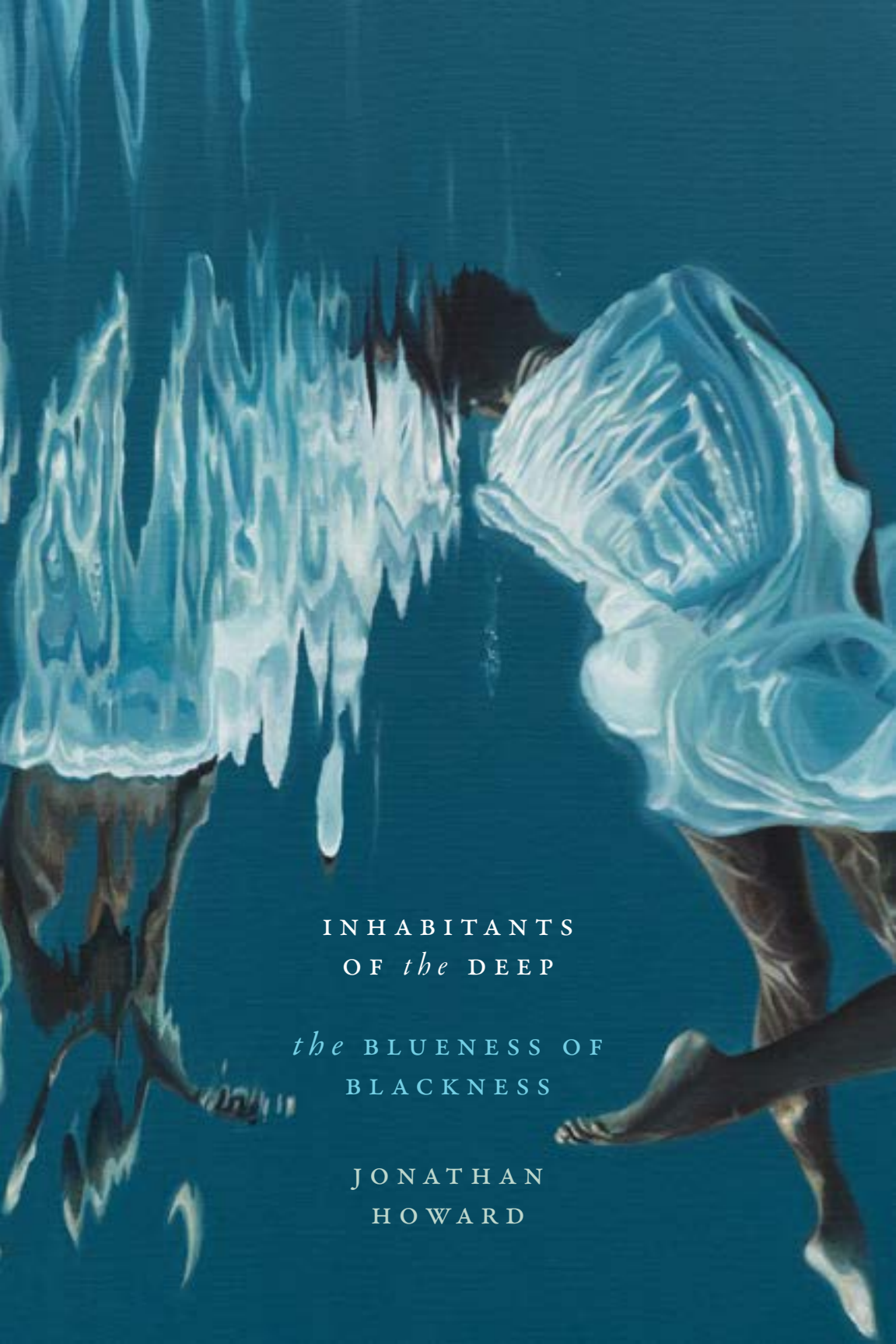


A person wearing a white, flowing dress is floating upside down in deep blue water. The dress is billowing upwards, creating a stark contrast with the dark water. The person's legs are visible, pointing downwards. The overall mood is serene yet mysterious.

INHABITANTS
OF *the* DEEP

the BLUENESS OF
BLACKNESS

JONATHAN
HOWARD

INHABITANTS
OF *the* DEEP

BUY

BLACK OUTDOORS: INNOVATIONS IN THE POETICS OF STUDY

A series edited by J. Kameron Carter and Sarah Jane Cervenak

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INHABITANTS
OF *the* DEEP

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BLACKNESS

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for the jumpers and the jettisoned
and my shipmate, alese

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Often did I think many of the inhabitants
of the deep much more happy than myself;
I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished
I could change my condition for theirs.

—OLAUDAH EQUIANO,
*The Interesting Narrative of the
Life of Olaudah Equiano*

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Prologue
THE BLUENESS OF BLACKNESS

I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world, and here I am an object among other objects.

—FRANTZ FANON, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Before all of this, there was a deep Black dream that woke as us.

—ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS, *Undrowned*

IN THE BEGINNING, black was blue. Not the ocean of lamentation poured out from the souls of blues people that Amiri Baraka spoke of (though not *not* this). But the literal ocean. The “In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue” blue. The other hue playing midwife to our births in the centuries when our skin learned speech and started talking to the world behind our backs. The water that there was in the beginning.

The history exhibit of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC, begins at this beginning. Visitors, however, do not. Instead, your escort to the beginning is a glass-walled elevator which looks out onto a black shaft that doubles as a timeline. White year markers roll by, subtitling your backward trek through time, as you make your one-way descent into the depths of black history:

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1877
1808
1776
1565
1400

The museum will not remember for you. Will not spare you the formality of having to actually work your way back through time—its thickness, its accumulation, its depth. You do not enter the museum on the ground floor. To get to the beginning, you’ve got to plunge. Like the unnamed narrator in the prologue of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, you don’t just enter history as he did music; you descend into its depths, the centuries closing in over your head, until you arrive at the lowest level, where someone can be heard beginning a sermon about the “blackness of blackness.” *In the beginning, there was blackness*, you almost hear them say. *And that blackness was blue.*

Our preacher, in this instance, is Olaudah Equiano, and his text is *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789). Soon after exiting the elevator, following a brief survey of precolonial African history, you encounter perhaps the narrative’s most famous sentence printed gravely on a wall:

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast, was . . . a slave ship . . . waiting for its cargo.¹

Invoked by the museum as part of the introductory apparatus of a history exhibit spanning three floors and progressing vertically “*up* from slavery,” as Booker T. Washington might describe it, Equiano’s words bespeak blackness’s beginnings (figure p.1).² They name what, in the curatorial imagination of the museum, is supposed to have come “first”: namely, the original and originating hail of the slave ship. And in this, the NMAAHC is hardly alone. Black history, which the playwright August Wilson has suggestively characterized as the “black American odyssey,” for many begins with the transatlantic slave trade, or what is otherwise known as the *Middle Passage*.³ And Equiano’s narrative in particular—as history’s only firsthand account of Middle Passage written by and from the perspective of the enslaved and one of the earliest works of African Diaspora literature—is often regarded as a point of entry for African Diaspora history and literature.⁴ Recently, however, this status of black history’s single narrative tether to Middle Passage has been thrown into question. Archival evidence discovered by notable Equiano biographer Vincent Carretta suggests that Equiano actually may have been born in South Carolina and not

*The first object which saluted my eyes
when I arrived on the coast, was . . .
a slave ship . . . waiting for its cargo.*

OLAUDAH EQUIANO 1789

FIGURE P.1. Excerpt from *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano* displayed on a wall in the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC.

in an Igbo village as his narrative claims.⁵ If so, Carretta argues, Equiano likely “invented his African childhood and the much-quoted account of the Middle Passage on a slave ship.” Although Carretta cautions that we can never know for sure, he insists that “anyone who still contends that Equiano’s account of the early years of his life is *authentic* is obligated to account for the powerful conflicting evidence.”⁶

So one of history’s most authenticated slave narratives—in and after its time, including by Carretta himself—has succumbed to the genre’s birthright of suspicion: the then oxymoronic prospect of a black author that necessitated the tautological assurance that the author’s narrative was “Written by Himself” in the first place.⁷ Or the thorny questions of authenticity that scholars have since raised about the slave narrative genre because of the explicitly political context of its creation and its subjection to varying degrees of mediation by publishers or amanuenses.⁸ What, then, are we to make of the presence of Equiano’s words on a load-bearing wall on the ground floor of the NMAAHC? Of African American history’s seeming false start? Achilles’ heel? If some have gone so far as to dismiss Equiano entirely as a “liar,” and his narrative by extension as

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unreliable, then what of the history that invokes Equiano's words in and as the beginning?⁹

Part of what is so unwelcome about Carretta's discovery, despite his efforts to redeem Equiano's alleged dishonesty as a genius enactment of self-fashioning, is its reification of blackness's already uncertain relationship to history owing to the historical rupture of Middle Passage. What might be gleaned from DNA testing notwithstanding, the precise when and where of history and origins are as open a question as they are a wound for those belonging to what Saidiya Hartman has called "the tribe of Middle Passage."¹⁰ If we did not know any better, the anonymous vacuum of the specific peoples and places from which we hail might even force us to conclude, with Hegel and others, that the scattered children of the Dark Continent have no history. That to be black is to be ahistorical. Having to "say goodbye" to Equiano, as one scholar argues we must in the wake of Carretta's explosive discovery, only adds insult to this injury by cutting the children of Middle Passage off from the one historical tether to a beginning that we do have:

Although we would love to have a firsthand account such as that in the *Interesting Narrative* that brings alive the Middle Passage and New World slavery, we have to say goodbye to Equiano as a guide to that experience. He may remain important as an example of black self-fashioning but in the great scheme of things such importance is of limited and specialized interest. We may have to accept that, as Primo Levi argued for understanding the Holocaust, "the survivors are not the true witnesses" because the "true witnesses" are the "drowned, the submerged, the annihilated." In my opinion, Equiano cannot remain a central figure in the reconstruction of the Atlantic world unless the doubt that Carretta has cast upon his *authenticity* as an African disappears.¹¹

Without Equiano, the Middle Passage beginnings of blackness threaten to slip into utter inarticulacy and join the chorus of the archive's deafening silence. But here, just as for Carretta, the doubt surrounding Equiano's narrative has specifically to do with its "authenticity." The horizon of this study, however, is *not* authenticity, and happily so. Consequently, I feel no such obligation to account for Equiano's possible South Carolinian birth, which, as far as I'm concerned, either is beside or helps to make my point. Far more than the narrative's authenticity, which was already in question to the degree that the authenticity of every slave narrative is in question, I'm concerned with the "truth" of Equiano's witness. And with respect to the experiences of black folk in particular, I've

known fiction to tell the truth just as often as I've known history to lie. For my purposes, it matters little whether Equiano got his knowledge of Middle Passage first- or secondhand. In fact, I mean to trouble that distinction altogether by suggesting that black life has yet to witness the end of the beginning it claims in Middle Passage. Notwithstanding the linear, vertical climb we perform as we make our way through the museum's history exhibit and the implicit suggestion that the beginning is safely in our historical rearview, Middle Passage is still with us. It persists, if not quite *firsthand*, then perhaps in the trouble still visited upon the *soles* of black folk, who can no more stand their ground today than the steps they blinked on the face of the Atlantic yesterday. Far from saying goodbye to Equiano, then, this book goes decisively in the other direction—continuing to consult *The Interesting Narrative* as a faithful guide not only to the Middle Passage beginnings of blackness but also to black life more broadly. The “true witnesses” of Middle Passage are indeed the “drowned” and “submerged”; but perhaps they are also those Alexis Pauline Gumbs has dubbed the “undrowned”—the survivors and their descendants who nevertheless struggle to breathe in a world inimical to their breath.¹² If so, the truth of their witness inheres not just in the testimony of the deaths we die, for which the dead indeed have the inside track, but also in the testimony of the lives we live.

But let's for the moment imagine that we could resurrect the drowned and hear the whole of their annihilation. It'd be no less devastating, but at least we'd be expecting to hear how desperately lungs full of water still can thirst. But would we be ready to answer their questions about the terrible pressure? These questions first occurred to me while I was learning to scuba dive. My instructor emphasized the importance of equalizing frequently—pinching and blowing my nose, the way we often do on airplanes—to relieve the painful pressure that builds in your ears as you descend. Even with careful instruction, I was not prepared for how quickly the pain sneaks up on you and how quickly it becomes unbearable. Still, I at least understood my pain and how to remedy it: stop, hold my nose, and blow. Eventually, to stay ahead of the pain, I had to learn to equalize every few feet. But what of the drowned and their untutored dives? What of the ones who could not stop or control the pace of their descent because they were weighed down with ball and chain? What of those who descended so many more feet than I? To be troubled by history during a scuba diving lesson, to be haunted by an underwater revelation and eventually succumb to writing it down, I hope is the extension and practice of a kind of care. A defense, and not a disturbance, of the dead.¹³ But I'm not sure it brings me any closer to the “truth”

of Middle Passage. Offloading the obligation to bear witness exclusively onto the dead in this way may even reify the narrow sense of truth that notoriously constrained early historiography of the transatlantic slave trade. History's earliest efforts to tell the truth about Middle Passage worried extensively over the precise number of Africans who embarked, perished at sea, and disembarked in the New World—facts and figures we cannot know for certain but which, nevertheless, enjoy a privileged relationship to truth.¹⁴ Yet I've never felt closer to whatever a "true witness" of Middle Passage might be than when reading these speculative lines from Dionne Brand's *Land to Light On*:

This those slaves must have known who were my mothers, skin
falling from their eyes, they moving toward their own bone,
"so thank god for the ocean and the sky all implicated, all
unconcerned," they must have said, "or there'd be nothing
to love."¹⁵

Could there really have been love? And could there really have been love for the more-than-human world? If it's possible to sit with and be stunned by the "true witness" of a poem, then perhaps you'll understand why I'm uninclined to say goodbye to Equiano and his possible experiments with fiction—except perhaps as the historical foundation of a people's climb *up*, from slavery or anywhere. I'm not sure that *The Interesting Narrative* was ever cut out as a launching pad for a vertical telling of history that, in the case of the NMAAHC, starts with Middle Passage and ends triumphantly with the inauguration of the first black president of the United States. Before its authenticity could be called into question, *The Interesting Narrative* already told of a people thrown into question. A "Negro Question" for which history still has no satisfactory answer. Good thing, then, that the animating velocity of this book is not up but down. And whatever our assessments of its historical authenticity, I've found *The Interesting Narrative* to be an excellent guide to getting down.¹⁶

But you wouldn't know it from the elided way in which Equiano's writing appears on the wall—the not inconsequential ellipsis we find between *was* and *a slave ship*. It is an elision we often see fit to make, within and without black studies, but one perhaps we can no longer afford in our age of ecological crisis. I'd like to turn, then, to a consideration of the unelided account of Equiano's famous words. To peek behind the veil of the ellipsis and explore what more, beyond the slave ship, there is to apprehend in the Middle Passage beginnings of blackness.

I. the missing sea

On the day Equiano became “black,” he stood at the threshold of a “world” that was going to kill him and bore witness to its and his own creation. There, on the coast of West Africa, he saw both astonishing and terrible things. But the water, we must always remember, was first:

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was *the sea*, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment which was soon converted to terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits and that they were going to kill me.¹⁷

What goes elided in the museum’s invocation of Equiano’s famous words, then, is “the sea,” which, we discover, is not only missing but first: “The *first* object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was *the sea*,” and then “a slave ship.” This elision of “the sea” may seem inconsequential, especially to the extent that the slave ship already implies the ocean. The grammar of Equiano’s phrasing, which conflates “the sea, and a slave ship” as a single “object,” even invites this reading. If the slave ship represents only a part of the whole of Middle Passage, perhaps it makes for a suitable metonym as the only part capable of distinguishing Middle Passage from a day at the beach. But this word that I have—about blackness and the blueness of blackness—queries this elision by nevertheless distinguishing “the sea” as first among “the first object” to catch Equiano’s eye and, what’s more, as an aspect of Middle Passage we cannot neglect without neglecting crucial dimensions of blackness itself.

