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All That's Left Behind: Black Ecological Interventions on Waste and Plastic

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Breanna Byrd and Christopher Lang are PhD candidates at the University of California, Santa Cruz in the Departments of Feminist Studies and Environmental Studies (respectively). Both are deeply committed to exploring how Black people respond to the environmental realities that shape community health, particularly those in the U.S. South. By blending their interests in waste, passions for environmental justice, and commitments to Black feminist scholarship and praxis, they write to re-route the assumed inevitability of an always uneven environmental collapse by asserting decolonial and Afrofutures.

Keywords

Black ecologies, plastics, colonialism, futurity, disposability

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_Abstract

This *_Article* explores the racial and geographic dimensions of disposability and extractive use to conceptualize the contemporary relationship among waste, plastics, and people, particularly in the U.S. South. In their essay, "Mapping Black Ecologies," JT Roane and Justin Hosbey argue that the eco-social knowledges within Black Southern and other African diasporic communities must frame interventions in the face of environmental crises. As a discipline, Black Ecologies offers a lens to analyze eco-social hauntings across space, time, and matter, providing flight paths beyond ecocidal futurity. Environmental justice scholarship demonstrates that the materiality of waste definitively and disproportionately impacts Black health. What is considered trash today is undoubtedly tied to a historical continuum of disposed-of matters, animate and otherwise, that precedes and exceeds a myopic understanding of 'trash' as plastic or other material waste. We argue that contemporary pollution often ends up in majority-Black elsewheres in the U.S. South and exists in spatial-temporal relation to systems of conquest and captivity. Combating this form of ongoing racial enclosure, Southern Black folks challenge the rigged notions of value through quotidian negotiations: coalition building, political advocacy, protests, and more. To conclude, we illustrate the need for iterative, emergent strategies that resist wastelanding by wrestling not only with the materiality of pollution but also with the sociological and relational underpinnings of disposability itself.

> I find refuge and respite in nature. The earth and the trees […] didn't care if I was a boy or a girl or neither or both. It reminded me of some of the greatest gifts of being Black. Of having the capacity to take light and photosynthesize it. To take the rotten, the vile, the poisonous things […] break them down. Decompose them into something new and nourishing. Decomposition as decolonization. Dirt became a metaphor for all the things that once made me feel ashamed of inhabiting this body, but also it represented the possibility for transformation, regeneration. To become something otherwise.[1]

In *Notes on Digging*, Kiyan Williams' poetic meditations on earth, Blackness, transformation, and memory overlay a visual montage of their movements in the creation of *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns*. Originally constructed on the banks of the James River in Richmond, Virginia, Williams' captivating three-dimensional installation consists of arcing, mud-made limbs, and hands that stretch beyond biological expectations and reach out of/as earth towards the skies above.[2] Throughout their symbolic and material interactions with soil, and a repetitive reference to digging in their poetic

prose, Williams continually blurs the delineation between Blackness and earth, between Black people and plants, and between Black boys and girls in release of violence and trauma… in search of warmth and healing… in desire of transformation and belonging. Doing so, they gesture to the alchemical, transcendent process that exists at a Black-Earth interface, a possibility of decomposing "the rotten, the vile, the poisonous […] into something new and nourishing […] something otherwise."[3] Williams joins a chorus of Black scholars, poets, activists, and artists who tussle with the conundrum of Black-Earth relations in a slavery-seeded world order.[4] This paper is also rooted here, in the capaciousness of Black aliveness, Black studies, and Black creativity to transform relations to place, self, the nonhuman, and the violence of anti-Black, colonial, cis-heteropatriarchal world-making practices.

As scholars whose research is rooted in North Carolina and Louisiana, we are drawn to the specific and yet far-too-common pattern of ecocidal necropolitics across many Souths and affirm that the fight for Black life is inseparable from the fight for our biosphere. We are indebted to the work of scholars who have continually linked race and the environment as well as scholars who have demonstrated the myriad of ways enslavement, genocide, and environmental degradation exceed the confines of the historical 'past' and shape the contemporary space-time through racial-capitalist structures of disposability.[5] By attending to the relationality of being, we find ourselves confronted with waste in both its material and procedural forms. *À la* Marisa Solomon, we affirm that "waste is not a metaphor for racist dispossession."[6] Despite its continuous absencing, waste is central to the ordering of racial capitalism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, during the early stages of garbage collection services, enslaved people in certain cities like Charleston, South Carolina, were deployed to conduct this work, intimately linking race and waste in the South.[7] We tend to the materiality of waste and plastic as integral to the processes of contemporary colonial world-making. Through this lens, the proliferation of plastics and the geographies of waste become immediate crises of the present, extensions of the past, and hauntings deferred. For the purposes of this paper, we consider waste to be a range of materials (Industrial and Municipal Solid Wastes—ISW and MSW, respectively), social conditions (race), and processes (waste infrastructure) formed via uninterrupted settler extraction and accumulation. As such, we center Black ecological frameworks in order to ask a different set of questions of ourselves and these materials. Rather than return to the

seemingly standard question, *how do we get rid of them?*, in its place, we ask: How might we find freedom from systems of capital and empire that coerce us into relations of disposability and nonconsensual chemical/extractive relations? How might paying attention to that which can be left behind—the dead, forgotten, chemical, discarded, plastic thing—disrupt the naturalization of racialized experiences of/as waste?

