

Ineffable Material: Atmospheric Aesthetics and the Archipelagic Americas

By

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Introduction

Ineffable Material

In April 2020, the Trinidadian writer and activist Amanda T. McIntyre published a poem called “Huracanna” in *PREE*, an online magazine of contemporary Caribbean writing. “Huracanna” was featured in *PREE*’s “Ecocide” issue that mourned and raged against the myriad crimes against nature in the region, from the dredging of coral reefs to the drying up of a waterfall. In “Huracanna” the speaker and her family read *Mythologies of the Mainland: The Mayan Legend of Huracan* to distract themselves from the storm. Outside their home, the “cacophony of winds” shakes the building and provides “proof / that we were surrounded by forces more powerful.” From this experience, the speaker learns to connect the powerful cultural and environmental forces that surround her, ranging from pre-Columbian myth, the winds “that rattled the galvanize [sic] roof,” and “the colonial house of shadows” down the street. The poem yokes the physical winds of the hurricane to the local narratives and colonial ideologies circulating throughout the island. Following on McIntyre’s exploration of the relationship between the colonial environment and aesthetic forms, this dissertation, *Ineffable Material: Atmospheric Aesthetics and the Archipelagic Americas*, explores circum-Caribbean texts across a wide swath of cultural and poetic forms that announce the imbrication of literary, affective, and physical atmospheres.

“Huracanna” deftly provides an opening for this exploration. In the poem, the storm becomes the occasion for the speaker’s meditation on cultural change and literary genres. From the book of Mayan mythology, the speaker learns a “clinical belief in structure” in which stories have an “introduction, rising action, complication, climax and conclusion.” The speaker,

perhaps, expects to be able to narrate the storm using the same linear, dramatic arc through which the myth of the Mayan god Huracan was re-told. Though the poem gives little information about the book of Mayan myths, the disjuncture between its “clinical structure” and the chaos of the storm suggests that the speaker is pulled between different aesthetic norms: one linear and text-based, the other circuitous and oral. The book’s “clinical structure” implies that it takes a distant or indifferent perspective on its mythological subject matter; though the structure of the dramatic arc gives the narrative a form, it does not convey any feeling toward that subject matter. The speaker ultimately cannot narrate the experience of the storm using the book’s detached structuralist lens. As Kamau Brathwaite would say, “the hurricane does not roar in pentameter” (“History of the Voice” 265). Pentameter is too fixed, too constraining, and therefore cannot fully capture the hurricane. Brathwaite calls for poetry that can match the material reality of the storm.¹ A renewed ecological language that is attentive to the atmospheric ebbs and flow of the circum-Caribbean would convey the counterclockwise rotation and multigeneric roar of the gale’s winds. A hurricane certainly isn’t “clinical” or linear: the circularity, speed, and intensity of a hurricane’s winds hardly find resolution as storms are rarely “over” for those impacted by them.

The hurricane of “Huracanna” enacts a cruel poesis as it marks the sky and land. The vertiginous storm—its “cacophony of winds” and “devastatingly calm eye”—acts on the land as if it were an enraged and prolific poet. McIntyre writes that the dark sky was “pierced by / flash fiction lines written in the hurricane’s cursive hand.” Next, the “gale’s violence” lets loose “oral

¹ Brathwaite contends that Caribbean writers—having been educated in European aesthetics, particularly a British literary tradition—are out of touch with the full aesthetic contours of Caribbean life: “in terms of what we write, our perceptual models, we are more conscious (in terms of sensibility) of the falling snow for instance—the models are all there for falling of the snow—than of the force of hurricanes, that take place every year” (“History of the Voice” 265).

histories and folk vignettes,” like leaves on the silk cotton tree. The winds are *writing or making* in the etymological sense of *poesis*. The storm writes in so many more literary styles—such as flash fiction and oral stories—than pentameter. As the cacophony of literary modes rages through the final stanza, the speaker laments the cultural particularity that disappears when the oral stories and folk vignettes are blown away by the storm. For instance, the hurricane erases the neighbor Tanty’s stories about the silk cotton tree’s power. The effect is that “All the presumed authority of island lore disappeared into the ether.” Thus, the storm is a devastating force that amplifies the cultural erasure of “island lore” that began centuries before with the colonization of the island. The speaker seems resigned to these catastrophes saying, “No better vengeance, I now suppose, was sweeter for bastions like / the colonial house of shadows that brooded on the corner / watching and withstanding the weathered years.” Environmental disaster and cultural erasure emerge as twinned catastrophes by the end of the poem as the “colonial house of shadows” malevolently observes the storm’s destruction.

“Huracanna” accentuates the tension between the storm’s creative potential as it writes on the landscape and the storm’s destructive potential as the changes wrought on the landscape mirror the loss of oral and folk forms of storytelling caused by colonial erasure. Because the storm’s capacity is expressed in terms of literary styles, it is aligned with a poet’s artistic sensibility and style. But even as the poet likens the storm’s awesome power to literary expressivity, the poet cannot escape the force of the “colonial house of shadows” which brings the storm’s havoc into new light. In the “stoic hours” the speaker recognizes how the storm ruptures both land and “clinical structures” of narration. Disabused of childhood innocence, she gains knowledge that some colonial infrastructure has survived “the weathered years” but native trees and oral stories have not. McIntyre uses this convergence of climate and poetic form to

stress the colonial legacies of environmental and cultural destruction. Her attentiveness to the intersection of physical atmospheres and literary aesthetics crystalizes this dissertation's goal of understanding the complexity of atmosphere in contemporary circum-Caribbean literary arts.

The increasing frequency and severity of tropical cyclones is but one material reason the atmosphere is a growing site of concern across the region. The air carries toxic agricultural chemicals that are absorbed by neighboring communities as anthropologist Vanessa Agard-Jones traces. Via the use of aerosol sprays like fungicides on banana plantations on Martinique, people are impacted by the air in ways they can hardly perceive. Moreover, the air is routinely a zone of imperial surveillance where people's movements are monitored and controlled. Sociologist Mimi Sheller demonstrates, for instance, how the Toussaint Louverture International Airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, became a "semimilitarized" state after the 2010 earthquake (71). Under the guise of providing humanitarian support, the US military took control of the airport effectively blocking flights carrying aid supplies and prioritizing military personnel and weapons (Sheller 70).² Controlling the air in this instance becomes a means of controlling people's mobility. Though many studies have productively focused on maritime Caribbean histories and mobilities, Agard-Jones' and Sheller's works prompt a more thorough examination of the air's role in fostering or impeding the movement of particles and persons.

These atmospheric crosscurrents are given shape and meaning by artists of the region. Poets like McIntyre and Brathwaite make these material environmental concerns the subject of their cultural projects. McIntyre's approach to atmospheres reveals how physical and literary atmospheres are tethered; the storm serves as the inspiration for the poet, and the poet strives to

² Caribbean airspace continues to be imperially controlled as evidenced by the frequency of US deportation flights to Haiti. In May 2022 alone 36 flights with nearly 4,000 Haitians departed the mainland US (Sullivan).

craft an ecologically-attuned aesthetics which captures and transmits the tempo and force of the storm's winds. But the experience of Caribbean airs is also a matter of the feelings that circulate in response to and despite these environmental risks. In other words, what is in the air has material and affective impacts. This material and affective intersection is evident in the magazine *PREE*'s call for contributors to eulogize damaged environs and to critique the legacies of colonialism and enslavement which exacerbate seasonal weather phenomena like hurricanes. In their call for the "Ecocide" issue, the editors ask contributors to "Send us your anger, your grief, your indifference, your uncertainty, your memories, your argument and your elegies for the Caribbean, now, in the era of the climate crisis." In this framing, the issue foregrounds the kaleidoscope of affective responses writers and artists might have toward the lands, waters, and airs of the Caribbean in the midst of intensifying catastrophe.

To address the interconnection of aesthetics, affect, and environment, my research emphasizes a humanistic approach to the weather as a necessary supplement to the knowledge that atmospheric sciences yield. In this project I focus on twentieth and twenty-first century archipelagic American literature and culture through the lens of physical and figurative atmospheres contributing to the growing field of the Environmental Humanities. The archipelagic Americas, which includes for the purpose of my study, the Caribbean islands and coasts of North and South America, has long been experiencing the effects of the climate crisis. Meanwhile, writers and artists of this region have long been attuned to the ways that colonialism and the legacies of slavery contribute to environmental destruction. In responding to the imbricated histories of environmental and colonial damage, I am guided by the following research questions: What do artists communicate about the air or atmosphere through non-realist, poetic, and speculative modes of writing? What can their work teach audiences about the

particles, histories, and feelings that fill the air at a time of grave environmental risk? What does their work reveal about seizing pleasure and life during and despite duress? At stake in my research are issues of power, geography, and aesthetics—the sensual perception of the material world as well as the ways that artistic works amplify and redirect sensory perceptions. In what follows I define what I call “atmospheric aesthetics,” a sensibility shared by the artists I study. From Julie Dash’s landmark film, *Daughters of the Dust*, Edwidge Danticat’s prose essays and novel, *The Farming of Bones*, Vincent Toro’s poetry collections, to Nalo Hopkinson’s science fiction novel, *Midnight Robber*, the figurative and material atmospheres of the circum-Caribbean converge. Across these works, artists turn what is ineffable—the atmosphere and affects—into the material for generating forms of life in the face of atmospheric crises.

Atmospheric Aesthetics

Poems like McIntyre’s make material the often-ineffable nature of the atmosphere. Whereas we are not often aware of the air surrounding us, storms can powerfully bring the air into conscious perception. We also live in an age when modern atmospheric sciences expertly register what is in the air, including toxicity, temperature, and turbulence, such that the hurricane that inspired “Huracanna” was predicted and prepared for. This prediction is possible because the twentieth century saw rapid growth in atmospheric observing systems, such as radar, lidar, and research aircraft (Stith et al). Yet as the atmosphere came under closer scrutiny, modern militarized regimes began to weaponize the air in order to turn peoples’ environments against them through what the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk calls “atmoterrorism.”³ Whether via airplanes that carry bombs or the chemical weapons like tear gas and pepper spray that anthropologist Kristen Simmons links to settler state policing, the air has become a “medium for

³ See also Jacob Darwin Hamblin’s *Arming Mother Nature: The Birth of Catastrophic Environmentalism*.

violence and control” (Simmons). It is easier than ever to see how the atmosphere is a site of both spectacular and slow violence. From devastating storms like Hurricane Maria (2017), to the invisible and gradually-acting airborne chemicals sprayed on Martiniquan banana plantations (Agard-Jones), and including the airports that mobilize or immobilize humans and nonhumans across the Caribbean (Sheller) the air is a politicized medium. In the face of these material realities, *how are archipelagic Caribbean artists making sense of the air?*

To answer this question Eva Horn advocates a return to a nuanced conception of the cultural value and meaning of the atmosphere. Horn, who studies the intellectual history of climate, observes that while modern meteorology and climatology produce a wealth of knowledge about the atmosphere, they have stripped the air of its cultural and symbolic meanings (14). Here it’s helpful to consider the dual nature of atmosphere: it can signify both macro- and micro-level phenomena: an atmosphere is “the whole body of terrestrial air” *and* “the air in a particular place” (“atmosphere, n.”). Horn connects the first meaning with a climatic understanding of atmosphere (of seasons and cycles within a generally stable pattern) and the second meaning with the weather (of events or energy which can be quite deadly). But Horn argues that we no longer hold both of these meanings in tandem: “While air used to be understood as the principle of dwelling and of flowing, of place, and planet, a link between all living things, today it seems to be neither of these” (13-14). In practice the weather has become subordinate to the climate, which resulted not only from the bifurcation of “atmosphere” into climate and weather, but also from the subordination of cultural meanings of atmosphere to meteorological ones.⁴ The standardization of meteorological data has had some very beneficial

⁴ Horn elaborates: “After centuries of private and unsystematic weather observations and a long history of tacit meteorological knowledge in agriculture and seafaring, the standardized gathering of meteorological data emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century. Thus, ironically, the birth of

effects, from the ability to predict and track extreme weather events and even the ability to identify the role of humans in shaping these events. But “a conception of climate that is entirely abstract, standardized, and computable” means that the atmosphere is legible as a knowable entity open to control and even weaponization (15). The litany of airborne disasters that opened this section proves how tempting it is to narrate a history of the air by quantifying the toxins in the air and even by identifying the human sources of atmospheric crises. While this remains important work, forging a more nuanced cultural conception of the air returns us to the myriad ways people engage with the ineffability of air and of the relationship of place and planet at once.⁵ As a literary studies scholar, I feel well equipped to “facilitate[e] a broader understanding and appreciation of the role air plays in conditioning and articulating forms of life” (9). Drawing from cultural studies and ecocritical methods, I trace the imbrication of cultural and climatological systems in order to produce a “broader understanding” of how circum-Caribbean artists interpret and respond to the atmosphere.

I turn to aesthetics to answer Horn’s call to initiate a renewed cultural understanding of the atmosphere for two reasons. First, aesthetic experience is often atmospheric in nature. Novels, poems, and films provoke a sensorial response in readers and viewers that is like a mood or surrounding atmosphere. In addition, texts transmit their surrounding historical and ideological atmospheres to their audiences. In either case, aesthetic experience can be hard to pin down just as it is not always easy to perceive the air. The air and aesthetics can both be ineffable. For instance, how can a lay person perceive or describe a vast temporal and spatial hyperobject

modern meteorology and climate science coincides with the beginnings of the massive transformations of air through pollution and rising carbon dioxide emissions in the course of the Industrial Revolution” (14).

⁵ See also Christina Sharpe who evokes climatological thinking by saying “the weather is the total climate; and the climate is antiblack” (*In the Wake* 104).

like the climate? Aesthetic experience is equally ineffable when considering what constitutes beauty or the ability to judge it. In the Kantian tradition, beauty is an experience that is mysteriously subjective, nevertheless purported to be universal. But “beauty” is hardly universal or the sole focus of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is deeply historical and situated. This fact leads me to the second reason aesthetics matter to my project.

The recuperation of aesthetic inquiry by feminist and ethnic studies scholars seeks to nuance a key term in literary studies by applying the lessons of feminist, queer, and postcolonial critique.⁶ They bring the knowledge that, in brief, aesthetic experience cannot be disinterested or universal because humans carry with them what Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter calls “culture-specific psycho-affective sensibilities” (“Rethinking” 269). Therefore, aesthetics must be understood as historically contingent and built out of classed and raced notions of taste and hierarchies of being (“Rethinking”). As Asian Americanist Kandice Chuh says, aesthetics *make* difference, “that of the racial and colonial order, that of sex-gender regulation” (xii). Instead of producing a universal experience, aesthetic judgement—because it is based on “culture-specific psycho-affective sensibilities”—creates difference and regulates what human difference means. This is true of Kantian aesthetics as well as aesthetic production in any tradition. Aesthetic production will always register human difference and the histories that define human difference. Nuancing the meaning of aesthetics for Wynter, Chu, and others means challenging the hierarchies of human difference which were naturalized by Kantian framings of aesthetics. Nuancing aesthetics also means attending to the artistry in minoritized literatures as well as critiquing the failures of the politically conservative uses of aesthetics.

⁶ See, for instance, Kandice Chuh, Claire Colebrook, Fred Moten, Sarah Nuttall, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Sianne Ngai and Jennifer Ponce de León address aesthetics through a Marxist lens.

Scholars like Chuh read minoritized literatures for their artistic value in addition to their political value. Chuh observes a shift in the academy which corrects not only the exclusion of minoritized literatures from the canon but their exclusion from aesthetic inquiry:

Even as minoritized literatures were being institutionalized by challenges to the idea of universality, the paradigm shift to cultural studies also complicated minoritized discourses' relationship to aesthetic inquiry by bringing with it what in hindsight has been understood as an overemphasis on minoritized writings as political or anthropological documents rather than artistic creations. . . . such literatures have in the main been framed and studied in terms of authenticity, racism, and resistance rather than literariness per se. (16)

Finding herself “fatigue[d]” with the trend toward political critique and its “predictable . . . rendering of resistance, agency, and subjectivity,” Chuh points to work in formalist criticism and affect studies as productive avenues through which to engage with minoritized literatures (17).⁷ This dissertation seeks to bring Chuh’s insights on aesthetics to bear on the study of environmental atmospheres so as to learn how the sensibilities engendered by ideologies of race and racialization create aesthetics. And, by bringing an ecocritical perspective on the toxicity and turbulence of physical atmospheres to bear on minoritized literatures, we learn how the physical atmosphere conditions forms of life—that is, how biological, ecological, and aesthetic processes intersect to shape experience.⁸

Across the four chapters of my project, I trace what I call atmospheric aesthetics in novels, poetry, film, and essays. Atmospheric aesthetics describes how the environmental and

⁷ Cf. Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* (2015).

⁸ The phrase, “forms of life” is used by Sylvia Wynter when she discusses genres of being human. See Katherine McKittrick’s *Demonic Grounds*, especially 122, 135, and 141.

cultural processes that drive literary production and reception are expressed in form and mood. Central to my conception of atmospheric aesthetics are the affects that texts and environments transmit via their mood. In literary studies, mood describes an “ambient and hazy” feeling somewhere in the background behind the more prominent devices of plot or character. In order to read a text’s mood, one must perceive what is between foreground (the content being represented) and the background (what is contextual or atmospheric). This can be challenging because often affect “seems a fugitive presence attached to or hovering in the vicinity of words” (Ngai 46). Both literary and social moods behave like atmospheres in that they fill the space around words, persons, or places. Because mood is perceived in the space between foreground and background, it has often eluded analysis. Adding to its haziness is the fact that the concept of mood is not robustly developed in contemporary literary criticism. Definitionally, mood, atmosphere, and tone are often used interchangeably or are used to define each other. As a case in point, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, mood means “the pervading atmosphere or tone of a particular place, event, or period; that quality of a work of art or literature which evokes or recalls a certain emotion or state of mind” (“mood n1” 3c).⁹ In more general parlance, mood connotes a quality of feeling as well as ephemerality whereas tone is more readily associated with sound, music, or acoustics.

Studies of the related concept of tone lend some insight into how mood and atmosphere function in literature and how they mediate between the text and the world. Contemporary theories of literary tone draw on affect theory in order to understand a text’s atmosphere as part of aesthetic form and experience. As Sianne Ngai argues in *Ugly Feelings* (2005), tone is “a literary text’s affective bearing, orientation, or ‘set toward’ its audience and the world” (28).

⁹ See also “tone, n.” 5d and 8.

Ngai insists that by understanding tone readers will be better able to understand a text's ideological position. She calls tone "the formal aspect that enables [. . .] affective values [like paranoia, euphoria, and melancholy] to become significant with regard to how each critic understands the work as a totality within an equally holistic matrix of social relations" (43). In other words, tone is what scales between the formal qualities of a work of literature and the social world of the critic. With this insight in mind, mood can be read as an affective quality within a text as well as an emotional and ideological atmosphere surrounding a work of art. As mood expands from text to audience, it becomes clear that moods are social phenomena. As social atmospheres, moods surround the body and have a palpable somatic effect. Literary critic Dora Zhang describes how "Moods are not intentional, not directed at specific objects, but are instead more ambient and hazy, like a surrounding or encompassing cloud" (125). In this example, even the metaphors used to describe mood make use of the language of the weather, from "atmosphere" to "cloud," suggesting the implicit affinities of these processes. In a very material way, moods engender an affective density, a thickening of the air.

Affects are the feelings or sensations that stand between the subject (whether a human being or an aesthetic object) and the world. The turn to affect by humanities scholars is largely motivated by feminist politics that put pressure on ideologies of rationalism and logocentrism as well as the gendered associations of feeling with irrationality and femininity (Margolis; Zerilli). Other scholars, following the lead of Brian Massumi, treat affect as a pre-cognitive entity and in doing so de-link affect from the socio-historical processes that shape perception. Linda Zerilli, however, "insists on the irreducible entanglement of thinking and feeling" (66) as part of a larger project of democratic political theory. As Chuh observes, the turn to affect coincides with the political motivations behind the turn to aesthetic inquiry by feminist and ethnic studies scholars

seeking to trace and understand how bodies are shaped in conceptual, material, and affective ways. Scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Leslie Bow, Anne Anlin Cheng, David Eng, Badia Ahad-Legardy, Bianca Williams, and José Muñoz continue this work with special attention to how race and racialization are affective processes. A growing body of postcolonial scholars such as Sara Ahmed, Dia Da Costa, Denise Ferreira da Silva, and Deborah Thomas stretch the study of affect beyond the North American frames that dominate the field. This counters the predominance of theories of affect that rely on a US-centric political and economic milieu. In affirming Wynter's argument about aesthetics, these theorists of affect demonstrate how contextual feelings can be. They also suggest how important it is for scholars to develop methods of scaling between individual subjective experience and cultural processes.

Affects are more than subjective individual feelings and more than qualities intrinsic to works of art. Rather, as Sara Ahmed demonstrates in *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, affects circulate and stick to certain bodies and objects. Cultural texts are very good at capturing and transmitting affects because they are repositories of other times and places. As Anne Cvetkovitch advances, texts can become "archives of feelings" that index emotions within their content but also those that surround their production and reception (7). We can therefore read the affective milieu within a text as well as the material and affective atmospheres which surround the text in order to ask what affective experiences become possible as texts mediate between the reader and the world. It therefore becomes possible as a critic to understand and assess feelings as historically produced phenomena with real political consequences. Both physical atmospheres and literary atmospheres are mediums which carry histories and feelings. The difference is that the texts I study seek to counteract the circulation of particles and feelings which generate and

promulgate environmental degradation. Instead, they seek to recover and create new atmospheres suitable for diasporic place making.

Like the environmental atmospheres, affects are ineffable: they are amorphous, ephemeral, and sometimes inexpressible; nevertheless they act on people and shape physical, sensorial, and emotional realities. Yet atmospheric aesthetics and their affective registers are difficult to discern through traditional methods of literary analysis such as close reading and ideology critique. Because a text can archive feelings that exceed any author's intention, readers and scholars are left with many moving pieces up for interpretation. To study all these elements, I propose a mode of analysis that can scale between the narrative and formal aspects of a text as well as that same text's historical and geographical situatedness. If analysis of mood requires "a mode of theorizing that aims less at defining or stabilizing a concept than at sensitizing us to it" (Zhang 124), this project seeks greater sensitivity to the spectrum of feelings produced within the atmospheres of the American archipelago than what Chuh calls the "predictable . . . rendering of resistance, agency, and subjectivity" within cultural studies. This project also brings a renewed attention to the emotions produced by artistic works, a facet of aesthetic life that is often taken for granted in contemporary literary studies.

To meet this challenge, *Ineffable Material* employs a method of reading that scales between the foreground (the content or what is being represented) and the background (what is contextual or "in the air"). Atmosphere, by its very nature, requires a scalable interpretive apparatus, one that can see the "whole body" and the status of a "particular place" ("atmosphere, n."). My reading of atmospheric aesthetics also attends to the ways that the air in our contemporary moment is moving from the background of perception to the foreground. In other words, as the physical atmosphere moves from the background to the foreground of

contemporary life due to anthropogenic climate change, it is more pressing than ever to be attuned to what is and has been in the background. In forging a renewed attention to the cultural qualities of atmosphere we can practice ways of “perceiving without possessing our environment” (Posmentier 120). Reading atmospheric aesthetics also emphasizes how communities—especially Caribbean island and coastal communities—most at risk choose to communicate their experience of and relationship with the more than human world.

The place-making strategies of the artists in this study direct readers’ and viewers’ attention to sensorial experience: from the winds, storms, and sounds that fill the air, to the emotional lives of characters, and even to transformations in literary and cultural production. They make material what is often ineffable about atmospheric and aesthetic life. Their works lead me to identify the three valences of atmospheric aesthetics that I have traced thus far: 1) the environmental, 2) the socio-affective, and 3) the literary. Each of the artists in this study yoke an environmental understanding of what is *in* the air with a cultural studies emphasis on the circuits of affect in social life. Lastly, they express these issues of environment and affect through their literary and formal innovations. Because atmosphere can be something both all-enveloping and all-encompassing while also remaining something particular to a place, it can be used as a sliding heuristic that is especially useful for the archipelagic approach of this project. “Atmosphere” points us to the material, physical atmospheres of the Caribbean, to the social and political ways that social atmospheres and feelings create relationships between people and their histories, and how these processes are tethered to literary and artistic forms. When these three valences intersect, we see just how material the seemingly ineffable qualities of the air, affect, and tone are.

Atmospheric aesthetics appear in the windy scenes of Dash's foundational and experimental film, *Daughters of the Dust* and in the hurricane-shaped concrete poems of Toro's debut collection, *Stereo. Island. Mosaic*. In Dash's film and Toro's poetry the material atmosphere is both setting and subject. The sea breezes constitute the airy surrounds within *Daughters* and in conjunction with other coastal ecological features like the tidal canals, give the film an ecologically oriented sense of time. In *Stereo*, non-western cultural forms like the Taíno hurricane zemi—a carved numinous object with a central face and arms that bend in the direction of a hurricane's counter-clockwise winds—transmit information about the air and atmosphere which have been lost due to modern meteorology's drive for standardization and global observation. In these cases, Earth processes act upon and, in Toro's case, literally give shape to aesthetic production. Artworks too produce their own atmospheric conditions, as in Edwidge Danticat's densely affective prose writings and the affirming feelings of home that are produced and transmitted by Dash's film. The artists I discuss also demonstrate how meteorological and social atmospheres contribute to histories and experiences of race and racialization thereby highlighting the imbrication of environmental conditions and human culture in aesthetic production. Ultimately, I seek to show how atmospheric aesthetics “articulat[e] forms of life” and deepen readers' attention to the intersections of environment and history in ways that expand the canon and founding questions of environmental studies (Horn 9).

Ecocriticism and the Air

My study of atmospheres expands the field of environmental humanities by insisting on the importance of aesthetic inquiry within environmental criticism. Aesthetics have always mattered to environmental scholarship in part because aesthetic inquiry has strong ties to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landscape paintings and the Romantic movement. The

importance of Romantic aesthetics to early ecocriticism cannot be understated, but this means that the aesthetic categories within ecocritical scholarship were drawn from a narrow canon of environmental literature. As ecocritic Heather Houser convincingly remarks, “the canon of environmental emotion extends beyond pastoral sentimentalism, ‘expansionist hubris,’ and the sublime” (22). Yet these aesthetic categories have been so powerful within ecocritical scholarship because of their relationship to referential reality and authenticity, or at least the illusion of the collapse between artwork and world that Timothy Morton calls ecomimesis (31). Referentiality has not only been the subject of much writing, but it has also shaped the questions and concerns of ecocriticism. As Victoria Saramago summarizes, “early ecocriticism, going against the grain of poststructuralist and postmodern thought and often identified as anti theoretical, was . . . committed to bringing back to literary studies a strong sense of referentiality” (13).¹⁰ Though referentiality remains a core concern of ecocritical scholarship, the field continues to fruitfully move past the aesthetics of nature writing as well as the North American and Western European frameworks shaping environmental thought.

This project joins ecocritics who insist on the conjunction of aesthetic practice with pressing environmental and political exigencies and texts that represent them. I seek to emphasize the atmospheric aesthetics and effects of literature’s bridging of text and context, sharing with Morton’s theory of ecomimesis the way that texts “convey” the ineffable “sense of atmosphere” to audiences (34). The environmental aesthetics of my archive do more than simply reference or describe their surrounds; rather, they demonstrate how texts actively constitute the world around them. Not only does the concept of atmosphere bridge text and context, but also cultural studies and ecocritical methods of aesthetic inquiry. Drawing from cultural studies’ and

¹⁰ Cf Morton who discusses the prevalence of ecomimesis even within the works of hallmark poststructuralist thinkers (32).

ethnic studies' recuperation of aesthetic inquiry and attention to the differences aesthetics make, this project understands that a more capacious model of social and environmental atmospheres will enhance the analytical payoffs of the dual figurative and material aspects of atmospheric aesthetics. To address environmental aesthetics in a broad sense, I build on the work of scholars who link meteorological and historical processes to literary form, such as Victoria Saramago, Jesse Oak Taylor and Sonia Posmentier. These scholars analyze transformations in language alongside transformations in the atmosphere, connecting aesthetics and literary form to human impacts on earth systems, whether in relation to developmentalist ideologies (Saramago), under the sign of the Anthropocene (Taylor), or read through racial capitalism and the Black diaspora (Posmentier).

Saramago and Taylor discuss the relationship between text and context in terms of literature's imbrication in environmental transformation. In *Fictional Environments* (2020) Saramago, a Latin Americanist, argues that there is a symbiotic relationship between text and world in Latin American literature of the 1940s-1960s—a time of increased deforestation and urban development. She studies novels that shaped conservationist and developmentalist responses to the non-human environment contending that, “in particular circumstances, literary works not only represent specific environments but also help forge and negotiate public perception of these environments” (8). Saramago finds that fiction, and especially the mode of literary mimesis, impacts and shapes the non-human world because novels shape public policy and conservation efforts, raise public awareness about environmental change, and become reservoirs of “environmental memories” (13-14). This process is rife with affective effects, as Saramago points out, nostalgia is a binding force driving the impacts of “fictional environments” (15). Saramago's study of ecologically-focused texts shows how readers feel nostalgic for lands

that have been modernized through development and deforestation. These texts produce an affect-driven ethics through which ecologically engaged authors and activists envision a world with less ecological damage.

Like Saramago, in *The Sky of Our Manufacture* (2016), Taylor focuses on the way that novels impact and reflect different environments. Taylor, in noticing smog in Victorian novels, finds that “the work of art in an age of anthropogenic climate change becomes not merely a representation of climate but an active constituent to it, participating in the ideological formations and social practices for filling the atmosphere with smoke” (1).¹¹ Taylor’s work, akin to Saramago’s, shows how mimetic fiction does not merely collapse text and world such that the artwork represents what is “outside” it; rather, mimetic fiction actively constitutes the worlds outside the page. For Taylor, words themselves have this capacity. Smog (a neologism of “smoke” and “fog” coined in the early twentieth century) “emerges *as* [the] intersection” of semantic, historical, and material processes (3). Taylor attends to the ways that language and culture contribute to, and can be considered, atmospheric phenomena.

While smog in Victorian literature indexes the material and cultural changes wrought by industrialization, my project’s circum-Caribbean texts provide a different geography for atmospheric aesthetics. I pick up with the atmospheric and racializing effects of industrialization on the places deemed peripheral to Western modernity, even though as many have noted, Western European industrialization would not have been possible without the plantation complex

¹¹ Taylor exclusively studies the Victorian novel, calling this particular form a “climate model”: “the novel as a form dramatizes the entanglement of the literal and metaphorical valences of the term. Climate is no longer a concept that can be isolated in either the natural-meteorological or cultural-historical realms. Indeed it never was” (13-14).

and its racializing technologies.¹² And whereas Saramago and Taylor specifically study the novel, my archive includes film, poetry, speculative, fiction, and essays. To grasp the fullness of atmospheric aesthetics we need to account for the genres and forms which are not tied to the Victorian novel's industrial ideology or to what Wynter calls the West Indian novel's episteme of "plot and plantation." Instead, the texts in this dissertation produce new knowledges and sensibilities that emerge out of the circum-Caribbean.

But if we turn to a Black diasporic archive, along the lines of Posmentier, we locate a set of aesthetic practices that explicitly emerge from migration and diaspora. These aesthetic practices are not primarily driven by the impulse to mimetically represent the non-human environment but by the place-making practices of diasporic communities. In *Cultivation and Catastrophe* (2017), Posmentier traces how diasporic Black writers created "lyric ecologies" to counter their alienation from the non-human world due to histories of enslavement. The very atmospheres through which Taylor traces the emergence of the Anthropocene, Posmentier reads through a Black Studies perspective on modernity and geography. She notices how modern Black writers "voic[e] a poetics of survival, repair, and generation" to counter environmental estrangement.¹³ She also illuminates "how black writing yields theories of environmental relation rooted in the particularities of black history, black experience, and black aesthetics" (4). By analyzing two linked tropes, that of "cultivation" (as in forced agricultural labor) and "catastrophe" (as in environmental disasters like hurricanes as well as the ecological alienation brought on by forced migrations), Posmentier reveals how twentieth century black writers' "formally represented ecologies haunted by the legacies of enforced agricultural labor" and how

¹² See, for example, Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation" and Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*.

¹³ See also Kimberly Ruffin's *Black on Earth*.

their poetry marks “the growth . . . and catastrophic breaks” of diasporic Black experience (15). Whereas Taylor emphasized the complicity of Victorian novels with early anthropogenic climate change, Posmentier emphasizes how diasporic artists uncover haunted ecologies and repair alienating effects of forced migration and labor, thus seeking to change the affective climate of the Americas.

One way that diasporic Black artists address environmental aesthetics is through what Posmentier identifies as the prevailing trope of the hurricane. Drawing from Brathwaite’s observation that “the most convenient form of labour was the labour on the very edge of the trade winds—the labour on the edge of the hurricane,” Posmentier identifies the hurricane as the intersection of cultivation and catastrophe (“History of the Voice” 261). For both Posmentier and Brathwaite, Black diasporic geography is superimposed on the geography of Atlantic hurricanes. Hurricanes are so abundant in Black Atlantic writing because they follow the same wind currents as Black modernity itself, “forming off the coast of West Africa and making landfall in the Caribbean archipelago and the southern United States, taking different forms as they touch different shores” (Posmentier 3). Zora Neale Hurston’s evocation of hurricanes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is a case in point of how hurricanes influence Black diasporic writers. The great Okeechobee hurricane of 1928, which caused the flooding of the Everglades region that killed thousands, serves as the climax of Hurston’s novel. The storm and the advancing waters unite the “folk” peoples (African American, Bahaman immigrants, and Seminoles) and the native flora and fauna of the Everglades in a struggle for survival in “the muck.” The existential threat it poses is so profound that the storm becomes the source for the title of the novel itself. Hurston grants the storm and the waters both anthropomorphic feelings and apocalyptic force. But this storm touched other shores. Prior to its landfall in Florida it struck

Puerto Rico as a category 5 hurricane, linking two circum-Caribbean locations in a shared, stormy history.¹⁴ Though the phrase “man-made disaster” is now commonly used to describe how “natural disasters” are made worse by poor infrastructure and state negligence, it bears repeating that hurricanes are also significant for their ability to cause and even worsen economic and racial inequalities. Hurricanes are thus “an apt figure for an understanding of black diaspora as constituted by a shared history, on the one hand, and by distinctive, at times uneven, geographic, economic, and cultural forms on the other” (Posmentier 3). The aesthetics of lyric ecologies add to ecocritical studies of literature and the atmosphere a sensibility that human and non-human relations are characterized by “beauty and burden” (Ruffin). Posmentier’s work on Black diasporic aesthetics brings to the foreground geography and history, core concerns for the artists that I engage with in this dissertation.

Posmentier charts a slightly different relationship between text and context than Saramago and Taylor by giving specific attention to the aesthetics of Black writers. For Posmentier, writers like Hurston, Brathwaite, Sterling Brown, and Bessie Smith (to name a few of the artists Posmentier studies) posit aesthetics of the provision ground, the blues, and the archive, avoiding the mastery of pastoral sentimentalism and expansionist hubris. Additionally, for Posmentier, a text’s referentiality comes from the ecological qualities of the lyric form: “poems sometimes mimic or approximate organic forms and processes often associated with enclosure, preservation, self-sustainability, and internal relation, forms that can exceed their own boundaries, and that may in turn yield new models for social and ecological relation” (4).

Posmentier’s notion of lyric ecologies foregrounds an atmospheric relationship between text and

¹⁴ Brian Russell Roberts traces Hurston’s own archipelagic movements to ask: “what might the study of Hurston’s novel—and American literary culture more generally—look like when the question of formal geography attains an interpretive weight that mirrors the heft typically afforded cultural geography?” (“Archipelagic Diaspora” 23).

environment. Where Saramago tracks how literature shaped public perception and Taylor notices how Victorian novels participated in and reproduced their culture's industrial ideology, Posmentier assesses how Black diasporic fictions toggle between their imbrication in dominant and nondominant ideological formations (of enclosure and preservation, for instance), but which might shape public perception and forge "new models for social and ecological relation." Posmentier's work builds on a tradition of Caribbean theorists like Brathwaite, Wynter, and Édouard Glissant who aim to disrupt literature's relationship to colonial projects and ideologies.

