by Henri Christophe before Christophe was crowned King of Haiti, he urges scholars to investigate the multiple layers of meaning of any one “fact” to produce a “better history” (49). The Souci analysis speaks to the larger problem of silence surrounding non-linear historical narratives of the Haitian revolution, despite the abundance of facts and perspectives within Haitian experience. Trouillot’s work radically disrupts any connection between the production of historical knowledge and the search for objective truth. For Trouillot, histories exist in paradoxical relations to the past and are always partial and retrospective and our concern must be with the ways in which we contribute to and are complicit in the production of history. What makes the relationship to histories paradoxical is that they are simultaneously past, present, and continuing to evolve based on the new archives created, which, in the case of

---

<sup>61</sup> Trouillot argues that historians, particularly those studying the Caribbean, must negotiate the constant tension between historical and narrative truth. Trouillot, born in Haiti, was trained as an anthropologist in the United States after leaving Haiti in 1968 during the Duvalier regime.

Haitian earthquake novels, focus on the aliveness of histories as present and future within the context of catastrophe temporality.

The practice of reading Haitian earthquake literature with an eye towards memory can help test some of the silences in Caribbean histories and de-center what Trouillot describes as the “formulas of erasure” in dominant narratives of the Haitian people (96). In other words, the power of storytelling, using the earthquake narrative as an opening for historical and artistic innovation, writes the experiences of Haitians into the narrative of Haiti for a global audience. Trouillot sees four critical junctures in the production of history: (1) the moment of fact creation (the making of sources), (2) the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives), (3) the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives), and (4) the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance) (26). What this chapter investigates most closely is the third category that Trouillot describes: using a vast range of sources and archives to create narratives, which are often a blend of historical, political, and aesthetic innovations. With Trouillot’s critique of mainstream Western historicity<sup>62</sup> in mind, this chapter explores the possibility of Haitian catastrophe literature as a tool for processing legacies of catastrophic events throughout modern Haitian history, for the sake of reinventing or reshaping contemporary Haitian literature’s relationship to punctual notions of catastrophe events as well as the boundaries of catastrophe aesthetics and the genre of the novel.

### **Fractured Memory, Identity, and Time in the Haitian Earthquake Literature**

---

<sup>62</sup> The language of “Western historicity” is Trouillot’s. To some degree, the rhetoric used is a product of the time in which he’s writing *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995). A binary approach to Western/non-Western is a reductive formulation we’ve largely moved beyond in literary and cultural criticism, historical research, and critical theory.

Regarding the important connection between memory and trauma in literature of catastrophe within the greater Caribbean, critical theorist David Scott uses Merle Collins's novels *The Colour of Forgetting* (1995) and *Angel* (1987) as representative of a catastrophic ending, grappling with the temporal dilemma of the violently punctuated Grenada Revolution (23). While this dissertation is focused on catastrophe aesthetics in historical and artistic examples from the U.S. Gulf coast and Haiti, Scott's reading of Collins's novels is quite useful in contextualizing my reading of Haitian earthquake literature in this chapter. Scott's analysis of Collins's novels, inasmuch as they organize catastrophic memory of the Grenada Revolution through a narrative that imagines alternative temporalities in tension with a catastrophe event, inform my interpretations of the earthquake novels, which I argue function in a similar ways.

*The Colour of Forgetting* provides the non-linear historicity and ethical memory that Scott argues must be at the forefront of grappling with the conscious awareness of time and tension of history in the context of catastrophe. Though much of his text is imbued with questions of restorative justice in the context of the Grenada Revolution's end, he uses Collins's *The Colour of Forgetting* to demonstrate catastrophe literature's ability to represent a "metaphysical or symbolic order of repeating time" (24). This attunement to literature as a tool to represent the metaphysical or symbolic order of repeating time saturates the work of all three novels I've selected for the Haitian earthquake archive.

For Scott, *Angel*'s narrative structure of the Bildungsroman falls in line with the long history of West Indian novels but sets up the novel's protagonist for an ending that comes to a temporal standstill "stranded in the postrevolutionary present that has nowhere to go" (24). This post-catastrophe moment, *Angel*'s stalling at the end of the novel, is set in direct contrast with Collins's later novel that responds directly to the temporal dilemma and stalled time of *Angel*.

The collapse of the Revolution, in *The Colour of Forgetting*, is read by Scott “not as the catastrophic end of a teleological history of progressive crisis and change but, rather, as merely one single episode in a larger and recurrent story of generations of conflict and perseverance and survival in what is now figured as the cyclic pattern of a history whose very *logic* and *grammar* is catastrophic” (24). He doesn’t present this contrast to suggest some hierarchy of the Bildungsroman’s organization of time versus the more challenging narrative structure of repeating time in Collins’s later work. Rather, Scott uses the comparison to encourage his readers to embrace a “wider range of temporal dispositions and story forms in the face of catastrophic ends” (24). This is exactly the strategy used in Léger, Orcel, and Chancy’s novels; there is a manipulation of temporalities that intentionally resists the reader’s ability to assess catastrophe time in a linear way.

What is most helpful in Scott’s reading of Collins’s novels, with my analysis of the examples of Haitian earthquake literature in mind, is Collins’s recurrent embedding of a traumatic political past in a seemingly presentist catastrophe context: the Grenada Revolution. Collins’s fascination with generational and cross-generational time in both novels, along with the way that that stands in discord with the time of the nation-state or a linear historicity of progress, serves as a comparative narrative playground for “contrasting generic models of time and thus [contrasting organizations of] temporal experience (particularly the temporal experience of catastrophic endings)” (72). These contrasting models of temporality in *Angel* and *The Colour of Forgetting* are rendered visible through encoded generic conventions that “effectively constrain how we represent temporal experience” of catastrophe in literature. For Scott, *The Colour of Forgetting* can be read as an allegory of time and catastrophe, or perhaps an allegory of *catastrophic time* (88). Scott ultimately asserts that, reading the novel as an allegory of what I

would define as catastrophic time. His most compelling argument is his projection of allegory as the form best “suited to moments of historical crisis and political and personal loss ... when the horizon of the future ... is not so easily discernible from the ruins of the present” (96). Scott’s final thoughts on repetition in *The Colour of Forgetting* translate seamlessly to Haitian earthquake fiction.

### **Approaches to Catastrophe Temporality in the Novels of Léger, Orcel, and Chancy**

The remainder of this chapter explores the possibilities of Haitian earthquake literature to tell the stories of Haitian people who are often excluded from the dominant global narratives of Haiti. These novels, though varied in their approaches and styles, all present a fractured aesthetic of catastrophe time, the experience of liminality, and symbolic representations of historical memory in the context of Haiti.

### **Dimitry Elias Léger’s *God Loves Haiti*: Embracing Catastrophe Temporalities**

Dimitry Elias Léger’s 2016 debut novel *God Loves Haiti* uses catastrophe as a framework to engage Haitian histories and alternative temporalities in the postcolonial and post-catastrophe nation. On the surface, Léger’s novel focuses on the aftermath of the 2010 Haitian earthquake and the psychological and spiritual oscillations within his three protagonists (Natasha, the President and Alain). However, interpreting the historical, ethical, and political undercurrents of the novel using catastrophe temporality and the event of the earthquake as an analytic device reveals a much more complex portrait of the Haitian relationship to catastrophe and literary creation. The novel offers up a non-linear historicity that must be at the forefront of grappling with the conscious awareness of time and tension of history in the context of a catastrophe like the 2010 Haitian earthquake. Léger’s post-earthquake novel beautifully confronts the often-bifurcated reading of modern Haiti as a failed state with unending cycles of natural and political

disaster, or the nostalgic reading of Haiti through the lens of the Haitian revolution (which carries the weight of cultural resiliency and autonomy).

The fractured narrative structure, unexpected and irreverent humor, and elements of the absurd guide Léger's novel. On one hand, the novel could be read as a narrative that centers on Natasha (the President's wife and Alain's lover) as she provides the crucial plot link between the two men. In fact, the sentimental summary on the HarperCollins website conveniently highlights this mass market appeal angle, writing: "reflecting the chaos of disaster and its aftermath, *God Loves Haiti* switches between time periods and locations, yet always moves closer to solving the driving mystery at its center: Will the artist Natasha Robert reunite with her one true love, the injured Alain Destiné, and live happily ever after" ("God Loves Haiti")? The same publicity blurb makes sure to note, in the first sentence describing the novel, that Léger is a native of Haiti.

Unsurprisingly, the publicity blurb omits the fact that most of Léger's career after attending St. John's University and Harvard's Kennedy School of Government has been working as staff writer and journalist for US economic publications and as an advisor to UN missions to Haiti. He is, like so many other fellow Haitian novelists, Haitian by birth but operating firmly within the global Haitian diaspora. Léger spent his time traveling between New York and Haiti until his family moved permanently to the US when Léger was a teen. He returned to Haiti hours after the 2010 earthquake to help with UN relief efforts. Much of the novel is dedicated to the question of escaping Haiti: Natasha wants to leave because she came from poverty, the President wants to escape political life and the ideological weight of his office, and, at the time of the novel, Alain has only recently returned to Haiti on an idealistic mission to 'give back' by taking his seat in the Port-au-Prince globalizing economic and political scene.

Part of the reason this novel did not receive much critical attention is because the novel can be easily dismissed as a simple love story set in post-earthquake Port-au-Prince. NPR interviewer Rachel Martin calls the novel a universal love story, saying: “it is about a woman who loves one man but is married to another man who happens to be the fictional president of Haiti” (“Clutching Memories”). Madison Smartt Bell, author of the celebrated *All Souls’ Rising* and many other novels set in Haiti, slips into this reductive reading of Léger’s text as romance novel, writing: “The Port-au-Prince earthquake of 2010 may seem like an odd setting for a romantic comedy, but then Haiti really is an amazing place” (“God Loves Haiti”). The novel makes use of comedic moments, but they register as dark absurdism rather than as the lighthearted fare of a romantic comedy. The love triangle of Natasha, Alain, and the President is important as a way to represent a fractured and multifaceted narrative experience of post-disaster Port-au-Prince rather than serving as the dominant narrative. Junot Díaz more accurately addresses the novel’s tone and purpose, writing:

Léger writes beautifully and with an immense humanity. Perhaps one of the finest Caribbean novels I’ve read in years and it is a testament to Léger’s extraordinary talents that in this incisive chronicle of failing lovers he never loses sight of his true subject – Haiti – which he renders in all of its stupendous beautiful tortured complexity. (“Praise for *God Loves Haiti*”)

Rather than focusing on the love-triangle element of the narrative, Díaz praises Léger’s novel for its effort to capture something of the modern Haiti. The novel is not nostalgic, nor is it pessimistic, but it encourages the reader to set aside assumptions of Haitian myths, modes of linear historicity, and to engage a distinctly Caribbean catastrophe temporality made possible as

a result of the particular national, historical and cultural context of the post-quake 2010 Port-au-Prince.

In a 2015 interview with NPR, Léger answers the question of what inspired him to write the earthquake novel, saying: “Wherever you turn, for months and months and months, hi, my name is, here’s how I spent those 35 seconds [of the earthquake]” (“In ‘God Loves Haiti,’ Clutching Memories”). His original manuscript condensed hundreds of accounts of earthquake survivor experiences. These short vignettes of survivor experiences may have read much like Laferrière’s *tout bouge autour de moi* (2011) or Gina Athena Ulysse’s *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives* (2015). Ulysse’s diverse text, part edited collection of essays, part record of online accounts, brings together hundreds of short nonacademic writings and blog posts connected to the 2010 Haitian earthquake. Perhaps the most compelling connection between Ulysse’s project of public writing and what developed into Léger’s novel is the idea that Haiti needs new narratives. This is certainly not a new position to take when it comes to narrating the Haitian experience, but both Léger and Ulysse use Goudougoudou (the 2010 earthquake) as the playground for literary invention and cultural introspection. Ulysse and Léger argue that the modern Haitian narrative must originate somewhere in between the idea of Ayiti Cheri (Beloved Haiti) and Ayiti Chire (Broken Haiti). Through two radically different literary modes Ulysse and Léger interrogate the divide between Ayiti Chire, with its refrain of Haiti as “the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere...code for poor and black” and the opposing Ayiti Cheri imbued with the ‘strength in unity’ notion of an undaunted, proud and resilient people (Ulysse 51-59).

Above all, Léger uses the stories of his three protagonists to generate a clear-eyed critique of three centuries of foreign intervention in Haiti. His novel, through its use of absurd humor and careful exploration of each protagonists’s relationship to legacy building in the wake

of disaster, creates a framework where “the past (the time of memory), present (the time of conscious awareness), and future (the time of anticipation)” collide out of the collective disruption of the earthquake. From a seemingly punctual catastrophic event springs a complex portrait of a Haitian catastrophic temporality in a novel (Scott 1-5). To organize my close reading of the novel I will explore scenes from the text that resonate within each of these three categories: the time of memory, the time of conscious awareness, and the time of anticipation. I will outline how Léger uses catastrophe to interrogate the often-traumatic Haitian relationship to a repeating past of political and social challenges while theorizing the present and possible futures of Haiti post-earthquake.

It is important to note that Léger doesn't bring Haiti's two-time President René Préval into his narrative. Rather, he invents the character of the President, referred to as “the President” until the final pages of the novel when Natasha addresses him for the first time as “Jean” after which the President notes that “no one had called him by his given name in a long, long time” (Léger 256). Léger's choice to invent a President for the crisis of the earthquake in his novel, though he doesn't shy away from including many other historical male leaders, frees him of the potential pitfalls of caricaturing or satirizing Préval so soon after the earthquake. In other words, it relieves any obligation to try to capture the real-life decisions, emotions and psychological processes of René Préval post-quake. The President is not so much “Jean” the individual as he is an embodiment of the role and responsibilities of the office he inhabits. He is, in some ways, the most allegorical of all three of the novel's protagonists. The novel's President becomes a figure which Léger uses not only as a critique of corruption, backroom dealings, and nepotism in the Haitian government, but also as a character that can be easily shaped into an allegory for masculine leadership in Haiti stretching back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The chapter titled “God is on line one”, the President’s chapter which functions as a surreal dream-state, opens with the President lying on the tarmac of the Toussaint Louverture airport after the initial jolts of the earthquake. From the first sentences of the chapter Léger encourages the reader to see the President as an unlikely leader, writing: “On the ground of the airport’s tarmac an old man in a torn suit lay flat on his back and performed snow angels in the dust with a big grin on his face. Of all the Haitian reactions to the earthquake, his will be the most scrutinized” (53). The President, and the reader, are not sure if he is dead or alive in the several pages of otherworldly snow-dust, ambient light and sound that the President wanders through. Suddenly, the President

rubbed his eyes, hard, then a vision, dream, or nightmare appeared to him. The scene was lit like the eye of a hurricane in a film ... A tall, bearded man stood behind a lectern.

Behind the man [he] saw the entrance to what looked like paradise: one of Haiti’s idyllic beaches ... the kind of inheritance taken for granted by locals throughout the Caribbean but beloved by northern dwellers. (54)

The President is standing at the gates of heaven waiting his turn in line to meet Saint Peter and account for his sins in life. It is with this vision of surreal spiritual reckoning that Léger introduces the reader to the President’s obsession with his place in Haiti’s history. His questioning throughout the novel is simultaneously characterized as a spiritual battle against corruption and a selfish need to be remembered as one of the good leaders in Haitian history. The President is last in a long line of what he realizes are Haitian presidents reflecting different periods in Haitian history.

Through the catastrophic temporality enacted in the President’s surreal vision Léger lampoons several key figures in the masculine line of Haitian presidents. The chaos of the

earthquake provides a moment of historical rupture where the President gets a preview of accounting for his own sins and achievements as leader of Haiti, primarily through the accounting of Dessalines's debate with Saint Peter. Dessalines has the most significant impact on the President, and Léger dwells on the example from the post-revolutionary period as a way to structure the extended catastrophe temporality of leadership failures in Haiti spanning back to the 19th century.

The first to account for achievements and sins in Saint Peter's ledger book is Jean-Jacques Dessalines, former plantation slave, Governor-General after Louverture's forced departure to France, and later self-proclaimed Emperor of Haiti. Saint Peter praises Dessalines's leadership and his efforts in bringing freedom to the former Haitian slaves through winning the war against France. Léger is collapsing Louverture's revolutionary efforts with Dessalines's as Louverture wasn't ever the head of state in Haiti; he appointed himself Governor-General of Saint-Domingue for life in the 1801 constitution, but Haiti declared its independence under Dessalines's leadership in 1804. This ultimately suggests that each individual within the line of Haitian leaders (from the revolutionary period to present) has stories filled with successes and failures which will all be judged, reinterpreted, and ultimately flattened into interchangeable examples for those outside of Haiti, represented by Saint Peter's outsider accounting and assessment. It also suggests that The President's obsession with his historical legacy is fueled by his ego and insecurity about his role on the international stage as a representative of Haiti, rather than by an internal dedication to actually improving the lives of the Haitian people.

Dessalines tells Saint Peter that he doesn't feel worthy of heaven, referencing his campaign of violence post-Haitian Revolution on white planters that chose to remain in Haiti. Saint Peter scolds Dessalines, saying: "it probably wasn't a good idea for you to name yourself

emperor of Haiti a few years into your presidency. ... That politically tone-deaf move made you a dead man walking thereafter. The last thing your people wanted so soon after overthrowing Napoleon was another emperor. [Dessalines sighs]" (56-57). Léger uses these two conflicting legacies of Dessalines to paint a portrait of masculine Haitian leadership that operates in the liminal space between heroic/nostalgic and corrupt/vengeful. Saint Peter then asks Dessalines if he wants to know who killed him during the 1806 assassination. This gives Léger an opportunity to continue cultivating the morbid humor throughout the novel, writing: "It would be no trouble for us. We can introduce them to you right now. Your killers, by the way, hacked your body into multiple pieces. The women who collected your dead body for a proper burial had to make multiple trips" (57). Dessalines declines the offer to meet his killers.

Saint Peter explains that although he should send Dessalines straight to hell for his violence against the planters, "you and your people [the Haitian people] present us with a complicated case" (57). Léger makes use of Saint Peter's debate as a meta-critique of Haitian political and cultural movements and the question of whether the national subjects have ever truly unified to advance well-being for all Haitian citizens. He explains:

Your inability to develop that pretty island caused millions of people to needlessly suffer malnutrition and other cruel forms of death for generations. Sending people to hell when they had resources and know-how to save or improve millions, and in some cases, billions of lives on earth but failed to do so out of a smallness of spirit ... is easy. ... You people, on the other hand lived in hell already, the hell of a slavery followed by a hellish poverty cocreated by your unforgiving former slave-masters. Your poor judgment still came down to vanity, an excessive amount of amour propre. (57-58)

Dessalines, and indeed all of the Haitian leaders collapsed into Saint Peter's critique, are indicted for their mismanagement of resources. Léger's point here is a subtle one, that one of the most flagrant offenses in the legacy of masculine Haitian leadership is the mismanagement of resources for personal gain. The leadership looking out for themselves and their material interests rather than the interests of the people of Haiti. Saint Peter points specifically to malnutrition and scarcity of food in his rationale. Fundamentally flawed agricultural policy, which benefits the richest of Haitian society at the top of the political and economic systems, shares a close cause-and-effect relationship to catastrophe in Haitian history; this has remained true since the revolutionary period.

The President witnesses Saint Peter's judgment of the most infamous Haitian leaders, and just before it's his turn he wakes from the vision and finds himself lying on the tarmac.<sup>63</sup> The narrative whiplash back to the present catastrophe situation of the earthquakes helps to solidify and to critique the cycles of catastrophe resulting from historical Haitian leadership. This narrative time-travel, and the fact that the President survives rather than facing an afterlife judgment of his own, offers him potential to rework or reinvent the role of Haitian President as a role that serves the Haitian people. This abrupt shift from recitation of historical traumas to positive potentiality in the face of catastrophe makes use of both the time-of-memory aspect of Haitian catastrophe temporality in narrative as well as the time-of-anticipation aspect. He grapples with this out-of-step experience of catastrophe and historical time, noting: "in his sixty

---

<sup>63</sup> Léger also uses the themes and tropes of Catholicism to frame Haiti's cyclical experience of catastrophe and ruptures of historical trauma. The line of Haitian presidents is the perfect example of how Léger uses a trope of popular Catholicism, waiting in line to account for sins as Saint Peter grants entrance to heaven, as a tool to critique self-serving governance in an allegorical collapse of all the leaders since Haitian independence. The novel's exploration of Haitian catastrophe temporality works together with themes of Catholicism as a result of the repeated cycles of guilt, sin, redemption, and salvation.

years never once had anyone he knew or anything he'd read about in his lifelong study of Haitian history mentioned the word 'earthquake' as a part of life ... [though in] his role as a natural then popular elected leader of the community, tragedy had been his daily bread" (65).

The president's move to act on behalf of his people is spurred by the chaos of the earthquake as well as his vision of the Presidential failures and abuses of power seen in the line of presidents in his dreamscape. Like Ebenezer Scrooge awaking with renewed vigor and love for his fellow man after the macabre visit with the ghost of Christmas yet to come, the President has a second chance to transform his country in the midst of chaos, as well as craft his legacy of Haitian leadership to positively impact the historical legacy of Haiti. The character of the President, perhaps most closely tied to the afterlife of historical trauma in the novel, serves as an allegory of sorts for an obsession with historical legacy, represented through the time of memory.

The time of conscious awareness, the second component of catastrophe temporality in the novel, is demonstrated most saliently through Natasha's experience post-earthquake. Natasha experiences the catastrophe event of the earthquake and subsequently begins to process her own relationship to the trauma through making clearly defined choices within the time of conscious awareness.<sup>64</sup> Her sections of the narrative are marked by an intense narrative realism that neither Alain nor the President's chapters include. The image of Natasha immediately after the earthquake describes her as "... a young woman in a torn dress and one broken high-heeled shoe [sitting] on her elbows and [crying]. The world had gone white on her in a very unexpected way. ... She felt ... unmoored and irretrievably lost" (3). While the President is making snow angels

---

<sup>64</sup> The President spends most of the novel reconciling his relationship to the time of memory and the repeated cycles of trauma and his obsession with his role in the historical legacy of governing Haiti. Alain's experience oscillates between the time of anticipation and the time of conscious awareness, and he recognizes the time of the past primarily through distorted memory and nostalgia for his affair with Natasha.

in the rubble and Alain is staring absently at his car precariously hanging from the tree, waiting to fall and crush him, Natasha simply sits and cries.

She immediately begins to process the trauma of the earthquake and reacts emotionally, demonstrating little shock or disorientation compared to Alain and the President. She is the only character who is able to remain entirely present throughout the aftermath of the quake. While the President is lost to historical memory and his own legacy and Alain's focus remains on the future and what could be, Natasha is led by her immediate emotional and psychological responses of deep sadness and loss. Through her almost immediate shift to grief, Natasha claims agency over her own experience for the first time in the novel. Her emotional response is fully her own; she is not distracted with how the President or Alain perceives her, the political and social future of Haiti, or what her legacy will be. Instead, Natasha claims her emotional agency and capitalizes on the immediate aftermath of the earthquake to express her sadness and grief.

Natasha's moment of agency and self-reflection situates her as the first character within Léger's novel to offer a critique of foreign aid in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Much of the novel's post-earthquake theme is focused on the legacy of foreign intervention in Haiti (particularly in the form of humanitarian aid). Natasha looks up from crying and sees parachutists jumping from international planes and asks herself, "Was the city up in flames? Had it sunk into the ocean? Was everyone dead? ... Were those men or angels? Or demons? What was she? Who would she know? How would they know? ... Suppose these men didn't know they were drifting down into hell? Her hell. Foolish, foolish foreigners" (8). She screams at the parachuting soldiers telling them to go away. This act, her immediate response to the first signs of foreign aid post-earthquake, is simultaneously to discourage the foreigners from entering into Haiti's catastrophe as well as to protect the catastrophe event as a distinctly Haitian event, not to

be co-opted or distorted by foreign governments, NGOs, and the international media. Natasha claims autonomy over her own experience of catastrophe and rejects the idea of international intervention, regardless of the chaos surrounding her.

Alain, though equally cynical of foreign aid post-earthquake, has a more practical approach than Natasha to accepting the assistance. He stepped, somewhat unwillingly, into a leadership role of the refugee camp. Though he is equally skeptical of the inevitable cost of foreign intervention post-quake, Alain realizes the immediate need for material support and sets the question of his personal future and the country's political future aside. Alain and Natasha, both in their own way, embrace the time of conscious awareness when it comes to the question of how to react to foreign aid. Through Natasha, Léger illustrates the psychological importance and rationale for claiming the lived experience of the earthquake as a distinctly Haitian event. Alain's cooperation and friendly manipulation of those working for foreign services to secure material gain, though perhaps more restrained and even-handed than Natasha's response, reveals the undercurrent of skepticism that speaks to the long history of imperialist efforts in Haiti masquerading as altruistic aid.

Léger uses the divergent plots of all three protagonists in his critique of influence of foreign powers in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Mary Renda's explanation of paternalism as a U.S. foreign policy in Haiti during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is particularly helpful in illustrating globally sanctioned paternalism, specifically aid and peacekeeping efforts, that Léger critiques in the novel. Renda writes: "Paternalism was not merely a justification laid on after the fact in order to pretty up ... wrongdoing. ... it was a form of domination, a relation of power, masked as benevolent by its reference to paternal care and guidance, but structured equally by norms of paternal authority and discipline" (Renda 15). Most interestingly, and

apropos to the post-earthquake catastrophe scenario in the novel, Léger focuses specifically on the United Nations as representative of paternalistic intervention.<sup>65</sup> As Natasha and the President drive through the streets of Port-au-Prince before the earthquake they argue about the number of occupying UN soldiers far surpassing the number of Haitian police. Natasha exclaims: “twelve thousand! Correct me if I’m wrong, but that’s a greater armed force—”, the President interjects, “—than the national police force. I know. We have seven thousand police officers. ... [and] the international community took our army away from us years ago” (Léger 15). Natasha puts an end to the argument with the President, noting that the U.N. peacekeeping efforts often “spend more money on weapons than food and medicine ... that says all I need to know about them. ... One thing you have that they don’t is that you’re Haitian and they’re not” (16). Léger uses Natasha’s intense streaks of nationalist pride to counterbalance her desire to leave Haiti at the beginning of the novel. Her entire romantic relationship with the President seems predicated on his ability to finance her departure from a life in Haiti. His wealth, a result of foreign dealings and capitulation to 21<sup>st</sup> century paternalism like the U.N. efforts Léger critiques, puts Natasha in a compromised situation in regard to her personal ethics. She remains defensive of Haitian political, economic, and spiritual autonomy throughout the novel while coming to the realization that she cannot leave Haiti and maintain her strict ethical code and political perspective in light of the earthquake and its aftermath.

The time of anticipation serves as a final component of the catastrophe temporality in the novel and addresses Léger’s critique of the global politics ‘managing’ of Haitian futures as well as the positive potentiality of Léger’s rendering of Haitian diasporic space at the close of the

---

<sup>65</sup> This is particularly interesting given Léger’s own history as assisting in U.N. peacekeeping and development work in Haiti.

novel. In some ways, this is the most speculative aspect of the novel, as much of the narrative is focused on the time of memory and the time of conscious awareness. Léger makes a concerted effort to structure a narrative that suggests what the future of Haiti might be in the aftermath of the earthquake but does not commit to specific predictions of material, political or cultural developments. Instead of projecting speculative futures of Haiti into the novel, Léger remains focused on his critique of foreign intervention in Haiti as well as moving from Haiti itself into Haitian diasporic space at the close of the novel.

After Natasha leaves the airport on her search for Alain the President reluctantly boards a plane to New York to meet with leaders of the UN to negotiate the terms of relief for Haiti after the earthquake. The President's disconnection from his own identity and lack of voice concerning his own earthquake narrative serves as the groundwork for his meeting with the UN leaders. The President walks into the meeting room to see:

The gang was all there when the President walked into the oak-paneled conference room. They wore dark suits and red or blue ties. The Frenchman was short. The German was tall. The Italian looked bored, and the Russian radiated sympathy. The Chinese was cool in thick black-framed glasses. The American was the only one sitting in a gold-trimmed armchair and smiling. He motioned for the Haitian to join him in a nearby chair. A class of well-cubed, dark and lovely drink materialized in the President's right hand. He sighed and sat down. (186-187)

The first questions for the President come from the American who wants to know how bad the earthquake was. He asks if the event was "Katrina bad", to which the President replies "Hiroshima bad" (187). The American gets straight to the bottom line and explains to the President that "we're willing to take care of you. We're humanitarians after all. We'll need a few

things in return” (187). They quickly schedule the next Haitian elections without consulting the President and tell him his retirement deal in Tuscany still stands as long as he agrees to the committee’s terms.

The President serves a largely symbolic function in this brief meeting, and the global powers at the UN table ultimately decide his fate as well as the fate of Haiti, in terms of monetary support and political future, without consulting him. Léger’s cynical portrayal of the UN leadership meeting ends as “billions in grants and low-interest loans from the American and his friends [would] be funneled through United Nations agencies and other nongovernmental organizations to rebuild Haiti” (190). The American tells the President to “build back better” and he is quickly shuffled out of the meeting room and back to his hotel room. The President, realizing that the political and immediate economic future of Haiti was decided by the international committee, begins to speculate about what the rebuilding process will look like as compared to 9/11 in New York. He compares the daunting task of the comparative small-scale recovery in one of the richest nations in the world and doubts that Haitians will work together so efficiently. He wonders, “How [will] the people of Léogâne, Carrefour, and Port-au-Prince muster the patience and strength to spend the next twenty years sanding down, cleaning up, and rebuilding streets when food, health care, education, and care for children will also be concerns without regular relief” (192)? The President’s general uncertainty about the material and political future of Haiti with regards to recovery after the catastrophe event is ultimately where Léger leaves his speculation as to the Haitian process of rebuilding.

Instead of focusing on earthquake relief efforts, the mishandling of aid funds, or the cholera epidemic, in the novel Léger focuses the narrative on the emotional and psychological recovery of Haitians. He addresses the anticipated emotional and psychological recovery both in

the earthquake zone, through the wedding at the cathedral, and in the novel's characterization of positive potentiality in Haitian diasporic space after Alain is exiled from Haiti. The wedding at the cathedral was between Philippe, one of Alain's closest friends from Place Pigeon, and his girlfriend that he met in the refugee camp, Fabby. Alain is slated to be the best man for the ceremony but on the way to the cathedral he is stopped by Bobo who is under the President's orders to take Alain straight to the airport to be exiled. Alain convinces Bobo to let him attend the wedding, and in the final chapter of the book Alain, Natasha now a nun, and the President meet again in the crowded rubble of the cathedral.

The community joins together in the unlikely religious and cultural ritual, which suggests that unification in a post-earthquake Haiti is possible. This event at the close of the novel also provides the opportunity for a reunion of Natasha, the President and Alain. When Alain sees Natasha, dressed in her habit, ready to preside over the wedding ceremony with Monsignor Dorélien, they "smashed into each other like atoms and they held each other tightly, tears running down their round cheeks. There was a tenderness to their embrace, a familial affection" (254). Alain is finally able to let go of his psychological obsession with Natasha and to enter the time of anticipation for a new future unbound from the trauma of lost love. She is alive and they both allow themselves to celebrate the fact of survival and hopeful futures, though these will be futures unlike anything ever imagined before the earthquake. The President shares a similar reaction to seeing Natasha in the habit and realizes that he too must turn to an uncertain future which will not include a romantic relationship with Natasha. Léger's focus on the community coming together and renewed hope for individual protagonists' futures speaks to the time of anticipation. This resolution serves as a positive emotional and psychological counterpoint to the fearful uncertainty of the UN recovery chapter.

Finally, with regards to the time-of-anticipation aspect of catastrophe temporality, Léger uses the novel's epilogue and Alain's exile to gesture at the positive potentiality of Haitian diasporic space in developing narratives of catastrophe experience. For a novel rooted primarily in catastrophe experience within Haiti itself, the move to Haitian diasporic space in the epilogue seems like a curious choice. Alain was exiled to Miami at the close of the novel. The epilogue explains that Natasha gives birth to a child (Nicky) in Miami who was fathered by Alain. She grows up to study art in New York City and Paris and is frequently visited by "an aunty, her mother's twin ... [a] nun [who] ostensibly came to teach Nicky catechism and art" (258). Many years later, after Alain's death, Natasha reveals her identity to Nicky and tells the "story of the love triangle and the disaster that surprisingly made everything right" (258). Alain and Natasha's daughter, who becomes an artist in her own right, is able to carry on the narrative of catastrophe that her parents had begun in Haiti. Nicky, American by birth with Haitian parents, serves as the point of translation between the lived experience of catastrophe in Haiti and the creative space of narrative potential available to her as a citizen of the Haitian diaspora.

Léger's epilogue uses the time of anticipation to gesture at the positive potential of creatively developing catastrophe narratives not only from Haiti itself, but from the Haitian diaspora as a way to expand the scope of Haitian literary and historical archives of catastrophe. The choice to include an epilogue set outside of Haiti, therefore outside of the spaces immediately affected by the catastrophe event, reminds the reader of the far-reaching temporal and creative legacies of seemingly punctual and hyper-local catastrophe events.

### **Makenzy Orcel's *The Immortals*: Memorializing Women of the Grand Rue Brothels**

Makenzy Orcel's novel *The Immortals*, first published in French in 2010 and translated into English by Nathan H. Dize in 2020, was one of the earliest Haitian earthquake novels to

reach the public. The novel, narrated primarily by an anonymous sex worker from the Grand Rue, is a collection of fragmented memories and scenes from the 2010 earthquake. Though the grieving prostitute is the focus of the narrative, her perspective is being recorded by a writer who has agreed to tell her story in exchange for sex. Her memories are disjointed, full of anger, and oscillate wildly across different temporalities. Of the three examples of Haitian earthquake novels explored in this chapter, Orcel's work is highly experimental and could just as easily be described as poetry or short fiction. There are also frequent interruptions from the sex worker to emphasize the significance of immortalizing the stories of the prostitutes of the Grand Rue in Port-au-Prince through literature.

The importance of literary archives as a form of historical record is made explicitly clear through the relationship between the prostitute and her protégé. The protégé (nicknamed Shakira) sustains a long relationship with a professor who brings her Haitian novels from the literary canon of the 20th century. She is drawn to the Haitian literature, in particular, Jacques Stephen Alexis's novel *In the Flicker of an Eyelid* (1959), as a way to seek freedom from her mother, the dogmatic evangelism of her community, and the realities of her life. The narrator's evolving appreciation of Shakira's love of Haitian literature comes only after the earthquake, when she has begun to dictate the stories of the sex workers of the Grand Rue to the writer. She ultimately comes to understand, through Shakira, that the act of passing on stories can create literary legacies which tell the truths of experience. The novel's theme of bearing witness to the lives, deaths, and memories of sex workers in Port-au-Prince without judgment or romanticizing the women offers a visceral blend of history with the aesthetic archives of catastrophe.

The constant interruptions by the narrator create a circuitous feeling which allows her memories of the past, as well as hopes for the future, to blend together. In this way, the novel

resists the catastrophe temporalities of a distinct timeline of before, during, and post-earthquake. Though the majority of the novel is straightforward realism, almost as a reporting of events and recollections, the density of sound and image in the narrator's stories of her earthquake memories disrupts the novel's tone and genre conventions. Her earthquake memories serve as a counterpoint to the overarching Shakira story, which reads like an interview or ethnography recording at times. Regarding the earthquake memory interruptions, the structure of the narrator's storytelling is fractured and unpredictable, moving rapidly from moments in her distant memory to the earthquake aftermath, and then, often, a self-aware exploration of her feelings on a completely separate matter. When the narrator describes the earthquake she often slips into a surreal, poetic style which stands out from her other stories and complicates any linear storytelling or feeling of time progressing. These poetic earthquake memories operate outside of time; they are suspended as a feeling the narrator accesses most fully through the poetic mode.

Orcel, and the writer, organize the space on the page to highlight this poetic earthquake memory mode. The poetry of the earthquake sense memories interrupts Shakira's story with no particular regularity. For example, just after describing a discussion between Shakira and the other sex workers about the kinds of men who frequent the brothel, the narrator slips unexpectedly into poetic earthquake memory:

*The day crumbles  
The night envelops everything  
insert  
fissured  
time has lost all desire to move forward  
each body is a pit which engulfs  
all the cries of the earth  
alone in the absolute darkness of night*

*a city agonizes (Orcel 71)*<sup>66</sup>

In this way, the unpredictable cadence of the poetic interruptions mirrors the experience of the earthquake itself. Just as the earthquake interrupted the everyday conversation about the brothel patrons, the space of poetic memory interrupts the reader's experience of the narrator's storytelling.

The poem above also uses spacing, line breaks, italics, and capitalization to create a feeling of temporal disorientation inherent to the catastrophe experience the narrator is describing. The line breaks also evoke a sense of stretched time or suspended time to emphasize the trauma of the disaster event. Anthropomorphizing time, the narrator gives time the agency to deviate from linear progression, writing: "*time has lost all desire to move forward*" (71). Time is an active agent in the experience of catastrophe, and describing the suspension of progress as a loss of desire is particularly curious. It suggests that time itself has abandoned Haiti; and in that unmoored temporal state, through the earthquake, only memories and feelings remain. The narrator, unsurprisingly, uses the theme of desire throughout many of her stories: Shakira's desire for freedom, the men's desire for sex, her desire to make the stories of the women a part of the historical and artistic catastrophe archive. However, describing time's loss of desire with the disruption of progress is particularly haunting. The most common marker of narrative development in the stories of human lives, linear progression of time and experience, disappears with the earthquake. Of all the narrator's earthquake memory poems this stands out as the clearest affective and sensory example of the aesthetic of catastrophe temporality in the novel.

