

‘A Body of Water Inside Me’: Insurgent Waterscapes Shaping African American Life and Literature from the Great Migration into the Twenty-First Century, 1919-2019

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(English and Women’s and Gender Studies)
in The University of Michigan
2026

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the memories of my grandmothers, Jessye Norman Adams and Twila Ivanelle Schroeder. Thank you for instilling in me your steadfastness and passion for education.

And to every Black person who insists upon the water: each swimming stroke, plunge and immersion makes these waterscapes ours.

Acknowledgements

When I first came to graduate school, I had a vision of myself mostly working in isolation—hunched over in the library stacks, in an office, or perhaps alone in a coffee shop. I am so glad my vision was inaccurate. It has been my great joy to be gathered into a community of family, friends and loved ones, mentors, faculty, staff, and students over the eight years I've spent in the Joint Program in Women's and Gender Studies and English. Without them, the writing of this dissertation would not be possible.

First, I thank my mysterious, omnipotent God: I am thankful to have You as a loving friend and guide. I thank my precious family in Milwaukee: my fiercely funny mother Julie Adams, my steadfast father Gerald Adams, my brilliant auntie Jill Friker, and my twin sister and best friend, Alexandra Adams. Each of you lift me up to heights I did not think possible. I love you, I love you, I love you. I thank my dear family in Texas, where my great-grandmother Alberta Norman was born in 1894: my cousin and first best friend Whitney Viola, my big cousin and twin flame Erika, my Auntie Eve, and my Great Uncle Lucious. Our family's migration across Omaha, Dallas, Chicago and Milwaukee led us here, and I am eternally grateful. I'm also thankful to have such wonderful "in-laws" in Nicole Murray-Lewis, Christina Lee, EJ Lewis, and Eryn Lewis; thank you for loving me and cheering me on. I thank my nonhuman children for their cuddles, gentleness and fierce love: Brandy (the red labrador), Raven (the rottweiler), and my sweet cats Smoky, Rocky, and Ripley.

I am blessed to have cultivated such a generous and loving community in Michigan. I thank Jeremy Glover, my “midbestie” (Midwestern Best Friend), for loving me and keeping an eye to the sky for birds. I thank Kyle Lindsey for his brilliance, side-splitting jokes and home-cooked meals. I thank Sena Duran, my Abrahamic cousin, for pondering faith with me, for her hugs and impeccable style. Sena, I am honored that we get to be “boys” together.

I thank the brilliant friends and mentors who came before me: Mar Aziz, I’ll always sing *NSYNC with you. Hannah Bredar, I hope I get to dance with you for all your birthdays to come. Martha Henzy, thank you for your big laugh and for teaching me to knit. Casidy Campbell and Eshe Sherley, thank you for your brilliance, laughter, and for always reminding me how powerful Black feminist criticism is. To LaVelle Ridley, my first and forever mentor in the program: thank you for your Piscean creative and critical genius, and for always looking out for me. Thank you to my fellow ecocritics, especially Gina Hsu (my water sister), Surabhi Balachander, and Patricia Jewell, for asking a question about limnology and Black feminism that I am still thinking about. Your sweetness and intelligence buoyed me as I navigated the later years of the program. Thank you to Mix Mann for your tender hugs, and thank you Rianna Johnson-Levy for your brilliance and deadpan humor. To my “Sweetland Sweeties” Gala Patenkovic, Katie Mikos, and Luiza Duarte Caetano: I am ever grateful for every craft night, chapter workshop, and group meal. We celebrate each other so well, and I could not have made it here without you. Thank you to my amazing cohort for their shoulders to lean on: Jessica Kiebler, Emily Coccia, Irene Mora, and Cecil McGhee. I could not have asked for a better group of people to navigate this program with.

Thank you to my sisterfriend Dr. Sarah Bruno, who teaches me about loyalty, honesty, and courageous joy. I learned from you how to speak up for my ideas in graduate school. To my

best friend of over 20 years, Lauren Elizabeth Champeau: thank you for loving every version of me and always asking for a bound copy of my future book. Thank you to another one of my best friends, Daniella Toosie-Watson: you are a friend of my heart and my mind. I thank my sisterfriends in Milwaukee for their love and encouragement, especially Annie Beamish, Rosella Joseph, Sabria Borom, and Breanna Taylor. Thank you also to my colleague-friend Dr. Dana Murphy, who I love to talk about Black feminism and poetry with. Your gentle and generous heart has meant so much to me over the years.

I am thankful to have such a generous and brilliant dissertation committee: to my Chair, Scotti Parrish: Thank you for hosting me and my fellow students in your backyard in the early fall of 2019, where I sat under a twilight sky with William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* for the first time. Your consistent belief in me and my ecocritical ideas means the world to me, and it is always a joy to think with you. To Dr. Louis: thank you for steadying me when my confidence wavered. Through being a Graduate Student Instructor for your course on race and mental health, you taught me how to be a more equitable teacher and reminded me that care and rigor inform one another in the classroom. To Aisha Sabatini Sloan: I am so thankful for your guidance in helping me think about my creative writing practice within my dissertation. Your beautiful writing about Rodney King's relationship to swimming pools in Los Angeles will always stay with me. To LaKisha Simmons: though you have been on my committee for the shortest amount of time, your willingness to think with me about Black feminist geographies and Black childhood has been fundamental to the finishing of this project. Thank you for your sage advice and encouraging spirit.

I am also thankful to faculty members within and without English and Women's and Gender Studies who have shaped my thinking in various ways. Aida Levy-Hussen, thank you for

the class I took a decade ago at the University of Wisconsin-Madison called “Problems in Contemporary African American Literature.” It was a meeting with you during my junior year that inspired me to pursue a Ph.D. in English; thank you for encouraging me to “say more.” Meg Sweeney, thank you for giving me the tools to think about feminist autotheory. Thank you to David Porter, who helped me nurture my passion for place-based education throughout my time working with the Detroit River Story Lab. Thank you Susan Najita for your class, “Environment, Empire and Decolonization,” and for the opportunity to work with you on a research project during my first year of graduate school. Thank you, Valerie Traub, for your playfully critical eyebrow raise when I confessed that although I was writing about swimming, I hadn’t spent much time in the pool—you helped me think about ways to bring water and embodiment together. Thank you, Liz Wingrove, for being so attentive and encouraging as I navigated administrative challenges. Thank you Sidonie Smith for your generous scholarship award that helped me continue my research, and for talking about feminist spirituality with me.

Thank you also to my “fellow fellows” of the Institute for the Humanities, with whom I was blessed to spend the 2024-2025 academic year studying, thinking, and writing: Asma Baban, Jason Young, Gayle Rubin, Stephen Berrey, Paolo Squatitri, Jacob Lederman, Joey Song, Janaki Philips, Jahnabi Chanchani, Umayyah Cable, Pragya Kaul Guido, Jennifer Hsieh, Yun Chen, Emilia Yang, Alyssa Paredes, Nancy Khalil, Niloofar Sarlati, and Melissa Phruksachart. Thank you to every staff member and librarian in the English and Women’s and Gender Studies departments, especially Kate Sechler, Thea Bude, Senia Vasquez, Meredith Kahn, and Sigrid Anderson. I could not do this work without you all. Thank you to my favorite baristas I had the pleasure of getting to know while they fueled my tired brain with sweet caffeine: Abbey, Matt and Sarah at lab in Ann Arbor, and Hunter at Vertex in Ypsilanti.

In March 2018, when we were both being recruited by the University, I met a beautiful, funny, and bright young woman named Sydney Ella-Camille Tunstall. At the Hampton Inn on South State Street, we began our friendship debating what Stevie Wonder's best album is: I advocated for *Innervisions*, while she made a case for *Fulfillingness' First Finale*. Though I still think *Innervisions* is his best work, I can concede for these lines from "Too Shy To Say":

I wanna fly
Away with you
Until there's nothing more for us to do
I wanna be
More than a friend
Until the end of an endless end

Sydney, through every high and low of graduate school, you have loved me. We've often debated whether we would be graduate students again, knowing what we know now. While the answer about graduate school changes day to day, please know that if I were given the chance to give you my heart again, I would never hesitate.

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Figures.....	x
Abstract.....	xi
Introduction: Turning Inland.....	1
Theoretical Foundations & Key Terms.....	5
African American Literature, Black Studies and the Atlantic Ocean	5
Material Ecocriticism, Black Geographies and Black Ecologies: Water as a form.....	9
Key term: Insurgent Waterscape.....	13
Key terms: Limnology, Limne, Limn	14
Objects and Methods.....	17
Limnological reading	19
Feminist autotheory	19
Interventions	21
Chapter Summaries.....	23
Limne: A Body of Water Inside Me	26
Chapter One: Lake Michigan’s Material and Metaphorical Turbidity in Eve Ewing’s 1919 and Lishan AZ’s <i>Eugene’s Cove</i>	28
Introduction: The aquatic context of Eugene Williams’ murder	28
Perilous and Playful: Reading Lake Michigan in the early twentieth century	32
Lake Michigan as an Insurgent Waterscape	37
Limnological reading and Material-Metaphorical Turbidity	40
Limnological Reading: Eve L. Ewing’s 1919.....	43
Negotiating the turbid circumstances of July 27th, 1919 via “Jump/Rope”	43
“The Pearl Diver’s” recovery attempt.....	47
Murkiness, subaquatic play and a limnological afterlife in <i>Eugene’s Cove</i>	57
Conclusion: The body, the city, the map, the reservoir	64

Limne: Florida Water.....	68
Chapter Two: Limnological Interiority and Relationality in Zora Neale Hurston’s <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>	70
Introduction: Covered by the waters.....	70
Beyond the porch and the pear tree: Trends in Ecocritical and Feminist criticism of <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> , and a turn to limnological interiority and relationality	72
Limnological reading: Interiority and relationality.....	77
A freshwater spring and a tropical disturbance: The limnological recomposition of Nanny and Janie.....	78
Marriage, fishing and the redirection of mourning on Lake Sabelia	84
The recomposing and redirecting Everglades	87
The disordering and redirecting Lake Okeechobee floodwaters	93
Conclusion: Janie’s return to Phoeby and the unconfined freshwater spring	96
Limne: <i>The Black Pool of Genius</i>.....	99
Chapter Three: Geographies of Aspiration: Black Girls and the Swimming Pool	101
Introduction: Dajerria, 2015.....	101
Samantha, 2007.....	102
The swimming pool as a geography of aspiration	104
Four Black girls and Feminist Autotheory.....	109
The swimming pool and ekphrastic excess.....	113
The functions of the American swimming pool	119
Intracommunal writing and athletic rigor: Inez Robie Patterson.....	122
Black Girls’ Aquatic Beauty and Athletic Rigor	125
Intracommunal Writing and Camaraderie between ‘Girls in Sports’	135
The aquatic Race Girl’s enduring impact	138
Bubbliness, Buoyancy and the Political Endurance of a Smile: Mimi Jones	139
The Political and Affective Register of a Smile	141
Buoyancy in the face of muriatic acid	143
Mimi’s enduring bubbliness	145
Coda: Dajerria and Samantha: Distilling the law toward aquatic freedom	150
Conclusion: The waters we see	165
Bibliography	169

List of Figures

Figure 1 'The Color Line Has Reached the North' Chicago Tribune, July 28th, 1919	36
Figure 2 Marcus underwater with silver fabric, photo by Lishan AZ	42
Figure 3 Marcus underwater with silver fabric, photo by Lishan AZ	43
Figure 4 Photo of a possible 'mer-child,' by Lishan AZ	58
Figure 5 Two Black children hold each other underwater, photo by Lishan AZ.....	61
Figure 6 Four photos of Black children underwater by Lishan AZ.....	61
Figure 7 A Black child holding up underwater 'peace signs,' photo by Lishan AZ.....	62
Figure 8 Inez 'Pat' Patterson demonstrating a dive, Philadelphia Art Museum.....	124
Figure 9 Billy Prince Griffin poses in her bathing suit, Philadelphia Tribune	128
Figure 10 WM.E. Griffin poses in his bathing suit, Philadelphia Tribune	129
Figure 11 The author for Lady Generals picture day, September 2012.....	132
Figure 12 "Inez Patterson first Race Girl to Qualify as Swimming Official," Philadelphia Tribune	134
Figure 13 Lady Generals at the 2012 MPS Conference Meet	138
Figure 14 Mimi Jones, Brenda Darten, Al Lingo, and J.T. Johnson in the Monson Motor Lodge Pool, June 18th, 1964, Associated Press.....	142
Figure 15 Mimi holds the infamous Monson Motor Lodge photograph, The Washington Post, 2020.....	146
Figure 16 Cheryl Jones, daughter of Brenda Darten, looks out at the swimming pool	148
Figure 17 Cheryl Jones waves one foot above the steps into the Hilton hotel pool in St. Augustine	148
Figure 18 Milwaukee County Lifeguard Corps Picture Day, August 2015	151
Figure 19 Screenshot of anonymous white Craig Ranch resident's folded hands	153
Figure 20 Dajerria speaks out about the assault, June 8 2015	154
Figure 21 "FACTS," page 3.....	158
Figure 22 "FACTS," page 4.....	159
Figure 23 "FACTS," page 5.....	160
Figure 24 "FACTS," page 6.....	161

Abstract

‘A Body of Water Inside Me’: Insurgent Waterscapes Shaping African American Life and Literature from the Great Migration into the Twenty-First Century” studies literary and historical relationships between Black subjects and bodies of water beyond yet not divorced from the Atlantic Ocean and its symbolic and material legacies of Middle Passage. Assembling an eclectic archive of poetry, a novel, photojournalism, documentary photography, and African American periodicals, I index various relatively natural bodies of freshwater and human-constructed swimming pools as what I call *insurgent waterscapes*. I argue that studying these bodies of water in the literary and historical contexts of the Great Migration illuminates their significance to Black personal and political worldmaking amidst white supremacist violence into our contemporary moment. These waterscapes include: the Lake Michigan of 1919 Chicago in Eve L. Ewing’s poetry collection *1919* and Lishan AZ’s *Eugene’s Cove*; the freshwater lakes, Floridan aquifer, and storm systems of 1928 central and southern Florida in Zora Neale Hurston’s watershed novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; urban swimming pools in 1920s to 1930s Philadelphia, Harlem and a hotel pool in 1960s St. Augustine, and twenty-first century outdoor pools in McKinney, Texas and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

I employ two interrelated research methods through which to explore these materials. Using feminist autotheory, I use my personal experience as a competitive swimmer, lifeguard, and swim instructor to position myself as a guide through the roughly one-hundred year timeline that my archive spans. Feminist autotheory allows me to critically examine my own attachments

to the forms of water I study, and unsettle a linear progress narrative of African American sociopolitical life from chattel slavery to our contemporary moment. Further, I develop a method called *limnological reading*, which uses the physical, chemical, and biological elements of freshwater ecosystems to inform my analyses of African American literature. Using ecological reports and freshwater science, limnological reading offers a way to make visible the underconsidered forms of freshwater in these literary works, as well as their impact on the interior lives of Black literary subjects.

This dissertation intervenes upon ongoing critical conversations in the fields of Black geographies, Black feminist criticism, and Ecocriticism. First, I contend that the study of these waters illuminates the significance of aquatic recreation—particularly in the forms of swimming and fishing—to African American life throughout the twentieth century and into the present moment. Second, I contend that the study of these forms of freshwater and swimming pools demonstrate that struggles against white supremacy are not contained to terrestrial movements such as marches or sit-ins; indeed, these waters serve as insurgent, rebellious sites of political struggle. Third, I contend that these waters, though differing in material composition from the Atlantic Ocean, are also significant and complex sites of freedom and constraint.

Introduction: Turning Inland

To open her 2017 song, “LSD,” (standing for Chicago’s Lake Shore Drive, a major thoroughfare situated alongside Lake Michigan), Black Chicagoan, singer-songwriter and poet Jamila Woods asserts her preference for the Great Lake:

A body of water inside me
Reminds me of oceans,
Though I’ve never known one
I’m born by a cold one
It’s only a small one compared
To the coast, I prefer it to most¹

Woods immediately asserts her preference for Lake Michigan—the body of water she has grown up with and knows intimately—and states that she has never truly known an ocean like she knows the lake. Her knowledge of the lake shapes her love for Chicago, despite how cruel it can be to Black communities, as well as her love for herself.

I grew up about 95 miles northwest of where Jamila sings of her beloved lake, near Milwaukee’s Lake Michigan beachfront. When I was little, I figured the lake was an ocean because I could not see to the other side of its shores. It was only as I returned to it over and over again each summer of my youth that I learned it was a part of something larger than itself—one of the largest bodies of freshwater, and a part of a larger Great Lakes basin connected to and

¹ Woods, Jamila. “LSD.” *Heavn* (2016).

distinct from the Atlantic. I learned the stench of the dead alewives washed ashore, the force of a bacterium called cryptosporidium that led my family to drink from truck-delivered water jugs for an amount of time I can't recall, and the formidable force of invasive zebra mussels. I learned that there were certain times of the day when some white Milwaukeeans moved north to Atwater beach, avoiding Bradford Beach due to its perceived "rowdiness," or, in other words, the presence of Black Milwaukeeans. I learned how cold the lake is nearly year-round, that if you're looking for warm water to swim in, then you should look elsewhere. I learned that wealthy families living on Lake Drive could privatize portions of the beach, a worn twine rope dividing where I could venture and where I could not. Alongside this knowledge, I learned that, like Woods, I much preferred the murky, cold, waters of Lake Michigan to even the warmest ocean water.