Far from unique to the NMAAHC, however, this elision of “the sea” arguably evidences a broader neglect of the ocean inside and outside of black studies.¹⁸ Something like the museum’s elision of the sea and emphasis instead on the slave ship, for instance, can also be witnessed in conceptions of blackness that center the subjection and abjection of the slave ship and its hold. Perhaps the most influential expression of this tendency in black study is Frank Wilderson’s now famous exhortation to “stay in the hold of the ship.”¹⁹ In this way, Wilderson advocates for a practice of black study that does not flinch from the recognition that black abjection ballasts the world no less today than when enslaved Africans brimmed the holds of slave ships. As a pioneering scholar of an influential school of black thought known as Afropessimism, Wilderson forwards

the iconoclastic argument that slavery—abolition, emancipation, and Civil Rights notwithstanding—never ended. Because more than a coerced laborer or property the slave, following Orlando Patterson’s classic redefinition, is a “socially dead person.”²⁰ Afropessimism extends Patterson’s redefinition of slavery by further arguing that *blackness* is “social death.” If, according to Hartman, slavery inaugurated a “measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone,” then within this unelapsed measure of man and life, Afropessimism contends that blackness not only originates but persists irrevocably as “social death” in a constitutively antiblack world.²¹ And when it comes specifically to Wilderson’s critique of the antiblack world, I hope not to flinch. I want all the smoke of the “pyrotechnics” that Wilderson argues are necessary to bring about the end of the antiblack world.²² There are too many thousands gone and gone on to want anything else. But I also wonder if, in the critical triage of attending to the emergency of the hold and its manifold afterlives along with the regime of Humanity they support, we sometimes, unwittingly, miss “the sea,” along with whatever implications for our study of blackness might inhere in the recognition that, at least for Equiano, the sea was first.

The possibility of black study’s neglect of the sea has previously been raised by Omise’ke Natasha Tinsley in the “writing out of materiality” she observes in two of the field’s most influential conceptions of diasporic blackness: Paul Gilroy’s “black Atlantic” and Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s “Peoples of the Sea.”²³ Tinsley writes, “These tropes of the black Atlantic, of Peoples of the Sea, do call to me as powerful enunciations of crosscurrents of African diaspora identity, and I evoke them in respect and solidarity. And yet as [they] call on maritime metaphors without maritime histories . . . their writing out of materiality stops short of the most radical potential of such oceanic imaginations. There are other Atlantic and Caribbean histories that these scholars could have evoked to make sense of the present, *other material details* of maritime crossings they could have drawn on to make their metaphors richer conceptual tools.”²⁴ What “other material details” have we neglected in our understanding of Middle Passage? What might constitute their “radical potential”? And how might an openness to these “other material details” apply a generative pressure to a black study that stays in the hold, not unto the hold’s disavowal, but toward an extension of our attention to the ocean that also captivated Equiano in the beginning? Especially if, as Tinsley suggests, “diving into this water stands to transform African diaspora scholarship in ways as surprising as Equiano’s first glimpse of the sea.”²⁵

Beyond the “writing out of [oceanic] materiality” sometimes witnessed in black study, the museum’s elision of “the sea” arguably exemplifies an even broader regard for the environment as little more than background for the

real goings-on of human history. With growing awareness of climate change and global ecological crisis, however, such neglect of the more-than-human natural world has come under increasing scrutiny. This growing ecological consciousness has led to the emergence of what—in critique of the general *anthropocentrism*, or human-centeredness, of the humanities—has otherwise come to be known as the *environmental* humanities. Within the effort of this interdisciplinary field of study to recuperate a neglected and degraded environment, several environmental humanities scholars have remarked upon a still more specific neglect of, if not outright antagonism toward, the ocean, which is especially at issue in the museum's elision of "the sea." In *Shakespeare's Ocean*, for example, ecocritical scholar Dan Brayton surveys the long-standing cultural status of the ocean in the West as a "void lying eternally outside—or on the margins—of human social constructs."²⁶ Perhaps, in this way, the ocean, too, is socially dead. Indeed, its position "eternally outside" the western world and its social constructs strikingly resembles what is generally meant by Afropessimism's elaboration of blackness as "social death." It is not for nothing that Herman Melville characterizes the ocean in *Moby-Dick* as "unspeakably unsocial and repelling."²⁷ In many respects, such a characterization of the sea is unremarkable. Humans are, after all, land creatures. Although we make occasional visits to the sea, as air-breathing bipeds our stomping grounds are undeniably terra firma. Nevertheless, it is the strange contention of a growing cohort of scholars that we humans are perhaps more amphibious than we let on.²⁸ These scholars argue that western humanism is animated by an uninterrogated "terrestrial bias," or "terracentrism": an organizing fetishization of land at the expense of a profound neglect of the ocean.²⁹ Thus, beyond the environmental humanities' general recuperation of the biophysical environment, Steve Mentz has argued even more specifically for a "blue humanities" that would grant the ocean a critical attention proportional to our overwhelmingly blue planet.³⁰

Intriguingly, the recent developments in black studies and the environmental humanities surveyed above share a mutual turn to the ocean and a mutual critique of the exclusionary logics of western humanism. Yet they have largely been elaborated independently of each other. The fact that these seemingly disparate fields have arrived, albeit in different ways and with different stakes, at a similar object of critique (the Human) and study (the ocean) suggests an interrelation far beyond their extant dialogue. Their confluence constitutes the organizing curiosity of this book, inspiring not only its attempt at a writing *in* of the oceanic materiality of Middle Passage and a blue recalibration of human being but the conviction that these endeavors are critical kin, long-lost but ready-

made collaborators. Taking up the intersection of black and blue in this way, this book's black study not only stays in the hold but also wades in the water, awaiting the trouble blue might bring to our thinking about black and human life on earth. Yet if, in this way, this book *blues* black, it also *blackens* blue (and green, for that matter) by privileging the black maritime experiences of middle passing Africans in the blue humanities' effort to think the human inhabitant of our blue planet. As far as I know, only that black cohort of humans who, like the famous castaway Pip, could be sold in Alabama have ever made their home in the ocean and lived to tell about it. Their souls took the measure of our immeasurably blue planet not as an isolated or individual experience but as the experiential crucible that birthed a people. Any environmental or blue humanities that merely or uncritically appends a concern for the environment to western humanism fails to speak adequately to the experiences of these non-Human humans or apprehend a modern humanism that is not just anti-ecological but also antiblack.³¹ Or rather, both these things, together and irreducibly. We've read too much Sylvia Wynter to remain optimistic about the "genre" of Human behind the rise of the Anthropocene, which arguably took its first steps not in the Industrial Revolution's factory but on the deck of a slave ship, ballasted by *all* of its non-Human cargo, human and nonhuman alike. Since humans have also been reckoned nonhuman, and none more paradigmatically than the Black, this book pursues an intercalation of the critiques of the Human arising out of both the environmental humanities and black studies. More specifically, it takes up the environmental or, even more precisely, *blue* humanity elaborated by the non-Human human, or the Black, in blackness's primordial encounter with our blue planet.

II. "ancient waters"

I come, again and again, to these words by Equiano in the devoted way I've been coming since boyhood to the words that famously open the book of Genesis, which, incidentally, also speak of the water that there was in the beginning: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters."³² Equiano's words, in comparison, aren't canon, and no doubt some would bristle at the suggestion, but I come to his dramatic encounter with the ocean, like Frantz Fanon, "desirous to be at the origin of the world." Which is to say that I believe Equiano's words to be a sacred, even holy, record of the beginning. That anyone desiring to be at the

origin of *this* world had sooner come here than to Genesis. And I believe this in spite of how I discover myself in Equiano, black *adam* of humans who are not Human, as, again to invoke Fanon, “an object among other objects.”³³

In the Genesis account of creation, we read of darkness and the spirit of God hovering over the face of the deep (*tehom*) in prelude to a creation repeatedly consummated as “good.” Yet in what I propose might be alternatively read as the genesis of our world, we find blackness over the face of the Atlantic and “*bad* spirits” hovering over the face of its waters. We might locate the creation of what I am asking us to apprehend as a “world,” the precise moment of its Big Bang, so to speak, in the instant Equiano is “carried on board.” That is, the moment Equiano recognizes that the ship “waiting for its cargo” was waiting for him. That he *is* the cargo for which the slave ship waits. The entire passage pivots on this moment. All in the accelerated time and space warp of *soon*, we witness not just the end of Equiano’s old world but the creation of a new one. A terrible zeroing and terrific expansion simultaneously elapse in the fissioning of humanity that inheres, with all of the worlding energy of a Big Bang, in Equiano’s transformation into mere cargo. It’s this redoubled conversion, of astonishment into terror, of people into cargo, all in the elapsing interval of *soon*, that I propose catalyzes the creation of the “world” Equiano “had gotten into.” Incidentally, a world is precisely the scale at which black studies has challenged us to think the nature of antiblackness as neither merely interpersonal nor structural but ultimately constitutive of an “antiblack world.” To what else, if not the creation of this antiblack world, does Equiano bear witness in his recognition that he had “gotten into a world” whose most immediate identifying trait was that it was “going to kill [him].” The problem of being black, then, is nothing short of a world. Our world. The antiblack world. Or, for those whose constitutions can only admit the euphemism, the modern world. What dawns with Middle Passage is nothing short of a world aimed with now crushing historical momentum at the genre of Human indexed by whiteness and made possible by the accumulation and death of those coming to be hailed as black, cargo among other cargo.

Whatever parallel with Genesis may be recognized in Equiano’s encounter with “the sea, and a slave ship,” is made even more explicit in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940). In the novel’s final chapter, poignantly entitled “FATE,” we find the novel’s famed protagonist, Bigger Thomas, resigning himself to his impending execution for the unintentional murder of a white woman. It is a resignation that brings him face-to-face with not only the same “ancient waters” that confronted Equiano but also, more ancient still, *tehom*:

Having felt in his heart some obscure need to be at home with people . . . and failed, he chose not to struggle any more. With a supreme act of will springing from the essence of his being, he turned away from his life and the long train of disastrous consequences that had flowed from it and looked wistfully upon the dark face of the ancient waters upon which some spirit had breathed and created him, the dark face of the waters from which he had been first made in the image of a man with a man's obscure need and urge; feeling that he wanted to sink back into those waters and rest eternally.³⁴

Behind Wright's invocation of "the dark face of the ancient waters" and "some spirit" loom not only Equiano's "the first object . . . was the sea, and a slave ship," and "I had gotten into a world of bad spirits" but also, more ancient still, Genesis's "darkness on the face of the deep" and "the spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters." These waters flow in and out of each other to the point of palimpsestic indistinction. Given the immediate context of Wright's effort to imagine the origins of antiblackness, "ancient waters" arguably alludes most immediately to the Atlantic Ocean. Yet by casting these waters in the familiar language of Genesis, Wright also ascribes to them cosmological import, similar to what we've observed in Equiano. Above even *tehom*, Wright signals to his readers that the beginnings of our world may be found here, on the face of this deep.

Yet for all the ways he invokes the language of Genesis, Wright's rendering of the beginning differs in one conspicuous way: Whereas in Genesis God "formed man of the dust of the *ground*, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life," Wright informs us that it was directly upon the water that "some *spirit* had breathed and created" Bigger.³⁵ And what better culprit for Bigger's differentiated creation than those "bad spirits" we find pushing wind with their sails across the face of the deep in Equiano's narrative? So distinguishing the creation of blackness from the universal creation of humanity, Wright imagines black being as cosmologically excluded from the ontological property that the Human otherwise claims in the ground. Here, black being takes the specific form of an ontological disinheritance of ground and a corresponding consignment to the water, while Humanness inheres in an ontological claim to and in the ground, in a way reminiscent of the evolutionary narration of the human as a biped—distinguished from the rest of nonhuman nature by the ability to stand on our own two feet. To stand on our ontological ground, as it were, atop a hierarchization of nature. Moreover, as the space *back* into which Bigger sinks in his racialized inability "to be at

home with people,” these “ancient waters” further index the radical exclusion from Human society that has come to be theorized in black studies as “social death.” If blackness indeed is social death, as Wilderson argues, and if the Black is “an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity,” then in Bigger this non-Humanity inheres specifically in an extrahuman identification with the ocean.³⁶ And what better symbol for the “social death” of blackness, when humans are otherwise paradigmatically recognized as land creatures?³⁷ The intervening years between Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* and Wright’s *Native Son* notwithstanding, according to the testimony of Bigger, the world into which Equiano had gotten remains intact and continues to rotate on the axis of black (social) death.

III. “desirous to be at the origin of the world”

As a Sunday school mainstay, I was oriented during childhood by the knowledge of a single, universal beginning in which we all share. So imagine the vertigo of falling upon Equiano’s words as a college freshman and discovering myself among the number of those whom history has made to begin again. Imagine the vertigo of learning of the genesis that is Middle Passage, or what Wilderson has provocatively labeled the “dawning of Blackness” and “the Black’s first ontological instance.”³⁸ It’s not just the dizzying matter of claiming your beginning in two moments at once, and so being born again into a kind of cosmological double consciousness. It’s also the ontological stretching of discovering yourself in Equiano as modernity’s “cargo.” Such a beginning yields no suitable anchor for (Human) ontology. Rather, it is the bottom falling out of ontology altogether, the ontological equivalent of the physical danger facing Equiano in all that water. It is we who are called black falling into and in with the nonhuman company of the hold, as the “handled” kin of a handled earth.