---

<sup>66</sup> I have retained Orcel's spacing and italics to show how he uses formatting, negative space, and poetic structures to disrupt the narrative flow of the novel when the narrator shares her memories of the earthquake.

The layers of Haitian literary history are most clearly represented in Shakira's obsession with Jacques Stephen Alexis's novel *In the Flicker of an Eyelid* (1959). Shakira's attachment to the novel is deeply connected to her desire for freedom from her family, in particular her mother, and freedom to tell her story on her own terms. Alexis's novel focuses on a Haitian Cuban sex worker nicknamed La Niña Estrellita who wants to leave prostitution to find her identity and love. When first considering the parallels with *The Immortals* and *In the Flicker of an Eyelid* it's tempting to read Shakira as a reincarnated La Niña Estrellita. The professor, Shakira's primary client, even calls her by this nickname. However, Shakira's character is much more aligned with another character from Alexis's novel: La Rubia. La Rubia, a Cuban woman who works with La Niña Estrellita, was inspired by the Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and begins writing her own story. This is quite similar to Shakira's inspiration from Alexis's novel, and she writes her own life story in her journal. Shakira is the only woman, aside from the narrator, who tells her own story (through the written record of her journal). The narrator is quite skeptical of Shakira's attachment to Alexis's novel and explains, "[Shakira and the professor] both agreed in saying that *In the Flicker of an Eyelid* is one of those rare books that would leave its mark on centuries of literature. But for me, I didn't understand a word of what they were chirping about" (65). The narrator explains in the early interactions with Shakira that she believes literature is for the wealthy, and not those who have to work to make a living. She eventually changes her perspective when she reads Shakira's journal entries after the earthquake.

The narrator slowly begins to appreciate the potential power of written storytelling, as she explains throughout the novel, once she finds Shakira's journal just before the earthquake. Shakira disappears in the earthquake, the narrator does not know what happened to her or her son, but the narrator recognizes that in Shakira's written word, she is immortalized. Her ideas

and desires are preserved in the literary and historical archive through her journal and then in the novel itself when the narrator gives her journal to the writer. She explains, "I'd like for you to add this notebook to your story. I found it in her bag a few days before the drama. It's without a doubt hers. I recognize her handwriting" (86). Shakira's journal entries describe her skepticism of humanity, her longing to escape, and her worship of literature as the only way to fully access freedom. Although the narrator isn't a writer or a reader herself she understands the power of the written literary and historical archive to preserve the stories of women after reading the journal. She explains to the writer: "The characters in the books never die. They're the masters of time" (94). The idea that stories are immortal motivates the narrator to tell the stories of the women of the Grand Rue. Although many died in the earthquake, she keeps them alive through the power of literary and historical archives of the earthquake.

The writer, who never speaks or reveals himself to the reader, is at the mercy of the narrator's fractured temporality and the particular woman's story she wants him to capture in that moment. The narrator's frequent interruptions and specific instructions to the author throughout the novel enable her to retain narrative control and limit the writer's agency. Although she is trading sex for his written record of the women's stories, she operates from a position of power both as the broker of the sexual relationship as well as the overseer of his aesthetic and the temporality of the story. Orcel's choice to empower the narrator, both as the arbiter of when and how their transactional sex will play out as well as the primary narrative perspective in the novel, is a subtle, but important strategy. In this way, the women are central to the narrative and Orcel continues to remind the reader to focus on the stories of the women, told through the narrator, and not on the male perspective of the writer within the narrative, or his perspective as the novel's author. Dize also recognizes the significance of gender and narrative power in *The*

*Immortals*, writing: “*The Immortals* is a book written by a man, about a man writing, and translated into English by a man. Yet the novel is populated with women’s voices, their kinship and their shared intimacies” (“Afterword” 122).

The novel concludes with an abrupt ending where the narrator simply tells the writer, “it’s not yet the end of the story, but we must stop here” (Orcel 120). As her final act of retaining narrative agency and power over the writer the narrator withholds the ending or a conclusion. She thanks the writer and reminds him of her control one final time, saying: “with regard to the story itself, I was the one who chose to write it as such, drop by drop, without pedantry, with an almost revolting simplicity. The manuscript, you do with it what you want” (121). The narrator infringes on the written record here, emphasizing that it was her choice to write it in the way he does. The writer dutifully includes the narrator’s final claim to the story as a way to highlight her ultimate agency. She has shared her story in a way that can only be read as hers; the writer is simply a tool used to record her literary and historical archive. It is the narrator that immortalizes the women of the Grand Rue, the writer is witness and acolyte who will bring the narrator’s stories into the world through his writing.

The fragmentation of Orcel’s storytelling structure offers creative opportunities for narrative voices which embody both the individual and collective experience of catastrophe. For example, she narrates Shakira’s mother’s story (she is looking for her daughter after years of absence) and interrupts, saying: “and there, there’s no need to tell you that it’s still the mother who’s talking. You’re the writer. You must be quite capable of appropriating all the voices that live inside me because they’re also your voices” (61). The narrator acknowledges both the collective and individual nature of her catastrophe storytelling here. She, as an individual, is telling the stories of the women of the Grand Rue and the writer’s job is to capture their various

voices as a collective experience to become part of the literary and historical archive of the earthquake. By taking care to focus on each woman's story, and offering a variety of perspectives on the life of sex workers on the Grand Rue, the lives of these women can't be reduced to a stereotype or generalized perspective on prostitution in Haiti. The women aren't victims of their own poverty, nor are they characterized as empowered and romanticized agents of their own destinies. Rather, the narrator's focus on each individual woman's experience of the earthquake, as well as their lives before and after, humanizes but allows each story to retain its complexity. As English translator Nathan H. Dize explains, "*The Immortals* imagines a world where these women can live and die without losing their right to human dignity" ("Afterword" 123). The narrator's frequent breaks and instruction to the writer emphasize her detailed attention to the contradictions within the women and the need to capture that in their memorialization for the archive. Simultaneously, the narrator is telling the story of a collective of women, a group who love each other deeply in spite of petty arguments and occasional conflict with each other.

The translation of the text itself extends beyond just the character of the writer who is translating the narrator's stories; Dize's 2020 translation from French to English invites new access to the literary and historical archive of the earthquake. Professor of French and Francophone Studies at Georgetown University Jennifer Boum Make explains, "the act of translation here is profoundly polysemous and is being passed on from the anonymous narrator, to Orcel, the writer, to Dize, the translator ... [the] memorialization of silenced voices demands translation" ("Translation as Testimony"). The act of translation increases the power and resonance of the stories and expands the reach of the literary and historical archive of the earthquake. While the English translation expands the readership potential as well as the nuanced understanding of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti it also brings new visibility to Makenzy Orcel's

body of work. *The Illusionists* is Port-au-Prince native Orcel's debut novel and is an important piece of the literary and historical archive of the earthquake as it offers the perspective of a Haitian writer who wants to lift up the stories of women who are often excluded from the dominant narratives.

Translating the novel into English so Anglophone readers can more deeply connect with the nuances of the historical and literary archive of the 2010 earthquake acknowledges the need for continued attention to creating and distributing stories from catastrophe long after the punctual event itself. In other words, the 2020 English translation reminds the global community that the act of forgetting, or worse, the historical erasure of the most marginalized communities impacted by disaster, is a catastrophe in and of itself. As Nathan Dize, the novel's English translator, explains, there is "the possibility of counterbalance, through writing, the rhetorical and physical effacement of the marginalized, by giving them a presence in the world" (Make, "Translation as Testimony"). The literary testimonies of the women of the Grand Rue take on new aesthetic and historical resonances in the English translation. This renewal and expansion of the earthquake archive fuels the very cycle of immortalization that the narrator hopes for in the novel. As she explains to the writer, "Let's begin. I'll talk. You, the writer, you write. You transform" (Orcel 5). The cycle of translation begins with the narrator's oral transmission of the women's stories and into the writer's written archive. However, the potential expansion to other languages, other modes of catastrophe storytelling, offers ample opportunity for creative expansion of the historical and literary archive of the 2010 earthquake. Given the oral and testimonial nature of the novel along with the poetic imagery and description, I can easily imagine a translation into a play or performance art piece. The space Orcel creates in the text, through narrative silences, fractured temporality, and the arrangement of physical space on the

page itself, invites a spirit of creative innovation all in service of the continued memorialization of the women of the Grand Rue.

### **Myriam J. A. Chancy's *What Storm, What Thunder: Aid, Diaspora, and the Future***

Haitian-American-Canadian scholar and author Myriam J. A. Chancy's novel *What Storm, What Thunder* (2021) is a result of listening to the stories of 2010 earthquake survivors for more than six months after the event. Chancy, like many Haitians scattered throughout the Haitian diaspora, was abroad at the time of the 2010 quake and wanted to write a novel which captured the fractured distribution of stories, out of time and without explanation, from ten different narrative perspectives. In some ways, Chancy's novel is a more conventional novelistic response to the catastrophe than Orcel's more stylistically experimental example. However, Chancy's narrators, in the diversity of their post-earthquake experiences, aesthetics, memories, and narrative styles accomplishes similar goals to Orcel's *The Immortals*. The stories of the earthquake survivors, those living on only in memories, and the haunting impact of their various pasts and future uncertainties creates a robust example of the disorienting catastrophe temporality at play.

In a brief introduction to the 2021 audiobook version of *What Storm, What Thunder*, author Myriam J. A. Chancy reflects on the resonance of her novel in the wake of the Aug 14, 2021 earthquake in the southern peninsula of Haiti as well as the global context of the Covid-19 pandemic, global warming, and the racial climate in the Americas. In 2021 more than 50,000 people were still living in internally displaced people's camps in Port-au-Prince from the 2010 earthquake and over a million were affected in the 2021 disaster. She recognizes that although there has been physical and psychological recovery in Haiti there are still tens of thousands who are dealing with the emotional and financial impacts of the event. She explains: "it's bittersweet

for me to know that a novel I wrote to reflect on a historical event with ongoing consequences that occurred over 10 years ago is still topical today” (Chancy, “Introduction”). Chancy acknowledges that the people of Haiti are still suffering a lack of access to education, overwhelming unemployment, shelter and food insecurity, as well as inconsistent resources such as potable water and medical care. All of these issues were compounded for the most vulnerable populations by the political instability and violence following the assassination of Haiti’s president in July of 2021. Chancy’s novel tackles all of these themes of precarity following the 2010 earthquake and their associated slow violence during the time of recovery and rebuilding.

The two primary additions to the literary and historical archive of Haitian earthquake literature that are not explored in Léger or Orcel’s novels are the impact of the earthquake on Haitians living throughout the diaspora as well as narratives which capture the life in the IDP (internally displaced people’s camps) months or years after the disaster event.<sup>67</sup> Chancy, similar to Léger, offers a critique of the continuing failure of aid distribution systems in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. Approximately 13 billion dollars of aid was distributed to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake and the GDP per capita is no higher than it was in 2009 (“What Storm”). It is estimated that less than 1% of the aid went to the Haitian government while much of the aid enriched organizations and individuals who made little material or social impact on the lives of everyday Haitians. Chancy’s stories from the IDP camps, though punctuated with sexual violence, mental illness, and excruciating loss, do not take away agency from the characters.

Like Orcel’s novel, Chancy allows her narrator’s autonomy to tell Haitian stories from their perspectives in a way which asks the readers to reserve judgment for complicated ethical or

---

<sup>67</sup> Léger’s *God Loves Haiti* (2016) includes several scenes from a camp within Port-au-Prince but nothing like the massive IDP camps many miles from the city explored in Chancy’s novel.

moral decisions they make. She does not portray characters as romanticized heroes, or as hopeless victims, but as individuals who persist in the face of chaos through creative and occasionally shocking means. The theme of resilience is embedded throughout the narrative but this does not necessarily equate to survival. For particular characters, Chancy arguably suggests that death is a mercy. For example, Olivier, Jonas's father and Sara's husband, is psychologically broken by the experience of losing his two daughters underneath their house immediately in the earthquake coupled with his responsibility to take Jonas to the medical marine tent to have his crushed leg amputated. After the amputation, seeing the pain his son is in and with the knowledge that the boy will likely die from the infection spreading up his leg, Olivier leaves Sara alone with Jonas under the pretense of trying to find work outside of the IDP camp. While wandering drunk several miles away from the camp he is attacked and raped by a gang of young men. Olivier decides, "I am no longer a man. I am no longer of use" and throws himself in front of the water truck as an act of reclaiming agency and choosing death over continued suffering (Chancy 252-253).

As Olivier lies in the road in a liminal state between life and death he knows the driver of the truck will have to deliver an unexpected form of aid: killing him as an act of mercy since he won't make it to a hospital. In a state of euphoria which transcends the tragedy of his experience Olivier reflects:

There will be nothing more for me to do, nothing more to be done. Nothing but to thank the truck driver for his swift hands, for the relief he will have brought, for the water he brings to quench the thirst of the camp dwellers who will have to dig my grave in this desert they must call home now, all the while waiting for rain. (253-254)

On one hand, it could be argued that Olivier's decision to jump in front of the truck is an act of defeat in the face of tragedy. However, the considered choice to end his life, moving out of the liminal space of catastrophe, brings the water truck to the camp to provide for his family.

Olivier's story, though certainly one of the more violent in the novel, is an excellent example of how Chancy preserves her characters' agency. The reader may be surprised at Olivier's decision; however, the symbolic act of bringing water to the camp is the final focus of the chapter. Chancy redirects the reader's attention to what Olivier is able to provide for his family and community, and he ultimately dies having fulfilled his caretaking role.

Chancy's unique ability to foreground the psychological and emotional processing of disaster for each of the characters is much more developed than in Léger and Orcel's work. Léger's emphasis is on the relationships between the characters and his creative surreal environments of disaster. Orcel's formal innovations, particularly the inclusion of poetry and use of silences and fractured narrative, is the novel's significant contribution. Chancy's approach to catastrophe storytelling from the perspective of her ten narrators emphasizes their internal monologues and the emotional and psychological impacts of their particular experiences and histories. In this way, the novel is the most conventional of the three. The stories from the three interconnected family groups are woven seamlessly together and the reader is slowly presented with information about how the characters are linked. The emotional and psychological links between the characters, carefully revealed as each narrator tells their story, is the strategy Chancy uses to tie together the novel's characters and their individual experiences. Chancy uses the internal monologues of her narrators to create liminal spaces between life and death as well as liminal spaces of relationships between characters.

The story of Leopold, the drug trafficker trapped in the Hotel de la Montagne elevator after the earthquake, is the most interesting use of symbolic and emotional liminal space in the novel. Leopold's chapter opens as the elevator "jolted and jarred before sending [Leopold], weightless, up against the metal ceiling of the elevator" (97). He was thinking of Sonia, his distant cousin Dieudonné's girlfriend, who he had lusted after for years. Sonia and Dieudonné are also staying at the hotel and he had been riding the elevator with them every day since his arrival into town. It is intentionally unclear from the start of Leopold's chapter whether he is alive in the elevator or dead. Chancy focuses on the liminal relational and emotional space of Leopold's desire for Sonia; the question of reciprocated desire is unclear to Leopold as he unpacks the past several years of their interactions in the hotel. In withholding Leopold's post-earthquake experience Chancy emphasizes a more complex understanding of Leopold before returning to the elevator scene after the hotel collapse.

The space of the elevator is the perfect setting for Leopold's reflections on Sonia; he's trapped, literally, in a liminal physical space, but also a psychological and emotional liminal space. In addition to his thoughts of Sonia, he recalls an experience from early childhood where he and some of the local boys went out to watch the turtle hatchlings make their journey to the ocean. The turtle hatchlings have to show incredible resilience and grit in their difficult trek to the ocean. He also reflects on the expanded evolutionary timeline of the turtles, thinking:

... they had been here before humans, before anything existed, even before dinosaurs. They'd survived the Ice Age, continental drift, volcanoes erupting below and above ground, asteroids. They were the first superheroes. After that, and still, like most things, they began puny and fragile, scared, scrambling. (102-103)

Some of the turtle hatchlings, against the odds, always make it to the ocean and survive. The story of the turtle hatchlings, also in a liminal state struggling to survive, is an apt metaphor for the immediate post-disaster experience of the earthquake Leopold and so many others in Port-au-Prince are experiencing. Chancy allows the reader to make that connection through Leopold's memory of the turtles. Leopold never consciously connects the memory from childhood to his experience in the elevator; in fact, he seems almost surprised to remember this story in the moment.

Throughout Leopold's extended reflections on Sonia and the turtle hatchlings the reader has no idea if Leopold is alive, dead, or somewhere in between. The movement between storytelling timelines, reflections, memories, and feelings is completely unbound by time. Chancy's distortion of time evokes a sense of Leopold's experience of catastrophe temporalities; he is suspended, literally and figuratively. Explaining the moment of the earthquake and the disorientation leading into his experience of surreal liminality Leopold recalls:

... all around him he felt the building sway. It was an eerie, surreal, strange feeling. It was as if the metal box were trying to remain still in the middle of an ocean wave. ... Then, as suddenly as the trembling had begun, he felt the tension of the box give way before it plummeted at high speed, and he felt his body spike abruptly into the space above his head. ... His mind careened and he thought of becoming reptilian, what it might feel like to be able to collapse lungs and limbs to survive. ... his body plummeted brusquely (or did it float, up, into the ether, while it was the car that careened down?) into a dark nook that bore no resemblance to water or sand.

Leopold's imagery of reptilian survival ties together his unconscious memories of the turtle hatchlings and the moment of catastrophe in the elevator. He, like the turtles, is making an

improbable journey that neither could expect to survive. However, he does survive, and spends the next several hours, or days, in the elevator waiting for rescue. It is unclear how much time passes for Leopold in the elevator before he is pulled from the rubble. Chancy makes good use of the suspended time and Leopold's experience in the elevator as a symbolic reference point for his feelings of entrapment in the drug trade, his desire for financial and ideological freedom, and his hope to move away from ambiguity in his relationship with Sonia and some of his estranged family members.

This surreal experience of reflection, memory, and disorienting physical and temporal location is one of the clearest examples of what I am calling an aesthetic of catastrophe temporality in *What Storm, What Thunder*. Chancy's novel includes several examples sharing similar aesthetic representations of catastrophe temporality: two characters are having sex as the earthquake strikes, a massive wave from the aftershocks drags a man into the ocean, and the two characters living in the diaspora have a flood of memories from Haiti and their family histories when they hear news of the earthquake. By blending the space of memory into the physical, emotional, and psychological experiences at the moment the earthquake strikes, Chancy creates a consistent aesthetic of catastrophe temporality for her narrators. However, it is the different uses of liminality which offer creative opportunity to speak to the nuances of catastrophe temporality for each character.

Building on Chancy's creative use of liminality throughout the novel, she is also the only author of the three explored in this chapter who actively engages the space of the Haitian diaspora in her earthquake novel. Didier, one of the diasporic narrators of the novel, is a jazz musician who makes a living driving a cab in Boston. At the end of his shift, he typically stops for coffee in Cambridge where "the college girls who liked to live dangerously knew how to find

their rides. I was waiting for one or the other to happen: a last hire or a hookup” (209). A girl approaches him, they walk to the cab, and he asks where she would like to go. She says she wants to go to his place, and Didier redirects, saying they’ll go to hers. On the drive the radio in the cab is on. Didier always keeps it tuned to NPR, and he hears the announcement of the earthquake in Haiti. Didier enters a kind of suspended state where he is partially present with the girl but with his mind on Haiti. They watch the news, she cooks for him, and after several hours she convinces Didier to go to bed, saying: “there’s nothing you can do. We’re alive. ... We can do this. It will make you feel better” (218).

While they have sex they both speak in their native languages, Didier in Kreyòl and the girl in Bengali, and they seem detached from each other, both lost in spaces of catastrophic memory from their homes. Didier realizes that he didn’t wear a condom and is struck by the irony that they “could have made a life while others were dying ... guilt washed over me, the possibility of life in the face of death ... I wonder who would make it through this night alive, if the only person left to tell the tale could be the embryo I might have implanted in this girl with jet-black hair, who spoke to me in tongues” (219). For Didier, though he’s thousands of miles away from the earthquake, he feels survivor’s guilt. Both he and the unnamed Bangladeshi girl are absent from home, from their communities, and from the disasters facing their people. Chancy’s layering of diasporic survivor’s guilt in this chapter is especially interesting. The Bangladeshi girl understands Didier in a way that few others might; she connects with his experience as someone living in the diaspora who has watched her community face natural, political, and economic disasters from afar. This is not to say that Didier and the girl explore their similarities, but it speaks to Chancy’s care with the representation of the Haitian diaspora in her novel. As Chancy explains, “[Didier] suffers, I would say, the pain of absence ... And I

thought that was a succinct way to summarize what it was like for many of us who watched the earthquake from the outside but had intimate ties to Haiti” (“What Storm”). The same is true for Anne, living in Rwanda watching the earthquake from afar, although Anne is able to get in contact with her family members in Haiti. Didier’s comparative lack of information contributes to his surreal state of disconnection which fuels his feelings of alienation and isolation living in the Haitian diaspora.

Anne, the other diasporic character, is deeply connected to Chancy’s critique of aid distribution in Haiti. As the second-to-last chapter in the novel Anne’s story of catastrophe looks towards rebuilding and recovery in Haiti. Lucien, Anne’s husband the engineer, remained in Haiti while she traveled to Rwanda to work for a Canadian NGO where “more international funds had been made available to rebuild the country after the ten-year anniversary of the genocide” (Chancy 257). Anne’s job as an architect is a convenient narrative tool for Chancy to critique the aid efforts and rebuilding process after the 2010 earthquake. Lucien tells Anne to return to Haiti because the country needs her expertise in affordable mixed-use buildings. Anne agrees, but also recognizes that “soon, the disaster vultures would descend on the island; things would spiral out of control. ... shelters had become a business opportunity, as more people around the world were displaced, made homeless and migratory by civil wars and famine” (258-259). Her critique of the disaster recovery industry’s driving capitalist impulse, to make money from the spaces of disaster, underpins her critique of aid distribution in Haiti. Anne first begins work volunteering in the IDP camps, which gives the reader an insider perspective on the incredible scope of the chaos and confusion with so many displaced Haitians. She only stays for a few weeks, and returns to her work in Rwanda, which is less emotionally and psychologically painful given the deaths of most of her immediate family in the earthquake.

Anne's chapter ends when she enters an international contest to redesign the recently destroyed cathedral in Port-au-Prince. For the first time, she feels that she can actually put her architectural skills to good use, saying: "I started drafting the plans I had been thinking about since my trips to the genocide sites when I had first arrived in Rwanda, before my brief return to volunteer in the IDP camps, for a new cathedral, a Haitian cathedral, one that would commemorate the dead and sanctify the living" (284). Chancy's use of Anne's cathedral design allows space for a creative and symbolic future for what Haiti's rebuilding efforts could look like. They could be full of beauty, symbolism, and acknowledge the histories of trauma and disaster Haiti has faced. One idea for the new cathedral was the plan to build it near the ruins of the old cathedral, but not demolish the remains of the old building. In this way, the ruins would serve as a memorial to those who died and the lingering and evolving ways the earthquake impacted Haiti's people. Anne's interest in this particular proposal speaks to the importance of the historical and artistic archive of catastrophe. She explains: "Ruins had meaning: they revealed time like nothing else could, outlived bodies, love stories, everything. They should stand" (287). Her belief in the power of a structural memorial to the earthquake is a wonderful symbolic example of catastrophe time. The ruins will stand, a reminder of the past, however they will simultaneously change and evolve through the passing of time.

Chancy's hope for readers of her novel is that they gain a sense of what occurred in Haiti in the 2010 earthquake, but also that they might be able to understand the complexities of catastrophe responses through the nuanced narratives of the characters in the novel. As Chancy reminds audiobook listeners, "It's a novel about home, and what it might feel like to lose a sense of place, of beginning for yourself or your family, and what you or anyone might have to reimagine or rebuild in the wake of such material and spiritual loss" ("Introduction"). Those who

have not yet experienced catastrophe in their own lives and communities look towards a future where this is a near guarantee with acknowledgement of climate collapse and the ripples of disaster that will bring. Chancy's novel is written to memorialize the stories of those lost in the Haitian earthquake, but, like Anne's plans for the cathedral, the novel also seeks to create new forms of catastrophe art to enact a form of healing.

Léger, Orcel, and Chancy's novels are memorials which tell often-marginalized stories of Haitian life. The novels also bring new opportunities for psychological and emotional healing to the historical and literary archive of Haitian earthquake literature. Perhaps the ultimate goal of the three catastrophe novelists explored in this chapter is best summed up in the final lines of Munro's *Writing on the Fault Line*. Munro writes:

In the generosity and openness of spirit that motivate this project, and in the new connections it makes between Haiti and the broader world, the earthquake in a sense meets its match[.] ... [Creation] follows disaster, and through words ... a new world is brought into being. (Munro 228)

All three novels accomplish the difficult task of striking a balance between representing the literary and historical complexities of Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake. Like Orcel's narrator suggests, the story of Haiti's literary and historical earthquake archive is not yet finished; this is an ongoing creative and political project as narratives of the catastrophe, both from within Haiti and the Haitian diaspora, circulate around the globe.

### Chapter 3: Re/Constructing New Orleans: Colonialism, Afro-Louisianan Geographies, & Katrina Theater

“Theater – or as I see it or as I want to use it – can make history. ... If that means inserting some of you back in the early 1800’s, why not? I think it is just as valid as what we are told happened back then. ... It should not be viewed as “Oh yes, this is some historical document.” But rather, “Oh yes, this is an account, not of what happened but of what was. Or an account of what is.” ... History is not “was,” history is “is.” It’s present, so if you believe that history is present you can also believe that the present is in the past.” – Suzan-Lori Parks<sup>68</sup>

In the spring of 1996 *Callaloo* published a special issue dedicated to Emerging Women Writers featuring a wide-ranging interview with African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks. Parks’ play *Venus* (1996), a fictionalized drama of the life of Sarah Baartman, had just earned an Obie Award.<sup>69</sup> At the beginning of the interview, Parks is asked to explain what playwriting means to her and how she understands the impact of theater for contemporary audiences. This question, although innocuous at first glance, suggests that it is not obvious why audiences should care about the dramatic account of the life of Sarah Baartman, or perhaps, why anyone should bother with theater at all. Parks responds, arguing that theater allows audiences to collectively create new places of cultural memory which blend histories of past, present, and future in service of transformative storytelling which works towards liberation. The histories created by theater do not replace traditional forms of historical archival work, for Parks; however, they operate as alternative historical texts which productively blur the line between present and past for the audience and hold equal weight to dominant historical narratives.

---

<sup>68</sup> Parks is the playwright of *Topdog/Underdog* (2001): the first play written by an African American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Baartman was a member of the Khoekhoe people of the Xhosa kingdom which is now in Eastern Cape, South Africa. She was born in 1789 and died in Paris in 1815. During her short lifetime, she was enslaved and taken to Europe where she was forced to display her body for audiences as a part of the “human curiosities” or sideshow movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Europe (Lyons 327).

Parks justifies her theory of how theater generates new historical archives unbound by modernity's hegemonic structures of time referencing Faulkner's approach to understanding history. She explains, "Faulkner has this great thing: he talks about is and was, or was and is. History is not "was," history is "is". It's present, so if you believe that history is in the present, you can also believe that the present is in the past" (Jiggetts 317). While Parks's statement here specifically justifies the relevance of *Venus* to contemporary audiences, her explanation of theater's ability to merge experiences of the present with the past (particularly experiences of inherited trauma of racialized violence and fetishization of the black body) applies to all the Katrina-plays this chapter explores as its primary texts.

Of particular interest is the function of time in theatrical place in "time conspicuous" Katrina plays analyzed in this chapter (J. Fleming 587). I will explore the audience's relationship between their experience of linear time, for example, two hours in a theater watching actors perform, and the use of temporal aesthetics employed in the plays to transform the historical geographies of catastrophe time. These plays' ability to transform historical geographies of catastrophe is an aesthetic, embodied, and political experiment which contributes to the scholarly

conversations analyzing a modality of time that resists confinement to a single period and that insists the present (and future) is under the weight of an enduring past.<sup>70</sup>

This chapter argues that Katrina theater's ability to blend past and present catastrophes offers audiences an opportunity to collectively process the traumas of systematic exploitation, neglect, and erasure of black and indigenous people in service of colonial economies and the spread of empire unique to New Orleans and the colonial territory of Louisiana. The function of theatrical space and materiality of the Katrina plays explored in this chapter, those first produced and performed within New Orleans, invites audiences to engage with the "found realities" of Katrina as a catastrophe. The concept of "found reality" and the function of place unique to theater as an art form originates with Polish visual artist and theater director Thadeusz Kantor. Kantor is considered the foundational theorist for theater's unique ability to utilize space itself as an object of creation (Kobialka 332). What makes Kantor's theories particularly relevant to this chapter's analysis of Katrina theater is the political circumstances where his ideas originate: the underground theater scene in Nazi-occupied Poland. The post-Katrina landscape of New Orleans where many of the original Katrina productions explored in this chapter were performed invites

---

<sup>70</sup> The conditions required for this temporality, what I define as catastrophe time, are cleverly distilled in Habiba Ibrahim's work on atemporal Blackness and "untimeliness" where she argues that under the systems of coloniality, enslavement, and property the Black body is "constituted as a site of historical and human emptiness, which could be endowed with any meaning at all" (28). Ibrahim's concept of "untimeliness" is foundational as it asserts that exclusion of Black bodies from history and the dominant narrative of historical progress because this positions Blackness as the distinction between the human and possessive individual (Blake 562). What's most pertinent in Ibrahim's work is her framework considering how reclaiming Black life creates an alternative humanism, and alternative way of understanding the past and the present outside of modernity's hegemonic measure of time, which isn't bound by the dominant modes of progress and racialized erasures of historical time. My heuristic of catastrophe time is also deeply informed by the work of Christina Sharpe, Anna Hartnell, Édouard Glissant, Katherine McKittrick, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Clyde Woods, Rob Nixon, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Martin Monro, and Walter D. Mignolo.

easy comparison.<sup>71</sup> Each of Kantor's "theaters" questioned the boundaries of theatrical representation not just because of their use of the environment, but also because of his selected play's hyper-fixation on place and materiality relevant to the action of the plot. We see this clearly in the examples of Katrina theater analyzed in this chapter regardless of sub-genre: documentary theater, magical realism, or realism.

This chapter explores how catastrophe temporality as a heuristic makes visible the hemispheric impacts of European colonialism on the Caribbean, the impact of regional plantation economies on the unique cultural, racial, and class constellations of Louisiana, and the importance of black performance geographies on the spaces and histories at the root of Katrina theater as an archive.<sup>72</sup> I address Katrina, and the resonances of Katrina theater, with two theoretical approaches: first, a historical approach to the shadow timeline of catastrophe in Louisiana linking the roots of Katrina's catastrophe back to the global and colonial formations

---

<sup>71</sup> Kantor's theater, often staged and performed in abandoned buildings, sets designed to appear as wreckage, or other unconventional theatrical spaces, invited audiences to focus on the reality which was almost obliterated by war, "a destroyed room; that is, illegitimate 'raw' reality that was not and could have no longer been altered by pre-existing artistic modes of representation. ... a wheel smeared with mud, a rotten board, a chair, a gun barrel, a loudspeaker, dusty parcels, lost the traditional functions assigned to them in life/war and emerged instead within the network of relations created in and by the performance space" (332-333).

<sup>72</sup> This chapter's interest in the plantation economies of Louisiana begins at roughly the same timeline as Chapter One, the late 1790s, because of the shared interest in the long afterlives of French and Spanish colonialism in these Caribbean spaces. Both Louisiana and present-day Haiti suffer from similar political, cultural, environmental, and economic violence because of their colonial histories and the complicated role they play in the coalescing of national identity for the United States and France respectively. The impact of Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence can be applied to both sites of study: "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Turning to New Orleans, the transition of colonial authority from imperial Spain to Bonaparte's France, and finally to Jefferson's government in the US lays the foundation for the 300-years of federal neglect and the hybrid chaos of democratic capitalism and natural catastrophe on the lives of Louisianans (Faber 3).

that built New Orleans and the surrounding region's plantation economies.<sup>73</sup> Second, this chapter offers a cultural analysis of theatrical responses to Katrina as continuing afterlives of the traumas and material conditions rippling from imperial sugar economies in the US and Caribbean. I offer the historical framework as the basis for my cultural analysis of the site-specific theatrical responses to Katrina used in processing the traumas of systematic exploitation, neglect, and erasure of black and indigenous people in service of colonial economies and the spread of empire. In other words, the catastrophe of interest is Katrina, but only inasmuch as Katrina presented the creative opportunity to make site-specific art encompassing the echoes of empire and documentation of black experiences not just as Katrina survivors, but as the continuing legacy of a performance culture of resistance born from the traumas of imperial sugar economies.

The first half of this chapter draws primarily on a historical archive to explain how global colonial legacies, the sugar economy, and the material and social impacts of the transatlantic slave trade shaped a Louisiana that is distinctly 'other' to American nationalism and the project of Americanization. Importantly, this Louisiana, underpinned by the Caribbean-imported religious, racial, and political currents sits uneasily within the geographic context of the United States and the dominant narrative of New Orleans as an American city with an American

---

<sup>73</sup> Much of the chapter's exploration of plantation economies will focus on sugarcane and cotton as the dominant cash crops, but plantation owners in the region also produced tobacco and indigo for global distribution as early as the colonial period.

history.<sup>74</sup> Historical narratives of New Orleans itself, and the territory of Louisiana, fit more comfortably within a Caribbean context given the influence of both the spread of European empire and, more locally, Caribbean political, economic, and cultural influences saturating the narrative. I focus on this historical period (moving from French colonization to the period shortly following U.S. acquisition of the territory) in order to establish the argument that the roots of site-specific performance as a means for processing trauma emerge from the catastrophe of sugar plantation slavery. It is equally important to establish the intertwining cultural and political formations of New Orleans, more broadly the Orleans Territory, as exceptional in U.S. history to understand how cycles of federal neglect and artistic resistance originate. The evolution of performance culture in New Orleans offers a compelling example of the hybridized European and Caribbean influences creating the fabric of New Orleanian identities which characterize Katrina theater as an artistic and political movement.

The site-specific performance culture is deeply rooted in the use of public space and site-specific performance (specifically: African/Afro-Caribbean dance, drumming, vodou, and storytelling) to process traumas and create artistic resistance to the inherent abuse/policing and disposability of black and indigenous lives and culture under sugar plantation slavery. The second half of this chapter moves to individual case studies of site-specific performances of Katrina theater which illustrate the pattern of how artistic responses to catastrophe in New

---

<sup>74</sup> The historical framework of this chapter situates New Orleans as the product of competing international economic, political, and ideological forces rather than a distinctly American project. Much of the historical scholarship focusing on the transition of New Orleans and the territory of Louisiana to US control treats the city as an outlier to the evolving national identity of “America” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Sublette 4). Major Amos Stoddard, writing in 1812, describes the wider economic context of New Orleans as a global marketplace, calling it “the great mart of all the wealth of the western world” and offers an alternative American history from a pressure cooker of Caribbean, US, and European interests (151).

Orleans evolve as performative examples of community resistance; these case studies of collective processing of trauma through performance serve to resist dominant American narratives of the disposability of black people and culture.

This chapter's analysis of the Katrina theatrical archive does not focus on details of how the United States government failed the people of New Orleans post-Katrina; this is perhaps the best documented US catastrophe of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and exploring that governmental failure has been the approach of many foundational sociological and anthropological studies. The overwhelming majority of Katrina scholarship acknowledges that the hurricane itself was not the catastrophe: the true catastrophe of Katrina is the subsequent neglect from the federal government in the form both of withholding aid, and also of engineering failures of the US Army Corps of engineers.<sup>75</sup> However, my interest in Katrina as a catastrophe is not in the social and material failings of the broken national disaster aid and levy systems; this is well-trodden scholarly territory. The proliferation of scholarly work on Katrina provides both the privilege and challenge of contributing a new analytical perspective on New Orleans and catastrophe. I explore a new approach to the cultural archive of Katrina by analyzing plays as primary texts to better understand how theater offers frameworks of temporal innovation to transform the region's historical geographies of black time into narratives which reveal the radical potential of community, embodied performance, and the collective processing of the afterlives of plantation slavery and colonialism on the people of Louisiana. These plays are political and aesthetic

---

<sup>75</sup> I am deeply indebted to the Katrina scholarship of Jed Horne, Douglass Brinkely, Anna Hartnell, Steve Kroll-Smith, Michael Eric Dyson, Vern Baxter, Valerie Gunter, and so many other scholars who have researched and reported on the political, economic, and social failings of FEMA and the U.S. federal government in responding to the flooding of New Orleans and the people of New Orleans in 2005. The proliferation of work on Katrina provides both the privilege and challenge of contributing a new analytical perspective on New Orleans and disaster which explores new cultural archives.

experiments which allow us to approach critical readings of Katrina as a catastrophe which serves as a catalyst for new artistic and affective responses to the disposability and erasure of black communities and the importance of time in the developing fields of black geographies and Caribbean studies of catastrophe.<sup>76</sup>

Before I offer my analysis of the Katrina theater archive it is important to understand the deep historical and political context of the Louisiana territory in relation to the Haitian, French, and American Revolutions and national projects as foundational to the catastrophe temporality itself. I'll also establish the intertwining cultural and ideological formations of Louisiana, more broadly the Louisiana Territory, as a place of psychic marginalization within U.S. imagination to understand how cycles of federal neglect and artistic resistance originate within the region.