Caribbean artists and philosophers are very good at theorizing the relationship between aesthetics and the environment. Foremost is Glissant who theorizes how attention to the earth and earth systems is instrumental in forging anti-hegemonic aesthetics. He argues that the emergence of new forms of expression must be in opposition to the "standardization of taste [which] is 'managed' by the industrial powers" (*Poetics of Relation* 148). Because "sensibilities have become so profoundly contaminated," Glissant argues that "the imagination and expression of an aesthetics of the earth [is] indispensable" (149). An aesthetics of the earth emerges from artists who yoke the literary to their social and environmental surrounds, creating the circumstances for human and more than human forms of life to flourish. Glissant challenges the transparent referentiality between text and context, terming "opacity" the ontological and aesthetic rupture or break of the Middle Passage. Posmentier traces the opacity of Black aesthetics through the ways that texts vacillate between rupture and connection. For Posmentier, there remains an imperative to preserve or repair the relationship between text and context or text and culture. The texts gathered for this project negotiate the different relationships between text and world that I have traced through Saramago, Taylor, Posmentier, and Glissant. At times their atmospheric aesthetics transmit anti-hegemonic attitudes and ideologies, at other times they

shape public perception. More than anything, their works *create* new atmospheres. They recreate Afro-diasporic and Indigenous ways of inhabiting and experiencing place, experiences which at times predate colonial expansion and enslavement, and at other times were created in response to these histories. They also provide opportunities for audiences to experience alternatives to the overwhelming placelessness of diaspora.

Archipelagic Atmospheres

Different personal and political experiences of diaspora impact each of the artists I study. Diaspora shapes their relationship to geography and history leading them to unique perspectives on the atmospheres and aesthetics of the archipelagic Americas. From African American to Haitian and Puerto Rican diasporas and even including a post-Earth Caribbean diaspora, these texts reflect a range of historical, contemporary, and even future-oriented diasporic communities.

The experience of diaspora—of displaced communities, who have often been multiply relocated, and the political and cultural work of these groups—is reflected in every text.¹⁵ Dash’s film depicts a Black family striving to create a sense of place on former plantation grounds while some family members prepare for another displacement from the US South to the North.

Danticat carefully attends to the ongoing displacement of Haitians from Haiti to the US and the Dominican Republic due to internal political instability and violence as well as US imperialism.

Vincent Toro, writing from the US mainland, grapples with Puerto Rico’s territorial status and the economic crises fueling migration and worsening the effects of hurricanes. Lastly,

Hopkinson’s novel imagines a post-Earth future engineered by characters who reflect the fullness of Caribbean linguistic and ethnic diversity as they make life on a new planet.

¹⁵ See Ortíz who identifies four main qualities of diaspora: (1) a collective experience of displacement; (2) displacement across multiple generations; (3) displacement motivated by violence or extreme necessity that renders these groups extremely precarious; and (4) the cultural field produced by these collective experiences.

Taken together, we can see how artists who either experience or depict diaspora grapple with trajectories and histories of home and homeland. As James Clifford explains, “diaspora cultures . . . mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement of living here and remembering/desiring another place” (255). Geographic displacement affects how artists relate place as well as the past. Stuart Hall illustrates this point saying, “We bear the traces of a past . . . It is always retold, rediscovered, reinvented. It has to be narrativized. We go to our own pasts through history, through memory, through desire, not as a literal fact” (“Old and New Identities” 79). People bear traces of the past and utilize narrative in mediating the past and the present. But as Samantha Pinto argues, diasporic aesthetics extend beyond narrative retellings of the past to include the “forms, genres, structures, and rhetorical patterns that express a relationship to various structures of meaning and reading that do not necessarily seem in direct relation to recognizable discourses of race, gender, and/or location” (8). In other words, artists communicate the experience of diaspora through the creativity and artistry of different modes and mediums that are not always immediately or transparently associated with race and geography. In doing so, these artists prompt readers to interrogate the dynamic interplay of representational and non-representational aesthetics. The texts I discuss are archives of the memories and desires that shape diaspora experience. Each artist utilizes atmospheric aesthetics to convey and produce feelings about home and homeland across different literary modes. As Hall signals, diasporic aesthetics are deeply affective, as memory and desire influence how the past is told and retold and how memory and desire give shape to the forms and genres through which it is told. Because these artists are attuned to the multiple histories that diaspora produces, they seek to generate new knowledge about the past and to break the silence around histories of subjection, genocide, and colonialism as well as these histories’ aftermaths. The place-making

practices revealed in these texts contribute to efforts to theorize New World geographies especially as these artists eschew the nation as the formative geopolitical analytic for their work. Instead, they offer more archipelagic accounts of movement and transformation.

The emergence of Archipelagic American Studies in the last few years enhances our understanding of the routes of New World peoples, texts, and cultures because it offers a spatial model built on the connectivity of environment and geography.¹⁶ Conceptually, the archipelago describes an organization of geographic space that prioritizes the relation of parts (of islands and seas) to the whole (the archipelago). Attending to physical geographies of islands and oceans, what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls “archipelagraphy,” brings into view the “complex ebb and flow of immigration, arrival, and of island settlement” across the Caribbean (“Litany of Islands” 23). Rather than understanding islands as discrete units or ideal models for nation-state formation, the archipelago is productively used to name a way of tracing cultural movements and ties across the Americas.¹⁷

Ineffable Material focuses on the American archipelago, a multiracial, multiethnic, multilingual, and environmentally-diverse region that stretches from the edges of southern North America to northern South America and the Caribbean isles.¹⁸ Though this framework toggles

¹⁶ The word “archipelago” comes from the thirteenth-century Italian *arci* (chief, principle) and *pélagos*, (deep, abyss, gulf, or pool) (“archipelago”). Though the term initially referred to the Aegean Sea, it came to refer to “any sea, or sheet of water, in which there are numerous islands” or a “group of islands” (“archipelago”). From understanding the geography of US imperialism in the Caribbean and the Pacific, producing new archives of texts from the edges of empire, comparing the tropes of island as paradise and island as site of resistance, to reassessing the plantation as an agricultural and racializing technology, Archipelagic American Studies builds on postcolonial studies methodologies and sites of study and decontinentalizes the study of the Americas. See Russell and Stephens.

¹⁷ See Yarimar Bonilla’s *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (2015) and Michelle Anne Stephens’s “What is an Island? Caribbean Studies and the Contemporary Visual Artist.”

¹⁸ Though all the texts I engage with are multilingual, I primarily analyze English language texts or Anglophone Creole texts. Though I discuss elements of Haitian Kreyòl, Spanish, and Jamaican Creole in

between the particular (the nation state) and the planetary (the globe), it relies on the regional (in this instance the circum-Caribbean) to observe and discuss the global effects of environmental change on the American archipelago. Akin to the scaling between foreground and background that reading atmospheric aesthetics requires, analyzing the physical effects of material atmospheres requires scaling from the air of a particular place to the air of the whole system. I find the regional scale of the archipelago useful because its geography enables us to see the interplay of foreground/background and place/planet with renewed dynamism. The archipelagic frame also allows for careful attention to particular atmospheres and environments while also seeking for affinities and commonalities across archipelagic space. Within the context of the archipelagic Americas, histories of dispossession, enslavement, and revolution saturate the seas, the land, and, of course, the air.

The air plays an undertheorized role in mediating the terraqueous archipelago even though it is an important medium connecting archipelagic space. Glissant's argument about the relational quality of the sea is similarly applicable to the atmosphere. For Glissant, the sea is the material of his theory of a poetics of relation, a poetics that is "latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible" (*Poetics of Relation* 32). Not only for Glissant, but for many Caribbean writers, the sea is ever present; it is a medium linking islands, a conduit to trade, and an archive. As poet Derek Walcott has so famously said, it is History—it records, conjures, and reminds us of those who have crossed it ("The Sea is History"). Thus, the

an attempt to avoid a language-based area studies approach to the Caribbean, I am yet limited by my own lack of fluency in multiple languages. Silvio Torres-Saillant enumerates the issues that arise from monolingual scholarship, namely that "language remains [...] the ultimate border" (26). He elaborates: "To know only one of the languages of a bilingual or multilingual society is to have one's access to the knowledge of the overall national reality partly blocked. . . . When it comes to mediating the rapport between Caribbean societies, linguistic difference, more than any other obstacle, has the power to encourage and preserve the otherness of neighbors, preventing the harmonious identification that might otherwise naturally ensue."

sea organizes space and becomes the temporal guide to the *longue durée* of New World history. By attending to atmospheric aesthetics, the chapters of this dissertation demonstrate how geography and history are not only under our feet (in an archeological sense) or in the depths of the ocean, but in the air. A revived aesthetics of the earth must account for the aerial earth processes as well as terrestrial ones. Additionally, Glissant models how the Caribbean archipelago is a site where atmospheric and aesthetic theory are made, not simply a site where atmospheric climate change's deleterious effects are felt. In other words, by theorizing from the archipelago, we learn how atmospheric aesthetics prime readers to make the kinds of connections between places and histories that will be necessary to weather unsure futures.

The atmosphere extends across formations of land and sea, as Walcott explores in his syncretic epic, *Omeros* (1990). A refashioning of Homer's *Iliad*, *Omeros* bridges an "Old World" Mediterranean epic with one from the "New World," trading the wrath of Achilles for a raging hurricane. The storm proves how local weather is integral to the poem's setting. In *Omeros*, the lands and waters of St. Lucia are mythical, powerful, and they encode histories of colonialism and enslavement that cannot be ignored. The storm, rendered as the god named "Cyclone," has his own pantheon of lesser gods, including "Lightening, [Cyclone's] stilt-walking messenger," who "jiggers the sky / with his forked stride" and "crackles over the troughs / like a split electric wishbone" (52). Joining Cyclone and Lightening are Zeus, Erzulie, Damballa, and Ogun who cumulatively form a syncretic blend of Caribbean, Greek, and African-derived deities. Drawing an ironic parallel to the human characters, the speaker of the poem explains: "For the gods aren't men, they get on well together, / holding a hurricane-party in their cloud-house" (53). The irony is that the world above, the "cloud house," is full of conflicts paralleling human vicissitudes which rage on like a "hurricane party" making the drama of both gods and men into

a metaphorical storm of emotions and a literal storm that crashes onto the island of St. Lucia. *Omeros*'s storm not only produces a setting with a syncretic cosmos but also dramatizes the psycho-affective states of the characters. Walcott's atmospheric aesthetics creates a poetics of relation which highlights the connectivity of air, land, and sea and unites aesthetic traditions from the African-derived gods to the epic form via the weather of the Caribbean. Walcott's raging storm returns me to the problem of environmental catastrophe that the poem "Huracanna" introduced through its conjunction of environmental and cultural disaster. In framing this introduction through McIntyre's poem, I sought to make clear the reality that catastrophe is not a single discrete event, but an ongoing form of slow violence.¹⁹ When the storm has passed, lingering effects remains.

Devastating storms and the climate crisis posit one reason we should attend to the entwinement of cultural and ecological ways of experiencing the air, from the air one breathes in a specific place to the mood of a place or situation. Contributing to emerging studies of atmosphere, my analysis of literary texts shows how race and racism are in the air saturating circum-Caribbean climates. The artists that I study are very aware of these complex and increasing environmental and social harms. Their archipelagic perspectives help them complicate and circumvent the limits of Anthropocene discourse which dominates ecocritical readings of literature and, as Rob Nixon observes, oversimplifies the relationship between coloniality and structural racism ("Anthropocene"). Dash, Danticat, Toro, and Hopkinson demonstrate a long-standing critical awareness of the environmental devastation brought on by colonialism and

¹⁹ See Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Bedour Alagraa. The anthropologist Michaelle Ascencio offers another perspective, saying that the conjunction of ecological and social disaster in the Antilles is a matter of "two ills of very different sorts . . . hurricanes and sugar" (qtd in Torres-Saillant 13). On the "atmosphere of crisis" in Haiti, see Greg Beckett. Martin Munro calls the present a "tropical apocalypse" for Haiti and Haitians. Cf David Scott on the "dead end present." See also Christina Sharpe and Rocío Zambrana.

neocolonialism. Yet these artists nevertheless reject the totalizing effects of crises. Instead, they build literary, filmic, and poetic atmospheres where life is livable, breathable in the midst of duress. I draw on affect studies in order to trace how cultural forms negotiate ongoing catastrophe and how they push against the emotional maintenance of oppressive political and economic regimes by producing feelings that exceed neocolonial and neoliberal power relations. In noticing how these artists *create* new atmospheres, this project responds to Deborah Thomas provocation, “How have people confronted the unpredictable afterlives of colonialism and slavery, nationalism, and state formation in ways that perform not only a material but also an affective transformation?” (1).

Chapter Descriptions

The atmosphere is a physical system shaped by human history as well as feelings responsive to physical atmospheres. Literary atmospheres are no less material in their capacity to create moods, palpable atmospheres surrounding audiences and texts. Across the four chapters of this dissertation, I show how cultural processes shape the weather and, in turn, how the weather shapes literary form. If indeed “the hurricane does not roar in pentameter”—for instance, Walcott’s hurricane roars in a freestyling terza rima—then we need to read climatological and literary forms together. I therefore read across texts from well-known artists like Edwidge Danticat and Julie Dash to lesser-known works by Vincent Toro. I survey the ecological language and nonwestern forms these artists deploy in order to register the atmosphere in all its metaphorical and material meanings. These artists produce atmospheres that reflect and respond to the ways colonial pasts, including their environmental legacies, operate in the present to produce new social and literary atmospheres. Each artist conveys a different aspect of atmospheric aesthetics: Dash’s film crafts a nostalgic mood through which viewers can

experience a surrogate feeling of home; Danticat's thick textual atmospheres create diasporic affiliation; Toro's poems take the air as their subject and form; and Hopkinson's speculative atmospheres are filled with the sounds of Creole languages. The circulation of atmosphere and affect across these texts shows how the cultivation of feelings about place is central to these artists' works.

The first two chapters emphasize how land and water influence atmospheric processes. Chapter 1, "Reforming the Senses," analyzes Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*, which depicts a community of Low Country Creoles at the turn of the twentieth century. In the film the rhythmic temporality of the winds and waters of the Sea Islands inspire the characters' ritual practices, producing realities and sensory experiences that serve Black communities' sense of place. Dash produces a "kaleidoscopic aesthetic" (a mode of artistic expression and experience that composes images and objects out of fragments of the material culture of the past) which she conceives as a Black technological practice. The effect is that characters as well as Black audiences can cultivate anticolonial, and even nostalgic, relations to place. *Daughters'* setting fosters this new kind of social atmosphere precisely because the film is so attuned to the winds and waters of the islands.

In Chapter 2, "Nature's Memory: Atmospheric Aesthetics in Edwidge Danticat," I read Danticat's representation of the myth of the Taíno chieftain, Anacaona, within a lineage of Haitian *indigenism*. Artists of this anti-imperialist literary movement built a nationalist sensibility and politics rooted in a sense of place. In other words, Haitian indigenists wrote themselves onto the land of Haiti. Following on this tradition, Danticat aligns Haitian women across the diaspora with Anacaona and the terraqueous geography of Haiti in her nonfiction essays, novels, and young adult fiction. Danticat addresses how non-human atmospheres are

created out of terraqueous processes that saturate her fictions with feelings and memories of collective and personal loss. In these first two chapters, the feelings associated with and produced by each artist's sense of place allow us to see history written on the landscape and to tenuously feel the intimacy of past moments of care and resistance. Whereas Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* provided a strategically nostalgic, and reparative, answer to the issue of place and feeling, Danticat's fiction lingers on the "tè glise, slippery ground" of history and feeling (Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, 157). *Daughters'* shifting terraqueous ground was a site of inspiration for viewers, with time-altering force matched by the film's griot narration; Danticat's tè glise is a site of danger. Both artists' aims are counter-hegemonic, but they produce strikingly different atmospheric aesthetics.

With Chapters 3 the project turns to the atmosphere in the fullest climatological sense. In "Vincent Toro's Hurricane Formalism," I observe how Toro produces a geo-formal poetics that takes a Taíno hurricane zemi as its central organizing form, an aesthetic choice that foregrounds nonwestern literary forms in communicating Puerto Rican economic and ecological atmospheres. The entwinement of colonialism and natural disaster is the subject of Toro's poetry and essays, which again and again critique the ways that US actions in the wake of natural disasters damage Puerto Rican ecologies and culture. His collections, *Stereo. Island. Mosaic.* (2016) and *Tertulia* (2020) instruct readers to toggle between close reading of language and formal analysis of genre and shape and to seek modes of expression that foster Puerto Rican resilience. Toro's atmospheric aesthetics condition readers to imagine new feelings in response to his poetry and to feel the material surrounds of Puerto Rican archipelagic life.

In Chapter 4, "Creoles in Space: Language and Genre in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*," I argue that Hopkinson crafts a science fiction novel that is deeply invested in

languages *as* technologies. *Midnight Robber* incorporates science fiction tropes—including interplanetary travel, scientific innovation, and alien lifeforms—to fashion a continuity between folk aesthetics and the technology-driven future. From its various Creoles to its invention of a new mode of communication called Nannysong, *Midnight Robber* proposes syncretic modes of communication as the synthesis of the past, present, and future of Caribbean peoples. In *Midnight Robber's* new setting—on the planet Toussaint which has a new affective and environmental atmosphere—the issue of language takes on new meaning as the material for new forms of aesthetic life.

The concerns that these authors raise about climate and language are made even more pressing in the context of the rapid and devastating effects of atmospheric climate change. Each new report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) places Earth at the brink of collapse and the wealthy countries of the Global North have mounted little meaningful response. This reality only adds to the banality of other environmental and political disasters. While I was revising the chapter on Danticat, Haiti experienced another major earthquake which followed the assassination of the nation's president, Jovenel Moïse. When I visited the Sea Islands in 2019, real estate developers were taking advantage of Black landowners whose properties had been passed down without a will through predatory heir's property sales. In addition to land loss, ocean acidification was altering fisheries and oyster beds in Black coastal communities.

While Anthropocene discourse suggests a new awareness of humanity's geomorphic power, these texts ask readers to consider the *longue durée* processes in which earth and colonial forces together re-make the planet. In asserting their aesthetics of the air, the artists under discussion here also craft affects which are suitable for remembering, relishing, and forging

resilience in the face of ongoing crisis. If the “wrong air of the Anthropocene trains our attention...to how things exist in atmospheres” (Choy and Zee 211), then the texts I address are trained to a variety of atmospheric phenomena and therefore warrant closer study for the affects and knowledges they can reveal about the complexity of environmental risk. I trace the ways that atmospheric aesthetics, the enveloping sensorial experience of texts and their histories, allow these artists to forge new attachments to the non-human environment and to operate on the sensorium. *Ineffable Material* argues that this sensorial operation reveals the ways that the past, present, and future are folded together in texts that seek to understand how memory, repair, and futurity are constituted.

Chapter 1

Reforming the Senses

How have people confronted the unpredictable afterlives of colonialism and slavery, nationalism, and state formation in ways that perform not only a material but also an affective transformation?

(Deborah Thomas, *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation*)

You study on the colors and shapes.

(Nana Peazant)

Deborah Thomas's provocation is the jumping off point of my investigation into the role of affect and ecology in Julie Dash's film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). *Daughters* is the first film directed by an African American woman to achieve wide release in the US and is renowned for its non-linear structure, West African inspired soundtrack, and mesmerizing visual aesthetics. Set in the US Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia in 1902, the film focuses on how the Peazant family prepares to separate, some members deciding to remain on the island and others "crossing over" to the mainland in the early days of the Great Migration. The Sea Islands are important sites of Gullah-Geechee community where Africans stolen to labor in the plantations of the US South produced a creole culture, blending West and Central African and Indigenous languages and religious practices.²⁰ At various points, the film acknowledges the

²⁰ See Edda L. Fields-Black for a discussion of Gullah and Geechee identity. Fields-Black argues that "Gullah" identity is a twentieth century construction and she prefers to use the term "Lowcountry Creoles" to describe the Black people living on the Sea Islands and coastal mainland prior to the rise of anthropological studies of this region in the 1930s and 1940s. Fields-Black highlights "the uniqueness of Lowcountry microenvironments, vis-à-vis the adjacent uplands, and the complex processes of creolization that took place among people of African descent throughout the New World and in some portions of

trauma and violence of the afterlives of slavery yet prioritizes scenes that emphasize the bonds of kinship forged in this setting. Through the dense sensorial experience that accumulates in scenes such as the family's sumptuous feast on the beach, the confrontations with the Ibo masthead floating in the tidewater, and the glimmering bottle tree, Dash delivers a representation of Black life that many filmgoers and critics have described as inspiring pride in Black history. The film circumvents the social death produced by the plantation complex and its racial logics in favor of a sense of communal pride, especially for Black women viewers who can feel a familial, matrilineal, connection to a place and history. But why this place (the Sea Islands) and this history (at the cusp of the Great Migration)? And what kinds of material and affective transformations does the film make possible in this setting?

To answer these questions about setting and affective transformation, I first look to a series of objects in the film to understand how they bind the Peasant family to their immediate environment and daily life, especially as some of the family embark on a second diaspora. For instance, the family builds spiritual connections between the past and the present through objects like the bottletree which is constructed of blue and brown-tinted glass bottles attached to a living tree's branches. Considered a Kongo-derived tradition, bottletrees are used for "protecting the household through invocation of the dead," and the practice repeats across the Caribbean and US South (Thompson 142). Nana Peasant, the family matriarch, explains that the bottletree serves a ritual and aesthetic function: "The bottle tree reminds us of who was here and who's gone on. You study on the colors and shapes. You appreciate the bottle tree each day, as you appreciate your loved ones" (Dash "The Script" 148). As an aesthetic object, the bottletree amplifies and

coastal Western Africa and East Africa, including (but not limited to) the people who became the Gullah Geechee" (129). See also Melissa Cooper's *Making Gullah* on the development of Gullah identity in the American imagination.

redirects sensory perceptions of the viewer who “stud[ies] on the colors and shapes” it produces. The folk and fugitive art forms like the bottle tree, the families’ quilts and Nana Peasant’s “hand” also contribute to what I call the film’s “kaleidoscopic aesthetics” by which these objects, and the film as a whole, take pieces of everyday material life (glass, fabric, cultural symbols) and shape them into beautiful, fragile, new forms—much like a kaleidoscope rearranges colors and shapes into new composite images. I read Dash’s kaleidoscopic aesthetics alongside Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* and Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, both of which are important source texts for Dash’s film. *Daughters* works to produce an aesthetic response so that the viewer comes to see and feel the Sea Islands as a site of Black diaspora homemaking. Overall, aesthetic objects like the bottletree are essential to the affective transformation the film enacts. These objects are not mere props, rather they are sites of heightened attention that produce mesmerizing physical atmospheres and contribute to the social atmosphere of the Sea Islands.

In the second section of this chapter, I evaluate how the film’s kaleidoscopic aesthetics impact the film’s sense of time and how the ecology of the Sea Islands contribute to the film’s attitude toward the past. The terraqueous ecology of the Sea Islands—its marshlands, tidal estuaries, dunes, and flat sands—is richly and sensorially represented. When preparing to film *Daughters*, Dash wanted the crew and actors to intimately understand the ecology of the Sea Islands. She describes: “I brought the actors down early, so they could get used to the locale, feel what it was like, feel the mosquitoes biting. They said that they never experienced anything like the region” (Harris 111). The film also relishes in more ephemeral phenomena like the wind blowing off the ocean, the humid air, and the mosquitos that constantly irritate the characters. In addition to the languorous scenes that focus on the lands, airs, and waters of the Sea Islands,

Dash uses the technique of montage to further adjust the sequencing of the film. *Daughters* favors a composite image of the Peasant family's last day together by presenting scenes to viewers as a montage of characters, settings, and times, thus breaking with the sequencing common to linear narration. The fragmentation of scenes has the effect of spatializing time by foregrounding movement between various island locations over narrative progression. The film's setting—its beaches, ocean breezes, forests, canals, shoals, and fields—contributes to its spatialized sense of time, one in which the temporalities of past, present, and future implicate each other.

The film's ecological sensibility matches Dash's investment in creating a feeling of home for diasporic Black viewers. Her environmental sense of time includes the rhythms of tides and the rituals that the Peasant family craft in this setting. For contemporary viewers, this vision of the past—of a moment of Black collective life safeguarded (for a brief moment) from the pressures of mainland US white supremacy and predatory economic development—might spark a feeling of nostalgia, that comforting, yet conservative sensation of better times long past. Drawing on Black Studies theories of nostalgia and collective feeling, I conclude this chapter by arguing that Dash's vision of Black life enacts an affective transformation for viewers in which the history of African American community in the US South is refashioned away from the predominant—though nevertheless significant—narrative of enslavement, suffering, and degradation. By focusing on the social attitudes and ecological flows that circulate in the film's Sea Islands setting, this chapter illuminates how physical and affective atmospheres are linked in a major work of contemporary Archipelagic American media.

Kaleidoscopic Aesthetics

Dash began her career making movies about Black women. Her early work associated with the L.A. Rebellion reflects the broader aims of Black cinema aesthetics.²¹ Artists associated with the L.A. Rebellion positioned their work against white supremacist depictions of Black people within “Hollywood’s representational hegemony” (Field 2-3).²² The L.A. Rebellion’s general aim of centering Black life involved a revisioning and decolonizing of aesthetic norms and experience in addition to critiquing Eurocentric modes of representation. Not only had mainstream cinema perpetuated misguided and derogatory images of people of color, but mainstream white aesthetic values were shaped by a colonialist and racist 19th century episteme (Taylor). Aesthetics, what Sylvia Wynter has called “culture-specific psycho-affective sensibilities,” are historically contingent and, within the West, are built out of classed and raced notions of “taste” and hierarchies of being (269).²³ To create a terrain upon which to experience and interpret their work, Dash and other filmmakers of her generation were remaking aesthetics.

Dash’s Black cinema aesthetics transform sensory perception of the material world, amplifying and redirecting sensory perception toward visions of Black collective life. Her films

²¹ The L.A. Rebellion is shorthand for a generation of African, Caribbean, and African American filmmakers who collaborated and studied together at the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television in the late 1960s-1980s.

²² In addition to posing an alternative to Hollywood’s degrading and misinformed representation of Black people, artists associated with the L.A. Rebellion also remade the terrain of Black cinema, including the assimilationist and middle-class norms of Black cinema (Field 4). See Field, “Introduction” for a more nuanced discussion of themes within the large body of work associated with the L.A. Rebellion. The L.A. Rebellion’s anti-hegemonic practices and insistence on self-determination aligned with other decolonial and multi-ethnic film movements, like Third Cinema (Field 3). See also Allyson Field et al, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, and Toni Cade Bambara.

²³ The technologies of race and technologies of representation converge for visual studies scholars interested in regimes of viewing and technologies like photography and film. See Nicholas Mirzoeff and Shawn Michelle Smith.

have been characterized as “experimental” in their approach to Black culture (Dozier).²⁴ Ayanna Dozier describes Black women’s experimental cinema as a project that draws on “Black expressive culture” to emphasize corporeality and the creation of freedom of movement (617). Toni Cade Bambara describes some of Dash’s innovative stylistic choices as the “attention to the glamour (in the ancient sense of the word) and sheer gorgeousness of black women,” alongside *Daughters*’ “emphasis ... on shared space” via wide-angled and deep-focused shots “rather than dominated space” (xiv, xiii).²⁵ These examples of Dash’s prioritization of Black glamour and collective life point to her intervention in cinema aesthetics through camerawork that offers an affirmative representation of Black women. This cinema aesthetics is distilled in her landmark film, *Daughters*, which relishes in the intimate kinship practices especially of its female characters. Dash’s aesthetic project is conceptually and formally tied to an unlikely device introduced by one of the film’s characters: the kaleidoscope. The kaleidoscope becomes a useful interpretive tool for understanding the significance of other aesthetic objects and their work in shaping the sensory perception of the characters. The kaleidoscope then opens up a way of understanding the film’s overall “kaleidoscopic aesthetics” through which the mediation of beauty and experience are central.

The kaleidoscope is introduced early in the film by Mr. Snead, the photographer that Viola Peazant, a Christian teacher who lives on the mainland, brings to Ibo Landing to document

²⁴ For Dozier, “experimentation becomes an ideological tool for Black filmmakers to work through hegemonic identity and cultural expressions through their expressive use of Black culture” (618). Experimental cinema made by Dash and other members of the L.A. Rebellion contrasts with experimental films generally at the center of film scholarship characterized by a “masculine-formalist dogma” that “disavow[s] narrative content” (Dozier 617).

²⁵ Dash and other L.A. Rebellion artists often worked collaboratively. Arthur Jafa, the cinematographer, along with the Black actors and artisans were central to *Daughters*’ production. See Dash “Touching Our Own Spirit.”

her family's "crossing over."²⁶ In this scene Viola, Snead, "Yellow" Mary Peazant, and Trula (Yellow Mary's traveling companion) are on a barge carrying them from the mainland to Ibo Landing. On the slow journey through the tidal canals, Snead shows off his kaleidoscope, explaining to Yellow Mary and Trula its etymology: "Kalos . . . beautiful. Eidos . . . form. Skopein . . . to view." He then summarizes, "It's beauty, simplicity, and science all rolled into one small tube." Even the boatmen are interested in Snead's kaleidoscope and their attention is divided between navigating the water and gazing at it. Viola is the only one uninterested in the kaleidoscope, and she tries to distract Yellow Mary by pointing out landmarks. Yellow Mary, engrossed in the kaleidoscope, gazes through the tube to see a panoply of colors and shapes. Then she turns toward Trula and, as she places the kaleidoscope between them, Trula looks through the opposite end of the device and the two laugh flirtatiously.

From this early moment in the film, viewers are invited to adopt Snead's enthusiasm for the device and to draw a comparison between the device's aesthetic principle—"beauty, simplicity, and science"—and the film's own kaleidoscopic perspective. As their barge slowly glides toward Ibo Landing, Trula and Yellow Mary sit across from Viola and Snead. At first, Yellow Mary and Trula are placed as two mirrors, refracting their affection and desire onto each other as they hold the kaleidoscope in between their bodies. As the camera angle shifts, the pair become a quartet, Viola and Snead sitting across from and in symmetry to Yellow Mary and Trula. Then, from a further vantage, their boat is placed between the surface of the water and the lens of the camera, extending the kaleidoscopic view to the director/cinematographer's viewpoint. From this group of four, the film will expand its lens to incorporate more and more family members. As the film does so it transforms the kaleidoscope from an object to a cinematic

²⁶ Snead and Viola represent two kinds of Victorian sensibilities: Snead, the "Philadelphia" Negro, and Viola, the educated, Christian teacher.

technique that captures the affective panoply of individual characters' desires, aspirations, and their different reasons for (or against) leaving Ibo Landing. Though an object like the kaleidoscope and the sense of beauty it affords—which were derived from a 19th-century scientific milieu steeped in racial science and colonial expansion²⁷—would be at odds with *Daughters*' unflinching anticolonial objective, Dash uses the kaleidoscope as a philosophical and formalist principle that links up with her anti-hegemonic representation of Black history and Black women especially. The kaleidoscope creates an opportunity to rethink aesthetics (what Sneed defines as “beauty, simplicity, and science”) outside of its Eurocentric origins and to put to work the philosophical questions raised by the kaleidoscope in the context of the Sea Islands.

Sneed offers a concise, accurate description of the inner workings of the kaleidoscope: “If an object is placed between two mirrors, inclined at right angles, an image is formed in each mirror. Then these mirror images are in turn reflected in the other mirrors, forming the appearance of four symmetrically shaped objects.”²⁸ As the viewer rotates the tube, the view changes as the fragments of glass and other small objects inside the tube move. Rotating the kaleidoscope produces an infinite sequence of symmetrical images, each different from the last. The novel and beautiful images that the viewer sees in the kaleidoscope obscure the origin of the objects being reflected as their forms are converted into new composite forms through reflection. Invented in 1816 by the British scientist, Dr. David Brewster, the kaleidoscope quickly became popular because the beautiful images it produced were thought to offer new possibilities for the ornamental arts, including wallpaper design (Farman). But more than producing symmetrical

²⁷ See Brit Russert's *Fugitive Science*.

²⁸ The kaleidoscope's inventor, David Brewster, calculated that “the symmetrical picture formed by the Kaleidoscope contains half as many pairs of forms as the number of times that the inclination of the mirrors is contained in 360°; and that each pair consists of a direct and inverted form, so joined as to form a compound form” (21).

beauty, the kaleidoscope was a “philosophical toy” or “instrument of rational amusement” (Brewster 7). One issue the kaleidoscope raised was where beauty and its experience resided. Was beauty to be found in the natural world, visible to the unaided eye, or produced through the mediation of the device? Those who disassembled the kaleidoscope were further confused to find that the beautiful, symmetrical images in the viewer were produced by glass pieces and other rubbish. They complained that the beauty of the images they saw had been falsified or was suspect given its trashy origin (Farman). If beauty was a trick of light and mirrors reflecting fragments of objects, could this mediated beauty be *authentic*? Could a device that worked in this way be anything but trickery? Or, if viewers were distracted by the second-hand beauty of the images in the kaleidoscope, how could they appreciate what happens in real life? The philosophical questions around authenticity (of the relationship of beauty to mediation, fragmentation, and origins) at the core of the kaleidoscope are relevant to understanding the aesthetic significance of key aspects of *Daughters* composition. Low Country Creole cultural production has long been the subject of ethnographic study of African retentions, as scholars attempt to trace continuity between diasporic Black culture and its African antecedents. The items that the Peazant family create amplify the issue of authenticity that the kaleidoscope introduces to the film’s aesthetic terrain. The kaleidoscope is not the only device in the film that takes fragments and rearranges them into new and novel designs. The family’s quilts and Nana Peazant’s “hand” similarly act as technologies, as *techne*, that reorder pieces of material culture, serve aesthetic purposes, and, through their ritual significance, bind the Peazant family to Ibo Landing.

The family’s quilts appear in series of shots that pan first through the home of Eli and Eula Peazant, Nana Peazant’s grandchildren, and then through other rooms in other Peazant

family shanties. Some of the only scenes that take place indoors, these images offer a glimpse into intimate moments of the family's domestic space, like Eli turned away from Eula in his anger; Hagar's daughters, Iona and Myown, sharing a bed; and the newlywed couple having sex. As the viewer is introduced to these pairs of characters on the morning of the family's farewell picnic, viewers are also introduced into the aesthetic of the quilts. In these scenes the quilts (like the scraps of newsprint and drawings that cover the walls) make visible how the family repurposed and recycled the fragments of the everyday into new, beautiful forms.²⁹ The quilts themselves offer some of the only instances of vibrant color in the mostly earth-toned palate of the film. Made of patches of blue, yellow, purple, pink, green, white, and printed fabrics, these quilts would have been constructed with care and over time as the Peasant family women collected fabric from scraps and old clothing and likely constructed them communally. Another quilt, made of yellow, red, and brown blocks, is in the style of an 8-pointed star motif that would have taken great skill to make.

Though the quilts appear as part of the setting, the process of design and the artistry they allude to is more explicitly described in one of Dash's source texts for the film, Gloria Naylor's novel, *Mama Day*.³⁰ In Naylor's novel, the family matriarch, Miranda who lives on a fictionalized Sea Island named Willow Springs, sews her grandniece, Ophelia, a wedding quilt. The design is an intricate, hand-sewn double-ring quilt, and Miranda chooses her fabric pieces carefully:

²⁹ Cuesta Benberry, in *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts*, shows that "African-Americans have been making quilts in this land continuously from the late eighteenth century to the present" (13). See also Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit* on African American ties to Mande textile traditions.

³⁰ Naylor served as a production assistant to Dash during the shooting of *Daughters* (*Making 10*).

The overlapping circles start out as golds on the edge and melt into oranges, reds, blues, greens, and then back to golds for the middle of the quilt. A bit of her daddy's Sunday shirt is matched with Abigail's lace slip, the collar from Hope's graduation dress, the palm of Grace's baptismal gloves. [. . .] Golds into oranges and reds into blues . . . She concentrates on the tiny stitches as the clock ticks away. (137)

The scraps that Miranda gathers into the quilt are intimate remnants, material forms of memory of each person and the occasion for which they wore a given garment. The pieces, like the fragments of glass in a kaleidoscope, come to form beautiful shapes, but the fragments also signal—for the quilt-maker and the reader of the story—the significance of their origins. The scraps of fabric come together to form new patterns of shapes and pathways of color. Naylor's prose and Miranda's process of quilt-making act like the turning of the kaleidoscope's viewfinder; the colors and shapes twist and turn: "The overlapping circles start out as golds on the edge and melt into oranges, reds, blues, greens, and then back to golds for the middle of the quilt." Making the quilt becomes a form of thinking for Miranda, who, as she sews, considers the kind of love and affection that binds her grandniece and her fiancé. Just as Yellow Mary and Trula find pleasure in playing with the kaleidoscope together, so too does Miranda find pleasure in the creation of this quilt. The quilt's beauty will be apparent to Olivia when she receives it, and the simplicity of its repetitive design will obscure the complex science of color and textile construction, not to mention skill that went into its making. Reading the quilts in the domestic spaces of *Daughters* alongside Naylor's prose makes clear how the quilts that are so prominently featured in these opening shots participate in the kaleidoscopic aesthetic that Dash advances in the film. Their beauty is crafted out of the juxtaposition of shapes and colors, producing symmetrical and repeating patterns. The film associates the construction of the quilts with the

kaleidoscope when less than a minute after these domestic scenes, the camera peers into the tube of a kaleidoscope. The compound shapes in the viewfinder echo the form of the 8-point star quilt as well as the colors (yellow, red, pink, purple, pale green) of the quilts. The quilts demonstrate the family's practices of spinning fragments into forms that while tenuous and contingent produce beauty within their everyday lives. Additionally, the quilts are markers of domestic and feminine labor that, in the case of the motifs indexed by the film, are also uniquely New World textile practices (Benberry).