We focus on the United States South, which is where 56% of all Black people living in the country call home,[8] to track the convergence of anti-Blackness and disposability embedded into space via capitalist production, from plantations to chemical refineries to landfills. Borrowing from Traci Brynne Voyles' work on uranium mining across the Diné lands, we too deploy the term "wastelanding," which Voyles names as "a fully colonial project of rendering resources extractable and lands and bodies pollutable, rather than merely a problem of distribution of environmental bads."[9] Wastelanding and landfilling exist along a continuum of racialized-colonial and environmental violence, extending the biological determinism of white supremacy into a geographical reality of widespread ecocide. No matter how often colonial structures impose discrete lines of separation (past/present, here/elsewhere) and categorical hierarchies (clean/dirty), life—embodied life—is porous, is a web of entanglements in which we are all interconnected (even when poisoned differently). To conclude, we assert that solutions to the waste problem must excavate the underlying social, material, and political infrastructures of disposability *and* become strategies towards decolonization.

1_"is a black and living thing"[10]

In the United States, people, places, and objects (plastic and trash) are imbricated in the waste-making/managing apparatus. The processes that mark particular matters as 'waste' move waste from the category of mere object—solely its material life—into a *condition*, one that asserts meanings onto spaces alongside notions of worth, value, and more.[11] Sarah Moore asserts that "waste is what is '*managed* as waste,'"[12] whereby waste-making and waste-designating are both material and *social* processes that connect matter in entangled, uneven ways. As David Harvey explains, the ongoing (re)production of space is a fundamental organizing facet of global capitalism, which, crisis-prone by nature, constantly demands geographic expansion and reclassification to eschew the catastrophes embedded in its logic.[13] The landfill, as a site of

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waste designation, epitomizes such an expansion—a 'spatial fix'—to manage the crises of racial-capitalist accumulations (and disposals, thereafter). The corporate-governmental practice of wastelanding ensures that spaces considered outside the geographic boundaries of valuable capitalist use are at once peripheral and necessary to the functioning of capitalism, rendered into what we call *essential disposals*. These essential disposals represent the paradox of invisibility, devaluation, and simultaneous necessity, which wedges particular lands and bodies, from colonial to contemporary times, into a space of contradictory and extractive or disposable use. This does not go unnoticed by the frontline communities impacted by wastelanding practices. In a recent exposé titled "In the Afterlife of Slavery," environmental and cultural activist, Joy Banner, discusses the extractive practices of manufacturing that undermine the health of her community. While sitting in her home in Wallace, Louisiana, a former plantation town, Banner explains in the interview, "[w]e are dealing with the toxic chemicals that are involved in plastic production [...] everything is excused because of economic development [...] it's like it doesn't matter how problematic the chemicals are, or how bad the pollution is."[14] Banner recognizes that her community is a repository of toxins, decidedly sacrificed in service of profit. Plastic is big business, after all.[15] More broadly, plastic is ubiquitously integrated across the supply chain by manufacturers and retailers, despite increasing evidence that points to its racializing impacts along every aspect of its life cycle.[16]

The stigma of differential disposability predates and, more importantly, prefigures the literal waste emergence from the mid-twentieth century to the present. The plantation economies voraciously demanded the creation of ownable lands and bodies to serve as vessels for capital accumulation, extracting surplus value in a feedback loop to perpetually hoard resources and power. Pre-existing Earth ecosystems and assemblages, human and otherwise, were deemed impediments to progress, predictability, and profit for colonizers and were consequently cleared.[17] Enslavement became the engine of the South that displaced and attempted to replace Indigenous (African and Native) modes of living. Within this system, plantation owners preferenced monocrops over biodiverse landscapes, allowing the material goods of enslaved labor to circulate globally. Such cash crop markets are the nascent stages of the global, racial, petroleum-and-plastic-dependent[18] mass consumerism we witness today.[19] Capital and extractive use undergird the economies of conquest and exist in space-

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times that are relevant and connected to the racial eco-social catastrophes of the present. The proliferation of plastics; the toxicity of our bodies by which PCBs and other forever chemicals mark us and the generations to come; the endless material extraction and overproduction driving runaway climate change, all emerge out of the genocide-plantation-colonial economy. Which is to say: Slavery prefigures mass consumerism. Genocide prefigures mass extinction. These twin forces of conquest are at the heart of our contemporary waste crisis. Michelle Murphy and Denise Ferreira da Silva, in their respective fields, write toward the inseparability of bodies and Land, of the dead and the living, and of space and time.[20] We have all become, as Murphy writes, "non innocently" shaped by the worlds that "technoscience, mass consumption, slavery and genocide helped make."[21] Thus everyday living has become a negotiation of how much and what type of waste we will encounter. (Especially given that plastic manufacturers are invested in shaping consumers' realities and imaginaries in service of a lucrative plastic dependency.) Turning to Black ecological frameworks becomes imperative not to rid us of all plastic-chemical-waste relations, but to ask how we can find "more consensual ways of being together."[22] The modality by which we, then, conceptualize modes of being outside of extraction, domination, and disposability is fundamentally linked to how we build toward Black (and Indigenous) ecological futures. When we attend to anti-Black racism and colonial dispossession as ecological processes *in addition to* structural and cultural realities, the act of defending Black life from these systems of disposability cannot and should not be removed from the act of defending the Earth.