### **Colonizing the Louisiana Territory & the Chaos of French Rule**

New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Mississippi gulf coast would not be a part of the United States were it not for the accident of geological chance and the competing colonial economies and military exploits of France, Spain, and the U.S. in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. New Orleans sits roughly at the confluence of the mighty Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico which pumps out approximately forty-one percent of the runoff of the continental United States and is geologically

---

<sup>76</sup> Literary theorist Saidiya Hartman's thinking on the afterlives of slavery is useful here. She explains this, writing: "If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery – skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (Hartman 6). These are precisely the material and social conditions for the black communities most impacted by Katrina and they emerge from the logics of plantation slavery in the US.

the youngest part of the U.S. (Sublette 9).<sup>77</sup> British architectural artist Benjamin Henry Latrobe famously described New Orleans in his travel journal, writing in 1819: “New Orleans has at first sight a very imposing and handsome appearance, beyond any other city in the United States in which I have yet been. Mud, mud, mud. This is a floating city, floating below the surface of the water on a bed of mud.” (223). It’s precisely this fertile mud which provides the perfect conditions for the growing of sugar cane, tobacco, cotton, and other cash crops foundational to colonial economies and the transatlantic slave trade. However, even more important than the agricultural possibilities of Louisiana itself was the trade and expansion opportunities made possible by the Mississippi River. The Mississippi provided access to the bulk of the U.S., as well as Canada, through its junctions with the Missouri, Arkansas, Red, Ohio, Tennessee, and Illinois rivers. Controlling the port of New Orleans guaranteed oversight of trade entering the territory from the Gulf of Mexico.

For as long as there has been trade in North America there has been a port at the site of the Crescent-City or, less glamorously, the only spot in the vast swamp of the Mississippi delta that could support urban development of any scale (Sublette 10-11). As important as New Orleans is as a site of international trade it’s also a significant military asset. Whoever controls the port of New Orleans controls the primary waterway to access the North American continent: a pre-requisite for trade expansion, resource acquisition, and colonial expansion. No matter

---

<sup>77</sup> The approximately 90 miles of Mississippi river extending beyond New Orleans and into the Gulf of Mexico is what geologists call an “alluvial birdfoot” which is essentially a region where there is no determinable system of where land ends and sea begins (Sublette 10). Sublette goes on to describe that the southernmost swamps and bayous have been largely unpopulated, which is only true in comparison with the concentrated population of urban spaces like New Orleans or Baton Rouge. The “alluvial birdfoot” of southern Louisiana has been home to indigenous people (Natchez, Taensa, and Houma) since long before European intervention in the 1500s. This is especially important to consider in the shift to chapter 4 which explores the effects of rising tides on the gulf coast economies and storytelling in the time of climate catastrophe.

which colonial power controlled Louisiana, New Orleans served as the primary hub of communication and commerce, connecting “the Mississippi watershed, the Gulf Rim, the Atlantic seaboard, the Caribbean Rim, Western Europe (especially France and Spain), and various areas of West and central Africa” (4). Much as Saint-Domingue was considered the pearl of the Antilles due to its strategic location as the gateway to the Caribbean, this was the function of New Orleans for the North American continent.

Although Spanish explorers were the first Europeans to land in Louisiana in the early 1500s, the French were the first colonial occupying force to take control of the territory and establish colonial settlements in 1682.<sup>78</sup> These settlements at the mouths of the Mississippi River’s tributaries along the Gulf Coast claimed a huge portion of North America and created a foothold to expand a vast French commercial empire from the Gulf of Mexico all the way to Canada. French trade settlements began cropping up all along the Mississippi River valley, throughout the Great Lakes region, and into most of Eastern Canada.

Simultaneously, under Louis XIV’s leadership, and energized by the regional power France enjoyed following successes of the Franco-Dutch War, French forces began engaging in expensive foreign invasions to expand France’s global territories and solidify religious unity in Europe. The Nine Years War, which continued from 1688-1697, locked Louis XIV’s military into a protracted war against the Grand Alliance (the Holy Roman Empire, England, Spain, Savoy, and the Dutch Republic). Although the French had far greater wealth than England, and three times the population, the British structures of taxation on their domestic economy, the

---

<sup>78</sup> Hernando De Soto was the first European explorer to lead an expedition which entered what would eventually become Louisiana. His crew, following rumors of gold and precious metals, traveled from the Gulf of Mexico up the Mississippi river and into the White River in present-day Arkansas. The expedition frequently entered into skirmishes with Native American warriors and suffered significant casualties throughout their mission (Pasquier, “Early Exploration”).

implementation of credit practices in British banking, and expanding global British sea trade served as stiff economic competition for France. Louis XIV was also struggling to manage the new resistance of French nobles to the feudal tax system which had been used since the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Sublette 34). The medieval French taxation system, essentially the King squeezing the nobles who, in turn, collected from the underclass using force, had funded Louis XIV dreams of expansion. As part of Spain's concessions at the end of the Nine Years War, Carlos II officially conceded Saint-Domingue to France in 1697. In Saint-Domingue, French control was already a way of life but the formal acknowledgement allowed for France to begin rapidly building up the plantation economy which made Saint-Domingue the Pearl of the Antilles.

Life for French colonists in the Louisiana territory meant collaboration with or domination of Indigenous and free Black communities depending on the context and specific region. Infamous French-Canadian soldier and colonist Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, known for his leadership in wartime massacres and looting of furs in Hudson Bay to sell them for his own profit, was one of the first French colonists who traveled from Saint-Domingue to the US Gulf Coast territory in 1699 to establish a more permanent infrastructure for the French (36-39). Most Canadian fur traders and trappers traveling through the Louisiana territory before Iberville appeared on the scene had dedicated substantial energy to "drinking, gambling, and lechery" rather than civic development (C. Brasseaux 526).<sup>79</sup> As Iberville began to develop what would become Biloxi, Mobile Bay, New Orleans, Saint-Domingue's plantation economy and the slave trade were enriching French landowners and aristocrats. The wealth generated by Saint-

---

<sup>79</sup> There are records of occasional marriages between Canadian traders and Indigenous or free Black women which occasionally occurred. However, the enslavement of Indigenous women by Canadian traders to be sold into forced sex with French or Swiss soldiers was essentially the only "coherent labor force in the territory" (Sublette 40).

Domingue continued to fuel the potential for conflict in Europe. England was anxious about the possible New World alliance between colonial Spain and France which would push them out of trade and expansion possibilities in the Caribbean. These global trade and expansion fears resulted in the War of Spanish Succession which started only four years after the Nine Years War had concluded.<sup>80</sup>

With France and England, along with their allies, at war in Europe once again, the French colonists in Louisiana were virtually cut off from supply shipments or military support during the war. The French treasury was depleted so substantially that the French colonists only received 4 supply shipments during the 12 years of the War of Spanish Succession (Sublette 41). The French had limited naval power compared to the massive British fleet, so most French ships were conscripted into military service rather than providing the needed material support and plans to unify new French territories under continental governance.

Iberville took advantage of the lack of oversight and captured the British island colony of Nevis, “imprisoning all 7,000 living on the island, stealing 1,309 slaves, and carting off complete sugar mills” (41). He resold the stolen slaves in Saint-Domingue for his personal profit and continued to Havana where he caught yellow fever and died in 1706 (Hall 12). Iberville’s younger brother Bienville took over the development of the Louisiana colony after his death as well as Iberville’s penchant for profiteering. Bienville is credited with bringing the first enslaved Blacks into Louisiana from Havana. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall cites a letter from Antoine de la Mothe, sieur de Cadillac (the Louisiana governor from 1710-1717) which explains the details of

---

<sup>80</sup> The War of Spanish Succession lasted from 1701-1713 and ended with French defeat and the Treaty of Utrecht. However, the British couldn’t remove Philip of Anjou (Philip V of Spain) from the Spanish throne. This was a major goal of the war because of Philip V’s French ancestry and ties between the two colonizing forces competing with the British for control of territories in the Americas (Sublette 41-44).

Bienville's slave expedition which set off from Saint-Domingue, writing: "[Bienville] sent a ship to St. Domingue for [his] own benefit, and at the expense of the king. The ship... stopped over in Havana, under the pretext of looking for powder, and embarked several slaves. This is the first documentary evidence of the entrance of black slaves into Louisiana" (57-58).<sup>81</sup>

During Bienville's governorship he formally established New Orleans as along the crescent bend of the Mississippi largely because of its natural protection from hurricanes and tide surges. After a complicated series of negotiations with the Company of the West, which pushed for establishing New Orleans at Bayou Manchac instead of Bienville's site, Bienville took matters into his own hands and awarded himself the two largest land tracts near his selected site. These two areas, Vieux Carré (today's French Quarter) combined with the Chapitoulas district (present day Jefferson Parish, sometimes spelled "Tchoupitoulas"), and a small part of the west bank of the river opposite Vieux Carré (Kastor 45). Bienville granted himself complete ownership over the land without any approvals from the king or other governing bodies; most importantly, he established himself as the tax collector for both districts. Bienville persisted in the fight against the Company of the West-backed Bayou Manchac coalition and had stiff competition from the river itself. The section of the Mississippi delta leading to Bienville's site was shallow and left many trade ships stranded for weeks as they made their way upriver. Worse was the spring flood of 1719 which drowned Bienville's New Orleans under half a foot of water;

---

<sup>81</sup> Cadillac, a French fur trader and privateer, convinced French investors to fund his mining operations in the Louisiana territory which demoted Canadian-born Bienville. The king gave Cadillac a 15-year exclusive right on developing Louisiana as well as the governorship and financial administration powers which sidelined Bienville (Sublette 43). Cadillac's time as governor was disastrous; he wouldn't consult with Bienville, who was familiar with the territory's resources, and found no silver or gold. Bienville assumed the governorship again in 1716 and was appointed to the role twice more, for a grand total of 29 years over his four tenures as Louisiana governor between 1701-1743.

it would remain submerged for almost six months (49). The 1719 flood resulted in the first makeshift levee system for the colony.

Despite all of these challenges, Bienville's scheming yielded success when he began a porter system for new colonists arriving at the Bayou St. John. His flatboats would take the new arrival and their possessions upstream to Bienville's New Orleans site. Importantly, he also promised land and slaves if they could join his colony's site. Bienville controlled access to land as well as the enslaved African labor that he would sell the new arrivals on credit (52-54).<sup>82</sup> New colonists would purchase slaves from Bienville on this credit with the idea that their profits in farming the land would allow them to repay the loan. Bienville's near total control of the slave market and land-distribution practices in colonial Louisiana granted him extraordinary power. Bienville's duplicitous efforts eventually paid off when the sandy soil and frequent storms of the Biloxi site made the area too difficult to farm. Bienville's New Orleans had a deep-water port as well as easy access to the territories off the Mississippi where sugar and tobacco farming would flourish.

The enslaved Africans whom Bienville trafficked to Louisiana were the driving force behind the success of New Orleans as a city, not just because of their labor, but because of the skills they brought with them, which were crucial to keep the white colonists from starvation. The early arrivals of enslaved Senegambians brought experience cultivating rice as well as processing indigo to be used as a dye, neither of which the white Europeans could manage on their own (Hall 12). Indigo grew wild in both Senegambia and Louisiana and the first ships that arrived with enslaved Senegambians also transported rice seed as well as those who knew how to

---

<sup>82</sup> Between 1719-1721 Bienville arranged for eight slave ship transports to Louisiana which carried more than 1,900 enslaved Africans (Kastor 53).

grow it. Rice became a staple of the Louisiana diet and stopped the white colonists from starvation. Additionally, the first Africans brought with them the roots of music and religious practice which established the region's hybridized culture which blended European and African forms of expression and storytelling (124).

With the introduction of enslaved Africans and the explosive growth of New Orleans' urban and nearby plantation systems the diversity of class and race in the region continued to grow. The second generation of New Orleanians, the Creole generation, was a mix of "elites and the commoners, *les grands* and *les petits gens*, as well as Africans and Indians, slave and free – each had ideas of their own about what constituted community" which was far from the original economy, politics, and social structure proposed by the French colonists (92). The colony wasn't generating profits or the degree of social and political control seen in Saint-Domingue, and there was little disagreement in Paris that the Louisiana Territory should be transferred to Spanish control at the end of the Seven Years War.<sup>83</sup> The French attempted to use the territory as a bargaining chip to get Spain to ally against the British. Though the Spanish weren't initially interested in the colony, a secret treaty was established in 1762 between France and Spain which shifted control of the territory to Spain. The French were worried that Britain would take control of the Louisiana Territory before Spain could arrive to defend the land, but the British officially conceded the region to Spain in one of the many treaties ending the French and Indian War. Of course, this was a formality, as the Spanish were already in control of the territory.

The French, Creole, and native communities already occupying the Louisiana territory were generally unhappy with the shift to Spanish rule. The new Spanish colonial governor did

---

<sup>83</sup> The Seven Years War (1756-1763) was a global conflict which occurred simultaneously with the French and Indian War (1754-1763) as well as several other alliance-based conflicts which set Britain against Spain and France (Hoffman 90).

not arrive in Louisiana until 3 years after Spanish ownership was declared as a part of the treaty process ending the French and Indian War. The absence of a substantial Spanish military presence; persistent deep economic, linguistic, and cultural ties to France; and the lack of Spanish oversight from 1763-1766 set the tone for Louisiana's lack of governability which persisted well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Spanish leadership was unprepared to co-exist with the diversity of Native American tribes, French-speaking colonists, and the significant numbers of free and enslaved Afro-Louisianans. While not as strictly controlled as other Spanish colonies, Louisiana's trade was restricted to Spain's ports and crews with a two-thirds majority of Spanish sailors.

The colony's economic structures and security began to crumble under the new Spanish trade restrictions and set the political stage for an uprising against Spanish control. Louisiana citizens who had economically profited from French control had issues with Spanish regulations that "threatened the existing customs and economic interests of the colony but denied the money and military manpower needed to give [Spanish] authority credibility" (107). In October of 1768 the first Spanish governor of Louisiana, Antonio de Ulloa, was driven out of the colony by a French-loyalist revolt.<sup>84</sup> This French-loyalist rebellion was quickly suppressed by Spanish military forces and General Alexandre O'Reilly established a series of reforms which would strengthen Spain's ideological and economic power in the Louisiana Territory. Most importantly, O'Reilly dissolved the Superior Council (established during French rule) and created a *cabildo*,

---

<sup>84</sup> The Spanish responded with military force to the protests calling for a return to French rule. The French-loyalists leading the movement were convicted and either imprisoned or executed under the command of General Alexandre O'Reilly (Sublette 93-95, "Louisiana as a Spanish Colony").

or town council.<sup>85</sup> General O'Reilly's leadership also transformed the economic landscape of New Orleans and the Louisiana Territory. He expelled many foreign merchants from New Orleans and strengthened ties with Spain's production and distribution of goods from Cuba. Spain's focus on transforming Havana from a shipping hub into a sugar plantation economy increased the appeal of strengthening the strategic Spanish military presence in New Orleans.

### The Age of Revolution's Ideological and Economic Impact on Louisiana

Further complicating the Spanish, French, and U.S.'s competing economic interests in Louisiana as a strategic site for trade and colonial expansion were the waves of revolutions in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century: the American, French, and Haitian revolutions. Spain's control over Louisiana during the American revolution meant that Spanish leaders had regional decisions to make regarding the British expansion in the Caribbean. The Spanish colonial governor of Louisiana, Bernardo de Gálvez, was an experienced military leader and joined the side of the American colonists, along with their French allies, to strategically disrupt British expansion in the Caribbean and U.S. Gulf. Gálvez won important victories in Florida and upriver in the Mississippi against the British. This ultimately dislodged the British naval presence in the U.S. Gulf. His successful defense of the Louisiana territory and Florida led to provisions in the Treaty of Paris in 1763. The treaty gave Spain control of Florida and ended the British and Spanish conflict which temporarily solidified Spain's power in Louisiana and formally established American independence (K. DuVal 229-230). American independence and the evolving movement for self-governance in Saint-Domingue and France would soon push Spain out of New Orleans and the Louisiana Territory.

---

<sup>85</sup> This is particularly important because the cabildo set up formal civic and government operations that would turn New Orleans into a city rather than a disorganized colonial trade outpost. Taxation to benefit public works was one of the most immediate impacts of the cabildo.

Ideologies of liberty and egalitarianism from the French revolution began circulating in New Orleans as well as the French colony of Saint-Domingue soon after the American Revolution ended. As the U.S. was beginning to construct a national project on its own terms, the Revolution in Saint-Domingue began in 1791 and forever changed the dialogue around slavery in the New World. Historian Robin Blackburn distills the arguments of both C. L. R. James and Eugene Genovese summarizing the impacts of the French, American, and Haitian Revolution on the region, writing: “Part of the grandeur of the Great French Revolution is that it came to sponsor slave emancipation in the Americas; and part of that grandeur of the great Revolution in St. Domingue / Haiti is that it successfully defended the gains of the French revolution against France itself” (259). This context is why the histories of colonial Louisiana and Saint-Domingue are inextricably tied together at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Exploring both the international and the local impacts of the emancipation of slavery from French colonies as well as the revolutionary influence of Saint-Domingue on Louisiana clarifies the radical ungovernability of New Orleans once under U.S. control.

Agricultural developments during this period radically transformed the economic potential of Louisiana and began the large-scale production of sugar, cotton, and tobacco which replaced indigo production. Spanish fears of a slave rebellion in the Louisiana territory, inspired by the success of the revolution in Saint-Domingue, led to the Spanish decision to end slave imports to New Orleans. This decision frustrated the wealthy Creoles who relied on slave labor to manage the growing plantations. The city of New Orleans and economic power of the region continued to develop, but in 1795 the economic landscape changed dramatically with a treaty between Spain and the U.S. allowing U.S. merchants to trade freely along the Mississippi river and sell their goods in New Orleans without export taxes (Chamberlain and Faber, “Spanish

Colonial Louisiana”). In the same year, Étienne de Boré’s experimental process to produce refined sugar in Louisiana was successful. With sugar production on the rise in Louisiana, plantation production of sugar dropped to virtually nothing in Saint-Domingue because of the revolution. In 1802 the invention of the cotton gin shifted production away from tobacco to the primary focus of cotton and locally refined sugar. By the revolutionary period cotton was the dominant plantation cash crop outside of the southern tropical zones in Louisiana where sugar cane remained the primary crop.<sup>86</sup>

Although settlers successfully harvested sugar cane in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the sugar boom in Louisiana didn’t occur until refugees from Saint-Domingue brought a Caribbean variety to the territory in 1797.<sup>87</sup> Ribbon cane, introduced in 1817, and the refining technologies of Étienne de Boré which converted cane juice into granules which could be easily stored and shipped, convinced many plantation owners in Southern Louisiana to convert their cotton, tobacco, and indigo crops to sugar cane.<sup>88</sup> The granularization technique also inspired many plantation owners to take significant financial risks building sugar mills and consolidating smaller land holdings into sugar cane. Importantly, the production and refining of sugar cane was a year-round process from planting, growing, and cutting, up to milling the product.

Enslaved workers became the dominant labor force, fueling the sugar boom as the freed workers opted for less physically demanding agricultural work. Plantation owners began to

---

<sup>86</sup> See “Antebellum Louisiana II: Agrarian Life”.

<sup>87</sup> Many refugees from Saint-Domingue entered the Louisiana territory by way of Cuba based on its relative proximity to the island (Evans 25). The second wave of Haitian migration to Louisiana occurred in 1809 with France and Spain at war in Europe. Spanish officials were expelling all French refugees from Cuba if they wouldn’t pledge allegiance to the Spanish crown. Most Haitian immigrants left Cuba for New Orleans which deepened cultural ties to Haiti/Saint-Domingue. The majority of the approximately 9000 Haitian immigrants from 1809-1810 stayed in New Orleans and significantly increased the city’s population (48).

<sup>88</sup> See “Antebellum Louisiana II: Agrarian Life”.

recognize sugar's profitability over cotton and realized that big risks, for example, investing in expensive milling technology and slaves to cultivate year-round, resulted in significant wealth. By the revolutionary period, the average sugar plantation had a value of \$200,000, whereas even the largest cotton plantations were worth only half of that.<sup>89</sup> The machinery required for sugar milling was substantially more complicated and technically sophisticated than all other production technology for the period. Technological advancements in the sugar refining process continued to evolve production and enrich plantation owners throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Norbert Rillieux's vacuum-pan method of evaporating sugar cane juice to produce refined sugar transformed production by creating a safer and more lucrative alternative to de Boré's boiling and distilling method which produced unrefined granules (R. Brasseaux, "Norbert Rillieux"). In 1845 the first factory-scale Rillieux system of refining sugar began operation in Louisiana and was soon adopted by Cuba, Mexico, and other sugar-producing regions as the dominant refining model.

The rapid expansion of massive profits in sugar production made the Louisiana territory an ever more enticing territory for both American, British, and French interests. Spain, with the indecisive leadership of Carlos IV, was back at war with Great Britain and lost its hold on Louisiana in 1800. In a secret treaty with Napoleon Bonaparte's France, Carlos IV granted Louisiana back to France, although Spain did not share the necessary documents with France for a formal transfer of ownership.<sup>90</sup> Bonaparte had ambitions to turn Louisiana into a "wheat-growing breadbasket for a reconstructed, slave-based sugar economy in the Caribbean" and to reestablish control of Saint-Domingue (Chamberlain and Faber, "Spanish Colonial Louisiana").

---

<sup>89</sup> See "Antebellum Louisiana II: Agrarian Life".

<sup>90</sup> This allowed Spain to maintain a presence in Louisiana as well as make sure that the territory wouldn't be transferred to a third party (the U.S. or Britain).

Bonaparte's plans for Louisiana ultimately failed when French forces faced a series of military losses at the hands of formerly enslaved revolutionaries in Saint-Domingue. With Bonaparte's prospects of a New World sugar plantation economy waning and his anxieties about interference in the territory from the U.S. he pivoted to sell the Louisiana Territory to the United States in 1803. Strategically, this blocked the British from vying for the territory and warmed relations between the U.S. and France. For the U.S. government, the notion of France reestablishing itself within the North American mainland ran counter to the desire for U.S. expansion and regional autonomy. There was an underlying, albeit incorrect, assumption on the part of the Americans that Napoleon intended to generate a significant military force in the Louisiana territory (Kastor 38). Exclusive U.S. control over the Mississippi delta, specifically the ports of New Orleans and Baton Rouge, were the primary short-term goals driving the U.S. negotiations to secure the Louisiana Territory. However, the U.S. acquisition of Louisiana territory presented issues of cultural and ideological resistance to U.S. assimilation that remain at the core of Louisianans' regional and racial identity to the present day.<sup>91</sup>

Perhaps the most important aspect of the Louisiana Purchase, albeit frequently overlooked in American History scholarship, is that this massive territorial and nationalist project was made possible by the Haitian Revolution: a revolution which was organized, planned, and executed by formerly enslaved black men and women of Saint-Domingue to overthrow (both materially and ideologically) a powerful European colonizer. Haiti's formation

---

<sup>91</sup> The three-caste system included a large African population of both enslaved people and gens de couleur libres along with the primarily white and mixed-race Creole planter-merchant class. This racial system, more like the Caribbean and South American structures of racial hierarchy, persisted well beyond the revolutionary period. Many New Orleanians of mixed race self-identify as Creoles of color rather than African Americans today (Chamberlain and Faber, "Spanish Colonial Louisiana").

in 1804 brought about an experiment for a society whose “whole basis for citizenship was literally the renunciation of white privilege, but their revolution’s success had at the same time delivered the Mississippi Valley to a new empire of slavery” (Baptist 49). This new age of enslavement and plantation agriculture in Louisiana shifts the catastrophe of sugar production to the Gulf Coast and the attempted Americanization of Louisiana.

### **The Louisiana Purchase: Ungovernability and Rejection of “American” Ideologies**

The greatest challenge posted to the project of American nationalism under a unifying national ideology was the dramatic acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase.<sup>92</sup> This was the largest addition of new territory since independence which roughly doubled the size of the United States. It was not simply the expansion of physical borders that presented a challenge, but the prospect of governing a completely new demographic: black, white, and native residents who had not been transplanted from other regions of the U.S. (Reinhardt 247).<sup>93</sup> Cultural and social conflicts abounded within the new territory and the customs or traditions of the people living within what would become the state of Louisiana generally resisted the ideological connection to the United States. For example, the French-speaking Catholics would not become English-speaking Protestants overnight, and the dominant U.S. political values such as egalitarianism and republican virtue made little sense to the people of the hierarchical and authoritarian colonial society (Faber 2).

---

<sup>92</sup> This is, of course, a national ideology constructed to protect white supremacy, economic security for the wealthy, and English-speaking Protestant values.

<sup>93</sup> The historian Peter J. Kastor describes the incorporation of Louisiana residents in terms of “attachment” instead of the more limiting and contemporary construct of “identity” because the white and black residents of Louisiana were “equally concerned with political, administrative, commercial, diplomatic, and legal structures” of their experience post-Louisiana Purchase (4-5). He argues that identity rests firmly on the recent conceptions of self and society, which is not the ideal structure for analyzing the integration of Louisiana’s cross-cultural, cross-national residents into a broader concept of “Americanness” in 1803 (Handler 27-40).

However, the resistance to assimilation into the United States was seen as an opportunity by some Louisianans to use the political ideologies of the republican national government to grab power. As a result, the complicated social, economic, and political transitions in Louisiana touched “systems of slavery and racial order, the legal system, and constructions of ethnic and national identity – [amounting] to a revolution” (2). Faber characterizes this cultural and social revolution as doomed to fail, writing:

It was a revolution analogous in many ways to the American revolution that had severed the eastern states’ colonial connection to Great Britain a generation earlier. It was a strange kind of revolution, evolving neither military struggles nor popular mobilizations ... [and] it originated from the outside. ... To be sure, Americans, including both Americans in the federal government and Americans who moved to New Orleans and embroiled themselves in it struggled – had definite ideas about the sort of Louisiana they wanted to create. But they proved, for the most part, unable to impose their visions, and many of them despaired of ever being able to truly consider Louisiana a part of a republican Union. (3-4)

Constructing a coherent idea of “nationhood” was a foundational part of the history of the United States and presented real challenges in the incorporation of urban communities and rural industry developing in the Louisiana frontier. It was not only the formal spaces of government sparking conflict in Louisiana during the period of transition into the U.S., but the hyper-local negotiations between masters and slaves in shifting expectations around labor conditions as well as religious and artistic freedoms post-Louisiana Purchase (Kastor 4). Ultimately, the ideological turn towards nationhood was led by the white residents of Louisiana who “shifted from a fundamentally localist perspective to one that fused local concerns with a national outlook”

defined by white supremacy (5).<sup>94</sup> This national framework of white supremacy offered economic prosperity and local power to the white residents of Louisiana, and simultaneously created a sentimentality-dense narrative of belonging where they could conceptualize themselves as the primary stakeholders within a greater white national community compared to their black and mixed-race neighbors.

I describe this ideological shift to lay a foundation for the diverging psychological attachment to national belonging embraced by white Louisianans in contrast to the ideological, cultural, and physical resistance against nationhood from enslaved Africans and Afro-Caribbeans. During French and Spanish control of the Orleans Territory black and mixed-race residents had enjoyed a more liminal status with negotiated spaces of agency and control.<sup>95</sup> Slavery in Louisiana existed long before the transition to U.S. control. French control of the colony introduced plantation farming to the Gulf Coast during the colonial period. French officials enslaved Native Americans as the primary labor force due to the shortage of white settlers in the region. Soon after, Afro-Caribbean and Africans became the primary source of slaves, a shift which skyrocketed productivity and consolidated wealth in the colony due to the ability to import a high number of laborers. Demographic data from 1803 leads to estimates that

---

<sup>94</sup> A majority of free people of color in the Louisiana territory initially aligned with the white Louisianans sympathetic to the broader US nationalist outlook at the time of transition to US control. There were considerable opportunities presented to both communities in incorporation (Kastor 5). However, the power differentials between free people of color and white Louisianans would shift dramatically as the establishment of the US as a racial state progressed; thus, the alignment for incorporation ultimately benefitted the white Louisianans in the long-term establishment of power and control.

<sup>95</sup> This is not to suggest that the atrocities of slavery were not impacting black and indigenous communities in Louisiana. Slavery was as old as the colony itself regardless of which nation controlled the territory.

Louisiana's 11,000 slaves and 1,500 free people of color were almost equal to the white population: approximately 15,000.<sup>96</sup>

Within the imperial hierarchical structure of the Spanish and French colony those of Native American, European, and African descent all experienced different forms of inequality and marginalization; and thus, retained negotiated power in aspects of daily life in their economic and social interactions with one another. Compared to the rest of North America, enslaved black Louisianans under Spanish and French colonial rule had considerable freedom of movement and were able to sue and contract for their freedom through relatively liberal manumission policies, even without the consent of their masters (Cole 1010).<sup>97</sup> The right of “*coartación*”, or self-purchase, was never enacted into formal Louisiana law; it “was recognized and enforced, nevertheless, in a steady stream of judicial decisions averaging somewhat less than two cases per year for the thirty-three year period of direct Spanish rule” (Ingersoll 174). After the Louisiana purchase, manumissive rights were severely restricted, but Louisiana remained one of only three states in the US that allowed slaves to contract for their freedom (Matison 149). Many manumissions in Louisiana were paid for by free people of color, typically related to the enslaved party, living in New Orleans working as skilled merchants. These communities of free people of color conducted business with those who had amassed substantial wealth from the

---

<sup>96</sup> See “An Account of Louisiana, Being an Abstract of Documents, in the Offices of the Departments of State, and of the Treasury (1803)”.

<sup>97</sup> During Spanish control, from 1769-1803, the Spanish colony legal code afforded slaves several important rights which impacted the significant number of enslaved Africans and Afro-Caribbeans who purchased their freedom and migrated to New Orleans. As the economist Shawn Cole explains, under Spanish law, “masters did not require any official permission to manumit slaves; mistreated slaves could request resale to another master, and slaves could purchase their freedom by paying their market price to masters (1013). Cole’s analysis emerges from Gwendolyn Midlo Hall’s amazing data set which compiles and distills the “*coartación*” records from the French, Spanish, and U.S. colonial periods and translates the prices into USD for ease of comparative use.

thriving sugar and cotton industries, black and white alike. Almost 75% of manumissions from Louisiana occurred in New Orleans Parish, the only urban parish in Louisiana, largely due to the concentration of free people of color who were able to bankroll the freedom of their enslaved family members (Cole 1017).

Once a part of the United States two distinct political and ideological Afro-Louisianan groups emerged: free people of color, “seeking membership in an imperial polity”; and enslaved people of color who were “committed to its destruction” of the imperial policies and social structures which oppressed them (Kastor 29). Free people of color were concentrated in and around New Orleans and gained political and economic power through their work as artisans, merchants, and members of the militia. Immigrants from-Saint Domingue began identifying as Louisiana Creoles but were still seen as foreigners in the eyes of national policy makers. White lawmakers at the U.S. Capitol fought against the incorporation of Louisiana’s diverse population into the United States as an unconstitutional decision. Pennsylvania Congressman John Smilie summarizes the opposition view to incorporating Louisiana into the Union, claiming: “neither the conquest nor the purchase can incorporate them [the residents of a new territory] into the Union. They must remain in the condition of colonies, and be governed accordingly” (quoted in Kastor 48). The racial and cultural diversity of Louisianans was a threat to the concerns of the white majority in the American national community who wanted to withhold the right to elect representatives from Louisianans. There were persisting fears that the centuries of French and Spanish colonial rule, along with the growing ties to Saint-Domingue, had ruined any prospect of Americanization. The U.S. agricultural economy was reliant on plantation slavery, and the desire to prevent a slave revolt like that which began the Haitian Revolution fueled U.S. policymaking. Haiti’s history was the primary factor in the U.S. government’s decision to ban the international

slave trade, thus securing domestic slavery in Louisiana and establishing New Orleans as the largest slave market in the United States (Sublette 219).<sup>98</sup>

The ideological shift towards Americanization of Louisiana began when news of the French Revolution and the racial revolt and mobilization of slaves in the French colony of Saint-Domingue reached New Orleans. Aside from familial connections, there was little political or social organization that formed among enslaved Afro-Louisianans in the Spanish and French colonial periods, generally due to the linguistic and ethnic diversity of the population. The 1795 slave uprisings in Pointe Coupée, a plantation district not far from Baton Rouge, is an important example of the cross-national and political organization of Afro-Louisianans as it holds significant ideological links with the international Jacobinism which drove the revolution in Saint-Domingue (Hall 344). In 1811 the largest slave revolt in U.S. history occurred in the heart of sugar plantation production on the German Coast less than 41 miles outside of New Orleans in St. Charles and St. John the Baptist Parishes. There were as many as 500 enslaved Afro-Louisianans who organized and moved through the river lands burning cane fields en route to New Orleans.

Though the revolt's momentum was stopped by a militia from New Orleans, this uprising took inspiration from the organization and tactics at the start of the Haitian Revolution. The exact details of the uprising are somewhat murky, but one of the organizers, Charles Deslondes, would be credited and blamed as the leader and organizer of the revolt. Deslondes was likely formerly enslaved in Saint-Domingue before fleeing to Louisiana, but it is possible that he was a "Creole"

---

<sup>98</sup> The federal Slave Trade Act of 1807 established a national ban on the importation of slaves from abroad to the U.S. This is one of the most significant legislative acts in U.S. history as it forever linked the plantation agricultural systems of the South with the strength of a new domestic slave economy.

born in Louisiana. There are additional oral accounts of contributions from other formerly enslaved Saint-Domingue immigrants linked to Deslondes but few historical records to support a definitive picture of the revolt's leaders and structure.<sup>99</sup> Many of those who participated and survived the conflict itself were killed shortly after the revolt or its suspiciously swift trials.

The threat of a successful slave revolt, together with political and social organization among the Afro-Louisianan community generally, remained an existential threat to the white control of New Orleans. William C. C. Claiborne, the first territorial and state governor of Louisiana, used the German Coast revolt as a bargaining chip with the wealthy planters and aristocrats to push for Americanization and increased restrictions on enslaved blacks (Rasmussen 174). The fears of a successful uprising shifted the political will of the white aristocrats towards Claiborne and statehood.

Louisiana's loyalty to the U.S. was tested soon after as the British returned in 1815 in the battle of New Orleans. Andrew Jackson's victory at the battle of New Orleans, the last U.S. victory of the war of 1812, coupled with continuing fears of a slave uprising, served as justification for the U.S. to go to war for Spanish-controlled Florida. In President James Monroe's 1818 State of the Union speech, Monroe wholeheartedly supported Jackson's aggression, characterizing "Spain's control over Florida as a relic of the past, a figment of maps and treaties but no longer a reality" (183). He declared the border between the U.S. and Spanish

---

<sup>99</sup> The historian Edward E. Baptist describes a second "Charles" who was born in Saint-Domingue and brought to the U.S. by Auguste Girard from Havana to New Orleans. Manuel Andry, the plantation owner on the German Coast where the uprising began, bought this second Charles from Girard. This Charles who was "raised in the vortex of both slave and sugar-making revolution" was an organizer in Andry's sugar cane production and perhaps called the meeting on the levee to plan the revolt (Baptist 58).

Florida “an imaginary line in the woods” and intended to turn the region into an expansion of the slave-based plantation agricultural system dominating the rest of the Gulf Coast (183-184).

The unchecked growth of Lower Louisiana’s plantation sugar industry, along with the invention of the cotton gin, meant there was an essentially unlimited market for slaves in Louisiana. Ironically, the hub of all interstate slave trade was New Orleans, where black identity differed significantly from the rest of the United States. New Orleans, as a result of its global colonial past, had a massive community of free people of color, as well as relatively greater freedom for enslaved Afro-Louisianans under Spanish and French colonial rule. There was an integrated practice of African-derived religions and much of the black community of the region was centered in and around New Orleans (239). The 1810 census of New Orleans established the city as a black city: 37 percent of the 17,000 residents were white, and the rest were free people of color or enslaved Afro-Louisianans (260). While Louisiana’s early state politics were like other new U.S. states in many ways, the major distinction was a matter of class: the social and economic structures made possible only by the plantation agricultural system which privileged white supremacy and the elite (Kastor 187-188). The uniqueness of New Orleans stems from the rapid succession of three distinct colonial eras whose laws, languages, cultural norms, and separate ties to Africa and the transatlantic slave trade coalesced in an expression of regional identity built around the plantation economy that was decidedly un-American.