The second object that functions like a kaleidoscope is Nana Peasant's "hand," a talisman that she constructs to share with the family at a ceremony before their departure. In scenes across the film, Nana is seen holding a round tin box. She cradles it in her lap and extracts from it "scraps of memories" that she pieces together into the "hand." A kind of aesthetic-ritual object common throughout Afro-diasporic communities in the circum-Caribbean, a "hand" was made of items like roots, personal effects, herbs, was sewn into a pouch or small bag, and was used for various ritual or personal purposes to protect or heal the owner.³¹ Nana Peasant constructs her "hand" out of a lock of her mother's hair and one of her own which she weaves into a pouch of indigo fabric. Later, Nana can be seen adding other elements, like Viola's Bible and Yellow Mary's St. Christopher charm. Constructed out of the old and the new, Nana's "hand" is made of

³¹ See Robert Farris Thompson's discussion of Kongo derived *nkisi*—a charm in which objects are combined together with spirit into a container, some of which were likened to "the cosmos miniaturized" (117, 119). Thompson calls these objects key to the Black Atlantic and identifies *minkisi*-making traditions in the US South in *Flash of the Spirit* (see especially pp. 117-131). Writing about the *minkisi* of Central Africa and Cuba, Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz describes their value and purpose as a "communication medium," saying: "minkisi are themselves a form of graphic writing. Each object is made up of materials, symbols, shapes, and poses that collectively form a narrative that informs the object's identity and range of powers. As with any art form, the meaning and cultural interpretations with which they are imbued are necessarily a product of the cultures in which they are constructed as well as the artists and religious leaders involved in their production and use" (164). See also William Pietz who argues that *fetish* practices emerged in "cross-cultural spaces of the coast of West Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries," a position which challenges Eurocentric view of fetish objects (5).

fragments and memories that are her own, drawn from her family's experiences on the island and on the mainland. It works as a device to hold the family together as some prepare to cross over to the mainland. In the ceremony before the family's departure, she extends the "hand" as an emblem of her blessing and the family (except for her daughter-in-law, Hagar) step forward to kiss the hand and receive Nana's benediction. This scene is shot from a high angle with a full view of the clearing in the woods where the ceremony takes place. The family is shot in slow motion moving like a tide toward Nana's chair that is placed underneath the crook of a large fallen tree. Nana wraps the pieces together with a red string and adds to it some Spanish moss—a piece of the place itself. Nana announces: "This hand comes from me, from them, from us. . . . Take me wherever you go." Her benediction offers the emotional and spiritual energy necessary to maintain familial connection as they begin a second diaspora.

The construction of Nana's "hand" out of pieces of her family's history opens up the issue of how fragments of culture become bound together. The hand is key to the film's depiction of syncretism, a key aspect of the film's kaleidoscopic aesthetics. Understood as the process of blending disparate religious elements, such as African deities and Catholic saints, *Daughters* depicts syncretism frontally, as when Nana remarks at the ceremony, "We've taken old Gods and given them new names."³² The blending of religious elements is key to this scene, and Nana's "hand" is a blend of Vodun, Protestant, and Catholic elements.³³ Each element reflects back onto each woman's experiences, knowledge, and travels. For instance, Yellow

³² Dash drew on her research into Yoruba deities when developing the characters in *Daughters*. In an interview, Dash describes how she asked the actors to prepare for their roles: "Before we went down on location, I sent background sheets to all the actors with the backstory on each character representing a specific African deity, like Ogun or Yemoja" (*Touching Our Own Spirit*).

³³ Dash's inclusion of the character, Bilal Mohammad, introduces Islam into the world of the film and the character acts as a metonym for larger influences of Islam in the African diaspora. See Cooper's analysis of the historical Bilali Mohammed.

Mary's St. Christopher charm was meant to protect her as she worked on the mainland as a nurse and traveled to Cuba as a caretaker with a wealthy white family.³⁴ Her Catholic talisman is less indicative of her Catholic faith, than it is an awareness that a Black woman traveling—as Eula describes, a “new kind of woman” who makes her own sexual choices—in the early twentieth-century US South needed physical protection and spiritual sustenance against formalized racism and sexual predation. The power of the hand is how it draws together Yellow Mary's St. Christopher's charm alongside Viola's Bible. The “hand” operates through a syncretic logic of taking parts of disparate religious/spiritual practices and weaving them together into something relevant for the preservation of the idea of the family as a unit, a notion that is essential for the Peasant family's future (Friedman 158).

To understand how the “hand” attempts to preserve the idea of the family, it's important to trace the source of individual pieces and then to trace how the pieces work together and through Nana's ceremony. Scholars who study Kongo *minskisi* objects (from which Nana's “hand” partially derives) show how they index their environment via the materiality of the fragments they contain. They also mediate between—as in “to act or bring about” relationships between—the bearer and the world, including other persons and spirits (“mediate”).³⁵ One scholar elaborates that “by virtue of [these] artifact[s] mediation[s], the bearer stands to gain a different relation to human-scale phenomena (the body and its pleasures and pains, the threat of specific enemies) and to inhuman-scale ones (the forces of history and the phenomenal world in and through which historical force manifests).”³⁶ The elements that make up Nana's “hand”

³⁴ See *Daughters* (novel, p. 120) and the “The Script” where Dash's marginalia indicates that these scenes were cut (126).

³⁵ See Thompson, Pietz, and Martínez-Ruiz.

³⁶ See Allewaert 475.

index different characters and their experiences as well as mediate between the family and the inhumanly-scaled phenomena that are in the process of reshaping collective life on the Sea Islands. The charm reflects Yellow Mary as a traveling woman and the Bible indexes Viola's Christian faith. The two are not synthesized but are instead stitched together with the material effects Nana has sewn into the pouch. Their juxtaposition affirms the heterogeneity of the family while the hand performs the work of ritually binding the disparate members together in a specific place.³⁷ While leaving the island is a viable path to inclusion for some, they will need the "hand" to remind them of home.

To pay attention to the way that the "hand" mediates between its disparate parts is to see it within the epistemological framework out of which it was produced, in other words from the epistemological grounds of Black Sea Islanders' creolized African and New World practices. Dash incorporates these creolized practices following a tradition of studying New World syncretism, a discourse with historical ties to the study of African Americans on the Sea Islands.³⁸ The Sea Islands were considered a principal site to study syncretism because scholars

³⁷ Wyatt MacGaffey writes that the BaKongo thought of *minkisi* as "mediators of power" (1). Referring to the discourse of the *fetish*, Pietz describes these objects as having an aspect of singularity and repetition, by which they index "a unique originating event that has brought together previously heterogeneous elements into a novel identity (7) and that the object has "the power to repeat its originating act of forging an identity of articulated relation between otherwise heterogeneous things" (7-8). For Pietz, what he refers to as the *fetish* as territorialized because it is "*not* a material signifier referring beyond itself, but acts as a material space gather otherwise unconnected multiplicity into the unity of its enduring singularity" (15).

³⁸ In the Americas, syncretism was a popular academic discourse from the early- to mid-twentieth century and it became a way of identifying and explaining the cultural products of colonial encounter, especially within the African diaspora. This discourse purported to be a solution to white supremacist ideas of African Americans as persons without a history. Scholarship on syncretism, popularized in the US by Melville Herskovits, sought to show in a scientific way how "African retentions" (or "Africanisms" or "survivals") proved African Americans' deep ties to the past and established religious traditions, language, and more. On the other hand, Herskovits' version of syncretism relied on an essentialist notion of African religious and linguistic purity (Apter). See Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen. Andrew Apter, Edda L. Fields-Black, and Melissa L. Cooper discuss the role of Black scholars—like W.E.B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, Jean Price-Mars, Fernando Ortiz, Zora Neale

like Lorenzo Dow Turner thought that there were stronger African retentions there. While the discourse of syncretism sought to describe the process of New World religious blending, at the same time it prioritized the search for authentic African elements. Dash's depiction of syncretism in *Daughters* is both a reflection of her research into the Sea Islands and a reflection of how the Sea Islands figure with the American imaginary.³⁹ The historical note at the beginning of *Daughters* explains: "At the turn of the century, Sea Island Gullahs, decedents of African Captives, remained isolated from the mainland of South Carolina and Georgia. As a result of their isolation, the Gullah created and maintained a distinct, imaginative and original African American culture. Gullah communities recalled, remembered, and recollected much of what their ancestors brought with them from Africa." Sea Island "isolation" was not total, as the film alludes to at several points.⁴⁰ People regularly traveled from the island to the mainland and

Hurston, René Ribeiro, Arthur Ramos, Gilberto Feyre, and Lorenzo Dow Turner—in developing the theory of syncretism. See also LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant and Kevin Yelvington. By the end of the twentieth century, "syncretism" fell out of the scholarly vocabulary and was replaced by terms like "hybridity," which spurred discussions that were less concerned with the nature of fragments of culture than they were with celebrations of New World blending and the unique and original practices and cultural forms that arose from the vitality of the Black diaspora. This shift reflects a wider shift in thinking about Black identity and aesthetics, particularly following the publication of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*. See LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant and Shalini Puri.

³⁹ Dash conducted research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the Smithsonian, the UCLA library as well as the Penn Center (*Making 5*). She was researching the film as early as 1975 while at the American Film Institute (*Touching Our Own Spirit*).

⁴⁰ In contemporary Gullah scholarship there is a trend to push back against the idea of isolation that for so long was considered the key to the uniqueness and authenticity of African retentions. Cooper rejects a narrative of island isolation and moves toward a more archipelagic understanding of the history of relationships between islands/islands and the mainland, foregrounding maroon flights from Sapelo (and by extension other Sea Islands), the long history of resistance by Sapelo islanders, and their ongoing fight for land ownership, autonomy, and freedom that continues in the present, proving "the way that the long history of blacks on the island has shaped the present" (2). Additionally, work by Paulla Ebron Edda L. Fields-Black, and LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant complicates the romanticizing of African retentions and instead shows the ongoing connections between islands and the mainland in the production of Gullah identity and language.

between the islands of this larger archipelago. Still, Dash's emphasis on cultural isolation is significant because she seeks to show the vitality of an autonomous and sovereign Black community.⁴¹ In this explanatory note, Dash celebrates that the Sea Islands were a refuge for Low Country Creoles, fostering their "imaginative and original African American culture."

Dash, and other Black women artists of her generation are responsive to what Melissa Cooper calls a "revival," spurred by the Black Arts movement and rise of Black Studies.⁴² Like Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Paule Marshal, Dash "picked up the Gullah as fictional subjects . . . to restore a sense of race pride and ancestral linkage that they believed black people had lost" (Cooper 162).⁴³ These artists leave behind the search for unadulterated African origins and instead focus on the dynamism of African American culture and memory produced in the Sea Islands. For Dash, the memory of Africa nevertheless has political consequences. In an interview in *Touching Our Own Spirit*, Dash explains her choice of setting: "I wanted to take a look at all the retentions that we have. The retention of traditions, culture, language, etc. because a lot of people still believe that we came here and we learned everything in this New World. But no, we brought a lot to this New World." The historical discourse of syncretism that Dash references is an aesthetically loaded one that she reorients toward Black aesthetics of beauty and

⁴¹ While Black communities of Sapelo and other islands experienced some degree of autonomy from racism during the Jim Crow era, that autonomy was circumscribed by legal disenfranchisement and land theft, as was the case when Howard Coffin purchased land on Sapelo (Cooper 5-6).

⁴² In her essay, "Making *Daughters of the Dust*," Dash remarks that her choice of setting was inspired by her own family history and desire to take viewers "inside our collective memories" (5).

⁴³ Cooper argues that Dash's (along with Toni Morrison, Paul Marshall, and Gloria Naylor) portrayal of coastal South Carolina and Georgia blacks materially changed the lives of Sapelo islanders by giving them "a way to imagine their identity, and a new way to understand their culture—one that replaced the old primitivist and condescending portrayals of their cultural words" at a time when their land was increasing under threat from R.J. Reynolds and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (155).

pleasure found in a renewed and vigorous study of Gullah history and African memory. The kaleidoscope is an apt analog for Dash's aesthetic project as she seeks to produce a collectivity made up of disparate parts and histories arranged in surprising ways. In doing so, Dash calls attention to how authenticity is always mediated. Moreover, she is intentionally mediating some fragments of history so as to produce something that is politically exigent and aesthetically pleasing.

Through the quilts and the "hand," *Daughters* conveys the role of fragmentation, juxtaposition, and mediation in aesthetic experience and production. The aesthetic objects in the film resemble the kaleidoscope in that they take shapes, colors, and fragments of material culture and rearrange them into new composite forms. The Peasant family quilts emphasize color, repetition, and symmetry to produce something beautiful and useful for everyday life. The symmetry and repetition important to the construction of the quilts point to the ways that the quilts are *techne* that shape perception, reflecting a set of aesthetic values that come out of a Black tradition and collective practice. The composite form of the quilts becomes a *techne* for thinking about collective origins and a pleasurable form of embodied memory, as in Miranda's double-ring quilt. Repetition is also a ritual of making and doing that is picked up more forcefully in the ritual function of Nana's "hand." The "hand" emphasizes how juxtaposition can be made useful and beautiful as Nana Peasant creates a composite ritual object meant to preserve memories of a specific place. Reading these objects in light of the kaleidoscope, we can see them also as technologies that stand between a bearer or viewer and the world. These objects also instruct viewers on how aesthetic objects work to generate feelings and responses. They mediate—as in they function as an "intermediary or medium concerned in bringing about (a result) or conveying (a message)"—"mediate"). As the kaleidoscope operates as an intermediary

between the viewer's experience of fragments and their composite image, so the "hand" is a composite object that seeks to bring about connections between the members of the Peazant family. As examples of fugitive art and science, these objects create an aesthetic which generates feelings of attachment to place and rituals of memory forged from the grounds of the Sea Islands. These objects create a kaleidoscopic aesthetics in line with the L.A. Rebellion's general objective of remaking aesthetics, and the film itself performs the work of mediation between viewers and a vibrant vision of Black history in the Sea Islands.

Unfolding Time

Dash's kaleidoscope aesthetics produce beauty out of fragmentation and patterning. As various patterns and associations between characters and locations in the film start to emerge, viewers begin to see how different images of the past are woven together. This form of storytelling is akin to Saidiya Hartman's method of critical fabulation which "illuminate[s] the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact" ("Venus in Two Acts" 12). Hartman elaborates that "The outcome of this method is a 'recombinant narrative,' which 'loops the strands' of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future in retelling the . . . story." The rituals the Peazant family construct and the cinematic techniques Dash employs orient viewer toward a rhythmic temporality, breaking away from linear narrative and sequential movement. Primarily through montage and slow motion, Dash signals how we see the past in glimpses and fragments. The fragmented, montage scenes offer a visual analog to the griot form of storytelling Dash uses in *Daughters*. Moreover, the film's cinematic techniques complement the rhythmic sense of time that this island setting creates. The film's production of a folding and recursive experience of time is yoked to the tidal rhythms of the Sea Islands. The

film's setting thus establishes a temporality that allows the rhythms and rituals of place to weave surprising connections between the past and the present.

Montage resembles the function of the kaleidoscope because it arranges and orders images and scenes to produce a composite picture. Montage does not suture together scenes in a causal way; it is more likely to produce a set of juxtapositions than smooth cause and effect relationships between scenes. The composite image it produces is developed over the course of the film. The film begins with a montage that takes the viewer through Eula and Eli's bedroom, the barge carrying Yellow Mary, Trula, Viola, and Mr. Snead to Ibo Landing, and gives a glimpse of Nana Peazant bathing in a canal. The opening montage stages one of the central concerns of the film: how to keep the family together. This concern is apparent in Dash's use of montage which introduces the characters—individually or in groups—to the viewer. It is impossible to see the entire family together in a single camera shot, and it's not until the end of the film that a full view of the Peazant family is realized. Even then characters like Trula and Hagar slip away. From the outset, we are introduced to the family in small glimpses, and as the film progresses, we see characters at different points in time. Montage is also a time-altering cinematic technique that breaks open the distinctions between past, present, and future. For instance, the film is punctuated by scenes that show enslaved women stirring indigo vats or a young Nana Peazant with her husband, Shad Peazant, first working the land. Newly emancipated, Nana and Shad sift dirt through their fingers and wonder how they will build a life out of dust. These are moments in the recent past, and this becomes apparent through other visual cues like Nana Peazant's indigo stained hands which signify her labor on an indigo plantation. Cutting to these different points in time without narrative cues can disorient the viewer. To blur the experience of past, present, and future even further, the Unborn Child—the not-yet-born

daughter of Eli and Eula Peazant—runs through the indigo vat scene. The Unborn Child is both a symbol of the past and the future and she layers multiple temporalities on top of each other as she moves through these montaged scenes.

Montage is also used in conjunction with other techniques, like slow motion to recalibrate the viewers sense of the passage of time. Slow motion is achieved by filming a scene with a higher-than-normal frame speed and then playing the footage back at a normal rate. Slow motion filmmaking literally manipulates time, and it has the effect of stretching time, emphasizing the power and richness of some moments over others. For example, in the scene in which Nana Peazant implores Eli to call on the ancestors, the time shifts and slows. Slow motion gives this scene texture and dramatizes what Sheila Smith McKoy calls “limbo time.” With roots in West African cycles of time, limbo time allows African diaspora cultures to maintain a ritual space for their connection to African cultures and the survival of those cultures in the Americas (McKoy 213, 219). Nana holds this space open for Eli as she sees the continuity between the living and her ancestors. This scene then abruptly cuts to a group of young women on the beach. They are all holding hands and dancing in a circle. As the camera speed continues to slow down, the girls spin and spin, until they tumble into a heap on the ground. The rapture of the young women’s and Eli’s spirit possession is magnified by Dash’s slow-motion technique. Controlling the speed of these shots allows Dash to visualize limbo time.

The kaleidoscopic techniques of the film also bring to the foreground the issue of non-linear storytelling at stake in the film’s narrative structure. Linear narratives rely on the connections and relationships between episodes or events. But Dash has described the film as taking on a griot-style of storytelling through which a linear plot is deemphasized in favor of an Africanist oral-storytelling aesthetic that values wandering (“Touching Our Own Spirit”).

Montage and slow motion contribute to this sense of narrative wandering as scenes are juxtaposed, disconnected, and stretched. For Susan Stanford Friedman, montage is a dialectic of scenes that “produces heightened parataxis—or the juxtaposition of difference that form a series of visual encounters” (159). The result is a hybrid aesthetic experience that resonates with the syncretism of the film, of “African and western forms of memory” (Friedman 159). Dash goes on to describe *Daughters*’ narrative as “folded.” She says, “The story kind of unfolds throughout this one day and a half in various vignettes. It unfolds comes back. It unfolds and comes back” (“Touching Our Own Spirit”). The sense of the story unfolding and coming back to itself moves away from a narrative frame focused on sequence and causation in which one scene begets the next and instead offers a narrative built around a recursive movement back and forth. Often there are no connections between vignettes, as when the scene of Eula and Yellow Mary talking shifts to Snead taking a photo of men on the beach. Frequently, the Unborn Child flits across the screen, a delicate tether stitching together scenes that are not otherwise connected except for the settings in which they unfold.

The film folds and unfolds onto scenes of the Ibo figurehead floating in the tidewater, linking the location—Ibo Landing—to a past moment of Black resistance that coalesces around the myth of the “flying Africans” The figurehead appears sporadically in the film and often without exposition while the soundtrack plays talking drums. When it appears, it triangulates different characters, but primarily Eula and Eli who find in it a ritual function. Tiya Miles traces the historical roots of the “flying African” narrative which springs from enslaved peoples’ memory of an uprising on the island of St. Simons in 1803 (154). She summarizes the extant history of this event:

A slave ship had docked outside of Savannah on Skidaway Island after having collected souls from the West Coast of Africa. Captives of this ship included members of the Ibo . . . tribe of present-day Nigeria . . . Brokers working on behalf of planters John Couper and Thomas Spalding purchased a group of these newly arrived slaves and put them on another ship en route to St. Simons Island. On the banks of an interior waterway now called Dunbar Creek, the captured Ibos rebelled, capsizing the craft. . . . The Ibos leapt off the ship, sinking into the waters at a place that is now called Ebo Landing.

(Miles 154-5)

Miles elaborates that the drowning of the Ibo was interpreted based on “the West African-based cultural belief that by drowning [the Ibo] could transport themselves spiritually, thereby ‘flying’ back to their African homeland” (156). This event exists within the African American oral tradition reflecting “an alternative consciousness about the strength of black slaves and the meaning of resistance” (Miles 156). In one scene that draws directly from Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, Eula stands on the bank of Ibo Landing facing the figurehead. She recites the lore of the Ibo her grandmother told her: “The minute those Ibo were brought ashore, they just stopped, and took a look around . . . not saying a word, just studying the place real good. . . . Well those Ibo got through . . . seeing what was to come . . . they turned, all of them, and walked back in the water” (“The Script” 141). The kind of collective action and unspoken agreement that Eula sees in the Ibo uprising leads to their magical return. In her telling, the Ibo can envision the future (“what was to come”) and realize that knowledge in the present. Eula then narrates their return to Africa: “They had all that iron upon them. Upon their ankles and their wrists, and fastened around their necks like dog collars. But chains didn’t stop those Ibo. They just kept walking, like the water was solid ground” (142). In Eula’s recounting of the Ibo

uprising, these captives' resistance comes from their ability to see time, not in progressive stages (past becomes present becomes future), but as a folded experience. This knowledge leads them to “fly” (or walk over the water) back to their homeland.

The figurehead acts as a mytho-historical tether between the Sea Islands and Africa. At times the Ibo figurehead is a painful reminder of the conditions of enslavement and the rupture of the Peazants' ancestors from their homeland. As a vestige of the past, the figurehead points to a moment of great loss. In an interview with Houston A. Baker, Dash described that she came up with the idea for the Ibo figurehead after seeing a figurehead on the prow of a slave ship at a New York art gallery (165). She remarked: “It was huge, monstrous. It struck me as an awful joke, the idea that the people who built the slave ship decided to make the figurehead into an African warrior” (165). Dash transforms this “awful joke” into a leitmotif in *Daughters* saying: “So I was going to have a figurehead, broken off of a slave ship, floating throughout the swamps, rotting—symbolic of the African warrior in the New World. This thing is forever floating and just rotting” (165). Dash forces the figurehead to stay in place as a constant reminder of the Middle Passage rupture.

The figurehead does more than signal the past, it highlights the amorphous relationship between water and land in the Sea Islands setting. In *Daughters*' script, the setting is described in rich detail: “Where the tidal waters slow to a stagnant green muck. Floating in a swampy estuary is the broken-off remains of a slave ship's FIGUREHEAD” (85). Though Eula's soliloquy gives force to these details written in the script, the script gives an explicit sense of the ecological processes acting on the figurehead and the ecological time scales that work to merge the past, present and future that Dash connects to the Ibo figurehead. The directions read: “Parasites and vegetation are clinging to what was once a carved representation of an African Warrior. The

Figurehead rocks in the thick mire, its rotted wooden flesh dumfoundly facing a place called Ibo Landing” (85). The “parasites” Dash invokes cannot be seen, and she adds a kind of psycho-affective intentionality as the figure is oriented “dumfoundly” to the land. The figurehead is stuck in the “thick mire,” a space at the intersection of the land and waters, that Tiffany Lethabo King calls a shoal. For Lethabo King, the shoal is a terraqueous and dynamic ecological zone that becomes a metaphor for the potential of Black aesthetics and thought to “chaf[e] and ru[b] up against the normative flows of Western thought” and its concomitant temporalities (2). Though the figurehead slowly and perpetually decomposes it does not fully become something else and its presence points to the material ways that the past continues to exert its force in the present. Dash links her sense of folded time to a lesson she learned from her father: “my daddy used to tell me that time would float in and out with the tide” (“Interview” 165). The figurehead “rock[ing]” in the tidal canal might be more stuck in time and place than fluidly moving “in and out.” But the sense of the continuity of the past and present is transmitted through the slowly decomposing carving. It floats, not fully land-based, not fully fluid in the water.

The film’s sense of time contributes to a trend within Black Studies since the publication of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* to break with the teleology of Western, linear time, challenge the narratives that dominate theories of modernity, and understand the persistence of the past in the present (Best). Michelle Wright observes how difficult it is to conceptualize modes of space and time outside of a Western episteme of linear or chronological time (40). This mode of thinking becomes hegemonic, as Wright argues, because linear time makes it nearly impossible for Black subjects to write themselves into a progress-defined narrative of modernity.⁴⁴ Some Black

⁴⁴ Wright notices three issues with linear space time that I draw on in understanding Dash’s intervention: the search for or emphasis on origins (46); the use of “hierarchical or vertical means of representation” (46); and the emphasis on white European agency which makes Black actions “always *reactions*” to the middle passage (47).

writers and scholars attempt to plot diasporic Black history within a Western narrative of modernity through what Wright calls the Middle Passage epistemology through which Black collective identity is narrated as a path from enslavement to emancipation which is followed by Civil Rights and onward (43). This attempt to write Black modernity, however, does not dismantle the ideology of linear space-time itself. One way that Black Studies scholars and Black feminists, especially, resist the linear progressive model of time is by insisting that the past of slavery has resonances for how life is experienced in the present for Black persons.⁴⁵ A linear conception to time that prioritizes sequence and resolution cannot account for the ways that some events are not past.

Dash's Affective Transformation

One way that the past remains present is through feeling and memory. The emotions and memories which follow on violent histories of enslavement are often associated with abjection, unbelonging and (generational) trauma.⁴⁶ In *Daughters*, the traumas are both obliquely and directly referenced, as in Nana Peazant's indigo-dyed hands and in Eula's rape and conflict with Eli. The complex feelings about these histories are intensified by the ongoing dispossession and disenfranchisement that African Americans in the Sea Islands continue to experience due to deeply embedded inequality in political and legal systems.⁴⁷ Yet Dash revises the emphasis on these particular historical feelings and memories by turning to a moment in the past and finding sustenance and joy in the Peazant family's bonds of kinship. Dash looks back to the Sea Islands in 1902 to find—and *create*—a vision of a sovereign Black collectivity. The name that Affect

⁴⁵ Cf. Stephen Best.

⁴⁶ See Elizabeth Alexander.

⁴⁷ On the pressing issue of heir's property law, see Allam and "What is Heirs Property?"

Studies gives to this positive feeling toward the past is nostalgia. But nostalgia has not traditionally been used to describe African Americans relationship to place (the US South) or time (enslavement or the Jim Crow era). As Badia Ahad-Legardy summarizes, “trauma has remained a largely uncontested and seemingly natural framework for interpreting black memory,” and the focus on trauma has foreclosed the study of other sometimes positive and certainly complex feelings that African Americans have toward the past, including nostalgia (3). Dash’s affective transformation hinges on the film’s ability to register historical trauma and to complicate the hold that trauma has over the present by enabling a nostalgia for other parts of the past.

Daughters’ vision of the Peasant family on Ibo Landing is a vision of the past that Black viewers *can* feel nostalgic for.⁴⁸ Greg Tate’s summarizes the emotional and sensorial power of *Daughters*: “Julie Dash’s film works on our emotions in ways that have less to do with what happens in the plot than with the ways that characters personalize the broader traumas, triumphs, tragedies and anxieties peculiar to the African American experience” (69). The characters’ relation to the range of affects that emerge in African American history warrants closer examination. In Tate’s list, we find “traumas” right next to “triumphs.” As Ahad-Legardy clarifies, “[t]he relationship between nostalgia and trauma is not a binary one; they are, instead, conceptual cousins. While trauma recalls a harmful past and nostalgia recalls a idealized one, both affective states materialize within what Ann Cvetkovitch describes as ‘public cultures of memory’” (7). Noticing the film’s nostalgic tendencies does not mean ignoring how it indexes violence; the two are twinned. Moreover, Dash chose not to represent violence in a documentary

⁴⁸ Cf. Paulla Ebron who is skeptical about Dash’s nostalgic perspective. She cautions that Dash ignores the practical concerns of Sea Islanders in the present who are forced out of necessity to work at tourist resorts, like ones on Hilton Head (101).

way, and this choice made room for a more reparative vision of the past. In an interview with Baker, Dash explained that she strove to “bring a basic integrity to the historical events” but that she needed to take creative license to certain elements, either because she did not want to reproduce worn tropes of violated Black bodies or because new symbols and affects were necessary (“Interview” 164). Nana Peasant’s indigo dyed hands are a case in point. Her hands signal the hazards of laboring on the indigo plantation, but the indigo dye appears again in the Unborn Child’s bow, suggesting though the color blue is tied to a history of plantation labor, it may also be recast as a bright symbol of the Peasant family’s future.

The film crafts an archive of feelings that is capacious enough to foster what Ahad-Legardy calls “Afro-nostalgia”: a lens through which we can conceptualize the desires of the African-descended to discern and devise romantic recollections of the past in the service of complicating the traumatic as a singular black historical through line” (3).⁴⁹ *Daughters’* nostalgia produces a longing for the Sea Islands, a location some of the characters are immanently leaving for the economic opportunities of the North. The film is sympathetic to those who stay, like Eula, Eli, and Yellow Mary indicating that rural Black life and the relative autonomy it afforded is worth remembering even as the other characters seek an urban future. Dash honors those who continue to make a life in the Sea Islands.⁵⁰

Daughters’ nostalgia is not only a blissful feeling directed at a moment in time, but it is also deeply rooted to the Sea Islands setting. As I have discussed, the setting of *Daughters* complicates a singular through-line in favor of an ecological temporality; the film, in yoking its ethos of folded time to a particular archipelagic setting, fashions a site onto which viewers can

⁴⁹ On reparative nostalgia see Boym.

⁵⁰ Not all the characters want to stay, and Dash offers a variety of affective responses to the family’s separation.

attach their feelings of nostalgia. For viewers, nostalgia is a kind of homecoming. Cooper describes the significance of “homecoming” for Black women writers of Gullah culture saying: “home is the cognitive space in which blacks reconnect with their past and receive their spiritual inheritance and true sense of self, which is defined by knowledge of their ancestors” (177). *Daughters* offers a surrogate and conceptual home, a place for Black viewers to remember, admire, and see as beautiful, ultimately contributing to a “public culture of memory” that is restorative. The Sea Islands becomes an affective simulacra of home.

Daughters’ vision of the past centers land-based kinship networks and produces a transformation of affect that reflects Dash’s Black cinema aesthetics. Returning to the family portrait scene, Sneed becomes an avatar for Dash, announcing “Remember Ibo Landing!” His declaration is aimed at the Peasant family and also at *Daughters*’ viewers. The comparison between Sneed and Dash extends to their use of visual technologies to record and preserve this space-time. Sneed’s photograph reminds viewers that the past is constructed, the characters arranged. The scene set for the purpose of, as Erhart says, “reclaiming real historical apparatuses of vision for a community’s specifically an African-American community’s survival.”

The visual technologies of photography and film make possible the entwinement of Dash’s kaleidoscopic aesthetics and the film’s affective work. The kaleidoscope alongside cinematic techniques like slow motion and montage signal that reality—including feeling—is mediated by technologies. The kaleidoscope sits between the viewer and an object, producing an affective/aesthetic response of beauty. The exchange requires a sensing organ (eye) and a technology (the kaleidoscope) which takes various objects and reorganizes them into a new composite image. The triangulation of technology-image-eye helpfully foregrounds the way that media play a role in shaping viewers’ expectations of reality. Media scholar, Kara Keeling

confirms that reality is not separate from its mediation by technology and ideology. Film is an organ, or mode of thinking that shapes viewers' expectations and ways of seeing (Keeling 4). Film does not merely represent reality but is imbedded within reality itself (12). This understanding of reality is important for "challeng[ing] demands for 'positive,' 'negative,' or 'accurate' representations—demands that assume the coherence of an indexical relationship between image and 'reality' that has never cohered for blacks and other groups who consistently have claimed to be misrepresented" (4). Contrary to these demand for realist representation that Keeling charts, Dash's film reshapes viewers' expectations altogether, making it possible to feel nostalgia for a past and a home.

In this way, the film helps to perform the "material but also an affective transformation" that Deborah Thomas sees as one of the acts of resistance to the afterlives of colonialism and slavery in the Americas. If the film's orientation to time—not just looking back but re-presenting the past—changes viewers orientation to time, then their understanding of history and behavior in response to this past can also be changed. Julie Dash's past is thick, diaphanous, and mesmerizing, leading to new forms of Black expression and representation underdeveloped in mainstream cinema of the time. Dash contends with both the representational and affective aspects of Western aesthetics, thus re-forming aesthetics around Black experience and history and reforming the senses of filmgoers alike.

Chapter 2

Nature's Memory: Atmospheric Aesthetics in Edwidge Danticat

I also thought that if I came to the river on the right day, at the right hour, the surface of the water might provide the answer: a clear sense of the moment, a stronger memory. But nature has
no memory.

(Edwidge Danticat, *The Farming of Bones* 309)

The protagonist of Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* bears witness to the genocide of Haitians living and working in the Dominican Republic in 1937. After years of mourning the deaths of her lover and friends, Amabelle returns to the scene of the crime—the Massacre River which marks the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic in the north of the island of Hispaniola. Amabelle seeks a “clear sense of the moment, a stronger memory” of what transpired (309). Years have passed, and she still seeks proof, a record, that Sebastien (her lover), her friends, her parents, other Haitians, Haitian-Dominicans, and all the nameless victims of the massacre meant for her to live on in their absence. But Amabelle finds no resolution. This is a heavy scene: its affective register is thick with Amabelle's grief, with the difficult knowledge that, having reached the conclusion of the novel, readers too must now bear witness.⁵¹

In this chapter I turn to Danticat's body of work to ask how specific places create, remember, or hold open affective atmospheres. From the Massacre River to Fort Ogé and Henri Christophe's Citadelle, to waterfalls and caves, Danticat conjoins specific locations in Haiti to feelings of grief over anti-Haitian violence, memories of revolutionary pride, joyous

⁵¹ See Bénédicte Boisseron and Elena Machado Sáez on the ethics of witness and the literary market for Caribbean novels, respectively.

celebrations, and fragile intimacies. Danticat's political geography includes the borderlands of Haiti and the Dominican Republic in *The Farming of Bones* which marks a specific history of anti-black violence. This setting gives a particular valence to Christina Sharpe's assertion that the atmosphere of the Americas is anti-black and to Greg Beckett's observations on the "atmosphere of crisis" in Haiti. In Danticat's novel, the borderlands hold an anti-Haitian atmosphere in suspension. But locations in Haiti also create atmospheres that contribute to Haiti's status as the first Black republic, like the fortress of Fort Ogé or a collection of cannons at La Petite Batterie. These affective atmospheres are transformed into aesthetic experiences in Danticat's prose. I define atmospheric aesthetics as the cultural and environmental processes a text transmits through its narrative or content as well as how these processes are manifested at the level of tone and form. I trace the affects that emerge out of Danticat's place-making writings using a methodology that toggles between noticing the affects that circulate inside and outside the text and by noticing how feelings and settings shift from a text's background to its foreground.

Danticat's atmospheric aesthetics produce an eco-affective archive, a hybrid assemblage of ecological processes and human feelings captured in her writings. An eco-affective archive is a synthesis of Ann Cvetkovich's concept of the "archive of feeling" and John Patrick Walsh's concept of the "eco-archive" in Haitian literature. Cvetkovich sees within cultural texts "repositories of feelings and emotions which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception" (7). Using the testimonio genre in *The Farming of Bones* especially, Danticat encodes in her fiction the traumas of race-based violence in the Haitian borderlands. As a literary genre, testimonio seeks to bring unspoken, undocumented, and unwritten history to light, and, in doing so, Danticat's testimonio

creates a thick affective and aesthetic experience.⁵² As Cvetkovich argues, trauma complicates what can count as an archive because trauma is at once unrepresentable and memories are ephemeral. Danticat's daring testimonial writing archives the ephemeral memories and lived experiences that are silenced within Haiti and the US. *Writing* a testimony of such traumatic histories as the Parsley Massacre or the Duvalier dictatorship is a complicated process for a Haitian artist, especially one living and writing from the US. This leads Bénédicte Boisseron to call Danticat "the epitome of the survivor's guilt that tortures the Haitian immigrant" (93). Between the traumas Danticat's characters witness and experience and the challenges the writer faces in giving voice to these experiences, Danticat's oeuvre, and its context and reception, is an archive of strong yet often ambivalent feelings.

