

INTRODUCTION

*“A Fault Line of Pain”**
*Colonization, Enslavement, and the Futures
 of Climate Justice*

In October 2018, on our way to Africatown, Alabama, my students and I stopped at the Equal Justice Initiative’s (EJI) National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery and also visited EJI’s Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration.¹ The students were enrolled in an immersion class as part of a long-term collaboration I have helped create between Africatown and Oberlin College.² I included the memorial and museum in the course in order to frame our environmental justice work in Africatown within a wider dialogue about anti-Black racism and persistent structures of enslavement.³ My understanding of this connection has been shaped by my time in Africatown. During my first visit to Alabama, Major Joe Womack, an Africatown community organizer, took my students and me on a tour of important sites. I listened to stories of how the survivors of the Middle Passage had bought land, built homes and a school, and called their place “African town.”⁴ Staring at industrial sites juxtaposed with historic homes, I felt disoriented. I had seen environmental justice maps that show how free Black towns were surrounded by industries; but this

* The title of this chapter, “A Fault Line of Pain,” is taken from Jemisin (2017, 7).

¹ For more information, see Robertson (2016) and Edgemon (2016) as well as the Equal Justice Initiative’s website: <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/museum>.

² My thanks to Major Joe Womack for reading this reflection on Africatown and the visit to the memorial, and even more for everything I have learned from him over the past six years. My thanks also to the community of Africatown and to student participants in the Africatown collaboration, especially the students in my fall semester 2018 classes ENVS 230: Environmental Justice and Local Knowledge; ENVS 330: Africatown Immersion, and ENVS 430: Environmental Justice Methodologies.

³ When speaking of people of the African diaspora in the United States, I use the terms *Black* and *African American*. When referring more widely to peoples of the African diaspora, I use the term *Black*. In the context of farming by enslaved peoples, I use the term *Black* to include Africans enslaved in the United States and the Caribbean, and enslaved African Americans. Following the lead of scholars like Monica White, I refer to the history of and contemporary farming by Africans and African Americans in the United States as “Black Agrarianism” (White 2018).

⁴ For an account of the founding of Africatown by a survivor of the Middle Passage, Cudjo (Kazoola or Kossula) Lewis, see Hurston (2018). On page 68, Kazoola says, “We call our village Affican Town.”

was the first time I was walking through this landscape.⁵ The abstract idea – that structures of enslavement are embedded in the contemporary geography of the American South and Gulf Coast – was real from the ground under my feet to the bridge that loomed over my head. The plantation, I realized, has not gone anywhere.

Walking through the memorial with my students, the enduring violence of enslavement was all around us. EJI is an organization that defends incarcerated people and has established the first memorial to victims of lynching and other forms of anti-Black violence as part of their work for transformative justice,⁶ offering “a sacred space for truth telling and reflection about racial terrorism and its legacy” (EJI).⁷ The memorial consists of 800 rectangular sculptures, some hanging from the ceiling, evoking both coffins and bodies. I noticed that the monuments were weathering irregularly, rusting in streaks and patches that reminded me of both blood and tears. I asked a docent what the monuments were made out of, and he explained that they were built from corten steel, which becomes stronger as it rusts.⁸ The corten steel suggests that survival itself is a form of resistance – but it comes at a cost.⁹ The memorial is a sculptural and material form of truth telling that is essential to reparations work. As the website explains, “The museum and memorial are part of EJI’s work to advance truth and reconciliation around race in America and to more honestly confront the legacy of slavery, lynching, and segregation” (EJI). By speaking truth about the past, the memorial and museum honor the enslaved, lynched, and incarcerated, and help us to understand the impact of this terror on the present.

Just as historical links and persistence of what Michelle Alexander terms “racial caste” are evident in the system of mass incarceration, they are also visible in built and natural landscapes (2012, 2). The line from enslavement and terrorism to polluting industries runs through Black bodies and neighborhoods. The plantation landscape is still visible in the South by tracing the history of enslavement, convict labor, and Jim Crow to the current situation of environmental racism (Alexander 2012).

⁵ I will return to the connections between plantations and environmental racism in Chapter 2. Foundational work in this area has been done by environmental justice scholars like Robert Bullard, Dorceta Taylor, and Beverly Wright; see the works cited for a complete listing. See also Allen (2006) and Colten (2005).

⁶ <https://eji.org/national-lynching-memorial>. ⁷ <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org>.

⁸ See also <https://eji.org/national-lynching-memorial>.