Earlier we asked *how can attuning ourselves to what's left behind alter our relationship to the naturalization of waste and wastelanding as a racialized environmental experience?* We named racialized geographies and modalities of being as 'behind.' This is not a reflection of our own values but a recognition that the hierarchical nature of white supremacy justifies itself through creating an idea of perpetual linear progress in which some people and places must remain behind in a spatial-temporal fix. To inhabit this position is to exist in contradiction to colonial expansion and, consequently, to reside at the liminal space of otherwise possibility. We think with behindness as a place of material consciousness in a similar vein to Christina Sharpe's conceptualization of being in the wake. In her book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Sharpe names "wake work" as a multi-registered praxis of "plotting, mapping

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and collecting the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death, and […] tracking the ways we resist and rupture that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially."[23] For Sharpe, the numerous definitions of 'wake' enable her to move across and around the inevitability of Black death (past/present/future) and resist disciplinarity (read: linearity) that makes Black scholars complicit in "our own annihilation."[24] For us, considering what is left *behind* allows us to take aim at plastics and the other matters of wastelanding in order to re-route away from our own annihilation at the Black-Earth interface. Our consideration of 'all that's left behind' is a reformation of waste work in the wake of slavery. As previously theorized by Christopher Lang, it:

> prompts us to eschew dualistic reductions of waste as non-living hazard and instead resurrect care for the always already deathbound Black-Indigenous-abject-animal-plastic-object, intimately informing praxes to unmake racial capitalism and the numerous forms of disposability it necessarily predetermines.[25]

While waste work may in part seem like a clever turn of phrase, we know this iteration of Sharpe's wake work to be possible through confronting the historical continuum of (racial) disposability that brings us to pollution as we understand it contemporaneously. As Max Liboiron argues, pollution is, in fact, colonialism, where colonial land relations are property relations that attempt to supplant Land relations, and where land and bodies are ownable and pollutable—always up for destruction/transformation.[26] In wrestling with waste work, we argue pollution is experienced by capitalism's beneficiaries as out-of-sight while those deemed behind—those essential disposals left in the wake whose abjection makes 'progress' possible—are designated for dumping or removal.

While we can observe these waste-siting patterns among the *living* across many Souths,[27] in St. James parish, Louisiana it is the dead who take center stage. The six-year long fight against the permitting and construction of a Formosa Plastics manufacturing facility on top of a known burial ground for enslaved African Americans in St. James Parish, Louisiana epitomizes this throughline we seek to convey between the plantation, the wastelands, the behind, and the anti-Black disposable economy of today. Formosa Plastics' proposed plans for this 2,400-acre project would be the largest of its kind in the country with 16 facilities specializing in producing polymers that can be molded into plastic bags and astroturf.[28] Formosa Plastics would join the other 136 petrochemical facilities and seven oil refineries that are densely concen-

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trated in this 85-mile stretch of primarily low-income, African American communities between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, now often referred to as "Cancer Alley."[29] High levels of toxic chemicals like ethylene and benzene saturate the air here in this 'sacrifice zone' for progress, contributing to cancer rates up to fifty times the national average in some areas. Seeking legal protection under the Civil Rights Act and Clean Air Act, a group of organizations has supported the residents of RISE St. James, an environmental justice organization, to litigate against the original permitting decision in favor of Formosa Plastics and to obstruct its approval. Sharon Lavigne, a leader in RISE St. James, describes the fight against the proposed facility as a way of fulfilling the wishes of the enslaved ancestors, whose remains are located within the construction site. Lavigne says:

> Our Ancestors, this is their home. This was their home when they were alive. This was their home when they died. So they don't want Formosa, or anyone, to come here and desecrate what's left of their remains. So they know we're going to stop Formosa.[30]

By tending to the wishes of the living and the dead, RISE St. James activists undoubtedly perform a type of waste work. From this position of otherwise, they rupture colonial separability of bodies (living and passed), times (past, present, and future), and toxic lands (here and elsewhere) in protection of the Black-Earth interface. Their successful obstruction of another chemical plant in 2019 has prevented the production of a million pounds of liquid hazardous waste each year thereafter, and their efforts delaying/denying Formosa have prevented countless more toxic materials from existing (in Black geographies) on this planet.[31] In this instance, those who perished from the plantation past are moved out of the peripheral (behind) and overlaid atop the concerns of the present; the dead and their rights to dignity are foregrounded to obstruct imminent wastelanding, haunting colonially-minded enterprises that seek to profit at the expense of the living *and* the dead. RISE St. James' efforts, like those of every Black environmental justice community, show that Black life defending Black life is Black life defending the matters of the dead, is Black life defending the earth.

In *Pollution Is Colonialism*, Max Liboiron traces how our "permission-to-pollute" paradigm arose out of early 19th-century (settler colonial) research to become contemporary industry standard. Industry-supporting science alleged to discover an *assimilative capacity* of water, which they define as a body of water's ability to receive a threshold concentration of pollutants before causing noticeable ecological damage.[32]

The "threshold theory of pollution" here legally permits pollution's existence as an inevitability of economic and industrial growth (wealth accumulation).[33] Doing so, "environmental protection" policy reifies and enables settler access to land "using the water as a sink, a site of storage for waste" at the expense of Black and Indigenous lives and lifeways.[34] Prevailing race science, based on biological determinism and upheld by white capitalists historically, assumed Black people, like the water, had an assimilative capacity to metabolize environmental burdens in ways white people could not.[35] Such logic justified/s and naturalized/s a Black position of pollutability, as a sink for environmental stressors in relation to a white-owned and controlled manufacturing system that encourages mass consumerism-turned-mass disposability. This overlap of Black-water's assimilative capacity is demonstrated during and after the Great Migration North. Black workers toiling in northern industrial furnaces/urban factories were disproportionately stationed in the hottest, most dangerous, and polluting work environments while the factories discharged their liquid hazardous wastes into the Mississippi River tributaries, which flowed back down into the Gulf South.[36]

