# CAPTIVE ECOLOGIES

THE ENVIRONMENTAL AFTERLIVES *of* SLAVERY

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To my late parents, Aaron C. and Maxine A. James,
whose love still sustains me

To my family, David James, Donovan James,
Reyna James, and Leslie Daland-James

To the late James A. Miller, always

i keep hearing tree talk
water words
and I keep knowing what they mean.

—LUCILLE CLIFTON, "breaklight," in *an ordinary woman*

# Contents

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*Introduction*

# Environmental Afterlives

> Slavery had established a measure of a man and a ranking of a life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.—SAIDIYA HARTMAN, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*

This book takes a simple observation as its premise: that the financial, psychological, physical, and geographical afterlife Hartman describes—the result of slavery's "racial calculus" and "devaluing" of Black life—is also environmental. In "Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence," geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore delineates the meaning of racial capitalism: "Racial capitalism: a mode of production, improved by enclosure in the Old World, and captive land and labor in the Americas, perfected in slavery's time-motion field-factory choreography."[1] Drawing energy from both Hartman and Gilmore, *Captive Ecologies: The Environmental Afterlives of Slavery* considers how the afterlife of enslavement in the form of racial capitalism—a relationship between captive land and captive bodies—has shaped the Black ecological imagination and Black ecological relation at the intersections of human and nonhuman worlds.[2] While enslavement is the foundational event giving rise to these concepts, the idea of captivity in this study signals not only slavery but Black life in the "wake": carceral

spaces and enclosures, exploitative economic systems and agreements, discourses of abjection, sacrifice zones, and Black Anthropocenes.[3] Environment thus expands beyond the natural world to include built environments from rural towns in the South to the dense cityscapes of the North.

In short, *Captive Ecologies* seeks to demonstrate how attentive readings of Black literature and art in slavery's aftermath open up new modes of ecocriticism while expanding our ideas of what kinds of literature and art count as environmental. At the same time, it attends to the harm racial capitalism does to Black people and the human and nonhuman worlds they inhabit. As Destin Jenkins and Justin Leroy contend in their introduction to *Histories of Racial Capitalism*, "the insights racial capitalism brings to the study of the past are also crucial for envisioning the future. If race came into being to justify the social dynamics of capitalism, then racial justice cannot thrive under capitalism."[4] My work in this book proposes that the future of racial justice and environmental justice are intersected claims to life; neither can survive, much less thrive, under capitalism.

My own environmental consciousness and theorizing initially emerged from my early experiences of the natural world. I was a child born within sight of the Pacific Ocean and was raised by the Atlantic. Although we did not reside at the beach itself, I could dig in my yard and find shells from the time when the shore stretched farther inland. I recall, when very young, asking my parents what the ocean was. I had acquired a lexicon born of sensation and experience—waves, salt, sand, seaweed, crabs, fish, jellyfish, even sharks—but wanted to know what those words added up to. My mother offered this by way of explanation: "It goes on and on to the other side of the world that you cannot see from here." My father, a seaman turned professor, added that he would like to take my mother to that other side someday. I was satisfied. The ocean had become synonymous with mystery, imagination, and desire. I once scrawled a note in my child's handwriting addressed to a someone, an anyone, over "there." I put it in a glass bottle, corked it, and tossed it into the sea wondering who might read it. This was before I had ever heard of the transatlantic slave trade. This was before I knew that the "someones" or "anyones" I would go looking for as a researcher were Black, from Africa, and born centuries before me.

At that time, the greatest horror I knew associated with the ocean was not a slave ship; it was the dread undertow. I understood that the sea was a source of two of my greatest pleasures—swimming and fishing—but that it was equally necessary to acknowledge the power of the ocean, to know and to respect what the ocean could do. My parents warned me that while

the waves tumbled toward us, one after another, a strong current could be moving beneath them waiting to pull us away from the shore. I learned then that the ocean could move in two simultaneous directions: one which carried us to safety, the other, to possible death. The enslaved might have thought otherwise; in fact, we know that many did. The shores of the Americas were hardly safety, and drowning, and the *away*, could transport one home.

The undertow appears in Jacqueline Jones LaMon's poem "Rockaway" from *What Water Knows*:

> How deep can we plunge and still discern
> the finest shades of difference? Today,
>
> the sea presents us with waves worthy
> of riding, shoving us away on the surface,
> while reeling us home with its fierce
>
> undertow. The surfers will need this,
> but maybe not us.[5]

Poet and scholar Bettina Judd notes that for LaMon, the water is something "which has the capacity to kill us, cradle us."[6] I have come to think of the threat of the undertow as a metaphor for Black art about the natural world produced under the conditions of capitalism. Knowing that enslavers used the unruly ocean to contain human beings—against the ocean's own nature, as they forced it to become a vast, captive ecology—Black artists still insist upon celebrating the sea while they recognize its duality. The sea is life and it is an enclosing economy; the sea is life, and it is death. Fred Moten notes in *Black and Blur* that to "celebrate is to solemnify, in practice. This is done not to avoid or ameliorate the hard truths of antiblackness but in the service of its violent eradication."[7]