⁹ My thanks to Santiago Roman and other students in the Africatown collaboration for continuing conversations about the memorial that have enriched my thinking about its impact. See Roman (2018).

Apocalypse and Revolution

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Environmental racism followed the Great Migration to the north and west, where toxic industries surround African American communities: Camden, New Jersey; South Central Los Angeles, California; Flint, Michigan.¹⁰ The links between structures of enslavement, segregation, and environmental racism, especially in the South, have been articulated by environmental justice scholars like Robert Bullard, Dorceta Taylor, and Beverly Wright from the beginning of the movement.¹¹ Environmental justice activists and scholars have further linked these embedded histories to vulnerability to climate change, “calling for environmental, climate, economic, energy and racial justice” that addresses the structural conditions of inequality and “unequal protection,” as Bullard describes (2019, 1996). In *Climate Change, Literature, and Environmental Justice*, I place climate disruption in the context of colonization and enslavement and look to direct actions and expressive cultures of frontline communities for the articulation of ethical approaches to climate justice. Julie Sze writes that “Rebellion and resistance stories are part and parcel of restorative environmental justice, grounded in *more*. . . . Radical visions for art, beauty, practice, and revolution already exist in many places if we look” (2020, 80). I dialogue with visions of emancipated futures and revolutionary pasts through speculative fiction, literature, poetry, dancing and demonstrations, as well as through the communities that are formed around blockades and in the streets. I engage with thinkers and activists who theorize through expressive culture, academic writing, political actions, labor, poetry, ceremony, and daily inhabitation, utilizing decolonial and critical race theories to shift imaginations of the future.

Apocalypse and Revolution

Climate change is portrayed as an apocalyptic event in environmental discourse and popular media, with urgent calls for policy changes and technological innovation to save civilization.¹² After the 2018 IPCC report explaining the pressing need for warming to be limited to 1.5 degrees Celsius, media sources and climate organizations repeated that “we have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe” (see, e.g., Watts 2018).

¹⁰ See Pomar (2005); Hamilton (1994); Clark (2018).

¹¹ See, e.g., Bullard (2000, 102), which uses the term “environmental apartheid”; Bullard (1996); Taylor (2014); Wright (2005). I discuss the links between enslavement and environmental racism more fully in Chapter 2.

¹² For the most recent assessment report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, see www.ipcc.ch.

The impacts of climate change on vulnerable populations, including Indigenous, African American, lower-income, and island and coastal communities, will be severe and disproportionate and are already under way (IPCC 2018; Whyte 2017c; Bullard 2019). However, placing climate change within the longer histories of enslavement and settler colonialism reveals that contemporary society is not only reliant on the stable climate of the Holocene, as the term Anthropocene might suggest.¹³ “Settler-industrial” civilization,¹⁴ the driver of climate change, is built on what N. K. Jemisin calls “a fault line of pain”: enslavement, genocide, imperialism, white supremacy, state violence, mass incarceration (2017, 7). In “Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises,” Kyle Powys Whyte (Citizen Potawatomi Nation) reframes the discourse of climate change to take into account the many apocalypses that Indigenous peoples have already survived as a result of colonization: “ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration” (2018b, 226).¹⁵ Whyte argues that the current discussion of the Anthropocene by settler colonial scholars and environmentalists assumes a “transition from stability to crisis,” failing to recognize that settler colonialism is a sustained crisis for Indigenous peoples (236). This imagination of current structures as stable allows settler colonial activists to escape responsibility for past and present colonization and to cast ourselves as “protagonists” in a narrative where we are “saviors of Indigenous peoples” from a dystopian climate change future (236, 237; see his discussion pp. 234–238). Through this analysis of the metanarrative of climate discourse, Whyte interrogates settler colonial academic and activist ideologies, including the use of the term “Anthropocene.” Whyte develops, in contrast, an Indigenous philosophical practice, “living Indigenous science (fiction),” an “intergenerational dialogue that unfolds through finding and empowering those protagonists who can inspire and guide us through the ancestral dystopias we continue to endure” (233). The essay articulates a clear critique of settler allies who deny that we are living in the domination fantasies of our ancestors (237).

¹³ The idea that the collapse of civilization is imminent with the end of the Holocene and the advent of the Anthropocene is widespread in climate discourse. See Chapter 1 for further discussion of the rhetoric of “collapse.” For critiques of the discourse of the Anthropocene, see Whyte (2018b, 2017c, 2017d, 2017e).

¹⁴ I adopt the term *settler-industrial* from Whyte (2015).