The archive of feelings that emerges in Danticat's oeuvre also reveals the interanimation of the author's and her characters' emotions and the non-human world including the land, waters, and air, of Haiti. Here, Walsh's concept of the "eco-archive" helps make sense of the significance of place in Danticat's works, from the Massacre River in *The Farming of Bones* to Fort Ogé in *After the Dance*. Walsh points to the capacity of literature to capture environmental and political processes at once. He writes: "The prefix 'eco' refers to the shared lived space of ecological problems, between humans and non-humans, and 'archive' to the accumulation of texts that reveal overlapping histories of past and present" (3). Because human histories have been encoded onto certain geographies, places are inherently emotive and emotional sites. The encoding of human emotion onto the non-human world is especially poignant in the borderlands of *The Farming of Bones* in which the Massacre River is a site of "overlapping . . . of past and

⁵² Jennifer Harford Vargas even calls the constellation of bodies and voices a "testimonial archive." Not only does testimonio give individual and collective voice to the Parsley Massacre, but it is also intensely affective for the purpose of eliciting sympathy to bring about social change, as Shemack and Caminero-Santangelo claim.

present.” When Amabelle says, “nature has no memory,” she seems to regret nature’s inability to keep Sebastien’s memory alive, as memories are one way of sustaining past within the present. The river cannot do so because it does not generate subjective human memories, and it cannot revive her loved ones. But the Massacre River *does* hold in suspension an affective atmosphere tinged with anti-immigrant sentiment and suffused with the grief of ongoing border violence.⁵³

Danticat’s impulse to yoke feelings to place follows on a lineage of Haitian indigenism, a literary and political movement beginning with Dessalines that writes Haitians onto the land of Haiti. Danticat builds on and departs from this tradition by writing the colonial-era Taíno chieftain Anacaona into a contemporary diasporic imaginary. In analyzing Danticat’s Anacaona, I emphasize the deeply affective nature of Haitian indigenism and show how important places—real and imagined—are for this movement. The challenge of encountering atmospheres that are saturated with loss and violence as in *The Farming of Bones* is met by the determined survival of Haitian women in Haiti and across the diaspora, emblemized in Danticat’s writings about Anacaona. Danticat’s yoking of feeling and land offers a different lens on those who live through these atmospheres, even if such writing cannot repair the atmospheres of violence in Haiti. In doing so, Danticat’s exploration of the borderlands and Anacaona’s legacy produces an eco-affective archive that reveals how the literary arts create a kind of surrogate memory and feeling through their textual atmospheres. Her novels and essays are invested in the ways that literature can perform two seemingly contradictory operations: testifying to the non-human environment’s role in lubricating political violence and showing how Haitians respond to political atmospheres with their own collective feelings.

⁵³ Borders produce, enforce, and protract anti-immigrant sentiment. These feelings travel, as the violence against Haitian migrants at the US/Mexico border recently demonstrates.

Border Atmospheres

Borderlands and borderland fiction are affectively dense. Borderland theorist and Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa testifies to the social and psychological work of borderlands when she writes “A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (25). While borders delimiting territories seem fixed and inherently powerful, the borderlands—the social, environmental, psychic, and cultural realities of and around borders—prove that borders are arbitrary, porous, contested, yet nevertheless violent contact zones. The Haiti-DR borderlands have been contested, malleable, and, thus, sites of violence from the colonial era to the present, “a legacy not just of colonialism but also of neo-colonialism” (Fumagalli 19).⁵⁴ Danticat addresses one moment of border violence—the genocide of thousands of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans living and working in the Dominican Republic in 1937—in *The Farming of Bones*.⁵⁵ The novel testifies to the “emotional residue” of nation state formation (triangulated between the Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the US) and to the encoding of this history in the borderlands environment. By focusing on these borderlands, the novel offers an intra-island diaspora geography for its Haitian characters rather than the

⁵⁴ The border itself was created in 1777 with the Treaty of Aranjuez to delineate the boundaries of the Spanish and French colonies on Hispaniola (Fumagalli 17). During the Haitian Revolution the border moved and disappeared at different points, and in the nineteenth century, President Jean-Pierre Boyer’s attempt to unify the island dissolved the border for a time (Fumagalli 18). Following this period of Haitian control, “Dominican elite made sure that the nation building process was constructed on the development and consolidation of anti-Haitianism.”

⁵⁵ In 1937, Raphael Léonidas Trujillo Molina, sanctioned the genocide of thousands of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans living and working in the Dominican Republic. Danticat is one of a handful of contemporary writers—both Haitian and Dominican—who write about the Parsley Massacre, including René Philoctète, Julia Alvarez, Rita Dove, and Freddy Prestol Castillo, whose *El massacre se pasa a pie* was written in 1937, first published in 1973, and only translated into English in 2019. See Fumagalli for a full treatment of the literature of the Haitian/Dominican borderlands. See Suárez, Turtis, and Fumagalli, on the unsatisfactory reporting on the massacre and the difficulty of documenting the number of victims. Estimates range from 9,000 to over 20,000 persons. It wasn’t until the 1990s that the event was largely recognized and memorialized through the 1995 Truth and Reconciliation Commission and then later through the annual Border of Lights ceremony that began in 2012. See Mónica Ayuso.

trajectory from Haiti to the US which is more common in Danticat's other fictions. In *The Farming of Bones* the "emotional residue" at stake is a form of anti-black and anti-Haitian violence that grew out of the challenges of state formation and the political ecology of sugar cultivation.

The violence of the Parsley Massacre is rooted in a particular form of anti-blackness called antihaitianismo that draws on indigenist rhetoric found in the Dominican Republic to denigrate Haitians for being Black and for being Haitian.⁵⁶ Anti-Haitian ideology requires the erasure of Afro-diasporic persons despite the presence of black and mix-raced people in the Dominican Republic since the sixteenth century. In the late nineteenth century, as Ernesto Sagás shows, Dominican "*mulattos* and *blacks* lexically disappeared in order to be replaced by *indios*." Additionally, Dominican "*indigenista* writers exalted the life and struggle of the Taínos, and established a symbolic link with the original inhabitants of Hispaniola" in order to produce a new national identity (Sagás 34).⁵⁷ This new national identity helped the nation "repress its traumatic colonial history" in which Dominicans were subject to Spanish domination (Sagás 35). The US played a role in delineating the Haiti/DR border in the twentieth century when it took over Dominican customs in 1907, subsequently occupied both nations, and revitalized the Dominican

⁵⁶ The massacre crystalizes what some scholars call the "fatal conflict model" in understanding the relationship between these two nations that share a single island. See Samuel Martínez, "Not a Cockfight: Rethinking Haitian-Dominican Relations," and Maria Christina Fumagalli, *On the Edge: Writing the Border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic*, pp. 12-13. However, recent scholarship pushes against the "cockfight" perspective by contextualizing moments of Haitian/Dominican solidarity, such as when Haiti aided in the Dominican fight for independence from Spain in the mid-nineteenth century. See also García-Peña and Eller.

⁵⁷ The romanization of an Amer-Indian past was part of a larger trend in Latin American countries at the time. See David Louis-Brown.

sugar industry to benefit its own markets (Fumagalli 19-20).⁵⁸ These new sugar plantations needed a labor force and the “active recruitment [of Haitian laborers] was required to launch large-scale labor circulation from Haiti to the Dominican Republic” in the 1930s (Martínez, “From Hidden Hand” 59).⁵⁹ The migration of an estimated 100,000 Haitians to the Dominican Republic at this time exacerbated existing prejudice against Haitians (66). During Rafael Trujillo’s dictatorship that began in 1930, anti-Haitian ideology became a full-fledged national ideology leading to the Parsley Massacre in 1937.

This ideology is the source of the violence enacted against the Haitian and Haitian-Dominicans in *The Farming of Bones*. The novel shows how the aristocratic Dominican family that Amabelle works for uses anti-Haitian ideology in mundane ways and how individual instances of anti-Haitian sentiment erupt into genocide. When Amabelle’s employer, Señora Valencia, gives birth to twins, Amabelle serves as midwife. Señora Valencia tells Amabelle: “See what we’ve brought forth together, my Spanish prince and my Indian princess” (29). Her light-skinned son, Rafi, is given a European lineage and her dark-skinned daughter, Rosalinda, is given a pre-colonial heritage. Señora Valencia looks at her daughter and exclaims, “She will

⁵⁸ Lorgia García-Peña argues that the ideology of antiblackness across Hispaniola should be read alongside the role of US empire in the region. She claims that “present day Dominican anti-Haitianism is founded on nineteenth-century global anti-Haitianism. A more productive examination of the Dominican-Haitian relationship thus requires our awareness of the intricacies of Hispaniola’s border history in dialogue with US History. Such analysis would also lead us to recognize the present Haiti-DR border as a product of US Empire” (10). Part of this history is recorded in *The Farming of Bones* when readers learn that many of the Haitian cane cutters labor on US-owned sugar mills in the Dominican Republic. The political geography of *The Farming of Bones* reveals a wider-view of the scope of transnational agriculture and anti-Haitian ideology even while Danticat downplays the role of the US in the construction and maintenance of the Haiti-DR border.

⁵⁹ See also Martínez “From Hidden Hand” 66-68. The migration of Haitians to labor as braceros in the Dominican Republic was not matched by a similar migration of Dominicans to Haiti. Fumagalli argues that the idea of the border is different for Haitians, saying “the Haitian-Dominican border is often a ‘presence’ in the lives and minds of all Dominicans while it is much less prominent in the imaginary and daily occurrences of the majority of Haitians” (10).

steal many hearts, my Rosalinda. Look at that profile. The profile of Anacaona, a true Indian queen” (29). The family uses Dominican indigenist rhetoric in these quotidian ways to symbolically cast themselves as Taíno and overwrite the African heritage that they and the nation want to erase. But there’s no separation between these intimate expressions of antihaitianismo and the large-scale political effects of this ideology. Señora Valencia’s husband, Señor Pico Duarte, is a Dominican military leader who leads raids against the Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans. However, Danticat establishes that Amabelle’s experience of the borderlands is in direct contradiction to the European racial purity that her Dominican employers imagine and seek to fashion through race-based violence.

The borderlands region that most concerns Danticat is the area in the North-East Department of Haiti which is separated from the Dajabón province of the Dominican Republic by the Massacre River. The Massacre River lexically indexes histories of border violence. The river gets its name not from the Parsley Massacre but from a 1728 battle between French buccaneers and the Spanish colonists of the island (Fumagalli 4). The river holds in suspension the legacies of colonial violence, and its name remains as an apt marker for a modern-day genocide. Yet it is also an “unnatural boundary,” proof of how nation states transform ecological features into political borders (Anzaldúa 25). In fact, the river does not stall or regulate movement between these two nations.⁶⁰ Rather, the ongoing movement of people across the border is enabled by the specific ecology of this river. At the point where Amabelle would have crossed the river—between Dajabón (DR) and Ouanaminthe (Haiti)—the river is shallow enough to walk across (Fumagalli 5). The porosity of the border and the ecology of the borderlands contributes to the “transnational creole culture” of this region (Fumagalli 106). This

⁶⁰ This region is an important trade zone and migration route between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. See Fumagalli on the border mobility created by bi-national markets (4-7).

transnational, multilingual, and multiethnic space is, in part, created in response to the international labor market in which Haitians work on Dominican sugar plantations. Even the agricultural practices within the borderlands are creolized to include sugar cultivation and the provision grounds of cane workers who grow yams and cassava.

Unlike the emphasis that the elite Dominican characters place on racial purity, Amabelle's experience emphasizes that the borderlands are a multiracial, multiethnic, multilingual community as opposed to an (imagined) homogenous one.⁶¹ Speaking with other women at a local school Amabelle remarks on their blended language, one woman speaking "in a mix of Alegrián Kreyòl and Spanish" (69). Theirs is "the tangled language of those who always stuttered as they spoke, caught as they were on the narrow ridge between two nearly native tongues." Language became a way to identify and harm Kreyòl speakers at the time of the Parsley Massacre. Asked to say the Spanish word for parsley, *perejil*, Kreyòl speakers would not trill the "r" as Spanish speakers would. Thus, perceived racial difference and linguistic difference were used to purge the Dominican borderlands of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans despite the multi-racial and multi-lingual reality of this space. Even the Afro-Dominicans Amabelle meets along the road back to Haiti—Tibon, Doloritas, and Dolores—are just as vulnerable to anti-Haitian violence as native-born Haitians.⁶² As Amabelle crosses and recrosses the border she is caught in the currents of anti-Haitian ideology. Yet she nevertheless identifies with the

⁶¹ According to the Dominican scholar, Lorgia García-Peña, "[t]he multiple, mostly foreign, studies about the Massacre of 1937 further exacerbate its erasure by casting it as an anti-immigrant state-sponsored crime against Haitians living on the Dominican side of the border rather than as a genocide of the intraethnic border population of *rayanos* who lived and worked in the northwestern towns of the Artibonito Valley" (14).

⁶² See Thornton and Ubiera on the problem of the term "Afro-Dominican" as well as on the overemphasis on frameworks of race and nation in Dominican Studies.

borderland's geography. Though marked by violence, the borderlands are also where Amabelle and others find beauty and make a life.

Danticat counters the atmosphere of antiblackness that suffuses the borderlands with the layered histories and feelings of her characters, primarily through Amabelle's narration. Her choice of testimonio—an emotionally and ethically charged genre of witness—to recount the violence in this borderland history makes the narration intimate and affecting. This is most evident in the novel's bolded chapters that break with the novel's linear narration. In these chapters Amabelle's thoughts and memories are brought to the foreground, whereas in the other chapters Amabelle conveys her experience in an expository and linear fashion. These bolded chapters become the novel's formal interstices, the "emotional residue" of the borderlands experience that are not easily captured in the novel's realist narrative mode. The novel begins with a bolded chapter and asks readers to engage in this affective mode of storytelling from the outset. The opening chapter introduces Amabelle's lover, Sebastien, who would comfort her when she had nightmares about her parents' drowning. When Sebastien leaves for the fields in the morning, Amabelle **"can still feel his presence there, in the small square of my room. I can smell his sweat, which is as thick as sugarcane juice when he's worked too much"** (2). Sebastien leaves a material trace in the air, a scent which communicates the intensity of his labor. The chapter ends by foreboding Sebastien's death: **"At times Sebastien Onius guarded me from the shadows. At other times he was one of them"** (4). This opening chapter trains readers to feel absent presences and the intimacy of shadows haunting the edges of the main narrative. Amabelle's joyous memories are layered over with the grief and loss that she experiences over the course of the events recounted in the novel. The affective and typographical uniqueness of

these chapters has the effect of making Amabelle's memories layered, like a palimpsest, over the novel's primary diegesis.

In these bolded chapters Amabelle expresses the role of land and setting (the surrounding mood and physical world) in shaping her memories, creating the novel's *eco*-archive of feeling. Not only does Amabelle attempt to keep Sebastien alive by repeatedly speaking his name in the present tense, "**His name is Sebastien Onius**" (1, 281-2 italics added), she associates Sebastien with the material world around her. Amabelle declares: "**His name is Sebastien Onius and his spirit must be inside the waterfall cave at the source of the stream where the cane workers bathe, the grotto of wet moss and chalk and luminous green fresco—the dark green of wet papaya leaves**" (282). Sebastien is layered through the waters and flora of Haiti, joining in the non-human environmental processes Amabelle observes around her. Dense ecological imagery like the "luminous green fresco" and "the dark green of wet papaya leaves" becomes a vector through which Amabelle can recover her lover. When she speaks his name and calls him to her at the waterfall or grotto, she creates an aesthetic experience. Sebastien, who is not physically present, becomes a presence through the sensory richness of the "luminous" fresco of plants and "dark green of wet papaya leaves." Amabelle's grief is transformed into an ecologically inflected sensory experience creating a literary atmosphere to hold the trauma of loss that so many felt. These chapters cumulatively create an archive of feeling in which Amabelle's emotions are attached to place to testify to the individual and collective losses of the Parsley Massacre. The non-human world is an ambivalent vector for these feelings. Danticat's visual imagery is beautiful, yet its beauty is juxtaposed to the violence enacted on the same ground.

Sebastien is also dispersed through the air of Haiti, leading Amabelle to reflect on the role of air in mediating history and personal loss. His spirit merges the emotional atmosphere of

Amabelle's grief with the physical atmosphere. In one instance, Sebastien's spirit appears before Amabelle, who says that he **"fills up his lungs with the cloud of lint in the room. . . as though he wants to inhale me and everything there too"** (282-3). This scene is a reversal of the previous scene in which Amabelle inhales Sebastien's scent and recovers an essence he left behind. Here, Amabelle imagines Sebastien breathing in the particles in the room; he is a spirit taking in material particles in the air so as to become tangible too. Amabelle also desires for Sebastien to return to her in the air: **"I wish at least that [Sebastien] was part of the air on this side of the river, a tiny morsel in the breeze that passes through my room in the night. I wish at least that some of the dust of his bones could trail me in the wind"** (281). She wants a material remnant of her lover, "at least" a particle of air. Keenly aware of the air's capacity to hold particles and entities in suspension, Amabelle treats it as a vector to mediate and materialize her losses. The air becomes a mediator between past and present by carrying Sebastien's bones and spirit to Amabelle. If the air can preserve a trace of Sebastien, then it can give meaning to the chaos of the past. In addition to mediating Amabelle's loss, the air also mediates the collective losses of the Parsley Massacre.

As a palimpsest of colonial and anti-Haitian violence, the borderlands hold histories in suspension. The thick atmosphere of the borderlands makes possible anti-Haitian violence and that fosters Amabelle's dreams of reunion with her lover. These atmospheres are as palpable as the water Amabelle floats in when she returns to the Massacre River at the end of the novel. She contemplates how the physical river might help her restore the moment of her parents' drowning and free her from the grief of other losses. At the river, Amabelle finds that the water is no more than an opaque surface, and it does not produce the resolution she seeks. She laments that this place cannot repair her losses because "nature has no memory" of them (309). Instead, the river

is shallow enough for her to lay in and be unmoved. Its surface is neither a screen to project her memories onto nor a mirror to reflect her desires. Though the river doesn't hold subjective human memories, it mediates the survivor's experiences and memories. Amabelle immerses herself in it and in so doing immerses herself in the physical reminder of her losses. Danticat records Amabelle's losses through her atmospheric aesthetics. The testimonio genre makes Amabelle's individual feelings stand in for the collective loss of Haitians. These collective and shared feelings are, as Sara Ahmed argues, "at stake, and seem to surround us, like a thickness in the air, or an atmosphere" (10). As feelings circulate in the text, we can notice how they are not just interior, subjective affects, but historical, collective, and environmental. Place, and its ecological processes, matters for collective memory and writing, even for Haitians living under duress in the borderlands.

The Affective Dimension of Haitian Indigenism

Danticat's emphasis on land, water, and air in shaping human memory and feeling follows on a lineage of Haitian indigenism. Haitian indigenism is an anticolonial rhetorical practice and a foundational aspect of Haitian politics and literature that binds Afro-diasporic persons to the land. Beginning with Dessalines's naming of Haiti, African born, Black creole, and mixed-race Haitians wrote themselves onto the land of what was then Saint-Domingue using the Taino term, "Haiti." Over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, indigenism crystalized as a representational practice in the service of Haitian nationalism (Perry). At the same time as appeals to Haitian indigeneity support a postcolonial state, indigenism nevertheless repeats the erasure of native Caribbean peoples that began with European colonization.⁶³ As an ongoing

⁶³ Haitian indigenists were not alone in constructing a form of indigeneity for diasporic Africans in the Caribbean. Sylvia Wynter calls "the rooting of the African in the New World" a "process of *indigenization*" (Jonkonnu in Jamaica" 36). This process entailed the "re-placement of African folk practices in the new ecological terrain of the Caribbean" (35). Shona Jackson calls this a "creole

aesthetic practice and structure of feeling, indigenism contributes to the affective work of building place-based collectivity for Haitians and Afro-diasporic persons in the Caribbean.

In his 1804 Act of Independence, Dessalines refers to the “Indigenous Army” and the “natives of Haiti” who fought in the revolution. This “indigenous army” produced the first successful slave revolution and Black republic, an unthinkable event, as Trouillot claims, because of its threat to slaveholding nations across the Americas. The naming of Haiti after the Taíno word for the island signaled what Bettina Ng’weno calls Haiti’s “position as an *American* republic,” not one modeled on colonialist Europe or envisioned as a return to Africa (202).⁶⁴ In this context, “one becomes indigenous as a result of subjugation and the struggle against it” (Perry 46). Not only did Dessalines appeals to indigeneity solidify Haitian political sovereignty, but they also “provided a connection to land,” something the colonial powers could not claim (Ng’weno 202).

Land has been a crucial site of Haitian politics and identity formation beginning with the nation’s founding. Though there was a fascination with Taíno relics and the revolutionary figure of Enrique—the sixteenth century Taíno leader who rebelled against the Spanish—Haitian indigenists make the most use of indigeneity as a relationship to land rather than as a connection

indigeneity” unique to those persons who moved through the Middle Passage and plantation slavery and who labored to become indigenous to the Caribbean. See also Melanie J. Newton. Jackson and Ng’weno separate the term “indigenous” from “native” so as to distinguish between the territorial and political claims of these groups. Jodi Byrd sees the pitting of Indigenous groups against Afro-diasporic groups as consequence of the “cacophony of empire.” She draws on Kamau Brathwaite’s term “arrivants” to ask: “How do arrivants and other peoples forced to move through empire use indigeneity as a transit to redress, grieve, and fill the fractures and ruptures created through diaspora and exclusion?” (39).

⁶⁴ On the naming of Haiti, David Geggus clarifies that educated and mixed-race elites would have encountered the Taíno word “Haiti” in written documents. He argues that these persons would not have had direct contact with Taíno peoples. It was significant for the ruling class to draw on the Taíno to distance themselves from European colonizers and African culture (46-7).

to Taíno culture.⁶⁵ This has to do, in part, with the way that land is definitionally linked to nativity. An Indigenous person is someone born “in a land or region; native or belonging naturally to the (soil, region, etc.)” (“indigenous”).⁶⁶ It’s this connection to land, soil, and local ecology that Haitian indigenists return to over and over again in their writings.

In the twentieth century, Haitian indigenists doubled down on the revolutionary and anticolonial feelings that grew out of land-based claims to power and sovereignty.⁶⁷ Amanda T. Perry argues that indigeneity is evoked most frequently when there is a crisis of national sovereignty: “this rhetoric’s emergence at moments when Haitians need to aggressively assert their right to independence is telling: signaling both the utility of indigenous language in laying claim to a specific territory and the challenge of translating diaspora into a compelling case for sovereignty” (47). For instance, the writer and proponent of the *négritude* movement in Haiti, Jean Price Mars, responded to both US military occupation (1915-1934) and French cultural authority by championing Haitian’s African heritage. To break with the colorism of the elites and the prominence of French language and culture they espoused, Price Mars and other indigenists sought an aesthetic and epistemological decolonization of the mind rooted in the African derived practices of the peasant class and their “indigenous values” (J. Michael Dash 35). Sylvia Wynter

⁶⁵ See Geggus 47.

⁶⁶ “Indigene” signals a spatial as well as temporal relation to place prior to European colonization in the Americas. Mark Rifkin, Jackson, and Ng’weno variously write about indigeneity as a settler technology, a term that comes about in opposition to settler colonialism and its temporalities. In this second sense, indigene has a temporal dimension that the Haitian indigenists dispense with in order to fortify a postcolonial state.

⁶⁷ See J. Michael Dash and Perry on the longer history of Haitian indigenism. Dash describes of the state of contemporary Haitian literature as a “post-indigenist era.” But the current literary field is saturated with accounts of indigeneity albeit without the indigenist impulse toward cultural exceptionalism found in the genre of the twentieth-century peasant novel. See Jackson, “Re/Presentation,” for an alternative framework.

assesses that “Price Mars’ thesis implies that the study of African heritage in Haiti does not make a Haitian an African, but paradoxically returns him to his Haitian roots” (34). “Folklore was the record, the living testimony of the roots that the Haitian people had put down in a ‘stranger soil’ which, by reason of these roots, was now theirs” (35). Price Mars is Wynter’s inspiration for defining “indigenization” as a process of Afro-diasporic people’s place making in the Americas. The emphasis on soil and roots helped the indigenists lay claim to the territory of Haiti, which had the effect of synthesizing the roots and the routes of diaspora.

As a literary trope and territorial concept, indigeneity within the twentieth century Haitian indigenist movement allows for a rearticulation of Haitian nationalism that champions the survival of African-derived folkways which are seen as uniquely tied to the hinterlands. J. Michael Dash calls this practice an “aesthetic territorialization” (35). The indigenists’ interest in the hinterlands and peasant class stems from their relationship to the land, the land which is beautiful, alive, cultivated, and inaccessible to foreigners. These trends were formalized in the publication *La Revue Indigène* (1927-28).⁶⁸ In the following poem by Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, “Croix-des-Missions, Port-au-Prince,” the speaker is enraptured by the land:

The road arches its back,
 opens out, and what a beautiful landscape!
 A sea of mango trees spread out like a large bed

Alongside the green river of sugar cane fields. (Meehan and Léticée 1387)

The speaker finds an erotic comfort in the “bed” of mango trees and the abundant “river” of sugar cane fields. This landscape “arches its back” for the viewer’s pleasure. The land is there for the viewing and for cultivation. Another poem by Thoby-Marcelin, “The Atlas Lied,”

⁶⁸ See Kevin Meehan and Marie Léticée’s translation and commentary on *La Reveu Indigène* in *Callaloo*. Philippe Thoby-Marcelin was one of the founding writers of *La Revue Indigène*.

addresses how viewing the Haitian landscape is an aesthetic experience that is shaped by one's relationship to the land, as native or foreigner. The speaker turns to Kreyòl to critique US occupation, symbolized in the airplane's view of Haiti. The peasant figure, Bouqui, is called upon to dance and sing in Kreyòl:

Behind the mountains there are more mountains

EH?

And that's how

the foreigners make Haiti so

small

with their maps. (Meehan and Léticée 1390)

Breaking with the French, Thoby-Marcelin uses a Kreyòl aphorism, “Dèhè mônès gains mônès,” which means “behind the mountains there are mountain.” This phrase “convey[s] both the idea of life as a perpetual struggle against intransigent power and the idea that Haitian peasants are resilient in the face of this struggle” (Meehan and Léticée, 1379).⁶⁹ This perspective is contrasted to the foreigner's perspective in which land is converted into territory to be mapped and controlled. In these examples, Haitians properly see and take pleasure in the land. They can express their relationship to land as an anticolonial struggle that includes agricultural cultivation and the Kreyòl language.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ In 1987, Haitian Creole became one of the two official languages of Haiti. Its orthography has since been standardized. I follow Meehand and Léticée's spelling in this example.

⁷⁰ Amanda T. Perry cautions scholars not “to romanticize the use of indigenous rhetoric” because though it may have an anticolonial orientation, it did not secure individual freedoms, especially for the peasant class it emphasized so strongly. Meehan and Léticée make a similar point, observing that many of the writers of *La Revue Indigène* were concerned with “interior consciousness . . . and the psychology of alienation” (1380). Instead they “pose the romantic idea of Haitian peasant culture as a source of ideological resistance. Meehan and Léticée even more strongly assert that “[d]espite these enthusiastic efforts to conjure up masks of resistance out of peasant traditions, however, there is surprisingly little

In Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944, trans. 1947), the Haitian farmer properly *works* and transforms the land.⁷¹ Roumain's protagonist, Manuel, labors with a revolutionary fervor, and his anticolonial attitude grows out of and is nurtured by the lands and waters of the Haitian hinterlands. The novel begins with Manuel's return to Haiti after many years cutting cane in Cuba. He returns to find his small farming and charcoal producing village in the mountains beset by drought, exploited by the law, and plagued by poverty. He speaks of his ancestral land with tenderness and spirit:

“I'm made out of this, I am.” He touched the earth, caressing its soil. “That's what I am, this very earth! I've got it in my blood. Look at my color. Folks could say the soil has faded on me, and on you, too. This land is the black man's. Each time they've tried to take it from us, we have cleaned out injustice with the blades of our machetes.” (55)

Manuel expresses a sense of pride in his dark skin and his husbandry of the land. He defends his ties to Haiti by evoking the Haitian Revolution and smaller but ongoing attempts to rid the nation of foreign European and, especially, US control. Not only is he possessive of the land, but he's also part of a lineage of Haitian revolutionary figures who “cleaned out injustice with the blades of ... machetes.”

Roumain adds to the revolutionary indigenism of Dessalines an emphasis on labor—working and living on the land, such that Manuel can “plant a life”—as what makes him and others indigenous to Haiti. Manuel contends that black labor produces the Haitian nation. He declares:

evidence of historical consciousness in early indigenist texts, apart from a consistent visceral reaction against the U.S.”

⁷¹ See Smith on Roumain's radicalism and *La Revue Indigène* (23-5).

“We’re *this country*, and it wouldn’t be a thing without us, nothing at all. Who does the planting? Who does the watering? . . . We don’t know what a force we are, what a single force—all the peasants, all the Negroes of plain and hill, all united. Some day, when we get wise to that, we’ll rise up from one end of the country to the other. Then we’ll call a General Assembly of the Masters of the Dew, a great big *coumbite* of farmers, and we’ll clear out poverty and plant a new life.” (55-6)

Manuel is consciousness of how the peasant’s labor constitutes the country itself. Their labor is grounds for a new kind of class revolution built on a historical sense of injustice remediated by work on the land. He dreams of building an irrigation system that would bring water from high in the mountains down to his village in the Artibonite valley to foster agriculture. In writing *Gouverneurs*, Roumain sought to shape the terrain of Haitian politics as much as Manuel sought to shape the ecological terrain of the hinterlands. Roumain’s writings contributed to an aesthetic and political movement producing an understanding of Haiti’s hinterlands as valuable. The ideology of indigenism in Roumain and in *La Review Indigène* coheres in the hinterlands through the Haitians who work and know the land. Their aspirations are material and affective ones, signaling how important it is to think environmental and affective transformations at the same time.

Like the indigenists before her, Danticat conveys the beauty of the Haitian landscape of her “native land.” On arriving in Cap Haitien, Amabelle relishes in the beauty of the land: “In that part of the country, the indigo mountains, cactus trees, large egrets and flamingos were great spectacles for the eyes, visions that made the people feel obligated to twist and contort their hurt bodies to peer outside and shiver with gratitude for having survived to see their native land”

(218). In centering Amabelle in this narrative, Danticat avoids the pitfalls characteristic of the male-dominated narratives and poetics of the earlier indigenists. Amabelle and other Haitians returning from laboring in the Dominican Republic also properly see and appreciate the land. Yet these returning Haitians' labor, "the farming of bones," is starkly contrasted to Manuel's dream of "planting a life." The phrase "the farming of bones," or "travay tè pou zo" in Kreyòl, points to the danger inherent to sugar cultivation as well as the violent consequences of the cultivation of anti-Haitian sentiment in the Dominican Republic (*Farming of Bones* 55). Laboring the land is unprofitable in Haiti and deadly across the border.

In Danticat's fictions land is an ambivalent site for building affective ties because it is linked to colonial and postcolonial violence. The anticolonial promise of laboring on the land also fails to produce anticolonial politics.⁷² In *After the Dance, A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti* (2002)—which is part travelogue, memoir, and history of Jacmel and its carnival—Danticat relishes in description of events and places. The ecological touchstones in Haiti—like the digo plant and the silk cotton tree—are placed alongside the monuments to Haitian revolutionary history. Haitian monuments are subject to the same atmospheric and ecological processes that affect the local flora and fauna of a place. When Danticat visits Fort Ogé, she sees how the built structure and the land it sits on impact each other (45). Constructed in 1804 on the orders of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Fort Ogé honors Vincent Ogé who advocated for the rights of *affranchise* to the French General Assembly and was broken on the wheel for it.⁷³ Danticat describes how "two old cannons are slowly sinking into the ground, looking as if they are likely to disappear altogether under the thump of the next heavy rain" (45). The present-progressive

⁷² See David Scott and Yarimar Bonilla.

⁷³ See Clammer.

tense of “are sinking” makes this motion active; but the passive voice obscures who is doing the action. Either the cannons’ own weight propels them downward or the ground pulls them into its embrace. The ambiguity creates an indeterminate mood in which the signifiers of Haitian revolutionary history (the cannons) are subject to natural decomposition. These cannons may even be the agents of their own disappearance. Though Danticat and other visitors travel to see them, to the locals of Jacmel the Fort no longer serves as a reverent reminder of the nation’s anticolonial fight. As children play soccer in its courtyards and goats graze on weeds found in the cracks in its walls, the Fort is no longer what it was intended to be. Later, when Danticat goes to see another set of cannons (ones used in the Haitian Revolution), she learns that they were being relocated from their current site on the grounds of a Catholic school to “somewhere up in the hills” (49). Fort Ogé and other anticolonial sites are returning to the land. A site like Fort Ogé may no longer semantically register its anticolonial origin, and it is in the process of becoming something new, transforming materially into a grassy soccer field.

The return of these artifacts to the land is not a particularly mournful event for Danticat. In fact, her response is somewhat surprising. She reflects, “Simón Bolívar’s house is a dress shop. Ogé’s fort is a soccer field. Anacaona is living in Providence, Rhode Island. History is moving on” (49). In the first two statements, what was once a historically meaningful site has been transformed into something much more mundane. History, in fact or in place, is not static; historic sites weather into other things. The house and fort still exist in form, but they are used for something else. In another sense, history “moving on” could read as “getting over,” such that the anticolonial relics aren’t that meaningful for Haitians’ daily living, and Danticat’s prose suggests an ambivalence about this transformation. These passages have a subdued tone in comparison to Amabelle’s rhapsodic return to her native land. What is a contemporary Haitian

writer to feel about such relics and the land's role in transforming them when faced with the political realities of the present?

If, as Perry asserts, indigenist writing appears at moments of national crisis, we can see that Danticat too participates in this lineage of writing Haitians onto the land to combat national threats. She begins her writing career during at a volatile time in the 1990s. Her work is shadowed by the Duvalier regime, the overthrow and reinstatement of the democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and the catastrophes of US military occupation. Within this context, Danticat is especially attuned to the experience of diaspora—whether across the island of Hispaniola or to the US. The crisis of Haitian sovereignty extended and continues to extend beyond the boundaries of the nation, as in *The Farming of Bones*. Danticat's writings do a better job of “translating diaspora into a compelling case for sovereignty” than previous indigenists (Perry 47). Lastly, her indigenism is unique because she remediates the historical erasure of the Taíno via the figure of Anacaona and in doing so forges an affective link between Haitian women across Haiti and the diaspora and a female lineage.

Danticat's Anacaona

Danticat narrativizes the colonial-era Taíno chieftain, Anacaona in her young adult novel *Anacaona: Golden Flower* which imagines the daily life of Anacaona as she trains in dance and combat to become a Taíno leader. *Anacaona* was published in the Scholastic Royal Diaries series and serves a noticeable pedagogical function. The book includes a contextualizing epilogue, glossary, historical note, Anacaona's family tree, and various colonial-era drawings and maps alongside present-day portraits of Anacaona. It's in these explanatory appendices that the reader learns that Anacaona was eventually killed by the Spanish.⁷⁴ In the “Author's Note,” Danticat

⁷⁴ During Columbus's third voyage (1498-1500), he instituted the *repartimiento* system that authorized the Spanish settlers to seize the Taíno, particularly in Anacaona's region of Jaragua, and

and the Royal Diaries editors explain, “We hope some sense of her own wisdom and that of her people is conveyed in this fictional story of the real Anacaona” (3). Though obscured by the “girl power” ethos of the Royal Diaries series and the emphasis on Anacaona’s romance with a Taíno chief, Caonabó, it’s possible to read the story against the grain and see it within the wider view of Danticat’s oeuvre and the history of Haitian indigenism. With this wider view, Anacaona can be seen as a figure who forges a creolizing culture across the island of Hispaniola, and her legacy of storytelling is taken up by Danticat who forges in this text a feminized anticolonial past.