Thus while captivity is my guiding concept, I also read for ways in which some works—some celebratory of nature, and others not; some dealing with the natural world, others, the built environment—offer pathways for evading and eluding enclosure. Achille Mbembe tells us that race itself, not merely space, operates by the "*logic of enclosure*": "Historically race has always been a more or less coded way of dividing and organizing a multiplicity, of fixing and distributing it according to a hierarchy, of allocating it to more or less impermeable spaces according to a *logic of enclosure* . . . to fix as precisely as possible which sites they can occupy."[8] In racial bioeconomies,

he continues, racialized populations are marked as "'species,' 'classes,' and 'cases'" and are, if possible, "neutralize[d]" through "immobilization" and "incarceration." A key instance Mbembe uses alongside the colony and the apartheid state is, of course, the plantation. Similarly, although I treat spaces such as poisoned and polluted built environments as environmental enclosures, I am particularly interested in how racial capitalism as a financial bioeconomy forces the natural world to conform to human imperatives, enlisting it as a weapon against Black life to enclose both body and mind through the violent processes of objectification, dispossession, and "bestialization."[9] I depart from Mbembe on a key point, however. He views "dis-enclosure," our escape from enclosure, as the route to a liberatory undoing. If we are like the land, deprived of owning it, and are "undifferentiated" in Western discourse from both earth and animal, then we must forcefully resist that undifferation.[10] "Dis-enclosure" for Mbembe means that the Black will ultimately be recognized as sharing common humanity with other human beings, predicated perhaps on the abolition of the race concept as he writes elsewhere, to "restore the humanity stolen from those who have historically been subjected to processes of abstraction and objectification." He does acknowledge that this restored human must not work against "the world of non-humans."[11] Unlike Mbembe, this book ultimately will ask whether an open Black identification with earth and animal—*embracing* an undifferentiation with the nonhuman natural world instead of resisting it—might be the better and perhaps the only way to think outside of the categories and orders ecoracial capitalism imposes, and the only way to live in a unified relation to all planetary life.

## Racial Capitalism, Racial Captivity

The proper term for what this book explores might be what I at times call *ecoracial capitalism*.[12] Since Cedric Robinson first introduced the concept of racial capitalism in *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, the term has become central to discussing how capitalism endeavors to naturalize race in order to naturalize capitalism's operations. Arguing that "race" was a concept "internal" to European people, not simply a matter of white Europeans versus external dark "others," he writes, "In contradistinction to Marx's and Engels's expectations . . . [as] the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially

racial directions, so too did social ideology. . . . I have used the term 'racial capitalism' to refer to this development and to the subsequent structures emergent from capitalism."[13] As others have noted, for Robinson, capitalism is racial capitalism.[14] Nancy Leong later argued that focusing on the Marxian idea of value helps to crystalize the concept. "Racial capitalism," she asserts, "is the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another."[15] It is, in other words, a form of extractive exploitation benefiting the "unraced" who profit from the racialized subject in any number of ways. And as literary scholar Lindon Barrett explains, racial value is never an objective or neutral determination, but comes from the violent process of assignation at the hands of those empowered to classify, relegate, and ultimately, subjugate.[16] Jenkins and Leroy observe that "recent work . . . has been to place an emphasis on explaining how capitalism works rather than setting out to define precisely what capitalism is."[17] Similarly, *Captive Ecologies* is not an attempt to define precisely what racial capitalism is. It instead considers what racial capitalism *does*. This approach assumes that a study of effects is a study of both cause and operation.

One thing that practitioners of racial capitalism did—plantation capitalism particularly—is to use Black labor to alter ecosystems in what Gilmore notes is "racial capitalism's dramatically scaled cycles of place-making."[18] In some instances, these alterations permanently changed the landscape and, in longer-term consequences we are registering now, they changed the climate. As I will discuss in parts of this book, planters' overreliance on cotton was largely to blame. Historian Walter Johnson calls "cotton monocropping . . . a radical simplification of nature" that "stripped the land of vegetation" and "leached out its fertility" in the name of a plantation project targeting both land and the Black human in what he terms "pro-slavery imperialism."[19] Another historian, David Silkenat, describes the destruction to both flora and fauna resulting from the plantation project: "On its leading edge, slavery laid waste to fragile ecosystems, draining swamps and clearing forests to plant crops and fuel steamships. On its trailing edge, slavery left eroded hillsides, rivers clogged with sterile soil, and the extinction of native species."[20] Here, we can posit an analogy between the slave and the land. Hortense Spillers writes that the "captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being* for the captor" and so it was (and is), we can argue, with captive nature.[21] In ecologies held in captivity, humans strip nature of its being-for-itself and turn nature into being-for-the possessor—be it owner, corporation, nation. "To be a slave," Stefanie K. Dunning observes, "was to

be an unwilling party to multiple violations of the natural world; it was to participate in a system of extraction that was also extracting humanity" from the Black body.[22]

Indeed, slave owners and slave-owning businesses and corporations pushed both the Black body and the land beyond their capacities with a single goal, production. In the afterward of enslavement, forced and economically coerced labor remained central to ecologically exploitative practices, such as convict leasing to mines and fields, peonage, and tenant farming. The Black human and earthly landscapes were linked scenes of subjection, yoked in extractive systems ruinous to both, the commodity-body and commodity-nature becoming one in value. If, as Denise Ferreira da Silva posits, "the plaster (and every other material involved in the design and building) of a house, or anything that has any (economic) value here/now is but a re/composition of the flesh, blood, bones of the bodies of yesterday's colonial figures, namely the Native and the Slave," the same holds true of the natural world.[23] It has been "re/composed" of flesh, blood, and bone. Johnson puts it this way: "The Cotton Kingdom was built out of sun, water, and soil; animal energy, human labor, and mother wit; grain, flesh, and cotton; pain, hunger, and fatigue; blood, milk, semen and shit."[24]