But perhaps such talk of the beginning has fallen out of favor. If so, it is not without good reason. Often, the first order of operations in the justification of all manner of violent exclusions inheres in what we have come to believe or think about the beginning. In enormously consequential interpretations of the book of Genesis alone, we can identify the groundwork of nearly every ism under the sun. The anthropocentrism behind global ecological crisis, for example, has historically found reliable ideological cover in a humanity that alone is created in the image of God and granted dominion over the earth. Patriarchy too has found cover in the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib and her ignoble status as the first sinner. And heterosexism in the first marriage be-

tween a man and woman. And racism in the curse of Noah's son Ham. And in a book as preoccupied with the deep as this one, I take note that each of these hermeneutical incidents follows in the wake of a despised *tehom*, yielding in the traditional Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo not a second sex but a second geography, a maligned primordial ocean signifying chaos, disorder, and nothingness.³⁹

In a similar way, the beginning that blackness traditionally locates in Middle Passage has also fallen out of critical favor, either to the critical promotion of alternative beginnings, whose principal significance inheres in their circumvention of the blighted timeline of slavery, or to the effort to think blackness more flexibly and inclusively. Perhaps the most notable example of the former impulse is Ivan Van Sertima's *They Came Before Columbus*, which explores the African presence in ancient America. More than the important claims and critiques of Van Sertima's classic, however, I'm interested in its popular appeal as a redemption of blackness's American origins from the scourge of enslavement. Just as the appeal to ancient African civilizations has historically warded off claims of black inferiority by recalling a time when "we were kings," arriving before Christopher Columbus similarly allows us to take solace in the fact that "we were explorers." Aside from securing a beginning beyond enslavement, the Middle Passage beginnings of blackness have also been challenged on account of their exclusiveness. In *Physics of Blackness*, for example, Michelle Wright critiques what she theorizes as an overdetermining "Middle Passage epistemology" in black study, which "negotiates the complexity of the origins of Blackness in the West by stressing the process of being ripped from one existence and brutally thrust into another" and in this way fails to reflect the full diversity of black diasporic identity.⁴⁰ Wright observes:

Most discourses on Blackness in the United States and the Caribbean locate themselves in the history of the Middle Passage, linking our cultural practices and expressions, our politics and social sensibilities, to the historical experience of slavery in the Americas and the struggle to achieve full human suffrage in the West. These histories are both constructed and phenomenological: they are a chosen arrangement of historical events (spaces and times) perceived to be the defining moments of collective Blackness.⁴¹

Citing the example of contemporary African migrants, whose black experiences are more defined by colonialism and capitalism than Middle Passage and slavery, Wright argues that this "linear progress narrative," which proceeds from the fixed origin of Middle Passage, often works to exclude "others who

do not share in this origin but appear elsewhere in the narrative.”⁴² Opening up, rather than completely disavowing, what John Hope Franklin famously described as the journey “from slavery to freedom,” Wright calls for a more inclusive “model for defining Blackness across the Diaspora”⁴³ that eschews the sense of blackness as a monolithic *what* for a more expansive understanding of various “Blacknesses” performed across multiple *whens* and *wheres*.⁴⁴

Furthermore, in her critique of the assumption of Middle Passage as the fixed beginning of blackness, Wright specifically references the controversy surrounding the authenticity of Equiano’s narrative: “This ambiguity about Equiano makes it difficult to locate him in the linear spacetime of the Middle Passage epistemology, because we can no longer be sure about the truth of his *Narrative*. If we cannot know where Equiano was born or exactly where he traveled before arriving in England, we cannot be sure that his life reflects a heroic drive for freedom rather than a compromised and self-interested career in pseudoheroics (perhaps hiding yet more deception)—or something in between. The meaning of his *Narrative* now escapes us.”⁴⁵ Indeed, the doubt surrounding the authenticity of *The Interesting Narrative* troubles its status as what historian Nell Irvin Painter has labeled “a kind of founding myth of African American history.”⁴⁶ Do I return, again and again, then, to a grifter? Is it quite right that Equiano’s possibly fabricated record of what came first begins a national exhibit of African American *history*?

Yet as much as “we can no longer be sure about the truth” of Equiano’s narrative, I am also compelled by Jon Sensbach’s assertion that “a South Carolinian birth does not necessarily invalidate Equiano’s story but recasts it with a different kind of *authenticity*. If he did not endure the Middle Passage himself, how else should he have learned about it and reported on it so persuasively from the perspective of the captives themselves but by listening, at some point, somewhere, to those who had?”⁴⁷ If Equiano’s account of the beginning is not historical, in the strict sense of recording actual past events, perhaps it possesses “a different kind of authenticity” as historiography or, alternatively, what Hartman has called “critical fabulation,” informed by the primary source testimonies of those who did endure Middle Passage.⁴⁸ Even if Equiano delivers such history under the pretense of autobiography, it’s not as if New World Africans had much license or opportunity to practice history straight in the eighteenth century. If Equiano’s narrative is unreliable as a witness of the experiences of an individual, perhaps we might reimagine its reliability as the collective witness of a people. But even if we decide that Equiano’s record of the beginning is too compromised to qualify as history, I’m much more invested in reimagining its validity as a kind of liturgy—performing liturgy’s good work by hosting and fa-

cilitating the wonder and wondering of a people. Insofar as Equiano's narrative has served as a "founding myth," liturgy is what becomes of myth or scripture when it is repeatedly, devotionally, and collectively read and recited, just as visitors do nearly every day on the ground floor of the NMAAHC.

Such liturgy need not lay the groundwork for an exclusionary linear progress narrative, even if the museum's journey from the slave ship to the White House yields just that. Instead, it can be invoked as sacred speech capable of transporting those who are, like Fanon, "desirous to be at the origin of the world." All the aforementioned problems with talk of the beginning notwithstanding, I would not discourage such desire and, in fact, think that the origin of the world is a place we need to visit. The problem with the beginning, as I see it, inheres not in itself but rather in what we ask or want from it: a rigid ordering of the world or fixed origins we invoke to justify exclusions and separations. But as I understand it, Middle Passage (or Genesis, for that matter) is not that kind of beginning, and it may only function as such precisely to the degree that it disavows or neglects an ocean that is, in many ways, the enemy of both fixity and linearity. While I agree with Michelle Wright that blackness is a performance as much as a construction, since Middle Passage those varied performances have also shared the common stage of the antiblack world. And perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this stage is how uniquely unsuited it is for standing—or at least standing *your* ground. From the steps middle passing Africans blinked upon the face of the Atlantic to Trayvon Martin felled on a Florida sidewalk, this bottomless stage attends black life everywhere. In fact, we might recognize contemporary African migrants perishing at sea as foundering in the same antiblack world that claimed the lives of those who jumped, or else were thrown, over the side during Middle Passage. Although I think it's important to hold open a distinction between the antiblack world and the Earth, the former, being a world, is more suggestive of a sphere than the line in view with the exclusions of a linear progress narrative. Consequently, it may encapsulate the diversity of black experiences across the diaspora in the same way that the Earth encircles the diversity of all of life.⁴⁹ One need not follow in an unbroken line from Middle Passage to live in the antiblack world it helped create.

But with so many reasons to quit the beginning, why should one need, let alone desire, to be at the origin of the world? And in particular the antiblack world? Why return, again and again, to Genesis or Equiano? To the cosmological scene of the crime? If I speak for myself, perhaps I speak for more when I say that I desire to really *be at*, and not solve or figure out, the origin of the world.

And being at, being present at, the creation of the world, it turns out, is far more a proposition of attunement than time travel. Because the world's creation is all we're ever at, is where we're still at, even when we suppose we're farther down the line. I come to Genesis and Equiano, then, desirous for not *the* beginning but a model *for* beginning. To know genesis and creation not as past event but as something we do. Can do. Have, for better and worse, done. And in the specific case of the genesis of the "world of bad spirits" that Equiano had gotten into, something we must do again, because unlike its Genesis counterpart, it was explicitly *not* good. And what strikes me in both Genesis and Equiano is a practice of beginning that consents to hover over the face of the deep.

Yet if this is why we return to the beginning, why does Equiano? Assuming he fabricated his African nativity, when granted the opportunity to choose his origin, Equiano, who could have begun elsewhere, chose Middle Passage. In doing so, Carretta argues, Equiano capitalized on a specific void in the English abolitionist movement for an authentic African voice that could bear witness to the experience of Middle Passage from the perspective of the enslaved.⁵⁰ Equiano also didn't claim to be just anybody. Rather, as an alleged African prince, he really was at least a future king. Still, the fact remains that Equiano willfully adopted a more immediate relation to Middle Passage than he possibly had. And in that choice, he may have been motivated as much by a sincerely felt historical connection as either the commitment to a just cause or what some have rather ungenerously characterized as a desire for self-gain. Whatever his motivations, the remarkable consistency of Equiano's account with what historians have subsequently come to glean about Middle Passage suggests either that he carefully sought out and attended to the accounts of survivors of Middle Passage, the way an oral historian might, or that, by the time he wrote his narrative, Middle Passage had already assumed such profound cultural significance to the African Diaspora that Equiano could faithfully reproduce even its most fleeting and gratuitous details. Details as exorbitant and nonutilitarian, for instance, as his "astonishment."

IV. astonishment

The decision to willfully assume a more immediate relation to Middle Passage than one's biography possibly necessitates on some levels confounds, insofar as we imagine that there is little about the experience of Middle Passage itself that is worth going back to fetch. Whenever we release Sankofa, how often are

we hoping, like Noah and his dove, to receive confirmation of our ancestral connection to the motherland? To confirm that these connections endure despite the chasm we crossed. Or how often have we dreamed of returning “back to Africa” or, once upon a time in black studies, oriented ourselves toward the discovery of so-called Africanisms? Even if, in the wake of Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, we’ve evolved beyond the predominance of this particular mode of black study, not even his paradigm-shifting text has inspired any like discovery of Atlanticisms. There are no calls to go back to the Atlantic. What could this even entail, if all we knew in that chasm was the terrifying hail of “a slave ship”? But our return to Equiano’s narrative assures us that the very “first object which saluted [his] eyes when [he] arrived on the coast was the sea.” And that when he saw it, he was astonished. That this “astonishment” was “soon converted to terror,” in a conversion that mirrors his own conversion into cargo, suggests an interval so short as to be almost negligible, especially when considered beside the sheer scale of the antiblack world and all there is proportionally to say about such a world when held up against a moment here and already gone.⁵¹ The agenda for black study that Equiano’s record would seem to set is the study, critique, and overturning of this world. The urgent and ethical call to lay bare its “constituent elements.” And I am certainly about that life. But here is where I stumble, felled perhaps too long in the passing interval of “soon.” It’s Equiano’s “astonishment” that gets me, again and again and always. That there was, that there could be, astonishment. Then, in the time of astonishment, for a moment, but only for a moment, the Earth gathers, dancing.⁵²

Equiano did not jump at this chance to see the earth before the end of his world and the beginning of ours.⁵³ But he did see it. And, like so many middle passing Africans encountering the ocean for the very first time, he was astonished. Just prior to being “saluted,” or hailed in the classic Althusserian sense, by the slave ship—“Hey you there! Hey, cargo!”—to discovering that he really was the cargo for which the ship was waiting, and in this way being interpellated as black, Equiano was greeted by the blue face of an overwhelmingly blue planet, which, under the circumstances, he could not even be certain was *still* Earth. What if, compelled by such astonishment, we fall deep into the fleeting interval of *soon*? What would it mean to think the dawning of blackness in Middle Passage as not reducible to the “social death” hailed by the salute of the slave ship? What if, instead, we think blackness as not just responding also, but *first*, to the hailing waves of the astonishing sea? “Hey, you there! Hey, earthling.” What if, as our original antiphony, blackness dawns in the ongoing response of black ecological life to the hail of a blue planet?

As it happens, such black ecological life was also held out to Bigger Thomas in the “ancient waters” we’ve otherwise understood to signify his social death. Richard Wright narrates that

the feelings of [Bigger’s] body reasoned that if there could be no merging with men and women about him, there should be a *merging with some other part of the natural world* in which he lived. Out of the mood of renunciation there sprang up in him again the will to kill. But this time, it was not directed outward toward people, but inward, upon himself. . . . This feeling sprang up of itself, organically, automatically; like the rotted hull of a seed forming the soil in which it should grow again.⁵⁴

Here, the same “ancient waters” into which Bigger desired to sink in resignation to his own (social) death let out upon what may alternatively be recognized as a kind of ecological life. A merging with the more than human natural world whose ultimate horizon, like that of “the rotted hull of a seed,” is not death, but life.

If Sula couldn’t wait to “tell Nel,” just wait’ll we tell Killmonger.⁵⁵ In the film *Black Panther*, Killmonger famously invokes his ancestors who drowned during Middle Passage with his dying breath: “Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from ships because they knew that *death* was better than bondage.”⁵⁶ In the theater, this line left me breathless. I found it a cathartic elegy for those I haven’t stopped thinking about since I first heard Equiano call them “*inhabitants of the deep*.”⁵⁷ But how inhabitants, if humans cannot live under water? I’ve traveled with this phrase long enough to want to tell Killmonger the good news: that our ancestors who jumped knew not only death but also, in a way we must learn to fathom, *life*. Somebody run and tell Killmonger that the inhabitants of the deep jumped to see the Earth before the end of their worlds and the beginning of our antiblack one. Then, compelled by Equiano’s astonishment, let’s wade together into the deep water that there was in the beginning. Into its meaning not only for the (social) deaths we die but also, and more abundantly, for the black ecological life we live. I am about this life, too. About the life of blackness and the blackness of life. “What did we do to be so black and blue?” Louis Armstrong asked. Perhaps we lived. Took up the precarious experiment of black ecological life on a blue planet.

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Introduction

THE DEEP

“Je te salue, vieil Océan!” You still preserve on your crests the silent boat of our births,
your chasms are our own unconscious, furrowed with fugitive memories.

—ÉDOUARD GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation*

I LOOKED, AND BEHOLD, a great multitude which no one could number.¹ But I tried anyway, and the jumpers and the jettisoned, across the four centuries of the transatlantic slave trade, totaled 1,818,681. I arrive at this crude and inexact number by consulting the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database and subtracting the total number of Africans who ultimately disembarked in the New World from those who embarked in the Old. If you do this terrible math, you will greet the 1,818,681 who never made it across the Atlantic.² 1,818,681, then, who either stole (themselves) away to or were laid to un/rest in the ocean. 1,818,681 who never knew arrival. 1,818,681 who, under the circumstances, never even knew the middle that portended arrival. 1,818,681 who disembarked at sea. This number, like most related to the transatlantic slave trade, which are preserved to history in logs recorded in the spirit of inventory rather than census, yield what we might call a *statistical fabulation*.³ It gives us data we don't really have but which we might calculate anyway to help us remember and count our immeasurable losses. Not in the spirit of exactness but in the ethical extension of a

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care that was not there but should have been. Black lives count. The 1,818,681 hemorrhaged into the Atlantic count and are counted here.

They are counted, too, in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Sometimes in a traditional quantitative way: Equiano writes of “two of my wearied countrymen” who jumped over the side and the countless sick “almost daily” thrown overboard.⁴ But he also uses a different manner of accounting, a curious naming of the drowned. His appellation of those who jumped or else were jettisoned to their death insists into the ocean “a kind of life”:⁵

Often did I think many of the *inhabitants* of the deep much more happy than myself. I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs.⁶

It is one thing to refuse the antiblack world, to prefer death to slavery. But it is quite another thing to *inhabit* the deep. To suggest that the 1,818,681 did not (only) die but, rather, moved in. If the biblical Exodus famously begins with Moses turning aside to see the bush burning, yet not consumed, this book turns aside to see that sign and wonder that arguably founds the kindred exodus of the African Diaspora. That great, if impossible, sight that Olaudah Equiano beheld from the deck of a slave ship in the middle of the eighteenth century: the enslaved underwater, yet not dead, those he surprisingly names the “*inhabitants* of the deep.” Equiano’s term for those who perished over the side suggests they not only exited the antiblack world but entered a habitable elsewhere. But in a narrative explicitly committed to furnishing an unflinching witness to the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, why does Equiano use *inhabitants*, a word typically reserved for the living, to describe those who we know drowned? And how can he claim to “env[y] them the *freedom* they enjoyed”? Yet if we suspend our initial objections to Equiano’s apparent misnaming of the drowned and take seriously the lives that were *lived* underwater, awfully abbreviated as they were, then what emerges is an oceanic recalibration of human life and freedom. Perhaps the only sustainable life and freedom there is on this blue planet.

It can be easy to miss Equiano’s meaning. I certainly did when I was first introduced to Equiano’s narrative as a college sophomore. The knowledge that humans cannot live underwater and my sense of the ocean as a nonhuman space initially led me to mistake the “inhabitants of the deep” for fish, unwittingly perpetuating modernity’s foundational confusion of blackness with the nonhuman. Not until I read Equiano’s account of his “two . . . wearied countrymen” who jumped ship did I realize that the “inhabitants of the deep” were people whose unspeakable deaths were attended by unspeakable life.