Woods's love song for her lake, her city, and her Black² womanhood is a text I returned to constantly as I developed my dissertation project. Woods' verse serves as a point of departure for this project: from a multidisciplinary focus on the Atlantic Ocean's relationship to Black history, culture, and life toward a focus on how inland lakes, storm systems, and swimming pools shape African American life and literature in the early twentieth century to our present moment. The questions that guide this dissertation are: how do bodies/forms of water beyond the Atlantic Ocean and after the Middle Passage shape Black subject formation, both within literature (i.e., as symbolic, figurative affordances) and in mediations of historical reality in the

² I capitalize the "B" in Black after Barbara Smith in her 1987 pivotal essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism." In the essay, Smith argues for a "Black Feminist criticism" to combat the invisibility of Black women and Black lesbian writers in literary and political spheres. This Black Feminist criticism accentuates the interlocking of race, class, and gender in Black women's and Black lesbian writings. I use this format throughout this dissertation project to bring discourses of Black Feminisms, Ecocriticisms, and African American Literature closer together.

early twentieth century (i.e., as material affordances)? How does the materiality of these waters inform the figurative aspects of these Black literary and historical subjects?

I see my work as the work of turning inland—not to ignore the material and figurative significance of the Atlantic Ocean—but to examine understudied forms of water that shape African American self-fashioning beginning in the geographic sociopolitical upheaval of the Great Migration.³ I index the material and metaphorical Lake Michigan, inland lakes, the Everglades swamp, of Central-Southern Florida and storms of the Lake Okeechobee Watershed, and swimming pools in Philadelphia, St. Augustine to explore the affordances of extra-oceanic⁴ forms of water they relate to the study of Black life in the wake of chattel slavery. Particularly, I am interested in how these material-metaphorical waters—in their agentic relationships with Black literary and historical subjects—constitute and reflect insurgent Black geographies beginning with the geopolitical upheaval of the Great Migration. These inland waters speak to the crucial nature of aquatic recreation to interpersonal and political self-fashioning in an era of white supremacist violence as well as immense and prolific Black cultural production.⁵

Materially, symbolically, and historically, the Atlantic Ocean is a site of racial wounding, resistance, loss, and reconnection to the slave past. However, in my project I contend that as scholars of Black Studies, African American Literature, and Ecocriticism, attention to these material bodies and metaphorical forms of water can expand our knowledge of how Black ecologies are formed via constructions of race, gender, and geography. I do not intend for this

³ See Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Boll Weevil in the Cotton / Devil in the White Man”: Reasons for Leaving the South.” *Who Set You Flowin? The African American Migration Narrative*, pp. 13-47.

⁴ I use “extra-oceanic” as a term that captures forms of water that exist outside but often in relation to the Atlantic Ocean (in the case of this study, those waters would include Lake Michigan, the Floridan aquifer, Lake Okeechobee, and the Everglades wetland).

⁵ See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay’s edited edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, p. 554.

dissertation to suggest an exhaustive list of waters that are understudied in African American literature and cultural history. Rather, I turn my critical curiosities to these particular material bodies and metaphorical forms of water to illustrate their significance as sites of liberation and constraint, violence and joy, and aspiration and endurance. As the Atlantic Ocean bears the symbolic and material weight of the horrors of the Middle Passage, each of the literary and historical waterscapes I study turn our attention toward their geographic specificity, material features, and human interventions to illustrate their affordances as insurgent waterscapes in the anti-Black climates of the early twentieth century into the early twenty-first century.

I employ two interrelated research methods through which to explore these material-metaphorical waters: Employing feminist autotheory, I use my personal experience as a competitive swimmer, lifeguard, and swim instructor to position myself as a guide through the roughly one-hundred year timeline that my archive spans. As I explain further in the “Objects and Methods” section of this introduction, feminist autotheory allows me to critically examine my own attachments to the forms of water I study to unsettle a linear progress narrative of African American sociopolitical life from chattel slavery to our contemporary moment. In my use of these waterscapes to challenge this linear progress narrative, I draw from Michelle M. Wright’s *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*. Wright draws from the principles of physics, specifically “epiphenomenal time, or the ‘now’ through which the past, present and future are always interpreted.”⁶ Wright sees Blackness as not a fixed, stable, genetic or phenotypical “what,” but a multidirectional “when” and “where.”⁷ As I guide the reader through the century-long timespan, I hope to underscore that African American literary and historical relationships with these forms of freshwater and swimming pools show a multitude of

⁶ See Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, p. 5.

⁷ Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, p. 4.

different attachments across time and space. In other terms, the waters in this century-long archive magnify the multidirectional, nonlinear forms of African American literary and historical joy, leisure, violence, peace, alienation, and belonging that flow alongside one another.

The second method I use is what I term *limnological reading*, which uses the physical, chemical, and biological elements of freshwater ecosystems to inform my analyses of African American literature. Using ecological reports and freshwater science, limnological reading offers a way to make visible the underconsidered forms of freshwater in these literary works, as well as their impact on the interior lives of Black literary subjects.

Theoretical Foundations & Key Terms

The theoretical foundations of this dissertation project are based on and guided by Black Feminist literary criticism, Material ecocriticism, Black ecologies, and Black geographies. My engagement with each of these disciplines and fields demonstrates an investment in the ways relatively natural and human-constructed bodies of water shape African American literature and cultural history in the sociopolitical upheaval of the first Great Migration. Through critical engagement with literary representations of water in stories of self-making, I initiate expansive, cross-disciplinary thinking about what freshwater systems and swimming pools mean and do in various African American lifeworlds.

African American Literature, Black Studies and the Atlantic Ocean

Across the work of novelists, historians, poets and theorists that take up the Atlantic Ocean in the study of Black life, we learn that its vastness and depth comprise a material and symbolic space upon which to theorize the horrors of the Middle Passage, the determined

resistance of captive West Africans, and the “afterlives” of chattel slavery.⁸ Through Robert Hayden we learn that Middle Passage is “a voyage through death / to life on these shores.”⁹ From M. NourbeSe Philip, we know that the story of the Middle Passage is irreparably fragmented; perhaps we should not return to the violent history of the Atlantic to seek a whole and neat understanding of it, but rather to encounter and linger with the senselessness of it.¹⁰ Kimberly N. Ruffin and Camille Dungy assert the long tradition of African American literary engagement with natural environments from the slave narrative to the contemporary novel, with Ruffin delineating an “African American ecoliterary tradition.”¹¹ With this ecoliterary tradition in mind, I draw from Anissa Janine Wardi’s insistence upon the relationship between water and African American cultural memory, noting the “politics and poetry of water in the African American expressive tradition.”¹²

Paul Gilroy’s pivotal formulation of *the Black Atlantic* assists us in understanding the Atlantic Ocean as a material and figurative space where “intercultural positionality” is created; a vast aquatic space where the borders between nations and cultures are troubled, and the notion of a “pure culture” is necessarily challenged.¹³ Rinaldo Walcott tells us we can understand Black people across the African diaspora relate to water in an ambivalent sense: in other terms, these relationships are not solely traumatic or solely healing. Walcott’s term *the black aquatic* offers

⁸ See Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, p. 6. In her groundbreaking monograph, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage*, historian Sowande Mustakeem centers the transatlantic slave trade—most specifically, the perilous experiences that constitute being aboard British slave ships—to counter the typical placement of Middle Passage as a “symbol” or “artifact” in African American studies. Like Philip, Mustakeem provides insight into the slave ship as a social space, however precarious. In Mustakeem’s theorization, the slave ship is the “epicenter in the making and unmaking of transported slaves” (p. 4).

⁹ Hayden, Robert. “Middle Passage.” *Poetry Foundation*.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43076/middle-passage>

¹⁰ See Philip, M. NourbeSe’s *Zong!* pp. 187-209.

¹¹ Ruffin, Kimberly N. *Black On Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions*, pp. 1-24.

¹² Wardi, Anissa Janine. *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective*,

¹³ Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, p. 3.

us a space to see these relationships as “ambiguous” and also “foundationally formative of blackness.”¹⁴ For Black people affected by the trans-Atlantic slave trade especially, the sea is both life and death. Christina Sharpe offers us the concept of “the wake”¹⁵—space & time to honor the deceased, the space produced by a ship parting the water— to help us think about the persistent effects of slavery into the twenty-first century.

Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick turns to the Atlantic Ocean and Middle Passage as a primary site of domination in her monograph *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle*. In the introduction, McKittrick writes:

Indeed, Black matters are spatial matters. The displacement of difference, geographic domination, transatlantic slavery, and the Black Atlantic Ocean differently contribute to mapping out the real and imaginative geographies of Black women; they are understood here as social processes that *make* geography a racial-sexual terrain. Hence, Black women’s lives and experiences become especially visible through these concepts and moments because they clarify that Blackness is integral to the production of space.¹⁶

Indeed, Blackness is spatial; here, McKittrick builds upon Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s concept of “the displacement of difference.” According to Gilmore, what figures into this displacement is that “particular kinds of bodies, one by one, are materially (if not always visibly) configured by racism into a hierarchy of human and inhuman persons that in sum form the category of ‘human being.’”¹⁷ Thus, for McKittrick and Gilmore, the production of humanness and the production of geography are inextricable processes. These intertwined processes are further complicated when

¹⁴ Walcott, Rinaldo. “The Black Aquatic,” *pliquid blackness*, 5:1, Duke University Press, April 2021.

¹⁵ See Sharpe, Christina’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016. P. 65.

¹⁶ McKittrick, Katherine. “Introduction: Geographic Stories.” *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle*, xv.

¹⁷ McKittrick, Katherine. “Introduction: Geographic Stories.” *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, xv.

Black women's identities and experiences have been organized and displaced by what McKittrick terms "geographies of domination." The primary geography of domination she draws from throughout her analyses is transatlantic slavery; from the hold of the slave ship to the plantation, transatlantic slavery defined the Black woman's "racial-sexual body" and further "determined her whereabouts in her relation to her humanity" (xvii). Before reading *Demonic Grounds*, I recognized the significance of racialized gender as a category of analysis from reading Spillers's landmark essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Spillers argues that Black "females," making up a "smaller quantity" on slave ships, were "suspended in the Oceanic" and therefore "culturally unmade." Though their sexual difference was measured in this lack of space, Spillers insists that the institution of slavery threw received ideas about gender difference "into crisis."¹⁸ Spillers's and McKittrick's works are two examples of scholarship deeply important to my own thinking about Blackness, gender, and its relationships to natural and built environments alike. Spillers theorizes a Black womanhood apart from "patriarchalized female gender," suggesting that we aspire to gain "the insurgent ground of a female social subject."¹⁹

We can also locate aquatic insurgency in Toni Morrison's essay "The Site of Memory," in which she theorizes about emotional memory of writers in relation to the Mississippi River.

Morrison reminds us that

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our "flooding."²⁰

¹⁸ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." P. 80.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 80.

²⁰ Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory," p. 19.

Here, Morrison stakes out a relationship between the material memory and path of the Mississippi River and the practice of writing emotional truth. Wardi affirms the mutual relationship between bodies of water and human bodies, writing that Morrison's simile "advances the notion that humans, like bodies of water, are capable of flooding and that rivers, like humans, are creatures of memory."²¹ Though the Atlantic Ocean is not unimportant to Morrison's literary work, I find her theoretical focus on the Mississippi River compelling in that it shows that the Atlantic Ocean is not the ultimate waterscape through which to study the conditions of Black life. As a fellow Midwesterner and product of the Great Migration, I see the critical and creative potential of studying Black life in relation to the material bodies of water most proximal to us.²² Morrison urges us toward the importance of writing to access emotional memory, as well as alternative, extra-oceanic forms of water through which to study African American literature and life.

Material Ecocriticism, Black Geographies and Black Ecologies: Water as a form

My approach to studying water as a form takes its cue in part from Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. For Levine, form is not only a literary phenomenon (locatable within the covers of a novel or the beginning and ending lines of a poem), it is also a way of conceptualizing the organizing forces that shape sociopolitical experiences.²³ Levine finds it necessary to connect the content and form of a novel with the political and social

²¹ Wardi, Anissa J. "Introduction: African American Watersheds." *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective*. P. 1-11.

²² See Drelfus, Claudia. "Chloe Wofford Talks About Toni Morrison." *The New York Times*, 11 September 1994. Morrison's mother, Ramah was born in Greenville, Alabama, while her father George Wofford was from Cartersville, Georgia. The Woffords moved to Lorain, Ohio after George witnessed a lynching. He worked for U.S. Steel in Ohio. Morrison grew up nearby the Black River and Lake Erie. <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/11/magazine/chloe-wofford-talks-about-toni-morrison.html>

²³ See Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. P. 1.

conditions under which it is made. Extending Levine's thesis, I see water as a form that shapes and organizes the content of African American literature and life at material, symbolic, and historical levels. Levine identifies "affordances" as the defining feature of form. Borrowed from design theory, affordances "describe[s] the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs."²⁴ According to Levine, literary forms are not divorced from reality, rather, they help us understand the complexities of political power. Guided in part by Levine's curiosities, I ask: What do freshwater systems and the chlorinated water of a swimming pool as a form *afford* to African American life? What does water *do* as a form? How does it interact with Black literary and historical subjects as they migrated within and beyond geographic boundaries in the beginning of the twentieth century?

As I think with water as a form, I also draw from the principles of Material ecocriticism. The interconnectedness of matter and meaning is central to Material ecocriticism, just as the interconnections between material waters and African American literary and historical subjectivity are in this project. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann define material ecocriticism as "the study of the way material forms—bodies, things, elements, toxic substances, chemicals, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, and biological entities—intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we interpret as stories."²⁵ Material ecocritics insist upon placing the human in a "larger material-semiotic collective"²⁶ as opposed to locating the human as transcendent or dominant over a given ecosystem. In what Donna Haraway terms a "material-semiotic reality,"²⁷ literature is not merely a reflection of natural life or society, instead, we can "read world and text as an agentic

²⁴ Ibid, p. 7.

²⁵ Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann. "Stories Come to Matter." *Material Ecocriticism*. P. 7.

²⁶ Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann. "Stories Come to Matter." *Material Ecocriticism*. P. 6.

²⁷ Haraway, Donna J. *When Species Meet*. P.2.

entanglement.”²⁸ In the chapters that follow this introduction, the entanglement between Black Chicagoans and the material waters of Lake Michigan in 1919 locate an aquatic origin for resistance to white supremacy; For Janie Crawford, Floridan aquifer and inland lakes of central-southern Florida redirect and reconstitute her interpersonal romantic and familial relationships with her Nanny, Phoeby Watson, and her third husband Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods; and Inez Patterson and Mimi Jones transform swimming pools of West Philadelphia, New York City and St. Augustine into spaces of liberatory potential despite violently enforced racial segregation. These Black literary and historical subjects converse and “act together”²⁹ with the freshwater systems and swimming pools they encounter and inhabit.

The generative interplay between matter and meaning is not only vital to material ecocriticism. Grounded in the Black Radical Tradition, the principles of Black ecologies and Black geographies share an investment in the material-semiotic interaction, and are integral to this dissertation. In the April 1970 issue of *The Black Scholar*—a special issue focused on the conditions of Black life in urban contexts— the journal’s co-founder Nathan Hare urgently calls attention to the “ecological ordeal of the black race.”³⁰ This “ordeal” is the disproportionate distribution and concentration of and environmental toxins and pollutants in Black neighborhoods, conveniently ignored by what Hare names a “white ecology.” White ecology, in Hare’s view, views environmental pollutants as merely an obstacle to outdoor recreation and the conservation of habitats for endangered nonhuman animals.³¹ While he notes the bourgeois

²⁸ Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann. “Stories Come to Matter.” *Material Ecocriticism*. P. 6.

²⁹ See Bruno Latour’s *Politics of Nature*, p. 61.

³⁰ Hare, Nathan. *The Black Scholar*, April 1970, Vol. 1, No. 6, BLACK CITIES: COLONIES OR CITYSTATES? (April 1970), pp. 2-8.

³¹ Hare writes: “In the realm of white ecology, pollution ‘closes your beaches and prevents your youngsters from wading, swimming, boating, water-skiing, fishing, and other recreation close to home,’ and characterizes white ecology’s main thrust as ‘we want clear water, for boating and swimming, and fishing,—and clean water just to look at.’ Similar involvement includes the planting of redwood trees,

interests of white ecology, Hare presses upon a dangerous misconception that Black communities are generally unconcerned with the environments in which they make their lives, asserting that “the emergence of the concept of ecology in American life is potentially of momentous relevance to the ultimate liberation of black people. Yet blacks and their environmental interests have been so blatantly omitted that blacks and the ecology movement currently stand in contradiction to each other.”³² Following Hare’s assertion that “the solutions set forth for the ‘ecological crisis’ are reformist and evasive of the social and political revolution which black environmental correction demands,”³³ scholars in Black ecologies and Black geographies have illuminated the mutually constitutive relationship between race, space and place.³⁴ Alex A. Moulton and Inge Salo emphasize the subtle distinctions between and common foundations of Black ecologies and Black geographies: Where key themes in Black ecologies literature tend to include “the relationship between antiblackness, the exploitation of nature and ecological crisis, and the imperative of racial justice to environmental justice,”³⁵ themes in Black geographies scholarship tend to include “Black embodiment, Black spatial thought and practice, and the relationship between race and spatial imaginaries and representation.”³⁶ Central to both of these subfields of Black Studies are abolitionist ethics and praxes, the dynamism and fugitivity of Black spatial knowledge, and the unsettling of what Sylvia Wynter describes as the

saving the American eagle, and redeeming terrestrial beauty. Thus it is seen that ecologists aimed at the hearts and purse strings of industrialists and hit the eyeballs of the white bourgeoisie” (2).

³² See Hare, “Black Ecology,” p. 2.

³³ See Hare, “Black Ecology,” p. 2.

³⁴ Geographers typically define “space” as a measurable, physical location, whereas “place” typically refers to an environment that has accrued and is marked by cultural meaning. See Lambert, D. (eds) *Debates in Geography Education*, pp. 49–61.

³⁵ Moulton, Alex A. and Inge Salo. “Black Geographies and Black Ecologies as Insurgent Ecocriticism.” *Environment and Society*, 2022, Vol. 13. P. 157.