The *captive* of captive ecologies thus includes the ways that the master writ large instrumentalized Black bodies into tools used to imprint nature with his will. The "disorganized world" that the white Dutch farmer Jacob Vaark laments in *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison's novel of slavery in the early Americas, becomes "organized" when he builds fences and buys slaves to enclose and control his land.[25] An overarching idea in Jason W. Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life* conforms to Morrison's portrayal. He asserts that capitalism is not a social or economic system primarily, but "*a way of organizing nature*"—human and nonhuman—within a "world ecology" of profit.[26] As such, "capitalism does not have an ecological regime; it is an ecological regime." Here, Moore is scaling observations other scholars have made about the plantation. "Cotton plantations were tools for controlling labor and organizing production," Johnson observes nearly a decade before Moore, "but, although this has seldom been noted, they were also ways of attempting to control and *organize nature*."[27] Like capitalism itself, then, the ecological regime Moore describes is inherently a racial one. If capitalism is racial, as Robinson argues, and always ecological as Moore claims, and capitalism, racial capitalism, and ecoracial capitalism are in essence one and the same, then *ecoracial capitalism* names those interanimating denotations.

*Captive* additionally refers to circumscribed approaches of thinking about the relationship(s) of Black people to the earth. That is, it alludes to older, white, Western interpretative frameworks for environmental art, thought, and praxis that relegated Black, Indigenous, and other people of color to their margins. As we now know, the privileging of the wilderness as both site and symbol is chief among these. The environmental historian William Cronon has famously noted that there is "trouble" with this discourse: "The mythic frontier individualist was almost always masculine in gender: here, in the wilderness, a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity. . . . More often than not, men who felt this way came, like Wister and Roosevelt, from elite class backgrounds. . . . The very men who most benefited from urban-industrial capitalism were among those who believed they must escape its debilitating effects."[28] Those responsible for the creation of what has now become classed and racialized urban sacrifice zones—the polluted inner city—were eager to escape the landscapes of their own making. "Wildlands," environmental sociologist Dorceta Taylor explains, were meant to be "antidotes to the worst human instincts."[29] Instead, the wilderness concept merely exacerbated those instincts. The conservation idea emerging from the desire to preserve wildlands was entwined with an ideology of identity meant to conserve something else: a white masculinist selfhood defined by attitudes and activities related to the outdoors, which in turn provided a space where white Edenic innocence could be retrieved beyond the vistas of capitalism—smoke-filled air, crowded tenements, and streets strewn with garbage and sewage. This escapist desire helped propel the creation of the national park system, the most recognizable symbol of conservationist ideology. Yet their formation was predicated on somewhat less romantic outdoor activities than, say, climbing a rugged mountain. They were a "nation-building project," as cultural geographer Carolyn Finney notes; African Americans and "other nonwhite persons were not allowed to participate" in the project "on their own terms."[30] Given that the enterprise was predicated on Indigenous land dispossession, appropriation, and genocide, the attendant racial marginalization is of little wonder.

The critique of ecology's presumptive whiteness has been central to Black studies since its beginnings. Nathan Hare, a founder of the field, takes the idea of "white ecologies" to task for its shortcomings in his pathfinding 1970 essay "Black Ecology." For Hare, white ecology was predicated on exclusions of Black people from white spaces, depriving them of

access to nature and recreation, while hemming them into sites plagued with pollution.[31] These polluted sacrifice zones, whether urban, suburban, or rural, were and are sites where racial capitalism and those government and corporate entities indifferent or hostile to environmentalism do their deathly work with expedience and efficiency. The deteriorated levees in New Orleans, situated in the southern petrochemical corridor along the Mississippi ("cancer alley"), the poisoned water in Flint, toxic dumping in Houston, fecal pollution from factory farming in Alabama, the lead in Chicago housing projects, to name but a few examples, all point to one conclusion. Racial landscapes and their inhabitants are disposable. Nearly a decade after what is widely considered the birth of the environmental justice movement in 1982, sparked when largely Black protestors galvanized against a proposed landfill in rural North Carolina, the 1991 National People of Color Environmental Summit convened in Washington, DC. The summit was the first of its kind: a gathering of Black, Latinx, Native American, and Asian activists concerned about the connections among race, economic oppression, and environmental destruction. During the days-long meeting, the participants crafted an enduring document outlining seventeen principles of environmental justice, still a relatively new concept at that point. Its preamble states in part that they wished "to ensure environmental justice; to promote economic alternatives which would contribute to the development of environmentally safe livelihoods; and, to secure our political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land."[32] They recognized that "economic alternatives" were key to liberating both land and people. Racial capitalism was killing both.

While it is accurate to surmise that Black experiences of social injustice related to nature have complicated Black people's relationship to the land—the enslaved field worker, the exploited miner, the farmer cheated of land, for example—it remains essential to point out that these experiences have produced complex political and affective responses which are not wholly negatively deterministic. Naima Penniman, the cofounder of WILDSEED, a BIPOC ecological intentional community, opens an essay about her childhood with this observation: "It's no wonder the forest can be a terrifying place for Black folks. I don't even have to tell you. But my great-great grandmother told me, 'Herein lies the medicine.'"[33] She does not have to tell us because "we been knew" to use our vernacular. But we also "been knew," as does her grandmother, that the forest is full of healing and wonder. As I will discuss later, the idea of the forest—especially the

trees in those forests—represents this contradictory Black feeling about the natural world. In *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions*, Kimberly Ruffin considers the implications of the struggle over the "white tree" in the case of the Louisiana Jena Six to explore this point:

> A black freshman at the area high school asked permission from the school's principal to sit under a tree commonly understood as "the white tree." The following day when black students arrived to enjoy the white tree, they found three nooses hanging from it. The school's principal suggested an expulsion of the white students responsible; however, they received only a three-day suspension. Frustrated by this and other incidents of racial injustice, six black teenagers beat a white classmate whom they accused of making racist comments related to the noose hanging. Although the white student sustained relatively minor injuries, five of the Jena Six were charged with attempted murder. Across the United States, people saw the treatment of the Jena Six as representative of a national scourge: a criminal justice system that routinely minimizes or dismisses crimes perpetrated by whites and either falsely accuses blacks or inflates and unduly punishes black wrongdoing. A national outcry against the racial injustices brought into relief by the Jena Six culminated in a protest march that drew thousands to Jena on September 20, 2007, with solidarity protests around the country.[34]

The resolution of the conflict was both shocking and disturbing. Against the protests of Black members of the community, "School officials felled the white tree."[35] An ungenerous reading of that act would posit that the officials were destroying the evidence of white supremacist violence at the expense of nature. A more generous reading would allow that the officials recognized the historical symbolism of the lynching tree. Yet the Black voices who stood up for the life of the tree, asking school officials to spare it, tell a more complex story about nature and race. Ruffin suggests that when Black legacies of trauma associated with nature confront the wonder that the natural world inspires, a contradiction arises in the Black psyche: the "burden-and-beauty paradox."[36] In a slightly different move that incorporates an ecoracial interpretation of psychoanalysis, my opening chapter limns a concept I call Black "ecomelancholia" to characterize the conflicting and conflicted feelings of attachment, ambivalence, and even disavowal which can arise in African American encounters with nature. Still, if natural landscapes have been conscripted into acts of anti-Black violence, the interior landscapes of Black people can and do resist this capture, as in

the tales of trees Penniman and Ruffin offer. Like these and other writer-scholars of Black environmentalism and Black environmental art, I believe that it is crucial to underscore, at the risk of repetition, that there are ecological relations that racism, capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, and their accompanying terrors will always fail to undo. This undoing began during the time of slavery itself.

Indeed, scholars have noted that the very conditions of rural and plantation enslavement required environmental knowledge for effective agricultural methods, sustenance fishing and trapping, plant-based medicinal remedies, as I mentioned before, and of course, fugitivity. Political ecologist J. T. Roane borrows Sylvia Wynter's idea of the "plot"—the parcels of land slave owners offered the enslaved for semiautonomous subsistence—to argue that forms of "plotting," such as gardens, burial grounds, and swamp maroonage, were sites where the enslaved and the emancipated living in the lower Chesapeake Bay "renegotiated the terrain of radical exploitation and totalizing social control envisioned by slave masters."[37] These plots were both place and practice, offering "possibilities for survival, connection, and insurgency" which worked against the relegation of both human beings and nature to property in a practice that Roane calls "black commoning." Taylor suggests that Harriet Tubman should be revered for her journeys into the wilderness in the same manner celebrated white male environmental figures such as John Muir or Henry David Thoreau are for theirs, detailing Tubman's intimacy with nature. During fieldwork, she "learned to predict the weather" by "watch[ing] the sky"; she learned about the swamps while laboring in their proximity. Her beloved father taught her how to "imitate bird calls and use bird sounds to communicate to others," "how to feel the barks of trees for moss" to discern which way was north and instructed her how to discern edible and medicinal plants.[38] All were invaluable to her unparalleled ability to spirit the enslaved to freedom. The knowledge and intimacy that Roane, Taylor, and others have observed is the foundation for contemporary environmental politics. Environmental historian Mart Stewart explains: "Certain qualities of African American environmental politics—the pursuit of collective rights, the tendency to see community in broad terms that include humans and non-humans, the connection of environmental concerns to the world of work and production rather than to lifestyle and consumption . . . are rooted in the experience of African Americans as slaves. More importantly, these qualities and practices are part of a politics that African Americans deeply made, and not one that was thrust upon them or that was learned or

assimilated from other traditions of grassroots activism."[39] As my book will show, those qualities also appear in Black environmental art.

## Scope and Method

Each chapter in *Captive Ecologies* has three interconnected elements of analysis.

**PORTABLE TERMINOLOGY.** First, to make my work useful to environmental humanists both within and outside of Black studies, I present a portable or transferable framework in each chapter that can be used to interpret Black environmental literature and art. This is central to my project. While there is an ever-growing body of new scholarship on Black environmental thought, praxis, literature, and art, the field remains undertheorized. I view the development of a conceptual vocabulary as an essential part of interpreting Black ecological work in all of its forms in a manner organic to Black study. For instance, the "beauty/burden" paradox undergirds Ruffin's analysis in *Black on Earth*. Roane converts Wynter's "plot" and the idea of the commons into verbs communicating Black ecological relation. Sonya Posmentier's award-winning book on Black ecopoetics, *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature*, explains that "cultivation" and "catastrophe," while seemingly antonymic, are "key terms" which "intersect": "In the United States and the Caribbean, cultivation in the form of enforced agricultural labor has been a social catastrophe in and of itself; environmental catastrophes in turn have yielded rich traditions of art, music, and poetry. . . . These terms function in part as metaphors for human experiences of growth and displacement and in part as descriptions of agricultural and natural processes that have had material and ecological implications for black communities and their environments."[40] The poetry of these environments, she explains, are "lyric ecologies" in content and in form. Sarah Jane Cervenak's exploration of Black women's art in *Black Gathering: Art, Ecology, Ungiven Life* mobilizes two concepts, "gathering" and "ungiven," to examine how the artists in her study offer gathering as a remedy to dispersal, displacement, and exclusion in a country hostile to Black "togetherness." This hostility extends to the way Black people gather in ecological spaces and other sites representing the outdoors, such as the Jim Crow prohibitions against Black people using "white" beaches and pools.[41] "Ungiving," which might