The regional turmoil regarding the plantation economy, as well as the psychic threat of Haiti as a free black nation so close to Louisiana, shaped national efforts to withhold power and civic autonomy from Afro-Louisianans well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. J. Michael Dash describes the white American approximation of Haiti as an “inexhaustible symbol designed to satisfy material as well as psychological needs”, applying Edward Said’s theories from the seminal 1978 text,

*Orientalism* (Dash, *Haiti* 1-4). From the American perspective, Dash argues, Haiti's 'Otherness' and the idea of Haiti itself was almost an invention of the United States "coloured by a tendency by the latter to project its fantasies and insecurities onto the recently independent black state ... from the nineteenth century [to present] what beckons or revolts Americans is Haiti's impenetrable mystery, its irredeemable strangeness, its unpredictable 'Otherness'" (2-3).<sup>100</sup> I argue that there is a similar formation of 'Otherness' in the structuring of New Orleans in the American imagination. Contemporary stereotypes of New Orleans as a black city are filled with the same cultural mystique, lawlessness, and unpredictability in nature as a 19<sup>th</sup> century American might project onto Haiti. Following this logic, New Orleans must be governed, controlled, and restricted to protect the white supremacy and values of American nationalism. Regardless of how we might apply the symbolic logic of Haiti or New Orleans's 'Otherness' in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or in the present day, the parallels between the two regions are often overlooked because they present a challenge to notions of black inferiority and the project of colonialism.

Once a part of the U.S., New Orleans's continuing development as a culturally, religiously, artistically, and racially distinct city within a larger U.S. context guaranteed its ambiguous status within the American national identity to the present day. The undeniable influence of Haiti, the colonial legacies of France and Spain, and the persistent regional identity

---

<sup>100</sup> Haiti's own construction of identity within the context of modernity certainly operates under an embrace of 'Otherness'. However, early Haitian intellectuals explored issues of racial/ethnic hybridity that are profoundly creolized in ways they argued are distinct from the United States. Haitian journalist Emile Nau writes about his perspective of U.S. society in 1836 as "merely transplanted: 'We quite like the American are transplanted, stripped of traditions, but there is in the fusion of the European and African cultures, which constitutes our national character, something that makes us less French than the American is English. This advantage is a real one'" (Dash, *The Other America* 45-46). Nau's emphasis on the Haitian national experiment as singular in its hybridity provides an interesting counterpoint to my arguments about Louisiana and New Orleans.

of Louisiana as ungovernable set the stage for the federal neglect experienced by marginalized Louisianans in times of catastrophe throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For the purposes of this dissertation's focus on catastrophe time as heuristic I'll end my historical formation of Louisiana at the point of formal entry into U.S. Statehood. Catastrophe time, as my guiding temporality explored throughout this dissertation, requires an expansive historical reading of Louisiana and Haiti with inextricably intertwined economic, political, and cultural archives. As such, ending this chapter's history with U.S. statehood retains the emphasis on the complex colonial, ideological, and economic interplay between Haiti and Louisiana rather than dwelling on the failed project of Americanization in Louisiana.<sup>101</sup>

### **Aesthetic Possibilities & Imagined Futures: the Katrina Theater Archive**

What the Katrina theater archive presents are “geographies of survival, resistance, creativity, and the struggle against death” which demand that audiences engage with a complex understanding of the relationship between violence and domination outside of the boundaries and limits of past, present, and future (McKittrick, “Plantation Futures” 14). The stories told in the dramatic archive use a range of artistic and narrative modes which rearrange the affective, historical, and aesthetic relationship to catastrophe made visible in the media coverage of Katrina's aftermath. I approach the Katrina theater archive with a focus on embodied practices of performance, as well as the spaces of performance, as possessing resonance as objects of interdisciplinary study. On the surface, the question of “liveness” is a paradoxical issue for studying performance because of the distinctions between recorded text and embodied

---

<sup>101</sup> The contributions of late 19<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> century Americanist historians should not be overlooked. I'm particularly indebted to the work of Clyde Woods, Michelle Alexander, Michael Eric Dyson, Cedric Johnson, Anna Hartnell, and John M. Barry for their extensive coverage of New Orleans's historical and cultural evolution post-statehood.

performance and the always past-tensedness of the performance archive (Roach 3). However, the temporal confusion of performance, the relationship between past and articulated present, is exactly why I've selected Katrina theater as my archive.

Emphasizing the “liveness” of performance presents the same problems as privileging the ‘presentism’ of disaster events; sidelining temporal complexity is a potential tool of historical erasure which can be wielded to justify oppression. Instead, when the archive of performance is permitted to reveal new narratives of history and place, the critical response generates a dynamic account of the contested temporality of performance itself (Aranke and Sparks 2). This analytic creates the opportunity to embrace catastrophe time which necessitates the past, present, and future as inextricably intertwined in the Katrina theater archive.<sup>102</sup>

Turning to Joseph Roach's seminal performance studies text, *Cities of the Dead*, he explores what he calls the “aesthetic tangibility of live performances”; with both New Orleans and London as his sites of study are the cultures of the dead which are reinvented and given new life through performance (Roach xiii). Where Roach is most useful today is in legitimizing an interdisciplinary approach to the study of dramatic texts and theater history which takes seriously the relationship between memory, history, and performance. Roach, like many writing about New Orleans, characterizes memory (or history) as intangible and as something that must be brought into “aliveness” at particular times and places through embodied performance. Roach's approach uses theater as a site for investigating historically situated practices of surrogation: a process of cultural reproduction through public dramas of replacement and forgetting. Memory,

---

<sup>102</sup> This is not to suggest a collapse of past, present, and future. Rather, that the heuristic of catastrophe time provides a method of possibility or way of generating awareness of the complex relationships between past/present, present/future, past/future encompassed in catastrophe narratives and artistic archives.

for Roach, is constituted through modes of substitution; the roots of memory may not be intellectually understood but generate layered affective or spiritual responses in the bodies of the living, performing in the present.<sup>103</sup>

I approach the archive of Katrina theater analyzed in this chapter with a critical eye towards the performance geographies of the texts which link imaginative and embodied practices of material geography.<sup>104</sup> Sonjah Stanley Niaah defines “performance geography” as the site where “physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual activity ... enacts a human existence, specifically in the ‘black Atlantic’ space between violation, ruptured roots and self-reconstruction” (194). The examples of Katrina theater I explore offer ritualistic reenactments of the black experience of catastrophe within the geographies of a post-Katrina New Orleans (either literally or figuratively). While the performance geography itself exists as somewhere between the text and performance, the audience’s interplay with the performers and the theatrical archive undermines a linear time of recovery and the historical and material erasure of black communities from New Orleans. As McKittrick argues in her description of black geographies as political and material tools, these plays “require an engagement with everyday spaces of blackness” which allows the material, physical, and metaphorical spaces of catastrophe to flow into one another (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* 18). These three spaces cannot be separated

---

<sup>103</sup> The example Roach uses to describe this phenomenon is the Nine-Night Ceremony in Dennis Scott’s 1974 play *An Echo in the Bone*. As Roach explains, “*An Echo in the Bone* dramatizes the cultural politics of memory, particularly as they are realized through communications between the living and the dead” (34).

<sup>104</sup> Hershini Bhana Young applied a similar approach in her analysis of performance geographies in Jeremy Love’s graphic novel, *Bayou*. While I don’t work with any graphic novels in this chapter I appreciate the layering of image, text, history, environment, and identity (specifically gender/race) in Young’s analysis of *Bayou*.

from one another, in the same way that catastrophe time disrupts the distinctions between past, present, and future.

My archive of Katrina theater can all be characterized as time-conspicuous plays which offer revisionist histories of catastrophe in New Orleans and its surrounding plantation spaces. I'm borrowing the term of "time-conspicuous" plays from Julius B. Fleming Jr.'s analysis of the Free Southern Theater productions and performance art in the 1960s in rural Mississippi. Fleming is interested in the materiality of the production company's use of symbolic settings: the plantation house, sharecropper fields, etc. as a critique of the "violent histories of racial time archived in Mississippi's plantation geographies" (J. Fleming 590). The use of grassroots performance art, embodied performance in unconventional theater spaces, and staging of time-conspicuous works like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (2007) disrupts the global history of blackness and time, specifically a critique of what Fleming calls "black patience" (591). Fleming builds on Christina Sharpe's dynamic idea of "living in the wake" inasmuch as the expectation for black folks living in the American South is that they would experience the "still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery", but this "living" serves as a disruption to the threat of black death inherent to the aftermath of slavery (Sharpe 2, 16). The work of the Free Southern Theater, particularly their production of *Waiting for Godot*, complements my archive of Katrina plays and serves as a catastrophe temporality parallel to Paul Chan's production of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* staged in the badly damaged Gentilly and Lower Ninth neighborhoods in 2007.

I have chosen to focus specifically on theatrical responses to Katrina because, "at its core, theater about Hurricane Katrina asks us to bear witness – to acknowledge what New Orleans went through and continues to struggle with – and to support the residents of the Gulf Coast.

Plays permit us to document, dramatically, this devastation and to keep the casualties of Katrina alive in an immediate and visceral fashion” (Brenner “Introduction” xi). There is a shared responsibility of and a relationship to embodied tension between performer and audience while telling/receiving stories of catastrophe in the form of live theater. Perhaps most importantly, some of the earliest artistic responses to Katrina came in the form of documentary theater utilizing testimonies from survivors who told their stories from the wreckage of their homes and neighborhoods.

Many of the performances explored in this chapter challenge the very limits of what counts as “theater” – one might even argue that some of this storytelling is simply reportage or talk-therapy – however, the legacy of experimental, interdisciplinary, or site-specific work is integral to the identity of New Orleans performance culture. Exploring the theatrical afterlife of Katrina, from the documentary theater responses through the ethically complex evolution, perhaps at its worst an artistic gentrification or commodification of catastrophe spaces, seen in productions like Paul Chan’s critically celebrated production of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*, creates an aesthetic manifestation of catastrophe temporality. I loosely define three categories of Katrina theater: documentary theater, or theater of testimony (developed using interviews and primary sources from the community of New Orleans), commissioned Katrina collaborations (local academics and artists collaborating with local production houses, for example *The Rising Waters Trilogy*<sup>105</sup>), and art-as-aid productions from non-local artists (Paul Chan’s *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* – the layering on of narrative into the spaces of destruction).

---

<sup>105</sup> *The Rising Waters Trilogy* was first published as a complete collection in 2015.

## The Power of the Audience: Documentary Katrina Theater & Bearing Witness

One of the earliest theatrical responses to Katrina arrived in the form of documentary theater, or “theater of testimony”, which is uniquely positioned to build intimate connections to catastrophe for the audience by creating zones of contact with the stories of individuals who experienced the event directly.<sup>106</sup> In some cases, the actors themselves are the source texts for the production: i.e. they are sharing accounts of their own lives on stage. In other cases, similar to documentary film, interviews and research is conducted directly with sources who experienced an event, in this case, Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath in New Orleans, and those records are compiled into an information-dense play which is performed by actors. Most documentary theater practitioners and writers who contributed to the archive of Katrina theater are averse to using images of Katrina’s devastation as a part of their production design.<sup>107</sup> Interestingly, the misuse of traumatic images is a primary critique of documentary theater artists of documentary *films* about Katrina: the images of Black suffering were used unethically and did not serve to paint a complete portrait of the Katrina experience of Black New Orleanians. Rather, the media and documentary film depictions of Katrina dismiss the experiences of Black communities:

Like a blockbuster film, which uses the misery of the developing world as an exotic background for a story about the travails of white people, the rolling, roiling, repetitive

---

<sup>106</sup> Theater of testimony originated in the 1980s as a new genre of documentary play which dramatizes oral histories in a fragmented and fractured narrative without a central plot. This genre is less concerned with providing the audience a complete historical account of an event than offering the complexity of feeling of an event from a documentary perspective. The genre is primarily composed of social/political and personal/autobiographical plays which rely heavily on recorded transcripts, public documents, formal statements from corporations or governments, and broadcast journalism and newspaper reports (Salz 1).

<sup>107</sup> While most documentary theater designers avoid the use of images public documents relating to the historical events are often used to frame the action of a scene. For example, in *Katrina: The K Word*, a recording of Mayor Ray Nagin is used to explain how the levees broke (Brenner, “Storming the Nation” 19).

pictures of Black suffering are used as mise-en-scène for the “real” human-interest stories. ... They are treated like animals but the dogs and cats were rescued before they were. They are the new homeless, stuck inside their own rescue; poor and plain Black people, descended from slave ships. No individual story emerges from this teeming mass, except that of the predatory looters, packing pistols and raping women. (Dicker/Sun 615)

While this is not a full extent of the media and documentary coverage of Katrina, in the early days after the flooding of New Orleans this was far more prevalent than nuanced coverage of black experiences and stories of survival. Documentary theater projects focusing on the Black community experiences of Katrina began in 2006 and attempted to rebalance the narrative record by offering the nuance and autonomy of storytelling lost in the media and early documentary film coverage.

*Katrina: The K Word* (2006) originated as a project for undergraduate theater students in the acting program at Montclair State University. In May 2007 Montclair State students from the MFA and BFA acting program, with the support of acting professors Lisa S. Brenner and Suzanne M. Trauth as editors, traveled to New Orleans to interview residents from different neighborhoods about their lives before, during, and after Katrina which served as the primary archive for *Katrina: The K Word*. Brenner and Trauth served as editors for the script but designated the most problematic aspect of the project to the student dramaturg team for the world premiere production in 2007. The dramaturgical students compiled research on a Katrina timeline based on the interview transcripts as well as a study guide which detailed the geographical precarity of the predominantly black neighborhoods which incurred the most significant damage. The study guide also included an overview of the structural problems with the levee system, biographies of politicians involved in decision-making to respond to the events,

and a range of volunteer responses contextualizing the sections of post-Katrina interviews from survivors (Brenner “Storming the Nation” 16-17).

The dramaturgical work served to orient audience members in the form of lobby displays, worksheets and write-ups specifically tailored to high school students, and creates a linear structure of events which the play itself seeks to disrupt. In this way, the dramaturgical work of the production undermines the catastrophe time the play’s narrative form embraces. It creates an unnecessary layer of mediation for the audience and serves as a tool to distance the viewer from the emotional and aesthetic impact of the testimonies playing out on stage. While the dramaturgical efforts of Brenner and Trauth’s students are intended to serve as an educational tool for the audience, it limits the possibilities of the play’s impact to encourage political and material change from the testimonies of survivors.

The documentary theater movement, or the theater of testimony, originated in the 1980s as a new genre of documentary play which dramatizes oral histories in a fragmented and fractured narrative without a central plot. This genre is less concerned with providing the audience a complete historical account of an event than the complexity of feeling of an event from a documentary perspective. The genre is primarily composed of social/political and personal/autobiographical plays which rely heavily on recorded transcripts, public documents, formal statements from corporations or governments, and broadcast journalism and newspaper reports (Salz 1). *Katrina: The K Word*’s paratextual development, specifically the dramaturgical and educational framing of the play’s testimonial power, runs counter to the political heart of the documentary theater movement.

*Katrina: The K Word* is regularly performed on college campuses across the United States; by 2010 it had been produced by at least 20 theater departments at universities. Brenner’s

evolving thoughts on the potential pitfalls of using documentary theater as an educational tool develop as the play's circulation grows. Brenner writes, "while the success of this product has exceeded our expectations, producing documentary theatre about a national tragedy has brought with it a set of moral and artistic questions worth deliberating" ("Storming the Nation" 17). While the play's packaging as an educational tool, or re-educational tool, for those outside of New Orleans is problematic, the structure and resonance of the text as a stand-alone entity is unique in the Katrina theater archive. *Katrina: The K Word* was the first documentary Katrina play produced, and the testimonies collected as the source text for the script embrace a range of racial, socio-economic, and geographical locations in their diversity.

I interpret Brenner's hesitancy regarding the "moral questions" of writing a documentary theater account of Katrina as a reflection on the significant role of outsiders crafting the play. No one involved in script production development, aside from those who shared testimonies, had roots in New Orleans. The closest attachment to geographical space and history of the region came through the voluntourism trips of the students and playwrights to collect their archives. At its core, *Katrina: The K Word* is contradictory and complicated in nature. The stories told are indeed testimonies which create new histories and archives of Katrina for the broader audience; however, the construction and distribution of the history are designed from a decidedly outside perspective. This is perhaps most clear in the play's use of testimonies from a wide range of Katrina survivors rather than focusing on the racial geographies of the city with the deepest relationship to catastrophe time: the black communities of the Lower Ninth Ward.

*Katrina: The K Word's* 12 characters are intended to be performed by an undefined number of actors with a critical eye to the racial and gender balance of the casting which sets up the contradictory potential interpretations of the play's themes. The stage directions instruct that

multiple roles should be played by single actors and that “productions and readings should feature an ethnically diverse cast of actors. There is some flexibility in casting that would allow for adjustments along racial lines; however, the authors’ intention is to have a balanced cast in terms of race and gender” (Brenner and Trauth 206). This emphasis on diversity in the casting gestures to the play’s main themes, which are best distilled as two open-ended questions for the audience. First, does the audience believe that the characters possess the potential to come together as a utopian community post-Katrina regardless of social or ideological positionality? Alternatively, has the audience truly grappled with the histories and cultural inheritances of catastrophe time, made hyper-visible post-Katrina, and the disruptive potential of the testimonies which expose the fractures, disenfranchisement, and oppression for the marginalized characters? Ultimately, the play creates critical space for engagement where the audience is invited to political or social action but does not dictate what that should be. While the play does not offer answers or any sort of resolution, it prompts the audience to process the contradictory narratives of Katrina by honoring their existence. The play succeeds in its mission of bringing awareness to experiences of Katrina in the words and style of its source authors, however complex or problematic they might be, without critique. It simply offers questions about the future for New Orleans and creates a new archive which embraces the catastrophe time of the regional legacies through testimonial storytelling.

The final scene of the play abruptly concludes the “disaster tour” and references the unsatisfactory nature of the narrative with a nod to Vivie’s experience of catastrophe time. Vivie, the tour guide, self-critically announces:

This Disaster tour is not something Hollywood could do, because the ending would be a cliffhanger – you don’t know how it’s gonna ... It’s a cliffhanger. It’s like “to be

continued.” Which just pisses ya off when ya see “to be continued.” I remember as a kid to see a movie was like, god-dammit, I’m not going to be able to watch the rest of this shit. And that’s what it is. It’s to be continued. (244)

Vivie, one of the black characters in the play, is the most attuned to the weight of history and environment on experiences of Katrina. Vivie leads the “tour” through each of the ensemble players’ homes and neighborhoods, which presents the geographies of the testimonies (these geographies contextualize the temporal positioning of each character). She is also the character given testimony explaining the failure of the levees post-Katrina, the history of levee failures in New Orleans, and various hurricanes and floods that devastated New Orleans. Vivie does not offer specific dates or hurricane names in her dialogue; she presents a feeling of the looming presence of environmental and economic disaster as unbound by linear time. Vivie muses:

You know, I think Mother Earth came back to claim some of her land. That’s what my gut tells me. And you know this place was so broken. ... It was so broke it’s like a fine piece of china that’s just shattered in a million pieces. ... Katrina really just said, “You know what, you all are trying to put this fine china cup together. You know, you need to really start over. You’ll never drink out of it again.” (219)

Vivie’s dialogue which includes the personification of Katrina and Mother Nature embraces catastrophe temporality in its conscious play between a deep historical, political, economic, and environmental past of the region and the present and future. Mother Earth is characterized as returning to reclaim what has been taken from her: land. Katrina critiques the false pretense of a unified idea of New Orleans by pointing to the futile effort in attempting to fix the broken social systems. Katrina’s final threat gestures to the eventual displacement and erasure of the black

communities post-Katrina while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that New Orleans is, and was, broken beyond repair.

The symbolic imagery of “fine piece of china” which has been “shattered in a million pieces” evokes the materiality of both colonial and diasporic themes. “Fine china” and “fine bone china” are often used interchangeably and were first created in the United Kingdom by mixing animal bone ash and clay minerals in 1748.<sup>108</sup> Fine bone china was developed to compete with the production of imported porcelain from China. With the direct comparison of New Orleans to the imagery of broken fine china, a quintessential 18<sup>th</sup>-century product manufactured by the British, the economic connections to the global colonial marketplace and the production of the colonizer are clear. That New Orleans itself is equated with a colonial British product, specifically one made to compete with products of the Chinese empire which was also interested in colonial expansion in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, evokes a troubling reading of New Orleans as a pure commodity. Rather than understanding New Orleans as a place with a rich history, communities of people, and with a dynamism all its own, it is reduced to a product: an entity that can be bought and sold to enrich those in power (exactly like colonial New Orleans). It’s also significant that fine bone china is so deeply associated, perhaps even to the point of stereotype, with a degree of luxurious, upper-class, white Britishness. This comparison can extend even further if we consider the characteristics of fine bone china: it is prized for its structural strength as well as high levels of whiteness. Reading these characteristics into a description of New Orleans works only in an oppositional reading: New Orleans is like the *broken* fine china, shattered into a million pieces and beyond repair.

---

<sup>108</sup> Fine bone china is one of the world’s toughest porcelains which is quite hard, resilient and ivory white in color. It was first created in the UK in 1748 near the slaughterhouses of London and Essex, but development of the process was perfected between 1789 and 1793.

There's also an unsettling irony to prizing fine bone china for its characteristic whiteness in the same way that New Orleans is often fetishized for its blackness. If the metaphor of fine bone china and New Orleans as racial commodity is probed a bit more the fact that this product is made from mixing bones with clay resonates. It gestures to the disposability of black lives in New Orleans, the bones which provide structure and strength to the body of the region's plantation economy, as necessarily needing to be ground into dust for the production of fine bone china: aka, New Orleans as a commodity. Vivie's seemingly generic comparison is deeply connected to the catastrophe time and materiality of the sugar plantation economy. This allows the audience to consider the layers of racial and economic geographies tied up in the concept of New Orleans as a place "shattered into a million pieces" (219). The personified Katrina speaks and ends her recommendation to the people of New Orleans saying, "You know, you need to really start over. You'll never drink out of it again" (219). Katrina returns to the fine bone china metaphor suggesting that New Orleans will never recuperate its former value or purpose (as fine china's value rests in its functional identity as a drinking vessel). Katrina gestures to the neoliberal logic of New Orleans' cultural and economic value post-Katrina, now broken beyond repair, as not worth salvaging. Rather than recuperation, historical retrieval, and creating social and community networks to welcome back the poorest black residents and reinvigorate the city's culture, Katrina suggests that the future of New Orleans is better off as a blank slate. The city's history, its people, and their stories are wiped clean from the geography of New Orleans in service of a neoliberal agenda and new development which supports whiteness and erasure as a way to enrich those in power. There is neoliberal opportunism underpinning Katrina's dialogue which perfectly suits the context of the post-Katrina New Orleans: the cycles of federal neglect, New Orleans' otherness within the U.S. national project, and the history of oppression for black

and low-income communities is present in Katrina's advice to "start over" as if there is nothing to be lost. Vivie's dialogue, more than that of any other character in the play, embraces the richly layered imagery of the catastrophe temporality for the audience to digest.

*Katrina: The K Word's* most significant contribution to the archive of Katrina theater and embrace of a disruptive catastrophe temporality is in how the play integrates the audience and performance into the action and use of performance space. *Katrina: The K Word's* script doubles-up the roles to create critical distance between the audience and the individual testimonies shared on stage so that the material and psychological circumstances of the characters resonate as stories being told. The play does not attempt to create a reality or suspend the disbelief for the audience. Rather, a Brechtian approach to self-awareness of performance (primarily through casting) attempts to guard against the "two dangers of theater of testimony: audiences [watching] characters recount traumatic events merely for their own sensationalism, ... [or identifying] so strongly with the narratives that they simply become distressed" (Brenner "Introduction" xviii). The play situates the audience as voyeurs, but consciously resists a passive viewing experience which presents the events of Katrina in a linear fashion.

Even before the production begins the audience is welcomed by characters greeting them, welcoming them to the space of the theater (where they will experience the "real" Katrina on the perverse disaster tour). Vivie, the de facto tour guide, finishes the prologue inviting the audience to take their seats for the tour, saying: "We can't tell you ever story out of New Orleans, I mean, my God, 250,000 people lost their homes. But these twelve folks you just met are gonna tell you..." (209). The ensemble interrupts Vivie and the stage directions attempt to set the contradictory and uncertain tone as the Ensemble responds in unison, "Exactly... [*Warily, each of them thinks they know best what occurred*] ...what happened" (209). This moment of conflict

and testimonial discrepancy foreshadows the range of narratives and perspectives represented in the play: everyone knows, and no one knows what happened exactly. The inherent paradox of catastrophe storytelling (as a fractured narrative of lived experiences told through unreliable narrators) is embraced in *Katrina: The K Word*, and the audience must decide for themselves how to construct the idea of Katrina. The play's presentation of contradictory Katrina testimonies that undermine government reports and information shared by other characters beautifully captures the disorientation inherent to catastrophe time. While the audience will never experience Katrina the dramatic structure and lack of catharsis in *Katrina: The K Word* provide an affective opportunity for the audience to experience the disorientation and layers of historical and symbolic saturation inherent to catastrophe time.

*Katrina: The K Word* was one of only two documentary theater plays that were formally published in the years closely following Katrina; the second is Jonathan Holmes's *Katrina: A Play of New Orleans* (2010). Like Trauth and Brenner's play, Holmes's script relies on the verbatim testimony of Katrina survivors as its primary dialogue. Unlike *Katrina: The K Word*, *Katrina: A Play of New Orleans* is invested in the innovative use of performance space to create the experience of bearing witness to Katrina testimonies. The Jericho House, Holmes's experimental theater company which specializes in global issues plays, creates site-specific productions that blend music, theater, and installation art and immerse the audience into the performance space.<sup>109</sup> Holmes uses verbatim testimony as its dialogue, but does not approach the audience's critical distance from the subject matter in the same way as Trauth and Brenner.

---

<sup>109</sup> Jonathan Holmes's first documentary play, *Fallujah*, was another example of the conceptual documentary art produced at The Jericho House. This production, first staged in 2007, was composed of verbatim testimony from those present at the sieges of Fallujah during the Iraq war in 2004. *Fallujah*, like *Katrina: A Play of New Orleans*, relied heavily on immersive sound design to create a continuity of space for the audience.

Instead of using dialogue to highlight the theatrical mode as a mediated experience Holmes creates a physical world where the audience must literally participate in moving through the performance. Dialogue is less significant to Holmes's play, and he relies on the sensory experience, "not only visual but also aural, tactile, olfactory", to curate what he defines as a radical experience of the present (Holmes, "Theater and Experience" 1). As Holmes explains, "such a conceptual and spatial reconfiguration in how theatre works is not in service of a new naturalism, where the focus is on representation, but rather attends to the actual experience of those present – that of the storytellers, certainly, but most centrally that of the audience" (1-2).

Holmes empowers the audience to engage with the performance space, the performers, and each other without any strict instructions. His philosophy of documentary theater situates the audience as co-creators of the racial experience of the present in *Katrina: A Play of New Orleans*. The play was first staged and performed throughout the five stories of an abandoned warehouse on the Thames in central London meant to evoke the feeling of a Katrina-era New Orleans. Holmes's script is divided into five stories (rather than acts or scenes) with ample descriptions of the space and his intention for how the audience's experience of the testimonies is timed with the various videos, recordings, lighting/sound effects, and other technical components of each floor. Although each story creates a different place in New Orleans for interactions between audience and performers there is a consistent soundtrack of ambient noises looping throughout: the sound of water lapping onto feet, wading through water, gunshots, and helicopters. The directorial decision to include a consistent aesthetic reminder of the symbolic references to Katrina's materiality (the water, guns discharging, search helicopters) is a reminder of the surreal real underpinning the Katrina testimonies in the play's dialogue.

The radical experience of the present Holmes creates within the five stories is his attempt at curating what he understands as the ideal performance conditions for bearing witness to Katrina. For Holmes, there are two primary considerations of curating a theatrical emphasis on experience. First, “as an act itself, attending a performance is experiential, we are a part of that event, part of the story, immersed in its sensual space and sharing responsibility for its occurrence” (3). The site-specific nature of the play is a necessary component to invite the audience into the storytelling. For example, if the audience stops moving on the first floor, or elects to begin their theatrical experience at the top floor of the building rather than the ground floor, the stories they bear witness to are radically different. The inherent freedom of site-specific productions, in terms of audience agency, is particularly interesting when paired with theater of testimony. The audience members must act to co-create the story by moving between the rooms, stepping into earshot of the performers delivering dialogue, and jostling for sight lines among each other. Story Three serves as the primary performance space and the most traditional dramatic scene structure. The plot follows the death of Virgil, a New Orleans resident, who was trapped by the floodwaters and killed in the Lower Ninth ward. His partner, Beatrice, is the primary narrator of the third story scene and guides the audience through the performance space. The narrative throughline of the third story mirrors the audience’s journey; just as Beatrice travels through the flooded New Orleans hearing stories from survivors, so does the audience.

Paired with the audience’s participation the layer of symbolic representation completes the two components required for the theatrical emphasis on experience. Holmes explains, “As a representation, theatre serves to make the experience of others recognizable according to certain perceptual and cultural codes ... it is in the counterpoint of these understandings, the sensory and the perceptual, that the potency of theatrical aesthetics resides” (3). For example, as the audience

literally moves through the space, which makes use of the dilapidated nature of the performance site, they encounter the symbolic layers of representation of jazz music, news broadcasts of police violence, and the perpetual sloshing water sound effect throughout the play. Site-specific performance creates a constant awareness not only of the space's materiality, but the bodies and experiences of other audience members in co-creating the narrative. In this way, the site-specific performance space coupled with verbatim dialogue from Katrina testimonies, is an experience which creates solidarity through embodied engagement.

I argue that it is in the audience's journey through the performance space, where the individual must grapple with the aesthetic barrage of sonic, tactile, and olfactory experiences of Katrina, that catastrophe time is most present. The intentional disorientation of the site-specific performance coupled with the fractured dramatic narrative inherent to testimony theater forces the audience to question what is real, manufactured, and replicated for dramatic effect. This unique Katrina play prioritizes an embodied experience as the primary thesis of the work: bearing witness to catastrophe time, and the testimonies of Katrina (in all sensory forms), must be an affective and embodied experience for the audience.

Similar to *Katrina: The K Word*, there is no possibility for meaningful catharsis at the end of *Katrina: A Play of New Orleans*. Story Four, technically the fifth and final story as Story Three is divided into two parts, is Virgil's funeral. The audience serves as mourners at the funeral. The audience is wearing black waterproof rain slickers which they are given before entering Story One while the performers are dressed in white (Holmes *Katrina* 44). The directorial choice to have the audience as the mourners at Virgil's death is a symbolic layering of witnessing; the audience bears witness to Virgil and Beatrice's Katrina testimony (culminating in the funeral), but they also experience their own mediated Katrina story as well as witness the

testimonies of the other characters alongside Beatrice in Story Three. The script for Story Four, like One and Two, is quite spartan and leaves ample room for improvisation, audience participation, and attempts at individual reflection in the face of a chaotic soundscape. The stage directions describe the sound at the end of the play:

There then follows a raucous cacophony of recorded sound: music (blues and jazz from 1927 etc.), testimony (Bush's, West, Nagin, Brown, etc.), other text (Genesis and Congressional hearings) and so forth. The lights dim to black, the sound crescendos, and then abruptly everything stops. (45)

The audience exits the space out a door they have not previously used in total silence and darkness. The players do not interact with the audience or speak. The audience is now, by default, literally carrying forth the Katrina testimonies they have witnessed into the world. The definition between mediated theatrical experience and a radical experience of the present collapses into whatever embodied, intellectual, or emotional experience the audience has created for themselves and each other.

In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2009 Holmes considers how Katrina invites us to reflect on an expansive future of catastrophe temporality:

Everything you've been told about how societies respond is turned on its head and disproven [in the example of Katrina]. ... It means nowhere is safe, on a lot of levels: the climate, politically, socially, economically ... the interesting thing is – at what point does social disintegration become 'us'? We always talk about 'them' – these things happen to people far away and not like us. At what point does it become us? (Borger, "Katrina: The Play")

The intention to create a theatrical experience of bearing witness which moves beyond the intellectualizing of catastrophe is at the core of Holmes's artistic vision. More than any other work of Katrina theater in the archive *Katrina: A Play of New Orleans* pushes the boundaries of temporal and spatial experimentation which speaks to the aesthetic of a catastrophe temporality. Holmes work, although virtually unreproducible, expands the boundaries of documentary theater into the genre of site-specific, experiential documentary theater which "foregrounds the ethical authority of the artform, reviving its ancient function as a mouthpiece of resistance and place of change, not just rhetorical but actual...the natural role of theater is the transformation of lives" (3). Although Holmes's theory about the ethics and purpose of theater as an art form is lofty, he must be commended for such intentional curation of an aesthetic of catastrophe time which values the audience experience as a necessary component to bear witness to Katrina in the form of a theatrical experience.

### **Katrina Theater By/For New Orleans: *The Rising Water Trilogy***

In the spring of 2005, Ryan Rilette, the artistic director of the Southern Rep Theater at the time, commissioned 4th-generation New Orleanian John Biguenet, playwright, professor, and novelist, to write a Katrina play for the people of New Orleans.<sup>110</sup> This remains the premier Katrina play written by a resident of New Orleans and the only example of a local playwright's work on Katrina in this project. At the time of Rilette's call, Biguenet was still exiled from New Orleans by martial law. Rilette explained that Southern Rep wanted to premiere *Rising Water* as soon as possible. The Southern Rep was then located at Canal Place, an upscale mall at the edge

---

<sup>110</sup> The collaborative partnership between Southern Rep and John Biguenet began when the theater produced Biguenet's play, *The Vulgar Soul*, as part of its 2004-2005 season. The theater had worked with Biguenet and other faculty in Loyola University New Orleans' English department prior to 2005.

of the French Quarter, which had sustained substantial damage in the first days after Katrina. The mall was looted and then set on fire which virtually destroyed the theater. The Southern Rep Theater, founded in 1986, was one of the region's most active theaters producing both classics and new original works that spoke to the people of New Orleans.<sup>111</sup>

Biguenet finished the play while living in Newark before the first-year anniversary of Katrina. His reading community at New Jersey Rep continuously suggested revisions to the script which would make the play more universal and lean into themes of absurdism; however, Biguenet insisted on retaining the hyper-local focus of the play's themes (Biguenet, "From Rage to Page" 502). He wanted to write a Katrina play which honors the people of the New Orleans and tells their stories from the perspective of an insider. *Rising Water* is the only play in this dissertation's Katrina archive written by a New Orleans playwright with deep roots in the city, which dramatically impacts the play's themes, structure, and aesthetic sensibilities.

Biguenet recognized early in the *Rising Water* writing process that there are very few source texts from theater or literature of the United States which offered a model for structuring a play about the devastation of a city on the scale of Katrina and New Orleans (Biguenet "From Rage to Page" 503). Instead of piecing together an archive of U.S. disaster narratives or stories Biguenet turned to world literature to better understand the genre of disaster theater and fiction. He was immediately drawn to the postwar novels of Germany as well as the post-earthquake

---

<sup>111</sup> The Southern Rep Theater closed in 2022 after several years of financial uncertainty. The company was primarily itinerant in the years after 2005. The impact of Covid-19 and the significant expenses of the company's final home, the former St. Rose de Lima Church, led to the permanent closure ("The Sun Sets"). *American Theater* also explains that the closure of the Southern Rep was with the "expressed purpose of making space for 'Black-led performance companies who have never had a home'" with the former church's location in the heart of the Tremé. The former St. Rose de Lima Church property reopened as the Andre Cailloux Center for Performing Arts & Cultural Justice in 2021 and is now one of the primary Black-led and BIPOC-serving arts and cultural justice venues in the region ("The André Cailloux").

literature from Japan emerging from the 1990s. Biguenet cites Günter Grass's novel *The Tin Drum* (1959) and Haruki Murakami's collection of short stories *After the Quake* (2000) as two examples that inspired his dramatic structure and perspective for *Rising Water* as hyper-local productions from their respective regions (503-504). What the texts share is an integration of regionally specific representation of the local mythological and storytelling traditions as a way to explore the traumatic resonances of catastrophe.<sup>112</sup> Although New Orleans is only 300 years old and without an ancient mythology or storytelling tradition which spans centuries like the examples from Germany and Japan, Biguenet was determined to find a symbolic or regional narrative framework to fit New Orleans.

Biguenet's journey to find a convention or model for storytelling that suits the catastrophe temporality of Katrina and accurately represents the unraveling of his community's historical, political, cultural, and economic layers of catastrophe experience was uncharted philosophical and aesthetic territory. Of course, the city of New Orleans is the setting for countless examples of American literature which arguably co-creates the culture and aesthetic that the city markets to outsiders as its charming, ghost-filled essence. However, these texts rely on the physical and geographic structures of New Orleans as their aesthetic and theme; writing a play about the destruction and wreckage of the city required a new approach. As Biguenet explains:

I wasn't sure what to write. We had known how to depict New Orleans before the flood: Each art form here had its conventions, nearly all muddying the threshold between past and present. Jazz, for instance, usually took flight from an old song and came home to it

---

<sup>112</sup> The narrator in *The Tin Drum* is a character developed from the dwarves of the *Nibelungenlied* and other examples from early Germanic literature and Murakami's collection follows the narrative structure of the samurai stories (Biguenet, "From Rage to Page" 504).

at the end. Writers here made more use of ghost stories than authors elsewhere in America. Photographers situated the present under the mossy arches of the past. ... Since the destruction of the city, though, we are adrift in the present, far from the familiar coastline of the past. What conventions exist to depict something that has never happened before? (Biguenet, "The What and the How")

Biguenet's lengthy description of his uncertain process to find an aesthetic which suits the experience of catastrophe time for New Orleans and Katrina is representative of his own traumatic experiences and psychology. He is dedicated to the provocative blurring of past, present, and future inherent to the disorientation of catastrophe time, but recognizes that whatever convention he settled on for his Katrina plays must be created from scratch. *Rising Water* is the first example of a dramatic text which seeks to capture the essence of Katrina's impact and becomes the start of the dramatic aesthetic archive for future playwrights and creatives interested in catastrophe in New Orleans.