³⁶ Moulton, Alex A. and Inge Salo. “Black Geographies and Black Ecologies as Insurgent Ecocriticism.” *Environment and Society*, 2022, Vol. 13. P. 157.

overdetermined, colonial nonwhite “Man” as the sole producer of space.³⁷ In other terms, as Moulton and Salo note, Black ecologies and geographies constitute an “insurgent ecocriticism” that addresses the marginalization and radical potential of Black spatial thought.³⁸ Insurgency, as I will discuss in the following subsection of key terms, is a quality I ascribe to the freshwater, swimming pools, and early 20th century African American literary and historical subjects I study.

Key term: Insurgent Waterscape

I draw from Black feminist literary critic Hortense J. Spillers and historian Kevin Dawson for the term *insurgent waterscape*. Toward the end of her watershed essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Spillers asserts that the Black people who were “suspended in the Oceanic” have been culturally unmade by the Middle Passage, “ungendered” by the peculiar institution of chattel slavery, and continuously and violently marked by racism and misogyny “are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the insurgent ground as female social subject.”³⁹ Further, drawing from McKittrick, I see these early 20th century insurgent waters as real and imagined, material and metaphorical, rebellious and restless. While I take Spillers’ cue to look for that insurgent ground, I look for it in aquatic terms beyond, yet not isolated from, the Atlantic Ocean.

The latter part of the term is drawn from historian Kevin Dawson’s monograph *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora*. Dawson develops the term “waterscape” as a body of water that is infused with culture, combating the colonial white

³⁷ Wynter, Sylvia. “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Fall 2003, pp. 257-337.

³⁸ Moulton, Alex A. and Inge Salo. “Black Geographies and Black Ecologies as Insurgent Ecocriticism.” *Environment and Society*, 2022, Vol. 13. P. 157.

³⁹ See Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” p. 80.

European notions of the oceans and other bodies of water as void of culture and in need of colonial tempering. Waterscape “expresses how freshwater and saltwater systems actively informed group identities while articulating how water and land seascapes were interlaced into amphibious culturescapes.”⁴⁰ What I find especially useful about “waterscape” is that it seeks to actively include freshwater as a container and conduit of sociopolitical significance, expanding yet not ignoring the symbolic, historical, and material significance of marine “seascapes” to Black Diasporic life. I explore Black literary and historical subjectivity in aquatic terms beyond the symbolic realm of the Atlantic Ocean and toward inland waterscapes, both relatively natural and human-constructed. *Insurgent waterscape*, like the objects studied within this dissertation, links the literary and the historical, real and imagined dimensions of African Americans’ relationship to aquatic space. As *insurgent waterscape* allows me to connect bodies of freshwater that are home to upheavals both personal and political, literary and historical: A race riot in the first chapter; intra-state migration, laboring, loving and surviving in Florida in the second chapter, and everyday and spectacular swimming in pools in the third and fourth chapters. The following key term, *limnology*, allows me to more precisely identify the material specificities of freshwater systems and their relationships with African American literary subjects in the first two chapters of this project.

Key terms: Limnology, Limne, Limn

As a field of study, Limnology refers to the study of the crucially “integrated”⁴¹ physical, biological, and chemical elements of inland freshwater ecosystems. Ecologist and limnologist Robert Wetzel reminds us of the intimate relationships between land and freshwater, defining lake ecosystems as spaces of intimate exchange of energy and organic material. Wetzel notes

⁴⁰ Dawson, Kevin. *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora*, p. 2.

⁴¹ Wetzel, *Limnology*, p. 1.

that the “lake ecosystem is intimately coupled with its drainage area and atmosphere, and with its running waters and ground waters that flow, and metabolize en route, components of the land being transported to the lake.”⁴² Wetzel’s limnological scholarship, like that of the material ecocritics, emphasizes the human’s inextricability from the ecosystems they inhabit: “It is of major importance,” Wetzel writes, that “we fully understand the structure and function of fresh waters. Man is a very real component of these ecosystems, and his effects on them will increase markedly until stabilization of demographic growth is imposed.”⁴³ With a deeper understanding of the finite and delicate nature of freshwater resources, Wetzel hopes, humans might realize and act upon our designation as members of a freshwater ecosystem whose lives depend on its health. Limnology, in other words, is a study of freshwater’s movement and material transformation. I find limnology useful to this project, as it integrates freshwater across various states of matter and location, and foregrounds the multidirectionality and material dynamism of freshwater systems. Without taking on a misanthropic perspective on various ecological crises, limnology helps us see the vital role of humans as organisms in freshwater ecosystems.

Limne and limn

The ancient Greek root of limnology, *limne*, is a feminine noun that refers to a lake, pond or harbor.⁴⁴ Now considered obsolete, its primary uses were biblical in nature, describing inland waters that stand apart from the sea in the New Testament. The noun also connotes a safe haven: a “safe gathering place” or “shelter from the sea.”⁴⁵ I use *limne* as a structural component of this

⁴² Ibid, p. 1.

⁴³ In Limnology, “demographic growth” refers to “the cycle in which biospheric degradation occurs as a result of production utilization of the environment and consumption of technological products, both leading to pollution of water resources.” Wetzel continues, “in this way, attention is properly focused on all aspects of technological growth, i.e., the technological metabolism of man” (p. 2).

⁴⁴ See Abarim Publications’ Ancient Greek dictionary entry: <https://www.abarim-publications.com/DictionaryG/l/l-i-m-et-n.html>

⁴⁵ See Abarim Publications’ Ancient Greek dictionary entry: “In Greek, our word comes with an emphasis on safety and shelter (instead of, say, commerce). In Homer’s *Odyssey*, for instance, occurs the phrase

dissertation: between each chapter lies a *limne*, or brief creative interlude that introduces the subsequent body of water I study. These interludes highlight the physical contact I have personally made with Lake Michigan, a freshwater spring in Orlando, and a Milwaukee swimming pool, allowing my own personal relationship and African American literary and historical relationships with these waters to “rush together.”⁴⁶

The modern evolution of *limne* as a noun gives way to the verb *limn*, which takes on a figurative, transitive meaning grounded in artistic production: “to illuminate,” to “portray or depict, or describe” or “to adorn or embellish with gold or bright colour, typically with water-colours.”⁴⁷ As the lattermost definition demonstrates, the verb has not strayed too far from its freshwater origins. Though there are material differences between a midwestern great lake, southern inland lakes, storm systems and wetlands, and urban swimming pools on the east coast, I argue that each metaphorical and material body of water, in its political and personal relationships with Black literary and historical subjects, constitutes an insurgent waterscape. Where the first two chapters of this project use *limnology*—and an interpretive method I name *limnological reading*—to access the material specificities of freshwater, the third and fourth chapter use feminist autotheory and ekphrasis—an intimate description or *limning*, to encounter and describe Black women and girls’ relationships with swimming pools.

λιμενες θαλασσης (limenes thalasses), literally meaning “harbor from the sea” but by implication “shelter from the sea”, or more precise: “an escape from violent ruin by the sea.” As such, our word is used metaphorically in the sense of haven, retreat, refuge or even simply a (safe) gathering place.”
<https://www.abarim-publications.com/DictionaryG/I/I-i-m-et-n.html>

⁴⁶ See Saidiya Hartman’s discussion of the “rushing together of names and stories” of different Black girls and women in the early 20th century in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019). P. 19.

⁴⁷ “Limn. *Oxford English Dictionary*, Third Edition.

https://www.oed.com/dictionary/limn_v?tab=meaning_and_use#39201509

Objects and Methods

As mentioned, my dissertation engages literary and historical subjects and objects of and about early to mid twentieth century African American literature and history. I index several types of *insurgent waterscapes* in this project through African American periodical archives, photography, a novel, poetry, a documentary film, legal documentation, and ecological studies and reports. In chapter one, I take up Eve Ewing's poetic rendering of Lake Michigan in her collection *1919* (2019) paired with Lishan AZ's documentary photography in *Eugene's Cove* (2025), the site of Eugene Williams' murder by white mob violence and the galvanizing event of Chicago's Red Summer; in chapter two, I examine the Floridian inland lakes, storm systems, and wetlands of Zora Neale Hurston's watershed novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* known and encountered by protagonist Janie Crawford in 1928; while chapter three takes up periodical articles, photographs and documentary film to study Black women and girls and American swimming pools in 1920s-1930s Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1960s St. Augustine, Florida. As a coda that highlights the contemporary significance of Black subjectivity and swimming pools, chapter four takes up news media coverage, a lawsuit, and personal photography relating to a 2010s swimming pool in McKinney, Texas and my own relationship to pools in my hometown of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Each of the objects in the first three chapters of this project are either written during or retrospectively attend to the sociopolitical magnitude of the first Great Migration. In terms of African American literary history, the decades following the end of Reconstruction into the early twentieth century saw the production of literature that "was used to confirm and to manifest creativity and genius while also documenting and shaping social, political, and spiritual

aspirations and conditions.”⁴⁸ Migrants labored to establish cultural institutions such as the National Council for Negro Women, African American newspapers from the *Chicago Defender* to the *Philadelphia Tribune*, as well as religious, recreational, intellectual and social organizations. African Americans were indeed prolific writers; “as World War I began,” Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay write, “African Americans were reading and writing, publishing and pontificating in virtually every genre and in every literary style.”⁴⁹

Farrah Jasmine Griffin foregrounds the agency of Black migrant subject in her pivotal monograph *Who Set You Flowin? The African American Migration Narrative*. The Black subjects in the literary and historical objects she studies are not simply reacting to white supremacist violence and discrimination, they are actively choosing and self-fashioning new lives in geographies new to them. Where the Atlantic Ocean is the aquatic space of the geographic, material and cultural “rupture”⁵⁰ of Middle Passage, the waters encountered in the sociopolitical upheaval of the Great Migration—including but not limited to rivers, lakes, and swimming pools—hold another set of sociopolitical associations. I argue that these waters are sites within which Black subjects fashion notions of citizenship, athletic rigor, and aquatic recreation and leisure in a time of reactionary white supremacist violence, housing and labor

⁴⁸ Eds. Gates Jr. Henry Louis and Nellie Y. McKay. “Writing Things Right: Reconstruction to New Negro Renaissance, 1865-1919.” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, Second Edition*. P. 554.

⁴⁹ Eds. Gates Jr. Henry Louis and Nellie Y. McKay. “Writing Things Right: Reconstruction to New Negro Renaissance, 1865-1919.” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature, Second Edition*. P. 554.

⁵⁰ Hortense J. Spillers describes the Middle Passage as a geographic, temporal and cultural “rupture.” Her “insurgent female social subject” acknowledges how she has been marked by racial stereotype and abuses upon her body and psyche, but also claims the potential to reinvent herself and her life, or, as Spillers writes, claims “the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to name).” Insurgency refers to an active revolt, or uprising. Spillers’ female social subject becomes “monstrous” because of her “dual fatherhood”—her existence in place of a male father and apart from American heteropatriarchal visions of a nuclear family. She is monstrous in her “problematizing of gender” (p. 80). In the midst of racialized misogyny and the names that accompany it, Spillers’ Black female social subject can choose to name herself differently, to fashion a more free life for herself.

discrimination. The Black subjects I study, both literary and historical, actively fashion their lives, acting *with* material freshwater and swimming pools.

Limnological reading

Throughout the first two chapters of this dissertation, I develop *limnological reading* as a hermeneutic drawn from material ecocriticism's insistence upon the inextricability of matter and meaning.⁵¹ In the first and second chapters of this dissertation, I contend that limnological reading integrates the material elements of freshwater into close readings of literary objects to make visible the otherwise overlooked forms of water in the material-metaphorical contours of the lives of Janie Crawford in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Eugene Williams in Ewing's *1919* (2019). The material and figurative shapes of these waters impact these subjects' interpersonal and political senses of belonging and place. Whereas close reading treats the literary object as a closed, self-referential system, it cannot illuminate, or limn, the geographic, material specificities of Chicago's Lake Michigan shore or Lake Sabelia in Eatonville, Florida and their impact on the lives of Eugene and Janie. Thus, limnological reading uses environmental histories, ecological reports, and periodical archives to deepen the relationships between these inland lakes and the Black subjects who fashion their lives in, around, and with them. More than additive environmental context for the literary object, limnological reading pushes the freshwater material to inform analyses of Black geographies and ecologies. This hermeneutic insists upon the mutually transformative relationships between freshwater ecosystems and the Black subjects who know them.

Feminist autotheory

⁵¹ Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann, et al. *Material Ecocriticism*. Pp. 1-18.

In the latter two chapters of this dissertation, I employ feminist autotheory because of its emphasis on relational citation. In *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, feminist scholar Lauren Fournier acknowledges that feminist theorists have long known that theory and practice are deeply intertwined. She writes that “autotheory reveals the tenuousness of maintaining illusory separations between art and life, theory and practice, work and the self, research and motivation.” Fournier asserts the generative possibilities of feminist autotheoretical writing through her examination of Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, in which Nelson engages in “lateral citation” as well as “citing up”—citing her trans lover Harry Dodge as a source of knowledge about pregnancy, gender, embodiment, and desire, alongside philosophers such as Roland Barthes and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. For Fournier, this practice of citation facilitates, in part, the creation of a feminist intellectual community that refuses to rely solely on “high” philosophy without taking into consideration the theory that emerges in the everyday lives of everyday people. Fournier names this citation practice “intertextual intimacy.” In defining feminist autotheory, Fournier attends to its viscosity: it is “gut-centered, self-aware, and personal[...] it weaves autobiography and social criticism.” In chapter four, I discuss my gut reaction to the story of Dajerria Becton’s brutalization by police officer Eric Casebolt: it was, and remains, deep sadness and anger. My frustration with the slow pace of the law and news media taught me that this incident was something I could not ignore. As long as I can remember, my life has been waterborne. My work must be as well.

I also draw on the work of Sara Ahmed in my understanding and use of an autotheoretical method. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed expresses a fondness for theory, as well as frustration over how elitist and abstracted it has become in academic circles. In order to use theory most effectively, Ahmed suggests that we must “drag theory back to life” instead of “pulling away,

detaching, or diverting” from lived experience.⁵² My interest in studying the literary and material relationships between Black people and water is far from detached; it stems from my aquatic life—from always being in a swimming pool no matter how bitterly cold it grew outdoors, to advancing from the “guppy” level all the way to a “porpoise” during my early YMCA swim lessons, competing on a team in high school, spending the summers of my late teens and early twenties as a Milwaukee County Lifeguard, and teaching water safety to Black children. Ahmed’s insistence on bringing theory back to real life teaches me that my experiences are legitimate and essential sources of knowledge about difference and power.

The purposes of the three poetic forms that comprise my feminist autotheory—ekphrasis, erasure, and free verse—are description, clarification and speculation. I use an ekphrastic sensibility as I describe the evidence of these girls’ and women’s aquatic lives with an eye inward toward my own, and what challenges and joys they might have experienced that exceed the photographs, articles, and interviews I encounter. While these descriptions do not necessarily appear as they might in traditional ekphrasis—i.e., the poem nestled next to the image, distinct stanzas and line breaks—their prose-adjacent form helps me explore the attachments of Inez, Mimi, and Dajerria to their swimming pools as they flow into and across my own.

Interventions

This dissertation aims to contribute to ongoing critical conversations in the interdisciplinary fields of Black Ecologies, Black Geographies, and the Blue Humanities. First, I see this work as a provocation to these fields to continue to consider overlooked forms of water in relation to the study of Black life. At the beginning of this introduction, I described this dissertation as the work of “turning inland” to these understudied waters and how they shape the

⁵² Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*, p. 16.

life, labor, recreation and senses of belonging and home of Black subjects. In the midst of the largely ocean-centered Blue Humanities, there is a growing body of literature that acknowledges the role of wetlands, swamps, storms, and other extra-oceanic forms of water in literary and cultural storytelling.⁵³ In his *Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, Steve Mentz acknowledges the importance of “water-centric” thinking, and offers his own limitations as a scholar who focuses on literary and material oceans.⁵⁴ Mentz acknowledges the creative and critical work of Black feminist scholars thinking with water, writing that “creative–critical work on the legacies of the Black Atlantic by writers such as Dionne Brand, Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs provides new ways to reconfigure Atlantic histories, ecologies, and poetics.”⁵⁵ I see my project continuing the mission of the Blue Humanities to “intermingle creative and critical processes and modes of writing.”⁵⁶

I also see this project intervening upon the traditional ecological sensibilities of Black ecologies; that is, I wish to urge the growing body of literature in these fields to consider not only environmental pollution and ecological ruin as vital factors in the study of Black ecologies, but outdoor aquatic recreation as well. Where Nathan Hare rightfully interrogates the white bourgeois focus on “clear waters” for recreation instead of the psychosomatically harmful environmental toxins in Black urban communities, aquatic recreation— in Lake Michigan in chapter one, in Lake Sabelia and the Everglades in chapter two, and in swimming pools in chapters three and four—illuminate the integral relationship between aquatic recreation and Black literary and historical placemaking in the early twentieth century. This project joins other

⁵³ See Steve Mentz’ *Introduction to the Blue Humanities*, pp. 1-16.

⁵⁴ Mentz writes that there is a clearly articulated focus on “oceanic literature” in the Blue Humanities, and suggests that scholars in the Blue Humanities develop further studies on non-oceanic waters. Pp. 1-16.

⁵⁵ Mentz, *Introduction to the Blue Humanities*. Pp. 1-16.