Waste infrastructure within the United States often exports the trash of white consumption patterns into Black communities, which overwhelmingly exist in the U.S. South. Marisa Solomon's body of research, based on her time studying how waste from New York City ends up in Virginia, documents the ways trash "moves in and through landscapes and their histories, and how it congeals to, sticks on, and accumulates in Black geographies."[37] Foregrounding that waste management infrastructure relies on moving waste out-of-sight to maintain white property value, Solomon argues, in part, that perceived 'cleanliness' is a result of a world-ordering where whiteness is property and waste is sent *somewhere else* so white people are not inconvenienced by the waste of their own making.[38] Given that the South has the most landfills of any region in the United States,[39] for these Black southern elsewheres wastelanding demonstrate racism itself is and has been an environmental reality where ecological risks are exported.[40] For example, in 1971 in the majority-white Northwood Manor neighborhood of Houston, TX, a landfill siting proposal was turned down for reasons including unwanted health hazards and lowering property values; yet after 'white flight' between 1971 and 1978, the neighborhood became predominantly African American. The all-white City Council then renewed the permitting process and the landfill's construction was successful despite the same community contesta-

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tions.[41] In this sort of relationship, Solomon suggests Black people take on the non-metaphorical role of "fill" in the construction of white civilization:

> to be 'fill' is to be foundational or, rather, materially central to the constitution of a development plan […] but fill is also invisible [...] if being fill is also to be invisible, ageographic, ahistorical, then invisibility, too, is a material relationship to development and the naturalization of white property.[42]

Solomon plays with the language of fill, which could be interpreted as shorthand for 'landfill,' or perhaps also 'filler.' In both senses, the Black bodies, read analogously and alongside dirty trash in her article, are policed, surveilled, and continuously contained (segregated) around the exclusionary, disciplinary, and hygienic logic of white property. From plantation slavery to this contemporary moment, white society could not and cannot still exist without the extracted use value of Black people and spaces rendered into fill as essential disposals. Black southern communities are confronted with a long-standing white supremacist contradiction by which their lives are considered dirty, disorganized, and thus in need of management. (This is quite ironic given that white trash is sent into Black geographies!) When paired with statistics about low education outcomes and a generally higher poverty rate, the U.S. South, similar to the Global South, is coded as developmentally and socially *behind*, crisis-ridden, and failing.[43] The South's projected behindness collides with its eco-social damnation as the dumping ground and foundation for 'progress' of white, colonial, and liberal geographies considered 'in place.'[44] Southern elsewheres are not only designated culturally out of temporal relation, but also, through racialized wastelanding practices and the intentional introduction of industrial and municipal solid waste into areas at risk to its inhabitants, are cyclically transformed into places that are hazardous to the body and to the planet. The earlier colonial framing of biology-as-destiny is updated in such a way that geography becomes destiny.

We argue that the transfer of waste into Black Southern communities not only marks the paradox of essential disposals, but also transforms historically Indigenous, Black, and fugitive spaces for economic, industrial, and infrastructural development. The Great Dismal Swamp, which once spanned over 1 million acres between Southeastern Virginia and Northeastern North Carolina, at 113,000 acres today holds a critical diversity of flora and fauna as well as the material memory of Indigenous livelihoods and commerce. Additionally, it served as a site of refuge and resistance against disposability during genocidal expansion, slavery, and extractive economies.[45] During

the 18th and 19th centuries, enslaved Africans and African-Americans increasingly accessed the swamplands, some permanently and others for temporary respite.[46] Colonial and capitalist expansion, however, did not end at the boundaries of the wetlands: companies and slavers used enslaved laborers to deforest and dredge the swamp, transforming the dense domain into navigable passageways to further their corporate, tentacular reach for extractive use. The Dismal Swamp Company led this development of the wetlands as it aimed to tame and make 'productive' use of the swamp, relying on the alternative networks of *petit marronage* to sustain their expansion.[47] Morgan Vickers documents the abjection-extraction settler orientations to the Black swamp over time: like Black people, who were considered waste unless put to use for white geography's realization, the swamp would be considered a site of disease and decay until civilized through terraforming practices of "clearing."[48] This clearing is the first step taken in the construction of canals, pipelines, and refineries. The muddy, gassy, fugitive Black swamp, in this regard, becomes a frontier, yet another site commodified under relations of conquest; its rendering from uninhabitable to extractable imperils the Black, Indigenous, and refuge-seeking communities of the South who have existed in/with it in otherwise ways, especially through marronage.[49] In the present moment, the Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center's website celebrates, "Today we are able to explore its secrets, without the hardships endured by the early American pioneers that sought to tame it."[50] Here, the Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center erases the violent settler history that enabled a penetration of the swamplands, including the canal's existence itself, which was constructed by enslaved labor.[51] Similar to its treatment of hazardous wastes, settler logic surrounding conservation and land access renders its inconvenient truths of slavery and genocide out-of-sight. Though the Great Dismal Swamp is now preserved as a National Wildlife Refuge, swamps across the U.S. South exist at the intersection of freedom-making and pollutability. The Supreme Court's recent *Sackett v. Environmental Protection Agency* ruling deciding wetlands are no longer protected under the Clean Water Act, joins a litany of swamp-specific, state-sanctioned violence on these racialized geographies in pursuit of economic gain for a few at the expense of many.[52] We know this racial logic is not exclusive to the swamp; we see a similar modality of displacement in gentrification processes that expedite established Black communities' removal from places all in the name of development.