*Rising Water* begins the night after Katrina moved through New Orleans and the play's action centers on a married couple, Sugar and Camille, as their house floods. Most of the play takes place in Sugar and Camille's attic but concludes on the rooftop as the couple waits for a helicopter rescue that may never come. I focus specifically on *Rising Water* as part of the Katrina theater archive because of the way Biguenet distorts time to capture Sugar and Camille's experience of catastrophe. The play appeals to a Freudian theory of trauma which is "not simply a horrific event, but it is also an event that misaligns our perception of time" (Pozorski 71). For Sugar and Camille, their experience of catastrophe temporality plays out both in the present and in a fractured and distorted layering of past and future: reflections on their struggling marriage, the nature of love, and the uncertainty of what will happen to New Orleans. Aligning Freud's

trauma theory with my heuristic of catastrophe temporality, *Rising Water* uniquely archives Katrina as “...an event [which] occurs too soon for consciousness to process it during the moment when it occurs” (71). In essence, the play attempts to capture the trauma of catastrophe (before, during, and after Katrina) as a gift to the people of New Orleans, so they might better understand what it means to call the city home.

Reflecting on the function of theater as an act of social and community healing Biguenet explains what he learned while writing *The Rising Water Trilogy*:

I learned that a play is unlike other forms of narrative in that it is inextricably tied to the city in which it is performed. A theater, I came to realize is a forum where a community gathers to consider its most pressing concerns. ... So in the many productions around the country of the plays in my trilogy, I’ve always discouraged directors from urging actors to imitate a New Orleans accent; an audience should hear its own English on stage.

(Walsh “Q&A: New Orleans Playwright”).

It is Biguenet’s attunement to regional specificity and spatial geographies that sets *Rising Water* apart from the other plays in the Katrina archive. The play does not try to make sense of the catastrophe from perspectives outside of New Orleans, and, arguably, resists fully revealing its themes to outsiders. Given Biguenet and the Southern Rep’s deep commitment to the people of New Orleans as the primary audience it is important to consider symbolic and thematic elements of *Rising Water* which speaks to the catastrophe temporalities legible to the community of New Orleans. *The Rising Water Trilogy* emphasizes the local elements of New Orleans’s history, place, and culture of disaster, as well as the residents’ evolving relationship to a catastrophe temporality and aesthetic made hyper-visible by Katrina and subsequent flood.

*Rising Water* uses New Orleans's distinctive architecture and the sense of place created by the physical structures and their histories as the formative principle for the story. Biguenet's architectural motif continues throughout all three plays in the trilogy, but it is most aesthetically and thematically resonant in *Rising Water*. The setting of the play is divided by the two acts: the play opens in Sugar and Camille's attic a few hours after the levees fail, and Act Two takes place on the roof as the water continues to rise. The attic is filled with mementos from Sugar and Camille's life together and these memories drive the flow of their conversation about the disappointments and joys of their 30-year marriage. Sugar and Camille's marriage story is told through a blend of tragedy and comedy as they spend the night reflecting, for the first time in many years, on their time together. The attic scene in the first act is a combination of bickering, confusion, and denial about why their home is flooding. The scattershot conversation oscillates between questions about what they should do next and what's happening in New Orleans to the memories of their lives, children, and family histories represented by the junk stored in the attic. The fractured nature of their marriage and family histories told as the situation becomes more dire perfectly showcases how the architecture, the hyper-local geography of catastrophe, creates the conditions of constraint facing Sugar and Camille. Sugar and Camille are stuck in the staged representation of the spatial, symbolic, economic, and environmental constraints which allude to the experience of catastrophe temporality in a holistic sense. The stories of their family histories (deeply tied to the legacies of plantation slavery and Caribbean economies) intermingle with their increasing awareness of the urgent reality of the present as the waters continue to rise.

While confined in the attic, Sugar tells a story which evokes the colonial legacy of New Orleans as well as the slave trade throughout the Caribbean as they pause their conversation about how to escape. Sugar tells Camille the ghost story his father had told him about a cotton

merchant who ran a trade route from New Orleans to Panama during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On one journey the captain took his wife and child aboard and they died from a fever at sea. The captain buries both women at sea and marks the site of their watery grave on his map as he continues to Panama. On the return to New Orleans, at the same site, “the water rises up in the shape of two figures – one a bit taller than the other – and just sort of hangs there in the air” which collapses again into the water once the ship passes (Biguenet, *The Rising Water Trilogy* 31). He goes on to explain that stories of the two water ghosts spread through the shipyard and a photographer from the *Item*, a local paper, captured the phenomenon on film.<sup>113</sup> After the publication of the photo on the front page the ship captains gathered at Antoine’s and charted a new route between Panama and New Orleans. The clear historical references (to plantation slavery, the economic relevance of New Orleans, and geographic places throughout New Orleans) are woven into Sugar’s ghost story. The story ends with the uncertainty of what happened to the two water ghost women, but they’re memorialized by the story itself and the *Item*’s photograph “in some kind of archives on the third floor of the main library down on Tulane Avenue” (Biguenet *The Rising Water Trilogy* 32). After he finishes the story, Camille and Sugar slip into a philosophical reflection about what the dead want from the living, saying:

CAMILLE (*shuddering*): Even hot as it is right now, it gives me goosebumps, thinking of that woman and her baby waiting out there in the middle of the ocean all alone.

SUGAR: Waiting for what? That’s what I don’t understand. What were they looking for?

CAMILLE: You think the dead don’t have a claim on us?

SUGAR: Yeah, sure they do. But what is it they want, the dead?

---

<sup>113</sup> The *Item*, what would eventually become the *New Orleans Item-Tribune* and then merge with *The Daily Picayune* in the 1980s, was a New Orleans newspaper published in various forms beginning in 1877 (Swenson “A Glimpse in Time”).

CAMILLE: Whatever it is we haven't got to give 'em. (33)

Camille's fixation on the woman and child waiting in the middle of the ocean mirrors the couple's watery confinement in the attic. Sugar's tone of confusion and disorientation returns, which disappeared as he told the ghost story, and he can't make sense of what the dead would want from the living. Camille's final response which ends the conversation is a response of resistance; even if the dead has a hold on the lives of the living they don't have to succumb to memories or histories. This is the line of distinction between Camille and Sugar's experience of the catastrophe: Sugar is trapped, literally in the second act, whereas Camille sees possibility in the uncertainty of her future.

The temporal aesthetic of this scene feels distorted in its expansiveness, and Sugar and Camille's confinement in the oppressive heat and cramped space of the attic evokes the hold of a ship. They are trapped in the material conditions created by the failure of the levee system and centuries of U.S. government neglect. While trapped in the attic, uncertain of their futures and reflecting on the past, Sugar and Camille enter an almost surreal space as he tells the story. The act of Sugar's storytelling amidst the disorientation and fear is a radical reclamation of his rhetorical agency in spite of his confinement. As Sugar pauses their strategizing to tell the story, he creates a sense of possibility for their future relationship and attunement to the present moment which allows Sugar and Camille to emotionally connect in a new way. The story changes the tone of their interactions and reinvigorates their efforts to escape. Sugar is able to pry open the air vent so they can climb onto the roof which shifts the play into a suspended catastrophe time. Sugar and Camille are no longer looking to the past, or grappling with the present situation, but considering the future in an abstract sense.

The second act of the play distorts time completely for Sugar and Camille and intensifies the disorientation and rupture presented in the catastrophe temporality and aesthetic of disaster. While the attic is “an embodiment of memory” the roof opens “on an unimaginable scene of devastation, [and] is the setting of a dream” (Biguenet “From Rage to Page” 504). Camille crawls through the vent onto the roof where she encounters an eerie landscape of near total darkness in the middle of New Orleans where the only sound is lapping water. She describes the surreal aesthetic of catastrophe to Sugar, still stuck in the attic:

CAMILLE: The water stretches off to the horizon. There’s nothing but roofs and treetops left. (*Silence.*) ... And not a single light, as far as I can tell. Even with the moon out, I’ve never seen a place as dark as this. ... (*Silence.*) ... (*Camille shouting*): Anyone there? (*Silence.*) Anybody hear my voice? (*Silence.*) ... No one. It’s deadly quiet up here Sugar. Nothing but the sound of water lapping at the roof. (*Silence.*) No dogs, no motors, no human voices. Nothing. ... Not a sound. No wind. No birds. Nobody knocking. Nothing but the sloshing of the water. (Biguenet, *The Rising Water Trilogy* 48-49)

Camille’s entry into an otherworldly seascape of the flood presents an unsettling contact between the deeply familiar and a terrifying unknown. She is standing on the roof of her home, in the neighborhood she has lived in for 30 years and understands intimately. However, this familiarity is distorted and rejected by the rising waters which transform the place of safety and comfort to an environment of uncertainty and expansive confinement. While she is no longer confined to the attic, she is surrounded by water with no way to escape. Camille, like the mother and daughter who transformed into the ghosts on the sea, is all alone with no ships passing to acknowledge her or help her.

On the roof time is suspended, much like the unconstrained time of Sugar's story about the ghosts who appear as two pillars of water. Sugar is trapped between the past and a future he can't access as he cannot fit his body through the opening of the roof. Camille is suspended in the liminal state of waiting to be rescued, longing for Sugar to join her, and wondering how long they can survive. As the night passes Sugar and Camille's story blends with the ghost story. Sugar and the Capitán wait and mourn their losses in situations beyond their control. Camille and the ghost pillars of water wait forever, suspended outside of a time to be recognized and saved. The audience is left with the realization that Sugar and Camille will not be rescued. The closing stage directions read: "*They stop singing and look at each other. Wailing alarms grow louder and more numerous and light slowly brightens to full noon as they wait for help that does not come. They turn to face the audience. The alarms reach a crescendo. Blackout*" (Biguenet, *The Rising Water Trilogy* 73). Sugar and Camille's lives, like the ghosts in the pillars of water, join the mythologies of catastrophe and exist in the Katrina archive as a story, suspended in time and water.

Biguenet developed two additional Katrina plays after the critical and community success of *Rising Water*. The second play of the trilogy, *Shotgun* (2009), takes place four months after Katrina and explores the evolving racial dynamics of post-Katrina New Orleans. The play features a complicated romantic and financial relationship between a white man (Beau Harlan) and his black land lady (Mattie Godchaux). *Shotgun* is remarkably devoid of humor when compared to *Rising Water* and is primarily a dramatic representation of the lingering loss and

death New Orleanians suffered post-Katrina.<sup>114</sup> In this way, it's an interesting meditation on the post-Katrina reality for those who remained after the city was destroyed. The play presents a sort of internal displacement (both physical and emotional) as Beau's character grapples with his wife's death and loss of the family home.

The racial dynamic of Beau and Mattie's relationship remains a constant strain on the couple throughout the play and is truly the central conflict of the play. Beau decides to leave Mattie, and his side of the shotgun duplex, under the pretense that he is still grieving and emotionally attached to his life before Katrina. Mattie recognizes that their deep connection has no way to survive in the current context of a quickly gentrifying city with so many still displaced. She says, "This was normal world, we'd've known what to do. But call this normal, how we living now? I don't know a set of rules exists for life in a place like this" (151). Mattie's final words to Beau speak to the idea of New Orleans as an unlivable place plagued by the cyclical nature of catastrophe's trauma, as "to live in the unlivable condemns the geographies of marginalized to death over and over again" (McKittrick "Plantation Futures" 7). Though Mattie's outlook on the potential of their relationship is not as bleak as Beau's she is only able to recognize that the city, along with the racial, political, and economic dimensions of life in New Orleans, is changing. She does not go so far as to promise a utopian vision of racial unity between the black and white communities of New Orleans but acknowledges the complexity and possibility Katrina presents in reshaping the city and its culture. Beau is resistant to the change and the uncertainty of how this will play out in their lives as an interracial couple and cannot

---

<sup>114</sup> For example, Beau's wife dies from an infection after ingesting flood water when they escape their home (Biguenet, *The Rising Water Trilogy* 118). Rather than drowning in the flood waters as an immediate casualty she lingers and suffers for several days before eventually succumbing to a secondary threat: the infection.

fully embrace the catastrophe's potential for the future of the city and his personal life. Beau denies himself catharsis and the opportunity to heal through pursuing his relationship with Mattie and continuing to live in the city. Mattie, as the landlord, is tied to the unlivable space and whatever future will come for New Orleans. However, the rupture between Mattie and Beau, representative of the many conflicting racialized perspectives on New Orleans' recovery, is irreparable.

The final play of the trilogy, *Mold* (2013), is the most personal play when it comes to Biguenet's own experience of Katrina. *Mold* is set a year after the levees failed and flooded New Orleans and tells the story of a young couple, Trey and Marie, who are managing the bureaucratic nightmare of insurance companies, government agencies, and the question of whether to rebuild their home in New Orleans or to return to Houston. As soon as Trey and Marie begin exploring the wreckage of their home Amelia, the volunteer inspector from The Office of Code Enforcement, meets them at the home with three options which comply with the "Gutting Ordinance", "(1) the property owner may gut, remediate and board; (2) The property owner may renovate or rebuild; and/or (3) The property owner may elect voluntary demolition" (Biguenet, *The Rising Water Trilogy* 168). Trey and Marie have only 48 hours to comply with the Gutting Ordinance regulations and if they don't take measures into their own hands the house will be bulldozed by the city. The action of the play takes place over only a few hours where the trauma of the past year, Trey's guilt over his parents' deaths from dehydration trapped in the attic of their flooded home, and Marie's pregnancy all complicate the decision whether to leave New Orleans or stay and rebuild. Trey's father had mocked his decision to evacuate during Katrina saying he would "be back here in two days looking like some goddamn fool scared away by a little rain" (214). In the final scene of the play the layers of resentment, guilt, and fragile

masculinity build as Trey and Marie become completely entrenched in their position to leave versus stay. At the climax of their argument Marie seems like she's going to faint from exhaustion, the heat, or perhaps the effects of the mold, and the play ends abruptly with Trey holding her on the porch trying to cool her down. The audience never learns what decision is made, whether Marie has her baby, or if Trey can forgive himself for leaving his parents during the evacuation. The play offers no answers about the future for Marie, Trey, or the people of New Orleans.

*Mold, Shotgun, and Rising Water* all leave the audience without a final cathartic scene or resolution. The plays are focused on the layers of trauma and the experience of catastrophe temporality at three distinct points post-Katrina for the residents of New Orleans. While all three plays use the relationships between the primary characters as their plot, the architecture and deeply fraught sense of place created in each play are the core of Biguenet's dramatic structure. It is the plays' hyper-locality, the attunement to the evolving nature of catastrophe time post-Katrina, and three very different examples of the physical and psychological liminality of post-Katrina New Orleans which drive the themes of each play. As Biguenet explains in a 2010 article, "We are only now just beginning to discover what [Katrina] has done to us. But like Sugar, we are trapped between the New Orleans we remember and the New Orleans that still seems a kind of dream." ("What and the How"). This collection of plays, more than any other part of the Katrina archive, spoke to the people of New Orleans and recognized their challenges, the continuing trauma unfolding post-Katrina, and the roots of catastrophe in New Orleans which stretch back to colonization and the legacy of plantation slavery. Psychologically and culturally processing the layers of catastrophe Katrina reveals, as Biguenet reflects, will take decades for the people of New Orleans. Though *The Rising Water Trilogy* is filled with the anger and

devastation that follows catastrophe, each play leaves open the possibility of collective healing and the transformative power of theater written by and for the community of New Orleans.

*Rising Water* was a cathartic experience for many New Orleans residents who attended the 2007 world premiere run. *Rising Water* sold out for the entire two month run and became the best-selling show in the Southern Rep's twenty-three-year history before moving on to be produced by countless theaters all over the United States (Brenner, "Introduction" xii). *The Rising Water Trilogy*, and the 2007 production of *Rising Water* in particular, created space for community dialogue and engagement crucial to the rebuilding of the city. All three plays create new histories and cultural archives for future generations of New Orleanians, both those who have returned to the city and those living forever displaced in the Katrina diaspora.

#### **Art-as-Aid: Paul Chan's *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans***

The final production explored in this chapter, Paul Chan's 2007 site-specific production of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*, is arguably the most ethnically complex example in the Katrina theater archive as it was staged in the literal wreckage of the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly neighborhoods in the shadow of the failed levee. Chan is hardly the first activist/artist to make use of Samuel Beckett's play to explore sites of catastrophe which are, on one hand, entirely political, and on the other, an arresting aesthetic experience which transforms an audience's relationship to power through art's contact with the space itself. *Godot* has been staged in prisons "from Wuppertal, Germany, to San Quentin, California – as well as in the war zone of Sarajevo, notably directed by Susan Sontag – the play that brings the nothing within it to bear on everything around it" (Griffin, "*Waiting for Godot*"). What's important to understand about *Godot* is: nothing happens in the play; it is suggested that something is happening around the action of the play. *Godot* is an allegorical goldmine to spaces of catastrophe and political art,

which can be easily transposed by creatives to create meaning and resonance of the performance space and cultural context. In this spirit, I won't dedicate space to another detailed analysis of Vladimir and Estragon's various discussions while they wait for the Godot, who never arrives. The central metaphor for the play as it applies to New Orleans is straightforward: the production made use of the agonizing wait for help to critique the abandonment and cycles of government failure New Orleans experienced. Instead, I'll focus on the contradictions and possibilities of Chan's production as a part of the Katrina theater archive which intersects art and politics in an attempt to create an aesthetic manifestation of catastrophe temporality in New Orleans.

Paul Chan first visited New Orleans in 2006 to speak at Tulane where one of his exhibits was installed, and during his trip he visited the Lower Ninth Ward at the height of the reclamation effort. He was inspired by the landscape of the decimated neighborhood and began sketching sites for what would become the stage of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*. Chan's status as an outsider to the city became an immediate challenge but also proved an asset to building local partnerships who would support his production. As he describes in a 2009 interview, "The people of New Orleans have seen art and cultural projects come and go; they see how these projects use the background of New Orleans as a way to sell themselves and the idea that art can make a social impact without the projects actually benefitting anyone in the city long term" (Chan 309). To Chan's credit, he relocated to New Orleans for almost a year before the performance to build community connections and trust among the New Orleans locals. He taught classes and workshops at local high schools and elementary schools, he facilitated art projects for youth around the city, and spent countless hours knocking on doors and sharing copies of *Waiting for Godot* (309-310). Chan was immersed in New Orleans and the social-organizing model he deployed was effective in gaining community support.

Chan had three goals for the project: 1) create an engaging and inspiring encounter through art: the theatrical production of *Waiting for Godot*, 2) draw national and international attention to the fact that the people of New Orleans were essentially still waiting for all forms of aid and recovery support, 3) offer tangible support to the recovery and rebuilding efforts in the city that directly benefitted the people of New Orleans (x). The shadow fund created in the partnership with Creative Time was ultimately the way the production addressed direct support for rebuilding and recovery efforts. Local community organizations, cultural centers, and individuals could access a portion of the approximately \$50,000 of funds without having to submit reports or applications to justify their need or articulate deliverables (Stillman “Doing the Time”).<sup>115</sup> Admission to the performances was free and first-come-first-served. While the team expected around 100-200 people per performance there were often over 1000 people lined up waiting for a seat on the bleachers set up on the corner of Forstall Street and North Roman Street in the Lower Ninth Ward (Wilkerson 10-11).

What is most remarkable about the organizing effort is that the production brought together large numbers of people in the largely abandoned black neighborhoods within the deeply segregated city as a stark acknowledgment of the disproportionate impacts of Katrina’s devastation on communities of color. *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* had two sites where the production was performed: the Lower Ninth Ward and Gentilly, which were two of the neighborhoods which suffered the worst damage from Katrina. The history of racialized New Orleans runs deep in both locations and the neighborhoods have been primarily occupied by black New Orleanians for centuries. Chan specifically selected these spaces because of what they

---

<sup>115</sup> The shadow fund was created to provide a donor match for the amount that was spent on the production itself. These funds were then distributed to neighborhood organizations and individuals in New Orleans.

reveal about the racial and class dimensions of the failed Katrina response and federal neglect. He also insisted on inclusive engagement and collaboration as much as possible throughout the process where potlucks and community meetings were a priority (Stillman, “Doing the Time”). In this way, the project was about more than the references to the geographic resonances of the city and physical reminders of Katrina’s devastation as a canvas for the play’s themes. Chan recognized that the collaborative process of producing a play would help him “reimagine how art – as the form freedom takes without the use [of] coercion [or] force – can become a means to enter and engage with the myriad dimensions of life lived in the midst of ruin” (Chan 27). His selection of performance sites dialogues with the black geographies of New Orleans in a way that no other work in the Katrina theater archive can. For all the positive outcomes of Chan’s production, the question becomes: is this an ethical and appropriate engagement with the space of racialized catastrophe in New Orleans?

Chan, for all his successes with *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*, also contributes to the boon in disaster tourism that erupted in New Orleans post-Katrina. The use of the wreckage in neighborhood streets, debris as props and design elements, and condemned homes as the backdrop for a production of *Waiting for Godot* performed and produced by a theater company imported from New York City to New Orleans is arguably appropriative and deeply voyeuristic. The production made use of many tropes of New Orleans performance culture with little awareness of their resonances. For example, publicity for the opening night promised a “Gumbo Reception” followed by a “Second line – Follow the Band to the Play” which seems like a caricature of New Orleans’ culture that offers very little in terms of situating the play itself or speaking to the catastrophe of Katrina (Chan 234). New Orleans-based author Anne Gisleson offers a strong critique, writing:

[These efforts] came off as patronizing, or pandering, and wholly unnecessary. Is this what New York thinks we do down here every time more than ten of us get together? ... It may seem like the apex of cynicism to bitch about free gumbo and paid musicians, but joyless artificial second-lining makes even natives feel like awkward conventioners. With all this post-Katrina cultural boosterism, I feel as though we're in danger of self-parody and provincialism, always pointing our fingers back at our own "uniqueness" but always at the same uniquenesses, which become more and more commodified, less and less attached to their origins and ultimately threatening the true cultural strength of the city. (234)

While some local critics and residents who attended the production had issues with various aspects of the production (too many New Yorkers, too many white audience members, the play was too long), others praised Chan's efforts and celebrated the production's success. There is little ambiguity that the Classical Theater of Harlem artistic team and the acting itself was exceptional. However, the play's greatest contribution to the Katrina theater archive is *Godot's* thematic invitation to recognize place and the tortuous act of waiting for the arrival that will never come set within the context of Katrina's devastation.

*Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* is a meditation on the human condition which challenges the audience, both New Orleans locals and visitors alike, to consider what it means to be human in the face of catastrophe. There is no perfect argument for or against Chan's artistic activism and site-specific staging of *Godot*, but this final example within the Katrina theater archive is truly an experiment in the limits of the art form to create an aesthetic of the catastrophe temporality in a post-Katrina New Orleans. There is, good or bad, creative potential and possibility in the production history of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* which provides ample

space for questioning the ethical, political, and cultural resonances of site-specific performances of Katrina theater.

## **Rising Tides & Rural Experiences of Catastrophe in Narratives of the U.S. Gulf Coast**

“We are not moving off this island. If some people want to move they can go. But leave us alone. The people have the right to live where they want not where people tell them to go and live. They say the island is fading away soon we will not have a island left. If the island is not good stay away. May God bless the island. It’s worth saving.”

-Handwritten sign on Island Road (Pointe-aux-Chenes, Louisiana - February 2017)

This chapter shifts the focus from Katrina and New Orleans to the rural coastal communities of Southern Louisiana and Mississippi impacted by the intersecting catastrophes of land loss, cultural loss, environmental racism, and displacement as a result of climate collapse, superstorms, and rising tides. I will explore how two catastrophe narratives from the southern U.S. gulf coast, Jesmyn Ward’s novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and Benh Zeitlin’s film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), productively expand the artistic archive of catastrophes to include perspectives of resilience and resistance of communities who continue to face historical and cultural erasure as an impact of global climate collapse.<sup>116</sup> The two rural coastal settings of the novel and film are situated on the front lines of climate change with far less visibility and standing in the U.S. national perspective than their urban neighbors in New Orleans.

As a result of the focus on climate collapse and land loss in the U.S. southern gulf coast, this chapter will explore catastrophe time on its most expanded scale. These narratives access creative possibilities for imagined futures where marginalized populations from the most vulnerable coastal communities reclaim agency. By substantially expanding the limits of catastrophe time to consider the impacts of climate collapse on the Louisiana and Mississippi coastal communities the analysis of this chapter’s examples of catastrophe art looks towards the

---

<sup>116</sup> My chapter “Chronologies of Disaster in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*: Narrative Possibility and Adaptive Politics” (2018) was included in an edited collection published by Lexington Books: *Eco Culture: Disaster, Narrative, Discourse* edited by Robert Bell and Robert Ficociello.

future. For example, we do not yet know the extent of the climate refugee crisis for rural communities along the U.S. gulf coast as a result of rising sea levels, but these catastrophe narratives invite us to take notice of the rural experiences of catastrophe in this region. I am interested in the way in which catastrophe literature or catastrophe film, in this case 2005's Hurricane Katrina as represented in Jesmyn Ward's novel *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and Benh Zeitlin's feature film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), can politically or intellectually intervene in conversations about how communities outside of the urban centers are represented in the ever-expanding archive of catastrophe art. This chapter will also explore the ways the narrators of both *Salvage the Bones* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* reinvent mythology or allegorical narratives to generate unique ways of magical thinking as a cathartic act. Esch and Hushpuppy's stories generate new artistic archives of catastrophe, representing experiences from the often-forgotten rural communities of the U.S. South most vulnerable to rising tides and the effects of climate change.

Both *Salvage the Bones* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* challenge the idea of "catastrophe" as a punctual event. Though both the film and the novel were created, at least in part, as artistic responses or meditations on Katrina, they engage environmental catastrophe as situated within the "catastrophic" problem of inequitable social systems (often justified by race, gender, or class distinctions) and the relationship vulnerable populations have with these systems. These two catastrophe narratives can also be analyzed for their representations of characters that cope with what I will call intimate catastrophes (illness, broken families, or leaving childhood) within inequitable social systems and catastrophe environments. The film follows 6-year-old protagonist Hushpuppy who lives with her father Wink in "the Bathtub". The Bathtub is a fiercely survivalist Louisiana delta community cut off from the mainland, highly

evocative of its real-life counterparts: Isle de Jean Charles and Pointe-aux-Chenes, Louisiana. *Salvage the Bones* tells the story of a pregnant teenager Esch Baptiste and her family living in Bois Sauvage, Mississippi over the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina. Both the film and the novel have been discussed as “stories of survival” or allegories for “how even as death and destruction loom, life inevitably grows”, in the form of Esch’s pregnancy or Hushpuppy’s coming of age narrative (Marotte 207). This chapter will focus on close readings of Hushpuppy and Esch as representative of their larger, rural communities and the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of their creative processes to reclaim agency in the face of catastrophe. As such, I consider the limits of catastrophe art as presenting a model for the double-vision of catastrophe of rising tides and climate collapse; both narrators experience catastrophe as simultaneously intimate, at the level of the individual, and an expansive regional, or arguably global phenomenon.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *Salvage the Bones* offer up unique narrative perspectives which explore the trauma of catastrophe events but also the cathartic power of catastrophe literature or film more broadly. These texts reveal a psychological dimension to the creation of catastrophe literature and suggest that the process of literary or artistic creation both to fix and to interpret the trauma of catastrophe is a necessary act. The narrators of both texts, young black women, experience catastrophe at the macro- and micro-levels and use both established mythologies and their own magical thinking to cope with and create agency within the daily traumas of catastrophe environments. This chapter also explores the symbolic function of animals in both texts, China, the Pit Bull, and the aurochs in the film, to demonstrate how storytelling creates space for alternative narrative possibilities of catastrophe beyond the limits of human experience and knowledge.

In 2013 Cedric Johnson published an article in *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* that brings to the forefront the possible shortcomings of neoliberal thought in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Of the film Johnson writes: “The anarcho-liberal politics that define Benh Zeitlin’s acclaimed fantasy film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, are cynical and offer little hope for addressing the broad ecological and social challenges we face as a society and, for that matter, as a species” (“Watching” 225). He argues that although the film is superficially progressive in celebrating autonomy and protest through the self-sufficiency of the residents in the Bathtub community, it does not bridge the gap to become an anti-capitalist film in the traditional anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist sense. For Johnson, *Beasts*, through its failure to provide a realistic representation of disaster’s aftermath, and the refusal of the Bathtub community members to evolve beyond their long-established survivalism and separatist lifestyles, ultimately fails to provide viewers with incentive to reconsider disaster planning and government aid distribution. Johnson argues, “Revolutionary transformation of society is not a central aspiration, and in practice, the localized forms of autonomy and protest that are encouraged are non-threatening and fit comfortably within the established liberal democratic order. The film celebrates autonomy and wild freedom, but democratic government beyond the primitive village form is demonized” (“Watching” 211).

However, Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik’s 2015 *Ten Years After Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm’s Effect on American Culture and Identity*, compiles a collection of essays which rethink the role of art that represents Katrina as beyond simply reactionary. The collection works under the “assumption that the body of work that sprung out of Katrina offers a unique critical opportunity to better understand many things, including the genres that structure those stories [of Katrina] and the ways that stories reflect and produce

culture and identity” (Marotte and Jellenik viii-ix). They suggest that, like the scholarly and artistic products that developed in the decade after the 9-11 attacks, we might be able to consider the legacy of Katrina in a similar way. The essays in the collection seek to reconcile the “tensions between ‘fiction’ and ‘history’ and the struggle of these two modes of representation for shaping our collective memory and imagination” (xiii). The collection struggles to move beyond considering all Katrina-narratives as more or less one-dimensional representations of disaster/catastrophe that fall into two problematic categories: texts that focus on testimony and deal with processing the storm and its traumatic and cultural effects on people and the region, or texts that center on the identity politics activated and complicated by Katrina (x). This binary reinforces the pervasive understanding of disaster or catastrophe as inextricably tied to a punctual catastrophic event. The collection, though a well-intentioned scholarly effort and engaging in its focus on cultural products as the source texts inspiring the essays, fails to account for one of the primary questions of my research: How can the aesthetics of catastrophe narratives, and the underlying historical and social dimensions of this artistic archive, create new spaces for marginalized communities to make their experiences known, especially when experiences and echoes of catastrophe extend far beyond the material circumstances of a single disaster event?

Perhaps the exception to the reductive binary set up in the collection comes in the final essay, written by Jellenik himself, that explores *Salvage the Bones* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* as indicative of a shift in recent catastrophe narratives that speak to more universal themes, rather than simply reproducing representations or narratives of Katrina that “center on issues of class, race and government response (or lack thereof)” (Jellenik 221). He suggests that *Beasts* and *Salvage the Bones* signal a creative move “away from an overt focus on dissenting political,

racial and economic commentary and toward creative processings that center more inclusive and community-based aspects of what we can/should read into and take out of stories of Katrina's devastation" (221). For Jellenik, the earliest artistic reactions trying to make sense of Katrina's devastation and the underlying political failures ultimately relieved their audiences of the need to interpret the disaster as anything beyond the latest in a long line of "the federal government's failures" that "[typecast] Katrina in an overtly political light" (224).

Although I don't share Jellenik's desire to use *Beasts* and *Salvage the Bones* outside of their regional specificity as some stand-in for a universal experience, the writer makes a laudable effort to push beyond reading these two texts as merely reactionary politicized commentary on Bush-era disaster mitigation policies. He's overly focused with the function of the inverted levees in the film (in particular, the symbolic act of the marginalized Bathtub community stuffing an alligator full of explosives to blow them up). Most unforgivable, however, is Jellenik's analysis of race in the Bathtub as representative of "post-racial urges" where "skin color doesn't much matter" in the face of the "savage condition of the world" (232). This neo-liberal, colorblind analysis of the Bathtub's racial politics implies that global climate catastrophe is a great equalizer which will negatively impact populations indiscriminately, the fundamental problem being that the populations most vulnerable to climate catastrophe are often poor people of color.

### **Freedom, Invisibility, and Precarity of Living on the Margins**

Both *Beasts of the Southern Wild's* "Bathtub" and "the Pit" in *Salvage the Bones* are catastrophe environments that necessarily exist outside the purview of established societal or legible governmental structures. These are spaces operating beyond the limits of the mainstream politics or ideologies, one out of choice, the other out of circumstances. The "Bathtub" is a

utopic community largely unified around a somewhat anarchic politics oppositional to the “dry side” lifestyle on the far side of a levee. In the Bathtub material products and resources are communal; the land and water itself are shared by all the residents. There are no obvious ideological or political divisions between racial or generational factions of the Bathtub; all seem united against the “dry world”, which develops the highly romanticized utopian undercurrents of the film. Bathtub residents are self-selecting: they choose to remain and carve out a hard-scrabble life in the Louisiana bayous while actively aware of the government-funded levees that divide their community from the “dry side”. They remain fiercely protective of their survivalist lifestyle even during catastrophe events in the film.

Alternatively, the Pit, and the Batiste home, are spaces made vulnerable to catastrophe which was created through years of excavation from the clay hill behind the Batiste home. Esch recalls the history of the land, which goes back to her great-grandfather, Papa Joseph, who originally owned the 15 acres of property. She narrates the history of the family land, saying:

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 foundation for houses, let them excavate the side of a hill in a clearing 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, and the small stream that had run around and down the hill had diverted and pooled into the dry lake, making it a pond, and then Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp, so he stopped selling the earth for money. (Ward 14)

Esch’s history of the Pit is crucial to establish the extreme vulnerability of the Pit environment which mirrors the Batiste family’s vulnerability in the novel itself. The family’s history is deeply

connected to a rural landscape that has been forever altered by the process of excavating clay which serves as the material for foundations of homes in the nearby, predominantly white, sections of Bois Sauvage. The Batiste home, and the Pit, are on the margins of Bois Sauvage and even further removed from the white community, St. Catherine. It is truly a space unrecognized by even the center of rural life, though, ironically, the clay from the Pit itself along with the labor of Papa Joseph and the black community of Bois Sauvage created the literal foundations of the white community of St. Catherine.

Ward works carefully to construct a racial geography of the Bois Sauvage and St. Catherine as the novel progresses. Ward makes use of Esch's point of view, heavily peppered with repurposed memories or stories from Esch's brother Skeetah, to sketch the geographic divisions of race and class which stretch back several generations of Batistes. Esch explains that one year St. Catherine schools changed the bus route to pick her and her brothers up at 6:30am, which extended their bus ride more than an hour, as they traveled from "black Bois that we knew and into white Bois that we didn't" (Ward 70-71). Ward takes the reader through the Batiste children's daily journey through the trailers, low brick homes, and shacks of black Bois to the large and well-kept country homes of white children: "broad-shouldered, thick boys with wiry hair on their lips and little girls with red cheeks and eyes watery blue, their faces scrubbed rough" (71). She wonders if these white children "have their own Skeetahs and Esches crawling around the edges of their fields, like ants under the floorboards marching in line toward sugar left open in the cabinet" (71). Esch's imagination is drawn not to the white children themselves, or the spaces of the white homes, but the possibility that there are black families, with "Skeetahs and Esches" populating the margins of those well-kept fields and pastures. She helps construct a

racialized geography that focuses on the margins of the rural community, the bayous and woods, filled with black families that look like hers.

The divisions of class and race are made even clearer through Esch's imagery of ants "under the floorboards marching in line toward sugar left open in the cabinet" (71). In Esch's image, the black ants, intruders to the white domestic space, are making their way towards what might be interpreted as the perfect symbol of white excess and privilege: sugar. Throughout the novel Ward makes careful use of food and images of consumption to define the boundaries of class. The Batistes are constantly searching for food to sustain themselves: Esch hunts for chicken eggs in the woods with Junior, Big Henry brings canned goods to the Batistes before Katrina, and China's puppies are almost always characterized as hungry or thirsty.

Early in the novel Esch, Big Henry, and Skeetah make a trip to the grocery store in St. Catherine to buy dog food for China and her puppies while the white patrons are stocking up on non-perishable foods for the hurricane. Esch, Big Henry, and Skeetah all seem out of place in the store and are double-marginalized as the only black shoppers but also the only shoppers not spending large amounts of money to purchase food and materials for the coming storm. They "[bump] past carts pushed by ladies with feathery-light hair and freckled forearms" and Esch thinks to herself "I am small, dark: invisible. I could be Eurydice walking through the underworld to dissolve, unseen" (28). Esch thinks to herself that Daddy will stock the shelves to prepare for the storm, or perhaps hopes that he will, while she returns her focus to the possibility of her pregnancy.