⁵⁶ Mentz, *Introduction to the Blue Humanities*. Pp. 1-16.

scholars of Black Studies, African American literature, and Black ecologies and geographies who engage water and freshwater materially and semiotically, including but certainly not limited to Susan Scott Parrish, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, C. Riley Snorton, J.T. Roane, Tiffany Lethabo King, and Jonathan Howard.⁵⁷

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is divided into four chapters, divided by *limnes*, brief interludes that foreground moments of contact between myself and the waters I study in each subsequent chapter. The limnes are titled as follows: “A Body of Water Inside Me,” which introduces the first chapter on Lake Michigan; “Florida Water,” which introduces the second chapter on Hurston’s material-metaphorical Florida waters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; and “The Black Pool of Genius,” to introduce chapters three and four, which focuses on swimming pools in West Philadelphia, Harlem, St. Augustine, McKinney, Texas, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The first chapter, “Lake Michigan’s Material-Metaphorical Turbidity in Eve Ewing’s *1919* and Lishan AZ’s *Eugene’s Cove*,” takes up scholar-poet Eve L. Ewing’s poetry collection *1919* (2019) and visual artist Lishan AZ’s photographic collection *Eugene’s Cove* (2019) to study how Lake Michigan pushes us to interrogate the racialization of aquatic space. I explore how our understandings of recreation, segregation, and racist violence are reshaped when we shift our analytical focus to Lake Michigan’s waters, instead of primarily focusing on terrestrial-based resistance to white supremacy. I engage the turbidity of Lake Michigan to argue that the material murkiness of the lake’s waters and the metaphorical murkiness of the events and

⁵⁷ See Parrish’s *The Flood Year 1927*, Gumbs’ *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, Tiffany Lethabo King’s *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, J.T. Roane’s “Black Ecologies, subaquatic life, and the Jim Crow enclosure of the tidewater,” Snorton’s forthcoming monograph, *Mud: Ecologies of Racial Meaning*, and Howard’s *Inhabitants of the Deep: The Blueness of Blackness*.

aftermath of the murder of Eugene Williams—the event that galvanized Chicago’s 1919 race riots—allow Ewing and AZ to speculate on an aquatic afterlife for Eugene.

My second chapter, “Limnological Interiority and Relationality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” takes up the Central and Southern Floridian waterscapes of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Lake Sabelia, the Everglades swamp, and the material-metaphorical Lake Okeechobee floodwaters and the underground Floridan aquifer. I argue that a limnological reading of the novel allows us to figure protagonist Janie Crawford interiority aquatically, allowing room for the recomposition and redirection of notions of Black women’s propriety, as well as her romantic and familial bonds with her Nanny, best friend Phoeby Watson, and third husband Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods.

My third chapter, “Geographies of Aspiration: Black Girls and the Swimming Pool,” turns to the swimming pools of 1920s Philadelphia and 1960s St. Augustine. I ask: from the prewar twentieth century, across the battles of the Civil Rights Movement, how do Black girls and young women navigate swimming pools as geographies of domination and transform them into geographies of aspiration? Adopting a feminist autotheory approach, I explore how Black girls and women across the twentieth century—Inez “Pat” Patterson, and Mimi Jones, and myself as a lifeguard, competitive swimmer, and swim instructor—have engaged with swimming pools as geographies of aspiration. These are women and girls for whom the pool is a significant political, personal, and communal space. I define *geography of aspiration* as the multivocal, real and imagined space in which multiple subjects—white city planners, recreational directors, and Black women and girls—articulate visions of what the swimming pool could mean for American citizens. For Black women and girls like Inez and Mimi, aspirational visions for the swimming pool had to work differently: where the visions of white municipal officials failed to include the

realities of racial violence, from their racial and gendered standpoint, the violence of exclusion and segregation informed the endurance of their hope for what the swimming pool could be for Black Americans.

My fourth chapter, a coda entitled “Dajerria and Samantha: Distilling the Law Toward Aquatic Freedom” extends the work of chapter three, bringing the formulation of swimming pools as geographies of aspiration into the twenty-first century with an examination of the incident and news coverage of Dajerria Becton’s experience of police brutality at a swimming pool in June 2015. Continuing my feminist autotheoretical approach, I draw from Christina Sharpe’s method of “black redaction” to expose the potential limits of legal redress for Dajerria and her friends and family. Further, I use my own speculative free verse to poetically imagine the “re-do” of the pool party that I and Dajerria’s attorney wanted for her and her friends. The conclusion of this project reiterates and reaffirms the creative and critical goals of this study, and suggests directions for future research and lines of inquiry in studies of literary and historical relationships between Black subjectivity and material-metaphorical waters.

Limne: A Body of Water Inside Me

On a late summer night in 2015, it was far too dark to be sailing Lake Michigan from Port Washington to Milwaukee. It was reckless and the blood was racing from my heart, but I stepped into the boat anyway. I shouldn't have done this, either: after I crawled into the hull, I took the small, square white tab from my friend's hand and placed it underneath my tongue. I pressed my palms onto the foam cushions I was sitting on, awaiting some great existential revelation.

The cramped space of the hull soon grew dull. I crawled back out into the night air and laid on my belly, reaching down in an attempt to skim the cold water with my fingers. I wished to see a glimpse of a Black mermaid, so badly that I tried to negotiate with the hallucinogen in my blood. She never appeared. It seemed I was, perhaps a bit like DuBois in Lake Idlewild, "under the spell of the Thing."⁵⁸ Though I could not find a Black mermaid who traveled the depths of Lake Michigan, the sound of the water colliding with the boat's port side lulled me from my panicked state to a giddy tranquility.

~ ~ ~

In Toni Morrison's ninth novel *A Mercy*, the protagonist, Florens, is an enslaved girl in the Province of Maryland in the late seventeenth century. In one passage, Florens dreams that she is looking out onto a lake:

⁵⁸ DuBois, W.E.B. "Opinion of W.E.B. DuBois: HOPKINS, CHICAGO AND IDLEWILD." *The Crisis*, Vol. 22, No. 4. August 1921.

I notice I am at the edge of a lake. The blue of it is more than the sky, more than any blue I know. More than Lina's beads or the heads of chicory. I am loving it so, I can't stop. I want to put my face deep there. I want to. What is making me hesitate, making me not get the beautiful blue of what I want?⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Morrison, Toni. *A Mercy* (2008), cited by Imani Perry in *Black in Blues: How a Color Tells the Story of my People* (2025), xv.

**Chapter One: Lake Michigan's Material and Metaphorical Turbidity in Eve Ewing's *1919*
and Lishan AZ's *Eugene's Cove***

*"And afterward the people went to the chambers of the Pharaoh and told him:
"Thus saith the Lord God, the God of the prairie and the lake,
God of the flatlands and the railroads, God of vice and God of the
disciple,
God of the meatpacker and God of the laundress, God of the lost
Child, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the bungalows."
And Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice to let the people go?
I know not your God, neither will I set you
free."*

—Eve L. Ewing, "Exodus 5," *1919* (2019)

Introduction: The aquatic context of Eugene Williams' murder

One hundred years after a white mob murdered a seventeen year old Black boy named Eugene Williams on Chicago's Twenty-Ninth street beach on Lake Michigan, Black Chicagoan scholar-poet Eve L. Ewing writes a collection of poetry titled *1919*. This collection memorializes and enlivens the story of Eugene, who ventured into Lake Michigan with his friends to escape the late July heat. Ewing Her poem, "Exodus 5," appeals to an omnipotent, Abrahamic God of the early twentieth century rustbelt, transforming Him from a God of the sea and desert to a "God of the prairie and the lake." This geography, marked by multiple bodies of freshwater, becomes insurgent through her poetic rendering of one of the galvanizing events of Chicago's Red Summer. One year after *1919* is published, in the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, photographer and visual artist Lishan AZ plunges into Lake Michigan with her camera, documenting the defiantly playful leaps of Black Chicagoan children into the water. These

photographs comprise a new underwater world called *Eugene's Cove*. This underwater play in murky water turns Lake Michigan into an insurgent waterscape.

The August 2nd, 1919 edition of *The Chicago Defender* features an article titled “RIOT SWEEPS CHICAGO: Gun Battles and Fighting in Streets Keep the City in an Uproar; 4,000 Troops in Armory Ready to Patrol City; Scores are Killed.”⁶⁰ At the beginning of the article, the unnamed journalist mentions a refusal on the part of white police officer Daniel Callahan to arrest white beachgoer George Stauber the previous Sunday for “knock[ing] Eugene Williams, age 18, 3921 Prairie Avenue, from a raft as he was floating down Lake Michigan at Twenty-ninth street.”⁶¹ This murder-by-drowning, the journalist writes, “fanned into action one of the worst race riots in the history of Illinois,” one of several dozen riots nationwide against white supremacist violence in the summer of 1919, named the “Red Summer” for its relentless bloodshed.⁶² One Officer Callahan not only refused to make an arrest, but kept expert swimmers from reaching Williams.”⁶³ Though it appears customary to list Chicagoans’ addresses after they are mentioned by name in a *Defender* article, it is nevertheless striking when considering the racially segregated neighborhoods of Chicago, created by redlining, predatory loans, and other discriminatory housing practices.⁶⁴ Eugene Williams’ family’s address in Northeastern Bronzeville—now a vacant lot—was just under two miles from the Twenty-Ninth Street Beach

⁶⁰ “RIOT SWEEPS CHICAGO: GUN BATTLES AND FIGHTING IN STREETS KEEP THE CITY IN AN UPROAR 4,000 TROOPS IN ARMORY READY TO PATROL CITY; SCORES ARE KILLED.” *The Chicago Defender* (Big Weekend Edition) (1905-1966), 02 Aug., 1919, pp. 1. ProQuest, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/riot-sweeps-chicago/docview/493562238/se-2>.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, *The Chicago Defender*. 2 August 1919.

⁶² Historiographically, the Red Summer has been extensively studied by scholars such as Cameron McWhirter *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (2011). The Red Summer is studied poetically as well by Amaud Jamal Johnson in his 2006 collection *Red Summer*.

⁶³ *Ibid*, *The Chicago Defender*. 2 August 1919.

⁶⁴ See Adrienne Brown’s *The Residential is Racial: A Perceptual History of Mass Homeownership*. Pp. 1-41.

where Eugene and his friends began their Lake Michigan excursion on July 27th. As Colin Fisher notes, the “sweeping” race riot that ensued after Eugene’s murder by drowning is often primarily attributed to citywide racial tensions concerning labor, municipal politics and housing, while the violent clash at the Twenty-Ninth Street Beach is seen as merely symptomatic of the former terrestrial tensions. Access to nature and recreational space—more precisely, access to recreational waters—was indeed a vital part of Black Chicagoans’ struggle for a sense of belonging and safety in the first Great Migration.⁶⁵ Colin Fisher rightly turns our attention to contested access to Lake Michigan’s waters as a “serious” significant cause of racial tension, noting the brutality of extrajudicial gangs of white youth that used intimidation to prevent Black Chicagoans from accessing the lakefront. These violent barriers to access precede and set the condition for Eugene’s death: A 1913 *Defender* article quotes Mrs. Joseph T. Bowen— a “prominent society woman”⁶⁶ and President of the Juvenile Protection Association of Chicago—as lamenting the injustice of racial segregation on the lake. As a part of her report on “The Civil and Religious Status of the Colored People of Chicago,” Bowen states that “even the waters of Lake Michigan are not available for colored children to bathe in.”⁶⁷ In a proto-Moynihanian⁶⁸

⁶⁵ See Colin Fisher, “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot.” from *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*. Eds. Glave, Dianne D. and Mark Stoll. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005.

⁶⁶ “MRS. BOWEN SCORES POLICE.: JUVENILE PRESIDENT DECLARES THEIR ATTITUDE TOWARD BOYS WRONG.” *New York Times* (1857-1922), 17 June, 1909, pp. 6. ProQuest, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/mrs-bowen-scores-police/docview/96915418/se-2>.

⁶⁷ “INJUSTICE TO NEGRO CHARGED IN REPORT: COLORED CHILDREN NOT EVEN ALLOWED TO BATHE IN LAKE MICHIGAN SAYS MRS. JOSEPH T. BOWEN IN ADDRESS.” *The Chicago Defender* (Big Weekend Edition) (1905-1966), 13 Dec., 1913, pp. 1. ProQuest, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/injustice-negro-charged-report/docview/493413553/se-2>.

⁶⁸ Here I refer to Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report entitled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, more commonly known as the “Moynihan report.” Written to aid the Johnson administration in its study of the origins of Black poverty in the United States, Moynihan pathologizes Black American women who are heads of their households, making the case for Black men

tone, the same article goes on to discuss the “broken family life, surrounding of the vicious neighborhood, dearth of adequate employment, and lack of recreation for the Negro youth of both sexes [which] can be helped only in so far as the entire colored race in Chicago is understood and fairly treated.”⁶⁹ In Mrs. Bowen’s view, the terrestrial neighborhood becomes an antagonist to Black Chicagoans’ effort to thrive in the city. It is noteworthy that Mrs. Bowen turns to the waters of Lake Michigan to introduce this need for equitable access to outdoor recreation: There is something about the lake itself, the racial violence that occurred there, and its restorative potential that demanded urgent political action. Access to aquatic recreation is part and parcel of what it means to thrive in an industrial metropolitan area, and Black Chicagoans knew and pursued it fervently. Colin Fisher and Farah Jasmine Griffin emphasize the agentive Black subjects of the Great Migration, who, as Fisher states, “on their own initiative [...] used Chicago parks and beaches to temporarily escape the noise, heat, confinement, and congestion of the South Side and make contact with the natural world.”⁷⁰ Though her tone might be read as patronizing to an extent, Mrs. Bowen’s lament prompts us to turn to the realm of the aquatic as a site of racial and political contestation, as well as a mark of achievement of a suitable Black quality of life.

This first chapter proceeds with a brief narrative of the journalistic characterization of Lake Michigan by the *Chicago Defender*, *The Crisis*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. This narrative, drawn from my *limning* of periodical archives, frames Lake Michigan as a site of play and peril. Then, I use *limnological reading*, an interpretive method I use throughout this project, to

to be given the room to “strut,” or assume a patriarchal position as the economic head of their households. <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan/moynchapter4>

⁶⁹ Ibid, <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan/moynchapter4>

⁷⁰ Fisher, p. 71. See also Farah Jasmine Griffin’s insistence upon the agentive Black literary migrant/subject in *Who Set You Flowin? The African American Migration Narrative*, p. 3-12.

examine the material-metaphorical contours of Lake Michigan and explore the figurative role of physical, chemical and biological elements of this freshwater system. I use limnological reading to study three poems in Ewing's *1919*, which I argue centralizes Lake Michigan as a site of political contestation and speculative commemoration of Eugene. Second, I read the photography of Lishan AZ's *Eugene's Cove* (2025) as a visual representation of a potential limnological afterlife for Eugene, and an establishment and affirmation of a legacy of subaquatic play for Black youth of Chicago. Through these limnological readings, I further argue that Ewing and AZ decentralize the historiographic perception of Chicago's Red Summer as primarily terrestrial, and centralize the lake as a crucial space of Black strife and recreation.

Perilous and Playful: Reading Lake Michigan in the early twentieth century

Quiet as it's kept, the founder of *The Chicago Defender*, Robert Sengstacke Abbott, has aquatic roots. Abbott was born in St. Simons, Georgia, a part of the southeast barrier sea islands and the ancestral home of the Gullah people; and his step-grandfather, Herman Sengstacke, was a German sea captain who bought and subsequently freed and married his step-grandmother Tama Sengstacke.⁷¹ After studying printing and law at Hampton University and Kent College of Law, Abbott founded the *Defender* to assert a record of Black Chicagoan life and resistance to white supremacist violence during the Great Migration.⁷²

Between 1912 and 1918, articles in the *Defender* reported of a Lake Michigan that was a site of danger, labor, and play. On December 28th, 1912, a journalist wrote of an 11-year old boy

⁷¹ See Yenser, Thomas, ed. (1933). *Who's Who in Colored America: A Biographical Dictionary of Notable Living Persons of African Descent in America 1930–1931–1932* (3rd ed.). Brooklyn, NY: Who's Who in Colored America. p. 1.

⁷² See Yenser, Thomas, ed. (1933). *Who's Who in Colored America: A Biographical Dictionary of Notable Living Persons of African Descent in America 1930–1931–1932* (3rd ed.). Brooklyn, NY: Who's Who in Colored America. p. 1.

named Jimmy Lucas who “rode” the waves of Lake Michigan by accident via two waves; one that pulled him out into open water, and another that pushed him back to the lakeshore. Jimmy is reported to have been “standing on a temporary breakwater at the foot of East Thirty-ninth street,” watching with wonder at the lake’s waves “dashing spray” several feet in the air. The article reads as a thrilling short story, complete with an illustration of a little boy reaching out of the water with a shocked expression, “riding upon the crest.”⁷³ The article continues by framing the waves as simultaneously dangerous and playful, stating that Jimmy was “sucked out by the undertow and swept out in the lake,” but then was “lifted clear of the breakwater by the flood and hurled up high on the shore, shivering and frightened, but extremely grateful to “wave No. 2.”⁷⁴ Here, the lacustrine⁷⁵ waves take on a mischievous quality even as they threaten the life of the boy. Just two months earlier, the *Defender* reports on a tale of terror and heroism, a “battle for life on the lake’s bottom,” in which a man dived thirteen feet into the lake to rescue his drowning companion. The lake is described as a “suffocating” force, holding the victim in a “death embrace.”⁷⁶ The journalist lauds the rescuer as a hero, stating that “efforts will be made to obtain a Carnegie Medal.”⁷⁷ The newspaper’s tone of pride also recognizes the lake as a significant site of labor opportunities for Black Chicagoans: a Mr. Will Onsley, “one of our

⁷³ "MY, HOW "JIMMY" DID RIDE THOSE WAVES: FIRST BILLOW CARRIED BOY OUT INTO LAKE; BILLOW NO. 2 BROUGHT HIM SAFELY BACK." *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition)* (1905-1966), 28 Dec., 1912, pp. 7. ProQuest, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/my-how-jimmy-did-ride-those-waves/docview/493182094/se-2>.

⁷⁴ Ibid, *The Chicago Defender*.

⁷⁵ The definition of *Lacustrine* is “relating to, formed in, living in, or growing in lakes.” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lacustrine>

⁷⁶ "BATTLE FOR LIFE ON THE LAKE'S BOTTOM: RESCUER DIVES FOR DROWNING MAN AND IS SEIZED IN A DEATH EMBRACE." *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition)* (1905-1966), 19 Oct., 1912, pp. 6. ProQuest, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/battle-life-on-lakes-bottom/docview/493193227/se-2>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

young headwaiters,” is reported to have taken charge of the crew of the SS *Missouri* of the Northern Michigan Steamship Company.⁷⁸ Among the meatpacking factories, tanneries, and other terrestrial industries rapidly growing in the early twentieth century, Black Chicagoans also labored on the lake.

The lake also carries potential for restorative recreation. A September 1914 *Defender* article declares that the “love of outdoor life has been planted deep in the breasts of men and women.”⁷⁹ Among the vivid descriptions of the benefits of exploring the woods, the journalist describes with reverence the lakes where “bass, pickerel, pike and muskellunge abound,” and encourages readers of the newspaper to spend time outdoors for the sake of their physical and spiritual health. A momentary departure from the *Defender* to W.E.B. DuBois’ travelogue in *The Crisis* echoes this sentiment about inland lakes. Through discussing the much smaller Idlewild Lake in the unincorporated Black resort town of Idlewild, Michigan, DuBois describes the “Black Eden”⁸⁰ in “Hopkinsville, Chicago, and Idlewild”:

Not for one moment in fine joy of life, absolute freedom from the desperate cruelty of the color line and for the wooing of the great silence which is Peace and deep Contentment—not for one little minute can they rival or catch the bounding pulse of Idlewild. I have seen the moon rising above purple waters against the velvet background of tall and silent trees. I have seen the stars mirrored in the depths of the mystic bosom of the lake. I have seen the sun sink gloriously to rest

⁷⁸ “LAKE STEAMSHIP NEWS.” *The Chicago Defender* (Big Weekend Edition) (1905-1966), 17 July, 1915, pp. 5. ProQuest, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/lake-steamship-news/docview/493274041/se-2>.

⁷⁹ “IS PART OF HUMAN NATURE: LOVE OF OUTDOOR LIFE HAS BEEN PLANTED DEEP IN THE BREASTS OF MEN AND WOMEN.” *The Chicago Defender* (Big Weekend Edition) (1905-1966), 26 Sept., 1914, pp. 7. ProQuest, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/is-part-human-nature/docview/493213453/se-2>.

⁸⁰ “Black Eden” is a colloquial term for Idlewild, MI, founded in 1912.

with no roar or noise or rage of heart-beat, but filmed and crowned and kissed by the music of a million waving leaves and the song of many waters.⁸¹

Though only a fraction of the size and volume of Lake Michigan, Lake Idlewild is presented as a quasi-utopian refuge from the ever-haunting color line, the looming “problem of the twentieth century.”⁸² The lake’s waters take on a mystical, serene quality: there are hues of purple, the tactile pleasantness of velvet, the languid sun nestling into its watery bed. There is something maternal about this lake as well, its “mystic bosom” nourishing and tender. Further, he details what he calls the “sober truth” about Idlewild’s waters: “fairies and water nymph abound, mermaids, nice gracious ghosts and drinking water straight from the hills of Paradise.”⁸³ Fantastical and mystical, the limnological waters of Lake Idlewild are a material source of spiritual contentment for the Black swimmers who inhabit it.

This idyllic aquatic haven is contrasted sharply with DuBois’ description of Chicago as a site of racial terror and dogged resistance to it. DuBois writes that the city “scares [him]; the crowd at State Street and Madison, the ruthless raggedness and grime of the blazing streets, the brute might of the Thing. And the colored folk are fighting today just as they fought in the Battle of the Riot, with heads bloody but unbowed, triumphant, fearless, wild.”⁸⁴ He goes on to claim Chicago’s South Side in aquatic terms, stating that Black people have “swept like a wave over the South Side and bought it and own it and keep it despite lies and bombs.”⁸⁵ Here, DuBois reflects on the 1919 Red Summer, white supremacist terror figured into a brutal creature, a

⁸¹ “DuBois, W.E.B. Opinion of W.E.B. DuBois: Hopkinsville, Chicago and Idlewild.” *The Crisis*, Vol. 2. No. 4. August 1921.

⁸² DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

⁸³ DuBois, W.E.B. Opinion of W.E.B. DuBois: Hopkinsville, Chicago and Idlewild.” *The Crisis*, Vol. 2. No. 4. August 1921.

⁸⁴ “DuBois, W.E.B. Opinion of W.E.B. DuBois: Hopkinsville, Chicago and Idlewild.” *The Crisis*, Vol. 2. No. 4. August 1921.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 158.

“Thing.” Though the white supremacist violence is seemingly ineradicable, he lauds Black Chicagoans who insist upon the South Side as their home, their presence forming a powerful, sweeping wave.

One day after the murder of Eugene Williams by George Stauber, the *Chicago Tribune* featured a political cartoon referencing DuBois’ formulation of the color line. In it, two groups of Chicagoans, one Black and one white, stand firmly in Lake Michigan on either side of a rope. The caption reads: “The color line has reached the north.”⁸⁶ This caption at once undoes two preconceptions about racial terror: first, it unsettles the belief that such violence is contained in the Jim Crow South. Second, it literally illustrates the aquatic spark of the Red Summer riots in Chicago, and in doing so, undoes an image of riots as predominantly terrestrial.

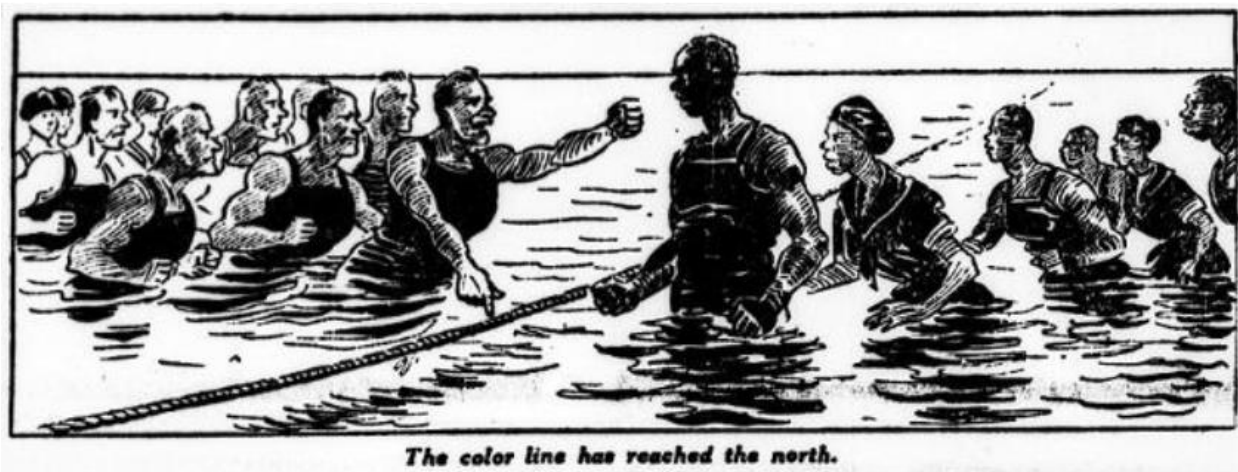


Figure 1 'The Color Line Has Reached the North' *Chicago Tribune*, July 28th, 1919

⁸⁶ McCutcheon, John T. "The Color Line Has Reached the North." *The Chicago Tribune*, July 28th 1919. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/3879.html>

These articles from the Defender, The Crisis and the Tribune frame freshwater lakes, and Lake Michigan specifically, as vital sites in the struggle for Black belonging and racial equity in Chicago. As dangerous as these waters are, they are also recreational, mystical, and insurgent.

Lake Michigan as an Insurgent Waterscape

The poetry and scholarship of native Chicagoan Eve L. Ewing and photography of Lishan AZ also ask us to linger in the cold, murky freshwater of Lake Michigan to explore the political stakes of Black contact with the aquatic. In *1919*, Ewing reframes the timeline of Chicago's Red Summer to center Eugene Williams' engagement with the lake as a galvanizing event of the riots amidst their broader sociopolitical context within the Great Migration. As a poet and sociologist, Ewing begins each poem with an epigraph quoted from the 1922 report from the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, entitled *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot*. As its title suggests, the aim of this report was to determine the root causes of the late summer riot. By situating quotes from this sociological report as introductions to poetic renditions and imaginings of the events of July 27th, 1919, Ewing exposes the limits of sociology or poetry alone to tell a complete story of Black Chicagoan insurgency against white supremacy. In focusing on the events of Eugene's interaction with Lake Michigan, I identify an *insurgent waterscape*: in this case, it is a body of limnological water (i.e., freshwater) that significantly shapes Black literary and historical subjectivity in the early twentieth century sociopolitical context of the Great Migration.

As Ewing uses sociology and poetry to examine the murkiness of the conflicting reports of what exactly happened to Eugene on the raft, Lishan AZ's *Eugene's Cove* is a photographic, poetic and essayistic speculation that asks, in the words of Africana Studies scholar Felicia

Renaud, “What if Eugene Williams did not die?”⁸⁷ In her introductory essay to AZ’s collection, “All Waters are Eulogies,” she asks

What if there is a shadow image of the earth composed of clearings, covers and cafes—surreal outposts against stolen life? To find them you must become them. You must give way to the reservoir of feeling that has allowed for survival and continuity. And perhaps most importantly, you must think with the elements because they ‘unthink the world...’⁸⁸

Here, Renaud introduces us to AZ’s speculative waters of Lake Michigan, where, at least between the covers of the book, Eugene might still be alive. The photographs of this underwater limnological world are marked by a medley of shadows and clarity: some waters more transparent, others more obscure. Renaud suggests that surrendering to the freshwater world is necessary, and in this surrender, one can become a part of the waters themselves, immersing oneself in a “reservoir of feeling” that facilitates survival. In order to imagine a Lake Michigan that provided an afterlife for Eugene, one must think *with* freshwater in a material sense. In other words, you must submerge.

Each of AZ’s photographs were taken in the lake underwater on Oakwood and Rainbow beaches, both on the South Side of the city, just under 8 miles apart. The two sets of photographs in the collection are divided by age group: the first is documentary photographs of young Black Chicagoans, children who AZ met and built relationships with when she swam at the beach for exercise at the peak of the COVID-19 lockdown. During the documentation process, AZ quickly learned that the lake was the children’s “domain,” noting that “at any of the beaches on the south side, if you’re in the water, the kids control the vibe.”⁸⁹ With the children, she took her camera

⁸⁷ Renaud, Felicia. “All Waters are Eulogies.” from *Eugene’s Cove* by Lishan AZ (2025). P. 4.

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 4.

⁸⁹ AZ, Lishan. “The Making of Eugene’s Cove: A Conversation between Nnaemeka Ekwelum and Lishan AZ.” *Eugene’s Cove*, p. 109.

just below the surface to ensure a relatively safe experience. The second set of photographs are full photoshoots with adults, and they called for a degree of vulnerability in the water: AZ recalls that she “was asking them to bare their bodies, they were in deeper waters, and they were actually sinking.”⁹⁰ AZ photographed Black adult Chicagoans of varied swimming skill levels, and emphasized the difficulty of sinking in the cold water. She learned that “the urge that we have to breathe in actually doesn’t come from a need for oxygen, it comes from a need to expel carbon dioxide. So although we think we need to breathe in we really need to breathe out.”⁹¹ For AZ and the subjects she photographed, submersion deep underneath the surface of Lake Michigan facilitates a physical and emotional catharsis. When you slowly let the air out of your lungs, what awaits you in the cold depths of the lake? What can you invent out of the stillness underneath the waves?

Ewing employs a caring curiosity in her poetry akin to AZ’s in her photography. She frames her exploration of *The Negro in Chicago* as the work of following evidence that seemed initially tangential:

For my writing of *Ghosts [in the Schoolyard]*, I needed one specific thing from *The Negro in Chicago*, and that was information about housing segregation at the beginning of the Great Migration. But as I was doing my research, I kept getting sucked into other parts of the report, things that were tangential to my work but were so fascinating. They gave me a view of Black life in my city a century earlier, and so many things struck me as either being radically different or completely unchanged. And even though this was a government-commissioned report, many of its passages immediately made me think about poetry. They were so evocative, so imagistic. The report was like an old tapestry with loose threads sticking out, and I wanted to tug on them and see what I could unravel, see what new thing I could weave.⁹²

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 109.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 108.

⁹² Ewing, 1919, p. 4.

Here, Ewing surrenders to the seemingly irrelevant yet fascinating “loose threads” of the 1919 *Red Summer*, seeing the literary potential of the sociological report. These threads comprise a crucial, if cloudy, window into Black Chicagoan life in the early twentieth century. She writes further of the speculative power of poetry, naming them as “what-if-machines and time-traveling devices.”⁹³ I contend that the material-metaphorical waters of Lake Michigan become integral fuel for the time-traveling power of Ewing’s poetry.

I pair Eve Ewing and Lishan AZ’s texts in this chapter because they both insist upon lingering in the realm of the aquatic—specifically in the material freshwater of Lake Michigan—to locate an aquatic origin for Chicago’s insurgency against white supremacist violence and to speculate on an aquatic afterlife for Eugene Williams.

Limnological reading and Material-Metaphorical Turbidity

I engage the material-metaphorical murkiness of Lake Michigan—turbidity, in hydrological, limnological terms—in conjunction with the murky details of the story of Eugene Williams’ murder at Chicago’s racially segregated Twenty-Ninth Street Beach. I argue that this material *and* figurative murkiness allows scholar-poet Eve Ewing to speculate on who might have acted on behalf of Eugene—who might have dived in after his body, who might have taken up arms against white mob violence and police inaction? This material-metaphorical turbidity allows photographer-poet Lishan AZ to explore a potential afterlife for Eugene and the creation of an underwater limnological community of Black swimmers.

In limnology—the study of freshwater systems—turbidity refers to the measure of the clarity of natural waters, specifically the extent to which sunlight passes through suspended

⁹³ Ewing, p. 5.

organic matter such as clay, sediment, plankton or algae.⁹⁴ Turbidity's etymological roots are the Latin *turba* and the Greek *tyrbe*, both of which refer to a condition of "turmoil," or "mudd[iness]," a troubled liquid "foul with extraneous matter."⁹⁵ In these linguistic roots, we see that material and figurative murkiness inform one another: a mental or emotional state of being troubled, confused or perplexed is integrated into the physical troubling of the water. Ewing engages the mysterious and murky conflicting accounts of what exactly made Eugene fall off the raft and wades through the suspended sediment, the aquatic aftermath of Eugene's death and the riots it spurred. This muddying of the water demonstrates the spatialization of white supremacist terror. In Lishan AZ's physical interaction with Lake Michigan and the submersion of her film camera and her subjects, she surrenders to murkiness/turbidity in order to speculate on a potential afterlife for Eugene, as well as the restorative potential of the waters for her subjects. In an interview with her colleague and friend Nnaemeka Ekwelum, she initially laments the murkiness of the lake, but then allows it to guide her artistic vision:

The film grain played a role in texture but actually a large part of the texture was how murky the water was, which was dependent on the weather and how much algae had bloomed recently. Some days the lake was clear and some days it was murky. In the moment, I'm always blown when it's murky, as if the shots are gonna go to waste. It happened on the day of the shoot I was most excited for, actually. The one with Marcus, with the silver fabric—I knew his was gonna go off. He just has a lot of presence [...]

EMEKA: His felt choreographed.

LISHAN: Yes! Everything he does above water, underwater, he just got it. So when I arrived at the lake that day and saw the water was murky, I was blown. But then when I developed the photos, it was—

EMEKA: Stunning, stunning.

⁹⁴ Wetzel, Robert. "Light in Lakes." from *Limnology* (1975). P. 62.

⁹⁵ "Turbidity." Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd Edition.

https://www.oed.com/dictionary/turbidity_n?tab=meaning_and_use#17488099

LISHAN: Yeah, it was one of those serendipitous things. The murkiness helped.⁹⁶

Here, AZ works through her frustration with the unpredictability of Chicago weather and the relative clarity of Lake Michigan's waters. Initially she hoped for clear waters for the highest possible level of visibility in her photographs, for if the water was too murky, the "shots would go to waste." She looks forward to the fluid lines that one of her subjects, Marcus, will bring to their co-constructed underwater refuge. When the water that day turns out to have a high degree of turbidity, AZ learns to surrender her physical body and her artistic practice to the murkiness, allowing Marcus' expansive wingspan and glistening silver fabric to reflect glimmers of liberatory potential. Ewing's *1919* echoes this liberatory potential of the lake as well, but in order to arrive there, she insists upon investigating the harrowing conditions of Eugene's murder.



Figure 2 Marcus underwater with silver fabric, photo by Lishan AZ

⁹⁶ AZ, Lishan. "The Making of Eugene's Cove: A Conversation between Nnaemeka Ekwelum & Lishan AZ." *Eugene's Cove*, p. 109.



Figure 3 Marcus underwater with silver fabric, photo by Lishan AZ

Limnological Reading: Eve L. Ewing's *1919*

Negotiating the turbid circumstances of July 27th, 1919 via “Jump/Rope”

In the second and central section of *1919* entitled “What Happened”—at once a desperate question and an affirmative statement—Ewing begins her poetic investigation into the murky circumstances of Eugene’s murder. She does so by making the first voices we hear discussing Eugene’s venture into the lake those of young children skipping rope. The epigraph of the poem “Jump/Rope” from the introduction to *The Negro in Chicago: A Study on Relations and a Race Riot* reads: “*On Sunday, July 27th, 2019, there was a clash of white people and Negroes at a bathing-beach in Chicago, which resulted in the drowning of a Negro boy (x).*” This epigraph reads clinically at first, but we see turbidity emerge even here, in the word “clash”: the collision of white mob violence against Black Chicagoans, the stirred sediment of violent racial

segregation of the beach becoming simultaneously visible and obscure. Ewing's child speakers engage in a game of jump rope to negotiate the circumstances of Eugene's murder. In the first two stanzas, we see a mutual recognition of childhood and a distressing warning about the perils of white gang violence:

Little Eugene Gene Gene
Sweetest I've seen seen seen
His mama told him him
Them white boys mean mean mean

He didn't listen listen listen
To what mama say say say
Went to the lake lake lake
That July day day day⁹⁷

Ewing's young speaker uses the melody of "Miss Mary Mack," a popular children's "counting-out" game, to recount what might have occurred prior to Eugene's 2-mile journey to the lake.⁹⁸ One popular version of "Miss Mary Mack" involves the titular character asking her mother for money to go to the circus to see the elephants jump over a fence; this eagerness to venture outside the house for outdoor recreation at the circus mirrors Eugene's childhood eagerness to visit the shores of Lake Michigan. Through the young voices of Ewing's speakers, we see Eugene's "sweetness," an innocence and tenderness not often readily afforded by a white supremacist culture to a seventeen year old Black boy who labored as a Pullman Porter. We learn through these youthful voices that Eugene's mother might have warned him about extrajudicial

⁹⁷ Ewing, Eve L. "Jump/Rope." 1919, p. 32.

⁹⁸ Bolton, Henry Carrington. *The counting-out rhymes of children: their antiquity, origin, and wide distribution; a study in folk-lore* (1888). P. 18.

white youth gangs that frequently terrorized Black beachgoers. These “white boys” are not only rogue, loosely organized groups of white youth and young adults, but they are lifeguards, city commissioners, and police officers who prevented an urgent investigation and recovery effort for Eugene.⁹⁹ This is a multi-scalar effort to hinder Black Chicagoans’ attempts at outdoor aquatic recreation.

There are multiple young speakers in this poem, and the subsequent stanzas reveal further obscurity, further turbidity in the collective memory of the details of Eugene’s murder. The following stanzas begin with “no, it goes like,” signaling disagreement with and insistence upon a revised understanding of Eugene’s interaction with the water:

No, it goes like
Little Eugene W
So sorry to trouble you
Rise, Eugene, rise!
Calm your mama’s cries!
Just sit up and look around
Don’t let em bury you down¹⁰⁰

Here, another young speaker intertwines skipping rope with an urgent plea, calling on Eugene to pull himself out of the water. They express an apology for “troubling” Eugene: the action of troubling and stirring Lake Michigan while asking him to rise connotes a Christian baptism in the Jordan River. Eugene’s is a cruel baptism: it is turbid and troubling, perplexing and painful. From their place on the sidewalk, one of the young speakers can hear Eugene’s “Mama’s cries,” and pleads with him to not let “them” bury you down. The murky ambiguity of “them” can be productive here: “them” refers to the multiple churning waves of the lake, the

⁹⁹ See Colin Fisher, “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Race Riot,” p. 71.

¹⁰⁰ Ewing, Eve L. “Jump/Rope.” p. 32.

violent action of George Stauber and inaction of Officer Daniel Callahan, and the prevailing terrestrial-centered narrative of Chicago's Red Summer that obscures its aquatic origins.

In the poem's final stanzas, another speaker interrupts the preceding plea, lingering with the terrible material fact of Eugene's murder by drowning:

No, it goes like

down down baby,
Down down the water's tugging
Sweet sweet baby
Don't let them let you go
Swallow swallow grab the sky
Swallow swallow dark
Swallow swallow grab the sky
Swallow swallow dark
Grandma grandma sick in bed
Call on Jesus cause your baby's

No, it goes like

All dressed in black black black
All dressed in black black black
All dressed in
And he never came back back back¹⁰¹

This speaker emphasizes Eugene's youth once more, affectionately referring to him as a "sweet baby." The repetition of the lines "swallow swallow grab the sky / swallow swallow dark" call to a sense of surprise and shock that characterize the first stage of drowning: the

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 33.

swimmer reaches their arms high, reaching for anything to grasp onto to support their breath. The speakers are pleading with Eugene as well as describing the harrowing fact of his death: Eugene sinks into the dark murkiness of the water, and this sinking reverberates inland, registering with his ill grandmother at his Bronzeville home. There are disturbing line breaks and silences in these stanzas: where we expect to read “Grandma grandma sick in [bed] / call on Jesus cause your baby’s [dead]” and “All dressed in [black],” the lines are cropped to “your baby’s” and “all dressed in.” The abrupt, premature ending of these lines reflect the violent suddenness of Stauber’s murder of Eugene, and asks the reader to supply, or even reckon with the devastating words that might end these lines. The final stanza returns to the melody of “Miss Mary Mack,” where in the popular version of the rhyme, she is “all dressed in black” to go to the circus. The jovial black of Miss Mary is not the black of Eugene and his family—theirs is funeral-black, mourning-black. The children’s voices collide together, making the truth of Eugene’s murder murky and turbid. The cruel truth is that Eugene does not come back from this violence, yet Ewing and AZ continually offer us glimmers of liberatory potential and insurgency in the material-metaphorical waters of the lake.

“The Pearl Diver’s” recovery attempt

The competing, colliding voices of the youthful speakers in “Jump/Rope” give way to a singular speaker at the lakeshore, bearing witness to a recovery attempt for Eugene’s body underneath the waves. Before we are introduced to this witness, “The Pearl Diver” begins with an epigraph from the fourth page of *The Negro in Chicago*, bluntly stating that “*no arrest was made.*”¹⁰² This opening sentence confirms not only the incompetence of the police department, but its collusion with the multi-scalar force of white supremacy that barred Black Chicagoans

¹⁰² Ewing, 1919, p. 34.

from aquatic recreation. For a sociological report, there is a literary quality about the following sentences: “*The tragedy was sensed by the battling crowd and, awed by it, they gathered on the beach. For an hour both whites and Negroes dived for the boy without results (4).*”¹⁰³ The tension and chaos on the sandy beach—the *tyrbe*, terrestrial turmoil born from the blood in the water—is registered, “sensed” by the Chicagoans gathered on the beach, and “awe” assumes one of its most original meanings: a sense of dread and fear tinged with reverence. The chaos of this turbid awe is momentarily muffled or submerged as we travel into the lake with the titular diver.

The speaker, though not the diver herself, observes her aquatic movements carefully and knows them intimately. We know that the pearl diver—who I read as a Black woman due to a historical precedent of Black women pearl divers in coastal Africa—“uses waves to her favor / knows when to resist, which is almost never.”¹⁰⁴ Here, I see Ewing identifying an insurgent woman in an insurgent waterscape, daring to dive amidst the threat of white supremacist police, lifeguards, and civilian mobs. The diver knows that swimming and diving are practices of creating resistance, or knowing when to push and pull against the water with your limbs. At the same time, swimming and diving are practices of surrender; of knowing when not to struggle against the water. In the case of a rip current in Lake Michigan, fighting against the water’s movement can be fatal.¹⁰⁵ The pearl diver continues her search for Eugene, “hold[ing] the warmth in her tender parts; / the fat on the hips, the breasts.”¹⁰⁶ Ewing crafts the pearl diver with tender, thermal imagery: the heat of her body is held close in the vastness and depth of Lake Michigan, and in the cold cruelty of Eugene’s murder. Though the warmest surface temperatures of the lake occur in late summer and early fall—July 27th, 1919, certainly falling in the warm

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 34.

¹⁰⁴ Ewing, 1919, p. 43.

¹⁰⁵ “Dangerous Currents in the Great Lakes.” *Michigan Sea Grant*.

¹⁰⁶ Ewing, 1919, p. 43.

days against the backdrop of major industrial pollution—an average surface temperature of 60 degrees fahrenheit would still certainly contrast with the heat of the diver’s skin.¹⁰⁷ Her hips and breasts move through the water with a tender power, an aquatic othermother figure searching for her fictive kin.¹⁰⁸

After her initial dive, the pearl diver begins to contend with the lake’s material murkiness in the aquatic space of the poem. She “pushes the darkness aside: / refusing the tangle of green.” With the diver, we encounter the freshwater materials that obscure Eugene’s body: a thicket of green aquatic plants, possibly aquatic plants such as slender naiad, coontail, and/or pondweed.¹⁰⁹ These plants are native to the Great Lakes region, and they thrive submerged underwater. The speaker’s observation of the “tangle of green” could refer to any one of these submerged plants or a combination of them; a mysterious aquatic grove. However, a limnological reading of this line can deepen our understanding of the pearl diver’s knowledge of and relationship to the material specificity of the lake she is submerged in. The slender naiad (*najas flexilis*), with its ribbon-like leaves that form “dense, busy masses by midsummer,”¹¹⁰ is named for the category of ancient Greek nymphs whose aquatic domains are freshwater springs. These nymphs are providers of and presiders over freshwater, and thus inseparable from their topography.¹¹¹ Many names of Naiads contain the ancient Greek root *-rhoe*, which can refer to “lovely flowing” or “swift flowing”;¹¹² marking their ethereal beauty and power within freshwater ecosystems.

¹⁰⁷ “Lake Michigan Climatology: Sustained Assessment of the Great Lakes.” Great Lakes Integrated Sciences and Assessments. <https://glisa.umich.edu/sustained-assessment/michigan-climatology/>

¹⁰⁸ See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990).

¹⁰⁹ Michigan Aquatic Plant Management Society Reference Chart.

¹¹⁰ Michigan Aquatic Plant Management Society Reference Chart, entry for *Najas flexilis*.

¹¹¹ Larson, Jennifer. “What is a Nymph?” *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore*. Oxford University Press, 2001. Pp. 4-5.

¹¹² Larson, Jennifer. “What is a Nymph?” p. 6. Larson refers to the names of Naiads Kallirhoe and Okyrhoe.

Further, the category of Limnade, a specific type of Naiad, provides and presides over freshwater marshes, wetlands and lakes. What meanings might we glean from seeing the “tangle of green” as slender naiads, specifically a group of Limnades that thrives in and maintains Lake Michigan? Naiads are complex figures: they are healers by association with freshwater, yet cannot be easily domesticated or tamed.¹¹³ Ambiguous, healing and unruly, this submergent forest is at once a hindrance to the pearl diver in her search for Eugene and a shield from the ensuing terrestrial violence happening on the beach. A reframing of the “tangle of green” as a forest of slender naiads offers us a mythological lens through which to see the affordances of turbidity and murkiness of Lake Michigan: the cruel impossibility of Eugene’s recovery is also an opening to a potentially healing underwater afterlife.

A limnological reading of “The Pearl Diver” also offers an opportunity to explore interpretive connections between the vital role of divers in 16th to 18th century Caribbean, Eastern, Central, and Western African aquatic communities and Ewing’s titular pearl diver. Kevin Dawson’s historical study reveals the deep significance of Black men and women divers to their coastal communities in marine and brackish waters of Sierra Leone, Somalia, and the Kingdom of Kongo.¹¹⁴ European colonizers marveled at and exploited these men and women’s aquatic labors and abilities, namely lifeguarding and the recovery of lucrative subaquatic materials. Lifeguarding labor was exploited by slave traders; on the coasts of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, some Black men were hired as lifeguards to protect the “investment” of a French slaver’s human chattel being transported via canoe, as well as European near-drowning

¹¹³ Larson, Jennifer. “What is a Nymph?” P. 2.

¹¹⁴ Dawson, Kevin. “History from Below: Enslaved Underwater Divers.” *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Cultures of the African Diaspora*. Pp. 57-85.

victims.¹¹⁵ Many Sierra Leonean women were noted to be expert divers, harvesting oysters for their lime and cowrie shells for their value as currency. Dawson cites an example of a sixteenth-century traveler's observation of these Black women's diving expertise: "Women dive under water, a depth of two yards or more, and filling their baskets with sand, they sift out certain small shellfish, called Lumanche, and then separate the male from the female, the latter being most prized for its color and brightness."¹¹⁶ Noteworthy here are two points, the first of which is the athletic precision of these women: to dive from the surface of the water to a depth of at least six feet is hardly a simple task, especially in churning coastal waves. Second, this account communicates that these women knew of the market value of oysters and shellfish and thus the value of their aquatic labor. Through a limnological reading, we can situate Ewing's insurgent pearl diver within a legacy (if not a lineage) of Black divers, ones whose aquatic labor recover precious things: the oyster, the cowrie shell, the human life. Though the churning marine and brackish waters of these West African coasts differ materially from Ewing's literary Lake Michigan, studying these historical divers alongside Ewing's literary diver in the space of the poem locate Lake Michigan as "a water people's geopolitical space," and Eugene Williams' life as deeply precious.¹¹⁷ In the depths of the poem's freshwater, with the knowledge of the legacy of divers who came before her, we find a Black woman attempting to recover a child who the city was intent on disappearing.

¹¹⁵ See Dawson, p. 58. Dawson notes the travel account of Paul Isert: "I was tossed around in the breakers until a Black came swimming from the shore, pulled me onto his back, and thus drew me ashore."

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 58.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 57. Dawson underscores the power of swimming in countering European conquests for economic power: "Both in Africa and in the Americas aquatics undercut European attempts to project power across waterscapes. Europeans had hoped to conquer African polities. However, ecological advantages favored Africans who possessed iron weapons, forcing Europeans to treat them as equals and superiors as they largely controlled the terms of commerce into the late eighteenth century. They were powerful enough to control territorial waters, using swimming, among other things, to counter European incursions" (p. 58).

Ewing continues her poetic speculation of the rescue attempt by mingling freshwater and marine materials, underscoring the murky, turbid conditions of Eugene's murder. The diver "reaches also for soft things: / sea cucumber. a slug. the arm of a boy."¹¹⁸ As implied in its name, the sea cucumber is an animal exclusive to marine waters, intolerant of freshwater. Leathery-skinned and slow moving, they live on the sea floor and break down organic detritus, recycling it into nutrients for marine ecosystems. The ambiguous "slug" that follows the sea cucumber is curious: while there are indeed freshwater slugs—also detritivores like the sea cucumber—the *Acochlidium* genus is primarily located in freshwater streams flowing to the Pacific, decidedly not native to the Great Lakes. Where would a slug fit into Lake Michigan's ecosystem? When read alongside the environmental, limnological history of the Great Lakes, we can illuminate the subaquatic material in "The Pearl Diver;" this unnamed "slug" might be read as the slippery and destructive sea lamprey. The sea lamprey's name rightly suggests its nativity to marine waters of the Northern Hemisphere, however with the completion of the second Welland Canal in 1919, these fish circumvented the natural barrier of Niagara Falls and invaded the Great Lakes. While the Welland Canal's restoration allowed for more efficient industrial travel between Ontario and the major Great Lakes ports of Chicago, Cleveland, Milwaukee and Detroit, the introduction of these "vampire fish" led to the decimation of vital native fish populations such as lake whitefish and trout.¹¹⁹ If we linger with the possibility of the titular pearl diver's tactile encounter with an invasive sea lamprey, we might see in their contact a bridging of two massive disturbances or insurgencies: one being the sociopolitical upheaval of Eugene's murder and subsequent riots; the other the ecological disturbance of the second Welland Canal, its associated dredging and

¹¹⁸ Ewing, 1919, p. 43.

¹¹⁹ See Rapai's *Lake Invaders: Invasive Species and the Battle for the Future of the Great Lakes*. Pp. 1-32.

rerouting of water and canalling boats, and consequent upset of Lake Michigan's ecosystem.¹²⁰ I read the collision of these upheavals—both occurring in 1919— as creating a simultaneously devastating and generative murkiness in the aquatic space of the poem. The inclusion of “the arm of a boy” among the organic material she reaches for communicates the integration of Eugene's body into the lakebed, and thus the material-metaphorical lake ecosystem. The fact of Eugene's murder remains devastating and nearly ineffable. However, when read with close attention to the material specificity of the water, the concluding lines offer a potential limnological, even mythological refuge or afterlife. The pearl diver

grasps also at false starts:

abalone. mussels. a rock with the shape of a tooth.

blinks at every cloud:

a burst of sand. blood in the water.¹²¹

Here again Ewing mingles freshwater and marine subaquatic material: the abalone sea snail lives exclusively in saltwater, while the ambiguous “mussel” could refer to freshwater bivalves in the *Unionidae* family that, decades before the disastrous introduction of invasive zebra and quagga mussels into the Great Lakes in the late 1980s, were vital food sources for native fauna and indicators of water quality.¹²² While mussels in both the native *Unionidae* and invasive

¹²⁰ See this revelatory quote from Applegate, Vernon C: “Natural History of the Sea Lamprey, *Petromyzon marinus*, in Michigan”: “Generally speaking, sea lamprey spawning runs occur in every major Michigan river system in the Lake Michigan basin: The St. Joseph, Kalamazoo, Grand, Muskegon, Pere Marquette, Manistee, Platte, Boardman, Manistique, and Menominee” (p. 13). Report conducted for The United States Department of the Interior Fish and Wildlife Service, 1950.

¹²¹ Ewing, 1919, p. 34.

¹²² Zebra and quagga mussels, of the family *Dreissenidae*, are native to eastern European freshwater systems. Their DNA was accidentally introduced to the Great Lakes via the emptying of ballast marine water into the St. Lawrence Seaway in the late 1980s. See Dan Egan's *The Death and Life of the Great Lakes*: “The [Environmental Protection Agency], for whatever reason, decided to quietly tweak the regulations the year after the Clean Water Act [of 1972] was passed, probably to save some hassle and

Dreissenidae families are filter feeders, the feeding of excessive populations of zebra and quagga mussels have filtered the freshwater of the Great Lakes to a point of excessive clarity. Dan Egan notes in his study of twentieth century Great Lakes pollution that this clarity is “not the sign of a healthy lake; it’s the sign of a lake having the life sucked out of it.”¹²³

Harmful levels of filtration emerge more explicitly in a subsequent poem entitled “sightseers.” The epigraph from *The Negro in Chicago* situates us in the immediate aftermath of the drowning: “Often the ‘sightseers’ and even those included in the nucleus did not know why they had taken part in crimes the viciousness of which was not apparent to them until afterward.”¹²⁴ These “sightseers” named here are spectators and participants in the ensuing white supremacist violence on the lakefront. The enclosure of ‘sightseers’ in quotation marks stakes out and critiques a relationship between the spectacle of the murder and the tourists who survey it. Ewing’s speaker contends with these sightseers and emphasizes the pleasure gained from “filtration” of the cultural memory of Eugene from the lake. The speaker begins at a loss, underscoring the ineffability of the murder: “I just don’t know what to say / that we live in a time of sightseers / standing on the bridge of history / watching the water go by.”¹²⁵ These spectators are passive, watching the movement of the lake from a safe distance, a stark contrast to the insistent proximity between the lake and the pearl diver. The speaker continues by declaring

and there are bodies in the water
and the water has been dirty for so long
and the sightseers still drink from it

money by giving the shipping industry a free pass to dump their ship-steadying ballast water. The rationale at the time was that ballast tanks weren’t full of noxious stuff like oils or acids. They held nothing but seawater. The folly here is that ballast water isn’t just water. It swarms with perhaps the most potent pollutant there is: DNA” (p. 29).

¹²³Egan, *The Death and Life of the Great Lakes*, xvi.

¹²⁴*The Negro in Chicago*, p. 23.

¹²⁵ Ewing, “sightseers,” p. 41.

they buy special filters and they smile
they have nice glasses and teacups
they put sugar in the dirty water
that has our bodies in it¹²⁶

There is a righteous anger that permeates this stanza; a tone that establishes a long history of white supremacy in and near the lacustrine waters. Ewing and her speaker locate death and anti-Black violence in the material waters of Lake Michigan, calling back to Toni Morrison's reminder that water is a carrier of cultural memory.¹²⁷ As an observer of the voyeuristic sightseers, the speaker regards the lake as a carrier of what Morrison describes as "emotional memory—what the nerves and skin remember as well as how it appeared."¹²⁸ This massive body of water holds Eugene's body and the memory of his death remains painful, corporeal. Anissa Janine Wardi reminds us that "in African American cultural history, bodies of water are *lieux de memoire*, embodied sites where memory and history converge."¹²⁹ Via a limnological reading that attends to the material specificity of Lake Michigan's environmental history, we might illuminate two crucial points: first, we can stake out a relationship between the invasive *Dreissinidae* and the sightseers' embodied, consumptive practices of filtration. Second, we can identify a crucial distinction between pollution and turbidity.

The speaker insists upon the "dirtiness" of the lake and the sightseers' willful, yet ultimately futile attempt to sanitize and sweeten its racialized history. I read this "dirtiness" as referring not solely to Eugene's physical body and the bodies of those murdered throughout the

¹²⁶ Ewing, *1919*, p. 41.

¹²⁷ Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory," p. 119

¹²⁸ Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory," p. 119.

¹²⁹ Wardi, Anissa Janine. "Introduction: African American Watersheds." *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective*. University of Florida Press, 2011. P. 6.

span of the riots. Rather, I see Ewing's speaker figuring the willful ignorance toward the racialized history of the lake as a sort of material-metaphorical pollution. In light of the limnological history of the lake ecosystem, the sightseers begin to resemble the invasive quagga and zebra mussels in their feverish impulse toward filtration and ecological destruction. No matter how the sightseers attempt to "clean" the water or alter its appearance—be it with neat cubes of sugar, delicate tea sets, or "special filters"—the pollution remains.

The agonizing and difficult thing is that we should not be able to see the lakebed. If the water is excessively clear (i.e., lacking a quality of turbidity), then it is ecologically unhealthy and in danger of losing its biodiversity. How can we reconcile that ecological reality with the impulse toward clarity around the circumstances of Eugene's murder? We can look back to a limnological reading of "The Pearl Diver": the inclusion of a native *Unionidae* mussel in the pearl diver's reach signals a generative relationship to material-metaphorical turbidity. The murkiness of the water puts Eugene's body devastatingly out of reach, but also encloses a potential underwater afterlife for Eugene. The juxtaposition of the marine abalone and freshwater mussels—that, in the terms of our ecological reality, could never be proximal to one another—hint at a quasi-mythological, aquatic afterlife that Eugene and the pearl diver linger at the edge of. What brackish haven might these two molluscs be inventing in the aquatic space of the poem?

The concluding lines of "The Pearl Diver" call our attention back to the technical measurement of turbidity and the disastrous reality of Eugene's murder. The suspended sediment of the "burst of sand" and of the "blood in the water" are placed alongside one another in the same line, both characterized as "clouds." Here on the material-metaphorical lakebed lies something devastating, opaque, and celestial: the blood and sand become subaquatic materials

that obscure Eugene's body, beyond the reach of the pearl diver. When read alongside the photographs in *Eugene's Cove*, the integration of Eugene's body into the material-metaphorical lakebed becomes a portal to a subaquatic, limnological afterlife.

Murkiness, subaquatic play and a limnological afterlife in *Eugene's Cove*

Where Ewing offers a critical textual gesture toward a limnological, underwater afterlife, most notably in "The Pearl Diver," AZ's photography—composed in communion with the camera, the Black swimmers, and the murky, lacustrine waters—illustrates the existence of a cove, a haven where a legacy of playful, joyful submersion in Lake Michigan exists in the wake of the city-sanctioned murder of Eugene. In my limnological reading of AZ's photography, I return to Felicia Renaud's call to surrender to the materiality of the water to find such a haven. Renaud describes the narrative arc of *Eugene's Cove* in terms of light and shadow, opacity and flashes of clarity:

Narratively, *Eugene's Cove* unfolds as a life cycle. The children are at once playful and gothic, always soulful and sometimes irreverent. Better yet, *the silhouette*: a haunting and delicate opacity drifts alongside ripples of liquid sun...Eugene? We are engulfed by the inability to distinguish between what was and what is. As childhood gives way to adulthood and the lives of underwater survivors (following the premise of the collection), a fantastical hue emerges. Spines, thighs, fingers, eyes—every body and every movement feels like *infinite suspension*. AZ displays the surreal physics of underwater movement through thrilling uses of perspective.¹³⁰

Here, Renaud notes the photographic chiaroscuro that AZ creates with the water and her subjects. This intermingling of light and shadow alters the viewer's sense of reality, time,

¹³⁰ Renaud, Felicia. "All Waters are Eulogies," from *Eugene's Cove*. p. 5. Italics Renaud's.

physics and ontological reality. In the realm of *Eugene's Cove*, AZ surrenders to and works with the material turbidity of the water, allowing a glimpse of what might be an image of Eugene—passing from his terrestrial life and transforming into his limnological, “fantastical” afterlife below the waves. As the silhouettes of each subject celebrate their individual artistry and relationships with the lake, their murkiness also opens up new temporal possibilities: these swimmers could just as easily be in the water with Eugene in 1919 as they could be in 2019. In the world of *Eugene's Cove*, these swimmers comprise a collective of lake-dwellers who suspend themselves and our sense of time in the water. We know that the measurement of turbidity is about the suspension of sediment and organic matter in the water; in these photographs, as Renaud underscores, the suspension of Black swimmers takes on a fantastical dimension.

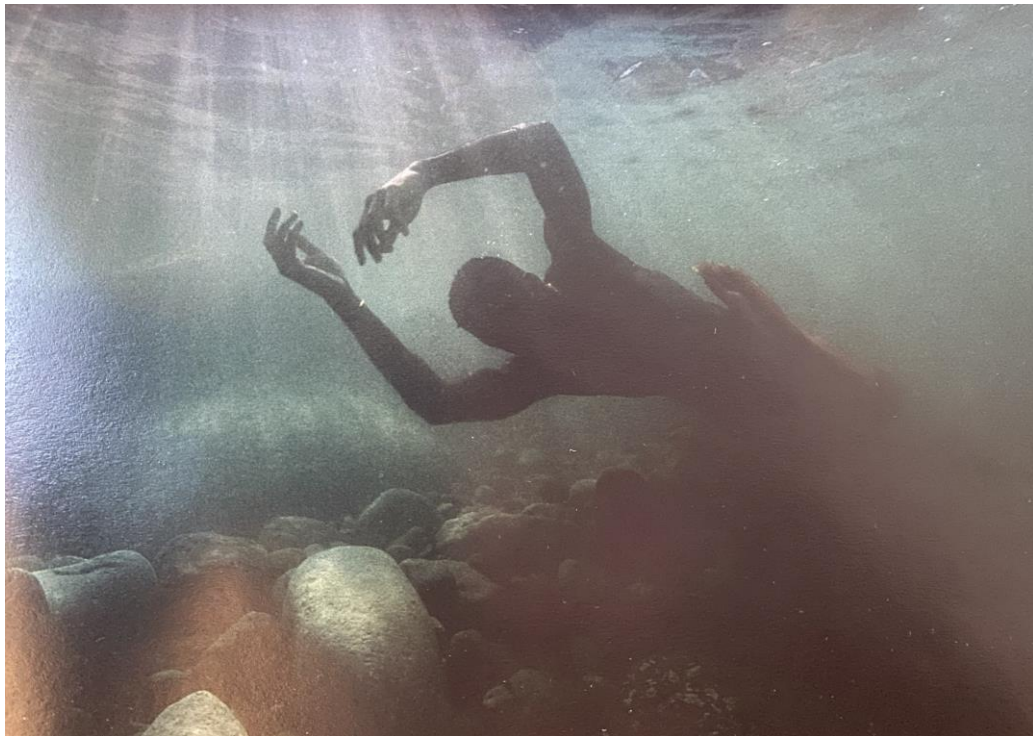


Figure 4 Photo of a possible 'mer-child,' by Lishan AZ

In the above photograph—which is also the cover of AZ’s book—the adult swimmer lifts their arms above their head, forming them into a circle, perhaps a halo. The celestial quality of their underwater pose is underscored by the sunlight filtering onto their hand and forearm. Along the lines of the swimmer’s silhouette, we see a peach-hued fabric billowing in the water, obscuring their legs and feet. The end of the fabric looks almost fin-like—might this be the tail of Eugene as a Lake Michigan merchild? As I think alongside Jalondra A. Davis’ study of Black “crossing merfolk,”¹³¹ I argue that the murkiness of the silhouette allows this swimmer’s body to extend Eugene’s life beyond the realm of the terrestrial into that of Black merfolk. Following M. Jacqui Alexander’s critical examinations on diasporic aquatic crossings and Sylvia Wynter’s critiques of Western humanism, Davis analyzes Nalo Hopkinson’s *The New Moon’s Arms* and Rivers Solomon’s *The Deep* to identify narratives of Black merfolk that work to unsettle the “hierarchical and ecologically disastrous category of the human” and “embody alternative forms of being.”¹³² I join Davis’ call to think with the narrative of the “crossing merfolk” to disrupt liberal humanism as a dominant epistemology, however where I diverge from her study is within the firm anchoring of the merfolk as necessarily marine-dwelling and direct descendants of those who died overboard slave ships during the transatlantic slave trade.¹³³ I read AZ’s photographs and the subjects’ murky silhouettes as an assertion and affirmation of freshwater merfolk—a community of Black swimmers for whom Lake Michigan is the body of water they know best

¹³¹ Davis, Jalondra A. “Crossing Merfolk, the Human, and the Anthropocene in Nalo Hopkinson’s *The New Moon’s Arms* and Rivers Solomon’s *The Deep*.” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Vol. 32, No. 3. Pp. 308-318.

¹³² Davis, Jalondra A. Crossing Merfolk, the Human, and the Anthropocene in Nalo Hopkinson’s *The New Moon’s Arms* and Rivers Solomon’s *The Deep*.” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Vol. 32, No. 3. (2021). P. 350.

¹³³ Davis writes in the introduction to her article: “By anchoring mermaid lore within the transatlantic slave trade as it launches modernity and global racial capitalism, crossing merfolk narratives interrupt the human. In doing so, these narratives reveal the imbrication of white supremacist and environmental violence and embody alternative forms of being” (p. 350).

and insist upon inhabiting. In an essayistic reflection on his process of writing the experimental poem “Swimchant of Nigger Mer-Folk (an Aquaboogie Set in Lapis),” Douglas Kearney writes of a transformational encounter he had with visual artist Kara Walker’s silhouettes and their ambiguity: “Walker works silhouettes. Black paper cut into figures and set-pieces then stuck to walls. Within the aesthetics’ constraint, Walker must rely on representational cues one can “read” by outline[...] Letting the Mermaids tell their dreams draws the precise nature of their desire into question. It seemed to me that the speaker’s motivation had to be unclear, slippery—as opaque as the cut-outs.”¹³⁴ I read the billowing, opaque fabric in AZ’s photograph as a cue that gestures toward the existence of freshwater merfolk—not seeking to lure anyone to their deaths or signify an elusive, exoticized sexuality as a masculinist view of a mermaid might¹³⁵—but to insist upon opacity, vitality and playfulness below the waves, below and beyond the spectacle of white supremacist violence.

¹³⁴ Kearney, Douglas. “MAST.” *Poetry Foundation*, 4 January 2011.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/featured-blogger/59796/mast>

¹³⁵ See Davis, Jalondra A. “Crossing Merfolk, the Human, and the Anthropocene in Nalo Hopkinson’s *The New Moon’s Arms* and Rivers Solomon’s *The Deep*.” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Vol. 32, No. 3. (2021). Pp. 308-318.



Figure 5 Two Black children hold each other underwater, photo by Lishan AZ



Figure 6 Four photos of Black children underwater by Lishan AZ



Figure 7 A Black child holding up underwater 'peace signs,' photo by Lishan AZ

The three subsequent photographs shown above demonstrate Renaud's noting of the "playful and gothic" qualities of the children in the lake. As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, AZ surrenders her photography practice to the unpredictable Chicago weather and graininess of the film. The resulting murkiness facilitates playfulness, youthful exuberance, and a tender embrace between young swimmers. The first photograph shows two children facing one another, suspended in the water, their hands holding each other's faces. The photograph's composition conceals the details of their facial features and expressions; however we know that the light of the midsummer sun is able to reach this gentle holding.

This gentle playfulness photographed in the water takes on, as Tina Campt reminds us, haptic and sonic dimensions that exceed the visual.¹³⁶ As we look at the layout of four photographs, we can see a wide smile, expressions of glee; the young swimmers plugging their noses, the sound of bubbles rushing upward to the surface. In the lower right corner of the page, we see a young swimmer with bubbles surrounding their face, one of their braids floating, almost encircling them. AZ's camera captures a black and white reflection of the swimmer on the surface of the water. Where the swimmer and their reflection meet just under the surface, we might find ourselves again suspended in time, an aquatic mirror that reflects an enduring legacy of subaquatic play. In the upper left corner, a young swimmer opens their eyes to look at the lens and a bubble appears to cover their iris and pupil. What can we make of this joyful gaze at the lens? I am called to remember the first verse of Jamila Woods' "LSD" (Lakeshore Drive), the song that in part inspired this dissertation project: "I prefer water that don't burn my eyes when they open / I won't let you criticize / my city like my skin it's so pretty / If you don't like it just leave it alone."¹³⁷ Several other swimmers—youth and adults—choose to open their eyes underwater for AZ's camera. Some of these gazes are directly at the camera while others are set beyond the scope of the lens. Read limnologically alongside fellow Black Chicagoan Woods' preference for Lake Michigan's freshwater, the swimmers' opened eyes in the murky water are searching for community underneath the waves without the ocular irritant of saltwater. Though George Stauber's murder of Eugene Williams was a brutal attempt at shutting out Black Chicagoan youth from accessing the lake, these photographs communicate a legacy of Black insistence upon aquatic play.

¹³⁶ See Campt's *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*, p. 16.

¹³⁷ Woods, Jamila. "LSD (Lakeshore Drive)." *HEAVN* (2016). Track 3.

Below the set of four photographs is another black and white photo of another young swimmer with both of their hands forming peace signs. It is blurrier than the photographs that precede it, and it is difficult to make out much of the swimmer's features save their braids and raised hands. This photo is situated next to a reproduction of Ewing's "Jump/Rope" in AZ's collection, and the swimmer's playful pose resonates with the collection of children skipping rope. The placement of this poem next to this peace-bringing swimmer places them in dialogue with "Jump/Rope's" young speakers: as the imagined children in 1919 Chicago vie to clarify the details of Eugene's death, the 21st century swimmer's subaquatic sign of peace seems to assure them that indeed, Eugene "never came back" to terrestrial Chicago, but perhaps he fashioned for himself a new afterlife in the depths of the lake.

Conclusion: The body, the city, the map, the reservoir

After lingering in the lake in that central section of *1919*, "What Happened," Ewing momentarily departs the lakeshore—but not the realm of the aquatic—to tell the story of Samuel Bass, a 57 year old Black man who, according to *The Negro in Chicago* report, was physically assaulted by a rogue gang of white men while walking home. The authors of the report write that the white men "*knocked him down three times, and cut gashes in his nose and cheeks with their shoes.*" We learn that "*Bass hid behind freight cars till a Jewish peddler took him in his cart to State Street. A doctor was visited, but when he learned that Bass had no money, he turned him away without treatment.*"¹³⁸ Even amidst the fleeting moment of early twentieth century interracial solidarity between Bass and the peddler, this epigraph illustrates Bass' fugitivity

¹³⁸ Ewing, "this is a map," p. 45. Epigraph from *The Negro in Chicago*, p. 659.

within his own city. Ewing crafts the speaker of the following poem “this is a map” as Bass himself, giving the reader a tour of his Chicago:

this is the blood of my rivers
this is the bruise of my marshland
this is the sinew of my furthest ridge, and
this is the map of the railroad.
and if I could stand and walk I could make it all the way back
to my granny, pinching snuff and humming
and if she looked up she would say *boy, my baby*
where you been all this time¹³⁹

In this final stanza, Ewing’s rendering of Bass likens his body to two major hydrological features of Chicago: The Chicago River—the flow of which was reversed via dredging in 1900 in an effort to reduce industrial pollution flowing into Lake Michigan¹⁴⁰—and the marshes and wetlands that significantly drained and diminished over the twentieth century due to the river’s engineered reversal.¹⁴¹ We encounter the imagined Bass speaking during or after the assault which occurred on July 29th, only two days after Eugene’s death. Like Eugene, Samuel Bass was a Pullman Porter who knew well the “map[s] of the railroad,” and on account of the street-car strike happening at the time of the riots, he opted to walk home from work.¹⁴² This poem is a

¹³⁹ Ewing, “this is a map,” p. 45. Emphasis Ewing’s.