In the wake of the “terror” that so quickly overwhelms Equiano’s first encounter with the sea, it can also be easy to miss the surprising reply he gives to the hail of an initially astonishing ocean. *Hey, you there! Hey, earthling!* Look closely at how Equiano responds to the violence of the antiblack world: “Two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across I think the windlass and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced anything of this kind before, and although, not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, *I would have jumped over the side.*”⁷ Is it not a little remarkable that despite his fear of this unfamiliar element, Equiano came to willfully desire the ocean, or at least the escape from slavery that it promised? On its surface, such complex willing might be interpreted as Equiano’s absolute refusal of the world he “had gotten into” and what black studies has come to recognize as its “gratuitous violence.”⁸ Certainly, those who willfully jumped over the side, in their preference for death to a life of slavery, expressed at least this referendum on the antiblack world and its uninhabitability. And with every passing year, the evidence accumulating against this world proves these leapers prophets. Yet the life that Equiano insists into the ocean also begs the question of whether this negative refusal of the antiblack world in Equiano’s desire to jump over the side can also be read as a positive apprehension of the deep as a habitable elsewhere. A place where Equiano might not only die but somehow also live.

This response to the sea’s call, which can be easy to miss in Equiano’s narrative, is much more conspicuous in Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* (1990). In the first chapter, “The Open Boat,” which offers an extended meditation on the historical experience and cultural legacy of Middle Passage, the Martinican poet and philosopher explicitly salutes the ocean: “Je te salue, vieil Océan!” [literally, ‘I salute you, ancient ocean!’] You still preserve on your crests the silent boat of our births, your chasms are our own unconscious, furrowed with fugitive memories.”⁹ In Glissant’s salute of the ocean, we explicitly witness at the end of the twentieth century what can already be perceived more subtly at the end of the eighteenth, in Equiano’s double take at the sea that “saluted” him in the beginning. Between Equiano and Glissant, and beyond, blackness’s enduring response to the hail of an astonishing ocean takes shape. *Blackness is an ongoing inhabitation of the deep; black study the perpetual discovery that if you surrender to the deep you can swim it.*

Inhabitants of the Deep: The Blueness of Blackness undertakes a black ecocritical study of the deep as the *diffuse subtext* of black literary and expressive culture. A

synonym for the ocean and a potential of all waters (and lands), the *deep* is what blackness has known throughout the changing same of black life and death from the steps blinked on the face of the Atlantic to the ground we still struggle to stand upon. Extending Equiano's surprising appellation of the jumpers and the jettisoned, this book offers a vision of blackness as an ongoing inhabitation of the deep that not only originates with but persists beyond Middle Passage.¹⁰ Yet Equiano's underwater vision of life and freedom is also our witness that we get down in the deep as much as we are cast down, wade in the water in which we have historically been weighed. Thus, *Inhabitants of the Deep* ultimately argues that the blackness which dawned in the oceanic encounter of Middle Passage set flowing an experiment of human inhabitation that is most fully apprehended not as social death hailed by the slave ship but as black ecological life hailed by a blue planet.

Focusing on the deep in this way can help attune us to the surprising turn and return to water that can be witnessed in and out of black letters. Like most, I've heard the negro speak of rivers. But I've also heard the negro speak of oceans, and bays, and creeks, and swamps, and at times water that isn't physically there. I've heard Frederick Douglass speak *to* the Chesapeake Bay and tell of Demby standing his ground in a creek. Heard Henry Bibb speak to the Ohio River after him and in a nearly identical way. Seen Otis Redding roam two thousand miles just to make his home on the dock of the San Francisco Bay. Heard M. NourbeSe Philip give

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the first protracted word of her book-length poem *Zong!*¹¹ Seen Pip drown in the Pacific and live to tell about it in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*. Seen Avey Johnson be compelled to return to "Ibo Landing" after her great-aunt Cuney appeared to her in a dream in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*. Seen Aunt Ester ferry Citizen Barlow to an underwater city made of bones in August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*. Seen and looked away from a photograph of a boy resurrected from a Tallahatchie River grave. Stood barefoot before the grave of that same boy in ankle-deep water. Watched the *povo de santo* give Iemanjá her flowers on February 2 on a beach in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, and been comforted by stories of how the jumpers and the jettisoned rest with Olokun. Felt the church sway to "Wade in the Water" as saints made their way to the baptismal pool. This is hardly the whole of it, but I've seen and heard and felt enough by now to appreciate something of the scope of the knowledge to which Martin Luther King Jr. alluded

on the eve of his assassination, when, reflecting on the high-pressure water hoses unleashed on black backs in Birmingham, he declared that “we knew water.” Indeed, with Langston Hughes, we affirm that we’ve known waters. That our soul has grown deep like the waters. *Deep*, of course, being the operative word.

I. take me to the water

What Equiano saw on one side of the Atlantic in *The Interesting Narrative*, Frederick Douglass saw on the other in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). Notwithstanding the changes in coast, century, and circumstances, Douglass’s account of his ritual rendezvous with the Chesapeake Bay shares several striking similarities with Equiano’s encounter with the Atlantic. Although the latter’s encounter with the deep comes in the context of Middle Passage and the former’s in the context of New World slavery, both, for instance, are attended by profound personal transformations. Just as Equiano’s encounter with the deep witnesses his transformation into mere cargo, Douglass similarly comes to stand before the Chesapeake in the immediate wake of what he famously characterizes as his transformation from a “man” into a “brute.”¹²

As the narrative’s organizing schema for representing the dehumanization of enslavement, this transformation is depicted throughout the narrative but is consummated by the harsh “discipline” that Douglass receives from the brutal overseer Mr. Covey during a period of Douglass’s enslavement when he is made to drink “the bitterest dregs of slavery.”¹³ As the precipitating cause of Douglass’s jaunts to the Chesapeake, this discipline represents a second point of similarity with Equiano, whose return to the ocean was similarly propelled by a severe flogging. Beyond slavery’s physical violence, however, Douglass’s account of the discipline to which Covey subjects him also emphasizes the existential violence whereby he “was broken in body, soul, and spirit.” This comprehensive breaking inheres specifically, for Douglass, in the ubiquity of the labor he is forced to perform under Covey. Douglass is not only “*worked* in all weather” but also worked at all times, so that “work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him.” Crucially, by using the passive voice, Douglass elides himself as the subject of his work. He is not a worker. Rather, he is *worked*. Evacuating the grammatical position of the subject in this way, Douglass registers the slave’s fungibility as objectified labor power that, in the event of overuse, may simply be replaced. Thus, Douglass is not only reduced to but also alienated from his labor power. And because he is worked around the clock, Douglass is also alienated from time. Such is the “discipline” that compels

Douglass's famous utterance "Behold a man transformed into a brute!"¹⁴ By it, Douglass laments a kinship with nonhuman beasts of burden who, within the logics of the plantation, were also, as it were, *on* the clock. That is, they were coerced into a relentlessly linear organization of time to maximize accumulation and profit. Also on the clock was the land, which, with the advent of monocrop agriculture, was also being worked to exhaustion. Thus, behold also time transformed into the Anthropocene, the seeds of an entire planet temporally remade in humanity's image.

Within this near-total colonization of time, however, Douglass details that "Sunday was my only leisure time," before proceeding to narrate his curious practice of using this time to repeatedly abscond to the lofty banks of the Chesapeake Bay. Here, once again, similarities between Equiano's and Douglass's respective encounters with the deep abound. In addition to sharing a basically similar *mise-en-scène*, Douglass's characterization of the Chesapeake can also be recognized to follow an affective trajectory parallel to Equiano's astonishment turned terror:

Our house stood within a few rods of the Chesapeake Bay, whose broad bosom was ever white with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe. Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships.¹⁵

Equiano's "the sea, and a slave ship," "bad spirits," and even the whiteness of his captors are all echoed in Douglass's "Chesapeake Bay," "the moving multitude of ships," "so many shrouded ghosts," and the conspicuous whiteness of the sails. Moreover, just as "soon" as we witnessed the conversion of Equiano's astonishment into terror, what begins as a sublime description of a "beautiful" and "delightful" seascape devolves, for Douglass, into a scene of "so many shrouded ghosts, to *terrify* and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition." What appears "to the eye of freemen" like a maritime cornucopia of commerce whose plenty is coded white is, to the eye of the enslaved Douglass, haunted.

In this characterization of the Chesapeake Bay, Douglass exhibits the same double vision as the poet Lucille Clifton in her untitled, would-be nature poem:

surely i am able to write poems
celebrating grass and how the blue
in the sky can flow green or red
and the waters lean against the
chesapeake shore like a familiar,
poems about nature and landscape
surely but whenever i begin
“the trees wave their knotted branches
and . . .” why
is there under that poem always
an other poem?¹⁶

Like Douglass, Clifton also waxes poetic about “nature and landscape” and even, as it happens, the “chesapeake.” But when this nature poem turns its celebratory regard upon trees and their “*knotted* branches,” it falters with a caesura that ultimately gives way to “*an other* poem.” The peculiar spacing suggests not simply another, different poem that the poet is also “able to write” but a poem instead whose difference and otherness are altogether its own. A poem, in other words, that pronounces itself independently of either the poet’s ability or consciousness. Involuntarily summoned, perhaps, by *knotted*, an adjective that can apply to ropes as well as branches and may, in this way, invoke, in the eyes of a black woman, the painful history of lynching. Moreover, the fact that this “other poem” surges up from “under” an otherwise one-noted celebration of nature illuminates at once a depth and a surface, a superficial celebration of the US landscape and a haunting, violent subtext.

Like Clifton’s would-be nature poem, I propose that Douglass’s celebration of the beauty and delight of the Chesapeake is similarly interrupted by the history of Middle Passage in a way that begins to evince the status of the deep as the diffuse subtext of the black literary tradition. Douglass stands atop the lofty banks of the Chesapeake seeing ghosts because, to the eye of a slave, these “beautiful vessels, robed in purest white,” invoke what Glissant might describe as an “unconscious memory” of slave ships, if not the genuine article. It is possible that at least some of the ghosts Douglass beheld in the early nineteenth century included literal slave ships, because the Chesapeake served as an important hub for both the transatlantic and domestic slave trade. The former persisted illicitly well beyond its 1808 abolition and the latter flourished

through the mid-nineteenth century. But even if they did not carry slaves, this multitude of ships almost certainly carried the fruits of slave labor:

Coastwise shipping along the Eastern Seaboard dominated the American economy until the late 1800s. Almost all personal and business travel of more than a relatively few miles and virtually all shipping of heavy goods were conducted predominantly by water, because watercraft offered by far the fastest, cheapest, and most efficient means of transport. Coastal schooners, sloops, and brigs were the workhorses of the internal trade, in which slave-produced raw materials such as cotton and molasses were shipped northward to New England and New York factories, and northern industrial manufactured goods were shipped south. These items included finished cotton cloth, iron and steel goods, agricultural machinery, as well as third-rate salted fish used as a cheap food for enslaved populations.¹⁷

By shipping the produce and necessities of a slave economy, these “beautiful vessels, robed in purest white,” quite literally shroud an underlying subtext of black suffering and enslavement. These ships signify Douglass’s “wretched condition” as a slave in much the same way that the slave ship alerted Equiano to his status as cargo. The ships’ economic implication in slavery at least partly accounts for their appearance to Douglass “as so many shrouded ghosts,” haunted, as Glissant would have it, by an unconscious memory of Middle Passage.

However, neither Douglass’s description of this seascape nor his rendering of his classic apostrophe to these ships explicitly alludes to Middle Passage. Instead, the explicit reason that the latter gives for why these ships affect Douglass so profoundly emphasizes the juxtaposition of their freedom of motion with Douglass’s relative confinement:

You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom’s swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! O, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll. Go on, go on. O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute!¹⁸

Douglass not only makes no explicit mention of slave ships but, quite the opposite, he actually characterizes these vessels as “freedom’s swift-winged angels.”

However, I propose that these angels do not pertain to freedom so much as whiteness. Although Douglass longs to be under their “protecting wing,” we’ve heard him previously describe these wings as robes of “purest white.” His exclusion from the coverage of these wings, then, also symbolizes his social exclusion, even as a mixed-race slave, from the protections and freedoms restricted to whiteness. Furthermore, like the “knotted” branches of Clifton’s “other poem,” Douglass’s specific wish to be on the “gallant *decks*” of these ships activates the historic subtext of the slave ship’s architectural reorganization of humanity with the slave’s paradigmatic exclusion from the deck and ontological reassignment to the *hold*. This Middle Passage subtext lurking beneath the freedom and protection of a deck coded white suggests a probable culprit for a disturbance that Douglass specifically characterizes, in “so many shrouded ghosts,” as a haunting. That is, an insistence of the past into the present. Douglass does not specify the source of this haunting, but the symbolic coding of the history of the slave trade upon this seascape suggests an unconscious memory of Middle Passage.

As Douglass’s famous apostrophe to the ships continues, his Chesapeake reverie, in a final parallel with Equiano, moves from the terror of enslavement to an ultimate resolution to run away:

The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught, or get clear, I’ll try it. I had as well die with ague as the fever. I have only one life to lose. I had as well be killed running as die standing. Only think of it; one hundred miles straight north, and I am free! Try it? Yes! God helping me, I will. It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave. I will take to the water. This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom.¹⁹

Just as Equiano’s vision of the “inhabitants of the deep” ultimately insists an improbable life and freedom into the ocean he had come to fear, so the terror of Douglass’s seascape belies how he ultimately comes to apprehend the Chesapeake as a crucial accomplice to his freedom. It is not the white freedom of the deck, however, because the “glad ship is gone” and “hides in the dim distance.” Rather, this freedom is attributed directly to the bay itself, which, in the absence of any explicit mediating technology, “shall yet bear [Douglass] into freedom.” Thus, much like Equiano, Douglass’s affective relation to the Chesapeake ultimately comes to assume a defining ambivalence, not between slavery and freedom so much as between slavery and fugitivity. That is, escape unto some as of yet unrealized freedom indexed not by the fixed and docile ground

of the deck—whose enabling underside is the subjugation of the hold—but by the comparatively indeterminate and *live* ground of the bay.

Much has been remarked about the significance of literacy or physical resistance to Douglass's freedom struggle. However, with respect to slavery's "bitterest dregs," and the consummation of his related transformation from a man into a brute, it is specifically Douglass's rendezvous with the Chesapeake that catalyzes his resolve to get free. In this way, it arguably represents the narrative's turning point. Immediately before, we find Douglass's famed characterization of the dehumanization of enslavement: "Behold a man transformed into a brute!" And immediately after follows perhaps the narrative's most iconic sentence, in which Douglass conversely characterizes his struggle for freedom: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you *shall* see how a slave was made a man."²⁰ This is one of several instances where Douglass employs the literary device of chiasmus. And to the extent that it yields a microcosm of a narrative that generally follows a chiasmatic structure in its account of the transformations induced by slavery and subsequently inverted by freedom, the precise location of Douglass's rendezvous with the Chesapeake in the narrative renders it the very hinge upon which this inversion turns.