The trip to the white grocery store helps to establish two primary recurring themes of the novel: Esch's struggle to hide as well as psychologically process her pregnancy and Skeetah's obsession with caring for China and her new puppies as a form of psychological escape from his

family and life in the Pit. Skeetah and Esch are both acutely aware of the family's vulnerable status and work to maintain a sense of stability for Junior and Randall, the youngest Batiste children, as well as themselves.

Ward's narrative focus on the landscape of the woods, fields, and structures surrounding the Pit as the primary setting for the novel makes a decidedly rural decentering of Katrina's effects possible. Esch and Skeetah have perhaps the strongest connection to the unaltered natural spaces of the woods and fields in the novel, but this implies a romanticism of the connection between human and nature which will be disrupted by the arrival of the storm. Esch and Skeetah walk together through the pines towards the nearby white farmer's house to steal dewormer for China, and Esch's tone in describing the environment is the polar opposite of her invisibility in the white grocery store.

Esch and Skeetah are seamlessly integrated into the natural world as she describes the trees, birds and their path through the woods. As they break into a run through the woods Esch narrates: "we run through a corridor of pines, oaks, birch, birds. I can't help it. I lean back against his pull, and I laugh. We fall into a pace. My face feels tight and hot, and the air coming into my nose feels like water. I am swimming through the air. My body does what it was made to do... I sink to my knees, lean forward, and bury my face in the pine straw breathing in the baked sap of the fallen leaves, feeling the sweat dripping off of me everywhere" (66-67). There is a security to the woods where Esch and Skeetah can breathe, run and become fully embodied characters just as they are.

Esch's narration focuses on a physical experience of freedom from inhibitions and being alive which runs counter to her earlier desire to be invisible while walking through the constructed and controlled environment of the white grocery store. Esch describes the upshot to

the invisibility of life in the Pit after she and Skeetah steal the dewormer, saying, “We live in the black heart of Bois Sauvage, and [the white farmer] lives out away in the pale arteries, so I don’t think he will ever come here, swinging his cane like an axe, his dog foaming, probably a rifle in the back window of his gleaming, tinted pickup truck” (97). The woods surrounding the Pit are a space of improvisation and safety for the Batiste children perhaps because of their marginalization and physical distance from the restrictions and values of the white community of St. Catherine.

### **Contextualizing Katrina as One Disaster Among Many**

Ward’s efforts to make visible the invisible elements of populations most vulnerable to catastrophe in *Salvage the Bones* necessarily places the punctual catastrophe event of Hurricane Katrina in the background of the novel. The plot is primarily driven by the relationships in the Batiste family, Esch’s pregnancy, as well as China’s puppies and dogfighting. The first nine chapters of the book make very little mention of Katrina aside from occasional clues: the grocery store patrons frantically purchasing canned goods, the radio station in the car giving the weather forecast, or Daddy nailing boards over the house windows to prepare. Arguably, part of Ward’s choice to downplay the event or aftermath of the hurricane, saving it for a precious few pages towards the end of the novel, is to take some power away from fetishizing the punctual catastrophe event itself and to focus the reader’s attention on the vulnerabilities of the characters pre-Katrina. The daily catastrophes of Esch’s struggle to navigate a world pervaded with uncertainty and instability take precedence over the hurricane’s ability to disrupt otherwise stable lives. Perhaps the most important choice Ward makes in the novel to downplay Katrina as the single marker of catastrophe in the region is her effort to situate Katrina within a long history of hurricanes and the realities of coastal land loss and flooding in the region. She does so by

including stories and memories of hurricanes and floods from almost every character. Most of the stories normalize rising water as a commonplace phenomenon for the region or suggest that each “big one” loomed large in the collective psyche until the next “big one”.

The first mention of storms comes in Esch’s explanation of hurricane season in Bois Sauvage saying, “It’s summer, and when it’s summer, 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” (4). Here the mention of summer mansions and slave galleys evokes an extended timeline of storm history that points to the timelessness of hurricane season; it has always been and will always be. Ward uses the history of hurricanes in the region to simultaneously map a racial history. First, there is the offhand mention of slave galleys which evokes a history of plantation slavery in Esch’s description of hurricane season. At Randall’s basketball game in the middle of the novel Esch describes the gym at St. Catherine’s elementary school and retells Ms. Deadeaux’s history of the space via segregation and Hurricane Camille. She explains:

...the elementary school 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, reburying them, sleeping on platforms that used to be the foundations of their houses, under tents, biking or walking miles for freshwater, for food, to still fight the law outlawing segregation. (140)

In Esch’s retelling of history, Camille and desegregation of schools in Mississippi go hand in hand. The destruction of the catastrophe was enough to overwhelm, or at least wear down, white

opposition to desegregation legislation. Ms. Deadeaux's connection between catastrophe and desegregation, retold by Esch, suggests that without the hurricane, full desegregation of schools in Bois Sauvage would have remained elusive. Esch follows this alternative history with the story of the courtship between Mama and Daddy when the school was still segregated. She seamlessly infuses her family's own history into the larger historical framework of catastrophe and race relations in America.

The day before Katrina hits Bois Sauvage Esch begins to carve out space for her own experience and story within the extended historical timeline of hurricanes. As part of the evacuation system, all households in the direct path of a hurricane receive an automated phone call which explains the severity and risk attached to that particular region. Esch recalls that when Mama was alive she always answered the evacuation phone calls. Then, after Mama's death Skeetah or Randall had taken over the responsibility, somewhat haphazardly.

The day before Katrina is the first day that Esch answers the call and describes the recording, saying:

I cannot remember exactly what he says, but I remember it in general. *Mandatory evacuation. Hurricane making landfall tomorrow. If you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible. You have been warned. And these could be the consequences of your actions.* There is a list. And I do now know if he says this, but this is what it feels like: *You can die.* This is when the hurricane becomes real. (217)

For Esch, the evacuation phone call brings the potential danger of the hurricane into clear focus. Up until this moment she has been concerned with the pregnancy, getting attention from Manny, and trying to suppress her anxiety surrounding impending motherhood. The evacuation message

brings the stark realization that her unborn baby requires protection just as Mama protected her during Hurricane Elaine. As soon as the message finishes Esch explains her memory of Elaine. She carefully considers the memory of Mama, pregnant with Junior at the time, rocking “from side to side like the baby in her would not let her sit still” (217). Elaine was only a category 3 and Katrina reached a category 5.

Realizing that the hurricane on the horizon was going to be much more severe than Elaine, Esch reflects on the night of Elaine in further detail and remembers Mama telling stories of Hurricane Camille. Stories from her mother’s retelling of “the legend: Camille” flash through Esch’s mind and land on the morbid detail that “Papa Joseph found a skeleton in the yard, gleaming, washed clean of flesh and clothing, but she said it still stank like a bad tooth in the mouth. [Mama] said that Papa Joseph never took the remains down to the church, but carried it in an oyster sack out into the woods; she thought he buried the bones there” (218). This particular detail from Mama’s story shifts the genealogy of hurricanes away from historical details and into a realm of folklore or even ghost stories.

On the eve of Katrina Esch’s mind is flooded with legends of catastrophe rather than statistics or protocol for hurricane preparation. Ward emphasizes storytelling in this instance to create an ambiguity around the storm itself. Hurricanes in the novel are more than markers of time; they create narrative space to make legends that are passed down through generations of Batiste women: Mama Lisbeth told tales from her childhood to Mama, Mama passed these along with her own on to Esch, and Esch will pass her stories on to her unborn child. For Esch, the phone call followed by the flood of generational memories from past storms, brings about the realization that she has stepped into the role of matriarchal storyteller. She is at once faced with the responsibility of protecting her unborn child during the punctual catastrophe itself and also

the weight of bearing witness. Ward intentionally blurs the line between fiction and reality in the hurricane tales; she troubles the distinction between reportage and legend so that the reader cannot separate one from the other. It's impossible to distinguish Esch's memories and personal experiences from what she's absorbed through the hurricane legends passed down to her. Through this particular instance of Esch's slippery storytelling and explosion of hurricane memories Ward productively blurs the line between clear historical timelines and individual narratives of catastrophe and trauma.

Esch's full transformation into matriarchal storyteller is complete at the end of the novel when she collects shards of glass from the wreckage as material artifacts to build her tale of Katrina around. She explains: "I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered. ... She left us a dark Gulf and salt-burned land. ... She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands committed to blood, comes" (255). With the final image of the next mother committed to blood, the next "big one", Esch returns to the established extended history of hurricanes but with an eye towards the future. For now, she is the keeper of the hurricane legends.

However, she recognizes she will pass on these stories and her children will inherit the traumas of catastrophe, just as she inherited them. The novel is less about Esch telling her story of survival and more about her eventual acceptance of the role of matriarchal storyteller. The final moments of the novel suggest that Esch is ready to take on the challenge of sitting, however uneasily, with the expectation of violence, traumas of motherhood, and the weight of passing down the hurricane legends and histories as her mother passed them down to her.

## Repurposing Medea: Esch's Use of Storytelling to Reclaim Agency

Scholarship on *Salvage the Bones* has focused on two primary ways of engaging Ward's novel: first, perhaps most naturally, reading the novel as a fictionalized representation of surviving Katrina and second, as a bildungsroman exploring the challenges of growing up poor, female, and black on the rural coast of Mississippi. The book has been critiqued for Ward's "considerable risks in employing stereotypes connected with race and the South (e.g., a pregnant fifteen-year-old and pit bull fighting) to create a narrative of internal other" (Travis 220). The pit bull fighting scenes and unflinching violence that pervade the book have struck a nerve with scholars who argue that the novel, full of "animal and human bodies bitten, bloodied, and broken; brutal dogfights and loveless, mechanical sex...goes well beyond graphic" (221). Ward's interest in representing the poverty cycle and social fragmentation in rural Mississippi has been compared to Steinbeck's work in *The Grapes of Wrath*, perhaps the quintessential American novel of survival against the odds during environmental, social and economic catastrophe (Railsback 188).

Shortly after Ward's novel was nominated for the National Book Award in 2011 *Salon* literary critic Laura Miller suggested that *Salvage the Bones*, along with other novels by lesser-known authors nominated for the same award, is "a book that somebody else thinks you *ought* to read, whether you like it or not" (Miller, "How the National Book"). What Miller points out concerning the National Book Award Committee's interest in promoting authors of color, women, and small press publications may be well-founded. However, it suggests that Ward's novel, by virtue of its challenging hyper-realist focus on violence, poverty and motherhood in catastrophe environments, cannot also be a pleasure to read or retain literary value as a piece of art rather than social or political commentary. Miller, Railsback, and Travis's critiques of the

novel fail to account for the allegorical dimensions of Ward's text which allow for interpretations of the novel that go beyond simply reading *Salvage the Bones* as a survival narrative.

In Andy Johnson's *Callaloo* review of *Salvage the Bones* he carefully outlines a one-to-one parallel between each character in the novel and their counterpart in the classical Greek Jason and Medea mythology.<sup>117</sup> The obvious correlations between Medea, China, Esch and Mama are clear: all are magical mothers, capable of extreme violence, desire for revenge, and a deep capacity for passionate love. The novel is filled with imagery of infanticide and maternal death. First, Mama's death while giving birth to Junior and later, when China is sick, her violent killing of the unlucky puppy lying closest to her. Nature and storms are also imbued with the violence of Medea in the novel; each superstorm and subsequent flood, like Medea, will bring death and destruction without remorse. Like Medea, Esch's mother, China, and the violent maternal allegories of Hurricane Camille and Betsy, Katrina is merely the most recent example of material destruction.

Manny, the father of Esch's child, is characterized as Medea's Jason but he requires a fair bit of creative retelling on Esch's part to fit the role of mythic lover. Manny never makes a promise to care for Esch or their unborn child. Nor does he commit to any type of a romantic relationship with Esch beyond casual and sporadic sex. The myth of Jason and Medea bridges the gap between Esch's understanding of her relationship with Manny and the harsh reality that, even though they've slept together, Manny remains primarily interested in Shaliyah, the novel's

---

<sup>117</sup> Literary scholar Andy Johnson equates Randall, the eldest Batiste son and a great basketball player, with Hector, the "de facto leader of the family" (Johnson 493). He argues that Daddy is a "wounded Menelaus, unable to imagine his life without [Mama]", which might be the biggest stretch of Johnson's allegorical comparisons (493-494). Ward's male characters, like the men in *Medea*, are ancillary to the narrative of violent motherhood.

Glauce character. Esch's jealousy and delusion pervades the text and when she sees Manny and Shaliyah together at the park she thinks, "I loved him before that girl. I imagine that this is the way Medea felt about Jason when she fell in love, when she knew him; that she looked at him and felt a fire eating up through her rib cage, turning her blood to boil. ... I feel it so strongly that I cannot imagine how Manny does not feel it too" (56-57). The love triangle in Medea has a degree of ambiguity that Esch capitalizes on in the repurposing of the myth; Jason may love Medea, but chooses to please Creon and elevate his status in Corinth by marrying princess Glauce and keeping Medea as a mistress. For Esch, Manny is performing the same type of equivocation. Esch remains convinced that Manny is drawn to Shaliyah purely for the status she provides, but she remains hopeful that her Jason will come back to her and fulfill her destiny as his "beloved" once he finds out about their child (16-17). This desire for Manny to come back to her runs counter to Esch's understanding of romantic love in Greek mythology. She explains that "in every one of the Greeks' mythology tales, there is this: a man chasing a woman, or a woman chasing a man. There is never a meeting in the middle. There is only a body in a ditch, and one person walking toward or away from it" (32).

When Esch tells Manny that the baby is his he denies the accusation saying, "How you come to me saying something's mine when you fuck everybody who come to the Pit" (Ward 204)? Esch, true to her instinctual desire for revenge, "[slaps] him, over and over, [her] hands a flurry, a black blur. His face is hot and stinging as boiling water. ... This is Medea wielding the knife. This is Medea cutting. [She rakes her] fingernails across his face, [leaves] pink scratches that turn red, fill with blood" (204). The Jason and Medea mythology is repurposed for Esch's violence inasmuch as it turns to her reworking of the mythology in moments of pleasure throughout the novel. On the morning after the fight between Manny and Skeetah at the

basketball game, which is partially motivated to defend Esch's honor and to settle the debate of China's puppies, Esch returns to her mythology book to find solace. The book has provided an escape from her life in the Pit and has provided a narrative framework for her to make sense of the challenges and traumas in her relationships.

However, she cannot force herself to get beyond the section of the Medea myth explaining that Medea is responsible for her brother's death. Esch's guilt over being the cause for Skeetah and Manny's fight lingers as she reads the different versions of how Medea's brother, Absyrtus, is betrayed:

One [version] says she lies to her brother and invites him onto the ship with the Argonauts as they were fleeing, and that Jason ambushes him. ... The other version says that she kills her brother herself, that her brother runs away with her and the Argonauts, assuming that he is safe, and that she chops him into bits: liver, gizzard, breast and thigh, and throws each part overboard ... I read it over and over again. It is like she is under the covers with me, both of us sweating to water. To get away from her, from the smell of Manny still on me a night and morning afterward, I get up. (154)

This marks a turning point in the novel when Esch becomes more focused on Skeetah and China and less on chasing after Manny's attention. The next time in the novel when Manny and Esch are alone together is when she tells him she is pregnant and gets her revenge.

She no longer needs to repurpose or retell the love affair portion of the Medea and Jason myth but instead reflects on Medea's killing of Absyrtus so as not to betray her loyalty to Skeetah and her family. Esch's repurposing of the story not only allows her to make sense of the traumas in her life beyond her control but also creates spaces of agency justified by the cherry-picked portions of the narrative used as an instructive guide for her actions and decisions.

Perhaps the character who is hardest to sketch onto the allegorical framework of the Medea story is Skeetah. Johnson suggests that Skeetah most closely resembles Odysseus because he's a "cunning strategist, better at psychological warfare than personal battle. ... Skeetah brawls, steals, and plots but always for his family, never for only himself" (Johnson 494). Skeetah and Esch have the closest relationship of the Batiste children and he is the one that first notices Esch is pregnant but keeps her secret until the hurricane hits so Esch can escape the attic first. At the very close of the novel Esch decides that if her baby is a boy she'll name it after Skeetah whose real name is "*Jason. Jason Aldon Batiste*" (Ward 248). The ironic twist that Jason was Skeetah all along provides perhaps the most significant, and furthest afield, retelling of the Medea myth in the novel.

Once Esch shifts her focus from Manny (Jason as lover) the importance of Skeetah as a new retelling of Jason becomes fully realized. He is the brother that Medea sacrifices. He is also the constant and grounding force in Corinth, a hostile environment, that Jason could not be for Medea. Skeetah is a version of Jason that sacrifices for those he loves and carves out of himself to protect his lovers and family: China and Esch. Skeetah is the Jason that Esch has created through her retelling of the Medea myth. She becomes a newly created version of Medea that fiercely protects her children and Skeetah becomes a new Jason who saves Esch during the hurricane, although this means letting go of China.

China is perhaps the closest character to Euripides's Medea in the *Salvage the Bones*. Ward describes China as "brutal and magical and loyal" (Hoover, "Jesmyn Ward"). The novel begins as China gives birth to her litter of puppies and ends with the Batiste children holding a bonfire vigil for her return after she is swept away by the hurricane waters. She, like Medea, kills her children, a puppy, seemingly to get revenge on Skeetah after he makes her sick by feeding

her the cow dewormer. China is also fiercely loyal to Skeetah and is personified throughout the book as being conscious of traumas as they occur, always seemingly aware of who is a threat and whom to trust. Skeetah, or Jason, is more closely connected to China than any of the humans in the novel.

Skeetah is her master but is often described with the same language that Esch reserves for lovers or husbands throughout the text. Before Skeetah lets China fight against Kilo to keep the puppies he chants an incantation to her: “*China White, ... my China. Like bleach, China, hitting and turning them red and white, China. ... Leave them shaking China, make them love you, China, make them need you, China, make them know even though they want to they can't live without you, China. My China*, he mumbles: *make them know, make them know, make them know*” (Ward 171). Skeetah’s chant is some of the most intimate language in the novel and demonstrates the depth of their relationship. This speech touches on his ownership of China, his protection and partnership, as well as the magical qualities that China embodies at the end of the novel.

China wins the fight against Kilo to protect her puppies and afterwards Skeetah dresses her injuries, including the torn breast once full of milk for her puppies. Esch describes this symbol of savage maternity, narrating: “Skeetah unwraps China’s breast, and it hangs free, already bruised and wilted from disuse; it is a dark mark on her, marring what was once so white, so pristine. The scar makes what remains even more beautiful. Skeetah looks at China like he would dive into her if he could and drown” (192). Esch makes constant comparisons to China’s body as her own begins to transform into the body of a mother. She explains that “bodies tell stories” and China’s scars do exactly that. They show the limits that a savage mother, like Medea and China, will go to in order to protect what they love.

Ward's careful attention to when and how Esch repurposes Greek mythology can serve as a timeline for Esch's attempts to understand or psychologically process experiences of trauma or to negotiate her own agency throughout the novel. In an interview with *The Paris Review* in 2011 Ward is asked about Esch's connection to the Medea myth. Ward stands behind her infusion of Greek mythology in the novel as potentially "transformative – and recuperative" saying that she "... wanted to align Esch with that classic text, with the universal figure of Medea, the antihero, to claim that tradition as part of my Western literary heritage" (Hoover, "Jesmyn Ward"). For summer reading before junior year Esch is required to read Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* (1942), which is where she is first exposed to the classical mythology that she ultimately uses to psychologically process her trauma. Esch is recuperating or transforming the classical white canon to her own life in the catastrophe space of black Bois Sauvage.

There is a psychological dimension to Esch's constant return to Medea which provides her with a layering of narrative and storytelling to process the weight of the traumas she endures. She turns to creativity and the unlikely role model of Medea with the most violent aspects of her life and experience. Ward's choice to weave the Medea myth into Esch's conscious (and subconscious) allows Esch an agency to psychologically traverse the spaces between the quotidian violence and marginalization she experiences in the real world and a fantastic world where she controls her fate, just as Medea. Importantly, Esch's fantastic world is not devoid of violence and does not play into an escapist fantasy, but storytelling is used to reclaim psychological and emotional agency amidst the chaos of the catastrophe around her.

Esch's focus on China as the primary example of savage motherhood throughout the novel informs her own developing understanding of what she will eventually become. China is the model that Esch requires to embrace her future. The moment of transformation where Esch

takes China's place in the narrative as the novel's mother occurs during Katrina. As the Batiste family escapes the flooding house Skeetah must make a choice between helping Esch and holding onto China as they jump to Mama Lizbeth's roof. Esch slips and drops China's puppies into the water. China reacts and tries to escape from Skeetah's grip. She will swim after the puppies and leave Skeetah behind. Esch describes China's sacrifice for her puppies, narrating: "Skeetah grabs China by the head and pulls and her body comes out and she is scrambling. She flies clear of him, twists in the air to splash belly first in the water. She is already swimming, fighting. ... [cutting] through the swirling water straight as a water moccasin into the whipping, fallen woods in the distance" (235-236). China's sacrifice makes it possible for Esch to fully embrace her role as mother. China becomes the standard that Esch will follow, demonstrating how hard she must fight to protect her unborn child.

After the hurricane Esch's transformation to savage mother and China's thematic function as her matriarchal guide are solidified in Esch's prophetic imagery describing China's return. Creating a new addition to the catastrophe storytelling archive and the allegory of violent motherhood, Esch narrates: "China. She will return, standing tall and straight, the milk burned out of her. She will look down on the circle of light we have made in the Pit, and she will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister. In the star-suffocated sky, there is a great waiting silence. She will know that I am a mother" (258). Esch is prepared to bear witness to the catastrophe, and she now has the power to narrate her own story of motherhood because of the model that China provided.

The novel ends with a recognition not of Esch fully understanding China, but of China recognizing Esch's existence as a mother. The final paragraphs of the novel slip into a fantastic level of narration which is simultaneously "anticipated and fulfilled" in Esch's imaginative

restructuring of her reality (Morgenstern 118). Esch's prophecy uses a "...grammatical structure [conveying] a kind of performative faith required for survival and for the re-constitution of the world" where the lines between human, nature, and animal blur. Literary scholar Naomi Morgenstern argues that Esch's identification with Medea, China, and Katrina is suggestive of "both a posthumanist ontology (a touch of the divine, the animal, the weather) and what it means to be taken to the edge of existence, radically exposed" (118). In this way, Esch is creating a new mode of existence for herself which does not conform to the norms of patriarchal humanism.

While it is not clear exactly how Esch will take on her decision to be a mother, the moment of China's recognition generates an alternative path for Esch which makes the decision to mother a choice, rather than an inevitability of her geographic and economic constraints. Morgenstern notes that the "complicated temporality" of Esch's decision to become a mother suggests that "the decision both *will happen* and is forever suspended in a perpetual future" (118). I argue that the final passage of the novel is the perfect encapsulation of the catastrophe temporality which Esch has experienced throughout the novel. She has operated within the past, present, and future of catastrophe simultaneously; the final prophecy is simply an embrace of the potential agency this temporality provides to Esch to fully inhabit all of her conflicting and complex identities.

This political and literary act of reclaiming mythology enters the text motivated by Ward's infuriation that "the work of white American writers can be universal and lay claim to classic texts, while black and female authors are ghetto-ized as 'other' ... The stories I write are particular to my community and my people, which means that the details are particular to our circumstances, but the larger story of the survivor, the savage, is essentially a universal, human one" (Hoover, "Jesmyn Ward"). Though the novel itself may be far from political, especially

when compared to Ward's Baldwin-inspired collection of essays *The Fire This Time* (2016) or her memoir *The Men We Reaped* (2013), Esch and Ward's retelling of classical Greek mythology creates space for new narrative appropriations of cultural products too often claimed by the white male writers of the literary canon. With Ward's politics of repurposing Greek mythology in *Salvage the Bones* in mind, and my argument that the novel is more than merely an example of the Katrina survivor fiction, I will shift focus to another narrative that pushes the theoretical and thematic limits of catastrophe artistic and cultural production: *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

### **Evolution of Representation from *Juicy and Delicious* to *Beasts of the Southern Wild***

Before I shift to my analysis of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* it's important to touch briefly on the literary and filmic source texts that creatively fueled *Beasts*. Lucy Alibar (*Juicy and Delicious* playwright and *Beasts* screenplay co-author) and Benh Zeitlin (director and co-author of *Beasts* screenplay) were childhood friends and used each other as creative consultants before their collaboration on *Beasts*. Zeitlin, son of American folklorist Steven Zeitlin, attended Wesleyan University and moved to New Orleans to make his first short film, *Glory at Sea*, in 2007. Alibar attended Tisch at NYU where she worked primarily in experimental theater and playwriting. After graduating from Tisch, Alibar remained in New York and her one-act play *Juicy and Delicious*, which is the first literary representation of Hushpuppy, premiered at The Tank theater collective in 2010. Before the premiere, Alibar showed her finished script to Zeitlin in 2007, who had just begun to gain critical buzz for *Glory at Sea*, and he asked her to collaborate on his follow up feature-length project: *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. The final script for the film, which, notoriously, was drafted and revised hundreds of times during casting and filming, is a truly hybrid product that melds the ideas, themes, and subject matter of Alibar and

Zeitlin's earlier creative work (Arceneaux). Without *Glory at Sea* and *Juicy and Delicious* there would be no *Beasts*.

Alibar has often explained that *Juicy and Delicious* was originally conceived as a way for her to work through the residual childhood traumas and her troubled relationship with her ailing father rather than climate change or the challenges of rural southern life. She describes the setting of the play as "a rural thing versus an urban thing", which allowed for the roots of the Bathtub community in *Beasts* to develop (Miller, "Beasts"). The action of the play follows its protagonist, Hushpuppy. However, unlike the *Beasts*' protagonist, Alibar's Hushpuppy is described as "a sweet southern boy ... not the sharpest knife in the box" (Alibar ix). Alibar discussed details of Hushpuppy's age, saying, "when the character was played in the theater, it was a 25-year-old guy playing an 11-year-old boy (Douglas, "Interview"). Alibar, in collaboration with Zeitlin, decided to change Hushpuppy's age and sex for the film, which I will explore further in my analysis of the film itself. One could argue that with the older, male Hushpuppy in Alibar's play the relationships and material circumstances seem somehow less hopeless than with the film's 6-year-old female Hushpuppy. Soon Hushpuppy will be able to move away from Daddy's house and away from the physical and emotional abuse. Similar to the film, Hushpuppy and Daddy live in extreme poverty. Hushpuppy returns home from school and "there's nothing in the house to eat but a bag of cat food. He opens the cat food [and] eats ravenously" (Alibar 7).

The cat food as a marker of the vulnerable material circumstances of Hushpuppy and Daddy's life also functions as a primary site for Alibar's magical realism. This play between material vulnerability and magic (or creative invention) is taken up in the film as well as the play. For example, in *Juicy and Delicious*, Hushpuppy digs into the cat food and the ghostly

presence of his mother, Mamma, emerges from the bag of cat food “dripping cat food and flowers” to remind Hushpuppy to “at least eat it off a plate, like a normal person” (Alibar 7). In *Beasts*, Hushpuppy decides to prepare herself dinner and after lighting the stove’s burner with a blow torch she dumps a can of dogfood into a frying pan. As she cooks she begins to talk to Mama’s Michael Jordan jersey, which Hushpuppy slid onto a chair at the table underneath a child’s drawing of a woman’s face, and Mama carries on a conversation with Hushpuppy.

In the play, Mama’s entrances onto the stage are always from unexpected materials and magical places: the bag of cat food, the raining grits, and the kitchen sink. Mama appears in the domestic sphere as a reminder of Daddy’s failure to provide for Hushpuppy in terms of material needs. Where food is lacking Mama appears through magic. Hushpuppy’s imaginings of Mama fill in his emotional needs and the care that Daddy cannot provide, partially due to his illness, partially due to his emotional removal from Hushpuppy. In the film, Mama’s appearance is more closely tied to Hushpuppy’s emotional needs and creative invention. She can choose when to have a conversation with Mama on her own terms simply by addressing the Michael Jordan jersey, but the physical form of Mama will never appear.<sup>118</sup> Mama’s presence and absence in the play are far more unpredictable.

In the same scene where Mama appears in the cat food, Alibar’s representation of the threat of climate catastrophe, through the melting polar icecaps and inevitable flood, is also made present through magical realism. The play often employs a form of magical realism that transforms food into metaphors for Hushpuppy’s psychological condition, the failure of the

---

<sup>118</sup> This is true with the exception of the cook/dancer appearance at the Elysian Fields near the end of the film. This may or may not be “Mama” as Hushpuppy has imagined her, but this character lines up uncannily with Wink’s flashbacks of the alligator killing and ‘boiling water’ memories.

family structure, and Daddy's anger. Alibar also uses magical realism and food products to create a world on stage that is in constant danger of being disrupted by environmental catastrophe. Whenever Daddy enters into the house lemons fly through the window, as if his presence has magically forced the environment to attack the house. In the cat food scene Daddy enters the house and lemons crash through the window so "[he] picks up the lemons and chucks them back out the window ... they fly back in, and he throws them right back" (Alibar 7). This darkly comic stage direction of the continued battle of lemons from the environment invading the home could represent the constant struggle against climate change in the face of certain environmental catastrophe. Hurricanes, floods, increased salinity and rising tides, like the lemons of the play, will arrive unpredictably and mitigation is a difficult, perhaps impossible, task.

As the play progresses, grits and flowers join the lemons as they "continue to bombard the windowpane" (Alibar 8). As the food and flowers pelt the window Daddy describes his rationale in building a boat for Hushpuppy so he can sail to Japan "when it's check out time" at the end of the world (Alibar 8). Reading this scene as perhaps Daddy's most caring and paternal gesture towards Hushpuppy, it is impossible to ignore Alibar's union of magical realism, the threat of climate catastrophe, and the need to work together as a community to prepare for the inevitabilities of catastrophe. Finally, at the end of the scene material chaos is introduced as the audience hears "the sound of ice melting. A wave soaks the stage. Catfish are washed onto the stage and flop around" (Alibar 8). Not only has the natural world finally forced its way into the house and the scene playing on the stage, but magical realism has forced the audience to engage the realities of climate catastrophe in the gulf and the failing global environment.

Hushpuppy and Daddy continue to build the boat together even though the waves soak the stage in a powerful statement of unity in planning for the inevitability of climate catastrophe.

Alibar's use of magical realism to engage climate change, as well as the representation of stark material realities in everyday lives of gulf communities, creates space to move the audience towards imagining political possibilities of addressing climate catastrophe mitigation, which, Johnson argues, *Beasts* fails to offer. The boat itself, which carries Hushpuppy to Japan once the great flood occurs, creates a reflective space for Hushpuppy to consider his own relationship to the universe in the reality of climate disaster. While floating across the floodwaters of the sea he "[breathes] in and [lets] the universe reveal itself" to find that he's "an integer in a great astronomical equation", which provides the "knowledge that there is an order, even if [he is] too much of a stupid little pussy bitch to see it" (Alibar 39). This moment of reflection is fundamental to the philosophical nature of Hushpuppy in the film. She is able to simultaneously narrate her experience of catastrophe and engage trauma both at the level of the individual and at the global level. The viewer, like Hushpuppy, must sit quietly and contemplate his or her own position in relation to the universe. Hushpuppy models for the viewer an unsettling empowerment in seeing the global scale of climate change, though we're constantly mired in our hyper-local experiences of ecological catastrophe.

Zeitlin filmed the bulk of *Glory at Sea* in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana. The action of the film follows a group of mourners and a man returning from Hades as they build a boat from the debris of Katrina in New Orleans and rescue loved ones trapped beneath the sea. *Glory at Sea* is a crucial turning point in the process of adapting Alibar's magical realism for Zeitlin's world in *Beasts*. The boat, evocative of Alibar's boat in the play, transforms into the material aftermath of Katrina in *Glory at Sea* and somewhat ambiguous Greek mythology takes the place of Alibar's magical realism.

There are two elements that stand out as unique in Zeitlin's projects: his attachment to catastrophe (in its myriad forms) in a rural post-Katrina Louisiana gulf setting, and his continued emphasis on wide-ranging magical and mythical elements in his films. Though he moves away from a Greek-inspired mythology in *Beasts*, ultimately creating Hushpuppy and Bathsheba's aurochs mythology, the indebtedness to myth-making to develop a narrative of catastrophe remains.

Zeitlin describes the process of filming *Beasts* with Court 13 in an interview, saying:

We're trying to create a system where it's a sort of like-minded group of people that want to be working in this grassroots way. It both sort of manifests itself in the film and we're hoping we can grow it and it can be the kind of thing where ... we can all come together to make these movies ... But it's sort of an approach, almost a code. (Douglas, "Interview")

Not unlike the Bathtub community represented in the film, Court 13 worked independently to produce *Beasts* with a sense of autonomy and rejection of mainstream Hollywood production culture. The actors were largely cast from local community members. Dwight Henry, who plays Wink, Hushpuppy's father in the film, owned the local bakery across the street from Court 13 offices. Zeitlin would rehearse with Henry during the middle of the night when he was baking for the following day. In casting Hushpuppy the production team auditioned hundreds of local students, finally settling on six-year-old Quvenzhané Wallis as their choice for the role.

Terrebonne Parish, more specifically Pointe-aux-Chenes, where *Beasts* was filmed, suffered extensive damage during Katrina and all the community members who participated, save Wallis and the other actors who were too young, lived through the event. These same local populations also encounter the slow-moving ecological catastrophe of Louisiana's gulf coast

sinking beneath rising oceans due to global warming as an everyday phenomenon. In the first months of production the BP oil spill drastically altered the natural environment and economies of this region. These lived experiences of ecological catastrophe bring into question the ethics of local casting. In other words, is it divisive to produce a fictional cultural product adapted with historical ecological catastrophe in mind using survivors from those catastrophes? What important lines can be drawn, if any, between telling the story of a community who survived (and is still grappling with the traumas of) catastrophe and the events themselves? Zeitlin walks this line in *Beasts* with almost prophetic representations of what would eventually become the relocation of Isle de Jean Charles residents in the first U.S.-government-sponsored resettlement program for climate refugees within U.S. borders.<sup>119</sup>

### ***Beasts of the Southern Wild: From Katrina to Climate Catastrophe***

Discerning between catastrophe fiction and reality in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* became all the more complicated as I found myself driving down the dangerously low-lying levee road separating salt water from fresh water on the way to Isle de Jean Charles with Mike Arceneaux. Arceneaux was the self-proclaimed head fixer and boat captain during the film's production. On a sticky Louisiana summer day in 2014 I was given a chance all too rare in academic life: the chance to tour a site of study firsthand, and, most importantly, to have intimate and extended conversations with the people of the bayou communities in Terrebonne Parish that inspired the film I was writing about. Isle de Jean Charles is slowly sinking into the gulf as a result of climate

---

<sup>119</sup> In 2016, Isle de Jean Charles was awarded \$48.3 million in Community Development Block Grant funds by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to create a plan for voluntary relocation of the island residents to a nearby location. The residents of Isle de Jean Charles are predominantly of American Indian ancestry and represent some of the last remaining native communities who have been hunting, trapping, fishing and farming southeastern Louisiana for generations (*Isle de Jean Charles Resettlement*). More on this below.

catastrophe and is not included in the boundaries of the 72-mile Morganza-to-the-Gulf Army Corps of Engineers project (Mayo, “Corps”). Still not completed in 2023, this nationally funded hurricane protection levee project is intended to protect greater Terrebonne Parish from hurricanes up to Category 3. The project is also designed to combat rising tides and floodwaters. However, the small community of Biloxi-Chitimacha tribe members living on Isle de Jean Charles, not federally recognized or protected, remained, at the time of my research visit, in the path of imminent danger from rising tides. I spent several weeks listening to residents who refuse to leave their land or their fishing livelihoods, and who accept the disastrous reality of global warming, super storms and rising salinity and tides as they prepare to raise their homes a few more feet each flood season.

The conflict between cultural preservation and environmental issues in the region is palpable, not merely a filmic narrative. When asked about *Beasts*' portrayal of environmental catastrophe Arceneaux responded, “The difference in representing a reality of environmental [catastrophe] versus a story, a folk story, is complicated. *Beasts* operates on both levels, right? You can't get away from the issues of reality but you're in this total fantasy world. Hushpuppy lives in both at the same time” (Arceneaux). Arceneaux's instinctive analysis of Hushpuppy's dual-management of both the lived experience of environmental catastrophe events as well as the grappling with an extended catastrophe chronology, described as fantastic because of the mythical aurochs in the film, speaks to the primary goals of my dissertation.

In my reading of the film I argue that Hushpuppy's unique narrative perspective generates a critical space that allows viewers the opportunity to meaningfully engage extended timelines of climate catastrophe held in productive tension with seemingly punctual catastrophic events like Hurricane Katrina. The film's aurochs point to a scale of time stretched far beyond

the limits of a single catastrophic event. I reframe the question of catastrophe chronology within the aurochs' time scale: a scale of epoch where catastrophe is persistent, cyclically imminent, and never fully foreclosed by any one silver bullet of disaster planning or contained in an isolated catastrophe event. This refiguring of catastrophic time requires a reevaluation of the film's politics beyond a fetishization of Katrina as a punctual catastrophe or the film's politics as merely reactionary. My reading will trace the productive potential of Hushpuppy's evolutionary philosophy and negotiated agency in tension with her material reality and the "of the moment" politics of the Bathtub's older generation.