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Through following the convergence of bodies and land across time and scales, we name colonialism and anti-Black racism as *terraforming* processes which attempt to solidify the colonizer as the most desirable genre of Human.[53] We also consider terraforming in its present participle formation rather than in the past tense (i.e. terraformed) to recognize the ongoingness of colonization and hierarchical racialization.[54] Simply defined, to terraform is "to transform (a planet, moon, etc.) so that it is suitable for supporting human life,"[55] but as Sylvia Wynter argues, the Human is an exclusive category that informs and produces particular socio-material formations of race, gender, and, of course, species.[56] Naming colonialism as terraforming invites us to consider the ways colonizers, through centering themselves as the exemplary Human/man, alter existing ecological and social relations towards their own ends. Disposability, waste, and pollution are central to this process. This Human subject has been defined through domains of conquest, quite literally undermining the lives of the othered as it produces wastelands elsewhere. Across space and time, the colonial/American grammar pathologizes particular bodies and lands as behind, unproductive, barren, untamable, and so on. These meanings are mapped onto the "flesh"[57] and vice versa in a dialectical manner and further used rhetorically to invisibilize the racial, political, and geographic dimensions of excess, disposability, and extractive use embedded within the systems of capitalist expansion. As a tactic of world-making, terraforming has long/always extended through the body into the Land, attempting to restructure the present, refashion what futures are possible, and decide whose pasts are knowable.

2_"is a fish black blind in the belly of water"[58]

Despite the modes by which terraforming colonial superstructures treat Black folks[59] (and Black bodies) as what we have named essential disposals—matters ensnared in the continuum of capitalist relations that are simultaneously necessary yet discardable—the voices of those who experienced slavery firsthand invoke an otherwise value system across scales (of land and body). Daina Ramey Berry introduces "soul value" as a phrase that encapsulates the way "enslaved people repudiated the monetary values placed on their bodies and clung to an internal, personal, and spiritual valuation of themselves."[60] This position existed prior to and directly "against the backdrop of an institution that treated them as property […and] valued them for their bodies as mar-

ket commodities."[61] Soul value indicates these individuals saw themselves as possessing a place that was wholly defined by/for themselves rather than by the social conditions which would reduce them to ownable objects. Importantly, Berry repeatedly documents the way Nature was instrumental in how these folks connected to their soul value. When we return to the narratives of enslaved individuals, particularly those who fled from slavery, we come to understand that natural spaces held the material means of concealment and nourishment as well as spiritual-emotional means to inspire freedom-seeking and other risky negotiations under conquest.

In her autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs writes of her fever-inducing wait hidden on a boat in the "snaky swamp" while her uncle built out the garret, her famed "loophole of retreat."[62] Jacobs was terrified of snakes, and yet while in the swamp, she was surrounded by snakes larger than she could have imagined, covered in the bites of mosquitoes, and unable to see clearly ahead because of the bamboo.[63] Still, this "horrid swamp" was preferable to the terror of her master.[64] The swamp provided Jacobs with temporary protection as she renegotiated her captivity, proving pivotal to her journey to freedom.[65]

When Moses Roper first fled slavery, he was both desperate and determined as he ran to the woods "half naked" at 13/14 years old.[66] While reflecting on his numerous attempts to escape despite the punishments received for being caught, Roper writes that his master could tell he "was determined to die in the woods, and not live with him."[67] In this case, Roper's desire for freedom exceeded his fear of death and physical harm, and the woods promised a life beyond domination. Still, the woods did not always offer permanent means of escape.

And in the opening pages of his life account, Moses Grandy recalls how his mother engaged with the woods as a place of sustenance and circumvention for him and his siblings. Grandy's mother would hide her children in the woods to prevent them from being sold. When the children asked for water, "she sought for it in any hole or puddle under a fallen tree," straining the tadpoles from it with her hands and letting the children drink from her cupped palms.[68]

These accounts of fugitivity by the enslaved demonstrate how important the environment has been in the pursuit of freedom. This has historically been true of swamplands and forests where maroon communities removed themselves from the violent conditions of colonial property relations. Marronage disrupted the logic of ownership

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and exploitation, allowing Afro-Indigenous ways of being with materials and the Earth to take root. Daniel Sayers' archeological research on North Carolina's Dismal Swamp communities concludes that maroons performed a "praxis mode of production" that persisted for generations and fundamentally differed from the prevailing capitalist mode they had escaped.[69] Distanced from the plantation market economy during slavery, swamp communities used any handmade, traded, or found material resources, often repurposing broken items for second- and third-hand uses or more. Sayers argues that this form of communal self-determination should be interpreted as a direct critique of the world outside them and the "exploitative labor, sexual, and social conditions it fostered."[70] This mode of collective self-subsistence reflects soul value and a wholly Black ecological sense of place, one that refused all modes of extraction and disposability amid the dual forces of conquest and captivity.

For the descendants of the enslaved, and everyone who lives in the afterlives of slavery and its reverberations, the fight against pollution and against systems of devaluation can also be placed within this legacy of otherwise value-making. Fighting for ecological justice is also a fight to preserve Nature/Land as a liberating force connected to the deepest parts of us, to our soul values. Kiyan Williams' *Notes on Digging* / *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns* reflects how Earth is a necessary force in grounding and nourishing the mind, body, and spirit, assisting one's soul value to rise above conditions of reality and exist beyond trauma or injury. Within the art installation, *Reaching Towards Warmer Suns,* the soil that is Black/Brown and Blackness that is the soil stretch out in a mutual invitation to come and know and be known and know one another. Williams' work is, indeed, a provocation into deepening Earthly relations, echoing bell hooks' declaration that "when we love the earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully."[71] The love hooks speaks of is always a verb, is an ongoing action imbued with a commitment to responsibility.[72] This orientation, which ties love to responsibility—for ourselves and for our planet—urges us to enact and strategize towards a praxis of freedom where the Earth and Blackness are one and the same. When grounded within this framework, value—in this otherwise and Black ecological view—is uncapturable and must be actively protected.