Anacaona was a leader of a rapidly changing place. During her lifetime (1474-1504), Anacaona ruled the region of Jaragua, in the southwest of the island that is now called Hispaniola. Maria Christina Fumagalli observes that “as Jaragua’s ruler Anacaona seems to have presided over a creole community in which the boundaries between the indigenous population and the Spanish settlers were becoming increasingly blurred” (98). *Anacaona: Golden Flower* fictionalizes this history in scenes of violent conflict between Anacaona and Spanish conquistadors, including an ambush led by Anacaona and other chiefs on a Spanish encampment. Anacaona is a trained warrior, and Danticat doesn’t shy away from the role of violence in Anacaona’s struggle. This includes Anacaona’s armed resistance of the Spanish (138-52) as well as her training to fight other rival indigenous groups (49-54). At the end of the novel, Anacaona charges her nephew to fight to the bitter end: ““We will all fight bravely for you and [my daughter] and all of Quisqueya’s children. If we do not finish the battle, it is your duty to finish it for us and it is your burden to succeed”” (139).⁷⁵ *Anacaona: Golden Flower* unsettles any

“divide them . . . to use as forced laborers at the goldfields” (Rouse 153). In 1503, the governor of the colony, Nicolás Ovando, traveled to Jaragua to see Anacaona. He and his men burned alive 80 Taíno leaders and hanged Anacaona (Rouse 154; Danticat *Anacaona* 159).

⁷⁵ Anacaona’s nephew, Guarocuyá (also known as Enrique), led several assaults against the Spanish and became a folk hero for Haitians and Dominicans. See Ozuna.

romanticization of Haiti's indigenous past as idyllic and peaceful. Instead, the novel presents Anacaona as a leader at a complex juncture in history fighting against the odds.⁷⁶ The colonial encounter is at the center of Anacaona's story, and Danticat links Anacaona's anticolonial struggle to the aesthetic practices that record and memorialize that struggle.

In addition to the violent exchanges between the conquistadors and the Taíno, the novel vacillates between accounts of Anacaona's poetry and crafts. The historical Anacaona was known as a storyteller and poet who composed *areitos* which were recitations performed at ceremonies. A note at the beginning of the text explains the significance of these *areitos* for the Taíno: "They passed on their stories, myths, cultural practices, and ways of healing through songs, dances, and ballads that were performed at their feasts and celebrations" (3). Anacaona sings ballads, carves images onto "ceremonial chairs, effigy vessels, ceramic flasks, bowls, graters, scepters, baskets, headdresses, pendants, stone collars, all with images of frogs, fish, and birds carved into them" (102). The volume and variety of these aesthetic objects points to the complexity of Taíno expressive culture which was not tied to the written word. She imbues each object with bits of local fauna and vows that "[n]othing will be carved in [the region of] Maguana that will not bear the mark of Anacaona's heart or hand." Anacaona records frogs, birds, and other wildlife as well her own feeling, or "heart." She leaves a part of herself on these objects marked with her skill and care. If someone were to find one of her effigy vessels or hear one of her *areitos*, they would have access to a material trace of Anacaona, "heart or hand." Anacaona's record keeping includes a key battle in Taíno resistance to the Spanish. At the end of

⁷⁶ By 1524, "the Taíno population had broken down into small, isolated communities struggling to survive in a dominantly Spanish population," though by this time they may have been joined by maroons from the earliest group of Africans who were brought to Hispaniola in 1502 on Ovando's fleet (Rouse 139; Fumagalli 103). See also Geggus.

the novel, she composes a great areito to commemorate her marriage and a recent Taíno victory over the Spanish. She wishes that her stories will be passed down from generation to generation:

Yes, I want our victory over the pale men to be a tale that will inspire us when we have other battles to fight, one that reminds us that . . . we are a strong and powerful people. I do not want it to be a story whose veracity the young ones will ask me to confirm when I am an old woman, a story that my [daughter] will tell and retell to her own children. But I do not want it to become the only story we ever have to share with one another. It cannot be. It must not be. (155-6)

In this passage, Anacaona emphasizes that the story of the Taíno victory and resistance is foundational and worthy of retelling. But this revolutionary story is not “the only story we ever have to share with one another.” Anacaona gestures to the fact that there are stories of love, friendship, and the ordinary acts of living that are just as essential to survival.

Anacaona’s message can be read as a commentary on narratives of the Haitian Revolution. Danticat uses Anacaona’s speech to critique negative Haitian exceptionalism (the representation of Haiti and Haitians as grotesquely alterior) and to qualify the veneration of masculine revolutionary figures.⁷⁷ In contrast to the “literature of combat in Haiti,” which Nadège Clitandre shows “glorifies the heroes of the revolution to promote a rhetoric of national solidarity in ways that exclude women and the significant roles they played in the revolution and the construction of the Haitian nation,” Danticat envisions a feminized anticolonial past (*Edwidge Danticat* 70).⁷⁸ In telling a more nuanced story of Anacaona’s revolution, Danticat

⁷⁷ On Haitian exceptionalism, see Nadège Clitandre, “Haitian Exceptionalism in the Caribbean and the Project of Rebuilding Haiti.”

⁷⁸ Danticat even downplays the history of Enrique (or Enriquillo) by using a lesser-known name (Guarocuyá) in *Anacaona: Golden Flower* when talking to her nephew.

pushes against the grain of received narratives of Haitian national solidarity. Anacaona's legacy is both as a warrior-leader and artist. Therefore, it's no coincidence that Danticat would find affinity with Anacaona as an artist and storyteller for her people, one who leaves her "heart and hand" on her creations. As Danticat champions this feminized anticolonial history, she also foregrounds the creolized history of Haiti/Hispaniola through Anacaona's leadership of a cacique engaged with inter-island conflicts with other indigenous groups as well as Spanish conquistadors. In other pieces of writing Danticat complicates Anacaona's alignment with Haiti such that she becomes a transnational, diasporic figure.

"Anacaona Is Living in Providence, Rhode Island"

Though *Anacaona: Golden Flower* is Danticat's lengthiest engagement with indigenous history, Anacaona can be found scattered throughout her fictions and essays.⁷⁹ Two years before Danticat published *The Farming of Bones*, she wrote an essay for *The Caribbean Writer* called "We Are Ugly But We Are Here." In this essay, Danticat traces a symbolic line from Anacaona to contemporary Haitian women. She describes a 14-year old Haitian girl who named her daughter (conceived by rape), Anacaona. Danticat says that "The infant Anacaona has a face which no longer shows any trace of indigenous blood; however, her story echoes back to the first flow of blood on a land that has seen much more than its share." There is a semantic tether between the two Anacaonas—they share a name—and an affective tether. As with earlier Haitian indigenists, Danticat draws on a shared history of suffering to symbolically link the historical

⁷⁹ Danticat is not the only contemporary Haitian writer who writes about Anacaona. Both Jean Métellus and Danielle Legros Georges do as well. Oliva Tracy evaluates that beyond Haiti "[Anacaona] did not begin to popularly reemerge until the last decades of the twentieth century, in songs by Caribbean artists who presented an Anacaona very different from the historical versions. These works emerged in tandem with the Chicano, feminist, and postcolonial movements of the 1960s and 1970s" (107). Rather than the compliant, female native counterpart to Columbus's masculine, colonial aggression, Anacaona became explicitly linked with anticolonial and anti-patriarchal political movements. See also Jennifer Baez.

Anacaona with this baby. In Danticat’s framing, Anacaona sutures together centuries of violence “on a land that has seen much more than its share.” But the legacies of enslavement, Duvalierism, and natural disasters are not the only story, even while these legacies deeply impact life in the present. Contemporary Haitian women share with Anacaona a sense of injustice and a will to survive. Danticat uses a Kreyòl phrase—“Nou lèd, Nou la”—to signal this. It means “we are ugly, but we are here.”

But where is “here” for Anacaona or Danticat? And what “we” is invoked in this phrase? On the one hand Anacaona is repeatedly tied to the nation, the land of Haiti. At the end of *Anacaona: Golden Flower*, the “About the Author” section discloses that Danticat “was most thrilled to write this fictional diary of Anacaona for [a] very special reason” (180). Because her mother “was born in Léogâne,” a town within the Taíno region of Jaragua, Anacaona’s territory, Danticat felt some affinity with Anacaona. Danticat confirms that in *Anacaona: Golden Flower* “[w]e set this story in Haiti because Xaraguá, the region Anacaona ruled, is believed to have been part of what is now modern Haiti” (165-6). Danticat elaborates that “in some very primal way, Anacaona has always been in my blood and I remain, in the deepest part of my soul, one of her most faithful subjects” (180-1). Here blood and land seem even more closely linked than in the description of the infant, Anacaona from “We Are Ugly But We Are Here.” Danticat might be speculating on the colonial-era alliances between the Taíno and enslaved Africans or gesturing to recent studies of ancient DNA in the Caribbean.⁸⁰ Regardless, Anacaona is a name

⁸⁰ There’s a consensus among many scholars that the decimation of Native Caribbean peoples is perpetually cast as a narrative of total annihilation. Melanie J. Newton concedes that though their numbers were diminished, this did not stall European colonists from “transforming the defeat of even the smallest Carib contingent into a moment representing the annihilation of the Carib people ‘in whole or in part’” (6). Samuel M. Wilson, an archaeologist and historical anthropologist, also finds that the period of overlap of Taíno and colonial Spanish on Hispaniola to be underestimated (208). The “overlap factor”—or “the time, longer or shorter from place to place, in which indigenous people lived and interacted with the people of African and European descent who were to replace them”—would have produced a variety

linked to place. Even the infant Anacaona has this claim to place, as Danticat reveals she was given her name “because that family of women is from the same region where Anacaona was murdered” (“We Are Ugly But We Are Here”). Anacaona ruled and died within what are now the territorial borders of Haiti, in a specific region that Danticat and the young mother have intimate ties to. A collectivity of women begins to form around the history of Anacaona, testified to by the plural “we” used throughout Danticat’s essay. The “we” becomes “our” in the opening lines of the essay when Danticat references Anacaona as “one of the first people murdered on *our land*” (emphasis added). In multiple ways, Danticat emphasizes that Haitian women’s kinship with Anacaona is place-based. This is a geographic and political claim: Haitian women are the inheritors of Anacaona’s legacy because they reside on her land.

Yet on the other hand, Anacaona is a deterritorialized figure. Anacaona must be seen as a border-defying figure because the mapping of Anacaona onto modern political geographies poses a problem. Not only have the boundaries between Haiti and the Dominican Republic been chronically unstable, but these boundaries also remain porous due to ongoing economic and political migration. This reality has garnered Danticat some criticism. As Fumagalli reproaches, “Danticat’s uncharacteristically unsubtle appropriation of Anacaona as a Haitian icon . . .

of “human-land” interactions. In these interactions “a group’s complete way of living in the ecosystem—how they obtained food, shelter, medicines, and tools, and generally fit into the larger rhythms of the environment” would have been transferred, though the European colonial records give little voice to these interactions (207). See also Neil L. Whitehead. See Rouse and Wilson on the frequency of intermarriage between Spanish conquistadors and Taíno women during the early colonial period in the Greater Antilles. In Frank Moya Pons history of the Dominican Republic, he notes that the governor, Nicolas Ovando, forced those who opposed him to marry Taíno women (33). Additional evidence of Taíno and self-emancipated Africans living in the mountains appears in records of Enriquillo’s rebellion in 1519 (37). The Taíno also allied with Africans to attack Spanish settlements (40). By 1533, there were reported to be several hundred *cimarrones* in the mountains. See Geggus on the likelihood of Black or mixed-race Haitians having knowledge of Taíno peoples at the time of the Haitian Revolution (47-9). On more recent genealogical research uncovering ancient DNA in the Caribbean see David Reich and Orlando Patterson, though these studies reveal more about Taíno genetic legacy in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba rather than Haiti.

superimposes the current border of the island on a geo-political reality in which it was entirely non-existent” (106). For Fumagalli, Danticat doesn’t go far enough to make the connection between Anacaona and Hispaniola as a whole, which would have the effect of “claim[ing] as her historical legacy a tentative form of ethnographic pluralism which is at the core of the transnational creole culture currently binding the island of Hispaniola together and which has Taíno, European, and, after the arrivals of the African slaves, African origins” (106). This tension isn’t easily dispensed with, and it in fact echoes earlier Haitian indigenists elisions of transnational currents.⁸¹ Danticat comes closest to explicitly addressing the entire island of Hispaniola in *Anacaona: Golden Flower*. In a key passage Anacaona draws the political geography of the island by carving the five regions on a rock: “I carve on a flattened rock as round as the moon the entire realm of Quisqueya, of which Xaraguá is only one part. Quisqueya, which we also call Ayiti and Bohio, being a hand and each separate territory, a finger” (16). Anacaona’s description places Xaraguá (also spelled Jaragua) as a region that was part of a larger intra-island alliance. In modern renderings of the Taíno territories, it’s clear that these regions do not correspond to the current border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic (Fumagalli 95). Moreover, in Anacaona’s description, the Taíno word for the islands slips from “Quisqueya” to “Ayiti.”⁸² This slip deterritorializes “Ayiti” from the present-day borders of Haiti.

⁸¹ J. Michael Dash finds the same contradiction in Roumain’s *Gouverneurs* in which Manuel represents a transnational proletariat while at the same time laboring in an ahistorical Haitian hinterland. Visions of Haitian territoriality and cultural isolation occluded the fact of transnational currents across Hispaniola and across the Caribbean. Dash elaborates that “instead of seeing Haitian writing as the product of a unique Haitian space, we should see it as more global and cosmopolitan in nature, finding a renaissance in a new transnational comet in the 1920s” (35).

⁸² Cf Geggus: “Until the Haitian invasion of 1822, Spanish writers had freely accepted “Haití” as an indigenous term for Hispaniola” (56).

Reading across these examples of Danticat's Anacaona, it's clear that Danticat performs a double move: to link Anacaona to the land of present-day Haiti, and then to break the concrete link between land and nation. She reterritorializes Anacaona as a diasporic figure for modern diasporic Haitian women who still seek relation to kin and land. Danticat uses Anacaona to navigate a key issue for a diasporic writer, writing about one place (Haiti) while living in another (the US). The tension between a rooted sense of place and a diasporic experience of routes sets up an impossible question for Haitian artists in the late-twentieth century: "are Haitian writers of the diaspora truly Haitian or just the creations of a global postcoloniality or migrant literature in North America?" (J. Michael Dash 34). Yet through memory, language, and translation, Danticat synthesizes the lands of Haiti with diasporic mobility. Anacaona is reterritorialized in what Azade Seyhan calls the "third geography" of writing (5). A reterritorialized Anacaona is an apt figure for a diasporic writer seeking affiliation beyond the boundaries of Haiti, or "lot bod dlo," the other side of the sea. In this way she complicates the binary of nation/diaspora.

Anacaona functions as a symbol of gendered resistance and a tether between those in the diaspora and the land of Haiti. Olivia Tracy contextualizes the resurgence of indigenous figures in Haitian and Caribbean literature. She argues that there is "a growing Caribbean appropriation of [. . .] Anacaona: she transcends physical or national boundaries to become a symbol of the Caribbean experience as a whole, a figure who is just as poignant for those in the diaspora as those still living in Haiti" (108). This diasporic Anacaona is not a historical or conceptual problem, as Danticat writes in *After the Dance*. Rather, "[h]istory is moving on" (49). History "mov[es] on" and so do people, like the infant Anacaona and her mother who immigrated to the US. Now, this infant "Anacaona is living in Providence, Rhode Island." Through Anacaona, Danticat builds affective ties to Haitian land for Haitian women in the diaspora, and Anacaona

mediates these feelings of ongoing anticolonial resistance and attachment to Haitian geography. The affective ties that bind Danticat to Haiti and that bind Haitians in the diaspora together are strong because of the affiliation Danticat fashions with Anacaona. The phrase, “nou léd, nou la” is flexible enough to allow this reading as “here” can be understood as surviving in the present moment, detached from a specific location. Danticat extends her point to say: “For most of us, what is worth celebration is the fact that we are here, that we against all the odds exist.”

Haitian Atmospheres

Danticat’s atmospheric aesthetics—their dense affective register that is linked with ecological processes—help me to see more clearly the role of affect in shaping Haitian indigenist writing. Earlier indigenists’ investments in land and nation are complicated in Danticat’s writings, which instead worry the tensions between land and diaspora. Reading backwards from Danticat we can see that the lands, airs, and waters of Haiti produce the affects necessary for Haitians seeking anticolonial and place-based politics. In Danticat’s writings, land becomes a more potent nexus of feeling and history than related concepts like environment. In addition, the problem of land helps me to explore the ongoing appeal of indigenist rhetoric for Haitian writers. Land is a more visceral, affective, and material loci of analysis than “environment,” a term more readily used to describe the material processes of flora and fauna or climate of a place. The “environment” has long been associated with colonial processes and management of land and resources thought to produce colonial health and the rhapsodic declarations of island paradises that stimulate tourism in the region. The abstract quality of “environment” also impedes its ability to be the concept that organizes forms of collective anticolonial politics, which I find more substantiated by attachments to “land” in the examples in this chapter.

Yet land is not a static entity; rather land is imbricated in the soil and water cycles and the air and winds that circulate across the Caribbean.⁸³ One insight of the Haitian indigenists, Roumain, and Danticat is the unity of these ecological and human processes. In *Gouverneurs*, Manuel aspired to create an irrigation system that would unite the soil and the waters that nourish it. To become a “master of the dew” (if such mastery is possible) is to control water. Yet the dew is composed of water that is formed from condensation every morning. This dew is different than waters found in rivers and transported through irrigation. The text elevates Manuel’s project to a larger collective vision of a functioning hydraulic system that includes the atmospheric vapors from which dew forms. This system would increase human and non-human flourishing and would produce a synergy between ecological processes and political determination. Manuel’s utopian vision underscores how a “place”—and the attendant politics built from Haitian grounds—includes the ephemeral atmospheres and ecological processes that are indeed intimately a part of the land.

Despite all the examples I have given in this chapter, it is not often easy to notice the air. At times, the atmosphere is most perceptible when it erupts into violence. In such moments of violence, the ecological and political atmospheres of Haiti can make life precarious; storms rage and the ground becomes slippery. In her poem “Rain” published in the August 1927 issue of *La Revue Indigène*, the poet simply known as Doris rhapsodizes the turbulent rain that “comes down in heavy sheets that knock over the thatch roofs, mutilates the plants and dissolves their aromas” (Meehan and Léticée 1382).⁸⁴ In the rainy season, nights are “thick and heavy” with feeling and

⁸³ Other notable explorations of the cultural significance of water and the ocean can be found in Félix Morrisseau-Leroy’s poem “Dlo” from *Dyakout* (1951) and the musician BIC’s song “Men Sa Lanmè Di” which is the theme for the 2020 documentary by Arnold Antonin of the same title.

⁸⁴ Doris’s poem is the only work in *La Revue Indigène* signed with a woman’s name (Meehan and Léticée 1378).

water vapors. The humid air proves ephemeral as the night is punctuated by the sudden downpour that causes the waters to rise “higher and higher.” In this turbulent weather, the speaker contemplates: “Are my past lives rising up before me?” The sumptuous lyricism of the poem is juxtaposed to the “fierce burst of rage” that is the storm. A similar juxtaposition appears in Danticat’s response to the 2010 earthquake in *Create Dangerously*; the beauty of Haiti is counterposed with the violence of dictatorships and “natural” disasters:

Haitians like to tell each other that Haiti is *tè glise*, slippery ground. Even under the best of circumstances, the country can be stable one moment and crumbling the next. Haiti has never been more slippery ground than after this earthquake, with bodies littering the streets, entire communities buried in rubble, homes pancaked to dust. Now Haitian hearts are also slippery ground, hopeful one moment and filled with despair the next. (157)⁸⁵

In these examples, weathering is a process that happens in mundane and exceptional ways. The rainy season is a cyclical experience, but earthquakes are not. In combination with ongoing political, economic, and humanitarian issues, the weather and natural disasters contribute to the “atmosphere of crisis” that Becket says is endemic to Haiti. In his formulation, the very notion of crisis cannot be understood as an exceptional event. Rather crisis itself becomes a mood or affective atmosphere, akin to what Rob Nixon describes as slow violence, something which occurs “out of sight . . . an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). Within this atmosphere, as Danticat says, “Haitians hearts are also slippery ground, hopeful one

⁸⁵ In a book on the immigrant artist’s imperative to “create dangerously” Danticat elegizes those who were lost to political violence and at the same time the beauty of the Haitian countryside. She calls her forbears “weather-beaten.” These forbears could have become writers, like herself, except that they were “silenced by the brutal directives of one dictatorship, or one natural disaster, after another” (14).

moment and filled with despair the next.” The literal slipperiness of the ground becomes the affective sliding between fear and hope.

The weathering that occurs on the ground, in the air, and in peoples’ “hearts” is yoked to the exigencies that Becket discusses and the antiblackness which Sharpe calls the total climate of the Americas. Sharpe reckons with the weathering of bodies so as highlight the material effects of ephemeral and sometimes imperceptible processes. Sharpe clarifies her concept of the weather introduced in *In the Wake* by saying, “Weathering is the breaking down of soil through the contact with the earth’s atmosphere, water, and so on, Weathering as we know, is also the term used to describe the long-term deleterious effects of antiblackness on black women” (“And to Survive” 178). In Danticat’s writings we see these two valences of “weathering” intersect. From the material transformation of land and water to the struggles of Haitian women, Danticat’s Haitian atmospheres are thick with feeling. Hovering in the background of the texts I discuss is an atmosphere of crisis that builds a structure of feeling for Haitians.

These literary examples signal the importance of reading Haitian literature in an era of dramatic climate change. This is a time in which the “atmosphere” as such is seemingly more perceptible than ever. But on what and whose terms? As Walsh argues, “Haitian writers contribute in varied ways to debates about the converging paths of human and geological histories, yet at the same time their meditations on the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberalism are largely neglected in these very debates about the future of human life on the planet” (4). To fill this gap, Danticat’s writings are instructive of the imbrication of ecological and political atmospheres. At the same time, Danticat’s works are not merely *responsive* to political and climatological atmospheres. They also create their own atmospheres, ones filled with grief to mark the silences of history as in *The Farming of Bones* but ones that are also filled

with the difficulty and necessity of hope. Though the air verges on becoming suffocating and “unlivable,” as Beckett describes, Danticat’s writing nevertheless creates atmospheres in which her characters can breathe, even amidst duress contributing to what Clitandre calls the “pervasive feeling” of hope in Haiti (“Notes on Radical Hope” 192).

Through my readings of Danticat’s fiction and non-fiction writing, I elaborate on two of the main concerns of this dissertation: (1) how texts pick up the affects that circulate around them and that inform their production and (2) how the affective and aesthetic modes of texts are manifestations of ideological and ecological processes. I have focused on moments where ecological processes move into the foreground of Danticat’s writing—both through the typographical marking of certain chapters in *The Farming of Bones* and in the ways that Danticat and her literary predecessors engage with the land. In these moments both feelings and history are vexed sites of analysis, and they coalesce to form Danticat’s eco-archive of feeling. The silenced history of the Parsley Massacre is transformed into the atmospheric aesthetic of *The Farming of Bones* in which ecological processes insufficiently record history. And the recovery of Anacaona builds belonging across Haiti and the diaspora without losing sight of the struggle of Haitian women—as Danticat says, “nou léd, nou la.” Across genres, Danticat’s writing is affectively dense and attuned to ecological processes. By paying attention to Danticat’s production of literary atmospheres that hold histories of Haitian women and their environs together, it is possible to read *The Farming of Bones* and Danticat’s non-fictions that call forth Anacaona as part of the same literary and political project. She emphasizes how the non-human world functions in the production of memory and how places—and the air they hold—testify to the complex layering of human histories. The affective thickness around traumatic histories is inseparable from the lands, waters, and airs of Haiti, which are also marked by these histories.

History and land are mediated by the atmospheric aesthetics of Danticat's prose writings. In this way the material environment and the literary meet.

Chapter 3

Vincent Toro's Hurricane Formalism

Poetry is, first and foremost, unbridled imagination made material with language.

(Vincent Toro, "Interview with Adamo")

Puerto Rican artists' many responses to Hurricanes Irma and Maria (2017)⁸⁶ bring into focus what Puerto Rican anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla calls the "coloniality of disaster," a phrase she uses to signal the ways that hurricanes and other seasonal climatological events exacerbate existing colonial relations as well as the ways that the US's actions in the wake of hurricanes lead to "accelerated forms of extraction and dispossession" ("Coloniality of Disaster" 2).⁸⁷ Natural disasters exacerbate coloniality, and coloniality is its own kind of disaster.⁸⁸ The entwinement of colonialism and natural disaster is particularly clear in Puerto Rican poet Vincent Toro's poetry and essays, which again and again critique the ways that US actions in the wake of natural disasters damage Puerto Rican ecologies and culture. Yet Toro's 2016

⁸⁶ In early September 2017, Hurricane Irma, a Category 5 storm, caused severe damage from its winds and rain. Hurricane Maria, following on Irma's heels, made landfall as a Category 4 storm on September 20, 2017. On Puerto Rican artists' representations of Irma and Maria, see *Kweli Journal's #PoetsforPuertoRico*, Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón's *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*, as well as the comic book anthology *Ricanstruction: Reminiscing & Rebuilding Puerto Rico*. See also Bonilla "Postdisaster Futures," Rocío Zambrana, Ed Morales, and the *Puerto Rico Syllabus*.

⁸⁷ Bonilla is revising the framework of "disaster capitalism" put forward by Naomi Klein in *The Shock Doctrine*. Her reformulation is a necessary corrective to the absence of theorizing race and racism within disaster capitalism frameworks and the dominance of North American perspectives in Anthropocene discourse. See also Aníbal Quijano and Walter Mignolo.

⁸⁸ Following Hurricane Maria, Puerto Ricans responded with their own critiques of infrastructure collapse and austerity measures. See Bonilla, "Postdisaster Futures." On the temporality of disasters see Nelson Maldonado-Torres "Outline"; Rocío Zambrana; Christina Sharpe; Bedour Alagraa; and Martin Munro.

collection, *Stereo. Island. Mosaic.* also shows that poetry is a method for producing anticolonial ecologies and affects.⁸⁹ Using this anticolonial poetic method in *Stereo*, Toro recasts hurricanes not as opportunities for the expansion of US empire but, instead, as powerful conjunctions of natural and cultural forces by which readers might find alternative ways of conceptualizing and making meaning and feeling out of the litany of disasters that the US has forced on the region.

Hurricanes literally structure Toro's *Stereo*. The Table of Contents is shaped to resemble a Taíno hurricane zemi, a carved numinous object that mimics the wind currents of hurricanes. By structuring his collection through the hurricane zemi, Toro forges a geo-formal poetics that synchronizes place, ecology, and aesthetics. The work of the zemi in *Stereo* builds what Brian Russell Roberts calls "geographic formalism," emphasizing how space and ecology complement cultural geography and the creation of literary forms (40). Toro's geo-formal poetics shows how poetic forms are responsive to regional climatological atmospheres in addition to political ones.

Toro's hurricane-inspired formalism builds on a tradition of poets who respond to the entwined aesthetic and ecological experience of Caribbean storms. From the Puerto Rican poet Víctor Hernández Cruz's tragicomic perspective on the violence of storms in his poem "Problems with Hurricanes" to Barbadian Kamau Brathwaite's musing on the sound of hurricanes in "History of the Voice," storms elicit cultural and aesthetic responses. And as Bonilla and others have so convincingly argued, the aesthetics of storms—their sublimity, anticipation of their landfall, and their devastating effects—are inseparable from coloniality and the neglect of "small" Caribbean places and the Black and Brown people that inhabit them. Poets

⁸⁹ Since its debut, *Stereo* has garnered positive reviews and has won several prizes including the 2015 Sawtooth Poetry Prize and the 2017 Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America. Reviewers have praised Toro's musical style and have marveled at the number of references to Puerto Rican cultural icons. According to Natalie Diaz, the collection is "one of the strongest acts of resistance to on-going colonization" (Toro, "Vincent Toro").

like Toro, amplify this relationship by crafting an ecopoetics in which the anticolonial argument is made both in content and language as well as in formal innovation. Toro's work also contributes to a growing body of poetic responses to Hurricanes Irma and Maria, such as Raquel Salas Rivera's *while they sleep (under the bed is another country)* (2019) and Nicole Cecilia Delgado's Spanish language collection, *Periodo Especial* (2019), both of which heavily critique the neocolonialism that thrives in Puerto Rico.⁹⁰ Toro extends these approaches to hurricanes and colonialism across his oeuvre and draws out a translocal and pan Caribbean perspective. His work, like that of Nuyorican poet and scholar Urayoán Noel and Chamorro poet and critic Craig Santos Perez, seeks relation across archipelagic space. In Toro's case, relation exists across the shared airspace and economic atmospheres of the Caribbean.

In Toro's work, I see a unique attention to the air and atmosphere as sites where anticolonial critique and aesthetic innovation merge. This is evident in the way he scores hurricane winds on the page and in his attention to the materiality of air in his two books of poetry *Stereo. Island. Mosaic.* (2016) and *Tertulia* (2020). These collections foreground the imbrication of anticolonial and ecological aesthetics. *Stereo* emphasizes the shape and winds of hurricanes creating Toro's hurricane formalism. Reading this collection from a post-Maria vantage highlights *Stereo*'s Afro-indigenous touchstones which has the effect of re-routing Toro's anticolonial critique through the generative formal and aesthetic innovations that came before him. Starting with this hurricane zemi, *Stereo* mobilizes Taíno, Afro-diasporic, Spanish colonial, and other underutilized forms, including the *décima* (a sixteenth century Spanish form with 10-line stanzas) and the *areyto* (Taíno communal performances). Toro's collection is a primer that teaches audiences to read both poetry and ecology anew. From its zemi table of

⁹⁰ Rivera and Delgado's work center on the ways that colonialism and heteropatriarchy co-constitute each other.

contents to its concatenation of the rhythms of these Caribbean forms, Toro's poetries teach readers to perceive a specifically Caribbean "materiality of language" that cleaves away from policies and stories that unrelentingly cast the region through disaster ("Interview with Adamo"). His second collection, *Tertulia*, locates storms as more diffuse and ubiquitous atmospheric experiences. Storms are simultaneously climatic, economic, and affective phenomena. In this collection, Toro's hurricane formalism leaves behind the shape of storms so that readers may encounter the effects and affects of Caribbean weather. *Tertulia* extends Toro's engagement with the *décima* and *areyto* and forges an environmental-economic atmospheric continuum. Cumulatively, Toro's works instruct readers to toggle between close reading of language and formal analysis to seek modes of expression that foster Puerto Rican resilience.

Shaping the Weather

Toro works in the tradition of Nuyorican (a portmanteau of New Yorker and Puerto Rican) poetry founded by his mentor Miguel Algarín.⁹¹ This tradition emphasizes historical connection and continuity between Puerto Ricans in the diaspora and those residing in the Puerto Rican islands through music, bilingualism, and public performances (Algarín, "Nuyorican Literature"). Writing in 1981, Algarín defined Nuyorican poetics as having three elements: orality, the use of language for cultural and material survival, and the use of communal performance spaces (91-92). More recently, scholars such as Jorge Duany and Urayoán Noel have offered various definitions of Nuyorican poetry, but Algarín's three core elements remain central.⁹² Toro adds to this lineage a Latinx environmentalism that yokes geography (both urban

⁹¹ While at Rutgers for his MFA, Toro studied with Algarín, one of the founders of the Nuyorican Poets Café in the 1960s. See Toro, "Not Tonight But Tomorrow."

⁹² See Noel, *In Visible Movement* xxv; Duany, "Nuyorican and Diasporican Literature and Culture 2-3; and Márquez xxxv. See Carmen Teresa Whalen and Víctor Vázquez-Hernández on the

and rural settings) and language politics but which has often been viewed as ancillary to mainstream environmentalism.⁹³ Central to Toro's vision of Nuyorican and Latinx environmentalism is the *zemi* with which he begins *Stereo*.

Zemis (also spelled *zemís*, *cemíes*, or *cemís*) are Taíno aesthetic and spiritual objects. Hurricane *zemis* have a human face and two arms which each curve in a counter-clockwise motion like the wind-pattern of a hurricane. In *Stereo* Toro mimics the *zemi* form by giving the Table of Contents an eye, what he calls the "epicenter" poem, and two branches of poems that extends outward from this eye. The *zemi* calls forth a way of understanding the weather that predates modern meteorology and confounds the supposed primacy of colonial epistemes for interpreting and predicting storms. In 1947, Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz published archeological evidence from Cuba of ceramic *zemis* that depicted "a round face with spiraling arms pointing in opposite directions, which suggests that the Taíno perceived the circulatory nature of the hurricane winds around an eye, a fact that would not be established by Western science until the mid-nineteenth century" (Schwartz *Sea of Storms* 8). The counterclockwise motion of the winds is indicative of northern hemisphere cyclones and is reflected in the shape of the *zemi*'s arms (Ortiz 45). Artifacts like the *zemis* Ortiz evaluates provide evidence that "pre-Columbian indigenous civilizations throughout Latin America incorporated the experience of disaster into their worldview and cultural practices, constructing mythological and theological frameworks for mediating these events" (Anderson 9). Europeans like the Spanish colonial administrator Fernández de Oviedo, had their own interpretations of hurricanes, calling them

history of the Puerto Rican diaspora and Jose L. Torres-Padilla and Carmen Haydee Rivera on the literary production of the Puerto Rican diaspora. See also Noel, "Bodies that Antimatter."

⁹³ See the edited collection, *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial*; David J. Vázquez's essay, "Mapping Decolonial Environmental Imaginaries in Latinx Culture"; and Grisel Y. Acosta's keyword essay "Environmentalism."

infernal (Ortiz 72).⁹⁴ But for the Taíno, as several anthropologists argue, hurricanes were not purely malevolent, and zemi's were not merely objects.

Zemis were one way through which the Taíno experienced the unity of the material and mythological worlds. Zemís were typically made of stone, wood, ceramic, seashell, or cotton, and most were the size of a fist (Stevens-Arroyo 56). The hurricane zemi's material construction gave permanent shape to the ephemeral wind currents of tropical cyclones. The zemi's purpose was not merely to *represent* the hurricane, but to embody the spirit of storms and to *mediate* between the human bearer of the zemi and the atmosphere. The archaeologist José R. Oliver further explains that “the Taíno language term *cemí* refers not to an artifact or object but to an immaterial numinous, and vital force” (59).⁹⁵ Oliver describes Taíno animism as deeply attentive to form because it “is a perspective grounded on the continuing of relationships between all things, natural and cultural” (53).⁹⁶ Zemís were used in Taíno ceremonies to elicit protection from hurricanes (Ortiz 88). Fashioned after the god, Hurakán, the zemís indexed the potential terror of storms. But storms and winds were not always cataclysmic; they were sometimes desired (Ortiz 89).⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Bartolomé de las Casas and Ramón Pané attempted to link Taíno deities to hurricanes (Ortiz 87).

⁹⁵ See Ortiz 40.

⁹⁶ Oliver adds that “the transformation of form is crucial to the interactions between beings, each assuming a form appropriate to the relationships in which it is engaged” (53). Their shape was “appropriate” to their relationships, but the size of the zemi also mattered: “in a seeming contradiction, the great power of the spirit world was entered through contact with miniature figure” (Stevens-Arroyo 58). In miniature form, zemís mediated between “the psychic world of humans and nature” and “from the spirit world out into human experience, and from human need into the cosmos” (Stevens-Arroyo 59, 60). Some zemís were circulated between Taíno groups on Hispaniola and Cuba, and this circulation contributed to their relational function within kinship networks (Oliver 4, 62). See also Fernández Méndez.

⁹⁷ Toro comments on the spiritual application of the zemi, saying that the poems in the sections “Mosaic: Zemís” mediate between himself as poet and his mentors or guides. He calls each poem in the

Toro draws on these qualities of *zemis* in *Stereo*'s Table of Contents, which is itself a concrete poem that loosely takes the shape of a hurricane *zemi*. As a concrete poem, its significance is conveyed through its typography. From the eye or "epicenter" poem, two arms curve outwards. Each arm moves like a wave, bending diagonally in opposite directions from one page to the next. The *zemi* form breaks with the convention of reading left-to-right and top-to-bottom and asks the reader to focus on the epicenter and then trace each bending arm—to read from the center outward. The hurricane *zemi* Toro forges through his Table of Contents offers a precis on how to read in a multidirectional way so as to match the tempos and flows of Caribbean forms. The collection's center poem, "Epicenter: Caribbean Sea Crab Canon," is the only stand-alone poem, and it is centered on the page. It is bookended by three symmetrical sections: "Mosaic: *Zemís*," "Island: Palenques," and "Stereo: *Areytos*." If you read from the center outward, the order of the sections is inverted so that you read in this order: "Stereo: *Areytos*," "Island: Palenques," and "Mosaic: *Zemís*." This order corresponds to the collection's title, reinforcing that reading *Stereo. Island. Mosaic.* means reading the form of the hurricane *zemi*. To read the collection one must start at the epicenter and move outward in two directions at once, following hurricane *zemi*'s representation of the curvature of hurricane winds circulating around a central eye. When read this way, each of the three sections repeats in the same order. However, the poems in each section do not follow a pattern. There is both order and disorder. The hurricane *zemi* provides a shape and structure; but it is also a disorganizing form, through which certain poems repeat, as in the 4 *décimas* in the collection, but their repetition is irregular.

zemi sections a "gate to the spiritual world, the bridge between the material and the immaterial" ("Interview with Anderson"). Toro elaborates: "the figures I write about in these sections are my own personal bridges to the mythical or the divine." Some of the figures that appear in these poems are the painter Angel Rodríguez-Díaz, writer Eduardo Galeano, the rock band The Marz Volta, composer Chick Corea, and guitarist Paco de Lucia. He harnesses the poetic potential of the hurricane *zemi* beyond its literal shape and puts it to work for his own poetic explorations of relationships.