In earlier publications on *Beasts* I argued that Hushpuppy's narrative position or perspective was a political perspective, which set her apart from the older survivalist residents in the Bathtub community. However, I've come to understand her purpose in the film not so much as a one-to-one representation of a real-life political position, a position perhaps shared by many of the remaining residents of Isle de Jean Charles, but rather as promoting an adaptive philosophy that engages the traumas of catastrophe in a more nuanced way. I understand Hushpuppy's evolution in the film as ultimately a coming to understand that she has experienced individual, family, and environmental trauma. Her narrative makes visible a philosophy of engaging trauma that is hyper-conscious of both the punctual events that serve as the roots of the trauma as well as the inevitability of future and related traumas.

Fundamental to describing Hushpuppy's adaptive philosophy is how Hushpuppy engages established community mythology and her own creative or magical thinking to both cope with the traumatic aspects of her daily life and make sense of her place in the world. This theorization of catastrophic timelines weaves together an analytical framework of the hyper-local and politically immediate catastrophe (something like Hurricane Katrina or individual floods) with

the future collapse of global climate systems and rising sea levels. This analysis also considers the various ways in which Hushpuppy's evolutionary thinking and adaptive philosophy mirror the complicated perspective of those living in the most vulnerable environments of the Delta Plains in Louisiana today.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* premiered at Sundance in 2012 to an extraordinary range of harsh critiques and high praise from scholars and the film industry. *The New York Times* celebrated the film, writing, “[*Beasts*] is a blast of sheer, improbable joy... A lot of thinking has gone into [the film], about themes as well as methods, about the significance of the story as well as its shape. And it is certainly rich enough to invite and repay a healthy measure of critical thought” (A. Scott, “She’s the Man”). Geoffrey O’Brien categorizes the film as a classic adventure movie in its “truest sense” saying that “[*Beasts*] breathes an unaccustomed air of freedom and curiosity and what can only be called elation” (281). Alternatively, *The Chicago Tribune* called it “the most divisive film of 2012, ... Zeitlin has lived in southern Louisiana for several years, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and his work is unthinkable with the aftermath of that natural and then human-exacerbated disaster” (Phillips, “Manipulative Music”). The film begins as the residents of the Bathtub prepare for the end of the world, signaled by the prehistoric, mythical aurochs.

The aurochs released from the melting polar ice caps as a result of global climate systems collapse threaten the Bathtub community by ushering in a new era of chaos, destruction and Katrina-like storms. Hushpuppy's understanding of the aurochs comes largely through the instruction of the community's local teacher, Bathsheba. Though Bathsheba provides the foundational mythology of the aurochs, Hushpuppy's primary survivalist education comes from her father, Wink. Wink, suffering from a serious illness and left to care for Hushpuppy in her

mother's absence, tries to prepare Hushpuppy to live on her own in the wake of catastrophe and his passing. The film follows Hushpuppy as she develops her relationship to the shadow and surface catastrophe chronologies and her adaptive philosophical position distinguishing her from the majority position of the Bathtub community.

A surface-level interpretation of *Beasts* will most certainly engage the scenes evocative of a post-Katrina landscape as the primary markers of the film's environmental politics of the Louisiana gulf. However, I argue that the film makes a concerted effort to represent the collapse of epochal climate systems, not simply manifesting in a single moment of catastrophe à la Katrina. I am not suggesting we should ignore the immediacies of natural catastrophe in the film—there should always be an alertness to the social justice implications in acts of representation (film, literature, or any other form of art). However, a critical perspective on the film that scholars thus far seem to overlook is an analysis that engages its literary-ness, aesthetic-ness, and narrative-ness as a way to rethink extended chronologies of catastrophe time. Hushpuppy's perspective and the narrative frame of the film resist the often-assumed presentist nature of single catastrophe events. For example, the Katrina-like storm within the film sits in productive tension with the expanded chronology of ecological catastrophe temporality as embodied by the aurochs.

The film shows a double-vision of ecological catastrophe: the slow collapse of ecological systems due to global climate change as well as the hyper-local, seemingly punctual catastrophe event of the storm and Bathtub flood. The film's setting, specifically the real-life Bathtub counterpart Isle de Jean Charles, requires an engagement with a rural post-Katrina landscape that has little or no connection to the representations of catastrophe from New Orleans proper. This is where my reading of the film fundamentally differs from Hartnell's analysis. Now she argues,

and rightly so, that *Beasts* presents an “alternative temporality [which] offers no solutions or agendas [to climate catastrophe] but rather diagnoses a problem and challenges us to stare it in the face – or at least dance with it” (Hartnell 194). And she also brilliantly outlines what she calls “Katrina time” which is the “time of a neoliberal, ‘turbo-charged’ capitalism that has paradoxically dropped its vision of the future in favor of a race for instant gratification in the present” which is certainly made visible through the film’s rejection of individual property in favor of communally shared material wealth (194).<sup>120</sup>

However, Hartnell embraces *Beasts* primarily as an allegorical stand-in for New Orleans’s post-Katrina Ninth Ward. She argues that the film does not offer solutions or agendas for either disaster mitigation efforts for future superstorms or rising tides. But Hartnell’s approach does not engage the space of the Bathtub on its own decidedly rural terms: this is tribal land, neither incorporated nor federally protected, collectively farmed and fished by Cajuns and American Indians.<sup>121</sup> For Hartnell, the film’s representation of climate catastrophe serves as a model of what’s to come for New Orleans, as she writes: “culturally and environmentally, [the

---

<sup>120</sup> Hartnell’s theory of “Katrina time” is indebted to Rob Nixon’s theories of slow violence in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) as well as Naomi Klein’s arguments about market fundamentalism and the stalled-collective response pattern to climate change (Hartnell 19). This argument is echoed in Veronica Barnsley’s analysis of the film, which suggests “that disasters demand new narrative forms, and, in turn, artistic expression has a vital function in revealing and re-imagining, sometimes in contradictory ways, the crisis-driven reflexes of late capitalism” (242).

<sup>121</sup> The approximately 90 miles of Mississippi river extending beyond New Orleans and into the Gulf of Mexico is what geologists call an “alluvial birdfoot” which is essentially a region where there is no determinable system of where land ends and sea begins (Sublette 10). Sublette goes on to describe that the southernmost swamps and bayous have been largely unpopulated, which is only true in comparison with the concentrated population of urban spaces like New Orleans or Baton Rouge. The “alluvial birdfoot” of southern Louisiana has been home to indigenous people (Natchez, Taensa, and Houma) since long before European intervention in the 1500s (Sublette 37). The Houmas began to move into the area of Terrebonne and Lafourche Parish around 1800, but records from contact with European explorers cite Houma and Chitimacha people in the region as early as the 1650s (“United Houma Nation”).

city] dramatizes risk and precarity, and thus presents the rest of the nation with the suggestion of finitude” (194-195). But this largely ignores the reality that this cultural and environmental finitude has already come and gone in Isle de Jean Charles.

Fully engaging the Bathtub and environmental catastrophe, closely correlated with environmental catastrophe of Isle de Jean Charles, requires a more thorough understanding of what I am calling “shadow chronologies” of catastrophe time. This reframing of catastrophe as non-punctual and stretched far beyond single catastrophe events (which requires both a reaching back in time to look at cultural and historical preconditions as well as the examining of the afterlife of single events) allows us to reconsider the significance of how rural communities of coastal Louisiana encounter catastrophe over an expanded timeline. In order to fully engage Hushpuppy’s perspective, it is helpful to consider the two distinct timelines of catastrophe as occurring simultaneously.

The surface chronology of catastrophe is the chronology of reporting time, Hartnell’s “American Time”, and the timeline of the bulk of existing reactionary scholarship on a single catastrophe event (21-22). For example: Hurricane Katrina hits the gulf coast, the levees break, and the coastal communities below sea level are thrown into social and environmental chaos, which results in scholarship pointing the finger at who is to blame for the most proximate cause of the catastrophe event.<sup>122</sup> The second, the shadow chronology of catastrophe, uses punctual catastrophe events as a gateway to investigate understudied, expanded chronologies of catastrophe and catastrophic events that stretch far before and after the surface chronology. Here we can consider the role of the aurochs, representing climate catastrophe more broadly, as

---

<sup>122</sup> Two examples of quintessential Hurricane Katrina studies that use the surface catastrophe chronologies are historian Douglas Brinkley’s *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2006) and *Times-Picayune* editor Jed Horne’s *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City* (2006).

shaping the future of coastal economies, landscapes, and cultures. Engaging the shadow chronology of catastrophe allows for new lines of inquiry explaining the relationship between modernity and natural catastrophe events as well as the politics of catastrophe and alternative historical timelines.

Literary scholar Mark D. Anderson illustrates the difficulty of reconciling the different timelines of surface and shadow catastrophe chronologies in *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America* (2011), arguing that literary projects that attempt to represent the experience of a specific natural catastrophe often “bear the marks of competing, often contradictory interpretations” both of the catastrophe itself and of the region’s cultural and political histories (7). If we expand Anderson’s assessment of catastrophe literature to filmic narratives of catastrophe, including both the use of real-life catastrophe zone footage as well as invented or mythologized representations of catastrophe, these narratives must bear the weight of both the surface and the shadow catastrophe chronologies. Zeitlin’s film, specifically the tension between Hushpuppy’s and the Bathtub community’s relationship to catastrophe, encourages the viewer to grapple simultaneously with punctual catastrophe events and the weight of cultural preconditions and post-conditions of globally scaled climate catastrophe.

Cultural scholars responding to *Beasts* have remained largely fixated on critiquing the racial politics of the film. There has been a great deal of focus on Hushpuppy’s role as a young, black girl in the midst of social and environmental chaos. Perhaps the most critical responses to *Beasts* came from social activist and black feminist scholar bell hooks. On race and *Beasts*, hooks writes: “all the vibrancy of the film is generated by a crude pornography of violence. At the center of this spectacle is the continuous physical and emotional violence of the body and being of a small six-year-old black girl. ... Even though [racially] utopian values are depicted as

awesomely positive in the film, ultimately it is patriarchal masculinity that rules, that makes [decisions]” (“No Love”).

In hook’s reading of the film, Hushpuppy is denied meaningful agency as a result of Wink’s performance as the “hardass black man” (“No Love”). While I am sympathetic to her critique of Wink as caricaturing stereotypical tropes of black masculinity, Hushpuppy is a more complicated case. In *Juicy and Delicious*, the foundational text for Hushpuppy’s character, race isn’t his primary marker of identity. Rather, Hushpuppy’s gender, regional background and demeanor are described. Zeitlin and Alibar developed the screenplay as they were casting and changed Hushpuppy’s age as well as gender. Zeitlin explains the switch, saying: “[we] realized sort of to our horror that the mind we were trying to explore was actually a 6-year-old mind...we looked at 4,000 kids over the course of nine months, and you know, sometimes the world guides you to your person” (Zeitlin). The casting of Hushpuppy was a non-traditional process, not limited to a specific gender or race but to an age range, rather than a racially divisive search for a specifically black, female body to play Hushpuppy. Zeitlin and Alibar’s emphasis on a child protagonist’s psychology, and its effects on the narrative development, deserve further scholarly attention.

In her blog post, hooks interprets Hushpuppy’s relationship to her environment as a sort of symbiotic, idealized and primal experience of interconnectedness. She references Diane Ackerman’s short essay “Natural Wonder” (2012), which describes nature as “both personal and panoramic, including a profound sense of our animal essence” (“No Love”). For hooks, Hushpuppy is constantly seeking solace in an anesthetizing conceptualization of the natural environment which protects and divides her from the psychic and physical violence of her lived reality. This suggests that fictional narrative or imaginative childhood play cannot offer

meaningful building blocks for Hushpuppy's developing philosophical perspective on traumas of catastrophe. In short, hooks's reading of the environment glosses the film's careful representations of inequality and catastrophe in the gulf coast of Louisiana by arguing that the film seeks to divorce representations of the environment from the material oppressions of race, class or gender. In a more nuanced treatment of the film's representation of catastrophe environments, Natalia Cecire argues that *Beasts* illuminates "the deep interchanges between environmental innocence and racial innocence," and she importantly situates her readings of the film "in a longer trajectory of staging of black childhood" (165). Though Cecire remains ultimately skeptical of *Beasts*'s ability to transcend a racialized logic of black childhood, in fact arguing that the continuous misidentification of Hushpuppy's age and gender reinscribes this problematic schematic, she is open to the possibility of a more politically productive environmental dimension to the film.

Using Rob Nixon's seminal *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Cecire calls attention to Hushpuppy's crucial role as making visible the "unspectacularizable—indeed almost imperceptible— 'slow violence' of environmental destruction" (168). Nixon argues that environmental movements around the globe have often mirrored colonial practices of erasing or silencing local knowledge or ignoring the concerns of colonized peoples in favor of achieving environmental goals. He encourages his reader to consider the ways in which environmental injustices are often a result of governing agencies influenced by a global capitalist market that has little interest in preserving the non-human environment or protecting the most vulnerable populations living in those environments: often poor, colonized, and racialized bodies. Cecire's early interest in using Nixon as a lens to critique representations of the

environment in the film ultimately develops into an argument focusing on the overdetermined assumptions of responsibility or irresponsibility as to Hushpuppy's environmental innocence.

Cecire argues that Nixon's interest in temporality is primarily connected to the question of innocence and responsibility of environmental harm. While this is certainly a component of Nixon's interest in temporality, he also outlines what I have named the shadow chronology of catastrophe which "occurs gradually and out of sight...dispersed across time and space...typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). There's a possible third option, beyond innocence or responsibility, in acknowledging one's relationship to environmental catastrophe (including one's complicity) while simultaneously negotiating material realities and enacting incremental environmental and social change through adaptive political policies. We can begin to engage alternative timelines of environmental catastrophe to reconstruct, or perhaps construct for the first time, an adaptive philosophical perspective of catastrophic traumas.

This perspective remains in dialogue with punctual catastrophe events, and the question of blame or innocence becomes somehow less important. Narrative and the role of imaginative play can be meaningfully expanded to environmental policy and individual political sensibilities with the capacity to reinvigorate waning public interest in engaging catastrophe environments and populations. *Beasts*, though flawed in representations of race and gender, challenges the viewer to remain open to new possibilities of adaptive narrative agency in the face of imminent climate catastrophe and environmental collapse.

Hushpuppy's narrative models a compelling work-in-progress mode of existence for populations living in catastrophe environments. It also suggests that the very act of representing traumas of catastrophe in art serves a cathartic purpose in making visible what was invisible in the mainstream media's representations of catastrophe survivors in New Orleans proper. In other

words, novels like *Salvage the Bones* and films like *Beasts* carve out new creative spaces which offer crucial alternative representations of Katrina and climate catastrophe's effects on rural communities in the U.S. gulf.

In tracing the development of Hushpuppy's adaptive philosophical perspective, I will reference the function of race and gender in the film. I am particularly interested in reconsidering both Hushpuppy's blackness and youth as having potentially positive outcomes in shaping her relationship to the dual catastrophe temporalities. Presenting alternative readings of race and gender in the film also serves to complicate the critiques outlined by scholars in the earlier sections of this chapter. There are four crucial scenes showing the development of Hushpuppy's adaptive philosophical perspective and relationship to the shadow and surface catastrophe temporalities. Both race and gender play a part in juxtaposing Hushpuppy's political position and relationship to catastrophe with that of the adult members of the Bathtub community. These juxtapositions also highlight the positive possibility of her negotiated agency in an environment that seems to provide no space for individual choice or security.

It is helpful to consider something akin to Darieck Scott's literary spaces of abjection to better understand Hushpuppy's world of seeming non-agency. Elaborating on Frantz Fanon's theories of violence against Black bodies from *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), Scott argues that there is a distinct need for literary imagination as a way to render black power visible and to rethink the often sexual and violent abuse of black bodies. In Scott's view, we might consider Hushpuppy's consciousness and the film's aesthetics as requiring a

... need for a *literary* imagination ... because the [text's] primary reliance on slippage and evocation of excess, and jarring combinations of contradictory elements which are inherent to metaphorical representation and theorizing-in-metaphor, both enacts what

blackness is as a cultural figure and at least points toward the existential elements of abjection that language otherwise effaces. (Dar. Scott 258)

In other words, it is *Beasts*' very literary-ness, the fantastic and excessive aesthetics of Hushpuppy's narrative, that allows for negotiated agency and evolutionary philosophical perspective. It should be noted that Scott's abject subject does not necessarily translate to a liberated subject. Rather, the space of abjection requires constant adaptation and creative reinvention from the subject.

The first scene to consider as fundamental to Hushpuppy's adaptive philosophical perspective, and her relationship to dual catastrophe temporalities, is Bathsheba's telling of the aurochs myth. The scene opens with Hushpuppy and the other children of the Bathtub staring at a writhing bucket of crawfish. Bathsheba begins the lecture saying: "Meat. Meat. Meat. Meat. Every animal is made out of meat. I'm meat. Y'all asses meat. Everything is part of the buffet of the universe" (*Beasts*). From the start, Bathsheba constructs a predator-versus-prey, survivalist narrative of existence. All of the creatures on the earth are meat, pitted against each other trying to survive. She then reveals the tattoo on her upper thigh. The tattoo is in the style of a cave drawing depicting two aurochs locked in battle with three stick-figure "cavemens" (*Beasts*).

Bathsheba tells the story of humanity's violent struggle against the aurochs which has been occurring since the prehistoric era. She explains:

[The aurochs] would gobble them cave babies down right in front of the cave baby parents. And the cavemens they couldn't even do nothing about it 'cause they was too poor and too small. ... Y'all better think about that 'cause any day now the fabric of the universe is coming unraveled. Ice caps gonna melt, water's gonna rise, and everything south of the levee is goin' under. Y'all better learn how to survive now. (*Beasts*)

From Bathsheba's perspective, the aurochs myth teaches the children that they must learn to survive through the use of force and violence. Bathsheba does not present a world of compromise or compassion. The waters will inevitably rise, and the moral of the aurochs story suggests that the way to combat the rising tides should be the same tactic the cavemen used against the threat of the aurochs: violence.

The scene shifts away from Bathsheba as Hushpuppy retells the myth of the aurochs from her own perspective. She says "Way back in the day the aurochs was king of the world. If it wasn't for giant snowballs, and the ice age, I wouldn't even be Hushpuppy. I would just be breakfast" (*Beasts*). Instead of focusing only on fear of the aurochs she considers the environmental factors leading to her existence. She thinks carefully about her relationship to global systems and not with single-minded terror of imminent catastrophe. This is an important moment for Hushpuppy because it establishes the aurochs, associated with global warming, as operating within a deep-time, shadow chronology of catastrophe. Aurochs, from Hushpuppy's perspective, transcend any measurable space and time that orders the world of the Bathtub. They allow her to question the restrictions of a presentist notion of temporality as well as the nature of catastrophe itself.

Timothy Morton's explanation of the temporality of hyperobjects is helpful in considering how the aurochs function simultaneously as both myth and material threat. Morton argues that hyperobjects "involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to. ... [They] occupy a high-dimensional phase space that results in their being invisible to humans for stretches of time" (1). Bathsheba uses the aurochs as a parable to teach the oppositional survivalism and politics of the moment that govern the Bathtub's older generation. For Bathsheba, the aurochs embody a direct threat to the Bathtub community because

the aurochs bring the promise of the big storm and rising waters: a punctual catastrophe event. However, Hushpuppy's interpretation of the myth alters the symbolic function of the aurochs. The aurochs are present in the world of the Bathtub, manifest through contemporary fears of imminent catastrophe, yet they remain simultaneously fixed in a narrative of the past that is safely contained within the arctic's icecaps.

Hushpuppy's retelling of the aurochs myth situates the aurochs not as harbingers of a single catastrophe event, but rather as operating within a stretched time scale with a profoundly different temporality from the rest of the Bathtub. Her reinterpretation of the narrative sets the tone for her double-vision of catastrophe as well as her adaptive relationship to the aurochs. She begins to engage climate catastrophe and catastrophe events using both the surface and shadow chronologies of catastrophe time. In other words, Hushpuppy's understanding of climate catastrophe encompasses the hyper-local catastrophe event, the big storm that will inevitably come to the Bathtub, and at the same time grapples with the ramifications of deep-time global climate catastrophe. She is not limited to violent reactionism and does not see herself as merely pitted against the aurochs in a winner-take-all battle for survival. This allows for Hushpuppy to exercise alternative forms of agency when it comes to confronting the inevitable catastrophe events in the Bathtub as well as the aurochs themselves at the end of the film.

The next scene crucial to the development of Hushpuppy's perspective is the storm and subsequent flooding of the Bathtub. As thunder and lightning from the big storm begin many of the community members evacuate. Wink decides that he and Hushpuppy will weather the storm at his house. He prepares her for the event by giving her water-wings to float and reminding her that if the water gets too high, they'll simply float away in the boat. As the storm gains strength Hushpuppy becomes scared. Wink grabs his gun and bottle of liquor, intending to fight the

storm. He yells, “Whatcha scared? I’m gonna show you. No storm can’t beat no Doucet. We’re Doucets; we ain’t scared of no damn storm. I’m gonna show you. I’m gonna take care of that storm” (*Beasts*). Wink, in line with the violent survivalism taught by Bathsheba, runs outside firing the shotgun as Hushpuppy looks on through the window.

Hushpuppy’s reaction is not to join in with Wink’s man-conquering-nature display but rather to experiment with an alternative way to adapt to the catastrophe event. Hushpuppy retreats to her boat and closes her eyes. The shot abruptly shifts from the raging storm to a single aurochs standing in a quiet, misty rain. Hushpuppy’s imaginative transition from the punctual catastrophe event to the aurochs’ gestures to the shadow chronology of catastrophe. This allows her to put the Katrina-like storm into perspective within the epochal temporality of climate catastrophe. Hushpuppy’s adaptive agency does not allow her to escape from the storm itself but rather actively uses narrative to psychologically cope with catastrophe events. Juxtaposed with Wink’s violence, this alternative mode of psychological engagement demonstrates new avenues for constructing narratives of catastrophe. Hushpuppy does not have to fight the storm to survive, but simply to understand the storm through the lens of a shadow chronology of catastrophe. She can relate to the catastrophe event in a new way, beyond the scope of pure trauma and violence, by considering the epochal scale of catastrophe temporality embodied by the aurochs.

Perhaps the most important scene highlighting Hushpuppy’s evolving thinking is her face-to-face encounter with the aurochs. Hushpuppy, returning from the Elysian Fields bar, is walking through the bayou with the other girls from the Bathtub. Behind the girls, the aurochs swim down the rising channels of water. They have finally arrived at the Bathtub, bringing what should be certain chaos and catastrophe. The girls hear the sound of stampeding aurochs, scream, and run towards the protection of the Bathtub homes. Wink’s health is rapidly failing, and he lies

inside of a house looking outside towards Hushpuppy and the aurochs. Hushpuppy does not run away in terror like the other children. Rather, she makes eye contact with Wink and makes a conscious decision to turn and face the aurochs. With determination she stares down the aurochs. The aurochs in the front of the pack, so close to Hushpuppy that her face and the snout of the aurochs almost touch, stands silently, breathing deeply. Wink anxiously watches the interaction. Without words, the aurochs submissively bend down onto their knees. Hushpuppy responds by saying: “you’re my friend kind of. I gotta take care of mine” (*Beasts*). Almost as if the aurochs have reached a truce or pact with Hushpuppy, they turn and walk away. This silent agreement demonstrates the full possibility of Hushpuppy’s adaptive approach. She does not run away or use violence, but rather she chooses to open a dialogue with the aurochs. She chooses an alternative tactic to militant resistance. This is the collapse of both chronologies of catastrophe in one interaction. Hushpuppy’s actions suggest that the smallest, seemingly least capable member of a community can embody great strength to enact meaningful change in the world.

The final moments of the film remind the audience of the overall narrative structure. The story, as told by Hushpuppy, is a layered narration: a story of her adaptive philosophical perspective within a story of dual-catastrophe chronologies. In the final scene of the film Hushpuppy says, “When it all goes quiet behind my eyes, I see everything that made me flying around in invisible pieces. ... I see that I’m a little piece of a big, big universe, and that makes things right. When I die the scientists of the future they’re gonna find it all. ... Once there was a Hushpuppy and she lived with her daddy in the Bathtub” (*Beasts*). The final lines of dialogue suggest that Hushpuppy is a narrator looking back in time across the series of catastrophe events. The power of storytelling itself plays an important role connecting the distant past, punctual events of the present, and inevitable future.

What the film offers in the final scenes is a space of negotiation between the lived experience of a catastrophe event, i.e.: fallout of Katrina-like storm, Wink's death, and the stretching of time to the epochal catastrophe scale of the aurochs both to the distant unimaginable past and future. Hushpuppy's final moments are not triumphant, brash, and oppositional, as in the opening celebration of the film, but rather show a somber procession out of the Bathtub into some unknown physical and psychological future. This suggests further room for spaces, both psychological and material, of adaptive possibility. The film offers up a narrative of a young, black female body facing the embodiment of global climate systems' collapse. It ultimately makes visible, through storytelling and demonstrating alternative political possibility, manifestations of too-often invisible communities facing both punctual catastrophe events and global climate collapse.

As we drove down the same road Hushpuppy and the Bathtub community marched on at the end of the film, I asked Arceneaux about the effect of catastrophe on the region, both natural and man-made. I expected critiques of the BP oil spill that devastated oyster beds and fishermen and halted film production or lambastings of post-Katrina government services and material conditions. Instead he explained:

On 'the big disasters'? Well, my main concern is coastal erosion due to climate change. I've done a couple of documentaries on the situation and it hasn't gotten us anywhere, nobody is listening. ... land disappears on a weekly basis, and it's noticeable to me because I see it quite often. But an individual who doesn't go in these areas, is like, oh...what the hell happened? Where is the land? Where is the point? [The policy makers] should have thought about this crap...I mean, 25 or 30 years ago. There were lots of bills that were actually written 25 or 30 years ago but they were never enacted. (Arceneaux)

When considering the field of catastrophe studies more broadly, scholars largely agree that natural catastrophes are not isolated products of nature.<sup>123</sup> However, many of today's disaster studies projects are dedicated to discourses of risk management and catastrophe mitigation. Mitigation studies often favor presentist timelines of catastrophe. This chapter expands the theory of catastrophe time, engaging both the surface and shadow chronologies, opening up the possibility of exploring catastrophe events with an alternative temporal framework. It also allows us to consider the ways in which a film like *Beasts of the Southern Wild* can play a central role in understanding how regional populations address psychological and physical traumas of natural catastrophe. Reconsidering chronologies of catastrophe in this way may help to explain what the fictional catastrophe narrative more broadly offers in terms of framing risk for local populations of catastrophe environments.

Hushpuppy's adaptive philosophical perspective, as well as her relationship to both the shadow and surface chronologies of catastrophe, remain relevant when we consider the Louisiana floods of August 2016. Brad Kieserman, vice president of disaster services and logistics for the Red Cross, called this event "the worst natural disaster to strike the United States since Superstorm Sandy" (Brown et al. "Louisiana Flooding"). More than 40,000 homes were damaged, 10,000 Louisiana residents were displaced, and more than 70,000 people registered for FEMA assistance as a result of the floods. However, media coverage remained squarely focused on the Rio Olympics as well as on the drone of Trump versus Hillary. The storm system that led to the flooding was not given a name, à la Hurricane Katrina and Sandy, because unlike these

---

<sup>123</sup> We might consider the extensive body of work on climate disaster and displacement from authors like Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction* (2014) and *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* (2006), Bill Gates's *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster* (2021), Jake Bittle's *The Great Displacement: Climate Change and the Next American Migration* (2023), and Kathleen Dean Moore's *Great Tide Rising: Towards a Moral Courage in a time of Planetary Change* (2016).

two disaster events it did not fit squarely into the requirements for a tropical vortex, Arctic hurricane, or standard cyclonic pattern (Brown et al., “Louisiana Flooding”). *Washington Post* writer Jeff Halverson suggests that “the fact that [the storm] did not have a name or a neat definition posed serious communication challenges and may have led to less overall public awareness of the event’s danger” (Halverson, “How an Oddball”).

Compounding the media’s silence was the stunned reaction of local community members who did not anticipate flooding in the area. The majority of these community members did not have flood insurance on their homes because the region most affected was not considered a historic flood zone. The storm itself, eerily reminiscent of the storm in *Beasts*, is an anticipated result of global climate change in terms of both its increased frequency and its severity. Texas Tech University climate researcher Katharine Hayhoe explains this correlation, saying: “Louisiana is always at risk of floods, naturally, but climate change is exacerbating that risk, weighting the dice against us. How long will it be until we finally recognize that the dice are loaded?” (Mooney, “What Can We Say”). Catastrophe events like the Louisiana floods of 2016 further complicate the notion of punctual catastrophe events and suggest that developing our understanding of the tension between surface and shadow chronologies of catastrophe may be a productive starting point for new catastrophe mitigation studies.

### **Displacement of Isle de Jean Charles Native Communities**

The most striking case study of environmental catastrophe in the region is the fate of Isle de Jean Charles and Pointe-aux-Chenes within the short time between when *Beasts* wrapped filming in 2011 and the present. These islands not only serve as the inspiration for *Beast’s* Bathtub community but they are a symbol of the collective traumas facing American Indian communities in the Louisiana gulf and what may inevitably end up as a case of historical erasure.

What was once a small community on the margins of the climate catastrophe debate, certainly far less visible than the recovery and precarity of New Orleans post-Katrina, has now become the poster child for climate catastrophe displacement on a global scale. Isle de Jean Charles was once the size of Manhattan and in 2016 it's less than a third the size of Central Park (Sutter, "There's No More Land"). Isle de Jean Charles and Pointe-aux-Chenes are tribal territories shared by the Houma people.<sup>124</sup> Both islands are populated almost exclusively by Houma people and remain unrecognized and unprotected by the government-funded levee infrastructure.

Verdin thus distills the history of the Houma people: "we have survived colonialism, forced migrations, discrimination, and disease, through adaptation and assimilation. But our modern quest for cultural survival in the Mississippi river delta is now threatened by rising tides, sinking land, and the unintended side effects of human attempts to 'manage' and manipulate a complex deltaic system" (19). For Verdin, as for many native Houma people, their traumatic legacy of survival against the odds extends not only to the challenges of a changing climate but also to the challenge of understanding the silencing of Houma narratives that catalogue the history of a people and a culture that is disappearing as a result of climate catastrophe.

Verdin explains the historical invisibility of the Houma people and the need to claim agency through occupying tribal lands in the face of climate catastrophe, writing that the "federal government has refused to recognize the Houma for over two hundred years, denying us the fulfillment of the promise of colonial treaties. ... One day, we Houma may be forced to forever evacuate the wetlands of coastal Louisiana that we call home. Until that time, we will continue to

---

<sup>124</sup> Native Houma writer Monique Verdin explains that Houma or Ouma is "a word that means "red" in the common Choctaw/Mobilian trade jargon spoken by [Houma] ancestors" and the Houma are "largely descendants of Chitimacha, Biloxi, Bayougoula, Acolapissa, Washa-Chawasha, Atakapa, Houma, European, and African people" (Solnit and Snedeker 19).

make our last stand on sinking land” (24). As Wenceslaus Billiot, an 89-year-old native and chief of the Biloxi-Chitimacha tribe explains: “People say, ‘Oh man, it’s beautiful out here...But it’s just a skeleton of how it was when we were kids. It’s really terrible to see” (Sutter, “There’s No More Land”). More than a football field of land falls into the Gulf of Mexico every hour. This means you can literally watch the effects of climate catastrophe in real-time.

Unlike Verdin and Billiot, some Isle de Jean Charles and Pointe-aux-Chenes residents are ready to evacuate because the risk of the inevitable rising tides or the next hurricane season is too great. Tribal Chief of the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaws, Albert Naquin, perfectly distills this dilemma, saying: “We don’t have time. The longer we wait the more hurricane [seasons] we have to go through. We hate to let the island go but we have to. It is like losing a family member. We know we are going to lose it. We just don’t know when” (Van Houten, “The First”). In fact, only 25 to 30 homes remained occupied on the Isle de Jean Charles by late 2016. In January 2016 the Department of Housing and Urban Development earmarked \$48 million in grant relief for Isle de Jean Charles which is the first instance of allocating federal tax dollars to move an entire community as a result of climate catastrophe.

However, since the grant announcement the government intervention has resulted in “logistical and moral dilemmas ... [that] point up in microcosm the massive problems the world could face in the coming decades as it confronts a new category of displaced people who have become known as climate refugees” (Davenport and Robertson, “Resettling”). Though there were ample government funds to relocate the residents of Isle de Jean Charles, members of the tribal community feared the loss of their cultural history in the move away from the land that the Houma have occupied for more than 200 years. The resettlement proposal submitted to the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s National Disaster Resilience Competition

outlines the plans to build a new settlement which offers “an opportunity for the tribe to rebuild their homes and secure their culture on safe ground” (Van Houten, “The First”). As of February 2022, the majority of the Isle de Jean Charles households have agreed to relocation.

However, tribal leaders and members remain skeptical of what the relocation will mean for the future of the Houma culture once their ties are severed from the land itself. Preserving the history and culture of the Houma people will prove challenging at the new settlement as many members of the tribe are already displaced and living in new areas of the state with no plans to return. The livelihoods of the tribe, largely fishing, hunting, and agriculture, are dependent on the environment itself. So, though the community might be able to rebuild together, the fear is that most of the communities’ poorest populations will have no means of generating an income so that they might remain financially independent.

Deputy tribal chief’s daughter Chantel Comardelle explains, saying: “Once our island goes, the core of our tribe is lost. We’ve lost our whole culture – that is what is on the line. ... At one time, water was our life and now it’s almost our enemy because it’s driving us out, but it still gives us life. It’s a double-edged sword. It’s our life and our death” (Van Houten, “The First”). The question of financial independence after relocation continues to be a struggle for the Houma tribe at the new site. While the new homes in The New Isle subdivision in Gray, Louisiana are built in a far less precarious environmental space, the economic and cultural spaces tied to the tribe’s history are gone.

Adding to the challenge of maintaining the culture is the unanticipated influx of new recreational development of “fishing camps” and vacation homes on and around the island for the oil camp workers and corporate executives. The state of Louisiana had agreed in 2016 that the land was not to be repurposed for commercial use. Tribal members were asked to sign

agreements preventing them from living on, selling, or making substantial repairs to their island properties. However, non-native property owners in the area were not subject to the same agreements; under the regulations of the grant they were not obligated to sign agreements as they could not access the relocation funds. As Marvin McGraw, representative from Louisiana's Office of Community development argues, "we do not have authority to tell individual landowners who are receiving no money or considerations from us what they can and can't do with their property" (Jessee, "Tribal Leaders Raise"). The continued development of the area for oil and gas extraction as well as recreational use has led to further ecological destruction and further threatens the economic sovereignty of the tribal members in the region.

When considering the scope of relocating entire populations as a result of climate change, the Isle de Jean Charles residents account for less than 200 of the estimated 500 million people living in the most vulnerable coastal communities around the globe. Those 500 million climate refugees will likely be displaced by 2050 because of climate change (Van Houten, "The First"). This climate change, coastal erosion, and inevitable displacement is not a question of *if* but *when*. Most climate scientists agree that the 2050 simulation model provides a conservative estimate for the rise of sea levels that will take up to 1/3 of Louisiana's land area and the homes of more than 2/3 of Louisiana's residents off the maps.<sup>125</sup>

The bulk of the Deltaic Plain, along with the people and cultures who populate the area, will be displaced. The question that remains is what happens to the cultures, stories and histories of those who are likely to become the first generation of climate refugees. When the government grants, relocation plans, and efforts to build new communities in whatever geographic space becomes available fail, what will be left behind? Before we can begin to meaningfully address

---

<sup>125</sup> See "Land Loss" webpage from the *Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana*.

catastrophe mitigation at the level of policy we must take seriously the cultural and historical dimensions of catastrophe.

Catastrophe/disaster studies as a field must necessarily recognize local cultures, as well as marginalized or silenced voices and narratives of these cultures, to begin to adaptively mitigate natural catastrophe. The challenge of massive population displacement as a result of climate change, as the aurochs in *Beasts*, is coming. However, it is in our power to choose how we respond: perhaps in the mode of social justice initiatives or civic action, but certainly in preserving archives of catastrophe (in our histories and art) for the future.

## Conclusion

In 2013, a collective of experimental theater artists, climate activists, and community workers joined forces to produce an experiential piece of performance art which would bring audiences together in Southeastern Louisiana to tell the place-specific story where the audience becomes a temporary community at the site of environmental catastrophe. *Cry You One*, a co-production of New Orleans-based groups Mondo Bizarro and ArtSpot productions, was created to respond to the region's "interconnected struggles against coastal land loss, cultural loss, environmental racism and displacement" by blending the stories, music, dances, food, and traditions of Southeast Louisiana, performed on the very land it celebrates (*Cry You One*). The creators of the project ask the audience to give in to the joy of communal gathering to celebrate cultures and traditions of southeastern Louisiana, which was also designed to disarm their resistance to the sorrows and loss that are inherent to learning about the catastrophe facing the land and people of the region.