Attention to this otherwise value system also invites us to consider the ways Black communities reject the inherent disposability which defines contemporary waste. In "Modern Waste as Strategy," Liboiron outlines the way people developed a preserva-

tion and reuse sensibility in the aftermath of the Great Depression and the two World Wars. In response,

> industry intervened on a material level and developed disposability through planned obsolescence, single-use items, cheap materials, throw-away packaging, fashion, and conspicuous consumption. These changes were supported by a regimen of advertising that telegraphed industrial principals of valuation into the social realm, suggesting what was durable versus disposable, esteemed versus taboo.[73]

This material and advertising strategy was implemented to support a cultural shift within the U.S. to change buying and consumer behavior.[74] Disposability was/is economically more profitable than instilling an ethic of reciprocity.[75] Despite the built-in single-use imaginary of industry producers, Black communities (and other communities considered disposable) time and again find one more use for the objects imagined to be easily and readily thrown away. The images of leftovers in Country Crock and Cool Whip containers, of sewing materials in the cookie tin, of plastic cups used to water the garden or bathe the dog, and of course, the plastic bags that find a second use after the store as trash bags or shower caps or deep conditioning caps, all come to mind. These items, which were designed to be disposed of immediately after consumption, find their way into Black households just a bit longer. Through this extended proximity, Black folks refuse capitalist use models and create alternative waste cycles that might be harder to track but exist nonetheless. This reality of staying with these materials also means, however, that Black homes live with plastic longer. Despite the otherwise Black ecological sense of responsibility that disavows inherent disposability, Black people also live with the risk of such relations. Jovan Scott Lewis provocatively asserts, in "Black Life Beyond Injury," that the ongoing crisis of centuries of structural anti-Black violence is fundamentally a crisis of Black *relations.*[76] Black value systems, which reject built-in single-use frameworks, are placed in crisis as they result in prolonged contact with plastic and its chemical remnants.

Black folks in the South have long felt and fought against the convergence of disposability, environmental degradation, and racialized geographies. One of the many inflection points within this history emerges out of Warren County, North Carolina, considered the birthplace of the environmental justice movement. For months in the summer of 1978, the Ward Transformer Company of Raleigh arranged the illegal

dumping of PCB-lined oil alongside highways throughout North Carolina.[77] PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, which were used in coolants and insulators, were banned in 1979 for their toxic and carcinogenic nature. Years later, the state government finally acknowledged the illegal dumping and moved to build a hazardous waste landfill in Warren County, a former plantation town. Protesters gathered for six consecutive weeks to oppose the site's permitting and placement. Deploying a range of strategies, from lying on the roads and blockading trucks, to marching toward the proposed site, Warren County residents organized against their supposed dispensability/fungibility and attempted to prevent their town from receiving the hazardous materials. When it was clear that the options from the state were limited for the waste to 1) remain in Warren or 2) be sent to somewhere else, Warren residents switched tactics and decided to keep the waste in Warren County and eventually moved to have it detoxified. Warren County organizers deeply understood that under relations of racial capitalism, refusal of disposability does not necessarily lead to the demand for 'clean' space.

We will be remiss not to bring into conversation a reading of Black littering and of what that might mean as a Black ecological intervention on waste. Broader conversations around neighborhood-differentiated pollution are rife with opinions parroting the gripe 'if only Black people could clean up their neighborhoods,' further eliding the colonial relations of structural difference via abandonment, illegal dumping, and legalized wastelanding that overdetermine such outcomes. There is no doubt that the predicament of trash affixed to/in Black geographies is contested internally, within the Black community, ranging from apathy and complicity to outrage and sadness, and externally, as damnation. In one controversial column on Black littering practices, Kathy Wilson (self-referred as "Your Negro Tour Guide") writes, "I cannot reconcile all this black trash, especially when I've recently seen black folks littering *within feet of public trash cans*."[78] Wilson exhibits a form of Black frustrations and attempted refusals to the disposability of, and the disposals in, Black communities. Marisa Solomon argues that the regime of white property relations is reinforced and policed by notions of cleanliness and order. As such, we might even go so far as to analyze trash in Black space to enact a forcefield effect inhibiting white colonial ordering via gentrification. One YouTube video titled "People Litter To Mark The Segregation Line In Mobile Alabama" includes the description: "people litter at the en-

trance of the black neighborhoods […] The white areas are tree lined and clean […] but when you cross into black areas it's instantly obvious."[79] In this vein, we can consider Black littering praxes as simultaneously surviving, contesting, and staking claims around/outside the segregating boundaries of white valued property to demarcate Black space. We see Black littering as exceeding the mythical 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind' logic created by anti-Black waste management practices that overlook Black neighborhoods for cleaning and prioritize them for waste siting. When considering the excessive structural forces of colonially engineered dispossession/pollution in Black communities, the promise of community cleanliness via collective usage of a trashcan quickly vanishes under conditions of materiality and reality itself. Trashiness in a site of perpetual placelessness is a "critique of moral authority."[80] Whiteness does not know what to do with the confrontation of trash *in* place. Black littering, intentionally or unintentionally, refuses to send waste to some other community, refuses cleanliness at the expense of an elsewhere.

As the heterogeneity and excess of waste today surpasses the capacity of the state and local authorities to manage it, it would be an oversight not to mention that these same fossil fuel producers of waste material are drivers of climate precarity through their incessant release of greenhouse gas emissions. If plastics were a country, they would be the fifth leading greenhouse gas emitter on the planet.[81] A recent study ranked Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Florida (in that order), all unsurprisingly in the Gulf South, as states most impacted by 'natural' disasters since 1980.[82] In the aftermath of a major climate disaster event, such as a flood or hurricane, volumes of debris produced can range between five to fifteen times a waste site's annual average in just a few days.[83] According to 2021 data, EPA's regions 6 and 4, representing the Southern and Gulf South states, both topped the charts for production-related waste. Waste in these regions mostly originates from chemical production, chemical recycling, and food manufacturing.[84] However, in the urgency of recovery from a natural disaster, landfills can be temporarily reclassified under a state's emergency protocol, expanding the list of what they accept without nearby communities' consent. One can predict that at the cross-section of industrial zoning, racialized geographies, and natural disasters (worsening under climate change), Black coastal communities in the South are more likely to experience toxin-saturated air, water, and soil.

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In the face of these persistent threats, Black and Indigenous southerners continue to organize for vibrant communities and a healthy environment for all. During a news interview spotlighting illegal dumping in New Orleans East, Sage Michael, an environmental justice activist, points to the ground at an abandoned property filled with tires and accumulated plastic debris. He says, "It's depressing me […] if we don't stop the trash here, we're not going to be able to enjoy our culture. This is actually killing our culture, and we gotta connect the two."[85] The proximity of such communities to waste, via: the structural neglect in city's prioritizations to clean Black neighborhoods, unless with the goal of gentrifying them/pushing them out; the structurally predatory and polluting consumer environments overdetermined by fast foods and liquor stores disproportionately present in Black neighborhoods; the positioning of Black neighborhoods next to landfills or incinerators; and the chronic visibility of trash in the streets in Black neighborhoods,[86] all create the conditions and opportunities that enable a deeper disavowal of disposability altogether. Unlike white geographies marked by cleanliness and 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind' logic of waste, the inescapable fact of waste that "congeals to, sticks on, and accumulates in Black geographies," as Solomon says, creates an otherwise orientation to waste.[87] Thus, we see more grassroots Black and Indigenous-led environmental justice movements and organizations emerge, connecting waste to climate, connecting waste to race. Such proliferation of activist hubs speaks to the expansive, localized, and regional will to live beyond extraction. We refer to: The Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Indigenous Environmental Network, Gulf South Rising, Taproot Earth, the Vessel Project, RISE St. James, Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice, the Greater New Orleans Interfaith Climate Coalition, the Gulf South for a Green New Deal, Concerned Citizens of St John, the Descendants Project, Acorn Center 4 Restoration and Freedom, the Warren County Environmental Action Team, Sol Nation, Culture of Cleanliness, New Orleans People's Assembly, and more. These efforts seek to make visible (and for some, dismantle) the invisiblized infrastructures that imbricate waste, race, and environmental precarity in pursuit of profit and power, while asserting the need for decolonial and reparative futures.

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3_"is a favorite child / of the universe"[88]

The tension between visibility and invisibility, of course, is at the heart of the relationship between colonial domination and its world-making fantasy. In *To be Nsala's Daughter: Decomposing the Colonial Gaze*, Chérie N. Rivers is particularly concerned with photographs taken by colonizers and the stories they create of isolation, of disremembering, and of dislocation. For Rivers, what you cannot see, what has been removed from the gaze, serves as a reminder of the fallacy of separability and the undeniable contradictions evidenced within the master's myth of accumulation without consequence. In our efforts to seek inseparability, we have become plastic: unable to close ourselves off from the materiality of this space-time and unwilling to be pinned in place. Us now, plastic then, we cannot escape these new bonds. JT Roane and Justin Hosbey assert that "Black ecologies are foremost sites of ongoing injury, gratuitous harm, and premature death."[89] Through Rivers' work, we are reminded that learning to tell stories that allow the dead to be whole comes through haunting/being haunted. So we gaze unflinchingly at the

> wounds gouged into bodies in the name of progress, wounds gouged into landscapes in the name of development, wounds gouged into economies in the name of freedom [even when] all these wounds are seen as normal in anyone's eyes, that their violence is so thoroughly sanctioned as to make itself invisible.[90]

The violence of invisibility is undone through relentlessly seeking the dead. To do so in our context, we refuse the obfuscation of colonial wastelanding practices that repeatedly moves waste out of sight. We sit with the reality of toxic plastics to break down smaller and smaller but never fully decompose, and PFAS, known colloquially as 'forever chemicals,' to exist with us inter-generationally and apocalyptically as a man-made haunting. We critique how neoliberal refusal of waste first requires an "embodied subjectivity—one that is not universally shared."[91] We wrestle with the reality that we are still captive by a rigged regime of private property, enclosure, labor theft, unpaid reparations, premature Black death, and an ecocidal, necropolitical waste-making apparatus where industries are granted permits, bailouts, and subsidies by governments that allege to protect us. We gaze at the death-making, hazard-producing systems, because ghosts, regardless of our will, make themselves known.

In our efforts to seek the dead, we have come to waste. Persistent and profuse, it haunts us both metaphorically and materially. We are reminded that haunting is about the absolute total violence that produces ghosts that cannot be appeased by seeing or

through acts of reconciliation.[92] Clean and 'innocent' settler streets and government promises of solutions to waste disparity will not change the reality that plastic, waste, and their chemical afterlives unevenly haunt Black, Indigenous and othered communities and refuse to leave. It will not change the fact that colonial waste infrastructure elides how connection with industry/capitalist accumulation becomes universal and unavoidable in our everyday lives. Or, that "cleaning up certain areas at the expense of others and providing cleanliness for some people at the expense of others' health," has been built into U.S. infrastructure.[93] The impossibility of truly breaking down hazardous wastes propels us toward decolonization. Or perhaps, destruction first? But how? Joy Banner asserts: "If we're just producing, producing, producing [plastic], and then thinking we're gonna recycle our way out of this, that's not going to be effective."[94]