evoke an absence of generosity, is instead a resistance to a discourse of giving in Christian scripture and Western philosophical traditions wherein the earth is ostensibly given to man for dominion and possession. Dunning also offers useful language for Black ecological study. Although she states that her book is not a work of ecocriticism, her analyses of Black women's art offer the ideas of "homelessness" and "interbeing"—merging Afropessimism with Buddhist philosophy—to craft an argument about the possibilities of a Black return to nature. This return requires leaving "civil society" and its anti-Black apparatuses behind (an intentional homelessness) for a communion with the natural world (interbeing). Additionally, both Cervenak and Dunning consider what abolition might mean in the context of ecological thought. *Captive Ecologies* shares that interest and will take it up as an inquiry in the third chapter and the conclusion.

Somewhat differently from Posmentier, Dunning, and Cervenak, however, my book uses a series of distinct case studies, linked through the captive ecologies framework to introduce a series of terms and concepts across the five chapters and the conclusion. Some are original; others are repurposed and reimagined from other scholarly work in the fields I draw from throughout my study: Black studies, Marxism, psychoanalysis, Black feminism, queer and trans theory, and a range of ecocritical traditions. *Captive Ecologies* opens with the aforementioned ecomelancholia, which I theorize as a Black affective economy that resists two things. It resists the forgetting of nature-based racial trauma, such as enslavement, and it complicates Freud's belief that lost objects, whether love objects or elements of the natural world, will be endlessly replenishable. As I will explain, Freud's belief mirrors capitalism's ruse that natural resources are endlessly renewable. I open with this framework for its transhistorical resonance. If Black ecomelancholia's racial-ecological mourning is foundational to understanding Black environmental art, thought, and relation during the period of enslavement, its affective residue has also left its traces on the present. The Black artists, ecocritics, activists, and ordinary people in the pages of this book are all ecomelancholics, even if I do not call them that by name. Slavery's affective and psychological afterlife persists. The next three chapters—2, 3, and 4—turn to the immediate decades after Emancipation, the late nineteenth and the turn of the twentieth centuries, to follow that environmental afterlife in its varying manifestations. The racialized reading of the sustainability concept in chapter 2 thinks through how the disposability of Black bodies toiling in ecologically destructive industries after slavery's end—in capacities approximating neo-enslavement—remained

essential to the sustainability of capitalism in slavery's wake. Treated like the land, mined for their labor, these workers still at times managed to summon their strength to rise up to claim their humanity. As I contend, the kind of sustainability that calculates how many Black and Brown people can die to keep racial capitalism alive is antithetical to what I call racial sustainability, the valuing of Black and Brown life. The key concept of chapter 3, "dyspossession," is a term I develop to trouble the ways that Black landowning after Emancipation, even in experimental forms such as collectives, was viewed as a route to Black capitalist personhood; that is, landowning became a means to trade in the badge of the dispossessed, the slave and postslave, for proof that they were a property-owning possessor, much like the people who once held them in captivity. Although this desire is both logical and understandable, I nonetheless ask whether the emphasis on acquiring land in a propertied form might have inadvertently tightened the grip capitalism had on the Black ecological imagination, relegating other, more liberational ways of environmental being to a lesser possibility, possibly unthought. Chapter 3, which treats the twinned ideas of what I have named Black "environmental double consciousness" and the "black ecological soul," explores how the tug between Black modernity and technological advancement—in this case, in the form of imperialist expansion and exploration—deepens the unreconciled rifts between Blackness and nature caused by the oppressor's ever-present accusations of Black primitivism. Similar to the question I pose in chapter 2, I ask whether the longing to be associated with science as vehicle for Black futurity can risk the loss of ecological vision. Chapter 5 and my conclusion, respectively, explore two concepts derived from Black feminist queer and trans theory to elaborate how an ecological idea of Blackness might be liberated from the captivity of ecoracial capitalism. In chapter 5, I redeploy the idea of bottoming to name a Black ecofeminist view of ecology and environmentalism from below. My conclusion develops a theory of Black trans*ecology, to consider whether the movement of "trans" can destabilize dichotomies that separate the human from other forms of life. Black feminist, queer, and trans theory might not hold the sole answers to the problems this book limns, yet it is clear they offer ways of thinking and seeing from which these problems can be productively analyzed. In the end, my book moves toward the liberatory modes of Black ecological thought these perspectives offer.

HISTORICISM. Each of the terms I have discussed here arises from my readings of Black literature and art, and just as importantly, they emerge

from my interpretations of historical and environmental events that illumine Black environmental relations. Thus, second, each chapter turns to a historical environmental event to ground my theorizing historically and to use history itself as a source of theorizing. These events include an 1889 Black worker uprising carried out by guano miners in the Caribbean; an all-Black post-Emancipation experimental farming community, founded in the 1860s by a former slave on the plantation where he was previously held in bondage; the Arctic explorer Matthew Henson's treks to the North Pole with the Peary expedition during the early 1900s; the appearance of the Vietnam War in Black ecological art of the 1960s and '70s; the aforementioned protests against toxic dumping in North Carolina in the 1980s; the deindustrialization of Braddock, Pennsylvania, and the Flint water crisis, both continuing into the present. Hurricane Katrina, already the subject of an abundance of insightful analyses, is not offered extensive treatment in this book.