What is most interesting about this example of catastrophe art is the creative attention to traditional environmental knowledge from the region's landscape. Performer and artistic director of Mondo Bizarro, Nick Slie, explains the group's approach saying the performance evolved from "traditional environmental knowledge, which is protracted observation sitting there and looking over years, over long periods of time, that you're actually taking the wisdom of the landscape and putting into your plans for how you might save it" (*Cry You One*). The performance, which guides audience members through fields, waterways, and into the destroyed cypress groves of the bayou, creates an experience of interconnectedness between the performers, audience, and the environment. The distinctions between activist, performer, observer, and community member dissolve as the audience begins to taste, dance, smell, walk,

sing, touch, and hear the stories of Southeastern Louisiana. As Anna Hartnell explains, “by asking Americans to dance with death, it dramatizes their own complicity in a drama of modern consumerism that is sacrificing for the future” (194). The creative team challenges the audience to transform themselves through participation in the catastrophe storytelling. The audience is both complicit in the destruction, but also foundational to the act of collective dreaming that is required to create the art itself. The experience of *Cry You One* embraces the contradictory truths that the coastal land will sink, the trees have already died from the salinity of the water, and songs can be sung in celebration of the present and also as a goodbye. In short, *Cry You One* invites the audience to experience the temporal disruption and disorientation of catastrophe temporality to better understand how to adapt with catastrophe and each other in an unwritten future.

One of the main cultural organizers and multidisciplinary artists behind *Cry You One*, Jayeesha Dutta, argues that there is certain work that artists can do which is often overlooked in social justice movements, because their contributions are seen as less important or crucial to advancing the cause. She’s a fierce advocate for the inclusion of art as a social justice practice, saying, “...if you start to put art at the center, you’re going to see a shift in your own relationships with each other in this work. It will be more sustainable and won’t lead to as much burnout. But you’re also going to, I believe, be much more successful” (*Cry You One*). Dutta’s perspective certainly applies to the success and longevity of the Cry You One Project. Over the past 10 years, iterations of the *Cry You One* project have been performed across the United States and it has brought national visibility to the environmental and humanitarian issues facing

Southeastern Louisiana as well as other communities along the Gulf Coast.<sup>126</sup> *Cry You One* has also expanded the project to include a robust online presence with documentaries, interviews, recorded music, photography, and individual profiles of artists, activists, scholars, and community members. This unique example of interdisciplinary catastrophe art is exactly the kind of project which can tell the complex stories of catastrophe this dissertation is invested in exploring.

Current climate science projections and living through a global pandemic offer stark reminders that we, as a species, already exist within the material, social, and psychological impacts of catastrophe. What this dissertation ultimately suggests is that understanding catastrophe temporality through artistic and historical archives of catastrophe may better prepare us for the necessary resiliency and creativity we must access when disaster knocks. It takes seriously the idea that artistic archives of catastrophe which I have presented are powerful tools which validate the deep humanity, suffering, and cultural reclamation of minoritized stories and experiences of catastrophe. Earnestly engaging with these catastrophe archives requires an inherent critical openness and vulnerability to consider the function of power in all its forms.

Policy makers will shape this future narrative of environmental catastrophe, but cultural workers, artists, novelists, playwrights, and members of the most marginalized communities have the power and obligation to protect and celebrate their narratives at risk of being left behind. The continued cultivation of artistic archives of catastrophe is foundational to reshaping the public's relationship to environments, histories, and communities most impacted by catastrophe. The paradoxical challenge facing all of us is to adapt to the futures of catastrophe

---

<sup>126</sup> The original music and the opening/closing processional dance sections of *Cry You One* were also performed at the Nisville Jazz Theater Festival in Nis, Serbia in 2018.

that will inevitably occur, but in ways that honor the complexities and aliveness of historical and artistic archives from the most vulnerable communities. This embrace of catastrophe temporality as told through the artistic archives of catastrophe, I argue, provides a glimpse into what is to come, but also what is already here. This is, perhaps, the primary purpose of catastrophe art: to show us how to see the world in another way, with renewed appetite for social and political community action, coupled with permission to grieve what will be, and what has already been, lost.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Alibar, Lucy. *Juicy and Delicious*. Diversion Books, 2012.

*Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Directed by Benh Zeitlin. 2012. United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012. DVD.

Biguenet, John. *The Rising Water Trilogy*. Louisiana State University Press, 2015.

Brenner, Lisa S. and Suzanne M. Trauth. *Katrina: The K Word. Katrina On Stage: Five Plays*, edited by Suzanne M. Trauth and Lisa S. Brenner, Northwestern University Press, 2011, pp. 203-244.

Chan, Paul, editor. *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide*. Creative Time Books, 2010.

Chancy, Myriam J. A. *What Storm, What Thunder*. Tin House, 2021.

Holmes, Jonathan. *Katrina: A Play of New Orleans*. Methuen Drama, 2009.

James, C.L.R. *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History*. Duke University Press, 2013.

Léger, Dimitry Elias. *God Loves Haiti*. Amistad, 2016.

Orcel, Makenzy. *The Immortals*. Translated by Nathan H. Dize. State University of New York Press, 2020.

Roumain, Jacques. *Masters of the Dew*. 1947. Translated by Mercer Cook and Langston Hughes. Caribbean Studies Press, 2017.

Vieux-Chauvet, Marie. *Love, Anger, Madness*. 1968. Translated by Rose-Myriam Réjouis and Val Vinokur. Modern Library, 2009.

---. *Fonds-des-Nègres*. Henri Deschamps, 1960.

Ward, Jesmyn. *Salvage the Bones*. Bloomsbury, 2011.

## Secondary Sources

- Alexander, Leslie “A Pact with the Devil? The United States and the Fate of Modern Haiti.” [https://origins.osu.edu/article/pact-devil-united-states-and-fate-modern-haiti?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://origins.osu.edu/article/pact-devil-united-states-and-fate-modern-haiti?language_content_entity=en). Feb. 2011, *Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective* Accessed 14 May 2023.
- “An Account of Louisiana, Being an Abstract of Documents, in the Offices of the Departments of State, and of the Treasury (1803).” *The Louisiana Purchase: A Heritage Explored, Louisiana Digital Library*, Baton Rouge. <https://louisianadigitallibrary.org/islandora/object/lapur-lapur%3A3539>. Accessed 18 Dec 2022.
- Anderson, Mark D. *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America*. University of Virginia Press, 2011.
- “Antebellum Louisiana II: Agrarian Life.” *The Cabildo: Two Centuries of Louisiana History, Louisiana State Museum Online Exhibits*, 2018. <https://www.crt.state.la.us/louisiana-state-museum/online-exhibits/the-cabildo/antebellum-louisiana-agrarian-life/index>. Accessed 1 Feb 2023.
- Aranke, Sampada and Nikolas Oscar Sparks. “Reading and Feeling After *Scenes of Subjection*.” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*. vol. 27, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1-6.
- Arceneaux, Mike. Interview by author. Tape recording. Terrebonne Parish, Houma, Pointe-aux-Chenes, Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana, 3 Sept. 2014.
- Arthur, Charles and Michael Dash. *A Haitian Anthology libète*. Ian Randle Publishers, 1999.
- Baptist, Edward E. *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. Basic Books, 2014.
- Barnsley, Veronica. “The postcolonial child in Benh Zeitlin’s *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* vol. 51, no. 2, 2016, pp. 240-255.
- Barthélemy, Gérard. *L’univers rural haïtien: Le pays en dehors*. e-book, University of Texas Press, 2008.
- Baver, Sherrie. “Hispaniola’s Environmental Story Challenging an Iconic Image.” *Callaloo*, vol. 37 no. 3, 2014, pp. 648-661.
- Baxter, Vern and Steve Kroll-Smith. *Left to Chance: Hurricane Katrina and the Story of Two*

- New Orleans Neighborhoods*. University of Texas Press, 2015.
- Beckford, George L. *Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies of the Third World*. Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Bellegarde, Dantes. "Alexandre Petion: The Founder of Rural Democracy in Haiti." *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1953, pp. 167-173.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. Trans. James E. Maraniss. Duke University Press, 1996.
- Biguenet, John. "From Rage to Page to Stage to Rage." *The Southern Review*. vol. 51, no. 3, 2015, pp. 502-508.
- . "The What and the How of It." *Poets & Writers*, 1 July 2010. [https://www.pw.org/content/the\\_what\\_and\\_the\\_how\\_of\\_it?article\\_page=1](https://www.pw.org/content/the_what_and_the_how_of_it?article_page=1). Accessed 1 April 2023.
- Bittman, Mark. "Now This is Natural Food." *The New York Times*. 22 Oct. 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/23/opinion/bittman-now-this-is-natural-food.html>. Accessed 16 July 2019.
- Bell, Beverly. *Fault Lines: Views across Haiti's Divide*. Cornell University Press, 2013.
- Bell, Madison Smartt. "Permanent Exile: On Marie Vieux-Chauvet." *The Nation*. 14 Jan. 2010, <https://www.thenation.com/article/permanent-exile-marie-vieux-chauvet/>. Accessed 17 July 2019.
- . *Toussaint L'Ouverture: A Biography*, Pantheon, 2007.
- Blackburn, Robin. *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery: 1776-1848*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Verso, 2011.
- Blake, Felice. *Review of Black Age: Oceanic Lifespans and the Time of Black Life*, by Habiba Ibrahim (2021). *American Literary History Online Review*, series XXXIV, 20 Feb 2023, pp. 561-564.
- Boisseron, Bènedicte. *Creole Renegades: Rhetoric of Betrayal and Guilt in the Caribbean Diaspora*. University Press of Florida, 2014.
- Borger, Julian. "Katrina: the play returns to the eyes of the storm." *The Guardian*, <https://www.guardian.com/stage/2009/aug/30/katrina-new-orleans-play>. Accessed 20 April 2023.

- Brown, Emma, Ashley Cusick, and Mark Berman. "Louisiana flooding is the country's 'worst natural disaster' since Hurricane Sandy, Red Cross says." *Washington Post*. 17 Aug. 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/08/17/louisiana-flood-victims-face-long-road-back-to-normal-i-lost-everything>. Accessed 17 Aug. 2016.
- Brown, Karen McCarthy. "Systematic Remembering, Systematic Forgetting: Ogoni in Haiti." *Africa's Ogoni Old World and New*, edited by Sandra T. Barnes, 2nd ed., Indiana University Press, 1997, pp. 65-89.
- Brasseaux, Carl A. "The moral climate of French colonial Louisiana, 1699-1763," in *The French Experience in Louisiana*, edited by Glenn R. Conrad, Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History, vol. 1, Center for Louisiana Studies, pp. 526.
- Brasseaux, Ryan. "Norbert Rillieux." *64 Parishes*, 29 July 2013, <https://64parishes.org/entry/norbert-rillieux>. Accessed 4 Feb 2023.
- Brenner, Lisa S. "Introduction." *Katrina on Stage: Five Plays*, edited by: Suzanne M. Trauth and Lisa S. Brenner, Northwestern University Press, 2011. ix-xxii.
- . "Storming the Nation: Post-Katrina New Orleans, Documentary Theater, and Civic Responsibility." *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2009/2010, pp. 15-38.
- Brinkley, Douglas. *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*. William Morrow, 2006.
- Button, Gregory. *Disaster Culture: Knowledge and Uncertainty in the Wake of Human and Environmental Catastrophe*. Left Coast Press, 2010.
- Cartwright, Keith. *Sacral Grooves, Limbo Gateways: Travels in Deep Southern Time, Circum-Caribbean Space, Afro-creole Authority*. University of Georgia Press, 2013.
- Casimir, Jean. *La culture opprimée*. Fondation Connaissance et Liberté, 2001.
- Cecire, Natalia. "Environmental Innocence and Slow Violence." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2015, pp. 164-180.
- Chamberlain, Charles and Lo Faber. "Spanish Colonial Louisiana." *64 Parishes*. <https://64parishes.org/entry/spanish-colonial-louisiana#:~:text=Spain%20governed%>

- 20the%20colony%20of,the%20United%20States%20in%201803. Accessed 19 April 2023.
- Chancy, Myriam J. A. Introduction. *What Storm, What Thunder*, read by Ella Turenne. Spiegel & Grau by OrangeSky Audio, 2021. Audible audio ed., 11 hr., 6 min.
- Christophe, Henri. *Code Henry*. Au Cap-Henry Haiti: Chez P. Roux, Imprimeur du Roi, 1812. Boston Public Library, <https://archive.org/details/codehenry00hait/page/n4>. Accessed 30 June 2019.
- Chude-Sokei, Louis. "Blackness and Becoming: Édouard Glissant's *Retour*." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 48 no. 4, 2018, pp. 43-53.
- Clerici, Caterina and Kim Wall. "Vodou is elusive and endangered, but it remains the soul of Haitian people." *The Guardian* 7 Nov. 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/07/vodou-haiti-endangered-faith-soul-of-haitian-people>. Accessed 14 July 2019.
- Coicou, Massillon. "Impressions, 92." *Poésies Nationales*. Dujarric, 1903.
- Cole, Shawn. "Capitalism and Freedom: Manumissions and the Slave Market in Louisiana, 1725-1820." *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2005, pp. 1008-1027.
- Crawford-Roberts, Ann. "A History of United States Policy Towards Haiti." *Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies at Brown University*, <https://library.brown.edu/create/modernlatinamerica/chapters/chapter-14-the-united-states-and-latin-america/moments-in-u-s-latin-american-relations/a-history-of-united-states-policy-towards-haiti/>. Accessed 14 May 2023.
- Cry You One*. Cry You One. 22 May 2020, <http://www.cryyouone.com/>. Accessed 12 April 2023.
- Danticat, Edwidge. *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*. Vintage Books, 2010.
- Dash, J. Michael. *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination*. 2nd ed., St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1997.
- . *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context*. University of Virginia Press, 1998.

- Davenport, Coral and Campbell Robertson. "Resettling the First American 'Climate Refugees'." *New York Times*. 3 May 2016. [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/us/resettling-the-first-american-climate-refugees.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/us/resettling-the-first-american-climate-refugees.html?_r=0). Accessed 1 April 2017.
- Dayan, Colin [Joan]. *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. University of California Press, 1995.
- Diamond, Jared. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. Penguin Books, 2011.
- Dicker/Sun, Glenda. "Katrina: Acting Black / Playing Blackness." *Theater Journal*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2005, pp. 614-616.
- de Cauna, Jacques, editor. *Toussaint L'Overture et l'indépendance d'Haïti*. Karthala, 2004.
- Dirksen, Rebecca. "Haiti's Drums and Trees: Facing Loss of the Sacred." *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 63 no. 1, 2019, pp. 43-77.
- Dize, Nathan H. Afterword. *The Immortals*, State University of New York Press, 2020, pp. 121-123.
- Douglas, Edward. "Interview: Taming the Beasts of a Southern Wild." *Comingsoon.net*. <http://www.comingsoon.net/movies/features/91670-interview-taming-the-beasts-of-a-southern-wild>. Accessed 17 Aug. 2016.
- Dowd, Maureen. "Despite Role as Negotiator, Carter Feels Unappreciated." *New York Times*, 21 Sept. 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/21/world/mission-haiti-diplomat-despite-role-negotiator-carter-feels-unappreciated.html>. Accessed 26 Aug 2020.
- Dubois, Laurent. Foreword. *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History*, by C.L.R. James, Duke University Press, 2013, pp. vii-x.
- . *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*. Metropolitan Books, 2012.
- . "Maroons in the Archives: The Uses of the Past in the French Caribbean." *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory*, edited by Francis X. Blouin and William G. Rosenberg, University of Michigan Press, 2006, pp. 291-300.
- . "Who Will Speak for Haiti's Trees." *The New York Times*. 17 Oct. 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/18/opinion/who-will-speak-for-haitis-trees.html>. Accessed 30 June 2019.

- Duval, Jérôme. "Haiti: From Trafficking to Debt." *Committee for Abolition of Illegitimate Debt*. 11 Nov. 2017, <http://www.cadtm.org/Haiti-From-trafficking-to-debt>. Accessed 29 June 2019.
- DuVal, Kathleen. *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution*. Random House, 2015.
- Dyson, Michael Eric. *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*. Civitas Books, 2007.
- Evans, Freddi Williams. *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*. University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2011.
- Faber, Eberhard L. *Building the Land of Dreams: New Orleans and the Transformation of Early America*. Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2008.
- Farmer, Paul. *The Uses of Haiti*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Common Courage Press, 2006.
- Ferris, David and Nate Gronewold. "How the Caribbean's Charred Forests End Up Firing America's Barbecues." *E&E News*, 24 June 2016. <https://www.eenews.net/stories/1060039364>, Accessed 3 July 2019.
- Fleming, Julius B., Jr. "Transforming Geographies of Black Time: How the Free Southern Theater Used the Plantation for Civil Rights Activism." *American Literature*, vol. 91, no. 3, 2019, pp. 587-617.
- Fleming, Thomas., "Napoleon's invasion of North America: Aedes aegypti takes a holiday" in *What If? II: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been*, edited by Robert Cowley, Penguin Putnam Inc., 2001, pp. 134-151.
- Frankétienne. *Ready to Burst*. 1968. Translated by Kaiama L. Glover. Archipelago, 2014.
- Funes Monzote, Reinaldo. *From Rainforest to Cane Field in Cuba: An Environmental History Since 1492*. Translated by Alex Martin. University of North Carolina Press, 2008.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 1995.

- Glissant, Édouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. 1981. Translated by J. Michael Dash. University of Virginia, 1989.
- . *Poetics of Relation*. 1990. Translated by Betsy Wing, The University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Glover, Kaiama L. *Haiti Unbound A Spiralist Challenge to the Postcolonial Canon*. Liverpool University Press, 2010.
- . "New Narratives of Haiti; or, How to Empathize with a Zombie." *Small Axe* vol. 39, 2012, pp. 199-207.
- "God Loves Haiti: A Novel." *HarperCollins Publishers*. <https://www.harpercollins.com/products/god-loves-haiti-dimitry-elias-leger?variant=39806862065698>. Accessed 1 Feb. 2022.
- Greenhalgh, Michelle. "Haitian Farmers Reject Monsanto Donation." *Food Safety News*, 7 June 2010, <https://www.foodsafetynews.com/2010/06/haitian-farmers-burn-monsanto-hybrid-seeds/>. Accessed 12 July 2019.
- Griffin, Tim. "*Waiting for Godot*: Paul Chan in New Orleans." *Artforum*. Dec 2007, <https://www.artforum.com/print/200710/waiting-for-godot-paul-chan-in-new-orleans-18973>. Accessed 1 April 2023.
- Gronewold, Nathaniel. "Environmental Destruction, Chaos Bleeding Across Haitian Border." *New York Times*, 14 Dec. 2009, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/gwire/2009/12/14/14greenwire-environmental-destruction-chaos-bleeding-across-35779.html?Pagewanted=all/>. Accessed 3 July 2019.
- Gunter, Valerie and Steve Kroll-Smith. *Volatile Places: A Sociology of Communities and Environmental Controversies*. Pine Forge Press, 2007.
- "Haitian Peasants March Against Monsanto Company for Food and Seed Sovereignty." *La Via Campesina: International Peasant's Movement*, 16 June 2010, <https://viacampesina.org/en/haitian-peasants-march-against-monsanto-company-for-food-and-seed-sovereignty/>. Accessed 11 July 2019.
- Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth-Century*. Louisiana State University Press, 1995.

- Halverson, Jeff. "How an oddball, nameless storm unleashed a disastrous deluge in Louisiana." *Washington Post*. 17 Aug. 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/capital-weather-gang/wp/2016/08/17/how-an-oddball-nameless-storm-unleashed-a-disastrous-deluge-in-louisiana/?tid=a\\_inl](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/capital-weather-gang/wp/2016/08/17/how-an-oddball-nameless-storm-unleashed-a-disastrous-deluge-in-louisiana/?tid=a_inl). Accessed 17 Aug. 2016.
- Handler, Richard. "Is 'Identity' a Useful Cross-Cultural Concept?" *Commemoration: The Politics of National Identity*, edited by: John R. Gillis, Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 27-40.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.
- Hartnell, Anna. *After Katrina: Race, Neoliberalism, and the End of the American Century*. State University of New York Press, 2017.
- Høgsbjerg, Christian. Introduction. *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History*, by C.L.R. James, Duke University Press, 2013, pp. 1-39.
- Hoffman, Paul E. *A History of Louisiana before 1813*. Louisiana State University Press, 1996.
- Holmes, Jonathan. "Theater and Experience." *Katrina: A Play of New Orleans*, written by Jonathan Holmes, Methuen Drama, 2009, pp. 1-3.
- hooks, bell. "No Love in the Wild." *NewBlackMan (in Exile)* (blog). 5 Sept. 2012. <http://www.newblackmaninexile.net/2012/09/bell-hooks-no-love-in-wild.html>. Accessed 5 May 2016.
- Hoover, Elizabeth. "Jesmyn Ward on *Salvage the Bones*." *The Paris Review*. 30 Aug. 2011. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2011/08/30/jesmyn-ward-on-salvage-the-bones/>. Accessed 14 April 2017.
- Horne, Jed. *Breach of Faith: Hurricane Katrina and the Near Death of a Great American City*. Random House, 2008.
- Ibrahim, Habiba. *Black Age: Oceanic Lifespans and the Time of Black Life*. New York University Press, 2021.
- Ingersoll, Thomas. "Free Blacks in a Slave Society." *William and Mary Quarterly*. Vol. 48, no. 2, 1991, pp. 173-200.

“In ‘God Loves Haiti,’ Clutching Memories When the Earth Moves.” *Weekend Edition Saturday*. NPR, 4 Jan. 2015.

*Isle de Jean Charles Resettlement*. Isle de Jean Charles Resettlement Program, Louisiana Office of Community Development, 2021. <https://isledejeancharles.la.gov/>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2023.

Jellenik, Glenn. “Re-shaping the Narrative: Pulling Focus/Pushing Boundaries in Fictional Representations of Hurricane Katrina.” *Ten Years After Katrina*, edited by: Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik, Lexington Books, 2015, pp. 221-237.

Jessee, Nathan. “Tribal leaders raise ‘Serious Concerns’ about plans to turn their shrinking Louisiana island home into a ‘sportsman’s paradise’.” *Nation of Change*. 26 July 2021. <https://www.nationofchange.org/2021/07/26/tribal-leaders-raise-serious-concerns-about-plans-to-turn-their-shrinking-louisiana-island-home-into-a-sportsmans-paradise/>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2023.

Jiggetts, Shelby and Suzan-Lori Parks. “Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks.” *Callaloo*. vol. 19, no. 2, 1996, pp. 309-317.

Johnson, Andy. Review of *Salvage the Bones*, by Jesmyn Ward. *Callaloo*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2016, pp. 493-495.

Johnson, Cedric. “Watching the Train Wreck or Looking for the Brake? Contemporary Film, Urban Disaster, and the Specter of Planning.” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 14, no. 3-4, 2013, pp. 207-226.

Joseph, Régine Isabelle. *Ruins of Dreams: Marie Chauvet and Post-Apocalyptic Writing in Haiti*. 2010. New York University, PhD Dissertation.

Kastor, Peter J. *The Nation’s Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America*. Yale University Press, 2004.

Katz, Jonathan M. “With Cheap Food Imports, Haiti Can’t Feed Itself.” *Associated Press*, 20 March 2010, [http://archive.boston.com/news/world/latinamerica/articles/2010/03/20/with\\_cheap\\_food\\_imports\\_haiti\\_cant\\_feed\\_itself/](http://archive.boston.com/news/world/latinamerica/articles/2010/03/20/with_cheap_food_imports_haiti_cant_feed_itself/). Accessed 20 July 2019.

Kekesi, Alex and Darrel Williams. “Figure 1.” *NASA/Goddard Space Flight Center Scientific Visualization Studio* 25 Oct. 2002, <http://svs.gsfc.nasa.gov/2640>. Accessed 3 July 2019.

- Kheel, Jake. "The Charcoal War." *Latin American Science*, 10 March 2014, <http://latinamericanscience.org/2014/03/the-charcoal-war/>. Accessed 3 July 2019.
- Kobialka, Michal. "Spatial Representation: Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre of Found Reality." *Theater Journal*. vol. 44, no. 3, 1992, pp. 329-356.
- Laferrière, Dany. *The World Is Moving Around Me*. 2011. Translated by David Homel. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013.
- Lambert, Fernando. "Émile Ollivier, écrivain d'Haïti du Québec." Translated by Martin Munro. *Notre Librairie*, vol. 133, 1998, pp. 154–59.
- "Land Loss" *Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana*, <https://www.crcl.org/the-issue/land-loss.html>. Accessed 1 April 2017.
- LaRose, Serge. "The Haitian Lacou, Land, Family, and Ritual." *Family and Kinship in Middle America and the Caribbean*, edited by Arnaud F. Marks and René A. Römer, Willemstad/Curacao, Institute of Higher Studies in Curacao, 1975, pp. 482-501.
- Langley, Lester D. *The Banana Wars: An Inner History of American Empire 1900-1934*. The University Press of Kentucky, 2014.
- Latrobe, Benjamin Henry. *The journals of Benjamin Henry Latrobe 1799-1820 from Philadelphia to New Orleans*. vol. 3. Yale University Press, 1980.
- Loth, Laura. "(Re)Reading the Ruins: Yanick Lahen's Post-Earthquake Narrative Revisions." *Women in French Studies*, vol 23, 2015, pp.125-142.
- "Louisiana as a Spanish Colony." *Louisiana: European Explorations and the Louisiana Purchase Collection* from the Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/louisiana-european-explorations-and-the-louisiana-purchase/articles-and-essays/louisiana-as-a-spanish-colony/>. Accessed 1 April 2023.
- Lyons, Andrew P. "The Two Lives of Sara Baartman: Gender, "Race," Politics and the Historiography of Mis/Representation." *Anthropologica*. vol. 60, no. 1, 1996, pp. 327-346.
- Make, Jennifer Boum. "Translation as Testimony: on Makenzy Orcel's *The Immortals*,

Translated from French by Nathan Dize.” *Reading in Translation*, 2 Feb. 2021, <https://readingintranslation.com/2021/02/02/translation-as-testimony-on-makenzy-orcels-the-immortals-translated-from-french-by-nathan-dize/>. Accessed 3 May 2023.

“Makenzy Orcel.” *Cité internationale des arts*, <https://www.citedesartsparis.net/en/makenzy-orcel>, Accessed 6 May 2023.

Marotte, Mary Ruth. “Pregnancies, Storms, and Legacies of Loss in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*.” *Ten Years After Katrina*, edited by: Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik, Lexington Books, 2015, pp. 207-219.

Marotte, Mary Ruth and Glenn Jellenik. *Ten Years After Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm’s Effect on American Culture and Identity*. Edited by Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik. Lexington Books, 2015.

Matson, Sumner Eliot. “Manumission by Self-Purchase.” *Journal of Negro History*. vol. 33, no. 2, 1948, pp. 146-167.

Matthewson, Timothy D. “George Washington’s Policy Towards the Haitian Revolution.” *Diplomatic History* vol. 3 no. 3, 1979, pp. 321-336.

Mayo, Jason. “Corps says money woes won’t delay Morganza’s planned 2020 finish date.” *The Courier*. 28 April 2004. <http://www.houmatoday.com/article/20040428/NEWS/404280326>. Accessed 5 May 2016.

McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and The Cartographies of Struggle*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

---. “Plantation Futures.” *Small Axe*. vol. 17, no. 3, 2013, pp. 1-15.

McKittrick, Katherine and Woods, Clyde Adrian. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place. Between the Lines*, 2007.

Mier, Brian. “Becoming Actors in History.” *NACLA*, 30 June 2016, <https://nacla.org/news/2016/06/30/becoming-actors-history>. Accessed 1 May 2023.

Mignolo, Walter D. *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton University Press, 2000.

---. “The Logic of the In-Visible: Decolonial Reflection on the Change of Epoch.” *Theory*,

- Culture, & Society*. vol. 37, no. 7-8, 2020, pp. 205-218.
- Miller, Laura. "How the National Book Awards Made Themselves Irrelevant." *Salon*. 12 Oct. 2011. [http://www.salon.com/2011/10/12/how\\_the\\_national\\_book\\_awards\\_made\\_themselves\\_irrelevant/](http://www.salon.com/2011/10/12/how_the_national_book_awards_made_themselves_irrelevant/). Accessed 26 April 2017.
- Mintz, Sydney W. "Living Fences in the Fond-des-Nègres [sic] Region, Haiti." *Economic Botany* vol. 16 no. 2 (1962): 101-105.
- Mintz, Sidney and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. "The Social History of Haitian Vodou." *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, edited by Donald Cosentino, 1995, pp. 123-47.
- Mooney, Chris. "What we can say about the Louisiana floods and climate change." *Washington Post*. 15 Aug. 2016. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/08/15/what-we-can-say-about-the-louisiana-floods-and-climate-change/?tid=a\\_inl&utm\\_term=.8c39978c9a0b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2016/08/15/what-we-can-say-about-the-louisiana-floods-and-climate-change/?tid=a_inl&utm_term=.8c39978c9a0b). Accessed 15 Aug. 2016.
- Montgomery, David R. *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations*. University of California Press, 2012.
- Morgenstern, Naomi. "Maternal Sovereignty: Destruction and Survival in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*." *Reading Contemporary Black British and African American Women Writers: Race, Ethics, Narrative Form*, edited by Jean Wyatt and Sheldon George, Routledge, 2020, pp. 104-121.
- Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Munro, Martin. "Music, Vodou, and Rhythm in Nineteenth-Century Haiti." *Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2008): 52-70.
- . *Tropical Apocalypse: Haiti and the Caribbean End Times*. University of Virginia Press, 2015.
- . *Writing on the Fault Line: Haitian Literature and the Earthquake of 2010*. Liverpool University Press, 2014.
- Niaah, Sonjah Stanley. "Mapping Black Atlantic Performance Geographies: From Slave Ship to Ghetto." *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, Edited by Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, *Between the Lines*, 2007, pp. 193-217.

- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- O'Brien, Geoffrey. *Stolen Glimpses, Captive Shadows: Writing on Film, 2002-2012*. Counterpoint, 2013.
- Osborn, Deirdre. "Writing Black Back: An Overview of Black Theater and Performance in Britain." *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2016): 13-31.
- Paravisini-Gebert, Lizabeth. "'All Misfortune Comes from the Cut Trees': Marie Chauvet's Environmental Imagination." *Yale French Studies*, No. 128 (2015): 74-91.
- . "Deforestation and the Yearning for Lost Landscapes in Caribbean Literatures." *In Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, Oxford University Press, 2011, 99-116.
- Pasquier, Michael T. "Early Exploration." *64 Parishes: A Project of Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities*. 22 Feb 2022. <https://64parishes.org/entry/early-exploration>. Accessed 16 Dec 2022.
- Pemberton III, John. "The Dreadful God and the Divine King." *Africa's Ogun Old World and New*, edited by Sandra T. Barnes, 2nd ed., Indiana University Press, 1997, pp. 105-146.
- Phillips, Michael. "Manipulative Music, Plot Devices Keep Beasts of the Southern Wild from Greatness." *Chicago Tribune*. 5 July 2012. [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-07-05/entertainment/sc-mov-0703-beasts-southern-wild-20120704\\_1\\_southern-wild-benzeitlin-lucy-alibar](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-07-05/entertainment/sc-mov-0703-beasts-southern-wild-20120704_1_southern-wild-benzeitlin-lucy-alibar). Accessed 5 May 2016.
- Popkin, Jeremy D. *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Pozorski, Aimee L. "Trauma's Time" *Connecticut Review*. vol. 28, no. 1, 2006, pp. 71-76.
- Plummer, Brenda Gayle. *Haiti and the United States: The Psychological Moment*. The University of Georgia Press, 2003.
- . "The Metropolitan Connection: Foreign and Semiforeign Elites in Haiti, 1900-1915." *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1984): 119-142.
- "Praise for God Loves Haiti." DimitryEliasLéger.com, 15 Nov. 2016, <http://www.dimitry>

eliasleger.com/praise/. Accessed 3 Feb. 2019.

Quarantelli, E.L. "Catastrophes are Different from Disasters: Some Implications for Crisis Planning and Managing Drawn from Katrina." *Social Science Research Council*, <https://items.ssrc.org/understanding-katrina/catastrophes-are-different-from-disasters-some-implications-for-crisis-planning-and-managing-drawn-from-katrina/>. Accessed 1 Feb 2023.

Railsback, Brian. "A Twenty-First-Century *Grapes of Wrath*: Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*." *Steinbeck Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2016, pp. 179-195.

Rasmussen, Daniel. *American Uprising: The Untold Story of America's Largest Slave Revolt*. Harper Perennial, 2011.

Reinhardt, Thomas. "200 Years of Forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian Revolution." *Journal of Black Studies* 35, 2005, pp. 246-261.

Renda, Mary. *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940*. University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

Rigaud, Milo. *Secrets of Voodoo*. Translated by Robert B. Cross, City Lights Books, 2001.

Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. Columbia University Press, 1996.

Robinson, Cedric J. and R. D. G. Kelley. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. third ed., University of North Carolina Press, 2020.

Rodriguez, Havidán, et al. *Handbook of Disaster Research*. 2nd ed., Springer International Publishing, 2018.

Salz, Melissa. *Theater of Testimony: The Works of Emily Mann, Anna Deavere Smith and Spalding Gray*. 1996. University of Colorado at Boulder, PhD dissertation. *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*.

Scott, A.O. "She's The Man of This Swamp." *New York Times*. 26 June 2012. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/27/movies/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-directed-by-benh-zeitlin.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/27/movies/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-directed-by-benh-zeitlin.html?_r=0). Accessed 5 May 2016.

Scott, Darieck. *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American*

- Literary Imagination*. New York University Press, 2010.
- Scott, David. *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. Duke University Press, 2004.
- . *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*. Duke University Press, 2014.
- Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Sheller, Mimi. *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom*. Duke University Press, 2012.
- Solnit, Rebecca and Rebecca Snedeker. *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas*. University of California Press, 2013.
- Stillman, Nick. "Doing the Time: On Paul Chan." *The Nation*. 6 Oct. 2010, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/doing-time-paul-chan/>. Accessed 14 March 2023.
- Stoddard, Maj. Amos. *Sketches, historical and descriptive, of Louisiana*. Mathew Carey, Philadelphia, 1812.
- Sublette, Ned. *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square*. Lawrence Hill Books, 2008.
- Sutter, John D. "There's No More Land." *CNN*. 8 April 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/04/08/opinions/sutter-isle-de-jean-charles-louisiana-climate/>. Accessed 1 April 2017.
- Swenson, Dan. "A Glimpse in Time: See New Orleans' History, from 1837-2019, through Newspaper Front Pages." *Nola.com*, 6 July 2019, [https://www.nola.com/news/a-glimpse-in-time-see-new-orleans-history-from-1837-2019-through-newspaper-front-pages/article\\_e16d0920-9d18-11e9-b101-bf2742487475.html](https://www.nola.com/news/a-glimpse-in-time-see-new-orleans-history-from-1837-2019-through-newspaper-front-pages/article_e16d0920-9d18-11e9-b101-bf2742487475.html). Accessed 15 April 2023.
- "The André Cailloux Center for Performing Arts and Cultural Justice." *Rose Collaborative*, <https://www.rosecollaborative.com/andre-cailloux-center>. 20 April 2023.
- "The Sun Sets on Southern Rep." *American Theater*, 8 July 2022, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2022/07/08/the-sun-sets-on-southern-rep/>. Accessed 20 April 2023.
- Travis, Molly. "We Are Here: Jesmyn Ward's Survival Narratives Response to Anna Hartnell,

- “When Cars Become Churches.” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2016, pp. 219-224.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Haiti, State Against Nation: The Origins and Legacy of Duvalierism*. Monthly Review Press, 1990.
- . *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press, 1995.
- . “Haiti’s Nightmare and the Lessons of History.” *NACLA*. 25 Sept. 2007, <https://nacla.org/article/haiti%27s-nightmare-and-lessons-history>. Accessed 30 June 2019.
- . *Nation, State and Society in Haiti, 1804-1984.*, The Wilson Center, 1985.
- . *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press, 1995.
- Ulysse, Gina Athena. *Why Haiti Needs New Narratives: A Post-Quake Chronicle*. Wesleyan University Press, 2015.
- United Houma Nation*. United Houma Nation, 2020, <https://unitedhoumanation.org/>. Accessed 5 Feb. 2023.
- Van Houten, Carolyn. “The First Official Climate Refugees in the U.S. Race Against Time.” *National Geographic*. 25 May 2016. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/05/160525-isle-de-jean-charles-louisiana-sinking-climate-change-refugees/>. Accessed 1 April 2017.
- Walsh, Cory. “Q&A: New Orleans Playwright John Biguenet on Social Role of Theater.” *Missoulian*, 30 July 2017, *ProQuest*, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/q-amp-new-orleans-playwright-john-biguenet-on/docview/1924713315/se-2>. Accessed 20 April 2023.
- “‘What Storm, What Thunder’ brings to life the voices from Haiti’s 2010 earthquake.” *Weekend Edition Saturday*. NPR, 2 Oct. 2021.
- Wilkerson, Emily. *The Politics of Renewal: The Process and Record of Paul Chan’s Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*. 2012. University of Southern California, MA Thesis.
- Williams, Michael. *Deforesting the Earth: From Prehistory to Global Crisis*. University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Young, Hershini Bhana. "Making Space in Jeremy Love's *Bayou*, Volume 1." *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*, edited by Frances Gateward and John Jennings, Rutgers University Press, 2015, pp. 274-291.

Zeitlin, Benh. Interview with Melissa Block. *All Things Considered*. NPR, 27 June 2012.