¹⁵ Throughout this book I have followed the author’s use of terms such as Native American and Indigenous. I use the terms *Indigenous*, *Native American*, and *Alaska Native* when referring to communities within the United States. I refer to communities located in Canada as *Indigenous*, *First Nations*, *Métis*, and *Inuit*. I have left the term *Aboriginal* within quotations.

Whyte further warns against the illusion of an “allyship of innocence” from white activists and scholars within the climate movement, and the environmental movement more broadly, that denies these fantasies while “claiming moral high ground as saviors” (2018b, 237, 238). This book began with my excitement about the resurgence of direct action in the climate justice movement. As an undergraduate at a Quaker college, I had first learned about nonviolent civil disobedience from elders and professors whose conscientious objection to war and all forms of violence shaped my understanding of the centrality of dissent to democracy. In the spring of 2010, as I was teaching my first class on climate change, youth activism at COP (the UN’s conference on climate change), and the rise of 350.org (a climate action group founded by college students and author Bill McKibben in 2008 (350.org, “About”)), brought direct action to the forefront of the emerging climate justice movement. In addition, many of my students were active in resistance to mountaintop removal in West Virginia, and their activism encouraged me to integrate analysis of direct action into my teaching about climate change. Since that time, as I have thought about these issues, taught classes, written, and collaborated, environmental justice communities have continued to gather in prayer and civil disobedience (Gilio-Whitaker 2019, 4). I continue to believe in the importance of disruption and dissent and to have faith in the power of coalitions to bring about meaningful change. I see this radiant hope in my students. I return again and again to Rebecca Solnit’s luminous accounts of the paradises that can arise out of disasters (2009).

But one of the dangers of utopian desires, for those of us who are settler colonials, is the desire to be set free from the sins of the past.¹⁶ In her reflection on haunting, *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon highlights Toni Morrison’s observation about the peculiarly American desire to escape the past: “The American dream is innocence and clean slates and the future” (Morrison, quoted in Gordon 2008, 184). This desire for innocent utopian futures, as Whyte warns, appears in settler colonial imaginaries (2018b). Mike Hulme, in his analysis of climate narratives, identifies “Celebrating Jubilee” as a “myth” that expresses a “desire” for “justice, freedom, and celebration” (2009, 353). The term “Jubilee” is taken from

¹⁶ I use the term *settler colonial* to refer to the descendants of European imperialists in the context of continuing colonization of Indigenous lands in the United States and Canada. (This term could also be applied to settlers of countries like Australia and New Zealand, but those countries are not my focus in this book.) The term therefore does not refer to all white or European peoples or to immigrants of color. My thanks to Ted Toadvine for discussions of the connection between the move to innocence and apocalyptic thinking. See Toadvine (2020).

the tradition described in the Torah, where every fifty years, the enslaved were freed and debts forgiven (353). Within the Jubilee climate narrative, the crisis of climate change offers the opportunity for a new society to be built, free of the injustices of the past (354–355). However, this particular form of narrative can become a way for settlers to seek to escape responsibilities for this past by focusing on building a new society with a clean slate.

Furthermore, the rhetoric of the collapse of civilization encodes racialized anxieties: settler colonial fears of being surrounded by hostile Indigenous nations, when in fact settlers were the invaders (Estes 2019a, 184); enslavers' fears of revolt and insurrection (Ulysse 2015); white environmentalists' fears of non-Western nations expressed by language and imagery of population bombs; and xenophobic fears of invasion by immigrants on the United States/Mexico border. All of these racialized fears of the collapse of Western dominance can be activated by the language of white environmentalists who fear for the future of civilization under a changing climate regime, and we should be cautious about the ways our language might invoke these imaginaries.¹⁷ For example, histories of Africana resistance are often repressed or distorted as threats to civilization. In analyzing Haiti's representation in mainstream media, Gina Athena Ulysse observes: "Haiti and Haitians remain a manifestation of blackness in its worst form because, simply put, the unruly *enfant terrible* of the Americas defied all European odds and created a disorder of things colonial. Haiti had to become colonialism's *bête noir* if the sanctity of whiteness were to remain unquestioned" (2015, 28).¹⁸ Karen Salt discerns "ecological chains of unfreedom" in Haiti's struggle for sovereignty, describing a history of "racialization, appropriation and dispossession... that entwines racialized notions of power with racialized notions of sovereign rights" (2015, 267, 269). Salt describes these histories as a kind of "haunting" tied to "land and seas" "that live on in battles over sovereignty and attempts at making and unmaking freedom" (275). In contrast with these histories of racialized distortions and dispossessions, Afrofuturism's speculative fictions imagine utopian societies built on histories of insurrection. Speculative visions of Black utopias formed out of revolution are locations for agency and imagination of worlds within and beyond white

¹⁷ Solnit (2009) details the destructive impacts of media distortions and panic by white elites during Hurricane Katrina. See "New Orleans: Common Grounds and Killers," 232–304.