INTERMODALITY AND TRANSTEMPORALITY. And finally, to demonstrate the wide range of literature and art related to my topic, I treat multiple works in each chapter to demonstrate how they are linked in terms of theme, content, and/or politics. As such, the chapters cut across period, mode, genre, and racial production, as the chapter synopses below demonstrate.

## Chapter Summaries

My first chapter, "Ecomelancholia: Life, Land, and Unrenewable Loss," begins by discussing the difficulty of not referring to the cultural memory of trauma in discussions of African Americans and the environment. Traumatic memory permeates Black landscapes and Black ecologies; in Black literature, memory walks out of rivers, rises up in oceans, grows in flowers and in fields, and rolls back as stone. Memory becomes an inseparable part of the natural world. While it is tempting to analyze what I call *natural memory* as the return of the repressed—trauma irrupting—I argue that repression would require that these memories had been at times unavailable to the Black collective consciousness. I instead propose that this return be labeled *ecomelancholia* after another Freudian concept of memory, melancholia, a form of mourning marked by its resistance to termination. In so doing, I join other minority critics who wish to rethink Freud's definition

of melancholia as an inherently debilitating, pathological condition, and choose to read persistent mourning as missives from politically aggrieved and emotionally bereaved communities. Additionally, in discussing how Freud borrowed capitalist fantasies of endlessly renewable resources to deride what he considered excessive grieving, I claim that Black ecomelancholia troubles capitalism's influence on his theory of human emotion. As I further claim, Black ecomelancholia responds to the cumulative losses of nature, land, and resources, and to the traumas tied to those losses, such as death, deracination, and dispossession. It is activated by ongoing and interrelated social and political violence, including the catastrophes of poverty, genocide, and war. Indeed, a significant part of the chapter analyzes the ways that the Vietnam War shaped twentieth-century Black environmental expression and includes explorations of singer Marvin Gaye's "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)"; poems from Lucille Clifton's *good times* (1969) and *good news about the earth* (1972); and Alice Walker's 1976 novel *Meridian*.

Chapter 2, "'Buried in Guano': Race, Labor, and Sustainability," offers a racialized conceptualization of sustainability by using a case study to explore the ways Black laboring bodies and the earth are viewed as resources for endless capitalist extraction. I approach this by examining the first globally traded organic fertilizer, guano. During the nineteenth century, guano became a highly valued commodity that countries struggled against one another to procure in their efforts to offset the damage that industrial agriculture had wrought on the environment. It became, as I explore, a way to cover up—in a near-literal sense—capitalists' destruction of the natural world in an early instance of greenwashing. The use of guano, a "magic" commodity, also covered up the laboring Black and Brown bodies, such as slaves, coolies, and miners, who were industrial agriculture's other victims and became a means of sustaining just enough life to allow necrocapitalism to continue. As an example of this, the chapter takes as its historical centerpiece an 1889 Black labor uprising, the Navassa Island Riot, that occurred on a US-held territory where trapped and exploited Black workers were used to mine guano on behalf of the United States to the point of disease and death. Ultimately, the riot demonstrated that, if Black degradation and environmental degradation are coterminous, ecological sustainability and human sustainability are as well. Opening the chapter with guano's appearance in a scene from Walker's aforementioned novel *Meridian*, I then place in conversation array of writers and thinkers who write about guano in relation to race, land, and labor in the Americas: Frederick Douglass's

journalism; white reformer Frederick Law Olmsted's study of Southern slave economy, *A Journey into the Seaboard States* (1856); and Martinican poet and playwright Aimé Césaire's revision of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *A Tempest* (1969).

Chapter 3, "Dyspossession: Abolitionist Ecology and the Black Commons," offers the concept of dyspossession as a way of thinking about the potential for a Black anticapitalist relationship—an abolitionist ecology—to the land. Focusing primarily on Black writing about landownership in the postbellum era—fueled by an Afro-optimism born of a booming cotton market and the fresh promise of Emancipation—I consider what landowning engenders relationally even if the goal of ownership is to sustain Black life. I explore how *New York Freeman* editor T. Thomas Fortune's collection of anticapitalist essays, *Black and White: Land, Labor and Politics in the South* (1884), in which he calls for an end to private property in land, provides us with early insight, however limited, into an abolitionist politics of land. I propose that a concept I name *dyspossession* could become a useful way to point us toward a new affective and political relationship to Black landownership. This new relationship would envision collective ownership, including the Black commons, as a necessary but impermanent stop on the way to enacting an even more radical structural transformation. The bulk of the chapter examines two Black commons, one real and one fictional. The first is Davis Bend, a Mississippi experimental slave farming community initiated by Joseph E. Davis, Jefferson Davis's slaveholding older brother, modeled on Scottish utopian reformer Robert Owen's labor philosophies. He sold the plantation to his former slave, Benjamin Montgomery, who then transformed it into a Black-led farming cooperative during Reconstruction. Tracing its rise and fall—and the problems the swampy land upon which it was convened posed to its hopefuls—I suggest that the project becomes a metaphor for the attempts to rewrite ideas of land within capitalism. The plantation returns as an economic palimpsest, one possessed by the histories it attempts to escape; the swamp returns to reclaim the space from which it has been displaced. The second is W. E. B. Du Bois's imaginary Alabama Black Belt cooperative in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911), also led by a former enslaved person, a Black woman named Zora, who enacts her vision on the swamps of her birth. Here, too, the swamp hints at its potential resurgence. I then briefly consider Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899) in which yet another formerly enslaved person, Uncle Julius, lives on and from the land of his prior

captivity. Chesnutt allows Uncle Julius to embody a mode of land relation that escapes capitalist possession and productivity.