To understand the hurricane zemi as the central organizing form of the collection the reader must make an analytical adjustment. The hurricane zemi is a specifically Caribbean way of apprehending meteorological hurricanes. It highlights how the Taíno were attuned to Caribbean tempos and flows producing a circular form that Toro applies to the Table of Contents to break the linear presentation of poems that more often structures poetic works. As Chadwick Allen reminds, “Indigenous signs travel across generations . . . not to become enigmatic and dead, but rather to be (re)interpreted by readers who are multiply situated and multiply informed.” Toro adapts this indigenous form to retrain modern English-language reading conventions. Instead of linearity, the Table of Contents directs readers to multidirectionality. In describing *Stereo* as having a “Repeating Island structure” (“Interview with Adamo”), Toro explicitly draws on the sense of time advanced by Antonio Benítez-Rojo, explaining that “I wanted the book to unfold like time, or rather like the Caribbean notion of time . . . like waves, rolling in to shore and then back out again. For the Caribeño, time is not unidirectional” (“Interview with Anderson”). If you read from the center of the book outward, “the book has multiple beginnings and endings, moving forward and then reversing, evolving and then devolving, sometimes repeating itself” (“Interview with Adamo”). By patterning his poetry collection after Caribbean archipelagic flows and patterns, Toro shows an attunement to how “[t]he archipelago . . . becomes a geographic form that permits human temporalities to link up . . . with nonhuman temporalities that have traditionally been bracketed rather than grappled with in the humanities” (Roberts 20). The Table of Contents-as-hurricane zemi unites the repeating temporality and circular motion of tropical storms and hurricanes with the cultural rhythms of Caribbean literatures and oral traditions.

Toro's geo-formal poetics invests the zemi-as-poem with the capacity to weave together material and cultural meanings of the air. Toro's formalism responds to Kamau Brathwaite's provocation that "[t]he hurricane does not roar in pentameter" (265). His statement points to the need to read Caribbean climatological and literary forms together by foregrounding traditions that are indigenous to the region. Toro finds in the zemi an indigenous form with a shape, tempo and "a rhythm that approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience" (Brathwaite 265). The resuscitation of this indigenous Caribbean form links human and nonhuman rhythms in ways that advance anticolonial poetics and ecologies. Reading the hurricane zemi as the central geo-form of *Stereo*, reveals the power of this form to shape poetics such that the zemi can be understood to synchronize all the different kinds of poetics in the collection.

Hurricane Syncretism

The collection proceeds through a cacophony of poetic genres that pay tribute to the indigenous and colonial legacy of the Puerto Rican islands.⁹⁸ From Taíno areytos to Spanish colonial vox populi forms like the *décima* to dictionary entries to crab canons to concrete poems through what Toro calls other "underutilized" poetic forms, the collection testifies to the variety

⁹⁸ In drawing on Taíno zemis and areytos, Toro can forge an aesthetic lineage that links contemporary Puerto Ricans with their aboriginal roots. Such a desire to find inspiration and sustenance from the Taíno has a long history in Puerto Rico and in Puerto Rican literature. "Growing awareness of their pre-Columbian heritage has provided Puerto Ricans with a longer and more complete view of their past, apart from their colonial histories under Spain and the United States" (Duany 275). From the earliest attempts to recover Taíno culture to twentieth century nationalist movements, these recoveries have frequently been in the service of antiblackness, via the erasure of Afro-Puerto Rican history. Jorge Duany charts this intellectual history in *The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move*. However, much of popular enthusiasm for Taíno roots doesn't go much farther than locating the use of a few Taíno words like "huracan" or "hammock." As Duany's work reveals, people don't have a deep knowledge of Taíno heritage. An interesting counter perspective comes from current members of the Taíno nation: "rather than espouse the official rhetoric of the 'three roots' as the ethnic foundations of the Puerto Rican nation, members of the Taíno nation claim that their indigenous background takes precedence over their Spanish or African ancestry" (262). See especially Sherina Feliciano-Santos's *A Contested Caribbean Indigeneity*.

of Caribbean poetries. The Table of Contents-as zemi syncretizes these poetic histories and genres giving the collection the quality of “sometimes repeating itself (with subtle or not so subtle differences), and sometimes recasting itself as something entirely new” (“Interview with Adamo”). Toro turns to Taíno oral forms (like the areyto) and colonial era forms (like the *décima*) in order to resuscitate the germs of anticolonial struggle and alternative ways of making meaning at stake in them.

Revitalizing poetic forms is one of Toro’s primary objectives in writing *Stereo*. He explains that:

I made the decision to elevate the function of the poems by concentrating on form, form that would actually enrich the language and movement of the poems rather than flatten them, as some traditional poetic forms can do. But as my work has been a very conscious push back against American and Eurocentric traditions . . . I was adamant that the forms I chose for the poems would either be invented by me or come from relatively unknown or underutilized poetic forms and traditions. (“Interview with Adamo”)

Vocal about his frustration with the overrepresentation of the sonnet form in MFA workshops, for instance, Toro expresses a point similar to Brathwaite’s about the importance of local forms of expression for the Caribbean artist. In his essay, “History of the Voice,” Brathwaite advocates for “nation language” or a vernacular form of expression that emerges from subaltern Caribbean communities. In this formulation, Brathwaite searches for a kind of literary mimesis that can account for the Caribbean environment’s shaping of language, especially through the seasonal experience of hurricanes—including air, winds, and rain. Sonia Posmentier finds within Brathwaite a “future-oriented call for a circulatory, collective poetics that acknowledges the geographic range and the violence of the hurricane’s motion” (14). Toro’s emphasis on

incorporating forms from “underutilized” traditions is a conscious resuscitation of forms toward “future-oriented” anti-colonial ends in the line of Brathwaite’s “nation language” and formal experimentation.

The *décima* is one such underutilized form.⁹⁹ A ten-line stanza with a regular rhyme and meter, the *décima* was invented in Spain in the 16th century and it continues to find expression in a popular Puerto Rican musical style called the *plena*. Toro offers his readers a brief precis on the *décima* as part of the main text of *Stereo* (22). Literary scholar, Roberto Márquez recounts the long history of *décimas* as part of “a rich and fertile oral tradition of popular and anonymous verse” that was “first brought to the Americas by Spanish sailors, conquistadores, and settlers” (41). Like ballads, *décimas* were embedded in folk culture and would come to be considered “the characteristic modes of the rural and mountainous inland peasantry” (Márquez 41). Despite their Spanish origins, Márquez calls *décimas* a syncretic form that “blended, and merged with elements of indigenous (especially instrumental) custom and the various traditions and musical, vocal, and dance conventions brought to the island by African slaves.” In writing, it’s more challenging to locate the vestiges of indigenous and African musical or vocal improvisations, a point I will discuss in more detail later. As a syncretic form *décimas* signal an early and ongoing process of cultural change, from which Toro draws inspiration both in terms of content and in terms of rhyme and meter.

There are four *décimas* in *Stereo*, each focused on a different, subject, location, and time. They all share the same title, “*Décimarina*,” a portmanteau of “*décima*” and “*marina*.” *Marina* comes from the Latin, *marinas*, meaning “of the sea, maritime” and also refers to a shore or coast near the sea, sometimes built as a promenade (“*marina*”). The name suggests that each poem will

⁹⁹ Urayoán Noel is another contemporary Puerto Rican poet who is committed to resuscitating the *décima* form.

be a short, contained portrait, a ten-line snapshot of a place near or of the sea. The first, “*San Juan, 2010*” takes as its subject the 2010 student strikes at the University of Puerto Rico.¹⁰⁰ The poem satirizes the austerity measures ordered by the “simper[ing]” and “bloviat[ing]” Governor Luis Fortuño (22). The second *décima*, “*Queens, 1955*” is addressed to a “you” who is unnamed but stands in for a Puerto Rican who migrated from the island to New York City, also sometimes called a “diasporican.” The poem is a snapshot of a moment of increased Puerto Rican migration in the 1950s and describes the migrant as someone “Shipped as freight / from one isla to another” (37). The tone of the poem, like “*San Juan, 2010*,” is tense and critical, the perfect octosyllabic lines constraining language so that each line feels like a punctuated statement, as when the speaker asserts of the diasporican, “Your plot is re-soiled” (37). The proliferating meanings of “plot” and “soiled” express how the experience of diaspora affects both a sense of place and sense of self. “Plot” in this instance can refer to a sequence of narrative events, a secret plan, or a piece of land. The poem’s subject can be understood to have a new narrative plot and geography that responds to a US geo-political plot to industrialize Puerto Rico (Operation Bootstrap). The third *décima*, “*Rincon 1771*,” tells of a monumental event: the remuneration of land to former slaves. The plantation owner “returned to those who took care / of the land but who never shared / its bounty” (57). The poem quickly undercuts this act of reparation by qualifying that “In decades a brand / of migrants yearning to be tanned / will swipe it.” The victory of remuneration is undercut by the tourists and developers “swiping” the land.

The last *décima*, “*Guaorabo River, 1511*,” takes as its subject the lore of Diego Salcedo, a Spanish conquistador who was drowned by his Taíno guides who “were stricken with the urge to test / the Spaniard’s presumed deathlessness” (78). After the indigenous guides drown

¹⁰⁰ See Firuzeh Shokooh Valle.

Salcedo, they learn that “the ruse” that Spaniards are immortal is false and with their chief, Urayoán, conspire to rebel against the remaining conquistadors. This is the only *décima* with minor irregularities in rhyme and meter and is twice the length of the others (two stanzas rather than one). Also, unlike the other three *décimas*, “*Guaorabo River, 1511*” ends on a triumphant note the others lack:

The ruse
 was dispelled, the driven mule kicked,
 the cay shook as they raised the wick
 of rebellion and lit the fuse. (78)

That this poem doesn’t end in failure or resignation, suggests that even if the subject of “*Guaorabo River, 1511*” was only a moment in the past, the rebellion’s fuse is still lit. The enjambed lines and rhyme create a cadence, the rebellion raised and sustained through verse. This *décima* is also unique in being the only one named after a river and not a modern city or municipality. Its riparian setting occasions the rebellion that begins with the drowning of the Spaniard. The setting of Guaorabo River also unites the *décima* form with the watery “marina” of Toro’s portmanteau, “*décimarina*,” which holds multiple space-times of Puerto Rican life together (San Juan in 2010, Queens in 1955, and Rincon in 1771). Cumulatively, these *décimas* constellate issues of contemporary austerity and education, the experience of diaspora, dreams of equity and reparations for the enslaved, as well as Taíno uprisings. They elevate each moment in time into a larger archipelagic anticolonial history.

Toro’s “*Décimarina*” poems are found in the “Areyto” and “Palenques” sections of the collection, and, like the *décimas*, areyos and palenques are forms grounded in Caribbean history. The poetic qualities of areyos and palenques follow on Toro’s use of the aesthetic qualities of

the hurricane zemi and the *décimas*' emphasis on place. Reading from the epicenter poem outward, the reader first encounters sections called "areytos." Areytos (also spelled areito or areíto) were Taíno performances used to tell communal histories.¹⁰¹ Though written accounts of history remain the primary mode of transmitting history, the areyto calls forth another way: "a form of knowing as well as a system for storing and transmitting knowledge" especially through non-written practices (Taylor 18).

Clearly *Stereo* is a verbal and textual document. Yet it approximates the areyto in two ways. First, there are many poems that pay homage to performance artists, like Freddie Prinze, and other poems that champion the embodied and rhythmic tempo of music and dance ("To Governor Pezuela, on Banning the Merengue,"). Second, Toro writes several poems in the style of musical performances. There are poems called parrandas, which are celebratory social events in Puerto Rico that fall around Christmas. There are poems in the form of a threnody (a classical ode of lamentation), and poems called merenges, fugues, sonatas, and more that show the intersection and blending of the poetic and the performative. The aural and verbal qualities of these musical modes approximate the blended performance of the areyto.

Another grouping of poems, "Palenques," refers to maroon communities that formed during the colonial era, signaling the Afro-diasporic roots of Puerto Rican culture. Following on the Spanish *décima* and the Taíno areyto, the palenques sections evoke Puerto Rico's "three roots" discourse. As scholars such as Jorge Duany and Arlene Dávila have asserted, it is this

¹⁰¹ See Marquez, Taylor, Teglia, and Wallace. Much of what is currently known about areytos is discerned from the compromised accounts of Spanish colonials like Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdés, Bartolomé de las Casas, and Ramón Pané. Oviedo saw Taíno areytos as a stage in civilizational development, part of the transition from oral to written traditions. Oviedo was looking for the written transmission of history: "And on this island, as far as I have been able to find out, their chants, which they call *areytos*, are their only books or memorials to pass from person to person, from fathers to sons, from present to future generations, as will be explained here" (qtd in Marquez 7).

third, African root that is frequently erased.¹⁰² The term “palenque” was used during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (“palenque, n.”), a point in which escaped slaves in Puerto Rico would have likely been maritime maroons.¹⁰³ Historians have traced how fugitives fled by sea *to* the islands of Puerto Rico *from* the British and Dutch islands of the Lesser Antilles because of the brutalities of the plantation complex and rise of sugar cultivation on those islands. Ocean currents and winds favored their arrival in Puerto Rico, and there they found freedom and better resources, like land to grow food (Stark 559).¹⁰⁴ Many of these fugitives settled outside of San Juan in San Mateo de Cangrejos, which was recognized as a self-governing community in 1773 (Stark 558). Toro evokes these communities in poems addressed to maroons (“Crab Canon for The Marooned,” “Vox Populi for the Marooned”).¹⁰⁵ Palenques are not aesthetic forms in the same way as *zemis*, *décimas*, or *areytos*. Yet as with *zemis* and *areytos* the palenque expands the idea of what constitutes poetics. As sites of Black and Indigenous fugitivity, they point to a *poetics* of place, of making life outside of the confines of the plantation or colonial governance. Reading palenques alongside the extra-textual qualities of *zemis* and *areytos*, elevates the

¹⁰² Davila calls the “three roots” idea a “*metizaje* myth . . . that these strands have merged into a single ethnicity, the ‘Puerto Rican’” (13). Duany offers a similar evaluation: “Unfortunately, the largely positive attempt to recover the first root is often predicated on a denial of the third root of Puerto Rican culture” (271). However, there is a contemporary reevaluation and celebration of Afro-Puerto Rican identity. See Román and Flores. See also Duany, “Nuyorican and Diasporican Literature and Culture.”

¹⁰³ See Mintz on the nineteenth century emergence of the plantation system in Puerto Rico.

¹⁰⁴ The arrival of fugitive slaves to Puerto Rico continued until the end of the eighteenth century (Stark 560). On maroon communities see Stark 554. See also Jorge Chinaea on maroon communities and how colonial rivalries permitted them. Chinaea describes these maritime fugitives as “active agents who, notwithstanding insurmountable odds, labored energetically to recover and preserve their freedom” (53).

¹⁰⁵ Toro also engages with Afro diasporic traditions through the oral rhythms in poems like “Rumsong” whose opening lines use alliteration and punning, and repetition to humorous effect. Toro calls a Spring Break vacation a bacchanalia of “Belly bronzed bikini wasteland / of jello buck shots . . . the gleam of soaked / shirts and vomit as the spring / breakers bump stumps” (41). See Noel on Afro-Puerto Rican and Afro diasporic music and performance (xvii).

palenque to a poetic form, one that brings with it a repertoire of making meaning and making place. Read alongside areytos and décimas, the palenques point to a syncretization of cultural forms and histories. Toro's syncretism doesn't seek to incorporate all the fragments of history into a single narrative but to forge a poesis—the making and creating of worlds—in syncretizing underutilized forms.

Weathered Poems

The zemi as well as the concatenation of poetic forms that evoke a Caribbean sense of place contribute to Toro's geo-formal poetics. Another geo-formal element of the collection is its suggestion that ecological processes act on language. The central poem of *Stereo*—literally its “Epicenter”—underscores the ties between ecological and poetic forms and demonstrates how language composes worlds. Whereas several other poems in the collection show how coloniality decomposes worlds, “Epicenter” develops a materialist account of language central to Toro's effort to recompose worlds.

The “Epicenter” is a poem titled “Caribbean Sea Crab Canon.” It is organized into four columns: Ebb Tide and Huracan on one page and Meiosis and Flow Tide on the following page. This visual arrangement is significant as Toro originally conceived of this poem “as a mural” (“Interview with Adamo”). Approaching the poem as a mural emphasizes the cumulative visual image the columns produce. On the one hand the columns appear as vertical blocks of text, but on closer inspection each column is slightly different as the lineation changes. The columns' titles guide the reader to see *horizontal* and tidal movements between each column. Two tidal formations, ebb and flow tide, are the first and last columns of the poem. An ebb tide is a tide that recedes from the shoreline, and a flow tide is one that moves inland. On the first page's juxtaposed poems, Toro pulls the words of the second column to the left-hand side of the page,

as if they are being sucked out with the ebb tide. On the second page of the poem the words in the two columns drift to the right, or back in with the flow tide. This visual arrangement of words is key to understanding how this poem makes language material.

The second column, “Huracán,” makes clear the structural logic of the poem: all the words from one column are recycled in the next.¹⁰⁶ The poem offers three possible causes for this recycling: the movement of tides, the wind currents of the hurricane, and the process of cellular division called meiosis. From the first column to the second, the wind blows about all the words settling them in wild disarray in the second. In the column “Meiosis” words tumble from line to line down the page only to invert and tumble again down the column “Flow Tide.” The final lines of “Meiosis” (“all hallucinations / until) become the first lines of “Flow Tide” (“Until hallucinations, all”) and so forth. These wind-like movements and metamorphoses of words have a poetic source as well: the crab canon. A crab canon is a musical composition in which a piece is played forwards and then backwards, like a palindrome. The crab canon too cycles words and phrases, evoking the ecological and atmospheric cycling of tides and winds and the biological recycling of meiosis. Toro’s Caribbean ecologies are dexterous at moving bodies through them and restaging their materiality on the space of the page.

As these processes act on the words of the poem, new relationships between bodies and language emerge. First, these ecological processes act on the bodies of the “cimarrons” (Spanish for maroons) referenced in the first column, “Ebb Tide,” twining their bodies with the nonhuman surrounds. The opening lines tell of a shipwreck. The “sea swallowed” ship carried human cargo, “cimarrons,” who are metabolized by the sea and “emerge as oysters, / as barnacles clutching the

¹⁰⁶ The column “Ebb Tide” contains 72 words. In “Meiosis” and “Flow Tide” all 72 words are reordered. “Huracán” is the only column with significant variation: it only has 66 words. There is no logic to the 6 missing words. This column, more than the others, is concerned with spacing and alignment, which seems to overrule the significance of the absent words.

hull / of time” (51). The cimarrons are in transit from one island to the next, but being shipwrecked, their hope for freedom is cut short only to be realized through ecological processes. The column ends with the lines “All crawl / valiantly toward myth of palenques.” Though the maroons’ flight is stalled in the sea, their mission is taken up by the sea creatures that metabolize them. The result is ambivalent: the transformed cimarrons do not achieve their dream but they still “crawl / valiantly” in their metamorphosed forms. In this vision the sea is not a graveyard of lost life and dreams, but a place that holds room for and teems with the remainders of fugitivity. The remaining three columns further metabolize the narrative of the cimarrons via the hurricane, meiosis, and the flow tide. The syntax is disordered in lines like, “Until hallucinations, all ashore casts.” In other cases, the words jumble together, for instance: “Decks swallowed upon rapids of stroke” (52). “Caribbean Sea Crab Canon” conjoins issues of language and ecology by making words subject to ecological processes, preparing the reader to confront conjoined human and nonhuman histories, especially when these histories prove disastrous.

The key poem through which Toro syncs poetry and ecology is “Oxidation Mural of the Antilles.” The poem is a revision of Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem “Hugging the Jukebox.” Nye’s free verse poem is about a young boy named Alfred who hugs the jukebox as he belts out every song that plays. Meanwhile those around him prepare for a hurricane on the Honduran island of Utila. It is a gentle portrait of a child’s unbridled joy and pleasure. Toro’s poem completely erases Alfred from this portrait.

While Toro’s footnote indicates that this is an erasure poem, the poem’s title recodes erasure as “oxidation.” Conceptually, erasure poetry produces a new poem out of another by blacking out or redacting certain words and phrases often to highlight social or political issues. In calling his erasure a process of “oxidation,” Toro’s role as the poet is deemphasized; the

appearance or disappearance of words is relegated to a chemical process, oxidation, which is the process by which a molecule loses electrons. What is lost through oxidation is subsumed into another molecule in a process called reduction. Emphasizing “oxidation” here means that the processes acting on the words and figures within the poem do not “erase” the words but transform them. And Toro’s role as poet becomes one among many oxidizing processes.

In Toro’s “oxidation” of Nye’s poem, it is as if the child is lost to the storm that looms at the end of the original poem. The weathering of the storm sloughs away the primary human trace in the poem and leaves behind empty space. The jukebox remains, trumpeting its tunes in Spanish. Instead of Alfred’s voice, “the water / sings” and “the end of island life has been / scribbled on song” (76). In Nye’s poem, Alfred’s voice is unnaturally powerful; the speaker asks, “how can a giant whale live in the small pool of his chest?” In Toro’s poem, other sounds and voices fill the pages: the voice originally “trapped” in Alfred’s body is cut off in the lines: “this voice trapped in the” (75). Here a human voice is transformed into a more than human voice as Alfred passes into the ecological processes from which he derives and through which all life passes. There’s an ambivalence in the decentering of Alfred’s jubilant voice. Nye’s original poem is somewhat sentimental in its perspective in that its tender focus on Alfred verges on nostalgia. Toro’s oxidative process coverts this sentimental register into a more distant, flat seascape. The new poem created out of this biological process suggests that words can be bent or altered by the elements. Alfred is lost through oxidation, but his voice is a remainder, something that contributes to the ambivalence of this chemical process. “Oxidation Mural” experiments with bringing poetic form and the environmental surroundings closer together, as in the environmental qualities of Brathwaite’s “nation language” that can capture the roar of the hurricane or Robert’s “geo-formal” poetics which yoke geography and language.

Toro's experimentations with the materiality of language extend to capture the synesthesia of a mythic pre-contact Caribbean. In the poem, "Mythopoeia," which is dedicated to Brathwaite and Derek Walcott, Toro mimics the tropes and three-lined stanzas found within each's oeuvre. However, the content of the poem toggles between serious and bizarre cosmic events, inventing a myth out of the concerns of these foundational Caribbean writers. The primary issues "Mythopoeia" draws on are how indigenous and Afro-diasporic persons should contend with indigenous erasure in the New World—something Brathwaite and Walcott were philosophically at odds about—and the creation of a distinct Caribbean poetic or epic tradition.¹⁰⁷ Toro grounds these concerns in Puerto Rico, a location where the indigenous peoples are considered to have had a greater rate of survival from the colonial encounter; and in Puerto Rico, the literary culture has a history of mythologizing the Taíno.¹⁰⁸

Toro opens the poem by evoking an aboriginal artifact, what he calls a "Spear Sundial Compass Totem," a catch-all kind of artifact that takes the combined shape of all four talismanic items. This totem evokes the Taíno in a loose way, and the speaker says it "denot[es] demise of those dressed in pulp of cane / stalks . . . who swamdanced // through humid musk where the only exchange was a fair one" (47). This idyllic traditional world is captured through the synesthetic lines: "Foliage grew / from rainbows, meticulous mellow librettos of copper // citizens caught in a contradanza of sea and smoke." The visual (rainbows, copper, sea and smoke) blurs into the aural (mellow librettos, contradanza). The Eden of flamboyant plants and golden beings living at the edge of sea and land is torn apart by the arrival of a hurricane bringing with it "platoons of pale zombies" in their "wood fish." The "pale zombies" could be

¹⁰⁷ See Walcott's "The Muse of History" and "What the Twilight Says." And for comparison, Brathwaite's "Timehri."

¹⁰⁸ See Duany and Feliciano-Santos.

any European colonizing group, and the poem allows this generality to create an allegory of the colonial encounter. With the zombies' arrival the speaker recounts that "Land became merely a surface." After the arrival of the "pale zombies" the indigenous residents go into hiding for ten generations on the peak of El Yunque, a mountain in the rainforest in the northeast region of the main island of Puerto Rico. They survive in their maroon community for ten generations before being infiltrated by another "uninvited guest" who appears wearing "sheep's wool." This figure "conjur[es] thunder" and disappears all the elders and women from the tribe. But this second genocide is left unfinished, just like the first. By the final lines, "a green gurgling grew from below" in the night (48).

The mythopoeia lingers on colonial genocide as it repeats across generations. The myth forbodes a resurgence of a sound with color, "green gurgling," that is more in line with the synesthetic world before contact. This force is not "pale" or on the "surface." The residues of the past cannot be disappeared, but "gurgle" below ground despite colonial amnesia. And whereas for Brathwaite the indigenous past was an impediment to Black place-making and the Arawak peoples were perceived to be completely reduced, Toro leaves them an opening. He draws on a Puerto Rican literary tradition of Taíno recovery to keep pace with his wider Caribbean forebears and extends this recovery to fugitive slaves and children lost to contemporary storms. The gurgling, or living below the surface, resonates with the transformed cimarrons in the "Epicenter" poem and Alfred's oxidized voice in the erasure poem. Each poem points to a submerged and metamorphosed form of persons lost in maritime flight or the causalities of hurricanes. In affirming Roberts's assertion about what an archipelagic framework can offer—that is, a closer attunement to the cultural and ecological flows and patterns of the region—Toro also contributes to distinctly Puerto Rican critiques of colonialism's tempos and logics. At the

same time, he decenters colonialism as the object of these poems by instead turning very closely to the metabolic and ecological processes that act on bodies. These processes become his poetic method for composing the collection and his poems demonstrate how poetry makes language material.

“Pushing Across the Ethosphere”

Stereo offers few references to specific tropical storms or hurricanes, yet it is difficult not to read it in the context of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Toro’s second collection, *Tertulia*, published in 2020, more directly references storms though they move out of the center of his poetic project. Instead, Toro extends his investment in underutilized forms in poems called areytos and deepens the connection between environmental and economic disasters. Yet the resilience of trans-indigenous and anticolonial forms proffered by his hurricane syncretism in *Stereo* meets with the more humanistic emphasis that *Tertulia*—itself a Spanish word for a literary salon or gathering—offers readers. *Tertulia* prioritizes the sociality engendered by the literary arts. The poems of this collection generate a slightly different syncretism, one which stretches beyond the metabolic processes of land and water and reaches toward the atmospheres created by musical and theatrical performance as well as those atmospheres created by neoliberalism.

Across *Tertulia*’s five acts Toro includes a cycle of five poems called areytos. Areytos were a “compendium of all the choreographic, musical, and poetic art of the Antelleans” (Pedro Henríquez Ureña qtd in Márquez 3). The term “areyto” comes from an Arawakian word conquistadors used to “describe a collective act involving singing, dancing, celebration, and worship that claimed aesthetic as well as sociopolitical and religious legitimacy” (Taylor 15). Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor calls areytos a form of embodied repertoire within the

colonial archive. Recuperating the areyto “blurs all Aristotelian notions of discretely developed genres, publics, and ends. It clearly reflects the assumption that cultural manifestations exceed compartmentalization either by genre (song dance), by participant/actors, or by intended effect (religious, sociopolitical, aesthetic) that ground Western cultural throughout” (15). Taylor’s analysis is a powerful intervention because much of pre-contact and colonial-era cultural expressions were not tethered to the written word.¹⁰⁹ The performative nature of the areyto form lends Toro’s poems an atmospheric quality that extends beyond the textuality of the page.

Tertulia’s areytos prompt the reader to consider the performances of identity that constitute the US nation and its relationship to Puerto Rico. The first areyto, “Areyto for the Shipwrecked: Lost Articles,” is an erasure poem of a section of the Jones Act (1920). Toro’s note to the poem indicates that he excerpted a particular section of the Jones Act in which the US banned other nations from providing aid to Puerto Rico, (*Tertulia* 99-100).¹¹⁰ The poem’s mere thirteen words are scattered across a mostly blank page. Indeed, it is a smattering of lost articles: ten of the thirteen words are “the,” one instance of “an,” a single “a,” and the anomalous appearance of the word “alien” (15). The removal of all meaningful context combined with the string of detached articles makes the lone noun, “alien” stand out. In the context of a person’s immigration status, the word “alien” has a clearly derogatory and legal tone; yet the status of Puerto Ricans as US citizens pushes the meaning closer to the generalized othering of non-white persons that continues to drive US policy regarding Puerto Rico’s territorial status. Yet the

¹⁰⁹ Taylor describes the rift between indigenous knowledge and performance and colonial logocentrism this way: “The rift, I submit, does not lie between the written and spoken word, but between the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)” (19).

¹¹⁰ On the Jones Act and its implications see Christina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall’s edited volume, *Foreign in a Domestic Sense*.

decontextualized word can also productively recast the Jones Act as an alien force in Puerto Rico. The exclusionary political atmosphere in which the Jones Act was created is replaced by an anticolonial atmosphere in which US policy is the alien other, a perspective that is made possible by the erasure of the original text.¹¹¹

The final areyto in the collection, “Areyto for the Shipwrecked:” is a double feature with two sections each with different subjects. The first section, “The Case for Spanglish”, a half-page prose poem, returns Toro’s collection to a founding concern of Nuyorican poetics: bilingualism. In this section, Spanish words are described as more rich and powerful than their English counterparts. For instance, the speaker compares the Spanish and English words for heart while describing their grandfather: “Because a corazón is more resilient than a heart. Because when my abuelo’s spleen ruptured right there on Queens Boulevard he yanked himself up with nothing but smog to hold onto and walked home fifteen blocks before eventually collapsing on the bathroom floor” (96). As the poem builds, the speaker asserts the vigor and fulgent liveliness of his kin by mapping their strength onto the Spanish language words he uses to describe them. By writing in a blend of Spanish and English, the poet valorizes not only Spanish words but by using English Toro also expands on and deepens the imagery of the poem as when the speaker describes, in English, his grandfather who survives a major medical emergency by “yank[ing] himself up with nothing but smog to hold onto.” In this way, it’s the speaker’s verbal dexterity in two languages which makes the “case” for Spanglish. The final section, “*Quenepas*” is a playful ode to the quenepas fruit, or Spanish lime. Quenepas are so ubiquitous that they are described as “erupting,” “fueling,” “squirting,” “reaching,” and “adorning” all aspects of Puerto Rican life

¹¹¹ Another of *Tertulia*’s areytos deploys a dual formal structure. In “Areyto for the Shipwrecked: LatinX the Unknown” the poem utilizes the rhyme scheme of a *décima* in addition to the performative qualities of the areyto.

(97). In the final poem in the collection, Toro returns the reader to an ecopoetical concern that traverses his poetries: that of the ecological beauty, fortitude, and cultural value of Puerto Rican ecology via a fruit that sustains both biological and cultural life on the islands and across the diaspora. Between the two sections of this single poem, the reader encounters a linguistic and an ecological reality of Puerto Ricanness with the *areyto* form joining the two. The *areyto* is deployed as an elegy for and an invitation directed at the “shipwrecked,” a designation which could signal the *cimarrons* of *Stereo* or the Puerto Rican diaspora “shipwrecked” on the shores of the mainland US.

Tertulia is also an intensified expansion of the ecopoetics of *Stereo*, one that shows how poetry, far from being apolitical, contributes to anticolonial thinking by scaling between the particularities of Puerto Rico to the more atmospheric conditions of neocolonialism in the Caribbean. *Tertulia* directly addresses this connection in a poem titled “On Money” in which Toro riffs on the ways that monetary transactions, though seemingly ephemeral electronic funds transfers, are in fact acting on the atmosphere. He writes that:

Money has become the weather, a collection of unruly
environmental conditions pushing across the
ethosphere. (50)

The kind of neoliberal economies critiqued by the poem are not “like” the weather; they have the status of *being* the weather. The lines suggest a historical shift; money wasn’t *always* the weather but “has become” the weather. Toro reinterprets Marx’s oft cited phrase, “all that is solid melts into air,” by showing how what has “melted into air” has not disappeared or become ephemeral. In directing readers to winds and other aerial phenomena, Toro points the reader to the material effects—the “collection of unruly / environmental conditions”—of the US’s neoliberal policies

which have suffused life so thoroughly as to become the weather, affecting both the mood and actual climate of a place. Seemingly imperceptible digital money transfers actually materialize in Caribbean weather:

migration of symbols, of artificial signifiers, instantly materializes
 and disappears from one spatiotemporal
 location to another causing
 droughts, floods fallouts
 sandstorms
 and, on rare occasions,
 sunshine. (50)

Toro suggests that everything from individual greed to US neoliberalism has forged a kind of economic/environmental continuum. This continuum is a “pushing” or atmospheric reengineering of the “ethosphere.” Punning on the levels of Earth’s atmosphere and “ethos” as character and governing spirit, Toro proposes a new term that composes the weather and culture of place in order to critique the seemingly limitless, borderless economies that provide comforts and wealth on the mainland but produce stormy weather in Puerto Rico.

Toro elaborates on the materiality of air in another poem, “Puerto Rico Is Burning Its Dead,” to elegize the loss of this “ethos-here.” The title comes from a post-Maria article that reported that crematoriums were directed to burn the bodies of people who died from complications following the storm, but not to count their deaths in the official record (Prakash). This burning and not-documenting the dead continued for weeks after Maria’s landfall. It creates a scenario in which deaths cease to “matter” in an official capacity, as the agencies “expung[e] each loss from the sum total” (13) and debate “what is a person / and what is collateral” (14).

Toro laments the “converting kin into ether” that was deemed necessary in the wake of the storm.¹¹² In their conversion from “kin into ether” the dead leave material traces, even if they are “expelled data.” The wind is a driving force in the poem, from the turbulence of the hurricane to the winds that carry the dead’s remains. The dead do not disappear but are converted from one body to another: “the sky / replete with muted quarter tones of lamenting / townsfolk destined to live as smoke” (13). This volume of people being cremated causes other effects: “Tonight Tres Picachos is nine feet closer / to the exosphere, hoisted by the monolith / of undocumented skulls accruing at its saddle.” The land itself—one of the highest peaks in Puerto Rico—rises even higher in the sky to touch the very edge of the Earth’s atmosphere. The land rises to meet the sky and human remains meet as skulls and smoke. In death these bodies continue to matter, in the literal sense that they are carried, as ash, to circulate through the islands and as high as the exosphere. Meanwhile, grief-stricken loved ones debate whether the deaths were caused by the “hurricane or insouciance” of the US government. Toro’s elegy holds together the dead in tribute as they continue to “matter” in the world, and levels a critique at the economic and political logics by which the dead are expunged from life and formal records.

Through these post-Maria poems, Toro conjoins the materiality of language developed in *Stereo* to contemporary transformations of the air brought about by neoliberal economics. While transformations of air and atmosphere are typically discussed within the Environmental Humanities under the umbrella of Anthropocene discourse, Toro’s Nuyorican and Latinx environmentalism recenters ongoing coloniality as the necessary lens through which to view and understand atmospheric crisis. In an essay for the *#PoetsforPuertoRico* special edition of *Kweli*

¹¹² The number of fatalities caused by the storm is still debated, though it is greater than 4,500. Hurricane Maria is significant for the total destruction it caused on the island—as of November 9, 2017 (nearly 2 months after the hurricane’s landfall), only 18% of the island had working electricity (Irfan). See also Bonilla *Aftershocks*.

Journal, Toro creates a direct line between colonial governmentality and hurricanes. He describes the situation post-Maria as one in which Puerto Ricans mobilize for their own solidarity against a background of economic and environmental disasters: “As the colonizing government has exacerbated the crisis by implementing draconian neoliberal policies (Puerto Rico was struck by two hurricanes recently—the first being the PROMESA bill) while aggressively refusing to commit to relief efforts, Puerto Ricans from all over the world have come together to provide aid” (*#PoetsforPuertoRico*). Toro’s “two hurricanes” are PROMESA and Maria. PROMESA, or the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act of 2016, was a widely criticized piece of legislation that created an oversight board tasked with restructuring Puerto Rico’s debt by enacting sweeping austerity measures.¹¹³ The statement, “Puerto Rico was struck by two hurricanes recently,” is not a metaphor or analogy. Toro does not have to use metaphoric language to bring two disparate things (money and weather) closer together by saying “money is *like* the weather” or “the PROMESA bill was like a hurricane.” He has already established the imbrication of money and the weather through a distinctly Puerto Rican critical analysis of the matrix of race, capitalism, debt, and environment akin to Bonilla’s “coloniality of disaster” frame.¹¹⁴ In this way, Toro crystalizes the point in the poem “On Money” that “Money has become the weather.”

Toro also draws on conventional poetic devices to resist affective panic or resignation—the “shock and awe” of disaster capitalism, for instance—and foster the resilience he sees in Puerto Rican global solidarity. He ends the poem, “Puerto Rico Is Burning Its Dead,” with a litany:

¹¹³ See the *Puerto Rico Syllabus*.

¹¹⁴ See also Raquel Salas Rivera’s *lo terciario / the tertiary* (2018).

...The subcontractors
 have all walked off the job as the bereaved
 keep counting. Keep foraging. Keep shipping
 rations. Keep coming coast and summit
 for every vanished tía. Keep mourning this
 brownout with luster like aurora borealis. (14)

At first the repetition of phrases beginning with “keep” appears to be a list of activities “the bereaved” continue to do in the wake of state negligence. These actions are written with a combination of the imperative mood (“keep”) and the continuous present (“counting”).¹¹⁵ This means that the litany also has the effect of being a series of commands that begins with specific grassroots mobilizing (“counting”) and fugitive acts (“foraging”). As the list builds, the actions extend through Puerto Rican diaspora networks (“Keep shipping rations” and “Keep coming coast and summit”). While the list of commands grows, so does the length of each phrase, Toro even slipping into Spanish (“tía”) to mark the intimacy of these diaspora networks. The last action, “mourning,” opens the longest sentence in the litany and signals the persistent grief that follows on the “brownout”—a word that points to the energy outages that followed Maria and that puns on “brown” as an ethnic marker and the dead the poem elegizes. Finally, the last lines of the poem reach upwards into the Earth’s atmosphere to compare these efforts at recovery and solidarity with the beauty of aurora borealis, the dancing lights caused by solar winds. The poem thus transforms a headline—“Puerto Rico Is Burning Its Dead”—into an elegy in which remains of the dead become a lustrous “brownout,” a stunning atmospheric spectacle.

¹¹⁵ Cf Bonilla on waiting in “The Coloniality of Disaster

Toro's poetry collections show the dual necessity of critique and resilience through the poetic arts.¹¹⁶ "Puerto Rico Is Burning Its Dead" critiques the way that disaster capitalism converts "kin into ether" but then recasts the "ether" from "muted quarter tones of lamenting" to an "aurora borealis." As Toro uses figurative language to reassemble the dead from ash into light, he also performs an affective transformation. The poem offers readers a way of conceptualizing and making meaning and feeling from headline, "Puerto Rico Is Burning Its Dead." The materiality of language is joined by the affective work of resilience and critique. These two transformations—the material and affective—occur at the same time. The litany of rituals to guide the living emphasize how the air becomes material in both a physical and social sense. The elegiac tone of the poem and the litany of phrases and activities demonstrates how resilience is a practice of diaspora communities. Resilience, to follow Toro's lead, is less a return to some "pre-disaster" state, and instead a very material thing ("counting," "foraging," and "shipping") as well as a "capacity for joy" and love in the face of ongoing debasement.¹¹⁷ He clarifies his position further in his essay saying: "Hurricane Maria has only amplified these qualities inside us. . . . A hurricane rattles us, a regime attempts to erase us along with our three thousand dead, the 'suffering comes unabated,' and our response is to 'flourish,' to 'rise,' with

¹¹⁶ Nelson Maldonado-Torres affirms the value of critique in his "Afterward" to the *Aftershocks* collection, "because it indicates a shift from considering a crisis, disaster, or catastrophe, as a natural event to approaching it instead as connected to human intervention or sociohistorical forces" (332).

¹¹⁷ Bonilla and others have criticized the state's cooption of the language of resilience in the wake of Hurricane Maria as a way to further shirk its social responsibility. See Omar Pérez Figueroa and Bolívar Aponte Rolón for a longer discussion of resilience, especially how the term derives from the field of ecology. Figueroa and Rolón explain how the idea of resilience has been imprecisely applied to human populations following dramatic social upheavals.

jubilance and fulgent intellect” (#*PoetsforPuertoRico*).¹¹⁸ Toro’s response to Hurricane Maria fosters an affective state that sanctions Puerto Ricans’ self-reliance and flourishing, and which also inspires joy. This vision of flourishing goes hand in hand with the materiality of language across Toro’s body of work because it too yokes ecology and aesthetics, as in the luster of the aurora borealis or Puerto Rican’s “fulgent intellect.” In tandem with indigenous Caribbean knowledges, Afro-diasporic history, and ecological processes indexed in *Stereo*, Toro inspires relation across the diaspora and crafts an anticolonial hurricane formalism to counteract the coloniality of disaster.

Through poems like this one, *Tertulia* extends the hurricane formalism of *Stereo*, which took its shape from the hurricane zemi, to emphasize further the aesthetic-affective dimensions of Puerto Rican poetic and performance forms. Toro, thus, contributes to this dissertation’s goal of tracing ecological aesthetics and affects. In his poetry collections, the air becomes perceptible through storms that have powerful material impacts as well as metaphoric significance. He uses ancient forms like the Taíno hurricane zemi to show how the wind shapes aesthetic production. The turbulent air is also the site of Toro’s more strident commentary on the legacies of colonialism, US neocolonialism, and the economization of life. Toro’s “ethosphere” is an environmental-economic continuum in which the air is saturated with the ashes of persons lost to the storm and subsequent state negligence. Human remains become atmospheric phenomena—as imperceptible, ephemeral, and ubiquitous as instant monetary transactions. If Kamau Brathwaite noticed how “the unity is submarine,” meaning that there is a coherent Caribbean despite the fragmentation of islands, nations, languages. The unity comes from the shared experience of the

¹¹⁸ See Bonilla who elaborates on the relationship of disaster and debt in Puerto Rico. Several poets in the *Kweli Journal* response to Hurricane Maria use analogy to draw connections between US imperialism and tourism and the hurricane.

sea. But Toro notices the unity that coalesces in the air. For Toro, the weather of the Caribbean is driven by the technofuture of borderless capitalism yet also driven by the rage and resilience of those living in and through it. The affective turbulence produced by and in response to neocolonialism is the ethosphere of the present.

Chapter 4

Creoles in Space: Language and Genre in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*

Nalo Hopkinson is an award-winning writer of speculative fiction who blends Caribbean island and urban Canadian landscapes as well as Black, Caribbean, and queer perspectives.¹¹⁹ Born in Jamaica, Hopkinson has lived in Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Canada, and most recently the US. Hopkinson's second novel, *Midnight Robber* (2000), takes the pressing concerns about the atmosphere's turbulent relation to coloniality that I explored in the last chapter and blasts off. Using the tropes of speculative fiction and what Hopkinson calls "fabulist" writing, *Midnight Robber* seeks a post-Earth future for multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-linguistic Caribbean peoples.¹²⁰ Hopkinson locates this future on two new grounds: Toussaint, the planet colonized by former Caribbean peoples, and New-Half-Way Tree, Toussaint's penal colony. The novel's protagonist, Tan-Tan, lives on Toussaint with her father, Antonio, until he murders another man and the two are forced to flee. She comes of age in exile on New Half-Way Tree where she befriends Chichibud, a representative of an indigenous species called douen, who helps her escape her sexually abusive father. After she kills her father in self-defense, Tan-Tan goes to live with Chichibud and the douen. She even learns their language,

¹¹⁹ *Midnight Robber* has been shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick Award, the James R. Tiptree J. Award, the Nebula Award, the Starburst Award, and the Hugo Award.

¹²⁰ I use the umbrella term, "speculative fiction" to describe Hopkinson's work, though I also discuss science fiction tropes in *Midnight Robber*. I am less interested in parsing generic traits than I am in the aesthetics of a particular kind of non-realist mode. Using the term "fabulist" is one way out of this definitional problem for Hopkinson. Commenting on her edited collection, *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root*, Hopkinson says: "For myself, what I was trying to do with my anthology is to reveal that hybrid place where magical realism (an 'othering' term in itself, since it's so often used to refer to and exoticize fantastical fiction by hot country peoples), genre science fiction, and fantasy coexist" ("Making" 105). On the relationship between genre fiction and race, see André Carrington's *Speculative Blackness*.

which is typographically marked with bold text. Unlike the human colonizers of Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree who re-enact the colonial encounter by decimating the indigenous flora and fauna of these planets, Tan-Tan seeks a different mode of relation with her environment.¹²¹ Tan-Tan befriends and cohabitates with the douen, gaining strength from their kinship to transform into the figure of the Robber Queen.

As the Robber Queen, Tan-Tan draws on syncretic Caribbean folk traditions that are again syncretized to this post-Earth setting. The Robber King derives from the Jonkonnu celebration, a syncretic Anglo-Caribbean carnivalesque practice dating back to the eighteenth century.¹²² Tan-Tan dons the costume of the Robber King and transforms into the Robber *Queen*. She wears “a velvet sombrero, brim a metre wide, trimmed with pom-poms and papier-mâché skulls all round; leather chaps with plenty fringe; a noisemaker and fake guns” (314). As the Robber Queen, Tan-Tan cuts a fine figure and metes out justice in different settlements on New Half-Way Tree using her sharp tongue: “Power coursed through Tan-Tan, the Robber Queen’s power—the power of words: ‘I you will never catch, for I is more than a match; I will duck your base canards; I will flee and fly to flee again.’ Nanny, sweet Nanny, yes. Tan-Tan bad inna Robber Queen stylee” (319). Tan-Tan shows bravado in the rhyming lines, “I you will never catch, for I is more than a match.” She rebuffs those who would spread rumors about her or otherwise assault her, and she dexterously turns the word “flee” into “fly” and back to “flee” again to demonstrate her ability to escape capture. Language is a source of personal power for Tan-Tan, placing *Midnight Robber* in a tradition following feminists like Audre Lorde, who emphasize voice and speaking out against systems of oppression. The narrator comments on

¹²¹ On the problem of colonization in *Midnight Robber* see Jillana Enteen, Jessica Langer, and Ingrid Thaler.

¹²² On Jonkonnu, see Jenna M. Gibbs; Peter Reed; and Sylvia Wynter, “Jonkonnu in Jamaica.”

Tan-Tan's verbal agility using a Jamaican Creole expression, saying that Tan-Tan has a "bad . . . stylee." The narrator's description reinforces Tan-Tan's verbal power, effectively doubling down on Tan-Tan's linguistic creativity using a Creole English. Linguistic creativity is the route to Tan-Tan's transformation and the basis for the novel's aesthetic transformation of the science fiction genre.

Midnight Robber syncretizes Caribbean language and aesthetic practices in an extra-terrestrial setting where its characters create a new society by yoking past traditions and histories to technological innovations. On Toussaint, Caribbean peoples celebrate Jonkonnu and give thanks to Granny Nanny for their liberation from enslavement and from Earth:

Time to give thanks to Granny Nanny for the Leaving Times, for her care, for life in this land, free from downpression and botheration. Time to remember the way their forefathers had toiled and sweated together: Taino Carib and Arawak; African; Asian; Indian; even the Euro, though some wasn't too happy to acknowledge that-there bloodline. All the bloods flowing into one river, making a new home on a new planet. Come Jonkanoo Week, tout monde would find themselves home with family to drink red sorrel and eat black cake and read from *Marryshow Mythic Revelations of a New Garveyite: Sing Freedom Come*. (18)

The people of Toussaint fashion a world and words for their own flourishing, a world free of "downpression and botheration." Rather than combat the catastrophic technologies of colonialism and racialization (and their ecological impacts) on Earth, Hopkinson instead finds liberation for her characters on new grounds. "Caribbean peoples' departure from Earth [is] the ultimate act of marronage," argues Kate Perillo (6). It is "a wholesale rejection of the inequalities generated by past and present iterations of the Plantation" (Perillo). In this world, echoes of the

past—like forced labor and the Jonkonnu celebrations—remain, but their meaning is reconfigured. Racial and ethnic groups no longer compete in what Jodi Byrd terms the “cacophony of empire”; instead, all groups that “toiled and sweated together” now “flo[w] into one river.”¹²³ Hopkinson also references anticolonial figures like Toussaint Louverture, Granny Nanny (the eighteenth-century Jamaican maroon leader), T.A. Marryshow (called the father of the West Indies Federation), and Marcus Garvey (Pan-Africanist and founder of the Black Star Line) who are folded into the Jonkonnu tradition.

From this new ground Hopkinson forges a Creole futurism, a syncretic Caribbean perspective on technoculture. I use the word “Creole” instead of “Caribbean” to emphasize how *Midnight Robber* is driven by the linguistic creativity that emerges out of a Caribbean geography.¹²⁴ In *Midnight Robber*, Hopkinson incorporates Trinidadian and Jamaican Creoles and, from these languages, crafts an entirely new mode of communication called Nannysong, the programming language of Toussaint’s sentient AI, Granny Nanny. The text’s various Creoles synthesize the past, present, and future of Caribbean peoples—from the Creoles that developed during colonization, to twentieth century developments in language like Dread Talk, the language of the Rastafari, to the creation of novel coding languages like Nannysong. Hopkinson, thus, challenges readers to embrace a vision of futurity in which the past and present are not left behind or overshadowed by a demand for newness.

¹²³ In conversation about her anthology of Caribbean speculative fiction, *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root*, Hopkinson says that she seeks to “complicate an idea that I encounter in the north, that ‘Caribbean’ equals ‘black’” (“Making” 105).

¹²⁴ Hopkinson’s novel also expands the geography of Afrofuturist writing to include the multiethnic and multiracial Caribbean. Perillo describes Caribbean “science fictional thought” as anticolonial “in which considerations of racial justice are deeply engaged with but not limited to blackness: only within certain colonial ideologies is Caribbean culture the opposite of technoculture” (3).

Through its Creoles and Hopkinson's invention of Nannysong, *Midnight Robber* makes linguistic multiplicity a key problem of science fiction writing. In doing so, Hopkinson joins Afrofuturist artists like Octavia Butler and Sun Ra who explore Black futures in space and especially Samuel R. Delany whose fiction and essays routinely explore the connections among language, race, and genre fiction.¹²⁵ The science fiction genre allows Hopkinson to comment on the role that Creoles have to play in the political, technological, and environmental future of the Caribbean. Creoles are not separate from or incidental to the future, be that a science fictional future or the near future of impending climate disaster on Earth. Rather, following on Édouard Glissant's argument in *Poetics of Relation*, Creoles are essential for imagining and enacting anticolonial politics that counter the climate futures imposed on the region. Glissant calls for the development of "ethnotechniques," or tools for fostering Relation and creating the conditions for flourishing (in contradistinction to the developmental fantasies of neocolonial powers or global financial institutions). Through ethnotechniques, "choices of development would be adapted to the real needs of a community and to the protected landscape of its surroundings. . . . The promotion of languages is the first axiom of this ethnotechnique" (108). Hopkinson's fiction upholds linguistic multiplicity and creates a science fictional ethnotechnique in Nannysong. These languages are the route to Caribbean futures in the "protected landscape" of Toussaint's and New Half-Way Tree's new surrounds. Moreover, Hopkinson uses Creoles to craft a literary atmosphere in which diasporic readers can find the sounds and patterns of speech of Caribbean peoples within a genre dominated by standardized English.

¹²⁵ See also Sheree Renée Thomas's *Dark Matter* (2000) and Carrington.

Creole Language Aesthetics

The narrative of *Midnight Robber* is told in a blend of Trinidadian and Jamaican Creoles as well as Standard English. The variety of Englishes in the novel reflects the modes of communication that emerged from European colonization and the enslavement of African and Indigenous persons. As literacy and composition scholar Vivette Milson-Whyte shows, in the Caribbean “Standard Englishes exist side by side and are almost symbiotically linked with nonstandardized local Creole Englishes (that is, languages that developed in the colonial era from the contact of English with numerous African languages spoken by black Caribbean peoples’ slave ancestors)” (ix). In addition to writing in Standard English and Creole Englishes, Hopkinson references other Creoles like Papiamentu, a Portuguese and Spanish Creole spoken in the Dutch Caribbean.¹²⁶

Writing in Creole is a political and aesthetic choice. There are challenges to writing in Creole, such as its possible illegibility to a predominantly North American audience.¹²⁷ But communicating in Creole is inescapable for Hopkinson because of “the obvious fact that Creole speakers have the majority status within the [Caribbean]” (Barbara Lalla qtd in Bertacco 19). Simona Bertacco clarifies that “Creole permeates the very act of writing in the Caribbean even

¹²⁶ See Salikoko S. Mufwene who analyzes why there aren’t more Portuguese and Spanish Creoles and why those that did emerge did so mainly outside of plantation zones in contradistinction to English and French Creoles (“Latin America”).

¹²⁷ Creoles lexically stand apart from standardized English in written texts. As Barbara Lalla observes, “Creole and non-Creole speakers and writers from within the Caribbean and from abroad have long associated code choice in Caribbean discourse with notions of realism” (174). It has long been the case that Standard English is considered unmarked in speech and text, especially for monolingual English readers (Lalla 175). Lalla questions the extent to which artists incorporate marked Creole in order to achieve a “virtual realism” for a “reader who is a non-speaker” or create a “mental shift” for Creole speaking readers (179). Hopkinson has discussed how choosing to write in Creoles meant that she constantly navigated readers expectations, particularly managing monolingual English readers willingness to read nonstandardized English.

when that writing is not in Creole or not only in Creole” (20). In several interviews, Hopkinson describes why writing in Creoles is important, as it contributes to a tradition of Jamaican writers, like Louise Bennett, writing in Jamaican Creole. Like Bennett, Hopkinson seeks to challenge what counts as “good” writing—both in terms of language and in terms of subject matter. Hopkinson observes that “there’s still an uneasiness around vernacular speech, especially black vernacular speech. In this part of the world it can be seen as disrespectful to represent it” (“Speaking in Tongues” 600).¹²⁸ Breaking the shame around Creole speech helps to break the myth that there is such a thing as “unadorned English,” as Hopkinson says (“Speaking in Tongues” 601). Instead, Hopkinson wants to ensure that “Creoles can be accorded the full status of languages” (“Conversation”).¹²⁹

Midnight Robber not only elevates the status of its various Creoles but invites a consideration of the unique affordances of Creole languages. Dread Talk has heavily influenced Jamaican Creole, and elements of Dread Talk can be found throughout *Midnight Robber*.¹³⁰ Linguist Velma Pollard argues that “Dread Talk is a comparatively recent adjustment of the lexicon of Jamaican Creole” and that it represents “an example of lexical expansion within a Creole System” (*Dread Talk* 18, 4). One of the affordances of Creoles, according to Pollard, is

¹²⁸ On the politics, especially class politics, of Jamaican Creole in Jamaica, see Pauline Christie’s *Language in Jamaica* (2003) and Christie’s article “Whither English in the Caribbean” in Jeannette Allsopp and John R. Rickford’s edited volume, *Language, Culture and Caribbean Identity* (2012).

¹²⁹ What constitutes a “language” (instead of a dialect, creole, patois, pidgin, or vernacular) is debated by sociolinguists. I refer to Jamaican Creole as a Creole *language* following contemporary scholars like Michel DeGraff and Hopkinson’s own usage in order to elevate Creole from the lesser status of dialect or its perceived inferior social status. I also use the term “register” when referring to the way that language use shifts in different contexts. See DeGraff’s discussion of “Creole Exceptionalism,” Peter Patrick’s article on Jamaican Patwa; Biber and Conrad’s *Register, Genre, and Style*; and Donald Winford’s scholarship on Caribbean Creoles.

¹³⁰ Across Pollard’s scholarship, she emphasizes the reach of Dread Talk beyond the Rastafari movement and outside of Jamaica.

the way that speakers of Dread Talk create new words that unite the word's sound and symbolic meaning ("Sound and Power" 61). For instance, words like "downpression" and "botheration"—words that Hopkinson uses to describe colonialism and its aftermaths—"bear the weight of their phonological implications" (Pollard, *Dread Talk* 72). A word like "oppression," with its emphasis on "op" (which sounds like "up"), is inadequate to expressing the situation of people who are systemically *downtrodden*. The emphasis on "down" in "downpression" conveys greater somatic and affective weight. Thus, speakers of Dread Talk stitch together the sound, feeling, and symbolic meaning of words to actively remake language to suit their political and cultural ends. Rasta language proposes a conjunction of word and world through which we can understand how what is "in the air" catalyzes linguistic innovation and creates words that echo their socio-political context. The conjunction of sound and feeling leads Pollard to call the "language . . . the organ of the movement" (*Dread Talk* 83). Rex Nettleford goes even farther to claim that "The Rastafarians are *inventing* a language, using existing elements to be sure, but creating a means of communication that would faithfully reflect the specificities of their experience and perception of self and the world" (qtd in Pollard 6-7, emphasis added). In these linguists' view, Dread Talk is not only a "full" language; it is a twentieth century communication technology that contributes to a subaltern politics and aesthetics that travels beyond its origins.¹³¹

From the opening pages of the *Midnight Robber*, Hopkinson introduces Creoles and Creole storytelling as the "organ" of the novel. The narrative begins as an oral story addressed to an unknown interlocutor: "Oho. Like it starting, oui? Don't be frightened, sweetness; is for the best. I go be with you the whole time. Trust me and let me distract you little bit with one anansi story" (1). The narrator's Creole English interpolates the reader by calling out "Don't be

¹³¹ "The cultural movement that is Rastafari is perhaps the boldest statement of rejection of the values associated with European supremacy to have been made anywhere in the New world" (Pollard 83).

frightened, sweetness” and invites the reader to *listen*, to hear the story being told.¹³² Readers will quickly recognize that the narrator is an Anansi figure as well: “Maybe I is a master weaver. I spin the threads. I twist warp ’cross weft. I move my shuttle in and out, and smooth smooth, I weaving you my story, oui?” (3). The spider-storyteller-trickster Anansi of Jamaican and West African folklore weaves the story of the folk heroine, Tan-Tan the Midnight Robber. In just the first few pages Hopkinson establishes Creole storytelling as a narrative organ. Like a musical instrument, Hopkinson’s prose generates a sonic atmosphere in which Anansi weaves an oral and participatory narrative in order to shape a Creole-based science fiction world.

The reader knows that this story is a science fictional story because of the neologisms that announce that it takes place in a technologically advanced setting. Hopkinson’s neologisms combine the affordances of Dread Talk with the science fiction trope of advanced technology. For instance, people of Toussaint are connected to the AI that runs their society through cranial implants called “earbugs” (5). Machines that are not connected to this AI are called “headblind,” as are people who remove their earbugs (4). Like Dread Talk words, Hopkinson’s neologisms “bear the weight of their phonological implications.” An “implant” is a medically implanted device. But Hopkinson calls implants “earbugs,” a word that evokes a chirruping creature nestled inside a person’s ear. Words like earbug and headblind are Creole-science-fictional neologisms; they convey their meaning through their acoustic resonances, as in “earbug” or through a kind of visual-auditory synesthesia, as in “headblind.” The reader is invited to listen to the story and experience a synergy between word and world derived from Creole language practices in service of Hopkinson’s science fiction world building.

¹³² For an example of Hopkinson code-switching between Jamaican and Trinidadian Creoles, see Enteen 267.

Hopkinson's Creoles fuel the novel's greatest innovations: the 'Nansi Web and Nannysong. Toussaint is powered by the Grande Nanotech Sentient Interface, aka Granny Nansi's Web (10). The 'Nansi Web, sometimes also referred to as Granny Nanny, is a sentient technology that ran the "nation ships" that left Earth for Toussaint. When Toussaint was founded nanomites "seeded" the people, tools, buildings, and the land of Toussaint (10). These nanomites are literal pieces of Granny Nanny, her "hands and her body." Granny Nanny is infused in the lands and peoples like a rhizome and her knowledge of her people stretches like a web. Moreover, the 'Nansi Web takes its name from the master storyteller, Anansi, whose web becomes "one enormous data-gathering system" (10). The 'Nansi Web drives communication technologies like earbugs as well as the mechanical technologies that keep people free from performing hard labor.¹³³ People are connected to each other through their earbugs, giving them access to the 'Nansi Web. Nannysong, the operating language of the 'Nansi Web, enables the people on Toussaint to communicate with each other and with the other AI that run their society. Both the sentient AI that drives Toussaint's society and its operating language, Nannysong, are Creole neologisms that serve communication needs of Caribbean peoples transplanted to a new world.

Nannysong was first created as the programming language that powered Granny Nanny. A man descended from the early 'Nansi Web programmers named Maka tells Antonio, Tan-Tan's father, that Granny Nanny had the capacity to "develop her own language" (52). He reveals that programmers were not responsible for the development of Nannysong. Instead, Granny Nanny produced a language suitable to the needs of the people of Toussaint when the original programming language became too simple to be useful. The 'Nansi Web developers

¹³³ Some people on Toussaint find enjoyment and purpose in laboring, but hard labor is outside the norm.

were at first stymied when Granny Nanny broke from her original operating language, called Eleggua. Maka explains that Granny Nanny's thoughts became "too complex for Eleggua to translate" (51).¹³⁴ Then Granny Nanny began to *sing* in Nannysong, improvising and expanding her capacities to communicate. Granny Nanny developed a language that could be the organ of Toussaint's techno-future and even Tan-Tan's liberation. Nannysong crystalizes the role of Creoles as the organ of *Midnight Robber's* narrative, yoking the sonic aspects of Creole speech with the informatics system that powers society on Toussaint.

Nannysong synthesizes the sonic, symbolic, and affective aspects of Dread Talk with the technological requirements of the 'Nansi Web. Much like Dread Talk, Nannysong is adaptive to its context, in this case Granny Nanny's need to communicate across "all dimensions." Instead of using across what Maka calls "a simple four-dimensional" code, Granny Nanny developed "a hundred and twenty-seven tones" through which to communicate across all possible dimensions (52). Nannysong's protocols are auditory and expansive in range, which, for comparison, extends well beyond the 12 tones of Western music. And here the "song" of Nannysong is important. Like other neologisms in the novel, Nannysong is a word that phonologically carries the weight of what it is and means. It carries the tone and quality of Granny Nanny's communication: a benevolent caring maternal force that sings to her children, like Tan-Tan, to enhance their flourishing in a new place.

The "song" of Nannysong also evokes Caribbean music, like reggae, the counterpart to the political aesthetics of Dread Talk. The sonic qualities of Dread Talk were fully realized through reggae music of the 1960s, which doubled-down on the aural-political work of Rasta language in its lyrics and "slower tempo [that] resulted in a brooding mood conducive to the

¹³⁴ Eleggua refers to the Fon and Yoruba deity of the crossroads and trickster figure who is widely influential in circum-Caribbean culture (Gates 5).

weightier topics” like class conflict, religion, the nation, and poverty (Veal 33). Reggae was further innovated on in the dub music scene popular from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s in Jamaica. Dub remixes reggae in ways that lend insight into how Hopkinson’s Creole neologisms function. Michael Veal charts how music producers, engineers, and deejays transformed reggae through “song re-composition” (21). In the recording studio, the console became its own instrument, used to disassemble rhythms and vocals (35). Deejays then overlaid “generic rhythm patterns” with their own vocals (48). The remixing process—by the producer in the studio or by the deejay in the communal sound systems—“created a unique pop music language of fragmented song forms and reverberating soundscapes” (2). Dub’s “reverberating soundscapes” announce how sound is an atmospheric phenomenon, not only because sound disperses through the air but also because this reverberation can be felt in and on the body and it can set a social mood. Hopkinson yokes the aural aspects of Dread Talk and lyrical themes of reggae with the electronic remixing of dub. She creates a “reverberating soundscape,” a socially conscious and affective atmosphere that makes possible *Midnight Robber*’s Creole technoculture.

Through Creole neologisms, Hopkinson remixes words so that they carry the weight of their phonological implications and at the same time point to the technological innovation of the novel’s science-fictional world. Hopkinson re-routes tropes of AI and space travel through Creole language aesthetics, as a deejay would layer old rhythms with new lyrics. We can see the reverberating sonic elements of Nannysong in yet another of Hopkinson’s linguistic remixes. For those who are not fluent in Nannysong, its sound can be surprising. A person speaking Nannysong is described as humming something “fast, so fast, a snatch of notes that hemidemisemiquavered into tones [Antonio] couldn’t distinguish” (9). The word “hemidemisemiquavered” is a denominal verb that describes a sixty-fourth note, a

hemidemisemi-quaver. Though this word is not a new creation, it is used in a fresh way to describe the action of speaking Nannysong and this action's auditory effect. The word creates its own, almost onomatopoeic sound, a fast-paced lilting or trembling reverberation. The utterance is so quick that it almost evades Antonio's perception. Thus, Nannysong produces a soundscape that bridges the linguistic and the technological. The technological aspects of Nannysong lead me to reflect on the ways that other Creoles function as innovations in communication and aesthetic technologies.

Because Hopkinson builds Nannysong out of Caribbean Creoles, she prompts readers to reimagine Creoles as linguistic technologies. Many Creolists would agree with this move. As Bertacco argues, Creoles are signs of Caribbean innovation: "in an ironic and historically just turning of the tables, in fact, a region once deemed the antithesis of civilization has become one of the most creative laboratories of verbal art, both oral and written, and this is thanks to its radical creolization of the colonial languages" (18-19). To understand Creoles as technologies we must engage with a classical understanding of the meaning of technology. Technology in the classical sense is defined as a "treatise on the liberal arts" or a "systematic treatment of grammar" ("technology, n."). These earliest meanings reveal a synergy between science and art, in which geometry, music, and rhetoric were all considered liberal arts. In the Western tradition, Odysseus's "silver tongue" would have been considered a *techne*. The classical definition also homes in on language, the very thing that has dropped out of the modern meaning of technology. A modern understanding of technology, instead, has come to focus on mechanical or industrial arts and the objects produced by machinery or applied sciences ("technology, n."). This is perhaps why science fiction is preoccupied with technological products, such as incredible devices that make scenarios like interplanetary travel possible. Yet, scholars like Bertacco invite us to

reconsider languages as technologies in the classical sense. Bertacco, after all, calls the Caribbean a “creative laborator[y] of verbal art, both oral and written.” Bertacco’s phrasing recuperates the Caribbean as a region where technologies didn’t merely dominate people, rather it is a site—a laboratory—of technological innovation via language. Nannysong enacts the kind of linguistic-technological bridging which is essential for thinking about Caribbean futures.

The development of Creoles in the Caribbean served the needs of people forced into contact there just as Nannysong served the information technology needs of Toussaint. Linguist Salikoko S. Mufwene says that languages are “emergent, collective, and cumulative folk technology” (97). The latter point is especially relevant for understanding Caribbean Creoles. Their folk origins distinguish them from other technologies that emerged out of the laboratory of the plantation.¹³⁵ Glissant extends this point, arguing that Caribbean languages are integral to fostering present and future Caribbean communities. He calls for the development of “ethnotechniques” which would unite the political and ecological “needs of a community and to the protected landscape of its surroundings” (*Poetics of Relation* 108).¹³⁶ For Glissant the environmental “surroundings” cannot be divorced from the socio-political work of ethnotechniques. “Surround” evokes an enveloping atmosphere, something situated and local that might include the intertwined ecological and social concerns of a community. Hopkinson’s creation of Nannysong suggests how languages are especially good at uniting the ecological and social needs of a community because Creoles themselves unite the aural surrounds with the social consciousness of anti-colonial language aesthetics. As Jillana Enteen says, Granny Nanny

¹³⁵ See Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 74.

¹³⁶ Glissant differentiates between the multilingual Caribbean and the monolingual colonizing powers, whose monolingualism “continue[s] to monopolize the irrefutable powers of technology and their manipulation, which are imposed as the sole path to salvation and energized by their actual effects” (*Poetics of Relation* 108). Monolingualism is an impediment to imagination and Relation.

is “community centered, responsive, and in dialogue with those she surrounds” (274). Enteen homes in on the way that Granny Nanny serves her people because she is a two-way communication technology; not only does she function as an informatics storage system, but she is “in dialogue” with her people. Perillo too keys in on the ways that Granny Nanny evokes Glissant’s theory, calling the ’Nansi Web “an (ethno)technological computer system” (9).¹³⁷ It is meant to serve aid the people of Toussaint in their escape from Earth and to enhance their flourishing on a new planet. Hopkinson says that she created the ’Nansi Web after asking “what technologies a largely African diasporic culture might build, what stories its people might tell itself about technology” (“Conversation”). In this setting, technology bridges the material devices of communication and transportation systems and includes the linguistic and musical resonances of Creoles. Nannysong is an ethnotechnique in the way that Creoles are ethnotechnique; it was created by and for Caribbean peoples and is suitable to their communication needs on a new planet.¹³⁸

Hopkinson’s incorporation of Creoles and creation of Nannysong foregrounds the role of linguistic multiplicity as essential to the future of Caribbean peoples. Nannysong is a Creole among other Creoles in the novel, taking part in what linguists call a “Creole Continuum” or

¹³⁷ Cf. Romdhani who calls the ’Nansi Web “a metaphor for the collective psyche” (127).

¹³⁸ Though an ethnotechnique counters what Glissant calls the “science of conquest,” ethnotechniques are not simply utopian mechanical or linguistic products; their uses can vary and adapt for good or ill. Both Perillo and Glissant stress that ethnotechniques shouldn’t be romanticized. This leads Perillo to take an ambivalent stance as to whether the ’Nansi Web is a utopian counter to colonial or neocolonial developmentalism (Perillo 3). In some ways the ’Nansi Web is responsible for the reenactment of the colonial encounter on Toussaint. The first settlers not only decimated the indigenous douen, they also genetically altered a creature called the “jumbie bird” to be of a smaller size suitable to farming (*Midnight Robber* 32). Therefore, approaching *Midnight Robber’s* ethnotechnological elements with caution helps to “unsettle reductive binaries . . . between totalizing views that characterize emergent digital technologies either as beneficent and democratizing or as part and parcel of Euro-American neoimperialism (Perillo 3-4). Perillo also points to the ways that Glissant himself is cautious about the reductive binary of utopian and dystopian futures as well as technophobic and technophilic perspectives on innovation (17).

“Creole System” (Ashcroft et al 44; Pollard *Dread Talk* 4). Understanding Nannysong as part of a language system avoids the fallacy of viewing languages as discrete entities.¹³⁹ Thus, Hopkinson shifts readers’ focus to how language is used in the novel. Understanding languages as culturally driven adaptive communication technologies encourages us to consider the ways that mechanical technologies are embedded in cultural processes as well as how different technological advancements are produced, by whom, and toward what ends. The novel’s technological innovations are inseparable from its Caribbean sociolinguistic context, confirming what Perillo describes as its “distinctly Caribbean tradition of theorizing and aesthetic practice that contemplates the relationship between science, technology, and colonialism in Caribbean history and society” (2). Hopkinson’s use of the science fiction genre underscores these interrelated elements.

Creoles in Space

Hopkinson dramatizes “the relationship between science, technology, and colonialism” using a genre of writing that is steeped in a colonial episteme, a genre that produced and reflected supremacist ideas about the Caribbean. According to John Riedler, “early science fiction lives and breathes in the atmosphere of colonial history and its discourses” (3). Works by early science fiction writers like H.G. Wells reflected imperial ideologies and supported race science helping to fashion a dichotomy between European and North American geographies associated with power and scientific innovation and colonial outposts associated with primitive “others.”¹⁴⁰ This colonial hierarchy had other effects on the literary such as obscuring non-

¹³⁹ Though language practices in the Caribbean are full of codeswitching, the academic study of the Caribbean has been bracketed into different linguistic groups (as in the Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone Caribbean). See Shawn C. Gonzalez.

¹⁴⁰ A growing body of work on postcolonial science fiction tracks how the antagonism between Indigenous and Western knowledges is a central concern of the genre. See Langer.

Western aesthetic traditions with speculative elements which contributed to the whiteness of the science fiction genre (Romdhani). Black and postcolonial science fiction counteracts the European roots of science fiction by critiquing the persistence of supremacist tropes in genre fiction and by creating genealogies of Black speculative writing that include writers like W.E.B. Du Bois.¹⁴¹ Hopkinson's fiction is often read as a corrective to white and European traditions of science fiction and fantasy. Its characters reflect the hybridity of the region, and the novel affirms touchpoints in Caribbean cultural and political history as in the syncretic Jonkonnu celebration.

Despite these advancements, colonial ideologies persistently effect how Black technological innovation is understood and how Black science fiction is read. Alondra Nelson discusses the “racialized digital divide” in which racial identity, especially Blackness, is seen as a barrier to a utopian and bodiless digital future. Nelson shows how “the bodiless, colorblind mythotopias of cybertheory and commercial advertising have become the unacknowledged frames of reference for understanding race in the digital age. In these frameworks, the technologically enabled future is by its very nature unmoored from the past and from people of color” (6).¹⁴² Nelson demystifies the racialized digital divide by showing Black technological innovation across time, in order to counteract the idea that a techno future is “bodiless and colorblind.” Instead, she acknowledges West African fractal art and W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of

¹⁴¹ See André Carrington (particularly p. 24), Sheree Renée Thomas's *Dark Matter*, and Mark Bould's essay, “The Ships Landed Long Ago.” Hopkinson discusses her place in the tradition of Black science fiction in several interviews. See also Hopkinson's own anthology, *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction* (2000).

¹⁴² The divide Nelson identifies echoes the binaries that separate center/periphery and modernity/tradition which are key concerns in postcolonial and Caribbean thought. Cf Langer who proposes a non-binaristic way of viewing the relationship between Western and Indigenous sciences in postcolonial science fiction.

double consciousness as Black techne. By extension, signifying and Dread Talk become visible as Black technologies through Nelson's framework. In this light, technological innovation includes artistic and socio-linguistic innovation. Nelson also shows how the digital future is inseparable from the past and how a bodiless techno future fails to account for how bodies are treated outside of their networked disembodiment.

But these insights have not directly influenced scholarship on *Midnight Robber* as much as they should, argues Perillo. She observes that "even literary critics who are attentive to *Midnight Robber*'s cultural context often describe its science fiction tropes as separate from the 'Caribbean' elements of its narrative. Such readings posit black/white, culture/technology binaries in which blackness and/or Caribbeanness constitute the realm of 'culture,' while 'technology' is primarily associated with whiteness" (2). Rather, *Midnight Robber* addresses colonialism and the racialized digital divide head on by asserting Caribbean technological innovation as the grounds for the entire world of the novel. In this way Hopkinson protests the way the Caribbean is peripheral to issues of generic and technological innovation. She says, "Too often, we're told that the Caribbean's only purpose is to entertain, and that we can aspire to nothing more, that we are incapable of innovation." (Sander). Yet *Midnight Robber* seeks to correct this misconception, drawing on Black technologies as the basis of its Caribbean futurism. For instance, the planets Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree are separated from each other by a "dimension veil." This is a neologism that fuses the concept of space-time "dimensions" from physics with Du Bois's concept of the "veil" and its relationship to double consciousness. This neologism signals that the distance between the two planets is a problem of physics and human perception. The two planets are literally separated in the novel and characters can only travel from Toussaint to New Half-Way Tree. New Half-Way Tree bears an ecological resemblance to

Toussaint and is full of the flora and fauna common to Toussaint before these forms were eradicated or “genesculpted”—as in genetically engineered—to be more hospitable to human food consumption (32). The distance between these two planets is so great that even Granny Nanny has not “seeded” this place, and therefore the Nansi Web does not function on New Half-Way Tree which Tan-Tan learns after she is exiled there. Tan-Tan gains a new perspective on Toussaint and its advanced technoculture as she loses its benefits and must rely on the douen, like Chichibud. Her new perspective lifts the veil that mystified the effects of humans who colonized Toussaint. She also gains a kind of double consciousness as she experiences being both colonizer (as a beneficiary of Toussaint’s colonization and as a harmful addition to the douen community) and colonized (as a target of her father’s sexual and emotional violence). As Tan-Tan crosses the dimension veil, readers gather that *Midnight Robber*’s technofuture is not a utopia. Attempts to build a better world on New Half-Way Tree “free from downpression and botheration” require that Tan-Tan not repeat the colonial encounter. To avoid this, Tan-Tan must be nourished from the past and embrace her own transformation into the Robber Queen.

Midnight Robber places Blacks and multiethnic Caribbean peoples in the future as creators and users of technology for whom the past—including the traditions of Jonkonuu, processes of creolization, and anticolonial figures like Granny Nanny—is integral to the technological innovation of Nannysong. The novel, after all, begins as a Creole oral story. Discussing folk stories, Hopkinson says that “the old traditional folk, fairy, and epic allegorical tales” make up the “historical literature of the imagination” (“Interview with Nelson” 98). They are a resource for any writer to draw on. But Hopkinson also clarifies that speculative fiction is different from these historical genres in that it is “a contemporary literature that is performing that act of the imagination.” Yet, in effect, *Midnight Robber*’s folk elements feed into its

speculative elements. In *Midnight Robber* the concerns of contemporary speculative fiction—what Perillo called “the relationship between science, technology, and colonialism”—are enhanced by Hopkinson’s incorporation of folk elements, especially in Nannysong’s relationship to Elegua.

Nannysong derives from Ellegua, the “signifying” figure par excellence of African and Afro-Caribbean folklore. Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s observations about Elegua are especially useful here.¹⁴³ For instance, the Fon call Elegua (also known as Legba) “the divine linguist” because he “speaks all languages” (7). As Toussaint’s original operating code, Elegua’s divine linguistic abilities are deployed for the very material operations of society. A historical folk figure and the cunning qualities it represents—like language play, indeterminacy, and open-endedness (Gates 7)—underlie and inaugurate Nannysong as a technology. This means that the “Caribbean” elements of the novel are not separate from its “technological” elements; rather, the novel’s Caribbean elements are technological innovations themselves.

The interanimation of the folk and AI elements produces novel situations in *Midnight Robber*. The trickster figure of Elegua appears again in the form of Tan-Tan’s “house eshu,” the AI that manages her family’s household. Eshu serves a pedagogical function by teaching Tan-Tan about Earth’s history and comforting her during her parents’ arguments. For example, eshu teaches Tan-Tan about Carnival on Earth and shows her fossils of creatures that lived on Toussaint before the arrival of humans from Earth (28-33). Contrary to “the bodiless, colorblind mythotopias of cybertheory and commercial advertising” that Nelson critiqued, the Nansi Web, through eshu, is connected to people as individuals, not as bodiless and abstract entities. But eshu—true to its West African roots—also serves an important literary function. Readers who

¹⁴³ Gates observes how Elegua goes by many names, and he uses the composite Esu-Elegbara to refer to this varied tradition.

have keyed in on the Anansi storytelling will not be surprised to discover that eshu has been the unnamed narrator all along. In the last pages, the reader learns that Tan-Tan's house eshu has found a way to contact Tan-Tan's unborn child from across the dimension veil. Eshu speaks directly to Tan-Tan's unborn son to describe how Granny Nanny found them: "Only a quantum computer coulda trace she through infinite dimensions like that, only Granny Nanny and me, a house eshu. And only because Tan-Tan's earbug never dead yet" (327).¹⁴⁴ Granny Nanny reaches across time and space to reconnect to Tan-Tan's earbug, which, because Tan-Tan was a child when she passed across the dimension veil, had not died. But eshu reveals that it takes more than quantum computing power to enact this dimensional leap; it's the trickster-storyteller-narrator called eshu who guides the way. Eshu weaves across the dimension veil suggesting how a folk figure transformed into AI is central to the shaping of Hopkinson's speculative future.

A Creole-speaking trickster AI has not only been narrating Tan-Tan's transformation but crafting folk stories *about* Tan-Tan in interchapters that are woven throughout the novel. In these stories, Tan-Tan emerges as a powerful social figure. The narrator effusively explains:

What a thing those Tan-Tan stories had become, oui! Canto and cariso, crick-crack Anansi back; they had grown out of her and had become more than her. Seemed like every time she heard the stories they had become more elaborate. Anansi the Trickster himself couldn't have woven webs of lies so fine. She kept trying to discern truths about herself in the Tan-Tan tales, she couldn't help it. People loved them so, there must be something to them, ain't? Something hard, solid thing other people see in her; something she could hear and know about herself and hold in her heart. (299)

¹⁴⁴ Tan-Tan's newborn son is the first human to be born with complete fluency with Nannysong.

Eshu helps Tan-Tan see herself in a new light, one in which her experiences of hardship and trauma can be reformed into sources of strength and verbal agility. In these stories Tan-Tan is “hard” and “solid.” In other words, Tan-Tan is a formidable force, a quality that she has yet to embrace, but which eshu thinks she should “hold in her heart.” In Yoruba tradition Eshu is the figure who “translates, who explains, or ‘who loosens knowledge’” (Gates 11). Eshu “loosens knowledge” for Tan-Tan by translating stories about her for herself. Eshu also fulfills the role of the “indigenous black metaphor for the literary critic” (11). It is the novel’s internal meta-critic, commenting on Tan-Tan and shaping how her story is interpreted by other characters as well as for the reader. As Tan-Tan becomes a folk figure in the novel’s bolded interchapters, the novel positions folk forms as integral to speculative fiction storytelling. The folk genre is the motor for the new, fabulist genre. This merging of the folk and the speculative hinges on the role of eshu as folk storyteller and trickster AI.

Midnight Robber aligns folk and sci-fi storytelling and, in conjunction with Hopkinson’s deployment of various Creoles, it achieves its style of Creole futurism. Akin to an Afrofuturist ethos in which African American writers have “other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come,” Hopkinson’s Creole futurism syncretizes African and New World vernacular and technological practices in an extraplanetary setting (Mark Dery qtd in Nelson 9). On Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree, Hopkinson’s characters experience the synthesis of the past, present, and futures of Caribbean peoples. The ability to understand these intertwined temporalities is important because liberation—for Caribbean peoples and for Tan-Tan—is an ongoing process. Though Toussaint is no utopia, its technologies endeavor to serve “tout monde” who inhabit it. Moreover, the reader, transported to these new surrounds by Hopkinson’s Creoles and Creole neologisms experiences a shift in expectations for science fiction writing.

Hopkinson's production of a Creole futurism produces an aesthetic transformation of the science fiction genre via her Creole languages.

Hopkinson's Science Fiction Language

Describing why she writes in Creoles, Hopkinson says she strives to match the creativity of Caribbean expression while also using a genre—science fiction—which relishes in wordplay:

The multiple consciousness that Caribbean history gives us is reflected in our code-switching, code-sliding, code-tripping dancehall-rapso-dubwise approach to signifying simultaneously on multiple levels. Science fiction reaches for that in its use of neologisms. Caribbean people, like so many hybridised peoples the world over, live it. We are wordsmiths par excellence. (Sander)

Code-switching, the process of switching between different registers (such as standardized and non-standardized Englishes) in different social settings is a strategy of communication for multilingual people.¹⁴⁵ Hopkinson highlights that this communication practice results in “signifying simultaneously on multiple levels.” She models signifying via the different meanings of “sliding” and “tripping.” These words simultaneously mean different physical movements (sliding and tripping might point to dancing or other hapless movements) and they indirectly point to states of mind, or “multiple consciousness,” as in the state of drug-induced altered consciousness called “tripping.” “Code-sliding” and “code-tripping” are at once neologisms of Hopkinson's making and emblematic instances of the signifying that Gates calls foundational to the Black tradition. But Hopkinson extends Gates' emphasis on African derived wordplay to include the wordsmithing capacities of “hybridized peoples the world over.” She underscores how wordsmithing is an effect of creolization and even categorizes Jamaican and Trinidadian

¹⁴⁵ See Kathryn A. Woolard.

musical innovations, such as dancehall, rapso, and dub music, as wordsmithing practices. These musical styles, like Caribbean linguistic practices, remix sounds into new acoustic atmospheres. From wordsmithing to Tan-Tan's verbal dexterity, Hopkinson crafts a "dubwise" novel, one that remixes the sounds and languages of the Caribbean using advanced language and narrative technologies and one that conjoins the oral, literary, and subversive elements of language play.

Not only does *Midnight Robber* relish in its linguistic diversity, but Hopkinson also joins the ingenuity of Caribbean symbolic and sonic language play with the wordsmithing that is common to science fiction writing. Hopkinson's Creole neologisms produce acoustic resonances, and they remix language to suit Hopkinson's science fiction world building. Words like "genesculpt" and "dimension veil" announce Hopkinson's Creole technoculture. Genesculpt, which refers to the genetic engineering of Toussaint's indigenous plants and animals replaces the sterile and medicalized "engineering" process of altering a creature's genome, with the artistic and tactile practice of sculpture. Words like these remix meanings, create new associations between sound and meaning, and, ultimately, produce a literary mood in which Creole neologisms are the source of the text's science fiction atmosphere. Centering the Creoles in *Midnight Robber* opens new ways of understanding the wordsmithing of science fiction in relation to code-switching and subaltern language practices. By synchronizing the sound and meaning of words, Creoles, and Hopkinson's use of them, prompt readers to understand the voices of *Midnight Robber* in a new light: that is, as techne for shaping perception of Caribbean anticolonial futures. But, as Samuel R. Delany asserts, science fiction style extends beyond the creation of neologisms and marvelous technological advancements.

Delany is notable for focusing on the effects of wordsmithing and the unique affordances of language in science fiction writing.¹⁴⁶ In his collection of essays, *The Jewel Hinged Jaw*, he claims that the novel relationships between words are the key innovation of science fiction. The “unusual verbal juxtapositions” (284) common to sci-fi writing create a high level of “subjunctivity” (43). “Subjunctivity is the tension on the thread of meaning” connecting words. It signals something that has not happened, compelling readers to press on in search for what makes certain conditions possible. For instance, the sentence, “The red sun is high, the blue low” would not make sense in naturalistic fiction or reporting (39). In science fiction, the tether between the “red sun” and “blue sun” does not need to resolve into naturalistic clarity. This situation has a high level of subjunctivity because it simply it has not happened (44). Science fiction writers have a greater level of verbal freedom when they write about things that have not happened, and readers are propelled and compelled to trace the thread of meanings across “unusual verbal juxtapositions.” As a science fiction story builds, the author “expands the freedom of choice of words that can follow another group of words meaningfully” (44). The world-building process leaves open so many possible associations and connections. Delany

¹⁴⁶ Writing in the 1960s and 1970s, Delany is responding to the perception that science fiction writing lacks “style” because it is all “content.” Though this stigma has lessened due to the growth of academic scholarship on science fiction alongside the widening popularity of the genre (though science fiction was a very popular mode when Delany was writing) since the 70s, Delany’s insights on the linguistic innovations of science fiction writing remain apt. He draws on his experience as a queer Black man from New York in his approach to writing fiction and literary criticism. He speaks to his experience of codeswitching as a language practice he learned as a child in the essay “Shadows.” He writes, “Black Harlem speech and white Park Avenue speech are very different things. I became aware of language as an intriguing and infinitely malleable modelling tool very early” (*Jewel-Hinged Jaw* 119). Not only does Delany remark on the way that racialization and language go hand in hand (and also intersect with class markers, as in the difference between Harlem and Park Avenue), he sees codeswitching as a “tool” that is “infinitely malleable.” He further elaborates, saying, “I always felt myself to be living in several worlds with rather tenuous connections between them, but I never remember it causing me much anxiety. (Of the, perhaps ten blacks among the three hundred odd students in Dalton’s elementary school, five were my relatives.) Rather, it gave me a sense of modest (and sometimes not so modest) superiority” (119). It is notable that Delany frames his codeswitching and experience of being Black in a mostly white school as sources of strength that lead directly into his success as a writer.

elaborates: “Words in a narrative generate tones of voice, syntactic expectations, memories of other words and pictures. But rather than a fixed chronological relation, they sit in numerous inter- and over-weaving relations” (36).¹⁴⁷

Delaney is effectively shifting the focus from the “content” of science fiction (its alien post-Earth settings or dazzling nanotech inventions) to its “style.” Though all writers use language to create effects, science fiction writers, more than writers of other genres, “can produce the most violent leaps of the imagination” (45) from the “inter- and over-weaving relations” that their prose sparks. Linguistic innovations via “unusual verbal juxtapositions” are the beginning of science fiction aesthetics. Hopkinson’s Creole science fiction magnifies the “inter- and over-weaving patterns” via its Creole storytelling and multilingualism in order to fashion a future-oriented and anticolonial aesthetic. This aesthetic is driven by Creole languages and science fiction wordsmithing.

Midnight Robber produces a sense of subjunctivity from the very outset. The narrator introduces the protagonist Tan-Tan saying: “She name Tan-Tan, and New Half-Way Tree was she planet” (1). The reader seeks to discover more about this young woman and the other-worldly planet she inhabits. Not only is the setting new and unusual—something a devoted reader of science fiction would expect—but Hopkinson adds another storytelling convention to the mix. The opening passage ends: “New Half-Way Tree is where Tan-Tan end up, and *crick-crack*, this is she story:” (3). A reader versed in Caribbean oral storytelling practices would recognize the phrase, “*crick-crack*,” as an invitation to participate in the storytelling process. The phrase cues readers to a storytelling form, but Hopkinson merges this form with the subjunctivity

¹⁴⁷ Delany’s careful attention to the function of words hovers between a structuralist understanding of semiotics while at the same time embraces a poststructuralist attention to proliferating meanings and rejection of the mythic structures undergirding narrative.

of science fiction storytelling. For instance, when Tan-Tan arrives on New Half-Way Tree, everything is new and unfamiliar. Readers experience this newness alongside Tan-Tan: “She scrambled out from under the canvas. The warm morning light made the whole forest glow. It had some things like big butterflies dancing in the air, gold and green wings flashing. They were tearing leaves from the bushes with their hands and eating them. . . . The mongoose thing had had more legs than six, but it had gone before she could count them all’ (116). The butterflies tearing leaves with their hands and the mongoose with six legs announce the unfamiliarity of this world. For diasporic readers the novel joins the reverberations of Creole forms and the pleasure of science fiction subjunctivity to produce a dub aesthetic. In remixing the rhythms of folk and science fiction storytelling with the new “lyrics” of Creole and sci-fi neologisms, Hopkinson creates a novel that functions as a literary analog to dub music’s soundscapes. As Veal describes, “dub’s spatialized songscapes, heard at the extreme volume of the Jamaican sound system, simulated in an actual physical space within which the ‘roots’ African past and the utopian sci-fi future could be fleetingly experienced as one” (213). With Veal’s insight in mind, *Midnight Robber*’s aesthetic transformation of the sci-fi genre remixes cultural forms from the Caribbean’s past and present in order to propose a technofuture in which these elements layer and reverberate in novel associations.

Hopkinson’s merging of language of science fiction with the wordsmithing of Caribbean Creoles creates an affective atmosphere. *Midnight Robber* blends acoustic, affective, and narrative elements, producing its unique “feel and rhythm” which echoes the aesthetic qualities of Dread Talk. Hopkinson says that writing in Creoles changes the “feel and rhythm” of her works (“Conversation”). For example, Hopkinson explains, “I could say ‘Carnival revelry,’ but it wouldn’t convey movement, sound, and joy in the same way that ‘ring-bang ruction’ does”

(“Conversation”). While the mention of Carnival may evoke certain sights and sounds of revelry, “ring-bang ruction,” to use Pollard’s phrasing, “bear[s] the weight of [its] phonological implications.” The phrase itself is noisy. The effect is akin to Kamau Brathwaite’s concept of “nation language.” In opposition to imposed European languages which saturate institutions and create class divisions in the Caribbean, nation language is a tool of subaltern resistance and self-expression.¹⁴⁸ Sonia Posmentier calls nation language “geographically and temporally dynamic” and “intercultural” (11). It provides a “modern theory of the relationship between nature and culture” (Posmentier 11), as when Brathwaite asserts that “the hurricane does not roar in pentameter” (“History of the Voice” 265). Brathwaite’s nation language is a mode of expression that can account for the environmental and political realities of the Caribbean thereby enabling literary texts to produce their own acoustic and affective atmospheres appropriate to these conditions. Echoing Pollard’s insight into Dread Talk, he argues that nation language “is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning” (271). For Brathwaite, the “noise” of nation language comes from its roots in an oral and vernacular tradition.¹⁴⁹

Hopkinson draws on both the wordsmithing of science fiction and Dread Talk in order to contribute to what Bertacco and Barbara Lalla call a Creole *literary* discourse. Lalla cautions that

¹⁴⁸ Hopkinson and Brathwaite are both concerned with how “feel and rhythm” are communicated in written texts, when a reader does not *hear* the oral resonances of words in the same way as in speech. For Brathwaite “nation language” is used in both oral and written contexts, leading him to call both Bongo Jerry and Louise Bennet “nation language poets.” However, he argues that nation language loses some of its meaning when it is read as opposed to when it is spoken (271), a distinction that Hopkinson seems less likely to make. Bertacco too seems reticent to ascribe greater “feel and rhythm” to oral speech as this can play into stereotypes that Creole is inherently un-literary.

¹⁴⁹ “Lalla has “argued for *nation language* as necessarily comprising a total competence that would include code shifting. Creative writers in the Caribbean today so frequently manipulate code choice to exploit ambivalence of meaning that such exploitation may be viewed as a dimension of their competence” (180).

“The persistent assumption that Creole discourse remains inherently oral rather than literary is simplistic and somewhat paternalistic—a view betraying a colonial mindset even within academia itself. This is a mindset that so maps orality into our understanding of Creole as to obscure the extent to which Creole participates in literary discourse” (qtd in Bertacco 20). Creoles shape the style and prosody of literary texts, and they refract issues of form (like iambic pentameter) and genre (like science fiction) through the environmental and political concerns of Creole language politics and aesthetics. Creoles are not merely “marked” in texts, they actively heighten the acoustic and affective qualities of the literary through wordsmithing and signifying. Through wordsmithing and signifying, Hopkinson’s Creoles and Creole neologisms contribute an aural quality to the novel, one that highlights the sonic reverberations of Creole while also pointing to the unique contributions of Creoles to literary discourse. Hopkinson’s Creoles produce a textual atmosphere, one that can’t be ignored because “the noise is part of the meaning.”

Hopkinson’s use of Creole discourse within the science fiction genre opens up new avenues for thinking about how future-oriented texts produce literary atmospheres. *Dread Talk* and *nation language* presuppose a synergy between word and world, expanding the ecocritical interest in language and referentiality to include issues of linguistics, sound, and ecology in addition to representation. Posmentier affirms that *nation language* is a “modern theory of the relationship between nature and culture” because it seeks a correspondence between place and meaning (11). Glissant too offers a way of uniting language and world through the work of ethnotechniques. Following Glissant’s lead, we might come to understand languages as ecological forces. After all, Glissant says that Caribbean languages are foremost in the work of ensuring the “protected landscape of [Caribbean] surroundings” (108). Creoles can then be

understood to be ecological in the sense that they can be politically aligned with anticolonial development. But they also create aesthetic effects which unite word and world for readers.

Through *Midnight Robber*'s literary atmosphere, diasporic readers can experience the sounds and patterns of speech of Caribbean peoples within a genre more likely to be written in standardized English. I want to suggest that this quality of Hopkinson's writing is atmospheric. It is ephemeral and material. If one effect of the atmospheric aesthetics is that it *creates* affective worlds, my analysis of Hopkinson's novel gestures to the way that acoustic atmospheres—the sound and noise of Creoles—create atmospheres suitable to the anticolonial futures for Caribbean peoples.

Though *Midnight Robber* incorporates science fiction tropes—including inter-planetary travel, technological innovation, and alien lifeforms—these tropes are not fashioned from a European rationalist tradition. Instead, Hopkinson emphasizes a continuity between folk aesthetics and the technology-driven future. In Hopkinson's futurist vision, there is no racialized digital divide. Hopkinson has much to offer science fiction studies because as Jillana Enteen observes, "Her linguistic deviations reach beyond the introduction of new terms for technology and human enhancements, providing a distinct dialect that her characters enunciate" (266). This dialect is more precisely a formal matter of the text's Creole languages. They give the novel its affective bearing toward the world. Through wordsmithing and foregrounding Creole languages as technologies, Hopkinson crafts a world that does not reproduce a colonial episteme in which linguistic and racial hierarchies determine life. As Shawn C. Gonzalez asserts, "The critical and creative potential of multilingual Caribbean literary production, therefore, is linked not to its potential to intervene in a national context but rather to its potential to challenge a variety of colonial linguistic hierarchies" (13). In my reading of Hopkinson's use of Creoles, I return to the theme of language and cultural power that runs throughout this project, particularly the role of

Creoles, Spanish, and multilingualism as key contributions of circum-Caribbean literature and culture.

Refracting science fiction studies through Creole linguistics reveals new ways in which language impacts genre studies. In the field of Black linguistics Creole languages are implicitly understood as technological innovations that are suitable to the work of political liberation.¹⁵⁰ This insight bears on my reading of *Midnight Robber* which I have shown to be a science fiction novel deeply invested in languages *as* technologies. From its various Creoles to its invention of a new mode of communication called Nannysong, *Midnight Robber* proposes syncretic modes of communication as the synthesis of the past, present, and future of Caribbean peoples. In *Midnight Robber's* new setting—on the planet Toussaint which has a new political and environmental atmosphere—the issue of language refracts through the new communication technology, Nannysong. While this claim may, on the surface, be a narrowly humanist one because of my emphasis on human language practices in contradistinction to the posthumanist attention the novel typically garners, I believe an attunement to language in the novel allows for a central and still very relevant issue of postcolonial and feminist language politics to remain in sight and to animate science fiction studies in new ways. Hopkinson's synthesis of Caribbean linguistic creativity with the science fiction genre produces a cross-cultural aesthetics, what Wilson Harris says is necessary to break the fixed habits of mind that hold Caribbean peoples in colonial traps. These habits of mind obscure the "depth and tone" of reality accessible through the "cross-cultural imagination" which can surmount colonial legacies and transform sensibilities (xvi).

¹⁵⁰ From Brathwaite's "History of the Voice," to the edited collection *Black Linguistics: Language, Society, and Politics in Africa and the Americas* (2003). See also Hubert Devonish's *Language and Liberation: Creole Language Politics in the Caribbean* (1986).

Midnight Robber centers on Tan-Tan's ability to survive in her new surrounds on New Half-Way Tree and embrace her role as the Robber Queen, a harbinger of a more just technofuture in a strange, new place. We can read these as core concerns of what is, in fact, a climate change novel. While *Midnight Robber* does not narrativize extreme weather events, rising seas, or melting glaciers—all the topoi of typical Anthropocene texts—it does raise pressing questions about how social and ecological atmospheres—what Glissant calls surrounds—condition and articulate forms of life. The people of Toussaint are climate refugees in the sense that they left behind the compromised lands, waters, and airs of the Caribbean for a new home. Or, as Kate Perillo asserts, we can read the humans on Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree as maroons having left behind the plantation structure, past and present (6). On these new worlds Caribbean peoples encounter new ecologies. Though their advanced technologies and AI protect them from dangerous creatures and free them from hard labor, and though their political organization seems truly racially and ethnically egalitarian, Hopkinson still troubles a centuries old form of climate change: colonialism. When people are transplanted to a new place—by choice or force—how do they make sense of place and planet?

Hopkinson transports readers to this post-Caribbean, post-Earth setting to play out these concerns of diasporic place-making and atmospheric change. She uses a genre that frames these issues through its subjunctivity and wordsmithing. On Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree the humans adapt to new physical and figurative atmospheres by crafting new forms of politics and aesthetics, of “all the bloods flowing into one river” (*Midnight Robber* 18). The *difference* that this aesthetics makes is not based in the old forms of racialization based on earth but on species difference. Whereas the first human inhabitants of Toussaint decimated the indigenous flora and fauna, Tan-Tan's, in exile on New Half-Way Tree, seeks a different relation to the douen and

other life forms. Through her coming of age—a tale spun by the master literary figure, Esu-Elegbara—readers begin to see a new way of relation that does not result in species mastery but in cohabitation, communication, and collaboration. Moreover, the birth of Tan-Tan’s son at the end of the novel ushers in a whole new kind of being. Tubman is a networked person with full fluency in Nannysong and full connectivity to the ’Nansi Web. Tubman’s birth opens up the possibility that New Half-Way Tree would benefit from the knowledge and protection of Granny Nanny and from the strength and verbal prowess of Tan-Tan, the Robber Queen. Tan-Tan and her son also represent new forms of Relation premised on linguistic multiplicity, of Caribbean Creoles, of indigenous languages, and of AI languages like Nannysong. *Midnight Robber’s* Creole and science fiction wordsmithing, dub soundscapes, and multilingualism become sites of atmospheric change that have the potential to unsettle the expectations of monolingual English speakers and remind diasporic Caribbean readers of the aesthetic and political value—and the innovation—of Creoles.

Hopkinson places Creoles as the past, present, and future of Caribbean peoples. Making language the central concern of her science fiction world troubles the dominant tropes of Anthropocene writing. While the Global North discovers the impending climate collapse and diagnoses climate anxiety, Indigenous and Black scholars propose a different temporality of apocalypse. Kyle P. White charts how “Indigenous peoples have already endured harmful and rapid environmental transformations due to colonialism and other forms of domination,” (227) and Mark Dery asserts that “Apocalypse already happened” for Blacks in the Americas (qtd in Bould 180). Centering Haiti, Martin Munro argues that apocalypse has differential effects, as in “the ways in which the state functions (or does not function)” but more atmospherically, “the apocalypse has endured for centuries, and that the end times have no apparent end” (2).

Hopkinson confirms this expanded temporality from a Caribbeanist perspective by weaving histories of genocide and ecocide into the novel alongside Tan-Tan's violent upbringing. Her fiction also refreshes discourses of disaster and apocalypse in Caribbean writing by breaking with the totalizing effects of what David Scott calls the "dead end present" or Yarimar Bonilla calls the "non-sovereign future." For these scholars, the imaginaries that drove postcolonial movements in the Caribbean were never actualized. Even if dreams of sovereignty have become compromised, Hopkinson challenges readers to accept that Caribbean languages remain a source of vitality and futurity. The aesthetics and politics of Creoles remain relevant for any future imaginary. Like Glissant, Hopkinson affirms the violences of the past and present but also seeks for something to be born out of apocalypse. The sounds and soundscapes of *Midnight Robber* create a world through which readers can imagine future atmospheres.

Coda

Sensing the Ineffable Future

There is ample evidence that the Earth's atmosphere is changing. Climate indicators like pollution, changing ocean currents, rising temperatures, and human migration patterns show that transformations caused by *some* Anthropos are impacting the here and now. The changing temperature and the turbulence of the air, qualities that are particularly felt by those living in the tropics, birth storms that are some of the most visible scenes of the climate crisis. Such was the case with Hurricane Maria in 2018. Something as seemingly imperceptible and omnipresent as the air is now rapidly moving from the background to the foreground of human consciousness and analysis.

This dissertation has assessed how circum-Caribbean artists grapple with the atmosphere as it circulates, resounds, and, increasingly, changes dramatically. Through film, poetry, novels, and essays these artists demonstrate how the archipelagic Americas are linked by the particles, histories, and feelings that fill the air. They bring attention to the cultural processes, emotions, literary forms, and languages which fill the air, and often shift the focus from large-scale environmental phenomena, like hurricanes, to the smaller, often ineffable materiality of the air. They show this in texts that foster reparative feelings about the past and testify to Black women's struggles as in Julie Dash's and Edwidge Danticat's works. The dense sensorial atmosphere of *Daughters* and material culture created by Low Country Creoles set the stage for the film's championing of the bonds of family, especially for women, in this setting. Danticat focuses on the wellbeing of Haitian women whether they reside on Haitian soil or in the diaspora. Danticat's textual atmospheres, like Dash's filmic atmospheres, are humid and haunting. Toro and

Hopkinson, more than Dash or Danticat, address the changing physical atmospheres of the Americas and do so with an acute attention to the materiality of language. Toro's collections testify to the aesthetic and political power of storms especially in non-Western poetic forms. And Hopkinson's Creole language play makes room for life on a post-Earth world in which the Creoles that developed in the ecological terrain of the Americas are refashioned to create new environmental and social atmospheres for life on new planets. The texts covered in this project are critical of colonialist and neocolonialist extraction and fiercely attentive to the harms done to women, racialized and linguistic "others." They contribute to an intersectional cultural studies and environmentalist perspective on what is *in* the air, especially in the relationship between the weather and place. As aesthetic objects, each text influences my understanding of literary atmosphere as that which emerges from a text's production and reception, but which also comes from the environmental surrounds.

The works that I have constellated offer a different way of sensing and knowing the stakes of the present and ongoing crisis, eschewing the knowing tone and academic distance that permeates many accounts of the environmental future. One way that these artists avoid the determinism of much current environmental discourse is by instead calling attention to affects and aesthetic practices of the archipelagic Americas. Across this dissertation, I have located a kaleidoscope of affective response to atmospheric change from nostalgia, loss, anger, resilience, and more. For the writers and artists I study, no single affective orientation to the world will be sufficient for weathering the future. They trouble triumphalist and pessimistic attitudes by insisting on the multiplicity of feelings, as in the twinned experience of trauma and nostalgia in Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. Contrary to the binary of hope and despair that permeates contemporary North American ecocriticism—seen in scholarship from Heather Houser to Ursula

Heise—the diasporic artists in this study propose that the affects that mediate people’s relationship to their environs are layered, sometimes, contradictory, and always multiple.¹⁵¹ Readers and viewers do not need to toggle between climate optimism and climate despair, these experiences are folded into each other. Indeed, their works create affective atmospheres that counter individually focused sensations, like anxiety, and promote collective attitudes to place and planet. Following from a Black studies project of re-writing knowledge Dash, Danticat, Toro, and Hopkinson expand the epistemological and affective concerns of ecocriticism.

The texts I focus on obliquely address the atmosphere as a physical, measurable, and scientific entity. There is no “smog” in this project as there is in Jesse Oak Taylor’s study of Victorian literature. Apart from Toro’s hurricane formalism, the air is rarely represented as such in this dissertation. The indirect representation that I have sought after in these texts can in fact be considered a facet of the air. As something invisible to the naked eye under most conditions, the air is often overlooked. The atmosphere is also difficult to apprehend through visual or textual mimesis or to assess through literary analysis, requiring innovative methods and approaches to its study especially within the humanities. Thus, I have developed an approach that scales between the foreground and background of texts, between their form and their content, to understand how ecological processes and feelings impact aesthetic production. The atmospheres of these texts come into focus through each artist’s use of filmic techniques, figurative language, poetic forms, and Creole languages rather than through mimetic representation or plot. Their atmospheres are like Christina Sharpe’s notion of the “weather” and Taylor’s study of “smog”: they are historical and cultural and tied to language. Through these works, viewers and readers

¹⁵¹ Cf Amy Kaplan and Michael Richardson on “climate trauma.”

can come to understand Sylvia Wynter's definition of aesthetics, which derives from "culture-specific psycho-affective sensibilities" ("Rethinking" 269).

In focusing on the atmosphere as an ecological, affective, and aesthetic phenomena, I have chosen to sidestep some of the periodizing debates in both contemporary ecocritical and literary studies scholarship. Doing so has allowed me to focus on the array of responses that artists produce to the atmosphere that might fall outside the purview of Anthropocene, postmodern, or other disciplinary discourses. This choice has enabled me to select texts that put into practice what Glissant calls a "revived aesthetic connection with the earth" (*Poetics* 150). And with this focus in mind, even more texts can be considered to produce, communicate, and formalize "atmospheric aesthetics": Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*; Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*; Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*; or Patricia Smith's *Blood Dazzler*. These works are reminders that the American archipelago produces theories of aesthetics and is therefore not merely the site of the air's deleterious effects. In fact, following Wynter and others, this geographic region is a driver of aesthetic knowledge and experimentation.

From Dash to Danticat and Toro to Hopkinson, the works I have studied point to the atmosphere as a site of aesthetic, cultural, and historical power. I take inspiration from Danticat, who in her essay, "Mourning in Place" which was written in response to the COVID 19 pandemic and raging wildfires across the globe, asks: "What were these flaming skies trying to tell us in the midst of our plague? I took it as a sign that the world is still very much alive." Danticat answers her question another way saying, "deye mòn gen mòn," a Kreyòl phrase that means behind the mountains there are more mountains. As the Haitian studies scholars Kevin Meehan and Marie Léticée assert, the phrase "convey[s] both the idea of life as a perpetual struggle against intransigent power and the idea that Haitian peasants are resilient in the face of

this struggle” (1379). The world is very much alive. And as humans—across the uneven geographies of the Americas—make life amid atmospheric change, our futures will be shaped by the ability to make sense of the ineffable materials of our surrounds.

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