¹⁸ See also Karen Salt's monograph on Haiti, *The Unfinished Revolution: Haiti, Black Sovereignty and Power in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (2019b).

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supremacy, histories and futures that remain responsible to the past. Understanding climate disruption and thinking through climate justice requires settler scholars and activists to reflect on how apocalyptic and utopian imaginaries can reinscribe the erasures and ideologies of colonization and racial anxieties. Antiracist and decolonial speculative resistance, lived out through everyday inhabitation, offers visions of justice that escape the racialized erasure of the past.

Ceremonies of Dissent, Mourning, and Repair

Decolonial and emancipatory social movements led by Indigenous and Black communities such as Idle No More, Black Lives Matter, and Standing Rock imagine and inhabit different worlds where they develop “revolutionary theory” (Estes 2019a, 14; see also Coulthard 2014b; Simpson 2017; Sze 2020; Streeby 2018).¹⁹ Yet, the vocabulary of much mainstream protest and activism is inadequate to understand these movements, and, further, can recenter whiteness and settler colonial value systems. As the Water Protectors at Standing Rock articulated, Indigenous peoples call themselves protectors, not protestors. Clayton Thomas-Muller (Pukatawagan/Mathias Colomb Cree Nation) emphasizes that the Tar Sands Healing Walk is a prayer and ceremony, not a typical protest (2013b). Idle No More members dance in celebration, not only or always in protest (Crow 2015). In African American communities, dancing through the streets of New Orleans resists the domination of white supremacy, but begins and ends beyond the comprehension of racist structures (Turner 2009; Breunlin and Regis 2006). Similarly, Monica White’s *Freedom Farmers* warns against seeing Black farming as only defined by the exploitation and pain of enslavement and oppression: “If pain was all there was,” White argues, then Black farmers would not have held so fiercely to the promise of land as a basis for autonomy and resistance (2018, 141; see her discussion 141–147). White and other Black agrarian theorists and practitioners disclose land as a location of resistance and dissent, but also as a source of joy and spiritual connection, a location to “practice freedom” (White 2018, 5; see also Penniman 2018; Baxter et al. 2017).

¹⁹ My thanks to the reviewer who suggested organizing material with the theme of “ceremonies of dissent and repair” that also became part of the title for this book.

Just as Black farming is both a space of imagining a different world and a real place to grow freedom (White 2018), ceremonies of prayer and healing and mourning cannot be reduced to reactions to white supremacy or expressions of protest. As practiced in the round dances of Idle No More and the second lines in post-Katrina New Orleans, dancing remembers the traumas and horrors of the past and calls on the strength of ancestors in constructing better futures, including those futures disrupted by climate change. Elder John Cuthand describes the story of the round dance within Cree tradition. The round dance began as a ceremony for a daughter's grief after her mother's death. Her mother returns to teach her daughter the dance, explaining that "*when this circle is made we the ancestors will be dancing with you*" (Cuthand, quoted in Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014, 24). The Kino-nda-niimi Collective describes the presence of ancestors in the actions of Idle No More: "In the winter of 2012–2013, our Ancestors danced with us. They were there in intersections, in shopping malls, and in front of Parliament buildings. They marched with us in protests, stood with us at blockades, and spoke through us in teach-ins" (24). Memory and resistance are expressed through ritual and in material acts of care for the dead: neighbors tended the drowned bodies that floated in the streets of New Orleans after Katrina (Carleton). Their sacramental care defended the humanity of those who had been abandoned by the state and treated as subhuman by the military and in media stories.

Mourning is an act of hospitality to ghosts, to the lives and histories that haunt us (Brogan 1998; Derrida 2000; Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000; Gordon 2008; Morrison 2004). In *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon describes haunting as "a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (2008, 8). In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler suggests that we remain in the presence of grief instead of trying to escape the unbearable, linking the repression of affect to the eruption of violence (2004, 30). Butler asks a compelling question: "Is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its unbearability and not endeavoring to seek a resolution for grief through violence?" (30). Although Butler is referring to the turn to nationalism and violence after 9/11 by the United States government and populace, the necessity of dwelling with grief is crucial to thinking through the event of climate change. She suggests that a focus on grief can open us up to our shared