Borrowing from Du Bois's famous formulation, chapter 4, "Souls on Ice: Matthew Henson's Arctic Modernities," thinks through the future of a unified Black "ecological soul" that represents the possibility of resolving the appearance of "environmental double consciousness" resulting from Black life in the West. I consider whether this reconciliation can arise from retrieving a prediasporic blackness or, put in other terms, the possibility of accessing the ecotemporal before: before transatlantic enslavement and ecoracial capitalism. To return to an earlier argument in my book, the status of the slave and postslave in the West has encouraged, and even forced, division from the environment, which became a source of commodities to hoard and weaponize both during the durée of enslavement and afterward, during the "West's continued planetary imperializing expansion," as Sylvia Wynter has described it. The split requiring mending to render the ecological soul whole transcends Du Bois's "Black/American" dichotomy. Instead, it would emerge from the spiritual and psychological reunion of the Black human with the natural world within those Western cultures which consistently work against that unity. This chapter brings together a series of works about Matthew Henson's Arctic exploration to consider that idea: Henson's 1912 memoir of his role in the successful 1909 expedition to the North Pole *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912); Black British filmmaker Isaac Julien's 2004 environmental film installation *True North*, a diasporic reimagining of Henson's trek; Terry Adkins's photographs, video, and sculpture inspired by Henson and his expedition, *Nutjuitok (Polar Star)* (2012) and *Miy Paluk, 1866* (2012); and Robert Hayden's poem about Henson, "From 'The Snow Lamp,'" first published in 1977 and included in his collection *American Journal* (1978), the last to appear before his 1980 death. Henson's desire to become a part of white modernity was central to his self-portrait in his memoirs, and his successful trek to the North Pole has come to represent a form of unboundedness for those African Americans who write and make art about his extraordinary feat. As a man who refused the constraints of Jim Crow, Henson defied captive temporality—the anti-Black historical now—in a life driven by the potential of what Kodwu Eshun has termed counterfuturity. Yet the exploration facilitating this counterfuturism would play a role in Arctic oil extraction, climate change, and the disappearance of an environment he professed to love. My chapter suggests that Henson's post-Arctic meditations on the Indigenous

communities demonstrate an awareness that his counterfuturism came at an ecological cost.

Chapter 5, "A Theory of the Bottom: Black Ecofeminism as Politics," explores what I call Black ecofeminist "bottoming." In 1997, the postcolonial scholar Ariel Salleh offered her groundbreaking environmental intervention into Marxism, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern*. There, she claims that ecosocialists' theory of the intersection of labor and environmental destruction have failed to account for the experiences of women, who constitute the "global labour majority" if we acknowledge the "free" "gift" of biological and social reproductive labor. She posits that the "unlivable exploitations" which women endure from performing that labor under patriarchal forms of capitalism have profound environmental consequences.[42] Salleh further claims that capitalist patriarchy forces "women to live out their lives right at the bottom" of a "hierarchy of oppressions," and that bottom is where the experiences of "Women and Nature meet."[43] Drawing energy from Salleh, this chapter considers the embodied experiences of Black women, who occupy the "very-bottom of the American capitalistic economy" as the Black socialist feminist Combahee River Collective observed some twenty years before Salleh.[44] I propose that the bottom has become a generative site for Black ecofeminist liberationist politics, for it is at the economic bottom where Black women and environments that have been exploited, disrupted, and contaminated come into contact, whether those environments are natural or human made. In mobilizing a term from queer sexuality, I explore Black ecofeminist "bottoming" as a way to name an ecological intimacy emerging from a position of receptiveness and vulnerability: a countervailing intersectional mode of relation to all planetary life, human and non-. It signals the way Black women ecofeminist thinkers and artists envision the exploited and the imperiled—the objects of capitalism's destructive desires and its detritus—as their kin, whether human or not. Some texts discussed will include Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937); Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* (1977); Jesmyn Ward, *Salvage the Bones* (2012); Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Animals* (2022); Barbara Neely's treatment of lead poisoning in Boston, *Blanche Cleans Up* (1998); LaToya Ruby Frazier's photographic series on deindustrializion, *The Notion of Family* (2016) and her work on the Flint water crisis, *Flint Is Family* and *Flint Is Family in Three Acts* (2016, 2022); and Erika Dickerson-Despenza's experimental play about Flint, *Cullud Wattah* (2019).

The conclusion of this book, "Toward a Black Trans*ecology," turns to three Black queer and trans writers to limn—however tentatively—a Black, antiextractionist ecological theory in which trans*, as mode that both destabilizes and interconnects, complicates the transubstantiation of the Black human and the earth into property. While trans studies and Black trans studies are hitting their stride, inviting new and provocative ways to think about embodiment and gender, transecology is a relatively new subfield in both trans studies and environmental studies. I will ask whether the Black trans*ecological can create an alternative mode of being in which othering, taxonomies, classificatory schemes, binarisms, and the power/violence they enable can give way to a unified vision of life predicated upon the abolition of difference. Works include Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991), Donika Kelly's *Bestiary* (2016), and Cameron Awkward-Rich's *Sympathetic Little Monster* (2016).