Through accounting for the actuality of racialized geographies of waste and environmental harm, we have come to know, like Nathan Hare, that "the real solution to the environmental crisis is the decolonization of the black race" which subsequently reverberates outward.[95] The means to achieve decolonization must come from the way Black communities "challenge and confront the very foundations of American society."[96] This movement toward non-metaphorical decolonization, as Ferreira da Silva illuminates:

> is not one for "radical redistribution"—which would keep it within the liberal grammar. It is a call for the return of the total value extracted under total violence, which includes the very American (Indigenous) and African (enslaved) lives that were taken as well as the pasts, presents, and futures that were no longer because of their obliteration. More important, because the Dead (these lives) remain outside the scenes of economic and ethical value, there can be no hierarchy—vertically (spatially) or horizontally (temporally) presented—of suffering attached to the demand for decolonization.[97]

This form of return is the breakdown of colonial relations toward some otherwise form of being with and among each other, the Land, and the other beings and materials that call this planet home. We began this *_Article* with Williams' *Notes on Digging* to provide a north star of Earth-healing praxis beyond/despite/through injury towards transformation and belonging. The Earth, for Black folks, has long been part of how we get to freedom even if it is structurally unavailable. When our relationships are anchored here, a different way of being with the planet can emerge where Black life defending Black life is Black life defending the Earth. A Black ecological reading

of waste and plastics leads us toward decolonization, toward the breakdown of capitalist orderings of the future. A decomposition of sorts. As Williams recites, "[d]ecomposition as decolonization."[98] Williams comes to this place through simultaneously tending to Land and themselves. Nature, particularly the soil, reminded Williams of the range of possibilities of transformation. The darkness of the soil and its transmutative capacity become a metaphor for the very real, very Black body within which Williams lives. They learn from the Earth how to take it all, the "unwanted inheritance,"[99] and transform Blackness to mean something more than the rehearsals of violence they could not escape. We borrow from Williams' endeavor, seeking to bring a host of waste materials into relation so that we may break down global capitalist disposability. To look to Nature for Black ecological solutions to waste is to be inspired by mushrooms and compost, by dark matter and dark soil, by coal and dark waters to learn from their slow but inevitable transformative ability. We will learn from them all and one day transpose new meanings on Blackness, something beyond ecological risk.

_Endnotes

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Studies whose work allows us to also engage with earth-human relationships in invigorating ways. While we center Black scholars in our citational practice, we acknowledge that we think with many differently positioned voices, all with the hopes to more precisely get to the world we dream of.

5 Neel Ahuja, Tianna Bruno, Robert Bullard, Judith Carney, Nick Estes, Chelsea Frazier, Alexis Gumbs, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Mythri Jegathesan, Lyla June, Tiffany King, Max Liboiron, Toni Morrison, Winona LaDuke, Marisa Solomon, Dorceta Taylor, Pavithra Vasudevan, Françoise Vergès, Traci Voyles, Dina Gilio-Whitaker, Kyle Whyte, Brian Williams, Beverly Wright, Sylvia Wynter, and so many more. This list is not exhaustive, but it gestures to the depth of this interrelated way of contextualizing modernity. There are also activists, artists, and community members, past and present, who connect the experiences of othering to the exploitation of the planet and nonhuman matters. We owe much of our academic scholarship to their efforts.

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10 Lucille Clifton, “the earth is a living thing,” in *The Book of Light* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1993), Copyright © 1993 by Lucille Clifton, reprinted with the permission of Copper Canyon Press, <https://www.coppercanyonpress.org>.

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[23] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

[24] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 13.

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[34] Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism*, 40.

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47 Daniel O. Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant Peoples: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp* (Gainesville: University of Southern Florida Press, 2014).

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58 Clifton, "the earth is a living thing."

59 We deploy the phrase 'Black folks' here as we specifically move into the modes of resistance to disposability across the South. We gesture towards the legacy of Black Feminist Anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston, whose body of work is a thorough investigation and account of Southern Black "folks" (the everyday and quotidian) and their stories "folklore." Like Hurston, our endeavor is born out of a curiosity and love of our communities, and the ones we are connected to through struggle even when they are not 'ours.'

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61 Berry, "Soul Values and American Slavery," 201.

62 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (Boston: Thayer & Eldridge, 1861) 170.

63 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 171.

64 Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 171.

65 Jacobs*, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

66 Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Gunn Printers, 1838), 15.

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68 Moses Grandy, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy formerly a Slave in the United States of America* (Boston: Oliver Johnson 25 Cornhill, 1844), 5.

69 Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 10.

70 Sayers, *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People*, 116.

71 hooks, "Touching the Earth," 175.

72 bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 14.

73 Max Liboiron, "Modern Waste as Strategy," *Lo Squaderno: Explorations in Space and Society* 29 (2013): 9–12: here: 9. Andrew Szasz, *Ecopopulism: Toxic Waste and the Movement for Environmental Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 18–19. In writing this, we consider the ways that industry has shaped policy around waste in favor of source production. As Andrew Szasz also documents, during a time of emerging public unrest around hazardous waste in the 1970s, government policy via the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (1976) was faced with the decision to regulate either the production of waste or its disposal. Conceding to outspoken industry lobbyists, Congress ultimately selected the latter: "The industry perspective was backed by labor union spokesmen who argued that product standards, bans, or deposits would threaten jobs." A Dow Chemical lobbyist argued in front of the House of Representatives: "Authority to control production, composition, and distribution of products...would be devastating to free enterprise commerce." Here, we can see the direct connection between the corporation's right to profit and pollute.

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