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bodily vulnerability (30).²⁰ Butler asks a question appropriate to a world structured by loss: the loss of glaciers and entire biomes as well as the traumatic displacement of Indigenous, island, and coastal communities. Mourning is not despair. Many environmentalists fear that despair will lead to paralysis, and therefore emphasize hope as a response to climate change. Allen Thompson, for example, warns that without a commitment to “radical hope” we are disposed toward giving up “resistance and the struggle for change” and giving in to “reluctant acquiescence” with the “inevitability” of climate change (2010, 51).²¹ Other environmental humanists have noted the limitations of both apocalyptic rhetoric and the rhetoric of hope (see, e.g., Ray 2018, 310). Butler articulates both the anxieties that underlie the imperative of hope and the possibilities opened up by mourning: “If we stay with a sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?” (2004, 30). Perhaps willingness to remain in the presence of grief can help us move from individual powerlessness to a sense of collective vulnerability, responsibility, and agency, and to a focus on our shared responsibility for lives and bodies, expressed through social care. We see this shared responsibility in the neighbors who lifted each other out of the floodwaters of Katrina; in the demands of Idle No More to remember missing and murdered Indigenous women; in the kitchens and schools of encampments and blockades.

In this way, the collective practices of mourning, resistance, and hospitality offer an ethics for environmental justice and climate change. The affective responses of grief, rage, and love are not something to be escaped and do not lead inevitably to despair. Instead, blockades, encampments, and occupations express joy and solidarity. These affective flows are not the result of repressing the pain of grief but emerge from lived experiences of connection. Bodies articulate a vision of community and enact a different world through collective actions and inhabitations. These communities recognize that what Solnit calls the “social disaster” of privatization – of love, imagination, public life, and public goods – underlies what Rob Nixon calls the “slow violence” of climate disruption (Solnit 2009, 3;

²⁰ Similarly, Gerda Roelvink and Magdalena Zolkos (2011) see the possibility of ecocentric solidarity with “earth others” through actions that arise from sorrow and hope, a “post-humanist ethics [that] uses this shared condition of vulnerability to unsettle the ecological centrality of the human” (53, 47).

²¹ Thompson adopts the term “radical hope” from Jonathan Lear’s study of Indigenous leader Plenty Coups (43).

Nixon 2011). As studies of revolution have shown, “post-conflict visions” of alternative societies are essential to the success of overthrowing oppressive regimes, particularly when revolutionary movements are constituted by “diverse coalitions” (Lawson 2015, 465). These visions of alternative societies are generated by the arts of revolution: “stories, rituals, banners, songs, cartoons, graffiti, and posters that mobilize protest through affective cultural performances” (463). In her analysis of speculative and “visionary” futurisms by “activists, artists, and writers” in the context of climate change, Shelley Streeby writes that “direct action has moved to the center stage in the world-making projects of many social movements” (2018, 31, 41). Expressive culture, performance, and encampments collectively envision and enact better worlds.

There are many affective responses available to us in facing climate change and the long histories of racism and injustice that undergird this event, including horror, grief, rage, memorial, mourning, joy, solidarity, and love. In her study of disaster utopias, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit describes a “sense of immersion in the moment and solidarity with others caused by the rupture in everyday life... We don’t even have a language for this emotion, in which the wonderful comes wrapped in the terrible, joy in sorrow, courage in fear” (2009, 5). Solnit sees the spontaneous collectives that form after disaster as a model for what could be possible and calls for us to deprivatize our imaginations and social desires in order to imagine a different world (9). Similarly, Gerda Roelvink and Magdalena Zolkos identify the “affective encounter” as a place where “new possibilities for action” can arise out of the dialectic of “sorrow and hope” (2011, 53, 53, 52). And furthermore, Adrian Parr argues that the political crisis of climate change under neoliberalism involves “the new collective arrangements that the utopian imagination and social unrest create when brought into proximity with each other” (2013, 7).

Susan Leigh Foster’s essay “Choreographies of Protest” offers a framework for interpreting and understanding the significance of these actions. Foster calls bodies “articulate matter” (2003, 395). In nonviolent direct actions, blockades, and encampments of the climate justice movement, bodies articulate the violence of climate change. Foster focuses on what Gene Sharp identifies as methods of “physical intervention,” such as “sit-ins, walk-ins, pray-ins, and occupations” (395). Judith Butler further develops the significance of the body in public demonstrations in her book *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015). Thinking through demonstrations in public squares like those in the Arab Spring, Butler writes: “Sleeping on that pavement was not only a way to lay claim to the