We also find this alternative valence of the deep as a site of freedom in two other revealing instances throughout Douglass's writings and speeches. The first can be found in Douglass's only work of fiction, *The Heroic Slave* (1852). The novella is a work of historical fiction inspired by the Creole rebellion of 1841. One of the largest and most successful slave rebellions in US history, this slave revolt took place aboard an eponymous slave brig transporting 134 enslaved persons from Virginia to New Orleans as part of the United States' still thriving domestic slave trade. Led by an enslaved cook named Madison Washington, a group of enslaved men seized control of the *Creole* and redirected its course to the free territory of the Bahamas, where the survivors ultimately gained their freedom. In *The Heroic Slave*, in the wake of the uprising and a passing storm, Madison Washington stands proudly at the helm of the *Creole* and declares, "You cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows. The ocean, if not the land, is free."²¹ Against the patriotic grain of a hallowed freedom often coded into the US landscape—the national anthem's "land of the free," for instance, or the "amber waves of grain" and "fruited plain" of "America the Beautiful"—here, it is rather the ocean that *is* free in an absolute sense, while the land and even a (slave) ship may be subject to the "bloody laws of slavery." It is further intriguing, given the strong association between literacy and freedom in Douglass's narrative, that here the ocean's absolute freedom inheres in its complete

incapacitation of writing. In this way, Douglass alludes to a freedom that transcends writing or codification; that simply is, just as we often imagine the so-called inalienable rights of the individual. However, a second revealing instance of the deep in Douglass's writings troubles the grounding of such absolute freedom in the individual by applying pressure to the underlying assumption that the individual represents the most basic unit of social life. Consider the following passage from Douglass's 1859 lecture "Self-Made Men," in which the relationship between the ocean and the waves serves as an analogy for the relationship between the social and the individual:

It must in truth be said, though it may not accord well with self-conscious individuality and self-conceit, that no possible native force of character, and no depth of wealth and originality, can lift a man into absolute independence of his fellowmen, and no generation of men can be independent of the preceding generation. The brotherhood and interdependence of mankind are guarded and defended at all points. I believe in individuality, but individuals are, to the mass, like waves to the ocean. The highest order of genius is as dependent as is the lowest. It, like the loftiest waves of the sea, derives its power and greatness from the grandeur and vastness of the ocean of which it forms a part. We differ as the waves, but are one as the sea.²²

What Douglass characterizes as the absolute freedom of the ocean in *The Heroic Slave* here joins a second absolute—not the individual and their “inalienable rights,” which we might associate with the exclusionary freedom of a deck that proceeds under the banner of sails of “purest white,” but the *social*. Douglass's assertion that the social maintains an identical relation to the individual as the ocean does to individual waves inverts the traditional vision of social life enshrined by the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, in which the independent, or in other words *free*, individual represents the most basic unit of social life. Like the deck of a slave ship, this codified vision of social life and freedom was quite explicitly subtended by the underside of “the bloody laws of slavery.” In contrast, Douglass offers a metaphor for social life that, even as it accommodates individual expression, is ultimately grounded in and irreducible beyond the social—a conception of social life that Denise Ferreira da Silva has otherwise theorized as “difference without separability.”²³ These invocations of the deep elsewhere in Douglass's corpus inform how the same bay, which otherwise terrifies Douglass with thoughts of his enslavement, also and ultimately serves as the catalyst of his freedom struggle. A struggle,

crucially, not for the freedom from which he is barred, the freedom of the deck, but for what he alternatively imagines, with respect to the ocean itself, as an even more absolute freedom.

We find a similar encounter with the deep in *The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1849), where in place of the sea we find the Ohio River. Notwithstanding this shift from salt to fresh water, Henry Bibb's encounter with the Ohio River may be recognized to follow a nearly identical pattern to Equiano's and Douglass's respective encounters with the ocean. Like theirs, Bibb's encounter with the deep is precipitated by both an acute awareness of his enslavement and an experience of discipline:

As all the instrumentalities which I as a slave, could bring to bear upon the system, had utterly failed to palliate my sufferings, all hope and consolation fled. I must be a slave for life, and suffer under the lash or die. The influence which this had only tended to make me more unhappy. I resolved that I would be free if running away could make me so. I had heard that Canada was a land of liberty, somewhere in the North; and every wave of trouble that rolled across my breast, caused me to think more and more about Canada, and liberty. But more especially *after having been flogged*, I have fled to the highest hills of the forest, pressing my way to the North for refuge; but the river Ohio was my limit. To me it was an impassable gulf. I had no rod wherewith to smite the stream, and thereby divide the waters. I had no Moses to go before me and lead the way from bondage to a promised land.²⁴

Much like the flogging that motivated Equiano's return to the deep, Bibb's encounter with the Ohio River is immediately preceded by a flogging. And like the ontological violence that drove Douglass to the Chesapeake, including a sense of slavery's total colonization of his time, Bibb is driven to the Ohio River by an acute sense of slavery's endurance "for life." Even the most distinguishing feature of Bibb's encounter with the deep—that it involves a river and not the ocean—is mitigated by the fact that Bibb's characterization of the Ohio River is decidedly oceanic. He not only likens it to an "impassable *gulf*," a deep inlet of the sea surrounded by land, but also alludes to the Israelites' crossing of the *Red Sea* in Exodus. Like the parallel exodus of the Israelites, Bibb's fugitivity is ultimately oriented toward the promised land of Canada, while the Ohio River, as the geographic limit to Bibb's fugitivity, colludes with his enslavement just as the Red Sea barred the escape of the Israelites. In this way, the Ohio River is haunted in a different way than Douglass's Chesapeake. Here the subtext is the Atlantic's Middle Passage tenure as an "impassable gulf" to Equiano and many

other middle passing Africans who longed to return to the freedom of their homes. It may be more subtle than the Chesapeake and its ghosts, but such a haunting helps to explain the oceanic depiction of the Ohio, as well as what Bibb suggestively describes as so many *waves* of trouble *rolling* across his breast.

Yet, like Equiano and Douglass before, Bibb ultimately comes to identify the Ohio River with a kind of freedom. Consider the apostrophe that Bibb offers “on the lofty banks of the river Ohio,” which uncannily echoes Douglass’s apostrophe “upon the lofty banks” of the Chesapeake Bay:

Sometimes standing on the Ohio River bluff, looking over on a free State, and as far north as my eyes could see, I have eagerly gazed upon the blue sky of the free North, which at times constrained me to cry out from the depths of my soul, Oh! Canada, sweet land of rest—Oh! when shall I get there! Oh, that I had the wings of a dove, that I might soar away to where there is no slavery; no clanking of chains, no captives, no lacerating of backs, no parting of husbands and wives; and where man ceases to be the property of his fellow man. These thoughts have revolved in my mind a thousand times. I have stood upon the lofty banks of the river Ohio, gazing upon the splendid steamboats, wafted with all their magnificence up and down the river, and I thought of the fishes of the water, the fowls of the air, the wild beasts of the forest, all appeared to be free, to go just where they pleased, and I was an unhappy slave!²⁵

Aside from the fact that Bibb offers his apostrophe to Canada while Douglass offers his to the Chesapeake’s ships, their respective encounters with the deep are remarkably similar. Bibb cries out “from the depths of [his] soul” in the same way that Douglass pours out his “soul’s complaint.” Bibb also, like Douglass, juxtaposes the freedom of motion of “the splendid steamboats” with the relative constraint of his enslavement. In addition to these parallels, the two passages are so strikingly similar in language and tone that they may even be in *conscious* dialogue. Bibb’s narrative was published just four years after Douglass’s, and given the latter’s popularity Bibb was almost certainly familiar with it. Not to mention Bibb wrote to Douglass the same year that *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* was published.²⁶ Finally, just as Douglass gestures toward a deep freedom beyond the purview of the deck and in excess of the deep’s historical associations with slavery, so Bibb also comes to locate in the Ohio River a freedom that not only interrupts the river’s collusion with slavery but whose explicit wildness also distinguishes it from the freedom indexed by the promised land of Canada. In his invocation of the freedom of the “fishes of

the water,” Bibb gestures toward an aqueous freedom beyond the nation-state in a manner strongly reminiscent of the absolute freedom that Douglass similarly locates in the ocean in *The Heroic Slave*.

II. the submersion narrative

The striking intertextuality between Bibb’s, Douglass’s, and Equiano’s respective encounters with the Ohio River, Chesapeake Bay, and Atlantic Ocean suggests the early consolidation of a defining trope of the black literary tradition. In one of the inaugural genres of African American literature, how do we interpret the fact that these canonical slave narratives feature a repeated encounter with the formation that I am calling the deep? However much they may differ in their particulars, this trilogy of deep encounters set flowing by Equiano’s original encounter with “the sea, and a slave ship” nevertheless share a basic aesthetic vocabulary. A bay or river may occupy the original place of the Atlantic, and a “multitude of ships” or “splendid steamboats” may occupy the original place of the slave ship, but each individual seascape nevertheless shares three basic elements: (1) a body of water, (2) watercraft(s), and (3) a fugitive slave. Here, I employ fugitivity broadly to include *any* movement away from slavery—however significant or slight, permanent or temporary, actual or imagined—such that Equiano’s unrealized desire to jump over the side, Douglass’s temporary rendezvous with the Chesapeake, and Bibb’s limited escapes to the Ohio River all constitute enactments of fugitivity.²⁷ Beyond this shared aesthetic vocabulary, these repeated encounters with the deep also follow a general narrative progression that, regardless of their particulars, can likewise be delineated into three basic parts: (1) a *precipitating experience of racial subjection*, (2) a *fugitive return to the deep*, and (3) some degree of *inhabiting the deep*.

Whether a flogging in the case of Equiano and Bibb or nonphysical discipline in the case of Douglass, each of their respective encounters with the deep is precipitated by an experience of racial subjection, which inspires their acute awareness of slavery as the totality we have otherwise come to know as the anti-black world. In the immediate wake of their respective experiences of racial subjection, each also absconds to a manifestation of the deep that is haunted by an unconscious memory of Middle Passage and marked by a profound ambivalence. Hence, the deep occasions Equiano’s astonishment and terror, Douglass’s delight and torment, Bibb’s unhappiness and hope. And for all three, the deep evokes life and death, slavery and freedom. Finally, each of their respective encounters with the deep concludes with some degree, however marginal and whether literal or figurative, of inhabiting the deep. Consider, for instance,

how Equiano, Douglass, and Bibb all insist into the deep a kind of freedom. For Equiano it is the freedom of the “inhabitants of the deep,” for Douglass the absolute freedom unwritten on the “restless billows” of the ocean, and for Bibb the wild freedom of the “fishes of the water.” If, for Kamau Brathwaite, “the unity is submarine,” so apparently is freedom.²⁸ And Equiano, Douglass, and Bibb inhabit the deep insofar as they, to varying degrees, adopt a sense of freedom inspired by the deep.

Of course, whatever freedom may be found in the deep seems negligible relative to the narrative supremacy of the more conventional freedom drives that define these narratives. Equiano, for example, responds to the degradation of being traded by ultimately becoming a *trader* himself. Douglass responds to his transformation into a brute by ultimately endeavoring to become a *man*.²⁹ And Bibb evades the “system” of slavery by ultimately making landfall in a free *country*. However, beneath the narrative primacy of these more conventional economic, gendered, and political expressions of freedom runs the steady undercurrent of a wilder freedom associated with the deep. What can seem a mere ancillary detour, or in Bibb’s case an active obstruction on the way to freedom, belies what is otherwise the deep’s consistent proximity to the *crucial* moment when this triumvirate of fugitive slaves resolves to *be* free. At the height of each of their respective senses of the totalizing subjugation of slavery—when Equiano sensed he “had gotten into a world,” when Douglass despaired of the total colonization of his time, or when Bibb lamented his powerlessness within the “system” of enslavement—the deep looms as a consistent waterway out of no way. Moreover, its wild and absolute freedom better resonates with how the resolve to be free often precedes and exceeds the attainment of whatever existing formalizations of freedom are available to the enslaved. Consider, for example, Douglass’s resolution, in the wake of his consequential fight with Mr. Covey, not to be a “slave in fact,” however long he must remain “a slave in form.” Could we similarly imagine the possibility of being *free in fact*, regardless of whether one has managed to become free in form? Even if Douglass explicitly identifies his fight with Covey as “the turning-point in my career as a slave” with respect to such *in-fact* freedom, we cannot discount the crucial role of his rendezvous with the Chesapeake immediately prior.³⁰ Within what Douglass describes as the “hell of *unending* slavery,” it’s specifically his encounter with the bay that leads Douglass to affirm that “there is a better *day* coming.” Thus, with respect to Douglass’s experience of enslavement primarily as a total subjection of his time, this encounter with the deep functions as a significant turning point in its own right.³¹ What ultimately assumes the normative form of a masculinized freedom realized through violent self-defense arguably begins with the sheer

possibility of freedom apprehended on the face of the deep. Apparently, you cannot write the bloody laws of slavery or freedom on these restless billows.

The shared aesthetic vocabulary and narrative progression of this repeating encounter with the deep suggests a black narrative form commensurate with “the narratives of ascent and immersion” that Robert Stepto outlines in his classic study of African American literature, *From Behind the Veil*. According to Stepto, “The classic ascent narrative launches an ‘enslaved’ and semi-literate figure on a ritualized journey to a symbolic North; that journey is charted through spatial expressions of social structure, invariably systems of signs that the questing figure must read in order to be both increasingly literate and increasingly free. The ascent narrative conventionally ends with the questing figure situated in the least oppressive social structure afforded by the world of the narrative, and free in the sense that he or she has gained sufficient literacy.”³² Stepto identifies both the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* as classic ascent narratives.³³ Indeed, both narratives recount northern migrations, to New Bedford and Canada respectively, that culminate with their author’s freedom and literacy. Although *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* is not included in Stepto’s analysis, Equiano’s upward climb from cargo in the hold, where he “could not see how they managed the vessel,” to skilled sailor and trader on the deck can also be interpreted as a type of ascent, driven by a growing literacy of the maritime and mercantile world.³⁴

However, according to Stepto, a final feature of the ascent narrative—that “the least oppressive social structure afforded by the world of the narrative” is, “at best, one of solitude” and, “at worst, one of alienation”—contributes to the development of another narrative form. “Prior to *The Souls [of Black Folk]*,” Stepto observes, “the seminal journey in Afro-American narrative literature is unquestionably the journey north.” After *Souls*, however, Stepto tracks the emergence of the return journey south as a complementary vector of migration characterizing what he alternatively names the “immersion narrative.”³⁵ Outlining this complementary narrative form, Stepto writes, “The immersion narrative is fundamentally an expression of a ritualized journey into a symbolic South, in which the protagonist seeks those aspects of tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate, the conditions imposed by solitude. The conventional immersion narrative ends almost paradoxically, with the questing figure located in or near the narrative’s most oppressive social structure but free in the sense that he has regained sufficient tribal literacy.”³⁶ If Douglass’s 1845 narrative represents the “paradigmatic narrative of ascent,” then Stepto reads *Souls*, which traces W. E. B. Du Bois’s journey “from infancy in the Berkshires of

western Massachusetts to adulthood amid the western hills of Atlanta,” as the paradigmatic narrative of immersion.³⁷ Paule Marshall’s novel *Praisesong for the Widow* can also be read as a kind of “immersion narration” that extends to the Global South, with the parallel southern journeys of the protagonist, Avey Johnson, from New York to the South Carolina Sea Islands as a child and to Carriacou as an adult.

However, the terrestrial emphasis of this Jacob’s ladder of longitudinal migration processing north and south belies an equally prevalent vector of migration that has gone relatively unremarked in the study of black literature and whose strange fruition is not arrival in the existing structures of this world so much as the imagination of alternative worlds. Indeed, even longer than they’ve journeyed north or south, black peoples have consistently stolen (themselves) away to the deep. Especially with regard to the larger context of the African Diaspora, the journey to the deep can even be said to eclipse the journey north or south as the seminal journey of black narrative. Even if, paradoxically, it is a journey unto a placeless place where no human can hope to fully arrive.

In conversation with Stepto’s delineation of the ascent and immersion narrative, I propose that this fugitive migration to the deep might alternatively be conceived, with a nod to its ultimate inhabitation of the deep, as a *submersion narrative*. In place of “a symbolic North” or “South,” the submersion narrative launches an enslaved figure on a ritualized journey to the deep. Following the three-part narrative progression outlined above, it culminates not with the enslaved or questing figure situated in the least or most oppressive social structure in the world of the narrative nor with “sufficient literacy” of that world. Rather, it culminates with the realization of the possibility of a world otherwise. In the cases of Equiano, Douglass, and Bibb, this specifically manifests not just as the deep-inspired insight into freedom’s very possibility but also as a rewilding of available paradigms of freedom, even if short-lived or ultimately disavowed in the pursuit of formalized freedoms.

Freedom, however, is not the only aptitude at issue in the submersion narrative. Over the course of this study, the submersion narrative will also be found to subject other significant aptitudes—constitutive of western humanism’s “plan of living”—to a kind of sea change.³⁸ In what may be recognized as its subversive refusal of the world, the submersion narrative mirrors aspects of Stepto’s “immersion narrative.” Not only do they share, in the deep and in the South, similarly downward trajectories of migration, but their mutual descents enact similar refusals of the logic of ascent. According to Stepto, the immersion narrative rejects the individual, but also isolating, freedom of the North by undertak-

ing a return journey south in a “cultural immersion ritual” that results in “tribal literacy” and “the newfound balms of group identity.”³⁹ The submersion narrative performs a similar “cultural immersion ritual” by submersing the enslaved or questing figure in an ambivalent memory of Middle Passage.⁴⁰ Its tribal literacy and group identity, then, pertains specifically to what Saidiya Hartman has called “the tribe of Middle Passage.”⁴¹ Occasionally, as in the novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, such immersion and submersion can occur coterminously within a single text. Yet besides the latter’s shift from the terrestrial to the aquatic, the submersion narrative warrants further distinction in its departure from the existing social structure of the narrative world entirely. In this way, the kind of cultural immersion it facilitates is less a balm than a window into other possible worlds.

Furthermore, unlike other narrative forms, the submersion narrative needn’t exhaust the entirety of a given literary work or represent its dominant narrative. The submersion narrative is just as often—as in the case of Equiano, Douglass, and Bibb—the stuff of chapters, paragraphs, and even sentences, a subnarrative embedded within a larger text.⁴² As the reference to *Praisesong* already implies, the submersion narrative also includes other genres of African American literature beyond the slave narrative or even the purview of slavery. The far more recent “(Sittin’ on) The Dock of the Bay” (1968) by Otis Redding is neither a text about slavery nor, in the strictly literary sense, a text. Nevertheless, a closer inspection of Redding’s hit single reveals the same aesthetic vocabulary and narrative progression witnessed in Equiano’s, Douglass’s, and Bibb’s respective encounters with the deep.

Redding begins “The Dock of the Bay” by singing of a seascape that, no doubt by now, will appear familiar:

Sittin’ in the morning sun
 I’ll be sittin’ when the evening comes
 Watching the *ships* roll in
 Then I watch ’em roll away again, yeah
 I’m sittin’ on the dock of the *bay*
 Watchin’ the tide roll away, ooh
 I’m just sittin’ on the dock of the bay
 Wastin’ time⁴³

In the song’s opening verse and chorus, we encounter the three basic elements of the aesthetic vocabulary of the submersion narrative’s repeating encounter with the deep. The first two—a body of water and watercraft(s)—are immediately

apparent in the San Francisco Bay and the ships rolling in and away again, which further echo the steamboats that Bibb likewise watches wafting “up and down” the Ohio River. The final element of a fugitive slave, however, hardly seems germane to the semiautobiographical song inspired by Redding’s stay on a houseboat in Sausalito, California. Nevertheless, in our consideration of “The Dock of the Bay” as a submersion narrative, we might read the figure of the fugitive slave as liberally as Stepto does the “enslaved” figure in his study of the ascent narrative. Just as Stepto interprets the protagonists of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) and James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) as “enslaved” figures in the more general sense of a racial subjection that exceeds chattel slavery, we might read the figure of the fugitive slave in a similarly broad way. One that, regarding certain autobiographical elements of “The Dock of the Bay,” resonates with the specific way in which black studies has come to define slavery more broadly as “social death.”

Something approximating social death is arguably indexed by the song’s concluding verse:

Sittin’ here resting my bones
And this *loneliness* won’t leave me alone
Two thousand miles I roamed
Just to make this dock my home⁴⁴

In and of itself, “loneliness” is not commensurate with the radical exclusion from human society that has come to be understood in black studies under the rubric of “social death.” But in the specific context of Redding’s conscious search for a song that, in the racially segregated musical landscape of the United States, was “going to cross [him] over,” such loneliness bears the traces of Redding’s struggle against a racialized sonic isolation very much related to what is meant by the condition of social death.⁴⁵ Consider, too, the symbolic index of social death inhering in the looming signifier of *bones*, which is conspicuously tethered to *loneliness* by a conjunction. Thus, we might read Redding’s journey to the dock of the bay in conversation with our previous consideration in this book’s prologue of Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas, who, in response to his own loneliness, or inability “to be at home with people,” resigned himself to inhabit the deep. Redding can be read as a fugitive slave, then, in the sense of a fugitive “socially dead person.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, this “loneliness” can also be recognized as the *precipitating experience of racial subjection* in the basic narrative progression that defines the submersion narrative. And the subsequent lines of

the verse, “Two thousand miles I *roamed* / Just to make this dock my *home*,” in turn, represent both Redding’s *fugitive return to* and ultimate *inhabitation of the deep*.

If all three narrative components of the submersion narrative can be found in microcosm in the final verse of “The Dock of the Bay,” we can look to the rest of the song for the qualifying aspects of each part. For example, in the song’s second verse we detect something like the acute awareness of slavery (or social death) as a totality that typically attends the precipitating experience of racial subjection that sets our deep-bound migrants flowing :

I left my home in Georgia
Headed for the 'Frisco bay
'Cause I've had *nothing* to live for
And look like *nothing's* gonna come my way⁴⁷

Here, the repeated “nothing” indexes not only a total dispossession but a dispossession that also exerts a totalizing claim upon Redding’s time by consuming both his past and future. Redding’s fugitive return to the deep can also be read as haunted by Middle Passage to the extent that resting his bones raises the specter of the deep’s enduring significance, in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade, as an unmarked grave. This haunting is further augmented by the uncanny circumstances of Redding’s tragic passing, just three days after recording “The Dock of the Bay.” On December 10, 1967, the twenty-six-year-old Redding went the way of the “inhabitants of the deep” after his plane crashed in Lake Monona on the way to play a show in Madison, Wisconsin. But as much as we might therefore understand “The Dock of the Bay” to be haunted by the past, it is also haunted, in a more ambivalent sense, by the future. The iconic whistle at the end of “The Dock of the Bay” was originally intended as a placeholder for a final verse, which Redding never had the opportunity to write. To hear Redding’s whistle, then, is to hear not only the future but, more precisely, future possibility or futurity. In a song whose lyrics otherwise appear to cede the future to “nothing,” this is no small loophole. Finally, if in their respective submersion narratives we understand Equiano, Douglass, and Bibb to inhabit the deep with respect to their embrace of a deep-inspired freedom, Redding arguably does the same with respect to time. The song’s chorus is punctuated by Redding’s declaration of the one thing he is doing at the dock of the bay: “wasting time.” Just as Douglass curiously spent his “leisure time” rendezvousing with the Chesapeake Bay, so we find Redding similarly wasting time before the San Francisco Bay. And he lets us know about such time-wasting in that part of a song’s architecture that is always circling back on itself and that, in

this way, parallels the cyclicity of the ships and the tides rolling in and away again. Thus, Redding may be recognized not merely to waste but also to free time, modeling a deep-inspired orientation to time that refuses the relentless linearity of a world that, to hear Douglass tell it, has been on the clock since at least the plantation.

III. blue nativity

Blackness's history with the deep is enough to expect a Diaspora-wide episode of aquaphobia. There is certainly enough of this in Equiano's "terror" and Douglass's "ghosts." In the unmarked grave of the 1,818,681 and the unconscious memory of what befell the felled and fallen-out of the world. There is enough too in our present: a boy laid to rest in the Tallahatchie River with a cotton-gin fan tied around his neck and the homes shipwrecked by Hurricane Katrina and the boats of African migrants left to die on the Mediterranean Sea. Yet for as long as we've feared the deep with good reason, we've also courted it. We wasted no time. No sooner did Equiano recoil from the ocean in fear than did he wish to jump over the side. And it's not just Equiano and Douglass and Bibb and Redding. It's also Harriet Jacobs, dressed like a sailor and stowing away in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). And Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line. And Langston Hughes sailing from New York out into the Atlantic in *The Big Sea* (1940). And Alexis Pauline Gumbs being disciplined by whales in *Undrowned* (2020). And Rivers Solomon's vision of interspecies care and collaboration in *The Deep* (2019). Indeed, Equiano's turn and return to the sea appear to have set flowing (to borrow Farah Jasmine Griffin's language) a kind of hajj: an innumerable host, in every epoch and from every corner of the globe, making their pilgrimage to the deep. Why, then, do we come? Keep coming? Keep returning, as it were, to the scene of the crime? How could the blue-stained gate through which we passed into the hell of slavery also and for just as long (or longer, if we remember Equiano's astonishment) yield our very first "loophole of retreat"? And what might it mean that, relative to the miniscule dimensions of the hole Jacobs bored into an already impossibly circumscribed crawl space, this particular loophole constitutes the majority of Earth's surface?

One possible answer for why we come lies in history and the way we've always taken our leave of the antiblack world through the gate we came in, from the inhabitants of the deep to every deep-bound pilgrim since. In this way, the deep not only yields what Anissa Janine Wardi has theorized, following Toni Morrison, as an important "site of memory." It has also served not merely as

a symbolic but as a *literal* pathway to freedom. In *Sailing to Freedom*, for example, Timothy D. Walker argues that a significant part of the Underground Railroad actually proceeded by ship and sea: “Maritime escape episodes figure prominently in the majority of published North American fugitive slave accounts written before 1865: of 103 extant pre-Emancipation slave narratives, more than 70 percent recount the use of oceangoing vessels as a means of fleeing slavery. . . . Clearly, the sea should rightly constitute a central component of the full Underground Railroad story.”⁴⁸ Beside the history of the slave ship, then, we also have to acknowledge the history of what Marcus Rediker has recently surveyed as the “freedom ship.” If we’ve previously recognized the subtext of Douglass’s haunted encounter with the Chesapeake to be an unconscious memory of Middle Passage, this neglected history of what *Sailing to Freedom* reframes as the “maritime” or “saltwater Underground Railroad,” may be the subtext of his ultimate conviction to “take to the water” with the belief that “this very bay shall yet bear me into freedom.” Or Madison Washington’s declaration in *The Heroic Slave* that “The ocean, if not the land, is free.” In fact, Douglass’s own “escape from Baltimore, Maryland to New York City in 1838, though conducted along an ‘overland’ route of less than two hundred miles, nevertheless entailed three river or estuary crossings by ferry and a steamboat passage between Wilmington, Delaware, and Philadelphia.”⁴⁹ The diffusion of this alternative subtext of the deep can not only be witnessed in the slave narratives—in Bibb’s ability to see a kind of freedom in the same Ohio River that otherwise restricts him—but also in Gumbs’s return to the deep in *Undrowned* to learn of all things to breathe. And in Solomon’s explicit return to *The Deep* in her novella about middle passing women who were thrown overboard while pregnant and gave birth to progeny who could breathe underwater. Thus, Solomon renders from whence humans are thought to have evolved into the site of humanity’s further evolution, learning new ways to breathe through interspecies collaboration.

Blackness’s historical relationship to the deep is therefore marked with a profound ambivalence—as a site of life and death, slavery and freedom, deep suffocation and deep breath. Another answer for why we come, then, may have to do with the generative potential, as opposed to emotional indecision or paralysis, of this ambivalence. The poetic philosophy of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard is instructive on this point. In his book *Water and Dreams*, Bachelard asserts, “I believe it is possible to establish in the realm of the imagination, a *law of the four elements* which classifies various kinds

of material imagination by their connections with fire, air, water, or earth.” What Bachelard calls “material imagination” names a species of imagination that learns “its particular rules and poetics” from the physical properties of matter, so that if a lyric flows, it is because a brook flowed first.⁵⁰ For Bachelard, Earth is a poet and Creation begets creation. Moreover, matter’s ability to inspire imagination in this way hinges specifically on its ability to inspire ambivalence:

A matter to which the imagination cannot give a dual existence cannot play this psychological role of fundamental matter. Matter that does not provide the opportunity for a psychological ambivalence cannot find a *poetic double* which allows endless transpositions. For the material element to engage the whole soul, there must be a dual participation of desire and fear, a participation of good and evil.⁵¹

The deep may be recognized to engage the souls of black folk in precisely this way when Douglass pours out his “*soul’s* complaint” to the Chesapeake Bay or Bibb cries “out from the depths of [his] *soul*” on the Ohio River. Thus, we come to the deep as a matter to which the African Diaspora can give a dual existence because *water is our “fundamental matter.”* What’s *been* the matter since the rupture of Middle Passage. But what also constitutes most of the matter on this planet, and so is a fitting tutor for any who, like Celie in *The Color Purple*, would “enter the Creation.”

Toward a final reason why we come, we might take our cue from Douglass’s curious way of spending (or wasting, as Redding would have it) his “leisure time.” Douglass, we’ve said, is on the clock. And that clock is totalizing. As a limited interval when the time of the enslaved was, at least in some measure, their own, Douglass’s leisure time maintains the same fugitive relation to this clock that Sylvia Wynter argues that the plot maintains to the plantation. According to Wynter, the plots of land allotted to the enslaved for subsistence farming were a part of the plantation order intended to offset the costs of maintaining its labor force. However, due to its marginality, Wynter argues that the plot also served as an important “focus of resistance” to the plantation and what she saw as its fundamental reorganization of the relationship between humanity and nature:

1 Before the unique Western experience which began with the discovery of the New World, all societies of mankind existed in what [Léopold Sédar] Senghor describes as [a] dual oscillatory process in which Man adapts to Nature, and adapts Nature to his own needs.

- 2 But with the discovery of the New World and its vast exploitable lands that process which has been termed the “reduction . . . of Nature to Land” had its large scale beginning. From this moment on Western Man saw himself as “the lord and possessor of Nature.” The one-way transformation of Nature began. Since man is a part of Nature, a process of dehumanization and alienation was set in train. In old societies with traditional values based on the old relation, resistance could be put up to the dominance of the new dehumanizing system. In new societies like ours, created for the market, there seemed at first to be no possibility of such a tradition.
- 3 But from early, the planters gave the slaves plots of land on which to grow food to feed themselves in order to maximize profits. We suggest that this plot system, was . . . the focus of resistance to the market system and market values.⁵²

Because it allowed the enslaved to engage in subsistence farming at a remove from the plantation order, the plot served not only as the focus of resistance to the market system and its values but also to western humanism’s consequent flattening of nature into mere “land”—a docile surface to be possessed and endlessly extracted—and the related reconstitution of the Human as the non-contingent “lords and possessors” of the land.⁵³ Similarly, relative to the plantation’s near-total claim upon Douglass’s time, his “leisure time” constitutes a kind of temporal plot. An interval when his time, at least in some measure, was his own, and in which he could resist the plantation’s temporal order. Yet in the exercise of his free time, Douglass does not search out the plot but the deep, which is perhaps Earth’s greatest rebuff to the reduction of nature to mere land and whose marginality to the plantation affords Douglass a similar measure of autonomy.

Against the grain of western civilization’s one-way transformation of nature into a docile surface, Wynter further contends that the plot also facilitated an inverse process of indigenization whereby the displaced “multi-tribal African became the native of that area of experience that we term the New World” through the transplantation of their traditional African lifeways:⁵⁴

- 4 African peasants transplanted to the plot all the structure of values that had been created by traditional societies of Africa, the land remained the Earth—and the Earth was a goddess; man used the land to feed himself; and to offer first fruits to the Earth; his funeral was the mystical reunion with the earth. Because of this traditional concept the social order remained primary. Around the growing of yam, of food for survival, he

created on the plot a folk culture—the basis of a social order—in three hundred years.⁵⁵

Douglass's rendezvous with the Chesapeake during the temporal plot of his "leisure time" suggests the deep as another significant coconspirator in blackness's "creation of a folk culture." As the "basis of a social order," or anything, the conspicuously instable deep may not inspire confidence. But what if this understanding of the deep offers us a way of understanding the "sea-change" that Wynter contends African culture underwent during Middle Passage: "The extra-African's cultural response to the dehumanizing alienation of the Capitalist plantation system of the New World, was to reroot himself, making use of the old cultural patterns which had undergone a true *sea-change*, in order to create the new vocabulary of the new existence." Wynter's conception of Middle Passage as inducing a sea-change troubles the logic of the horticultural metaphor of transplantation, whereby the rerooting of African culture on the plot is otherwise preceded by the implicit uprooting of "the physical and geographic disruption implied by the Middle Passage." This is arguably the prevailing characterization of Middle Passage in black studies—echoed, for instance, in Hortense Spillers's characterization of Middle Passage as a "rupture." But rather than a sea-change, which points to some active cultural influence of the ocean itself, these metaphors render the ocean a kind of void. A site of negation that may interrupt or displace but otherwise exerts no positive influence of its own. Even when we've insisted that the rupture of Middle Passage was not absolute—ultimately giving rise, for Wynter, to a cultural process of transplantation or, for Spillers, to a "radically different kind of cultural continuation"—the ocean itself remains an absolute rupture: the unmaker rather than collaborator of human culture.⁵⁶ That in spite of which African survivals or New World transplantations improbably take their shape. But what if the ocean changes us as actively as it does the humans born underwater in *The Deep*? Indeed, Glissant's metaphorization of the abyss as a "womb" holds out to us the possibility that the Africans in the middle did not wait until they arrived on New World "plots" to commence the cultural process that would transform them into "the native of . . . the New World."⁵⁷ Rather, they may have already started to live in relationship to the deep, as the first "focus of resistance" facilitating blackness's indigenization if not to a New World, which risks the erasure of Native Americans, then perhaps to a blue planet.⁵⁸ Thus, we also come because the deep is a significant precedent to the plot. Because the Africans suspended over the face of the deep also put down roots in the sea.

Gesturing toward the deep in this way can appear to disregard recent black studies scholarship that interrogates the limits of a critical overidentification of

blackness with water. In *The Black Shoals*, for instance, Tiffany Lethabo King puts forward the geographic formation of the shoal, as a hybrid of land and sea, as a way of “thinking about Blackness as exceeding the metaphors and analytics of water and for thinking of indigeneity as exceeding the symbol and analytic of land.” For King, the critical preponderance of “metaphors and analytics of water” in black studies works to obscure blackness’s robust relationship to land and the continuities between black and indigenous struggles against conquest. The geographic formation that I am calling the deep, however, not only includes land but, even and precisely in its oceanic provenance, works to engender an interface with the planet that blackness brings to bear on both land and sea. Moreover, however much water may appear as overtrodden critical ground, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley argues that the overabundance of aquatic metaphors and analytics in black studies nevertheless tends to overlook the materiality of water. For all our talk of water, in other words, black studies has yet, in Tinsley’s estimation, to jump in. However well trodden, it appears black studies is yet to break the surface. In putting forward the deep, I attempt just that, to the surprising revelation not only of blackness’s deep interface with the planet but also of a black sense of indigeneity that is careful not to erase and, I hope, holds open the possibility for solidarity with the original indigenous peoples of the Americas. As the source, then, of what we have yet to fully think as the blue nativity of blackness and as the focus of resistance to western humanism’s dual reconstitution of Earth as a docile surface and the human as the “Lord and possessor” of that surface, the geographic formation that I am calling the deep yields an aquatic complement to the terrestrial formation of the plot and its insurgent afterlives.⁵⁹ Sure, insofar as humans are land creatures, blackness’s ongoing inhabitation of the deep across the texts I examine, on one hand, yields a fitting symbol of the radical exclusion from human society that black studies has come to understand as social death. But on the other hand, blackness’s inhabitation of the deep, precisely in its exclusion from western humanism’s environmentally impoverished vision of human sociality, also uniquely positions blackness to think and enact a more genuinely social (because also ecological) life. Especially as such life would need to be imagined on a blue planet.

If the problem of being black is the problem of being an ocean *away*, this book proposes that it is also the problem of having discovered in the deep *a way*. A way out of no way, even, though persisting in the language of negation seems ill-advised when we recall that this particular no way covers the bulk of the only planet known to sustain life. If the human would enter the kingdom of Earth, the climate scientists tell us that we must be born again. Must learn to be and live differently on the Earth. This difficulty, however, is not of the order

of a camel passing through the eye of a needle. The way (home) is so broad, you couldn't miss it. Yet, the vast homing of Earth indexed by the ongoing enterprise of white settler colonialism has managed to do just that. In its fetishization of terra firma, it has overlooked the ocean; forgotten, Ralph Ellison might say, the "chaos" against which every "plan of living" is conceived.

Each chapter of this study of the submersion narrative takes up a specific aptitude of western humanism's "plan of living" and explores how blackness's ongoing inhabitation of the deep has subjected it to a kind of sea change. As Elisabeth Mann Borgese observes, "The ocean is a medium different from the earth. . . . It forces us to think differently. The medium itself, where everything flows and everything is interconnected, forces us to 'unfocus,' to shed our old concepts and paradigms, to 'refocus' on a new paradigm."⁶⁰ If so, then this study of blackness's ongoing inhabitation of the deep elucidates how black life blues the human, in much the same way that John Coltrane has been known to blue a note.

Chapter 1, "Deep Humanities," undertakes a comparative analysis of Europe's and Africa's uneven encounters with the Atlantic Ocean during the eras of discovery, colonization, and the transatlantic slave trade, and interrogates how these oceanic crossings are represented in Arnold Guyot's *The Earth and Man* (1849) and Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, respectively. If, as Katherine McKittrick contends, "historical epochs are underwritten by differential encounters with geography," I argue that modernity is underwritten by two differential encounters with the ocean that produce whiteness as *stand-your-ground subjectivity* and blackness as *inhabitation of the deep*.⁶² These respective modes of interfacing with the planet as either a docile surface or a live deep bespeak the terrible history of black foundering that, since Middle Passage, has constituted (beside native genocide and expropriation) the violent underside of white settlement. Against the grain of humanity's excessive carbon *footprint*, however, this chapter also explores how blackness's paradigmatically deep interface with the planet nevertheless yields a privileged position from which to think and imagine a more ecologically salutary relation to an Earth that is significantly more deep than terra firma.

My second chapter, "Deep Study," interrogates the mutual characterization of blackness and the ocean in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) as the "*dark side of mankind*" and the "*dark side of earth*," respectively.⁶³ It argues that this entangled binarization of humanity (white and black) and Earth (land and sea) confesses a broader sense in which blackness and blueness furnish the constitutive outside of a modern world that is fundamentally antiblack and terracentric.⁶⁴ Additionally, the chapter illuminates how mainstream environmentalism

disavows this mutuality by perpetuating what Frank Wilderson has called the “ruse of analogy”—advocating for the environment in ways that search out analogy with, but ultimately mystify and even displace, antiblackness.⁶⁵ Yet this chapter also takes up environmentalism’s turn to “blue” as perhaps the one instance where the analogy between black suffering and environmental degradation is not a ruse insofar as the ocean may also be recognized as socially dead. Finally, I illuminate how the confluence of black and blue comes to an expressive head in *Moby-Dick* in the near drowning of the “poor little negro” Pip, who is consequently consigned to the “dark side” of humanity and the earth. “Not drowned entirely,” however, but “rather carried down *alive* to wondrous depths,” Pip is perhaps American literature’s most reliable witness that deep water and drowning are not the same thing.⁶⁶

In chapter 3, “Deep Voice,” I listen for the underwater utterance of the inhabitants of the deep—the drowned-out, would-be last words of the jumpers and the jettisoned. This historical moment of incapacitated speech mirrors what is likewise repeatedly characterized in the black literary tradition as the unspeakable “problem” of being black. But when words forsook the underwater utterance of the inhabitants of the deep, did *sound*? Instructed by the fact that water transmits sound four times more efficiently than air, this chapter queries whether, beyond its incapacitation of speech, the deep can also be apprehended as a kind of prosthesis unto some otherwise mode of expression. Furthermore, it explores the parallel way in which the black literary tradition can be recognized to speak with a *deep voice*. That is, to negotiate the ineffability of the problem of being black by recursively figuring it as a water-induced crisis of having no ground that both originates with and is subsequently haunted by Middle Passage. Through the prevalence of this trope in the black literary tradition, I observe, like M. NourbeSe Philip while writing *Zong!*, how “always what is going on seems to be about water” and as much unto the enactment of black ecological life as social death.⁶⁷

Extending chapter 3’s concern with sound and music, my fourth chapter argues that really listening to black expressive culture may be a matter of learning to detect the activity of a “Deep Imagination.” The chapter reads Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* as a prototypical submersion narrative, in which the protagonist Avey Johnson returns to a place where her great-aunt Cuney would recite a curious story about a group of Africans who disembarked a slave ship and walked on water back to Africa. I place Avey’s struggle to apprehend this story in conversation with the kindred struggle of the anonymous narrator of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to “really listen” to a recording of Louis Armstrong’s “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue.” In their

mutual concern with *really listening*, I argue that both novels model a method for the aesthetic appreciation of what Ellison calls the “blackness of blackness.” However, *Praisesong* does so in a way that pushes us to consider what might constitute the material referent of “blue” in Armstrong’s musical meditation on being “black.” Through close readings of the Ibo landing myth at the heart of *Praisesong*, I propose that appreciating the blackness of black literature, a familiar dilemma of black literary studies, may be a matter of learning to detect the creative activity of what I call, after the poetic philosophy of Gaston Bachelard, the *material imagination of blackness*. That is, an imagination, like Old Avatara’s mind in *Praisesong*, that is long “gone with the Ibos” and whose “fundamental matter,” following Bachelard, is water.

Chapter 5, “Deep Life,” wonders after the life of the deep by taking up another prototypical submersion narrative in August Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean*. Crucial to this wondering is an appreciation of *Gem* as the first play of Wilson’s famed Century Cycle, a series of ten plays representing each decade of the twentieth century. If, according to Wilson, the cycle explicitly aims to “place the culture of black America on stage” and to demonstrate, among other things, that black people “have a ground to stand on,” then this chapter interrogates why Wilson begins by locating blackness in the deep, with apparently no more ground to stand upon than blackness’s nonstanding in the modern world. However, Wilson’s ambivalent representation of blackness’s inhabitation of the deep also invites us to question what sort of ground the deep might actually be and, more, what sort of grounds for life. Wilson writes, “Some know about the land. Some know about the water. But there is some that know about the land and the water. They got both sides of it.”⁶⁸ If so, then perhaps, blackness’s inhabitation of the deep harbors the knowledge of “both sides of it” and, with it, a revelation of the only ground on which any of us have to live on this deep planet.

If chapter 3 listens for the inhabitants of the deep, my final chapter, “Deep Vision,” looks after them. But how can the inhabitants of the deep get a witness, if their passion unfolded below *see* level? The answer this chapter pursues is the photograph of Emmett Till, which I read as a photograph of the inhabitants of the deep. Until Emmett resurrected from his Tallahatchie grave on the third day, who had ever beheld this theretofore unseen terror? Of course, we behold Emmett only because his mother beheld him first and famously chose to “let the world see what I’ve seen.”⁶⁹ Thus, this chapter also reads the photograph as what Mamie Till-Mobley saw—her enactment of *deep vision*. As the presiding seer of this chapter, Mamie’s refusal to allow her son’s broken face to be retouched is instructive for its disruption of a modern regime of visibility

largely predicated upon mutual recognition. Helping to clarify the stakes of this refusal, I finally place the photograph of Emmett Till in conversation with the equally unrecognizable face of the black boy in Jason deCaires Taylor's underwater sculpture *Vicissitudes*. Notwithstanding the widely divergent circumstances of their submergence and subsequent viewing, I argue that both visualizations of the inhabitants of the deep confront their viewers with faces that, for their time spent underwater, are no longer recognizably human. In this way, they enlist viewers in an ethical exercise of attending to more-than-human life in the unrecognizability of our relation.

One of Emmett Till's murderers told on himself and all his folks when he explained that he killed Emmett "just so everybody can know how me and my folks *stand*."⁷⁰ Against the death-dealing grain of whiteness's stand-your-ground subjectivity and what we've tellingly also come to describe as humanity's "carbon *footprint*," *Inhabitants of the Deep* ultimately calls us to a recalibration of how we interface with the planet. In the face of ecological crisis, Alice Walker asks, "Where do we start? How do we reclaim a proper relationship to the world?"⁷¹ On a blue planet such as ours, this book proposes we start with the inhabitants of the deep and their bluing of the human.

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Notes

PROLOGUE. THE BLUENESS OF BLACKNESS

1. Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 38.
2. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (emphasis added).
3. Bryer and Hartig, *Conversations with August Wilson*, 253.

4. The problem with beginnings, as with history, is that we make them up. Not that they are wholly fictional, but they are the product of decisions and emphases we rarely cop to fully. Both the origins of African Diaspora literature and the African Diaspora could reasonably be located elsewhere than Equiano's 1789 narrative and the experience of Middle Passage to which the beginning of that narrative bears witness. With respect to African American literature specifically, Phillis Wheatley's earlier *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) makes for a more logical starting place. Yet, beside this study's interest in the black literary tradition's animation by the "deep," I choose to begin my account of African Diaspora literature with Equiano (however much the scope of this study leans African American), due to his geographic indeterminacy and the fact that his narrative also marks a beginning for the Caribbean and black British literary traditions. If black literature has several possible beginnings, so too does Africa's diaspora, which precedes the transatlantic slave trade just as it continues in its wake. Consider, e.g., Ivan Van Sertima's *They Came Before Columbus* (1976), which surveys archaeological evidence of African migration to the New World before the slave trade. Or consider the African origins of our species, such that Africa's diaspora, in some respects, may even be recognized as humanity itself. Still, I choose to begin my account of Africa's diaspora with Middle Passage because of its scale and role in the globalization of race and racial ideology. And because Middle Passage wrought a world that is still with us.

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5. The archival evidence in question is a baptismal record and a ship manifest, which list Equiano's birthplace as South Carolina. See Carretta, *Equiano, the African*.

6. Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, xiv–xv (emphasis added). For a powerful rebuttal of Carretta's argument, see Cathy Davidson's "Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself." There she illuminates how Carretta's interpretation of his archival findings fails to grapple sufficiently with the fundamental ways in which "indeterminacy" is a constitutive condition of eighteenth-century black life and experience. Davidson's sense of the precariousness and indeterminacy of eighteenth-century black life leads her to other possible explanations for why Equiano might have felt compelled to strategically claim South Carolinian birth, which, in her estimation, are far more plausible than the possibility that he invented his African nativity.

7. In a convention familiar to the genre of the slave narrative, *The Interesting Narrative* was published with the signatures of numerous white men vouching for the authenticity of Equiano's story. And notwithstanding the conflicting evidence specifically surrounding Equiano's nativity, Carretta also comments on what he perceives as the otherwise remarkable historical consistency and verifiability of Equiano's narrative.

8. The problem of "authenticity" is a central problematic in the study of slave narratives, due to their subjection to varying levels of mediation. In his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, John Ernest writes: "Many early book-length narratives were published specifically to promote the anti-slavery cause, and their authenticity was questioned so frequently—often, because white readers didn't believe that black Americans were capable of writing their own life stories—that the phrase 'written by himself' or 'written by herself' became a regular feature of these publications." Ernest proceeds to quote James Olney's important article "I Was Born": Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature." In that article, Olney observes that "unlike autobiography in general the narratives are all trained on one and the same objective reality, they have a coherent and defined audience, and have behind them and guiding them an organized group of 'sponsors,' and they are possessed of very specific motives, intentions, and uses understood by narrators, sponsors, and audiences alike: to reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition." Following Olney, and due to the political conditions under which the narratives were produced, Ernest asks, "What 'truth of slavery' could one hope to find from such resources beyond the views that guided them in the first place?" Ernest, *Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, 6; Olney, "I Was Born," 52.

9. Trevor Burnard argues this in a special issue of the journal *Historically Speaking* dedicated to the controversy surrounding Carretta's discovery. See Burnard, "Goodbye, Equiano, the African," 11.

10. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 101.

11. Burnard, "Goodbye, Equiano, the African," 11 (emphasis added).

12. Gumbs, *Undrowned*, 1–2.

13. Following M. NourbeSe Philip's mandate in *Zong!* to "defend the dead" (26), Christina Sharpe asks in her book *In the Wake*, "What does it mean to defend the dead? To tend to the Black dead and dying: to tend to the Black person, to Black people, always living in the push toward our death?" (10).

14. For a survey of the historiography of the transatlantic slave trade, and the fierce debates around the uses and limitations of quantitative analysis, see Domingues da Silva and Misevich, "Atlantic Slavery and the Slave Trade."

15. Brand, *Land to Light On*, 46.

16. Rather than saying goodbye to Equiano or recuperating the narrative's authenticity as a launching pad unto some high place, this book gets down by choosing instead to wade deeper into the indeterminacy of the narrative's disputed beginnings as a means of interrogating the indeterminacy of the beginnings of blackness more broadly. Such indeterminacy—what we cannot know for certain—need not be the slave narrative's or blackness's cross to bear. Not unless we adopt Jesus's orientation to the cross by actually taking it up and heading somewhere good, somewhere beyond the mere abjection of the slave ship that may or may not have saluted Equiano in the beginning. Instead, such indeterminacy can be the occasion of a deep interrogation of the Human, and of the nature of human life on Earth. All we do not and cannot know—like Frederick Douglass's lack of any accurate knowledge of his birthday beyond seasonal designations like "cherry time" or "planting time" given in his narrative—may just as well occasion our interrogation of the "genre of the human" predicated on individual rather than collective reckonings of time as signal black abjection. And, in the mode of Sylvia Wynter, a profound interrogation of the assumptions and ideologies of western humanism is precisely how this book aims to get down. See Douglass's *Narrative* (13) and Wynter's "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom" (269).

17. Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 38 (emphasis added).

18. Interestingly, Tiffany Lethabo King makes the opposite point in *The Black Shoals*, where she argues that conceptions of blackness in black studies can tend to overemphasize the ocean, at the expense of the development of a robust analytic for the land. But as my argument proceeds to detail, through a consideration of Omise'ke Natasha Tinsley's "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," this apparent emphasis on the ocean can itself overlook the materiality of the sea.

19. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, xi. Wilderson's mandate has also been taken up by Christina Sharpe and Fred Moten, respectively, in *In the Wake* and *The Universal Machine*.

20. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 38.

21. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.

22. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 337.

23. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*; Benítez-Rojo, *Repeating Island*.

24. Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," 197 (emphasis added).

25. Tinsley, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," 199.

26. Brayton, *Shakespeare's Ocean*, 23.

27. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 214.

28. Literary scholar Hester Blum proposes the term *oceanic studies* in her article "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies." And literary scholar Steve Mentz proposes the term *blue humanities* in his book *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*.

29. Dan Brayton proposes the phrase *terrestrial bias* in *Shakespeare's Ocean*, 15–42.

Marcus Rediker discusses his term *terracentrism* in his interview with Jeffrey Williams; Rediker, "History Below Deck," 563.

30. Mentz, *Introduction to the Blue Humanities*.

31. Pip is a black cabin boy aboard the *Pegquod* who nearly drowns during a whale chase in Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick*.

With my use of the majuscule *Human* and minuscule *human*, I intend here and henceforth, first, the dominant, normative, and global standard-bearing genre of the Human arguably indexed by whiteness and, second, the human as such, which makes no analogous claims to normativity or global standardization.

32. Gen. 1:1–2 (New King James Version).

33. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89.

34. R. Wright, *Native Son*, 255.

35. Gen. 2:7 (NKJV). Emphasis in both quotes added.

36. See Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*; Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 11.

37. The racial geography yielded by Wright's rewriting of the Genesis narrative effectively maps the color line onto the geographic binary of land and sea. And this cosmology is made physically manifest in what remain—in the wake of Middle Passage and white settler colonialism—humanity's racially uneven claims to the ground. Long after the historical tenure of the transatlantic slave trade, water persists in the black literary imagination as an index of the groundlessness of black being in ways not only precipitated but subsequently haunted by the "ancient waters" of Middle Passage.

38. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 37, 38.

39. See Keller, *Face of the Deep*.

40. M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 14.

41. M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 7–8.

42. M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 26.

43. M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 5.

44. M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 5, 12, 25.

45. M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 23.

46. Quoted in Sensbach, "Beyond Equiano" (2006), 12.

47. Sensbach, "Beyond Equiano" (2008), 108 (emphasis added).

48. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11.

49. On the distinction between the antiblack world and the Earth, see Howard, "To See the Earth Before the End of the Antiblack World."

50. Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, xvii.

51. On the concept of "Africanisms," see, Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 1–32. Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 38.

52. In *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson outlines what he identifies as the "constituent elements" of slavery. Afropeessimism also uses this phrasing in its delineation, after Patterson, of the "constituent elements" of social death, which include gratuitous violence, general dishonor, and natal alienation. See Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 1–16; Wilderson, *Afropeessimism*, 14.

Here, in my thinking on black ecological life, I am riffing on Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's reflections on "black social life" in their essay "Michael Brown." They write, "How can we survive genocide? We can only address this question by studying how we have survived genocide. In the interest of imagining what exists, there is an image of Michael Brown we must refuse in favor of another image we don't have. One is a lie, the other unavailable. If we refuse to show the image of a lonely body, of the outline of the space that body simultaneously took and left, we do so in order to imagine jurisgenerative black social life walking down the middle of the street—for a minute, but only for a minute,

unpoliced, another city gathers, dancing. We know it's there, and here, and real; we know what we can't have happens all the time" (81, emphasis added).

53. Here, I am riffing on a line from the title poem of Ed Roberson's collection *To See the Earth Before the End of the World*: "People are grabbing at the chance to see / the Earth before the end of the world" (3).

54. Wright, *Native Son*, 255 (emphasis added).

55. "Well I'll be damned. . . . It didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel." Morrison, *Sula*, 149.

56. Coogler, *Black Panther*.

57. Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 41 (emphasis added).

INTRODUCTION. THE DEEP

1. Rev. 7:9 (New King James Version).

2. Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, *Slave Voyages*, accessed October 2, 2024, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>.

3. Here I riff on Saidiya Hartman's often-cited method of "critical fabulation." See Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11–12.

4. Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 41.

5. Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me," Poetry Foundation, accessed October 15, 2024, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50974/wont-you-celebrate-with-me>.

6. Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 41 (emphasis added).

7. Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 39 (emphasis added).

8. The notion of "gratuitous violence" derives from Orlando Patterson's classic definition of slavery as the "permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons." The influential school of black thought known as Afropessimism locates in this definition three constitutive elements of not just slavery but blackness, including "natal alienation, general dishonor, and gratuitous violence." See Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 13; Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 17.

9. Glissant's oceanic salute is quoted from the first of *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868) by Isidore Ducasse/Comte de Lautréamont. See Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 7. I am grateful to Ernest Mitchell for pointing out to me that Glissant "greet[s] the ocean with the informal *tu*, which is reserved for children, friends, and God. There's a familiarity and intimacy to the greeting which makes sense for Glissant, born in a coastal town of Martinique, notably different from the sensibility of Equiano who . . . was raised in the interior and was encountering the ocean for the first time." Edward Mitchell, pers. comm., May 23, 2024.

10. As pioneering examples of what might be labeled *black ecocriticism*, I want to acknowledge Kimberly Ruffin's *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (2010) and Anissa Janine Wardi's *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective* (2011).

As a framing of black study, I appreciate the simplicity of what Fred Moten has described as "the devotional practice that is given in recitation of the sentence 'blackness is x.'" *Blackness is an ongoing inhabitation of the deep* is my own contribution to this great cloud of witnesses. See Moten, *Black and Blur*, vii.

11. Philip, *Zong!*, 3.

12. Douglass, *Narrative*, 48.

13. Douglass, *Narrative*, 57.

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14. Douglass, *Narrative*, 48.
15. Douglass, *Narrative*, 48.
16. In Dungy, *Black Nature*, vii.
17. T. Walker, "Sailing to Freedom," 18.
18. Douglass, *Narrative*, 48.
19. Douglass, *Narrative*, 48–49.
20. Douglass, *Narrative*, 49.
21. Douglass, *Heroic Slave*, 246.
22. Douglass, *Self-Made Men*, 5–6.
23. Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability."
24. Bibb, *Life and Adventures*, 28–29 (emphasis added).
25. Bibb, *Life and Adventures*, 29–30.
26. Bibb to Douglass, March 7, 1849, Frederick Douglass Papers Project, accessed October 1, 2024, <https://frederickdouglasspapersproject.com/s/digitaledition/item/6311>.
27. Douglass's rendezvous with the Chesapeake in particular recalls the familiar practice of *petit marronage*.
28. Brathwaite, "Caribbean Man," 90.
29. Equiano's narrative ultimately argues for the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade by proposing the alternative prosperity that would come from the world's regard of Africa as a global trading partner. Moreover, Equiano himself secures his manumission through trading.
30. Douglass, *Narrative*, 53.
31. Douglass, *Narrative*, 49 (emphasis added).
32. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*, 167.
33. Stepto refers to Douglass's *Narrative* in particular as "the paradigmatic narrative of ascent." See Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*, 66.
34. Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 40.
35. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*, 67. For another pioneering study of black longitudinal migration, see Griffin, "Who Set You Flowin'?"
36. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*, 167.
37. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*, 66. To a limited degree, Stepto also cites Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* and Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* as examples of immersion narratives that, while they center southern migrations, otherwise lack the form's complementary emphasis on tribal/cultural literacy.
38. I borrow the phrase "plan of living" from *Invisible Man*, where Ralph Ellison writes, "The mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived." I employ this phrase throughout this book to refer alternately to western humanism's and modernity's "plan of living," to speak to how humanity, or at least the reigning regime or genre of the Human, has organized life on Earth, often against the grain of life itself. And given the ocean's aesthetic and epistemic association with chaos, I argue that the ocean is the chaos that modernity has forgot and against which it has conceived its plan of living to the exclusion of all alternatives. See Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 580.
39. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*, 167.
40. August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* is particularly exemplary of this connection between blackness's inhabitation of the deep and its facilitation of a parallel cultural

immersion. The ritualistic journey to the “City of Bones” at the center of the play literally immerses the play’s protagonist, Citizen Barlow, in his cultural heritage in ways that actively empower and inform his struggle for freedom.

41. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 101–9.

42. Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* and August Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean* are two examples of texts that embody the submersion narrative in their entirety.

43. Emphasis added.

44. Emphasis added.

45. Brown, *Otis Redding*, 134.

46. Wright, *Native Son*, 255; Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 5.

47. Emphasis added. I riff here on the language of Farah Jasmine Griffin’s classic study, *“Who Set You Flowin’?”: The African-American Migration Narrative*.

48. I am indebted to Christina Sharpe’s discussion of the left-to-die boat in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. See Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 58–59, 107. The “loophole of retreat” derives from Harriet Jacobs’s narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. During the seven years she lived in the crawlspace, Jacobs used this “loophole of retreat” to look after and at her children, among other things. The term has since become generally symbolic, for numerous artists and black studies scholars, of how black people—and black women in particular—create space and possibility within experiences of confinement. T. Walker, “Introduction,” 1.

49. See Rediker, *Freedom Ship*; T. Walker, “Sailing to Freedom,” 18.

50. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 3.

51. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 11–12.

52. Walker, *Color Purple*, 198; Wynter, “Novel and History,” 99.

53. René Descartes in *Discourse on Method* quoted in Wynter, “Black Metamorphosis,” 19.

54. Wynter, “Black Metamorphosis,” 1.

55. Wynter, “Novel and History,” 99.

56. Wynter, “Black Metamorphosis,” 18, 17; Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 68.

57. Glissant describes the hold of the slave ship in “The Open Boat” as “a womb, a womb abyss.” He writes, “This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death.” In her unpublished manuscript, “Black Metamorphosis,” Wynter identifies New World blacks as “the native[s] of that area of experience that we term the New World.” See Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6; Wynter, “Black Metamorphosis,” 1.

58. Wynter, “Novel and History,” 99.

59. On the shoals, see King, *Black Shoals*, 4. Tinsley writes, for instance, that “diving into this water stands to transform African diaspora scholarship in ways as surprising as Equiano’s first glimpse of the sea”; see Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic,” 197. Wynter, “Novel and History,” 99.

60. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 580; Borgese quoted in DeLoughrey, “Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene,” 37.

61. In a way that captures the universal naivete of humanity’s first large-scale encounter with the deep sea, Arnold Guyot characterizes the Atlantic as an “unknown” and “dreaded” ocean in his mythologization of Europe’s early modern encounter with the Atlantic. See Guyot, *Earth and Man*, 233.

62. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 132–33.
63. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 142, 380 (emphasis added).
64. On “terracentrism,” see Rediker, “Hydrarchy and Terracentrism.”
65. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 35–53.
66. Melville, *Moby-Dick*, 308 (emphasis added).
67. Philip, *Zong!*, 195.
68. Wilson, *Gem of the Ocean*, 52.
69. Till-Mobley and Benson, *Death of Innocence*, 129.
70. Huie, “Shocking Story,” 207 (emphasis added).
71. A. Walker, *Sent by Earth*, 27.

CHAPTER 1. DEEP HUMANITIES

1. Moten, *Universal Machine*, 199.
2. “Uncover your origins” tagline from Ancestry, accessed December 1, 2019, ancestry.com. *Tehom* is ancient Hebrew for the deep and appears in Genesis as the primordial ocean of the Jewish and Christian creation narrative. Olokun is the deity and personification of the primordial sea in the Yoruba creation story. See Genesis 1:2 (New King James Version) and Marrero, “Olokun en África y en Cuba.”
3. Roberson, *Voices Cast Out*, 93 (emphasis added).
4. Moten, *Universal Machine*, 199.
5. “1964, March 29—Malcolm X—We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock—Closed Captioned,” posted November 3, 2014, by Captioning for Everyone, YouTube, 3:44, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Aq2Zoi8D6A&ab_channel=CaptioningforEveryone.
6. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 30.
7. Everett, *James*, 95.
8. Douglass, *Narrative*, 5; Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 436.
9. Huie, “Shocking Story.”
10. This phrase repeats across the media coverage of Sandra Bland’s death. See “Questions Still Swirling Around the Death of Sandra Bland,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/07/24/us/sandra-bland-questions-about-her-death.html>; Jamelle Bouie, “Blame the Police,” *Slate*, July 22, 2015, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2015/07/sandra-blands-arrest-and-death-are-a-national-scandal-brian-encinia-and-the-police-are-to-blame.html>.
11. Roberson, *Voices Cast Out*, 36.
12. Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, Slave Voyages, accessed October 2, 2024, <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>.
13. Coogler, *Black Panther*.
14. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 37, 38.
15. Crawley, “Otherwise Possibility.”
16. On stand-your-ground law, see Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*.
17. Brand, *Land to Light On*, 47.
18. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 438, 441.
19. “So far, these effects have largely been caused by only 25% of the world population.”

Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind.”