# Notes

## Introduction. Environmental Afterlives

1 Gilmore, "Abolition Geography," 473.

2 Although there is a lengthy history of African American environmental literature and art, monographs on the subject remain few. Many of those have been produced only recently, including Outka, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance*; Ruffin, *Black on Earth*; Posmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe*; King, *The Black Shoals*; Dunning, *Black to Nature*; and Cervenak, *Black Gathering*.

3 While I am not using the Anthropocene concept in my work (nor Capitalocene or Plantationocene), geographer Kathryn Yussof makes an important racial intervention into the idea of the Anthropocene. Her term "Black Anthropocenes" describes the way that Black and Brown bodies have been the energy supply for "Man" who has driven the planet to the brink of destruction. See Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. For more on race, the Anthropocene, and geology, see Luciano, *How the Earth Feels*.

4 Jenkins and Leroy, *Histories of Racial Capitalism*, 15.

5 Judd, *Feelin*, 180. Judd writes that Lamon is writing in the "aftermath of many apocalypses" involving water: "Hurricane Sandy, Hurricane Katrina, after the transatlantic slave trade, after Flint" to ask "what the water can tell us."

6 Judd, *Feelin*, 180.

7 Moten, *Black and Blur*, viii.

8 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 35, emphasis in original.

9 For a counterintuitive intervention into the prevailing idea that "humanization" is the discursive and conceptual solution for Black bestialization, see Jackson, *Becoming Human*.

10 Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 35–37.

11 Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, 63. He writes,

> But, for the disenclosure of the world to happen, it is necessary to detach oneself from oneself, precisely in order to confront what is coming

> and what, in coming, causes other resources of life to spring up. This is why the Fanonian self is fundamentally opening, distension, and gap: the *Open*. I have mentioned the arid region of existence that is race. In Fanon, the disenclosure of the world presupposes the abolition of race. It can take place only on the condition that the following truths are admitted: "The Negro is not . . . any more than the white man"; "the Negro is a man like the rest"; "a man among other men." In Fanon's eyes, this postulate of a fundamental similarity between men, an *original human citizenship*, constitutes the key to the project of the disenclosure of the world and human autonomy: decolonization. (Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 16, 182, 180)

Note that in this text "disenclosure" is translated as one word.

12 This is my own term.

13 Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 2.

14 Gilmore is one prominent scholar among many who affirms Robinson's idea: "Capitalism: never not racial," *Abolition Geography*, 471.

15 Leong, "Racial Capitalism," 2152.

16 See Barrett, *Blackness and Value*.

17 Jenkins and Leroy, *Histories of Racial Capitalism*, 3.

18 Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 473. Some drivers of "place-making" she names: "All of chattel slavery, imperialism, settler colonialism, resource extraction, infrastructural coordination, urban industrialization, regional development."

19 Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 8.

20 Silkenat, *Scars on the Land*, 1.

21 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.

22 Dunning, *Black to Nature*, 14.

23 Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*, 260.

24 Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 9.

25 Morrison, *A Mercy*, 29.

26 Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 1–2.

27 Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, emphasis added, 8.

28 Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 108.

29 Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*, 350.

30 Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces*, 50.

31 Hare, "Black Ecology," 2.

32 United Church of Christ, "Principles of Environmental Justice."

33 Penniman, "Concentric Memory," 149.

34 Ruffin, *Black on Earth*, 1–2.

35 Ruffin, *Black on Earth*, 2.

36 Ruffin, *Black on Earth*, 2.

37 Roane, "Plotting the Black Commons," 242.

38 Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*, 136. Taylor was drawing from Sarah Bradford's 1886 Tubman biography.

39 Stewart, "Slavery and African American Environmentalism," 20.
40 Posmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe*, 149.
41 Cervenak, *Black Gathering*, 3–5.
42 Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, xix.
43 Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, xx.
44 Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," 18.

## Chapter 1. Ecomelancholia: Life, Land, and Unrenewable Loss

An earlier version of this essay appeared as Jennifer C. James, "Ecomelancholia: Slavery, War and Black Ecological Imaginings," in Ken Hiltner, Stephanie LeMenager, and Teresa Shewry, eds., *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 163–78.

1 Dunbar, "The Haunted Oak," 89.
2 Teish, "Women's Spirituality," 325.
3 Clifton, "being property once myself," in *good woman*, 58; reprinted from *good news about the earth* (1972).
4 Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.
5 Quoted in K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought*, 187.
6 Fimrite, "Park Ranger Asks." Johnson is also a writer and has appeared in the Ken Burns PBS miniseries *The National Parks: America's Best Idea* (2009).
7 Turnbull, "Wanted."
8 Johnson and McDaniel, "Turpentine Negro," 61, 62.
9 See Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.
10 Mortimer-Sandilands, "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies," 333.
11 Clewell, "Mourning Beyond Melancholia," 45.
12 Freud, "On Transience," 305.
13 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 587.
14 Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 587.
15 Freud, "On Transience," 305.
16 Clewell, "Mourning Beyond Melancholia," 57.
17 Freud, "On Transience," 307.
18 Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," 592–93.
19 A. Walker, *Meridian*, 34.
20 Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 117–18.
21 Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity*, 103.
22 A. Walker, *Meridian*, 54.
23 L. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 25.
24 L. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 25.
25 Virgil, Eclogue I.64, in *Eclogues*.
26 A. Walker, *Meridian*, 22.
27 King, "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam."