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Contemporary Environmental Art: The Multidimensional Relationship Between Black Communities and the American Landscape

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Submitted to the LSU Roger Hadfield Ogden Honors College in partial fulfillment of the Upper Division Honors Program.

April 2023

Louisiana State University & Agricultural and Mechanical College
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Introduction

In 2019, Torkwase Dyson created an installation for the New Orleans Museum of Art titled *Black Compositional Thought: 15 Paintings for the Plantationocene* and informed by her theorization of what she calls Black Compositional Thought. This term “considers how waterways, architecture, objects, and geographies are composed and inhabited by black bodies” and how spatial properties can “form networks of liberation.”¹ The spaces curated and inhabited by Black individuals can be, and often are, the places where oppositional knowledge and culture are fostered. Dyson’s theory also acknowledges that spaces composed by Black bodies may not be inhabited by them or may be forced upon them. Her work is about composition; inspired by the design of architectural and environmental infrastructures (industrial structures built in Black neighborhoods, poor infrastructure, etc.). Each of the abstract paintings (Figure 1) feature geometric shapes and intersecting lines over a washy blue background. The linear abstractions are visual depictions of infrastructures, roadways, and architectural aspects of landscape that impose Black spaces, visualized by opaque black geometric shapes on the canvas. As the artist writes, the installation was specifically inspired by “design systems of architecture, water infrastructure, the oil and gas industry, and the physical impact of global warming” as well as the “legacy of plantation economies” and how those systems have contributed to environmental issues today.² New Orleans (and Louisiana generally) is a hotspot for environmental racism. The Southern landscape is rooted in the plantation, Dyson’s exhibition—produced specifically for NOMA—allows for a more regional understanding of her work. I discuss the exhibition and

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² Ibid.
Dyson’s other work further in the following section but find that the term Black Compositional Thought is integral to the other ideas presented in this thesis.

Black men and women have had a consistent battle with land loss, displacement, and lack of space. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods discuss the environmental injustices in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in the introduction of their co-edited volume *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, titled “No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean.”

The storm decimated New Orleans and resulted in the deaths of 1,400 to 2,000 residents. The levees meant to protect the city from flooding were ineffective, and the low income, majority Black areas of New Orleans were disproportionately affected by Katrina. The racial segregation in New Orleans is just one example of how environmental racism exists in the United States today.

Higher income neighborhoods in New Orleans are situated at higher sea level than low-income areas. After the hurricane, residents from lower income, minority areas of the city were not being reconstructed, barring these individuals from returning to their homes.

As a Louisiana resident, with Black family members in New Orleans, I witnessed the racism of Katrina firsthand. My grandmother left New Orleans after 2005 and moved to Baton Rouge. Rather than trusting the government for aid, many people fled New Orleans and never went back. Katrina was deemed a natural disaster, but the true reason behind the immense damage is a result of the “formal and informal racial segregation, socio-economic differentiation, and long-standing environmental neglect” in New Orleans’ history. Driving in New Orleans now, it is clear which areas were reconstructed and which ones were not. There are water stains multiple feet up on the bottoms of homes in Black neighborhoods, yet homes on St. Charles Ave.

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 2.
sell for millions of dollars and house the most affluent groups in the city. The ongoing oppression of Black Americans has resulted in environmental injustice for centuries. Black people in the United States have a unique sense of place in the country, as their ancestors were forced to be there. Many feel disconnected from the landscapes around them, and environmental racism is a contributing factor. Lack of environmental justice contributes to the common feeling of not belonging of the Black community. Redlining and gentrification – housing injustices that allow for the forced relocation of low income, majority Black residents - push them from their homes, thus destroying their settlements. Black spaces are encroached upon, and environmentally racist officials are making the decisions responsible.

The contemporary effects of environmental racism in the United States have their root in histories of dispossession and enslavement. Martiniquan writer Edouard Glissant examines the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade as the “first dark shadow” cast onto Black individuals’ sense of belonging and control over themselves in Poetics of Relation. Africans forced into slavery were removed from their environments and crammed into ships. Glissant describes the ships as the first abyss of the generational trauma brought about by slavery. Glissant states, “This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat, pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death.” A womb is meant to be a safe space for growth, yet here, Glissant describes it as a mode for expulsion from familiarity. He also notes that the boats held as many dead as living, clearly considering the amount of people who did not survive the journey. By deeming the living as being under a sentence of death, he also considers their lack of freedom, and their imminent deaths at the hand of slavery. The belly of the boat is the first, dark, unfamiliar, and unsafe regions forced upon enslaved Africans. The second “abyss” he describes

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7 Ibid., p. 6.
is the sea itself. Water is an established symbol of Black relationships to landscape in a two-sided fashion. On one hand, water is ever flowing, it is clear and fluid. On the contrary, water is dangerous, it is a symbol of forced removal and assimilation. Water is a necessary aspect of the human experience, but also serves as a symbol of exclusion. Glissant’s analysis focuses on the sea’s depth, and on sinking. The space of the sea is unknown, and daunting.

There is a unique connection between Black Americans and bodies of water. The myth of the Black Atlantis - coined Drexciya after the formation of a Detroit music group inspired by the folktale - provides a hopeful narrative for the individuals who never made it off the ships. According to legend, pregnant, enslaved people that jumped, or were thrown, overboard were able to create a utopia beneath the water. These women would have given birth underwater, and because the babies were born from amniotic fluid into water, they adapted past the need for oxygen. They would continue to populate and live freely at the bottom of the sea. Enslaved Africans were not considered fully human, they were considered property. Meaning that if slavers “lost property” at sea, they could be reimbursed. Africans who may have been considered weak, or unable to perform well, were expendable. It was more lucrative to be reimbursed for their deaths, than it would be to keep them and attempt to sell them for profit.\(^8\) This, unfortunately fabricated, legend provides hope where there is grief. The sea was widely unknown, and swallowed the freedom and lives of many, which is why Glissant interprets it as the second abyss in his trilogy.

The third and final abyss described by Glissant is the land that lay ahead of the ship, the American Landscape. According to Glissant, “the experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss” meaning that the abyss is passed down from generation to generation. He says that

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while current Black communities in America did not return to the homeland of their enslaved ancestors, they instead “rose up” and made their own spaces in this new landscape. Memory is a large component of this third abyss. The abyss is the idea of the unknown in the American Landscape. While Black culture and geography has changed since the first enslaved individuals arrived, much remains unknown and inaccessible.

The following landscape, or environmental, artists often depict the effects of environmental racism through their artwork. Dyson’s abstract installations serve to depict the nuanced, complex ways that Black individuals navigate space. Author Michelle Lanier couples Hamilton’s fantastical, and mysterious photographs of Black people surrounded by nature, with her own writing to depict her Southern, Black heritage. Hamilton and Frazier’s photography, while vastly different in subject, both depict Black Americans and their complex relationship to the American landscape. Rawles’ large-scale paintings of Black bodies submerged under water comment on the duality of the Black American relationship to waterways. All four work to exemplify the complexity of the Black American connection to their landscapes, specifically dealing with water as a symbol with a variety of meanings and connotations. Through their stylistically differing works, each exemplify the Black experience navigating the land surrounding them. Through various mediums, these Black, female landscape artists explore the politics of place for Black Americans today. This thesis suggests that Black communities were, and continue to be, integral to the formation of the American landscape, and the systemic oppression against them is inhumane. Americans must acknowledge these discrepancies and reconstruct the cultural and governmental values that allow them to persist.

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9 Ibid., p. 8.
Torkwase Dyson

Torkwase Dyson was born in Chicago, Illinois but grew up in the South between Mississippi and North Carolina. Because she was brought up in Southern landscapes, her work encapsulates an understanding of “Black spatial justice” and urbanization.\(^\text{10}\) Having been a young Black woman in the South, her personal experience and observations of her surroundings guide her work. In addition to her Southern background, Dyson is interested in geographic connections of Black history, which is evident in the linear aspects of her abstract paintings. In 2016, Dyson built a mobile studio called South Studio Zero as an homage to nomadism, which “became the framework for learning and making art about the environment.”\(^\text{11}\) In reference to South Studio Zero Dyson explains,

This tiny studio was built to travel around the United States studying places and spaces. By nature, this nomadic practice generates both environmental interdependency and solitude. Using this space allows the embrace of all that comes with it: the mundane, the complex, the fears, and the beauty. It's a spatial strategy where I learn to negotiate and negate various types of systems (and systemic orders) to cultivate questions of autonomy and peace. This is a living, fluid space—a lifestyle which makes it possible for me to make my art and support other people’s projects too.\(^\text{12}\)

The mobile studio serves as a mode of transportation throughout Black geographies. With this small structure, Dyson can actively incorporate Black Compositional Thought into her artwork by sharing with and learning from others. Dyson’s work is guided by her experience of a variety of Black landscapes and geographies, and how they connect to one another whether that be through waterways, infrastructure, or history; her creations are driven by connectivity between Black communities.

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\(^{10}\) “About,” https://www.torkwasedyson.com/about1.

\(^{11}\) Ibid.

Paul Gilroy’s book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* explains the history of the Black Atlantic which involves more of the Western hemisphere than just the United States. Gilroy’s idea of the Black Atlantic and Dyson’s Black Compositional Thought reference the connectivity of Black geographies. Gilroy uses English-Black communities as an example; Black intellectual thought from the United States “crisscrosses” the Atlantic, meaning it expands outside of the US. The term also encompasses the frequent movement of Black communities (slave-trade, segregation, deportation, etc.) across the sea. Gilroy describes the history of the Black Atlantic as “a counterculture to modernity.”13 A goal of his writing is to “rethink modernity” with this history as opposed to mainstream historical recounts of Black history.14 Gilroy’s countercultural claim is like Black feminist ideas about oppositional knowledge and resistance; Black communities’ shared experiences driving their activism and values. For enslaved Africans, on the other side of the sea is the plantations of the United States. The lack of belonging and forced physical and cultural deportation of enslaved Africans is the early catalyst for generational trauma and resistance in the Black community.

Dyson’s works are abstract interpretations of the intricate ways racial minorities negotiate space. In *Black Compositional Thought: 15 Paintings for the Plantationcene*, Dyson employs stark contrast and abstraction to illustrate the spatial relationship between Black bodies and their environments. The imagery can be interpreted as a representation of the constraints placed on the Black community. The collection of paintings are references to the era of slavery in the Southern United States, specifically the plantation landscape, as the birthplace of environmental racism in American systems. Slave’s quarters in Southern plantations were small, and poorly constructed. In comparison, the “Big House” on any plantation is beautifully built, usually painted white, and

14 Ibid.
continues to inspire home construction in the South today. Because Black individuals were viewed by society as property, rather than as humans, the only space they had agency over was the slaves’ quarters, and even those exist on land that is not theirs. American Black cultural practices begin here, from music to hairstyle, the limited space of enslaved individuals still allows for small communities and fosters oppositional knowledge. In Dyson’s paintings, the white lines are often bisecting the canvas, encroaching on the large Black shapes. The interaction between geometric shapes and lines in Dyson’s paintings could be visualizations of connectivity between Black geographies, or as infrastructural impositions, like highways, that are built in Black areas.

In two untitled paintings from *Black Compositional Thought* (Figure 2), the background is a very dark gray/blue hue, and the central focus is a large, opaque, black shape. Here, the black shape is outlined in white. The black space is completely constrained by the white lines and cannot breakthrough. The background color being so close to the color of the shape could represent that the two spaces are meant to be connected, but are broken up by the white lines, which may be representative of the politics of space that excludes and displaces Black bodies today. Black households and businesses have been subject to redlining and gentrification in the United States for decades. White Americans are more valued in society, and their voices have the power to limit and constrain the Black community. Dyson connects the abstract forms and shapes in her paintings with the networks of white supremacy and systemic oppression “that often hide in the abstractions of machines, maps, and data.”  

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15 New Orleans Museum of Art, “Torkwase Dyson”.

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what happens when multidimensionality meets flatness, the unsteady relationships between more organic shapes within her work and their geometric counterparts.

In another installation titled *Bodies of Water* (Figure 3), Dyson explores reflection and space through sculpture and painting. In alliance with her other work, each piece is geometric, and abstract in style. The large, central sculptures in the exhibition include large, circular panes of glass held up by trapezoidal metal structures. The glass is so dark that it is almost black and allows for the viewer to see themselves in the work. The collection was featured in the 13th Shanghai Biennale among 32 other artists’ work with the same inspiration (bodies of water). The Biennale stated that “the participating artists and collectives present artworks that… negotiate our entanglement in extended ecosystems of interdependency.” Dyson’s practice is based in relationships between bodies and space, and the interactions between various systems and networks. The glass structures’ water-like qualities could be referencing Black histories of forced migration, and exclusion. One could recall the myth of Drexciya, seeing their own reflections in the glass as if it is the sea. However, the sculptures could also be perceived under Glissant’s perspective of the abyss that the sea was for enslaved individuals. He described the sea as a deep, dark abyss of unknown dangers. The dark glass may be in reference to water as a symbol of danger opposed to one of hope.

In a virtually conducted interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist from Pace Gallery, Torkwase Dyson provides a detailed description of the importance of distance and movement in her work. In November and December of 2019, Dyson created a sculptural installation and a two-act performance at Pace Gallery entitled *I Can Drink The Distance: Plantationocene in 2 Acts* (Figure 4). She explains in the interview that the exhibition incorporates architecture and space

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as it pertains to “hypershape” - a concept she developed through which different shapes and lines come to be associated with different figures of self-liberation from enslavement. The artist describes that certain historical figures are attributed different geometric shapes such as rectangles or circles. Hypershape is “creating space out of no space… paths out of no paths.”

The shapes and geometries in Dyson’s art are also representations of Black liberation in geography. Dyson explains that she was thinking about the Middle Passage, underground escape routes and channels, plantations, and other spaces that Black bodies migrate through. The first act is “Way Over There Inside Me”, and the second act is “I See You Across That Water,” both incorporating work from a variety of contemporary artists (including writers, musicians, dancers, and videographers) to build on her theory of Black Compositional Thought. The installation serves to display multiple Black geographies and environmental perspectives because of the range of mediums and artists included. Dyson states,

> I think blackness will swallow the whole of terror to be free. It will move across distances, molecules, units – through architecture, atmospheres and concrete, in magic and bloodstream to self-liberate. To image and imagine movements and geographies of freedom, known and unknown, is to regard this space as irreducible, or to regard black spatial movement as irreducible.

Dyson describes “blackness” as a life form itself, nomadic in nature and unable to be diminished. She explains that to depict movement in her work is to exemplify Black movement through landscape. Dancers move throughout the space to music and spoken word that is based on human-induced climate change and racism. The constant movement, the sounds, and sculptural elements of this installation are reminiscent of Black Compositional Thought because

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19 Ibid.
of their connection to one another. Each element works with the others, a communication like that of Black histories across multiple geographies.

LaToya Ruby Frazier

LaToya Ruby Frazier’s practice includes a variety of media, her most notable being photography. The artist “centers on the nexus of social justice” in her work and is inspired by “the legacy of 1930s social documentary work and 1960s conceptual photography that address urgent social and political issues of everyday life.” Frazier uses her community and the act of storytelling in her artwork to address environmental racism and inequal access to clean water.

The Notion of Family is a deeply personal photo essay depicting environmental injustice in Frazier’s hometown. The artist was born in 1982 in Braddock, Pennsvylania, a small American town with a long history of racism and economic inequality. The photo series includes several of Frazier’s family members, and the artist herself, in their homes. In contrast, the other photographs are of the Braddock landscape. Frazier highlights the industrialization that overtakes small towns all over the country with no regard for the communities living there. In the 2009 image The Bottom (Talbot Towers, Allegheny County Housing Projects) (Figure 5) there is an old car in the foreground, and towering behind it is an industrial complex (presumably a steel mill). The Talbot Towers were low-income townhouses built in 1953, and destroyed in 1990 because renovations would be too expensive, and instead the townhomes were rebuilt elsewhere. The 145 families who lived in the towers from 1953 to 1990 were removed from their homes, and only some were able to move into the new townhouses being constructed. The

other families were given small rent vouchers in exchange for their homes of almost 40 years. By titling the work after this housing project, Frazier implies that government welfare is not reliable for communities like the Black citizens of Braddock. Rather than fund housing projects, funding goes toward industrialization. These industrial projects often happen in low-income areas (like the location of the Talbot Towers) and impact their everyday life. Frazier juxtaposes the old car model with the plant or mill in the background to display this imposition.

Frazier also includes familial and communal imagery in The Notion of Family. The artist is featured in several images alongside her mother and her grandmother in their homes. Grandma Ruby and Me in Her Livingroom (Figure 6), taken in 2007, is a realistic portrayal of an average day with family. The two are relaxed, laying down in comfortable chairs, and presumably watching television as their gaze is toward something other than the camera. Frazier’s hair is wrapped in a durag or satin cap, and there are house slippers at her grandmother’s feet. Here, Frazier uses her own family to display life for Black communities in small American towns. Her work is relatable for Black individuals, specifically women, as it documents their everyday practices. In another photo from this series, Mom Relaxing My Hair (Figure 7) from 2005, the artist is sitting in front of a mirror with relaxing solution in her hair, and her mother is standing behind her, holding a pair of plastic gloves as if she just removed them. The image is powerful because the act of a mother doing her daughter’s hair is ingrained in Black culture, even after the daughter is an adult. There is a communal nature to doing one’s hair that Frazier is using to document the daily lives of Black families in the US.

The imagery of Black female communities in Frazier’s photography can be analyzed under the lens of Black feminism. Black feminist thought is a multidimensional framework with the goal of Black women’s liberation. It is oppositional to mainstream feminism because it
rejects the single axis framework. The multidimensional practices and values of Black feminism take all forms of oppression into account. Mainstream feminism allows multiply oppressed individuals (such as Black women) to fall through the cracks. Black Feminist intellectuals argue that to liberate marginalized groups, a total reconstruction of social and political systems of oppression is necessary. The intersectional or multidimensional aspects of Black feminism encompass a variety of marginalized groups, rather than viewing oppression from a single lens. Black women are not a monolith, and each individual identity trait comes with its own privileges and/or disadvantages in Western society.

In her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins details the unique standpoint of Black women in the United States as they exist at the intersection of racial and gendered oppression.

“For one, prior to World War II, racial segregation in urban housing became so entrenched that the majority of African-American women lived in self-contained Black neighborhoods where their children attended overwhelmingly Black schools, and where they themselves belonged to all-Black churches and similar community organizations. Despite the fact that ghettoization was designed to foster political control and economic exploitation of Black Americans (Squires 1994), these all-Black neighborhoods provided a separate space where African-American women and men could use African-derived ideas to craft distinctive oppositional knowledges designed to resist racial oppression.”

Not only is she commenting on the poor governmental structures forcing Black communities into these areas, but she also describes the sense of belonging fostered in these Black spaces.

Segregation of housing and neighborhoods occurred to control Black communities, and exploit them for their labor. Unknowingly, the oppressive system of segregation aided in the creation of Black spaces and Black resistance to social and governmental systems.

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Black women are the mothers, teachers, and wives of these urban communities. They fully participated in the formation of oppositional thought and related to one another over shared experiences of Black womanhood. These shared experiences do not mean that all Black women are being oppressed in identical ways, but instead the shared experience of each being individually oppressed for sharing the same traits. This collective ideology of Black women is the precursor to Black feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins. The Black female relationship to environment is unique and multifaceted. Removal, movement, fluidity, and shared experience are themes presented in Frazier’s work. The Black female experience in America is highly communal. The oppositional thought described by Patricia Hill Collins has, in part, dictated Black female relationships with their environment. Black individuals in America experience a sense of place when they are in community spaces. Black women are free alongside one another, even through the generational hardship and disadvantages.

In her 2016 photo essay, *Flint is Family*, Frazier depicts the Black community in Flint, Michigan, and how they live their lives during a clean water crisis. Beginning in the 2010s, many of the low-income and Black neighborhoods of Flint, Michigan were subjected to unclean water conditions. The water that runs in their home is unsafe for drinking and bathing and has resulted in a rapid increase of health problems for the families impacted. In 2014, an eight-year-old Black girl named Amariyanna Copeny – widely known as Miss Flint – bravely wrote to President Barack Obama to do something to fix the water crisis. Her letter sparked awareness and news coverage, which is positive, however much of it incorrectly describes Flint as an outlier in the US when it is not. Black neighborhoods across the country are subjugated to water insecurity

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23 Ibid.
because of a history of antiblack zoning and a lack of governmental care. Frazier’s work is a unique form of activist art; she does not photograph the environmental crisis itself, instead she depicts the community which it effects the most. In this case, that community is the Black families of Flint. In one of the untitled photos from the series (Figure 8) there are three female figures sat in a bedroom. The two young adult women in the image are on the bed, one sits on the edge while the other is knelt behind her. The seated woman is having her hair placed into box braids by the kneeling woman. In the background of the image, behind the bed, a young girl is looking out of a window. Her back is facing toward the camera, and she has her hands atop the windowsill. In the image, there is no direct acknowledgement of the water crisis in Flint. Rather than photograph faucets with dirty water or hundreds of water bottles, Frazier depicts Black people doing everyday tasks. Again, she includes imagery of Black women doing each other’s hair, which I read as a symbol of physical connection and trust between Black women.

The photo essay also includes photographs of Black people protesting for their right to clean water, and images of homes and water towers across the city. She pairs images displaying the crisis with almost candid images of the community to humanize the subjects. Further, she is deliberately implicating the government allowing for Flint’s water crisis to continue in a human rights violation, claiming that they view the Black community of Flint as less deserving of rights than other areas of Michigan.

In another untitled image from Flint is Family (Figure 9) Frazier photographs the aunt and uncle of a friend of hers as they watch television. They appear to be in their living room, both standing in front of the television watching with their faces turned away from the camera. On the television is a still from the infamous Presidential visit that Barack Obama took to Flint,

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Michigan. The visit was in 2016, and here he was addressing the community’s concerns. After being asked about the water crisis, and why it had not been declared a national emergency, the former president drank a cup of Flint water from a cup in front of the whole crowd. His action caused a stir in the community and across the nation. Not only did he reject their pleas for help, but he essentially dismissed their credibility. By taking a sip of the water himself, he deemed it safe, attempting to silence the Flint community. Frazier felt it extremely important that this photograph was included in her essay. In an interview with Kellie Jones, Frazier explains that she “knew I (she) needed it to be this historic image” and was disappointed in the slowing media attention towards Flint and its people.\(^\text{25}\)

Frazier couples familiar and communal imagery with photographs depicting injustice as a view into the lives that are negatively impacted by environmental racism. Her portraits do not appear staged, her work looks as if she walked into a family home and documented their usual routine; she is highlighting their humanity. The artist argues that environmental injustice is a crime against humanity. No one should lack access to safe water, as it is integral to survival. What is happening in Flint, and many other Black American regions, is deadly and preventable. By ignoring and silencing these communities’ pleas for help, the oppressive systems of the American government are willingly, and knowingly, killing people.

**Allison Janae Hamilton**

Allison Janae Hamilton works in a variety of mediums, interpreting societal relationships within the American landscape. She was born in Kentucky, raised in Florida, and has maternal connections to western Tennessee.\(^\text{26}\) Because of her background, her work focuses on the


relationships between the people of the South and their land. Rather than portray landscapes as backdrops for figurative subject matter, the nature is equally as important to her compositions. As well as rural Southern influence, Hamilton’s artworks contain pieces and parts of folklore and familial narratives.

Allison Janae Hamilton’s work can be described as “womanist cartography,” as it recenters the narratives of Black women, and their presence in the American South. Womanist is a term coined by Alice Walker meaning:

“A Black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one.”

Cartography is the practice of mapmaking; therefore womanist cartography means mapmaking from the perspective of a feminist of color. Works under this category, such as Hamilton’s photographs, offer the “opportunity to recalibrate toward a more expansive awareness of place, in general, and in the memories of the South’s wounds of memory.” Her work is the Southern landscape reimagined to include Black history, Black memories. The wounds of memory for Southern Black communities are deep, as they live in the heart of plantation culture, and in what was once the Confederate region of the country. Hamilton’s work is “womanist” in its innate feminine energy. The figures of her photography are Black women, young and old, interacting with nature as if they are connected. Black bodies swimming in swampy water, or playing in deep woods, the subjects are well acquainted with one another. The connective style of her

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
photographs reestablishes the Black female relationship with their landscape as coexisting, not fighting against one another.

Memory is a prominent theme in Hamilton’s work. Michelle Lanier, a Black female scholar, couples a personal essay with Hamilton’s photographs to describe her Gullah Geechee upbringing. Lanier works with Hamilton to develop the belief that Southern Black women have a unique and spiritual relationship with their natural environments. Gullah Geechee is a creole culture with West African descendance, mostly populating the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. Lanier grew up in “a cultural heart of Gullah Geechee people” and uses Hamilton’s mystical photographs to help describe her relationship with the landscape.\(^\text{30}\) *Floridawater IV* (Figure 10), a photograph of Hamilton’s from 2019, depicts a young girl, all but her head, submerged underwater. The girl is wearing a white, baby doll dress, which flows and moves with the water. Her arms are outstretched, and her ballet slipper adorned feet are lightly standing on top of what appears to be a metal cage, possibly meant to catch fish. The photograph is positioned to where her submerged body is bisected by the surface of the water and her horizon. Lanier combines this photograph with her recounting of memories growing up on Hilton Head Island to emphasize the importance of remembrance. Black American ancestors lost their privilege to complete remembrance because of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Enslaved Africans were forced to leave their homeland, stripped of their identities, prohibited from participating in their cultural practices. Lanier emphasizes the importance of memory for the Black community today, who do have access to their birthplaces and original identities. She recounts stories of herself as a young child feeding the animals, eating the berries from bushes around her home, her fascination with the black snakes that found their way to her porch, and her unknown connection to the land

\(^{30}\) Lanier and Hamilton, “Rooted,” p. 16.
around her. It was at a young age that Lanier began to associate the environment with the word sacred.

Michelle Lanier uses Allison Janae Hamilton’s photographs to display that Black women of the South have a distinct, intimate connection to their homelands. Lanier states:

“The red and black and sandy tan of Carolina soils mirror her Black daughters in that we too are a spectrum from cream to midnight. We too have fed each other with our own loss. We too have sunk and risen above waters. We too have fed each other with our own loss. The land carries the bones of our babies and the bones of our own bodies carry her offerings.”

Lanier implies that Black women of the South and their land are the same. They have both suffered at the hands of the majority, they have both created and sustained life, and they are both made up of memories from generations past. Hamilton’s photograph, *Floridawater IV*, is an example of women’s connection to the land. The girl in the photograph, while at the center of the photo, is not the only focus. The water engulfing her takes up much of the space and moves her dress and keeps her body afloat. The natural elements of the photograph are rendered to be equally as important of the central figure. Hamilton equalizes the figure and the landscape to properly depict the relationship between the two. The familiarity between the figure and the landscape provides a nostalgic recalling of childhood memories in an environment. For Hamilton, and Lanier, that environment is the South, swampy areas with bodies of brown water and different marsh plants. The landscape cultivated the people, it provided food, shelter, and created different aspects of their culture. The Gullah Geechee people believed their land and waterways were holy.

*Three girls in a sabal palm forest II* (Figure 11) is another example of nostalgic themes in Hamilton’s photography. The composition includes three young Black girls standing on a fallen
tree limb. They stand in a small clearing of the forest scene, behind them dozens of tall palm trees. The girls are not all standing perfectly still, the leftmost hunched over as if she is slipping off the limb, and the rightmost looking down at the ground beneath her feet. The centered young girl is, however, stood up straight, her stance mirroring that of the trees standing around them. Hamilton has centered the young girls compositionally, possibly referencing the ideology of womanist cartographies and recentering Black women in the Southern landscape. The age of the figures is indicative of nostalgia and develops the idea of connectivity between past and present conditions of this forest, and Black women who played or existed there in the past and those who do now. Allison Janae Hamilton’s body of work is a womanist cartography of the Southern landscape in America, reimagining Black women’s relationship with it from their point of view.

Calida Garcia Rawles

Calida Garcia Rawles is a Los Angeles based artist, but was born in Wilmington, Delaware in 1976. Her hyper-realistic figural paintings are an “exploration of identity, race, and politics” that are grounded in her spiritual beliefs about water.32 The artist is exploring the duality of water in the Black community as both exclusionary and sacred to “envision a new space for black healing, and to reimagine her subjects beyond racialized tropes,” such as the incorrect stereotype that Black people do not know how to swim.33 Stereotypes like this are rooted in racist histories of exclusion; Black families historically were barred from public beaches and pools, therefore never being taught to swim. Like the previously discussed artists, Rawles’ interpretations of water also consider the forced migration of enslaved people on slave

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33 Ibid.
ships. Through ethereal paintings of Black bodies in water reimagine the element as a symbol of “strength and tranquility” as opposed to a symbol of trauma.\textsuperscript{34}

Rawles’ hyper-realistic paintings of Black men and women submerged in water to display water’s spiritual and fear evoking connotations. Water is a motif often used to connote purity, spirituality, and peace. However, for Black Americans, water can also evoke feelings of fear and exclusion. The painful history of the slave trade includes violent, and deadly voyages across the sea. Enslaved people were packed so tightly into slave ships and were treated as cargo as opposed to human passengers. These trips were brutal, as they were treated as cargo rather than human passengers. Some who could not bear the conditions chose to free themselves by jumping ship and allowing themselves to drown. The water was simultaneously a place of terror, and a place of freedom. Rawles considers water to be “a spiritually healing element for all people,” but she does not ignore the “historical connotations to racial exclusion and cultural fears.”\textsuperscript{35} Rawles depicts her subjects outside of cultural tropes and stereotypes to uplift the Black community. In her 2019 painting \textit{Reflecting My Grace} (Figure 12), Rawles is highlighting the beauty of Black women. The subject of the painting is a young, Black woman. Her entire body is submerged underwater as she floats on her back, her face is the only part of her above the water’s surface. Her pose is somewhat reminiscent of a ballerina; her legs together under the water, one arm outstretched to her side while the other is delicately curved across her lower stomach. She wears a mid-length, white dress with thin straps exposing her shoulders and arms. The figure’s eyes are closed, and her face appears relaxed, almost as if she is asleep in the water. The water surrounding her is a bright blue, and the small waves or ripples depict how her movement effects the water.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
Reflecting My Grace is an example of Rawles’ negotiations with space and landscape. Waterways are known to be places of horror and exclusion for the Black community. Here, the figure has taken up most of the space within the composition. She has taken ownership of her surroundings, she is comfortable in the water, not fearful. The title denotes the female figure as “graceful,” rather than violent or inferior. Her white dress and Rawles’ feelings about the spiritual nature of water are coupled to highlight the beauty of the figure. She is poised, relaxed, and elegantly posed in the water. Rawles has taken a landscape that once represented the exclusion of Black Americans and reclaimed it in her work.

On the contrary, to fully envelop the duality of water in the eyes of the Black community, some of her work depicts Black Americans struggling or succumbing to the water. In Guardian (Figure 13), a 2020 painting, a Black, pregnant woman is depicted in the water. Her head is not in frame, as the water bisects her body along her shoulder blades. Her head would be above surface, but the angle underneath the water shows a warped reflection rather than a surface view. Her side is towards the audience, and she slightly crouches her torso, her hands cradling her stomach. Her white dress is sleeveless, and the bottom portion floats around her thighs. Her pregnancy could be an allusion to the myth of Drexciya.

Rawles may have been inspired by this legend in Guardian. Unlike the figure in Reflecting My Grace, the woman in Guardian does not appear to be comfortable in the water. Her crouched position embodies feelings of pain or discomfort. Her clutch on her stomach implies that she is in pain because of her pregnancy, possibly going into labor beneath the water – a concept likely referencing the myth of Drexciya, or the Black Atlantis. The legend of the is a hopeful prediction about pregnant women who were thrown from slave ships in which their children adapt to the water after birth and survive, creating a successful society underwater.
Here, Rawles is referencing the more negative connotations the Black community has for water. The figure is in distress, her face out of sight, and alone in the composition. While the myth of Drexciya provides the Black community with a positive story of their ancestry, the reality is that there was no utopia, and it is no more than a legend. The title *Guardian* could be in reference to the relationships between the mother, the future child, and the water. The title could reflect the guardianship the water has over the mother and her child. A sort of promise between the two that the water will provide for them. A promise from the water to the mother that her baby will adapt to the circumstances, and the water will take over. It is possible that the mother will not be able to care for the baby after its birth, their relationship may cease to exist. The baby’s conditions are theoretically more plausible than the mother’s. She is an adult, who has only inhaled oxygen for her entire life. The baby, upon being born, would move from the amniotic fluid of the womb to the water, a similar consistency. In this case, the water would symbolically take guardianship of the child.

Rawles’ body of work is also representative of the Black community’s association with swimming. Segregation and Jim Crow laws in America resulted in the barring of Black families from public swimming areas. Generations of Black children were not taught to swim, and the repercussions are still ever present today; 64% of Black children being unable to swim. Because of this, she believes that “seeing Black bodies in water is special” and that, above all, her paintings are “celebratory” of Black Americans.\(^{36}\) *Little Swimmer* (Figure 14), a painting of hers from 2016, depicts a young Black girl swimming beneath the water’s surface. She is wearing a colorful, two-piece swimsuit, and her arms are outstretched behind her as she swims. Based on the large number of small waves and ripples surrounding the central figure, she would be moving

frantically, as a weak swimmer would. Kicking her legs quickly and flailing her arms side to side and up and down to stay afloat. Rawles equally represents the joy of young Black children in swimming pools, and the continued lack of proper swim knowledge they are given. Rawles’ own personal connection to water is a theme in her paintings as well. The artist did not learn to properly swim until adulthood, when she was pregnant with her third daughter. Rawles swam throughout her pregnancy and claims that although “it started as exercise… it became almost like a therapy.” It is this meditative experience that drove her to create her hyper-realistic paintings. Rawles’ work represents Black people as a group while incorporating her own personal experiences. By incorporating individual narrative, Rawles pushes against the societal view of Black Americans as monolithic.

Conclusion

The differences between each artists’ work are comparable to the shared, but varying, standpoint and experiences of Black Americans as a whole. While each artist visualizes and reconstructs Black landscapes considering their shared history, their work varies greatly. Frazier and Hamilton both specialize in photography, however the former’s work is realist and documentary-like while the latter’s is ethereal and reimagined. Both center the views and experiences of Southern Black communities, specifically their women, with vastly different imagery. Each of the artists portrays the connection between Black bodies and their landscape. Dyson’s linear abstraction connects shapes and spaces to one another as histories connect Black individuals across different geographies. Frazier photographs human connection despite environmental racism, expanding the Black space into the home as opposed to focusing only on the outdoor landscape. Hamilton recenters Black women in the history of the Southern

37 Ibid.
landscape. She is inspired by memory and nostalgia, and photographs women and girls in natural spaces to imply that they belong in the landscape’s narrative. Rawles, similarly to Hamilton, reimagines the meaning of water to be healing for Black people instead of a source of trauma.

The Black experience within the American landscape is deeply complex. Ancestors of the Black community were forcefully brought to the United States and stripped of their African culture. Because of this, they were forced to regroup, and create new traditions and practices, a fusion of their original land and their new situation. Black American culture and landscapes have changed time and time again, from emancipation, to the Jim Crow era, to now - as the repercussions of systemic racism are still present in the American landscape. Environmental racism effects the morale, health, and sense of place for minority groups, specifically Black Americans. Dyson, Hamilton, Frazier, and Rawles renegotiate the politics of place within the United States, centering landscapes around Black bodies to provide that sense of place the community has always struggled to attain.


LaToya Ruby Frazier, image from *Flint is Family* photo series, 2016, gelatin silver print.
LaToya Ruby Frazier, image from photo series *Flint is Family*, 2016, gelatin silver print.


Calida Garcia Rawles, *Reflecting My Grace*, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 72 in.
Calida Garcia Rawles, *Little Swimmer*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 in.
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