¹⁴⁰ See Corpolongo’s “Cleansing Chicago: Environmental Control and the Reversal of the Chicago River.” from *City of Lake and Prairie: Chicago’s Environmental History*. The reversal of the river’s flow was accomplished by January 17th, 1900. Corpolongo writes: “Through improved sanitation and assurances of a clean urban environment, city officials claimed a resounding victory. Industrialists continued to establish factories in Chicago, which increased the demand for laborers. Ultimately the canal succeeded in combating pollution and improving Chicago’s drinking water for most residents. Nonetheless, immigrant working class residents living in neighborhoods near the Union Stock Yard lacked effective sanitation and waste-removal services despite the technological marvel built just blocks from their homes.” p. 76.

¹⁴¹ Cartier, K. M. S. (2020), Chicago wetlands shrank by 40% during the 20th century, *Eos*, 101, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2020EO149410>. Published on 23 September 2020.

¹⁴² “Commemorating the Killed: Samuel Bass.” The Chicago Race Riot of 1919 Commemoration Project. <https://chicagoraceriot.org/the-killed/samuel-bass/>

profession of faith to the city he calls home in spite of the immense pain it has caused him. Ewing's use of anaphora in this final stanza underscores Bass' declarative tone: this city and all its waterways are not only the spaces he is familiar with, they are part of his corporeal composition. The first two lines of this stanza stake out a symbiotic relationship between Samuel and the wetlands: The Chicago river remains his lifeblood, even as it flows from the wounds on his face and is physically manipulated and dredged by civil engineers. The marshland—often called the “kidneys” of hydrological systems due to their vital role in filtering out pollutants and absorbing floodwater—darkens and yellows in the stanza, forming a bruise.¹⁴³ Through Samuel's eyes, the city is his tender body, mirroring his pain, rendering him inextricable from the waterscapes that made him. The conditional tense that concludes the poem frames Samuel's wish for a return to his grandmother: “if” he could rise from the ground after this brutal violence, he could meet the light of his grandmother's familiar voice and face. Ewing's poetic speculation of Bass' grandmother claims him with tender affection, echoing the title of “sweet sweet baby” given to Eugene by the children jumping rope. Ewing's speculative poetic practice is necessarily murky; we are given a “map” to Samuel's Chicago, but can only see as far as the “sinew of [his] furthest ridge.” As the Chicago River's directional flow was reversed, Ewing speculates upon Samuel's directionality. Did make it back home safely to his beloveds? The answer lies outside the lines of the map, beyond the topographic scope of the poem—in our material reality, he did make it home to his family, though he would die approximately one month later of a brain hemorrhage, likely related to the cerebral trauma he suffered at the hands of the white mob.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ See Cartier, K. M. S. (2020), Chicago wetlands shrank by 40% during the 20th century, *Eos*, 101, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2020EO149410>. Published on 23 September 2020.

¹⁴⁴ “Commemorating the Killed: Samuel Bass.” The Chicago Race Riot of 1919 Commemoration Project. <https://chicagoraceriot.org/the-killed/samuel-bass/>: “Bass ultimately received cursory treatment at a hospital, but he died a little over a month later of a brain hemorrhage on September 5th at the age of fifty-seven.”

This declarative tone of “this is a map” marks the Chicago River and Chicago marshlands as insurgent waterscapes that echo Ewing’s and AZ’s longing for Lake Michigan. Through their poetry and photography, Lake Michigan is transformed into an insurgent waterscape, integral to the fullness of their subjects’ lives. The water’s material-metaphorical turbidity/murkiness is both confounding and generative: it operates in Ewing’s poetry as the blurring of marine and freshwater flora and fauna, concealing the elusive details of Eugene’s death as well as a limnological afterlife. Through surrendering to the material murkiness of Lake Michigan, AZ’s photography gestures toward his limnological afterlife and establishes a legacy of playful engagement with freshwater; a legacy held in suspension, like sediment, across space and time.

Ewing and AZ open their collections with a dedication to Black subjects for whom the waters were a passageway to another life. Echoing Langston Hughes’ famous poem, Ewing writes *1919* for “all those who speak of rivers [and] to all those who made safe passage and to all those lost in the waters.”¹⁴⁵ Where Ewing speaks to a collective of Black subjects who engage with the aquatic, AZ speaks directly to Eugene’s memory: “For young Eugene, who didn’t choose to die in these waters. May your stolen laughter continue to be our rallying cry.”¹⁴⁶ In their literary and visual mediations, Lake Michigan becomes that “reservoir of feeling” that Renaud mentions at the beginning of *Eugene’s Cove*. Here are limnological waters to return to and be redirected by; materially different yet not totally unlike the freshwater lakes in central-southern Florida that comprise the second chapter of this project.

¹⁴⁵ See Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” *Poetry Foundation*.
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44428/the-negro-speaks-of-rivers>

¹⁴⁶ AZ, Lishan. *Eugene’s Cove*, xv.

Limne: Florida Water

Nestled in her 2019 album *When I Get Home*, Solange Knowles writes and sings of “Almeda,” a neighborhood in her native Houston, Texas. The song does not outline a neat, realistic map of the small neighborhood, located about 11 miles from downtown Houston; it is more of a fantastical, glittering cartography insisting upon the permanence of Blackness in Texas:

Brown liquor, brown liquor
Brown skin, brown face
Brown leather, brown sugar
Brown leaves, brown keys
Brown clippers, brown face
Black skin, black braids
Black waves, black days...

These are black-owned things
Black faith still can't be washed away
Not even in that Florida water
Not even in that Florida water
In that Florida water¹⁴⁷

Knowles’ “third coast” stretches nearly 400 miles along the Texas Gulf, and the vastness of its cartographic expanse echoes the vastness of her love for the place. Here, the “Florida water” is an eau de cologne, a citrus scent grounded in syncretic Hoodoo practices of spiritual

¹⁴⁷ Knowles, Solange. “Almeda.” *When I Get Home* (2019) [Track 9].

cleansing. In her poetry collection *Florida Water*, aja monet reflects on the multitudinous waters that shape her migration to South Florida:

in love with the wand of a body withering and weathering. sea levels rising and the choking tides of racism. you ever been who you was supposed to be? waterfalls and freshwater springs. soaked with grief. florida wet with blood. the blessing and battleground.¹⁴⁸

About one decade ago on a spring day in Orlando, I traveled to a freshwater spring tucked away in central Floridian foliage. The water was breathtakingly clear; I could see the gentle swish of a blue tilapia's tail and the darting of a Florida gar—a tiny leopard-printed missile shooting to and fro in the calm water. Most captivating of all was the seemingly endless bubbling of the spring from its original aquifer. The seeping and bubbling was slow, steady and deliberate. I could have watched the water stretch upward forever.

¹⁴⁸ monet, aja. *Florida Water*, p. 3.

Chapter Two: Limnological Interiority and Relationality in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Introduction: Covered by the waters

"Beside the waters of the Hudson' I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, overswept by a creamy sea. I am surged upon and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again."

—Zora Neale Hurston, "How it Feels to be Colored Me" (1928)

The "sharp white background" of Barnard College in Manhattan is among Zora Neale Hurston's places where she feels most "colored."¹⁴⁹ The college, far from the lakes of her native Eatonville and surrounding Orange County, Florida, is figured as a brackish waterscape: the cold freshwater of the Hudson River mingles with her figuration of a "creamy sea," attempting to obscure and silence Hurston, the first Black woman to be admitted to Barnard three years before the publishing of "How It Feels to be Colored Me" in the May edition of the Christian Socialist magazine *The World Tomorrow*.¹⁵⁰ Though Hurston cites the "daring" front porches of Eatonville as her favorite places from which to observe the performances of Black Floridian language and idiom,¹⁵¹ the freshwaters of the Hudson also become a useful figuration of her experience with the whiteness of Barnard. In this brackish mixture¹⁵² of material and

¹⁴⁹ "How It Feels to be Colored Me," *The World Tomorrow*. Pp. 215-16. photocopy, May, 1928, Box: 13, Folder: 20. Zora Neale Hurston Papers, MS Group 006. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida. *The World Tomorrow* ran between 1918 and 1934.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 215.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p. 215.

¹⁵² The Cambridge Dictionary defines "brackish" as 'of water, slightly salty,' as in 'As a river approaches the sea, its water becomes brackish.'" <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/brackish>

metaphorical waters we find a Hurston solidified. The material-metaphorical waters recompose her into a rock momentarily overtaken by a surge of overwhelming racial difference, but remains proudly in place, nestled in the riverbed.

I find that in her works, Hurston thinks and writes with water materially and metaphorically. In this chapter, I study how Hurston thinks with Floridian waterscapes to complicate the interiority of and relationality between her characters in her watershed novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This novel teems with material and metaphorical fresh, atmospheric, and groundwater, which warrant further exploration in addition to the hurricane as an Atlantic phenomenon. Through a limnological reading of the novel—which foregrounds the freshwater systems of the metaphorical-material tropical storm, the subterranean Floridian aquifer, the inland Lake Sabelia, the Everglades swamp, and the Lake Okeechobee floodwaters—I argue that Janie’s interiority and interpersonal relationships with Nanny, Pheoby, and Tea Cake are recomposed and redirected limnologically, which allows for the renegotiation of romantic and familial interpersonal relationships as well as notions of Black women’s propriety in Hurston’s early twentieth century Florida.

I contend that these proximal atmospheric, surface, and subterranean waters Hurston’s characters know inform their emotional interiorities and interrelationships. Material recomposition and redirection of limnological waters occurs in various forms: Groundwater under the pressure of limestone forces itself upward through an aquifer into a freshwater spring, signaling Nanny’s fervent wishes for Janie and her impending death; the gusty, nomadic tropical disturbance of Janie’s frustration and grief migrates inland from the Atlantic; the calm yet treacherous depth of Lake Sabelia offers a risky sort of solace for Janie and Phoeby after Jody

Starks' death; and the stunning and precarious Everglades swamp offers Janie a muddy material expanse upon which to defy notions of Black women's propriety, while it is also the place where Tea Cake physically abuses her. Further, the floodwaters of Lake Okeechobee are destructive and clarifying: they destroy Tea Cake and Janie's shared shack near the lakeshore, and clarify for Janie the impossibility of a return to the tenuously harmonious state of her marriage.

As we travel along the novel's Lake Okeechobee watershed, we witness an aqueous Janie interact with bodies of increasingly dangerous waters where the propriety of widowhood, participation in agricultural labor, questioning of romantic and sexual fidelity and perpetuation of domestic abuse are recomposed and redirected. These insights about Janie's interiority and relationships with other characters are available to us if we decenter the static, fixed edifice by foregrounding the expansive, destructive and clarifying dynamism of Florida waterscapes as foremost figurations of Janie's interiority and relationships with Nanny, Phoebe and Tea Cake.

Beyond the porch and the pear tree: Trends in Ecocritical and Feminist criticism of Their Eyes Were Watching God, and a turn to limnological interiority and relationality

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a novel as beloved as it is contested, though tension between those two critical attitudes has shifted over the course of the last several decades. I find that ecocritical engagement with the novel focuses on two moments in Janie's relationships with the Floridian natural environment: The first is Janie's witnessing of the blossoming pear tree at the beginning of the novel and the second is the San Felipe Segundo hurricane and subsequent flooding of Lake Okeechobee at the novel's climax. 16-year-old Janie's witnessing of the blossoming pear tree has come to represent a sexual and spiritual awakening. After Janie kisses local boy Johnny Taylor atop her grandmother's fence post, she spends the afternoon admiring the way bees pollinate the pear tree, relishing in the "love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the

tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight.”¹⁵³ A new model for love and tenderness reveals itself to Janie: “So this was a marriage!”¹⁵⁴ African Americanist and Caribbeanist scholar Donna Aza Weir-Soley locates the pear tree scene as the one of the first entries in a genealogy of Black women writing of the erotic, inspiringly transgressive for its time.¹⁵⁵ Carla Kaplan indexes the pear tree scene as one that sets in motion the eroticization of Janie’s journey to “that oldest human longing—self revelation,”¹⁵⁶ and argues that as the “hungry listener” of Janie’s story, her best friend Phoeby Watson is the apt “bee to [Janie’s] flower.”¹⁵⁷ The blossoming pear tree is indeed significant to Janie’s spiritual and erotic revelations and indicates Janie’s attunement to her West Floridian landscape.

Ecocritical analyses of Hurston’s representation of the 1928 San Felipe Segundo hurricane and the Lake Okeechobee flood rightly underscore how Hurston exposes the racialized and socioeconomic dimensions of ecological disasters. Susan Scott Parrish discusses Hurston as a mediator of “20th century, rural, southern, African-American men and women[‘s] history and cosmology,”¹⁵⁸ noting that Black Southern men and women were not wholly disillusioned or enchanted by the idea of “belonging” to nature. Rather, they perceived a more accurate attachment to nature as “shot through with chance and risk, acted on by an ever-involved and potent God and only sometimes respondent to human propitiation.”¹⁵⁹ Janie and Tea Cake find pleasure and community in “the muck” as they participate in extractive economies of the

¹⁵³ Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. p. 11.

¹⁵⁴ Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p. 11.

¹⁵⁵ Weir-Soley, Donna. “Literary interventions in Their eyes were watching God: Contradictory directives and the erotics of remembering.” *Eroticism, Spirituality, and Resistance in Black Women’s Writings*. University Press of Florida, 2009. Pp. 1-288.

¹⁵⁶ Kaplan, Karla. The Erotics of Talk: “That Oldest Human Longing” in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. ” *Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Casebook*. Ed. Cheryl Wall.

¹⁵⁷ Kaplan, “The Erotics of Talk,” p. 138.

¹⁵⁸ Parrish, Susan Scott. “Zora Neale Hurston and the Environmental Ethic of Risk,” p. 21.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 21.

commercial harvesting beans, tomatoes, and sugar cane. Parrish usefully terms Tea Cake and Janie's ecological knowledge "bio-sentience," a knowledge that Tea Cake overlooks to the benefit of the white "bossman" who owns the fertile land on the muck, and to the detriment of himself and Janie at the onset of the flood. Parrish notes that "in the case of the flood, Hurston used the visible and catastrophic consequences of a massive drainage scheme to dramatize how even bio-sentient people could fool themselves into not knowing about risk-regimes that they have helped to create."¹⁶⁰ Daphne Lamothe has noted the influence of Haitian Vodou on the Hurston's representation of the hurricane, particularly citing the presence of the goddess Ezili Freda likened to Janie, "mulatta goddess of love," and Ezili Danto, a "black goddess associated with maternal rage."¹⁶¹ In Lamothe's view, Ezili Danto makes her presence known through the "gentle rainfall" in the muck, and her rage is represented by the flooding of the lake.¹⁶² Though Janie's light skin, long hair, and eroticism makes her association with Ezili Freda more immediately clear, I see Janie's rage-as-rainfall and interior storm also offering her a spiritual and embodied link to Ezili Danto.

Hurston's ecological knowledge of the land and waterscapes around her are richly evident in her fiction, folklore, and autobiographical works. Scott Hicks rightly indicates Hurston as an environmentalist *par excellence*, as she not only "narrate[s] and critique[s] the ecological depredations of her time, she also explores and exposes the racial, socioeconomic, and gendered interpretations of environmental consciousness and inhabitation."¹⁶³ Given Hurston's extensive ecological knowledge and her deployment of it within her works, how can we enrich our

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 35.

¹⁶¹ Lamothe, Daphne. "Vodou Imagery, African American Tradition." *Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Casebook*. Ed. Cheryl Wall. P. 221.

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 221.

¹⁶³ See Hicks, Scott. "Zora Neale Hurston: Environmentalist in Southern Literature. *The Inside Light: New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*. Pp. 113-123.

understanding of Janie's journey by incorporating the material-metaphorical specificity of limnological Floridian waterscapes, in addition to the pear tree and the hurricane? How else can we study Janie's ecological knowledge as it relates to her interiority in a world designed for Black women to be "de mule uh de world?"¹⁶⁴

In my study of Floridian limnological waterscapes, I draw from Hurston's autobiographical musings on her life in Floridian "lake country." Among the inland lakes of Hurston's home in and around Eatonville, she felt compelled to explore her interiority. For instance, as a young Zora Neale¹⁶⁵ expresses disappointment with the dolls she receives for Christmas by drowning them in the lake, she declares that "without knowing it, I wanted action. So I was driven inward. I lived an exciting life unseen."¹⁶⁶ Young Zora Neale crafted fantastic stories of a local Black man named Mr. Pendir who transformed into an alligator at night, swimming in Lake Belle as a "gator among gators."¹⁶⁷ Bustling with life inside of the lake country of central and southern Florida was Zora Neale's own interior "lake country," fueled by an imagination shaped by the local, inland waters she encountered.

I find that critical considerations of Janie's voice and her capacity to be a feminist character usually occur spatially, limited to the architectural edifices of the porch and general store. In "Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Barbara Johnson cites the aftermath of an argument between Janie and her second husband, Jody Starks, to underscore Hurston's splitting of Janie's consciousness into interior and exterior selves. After

¹⁶⁴ Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. p. 14.

¹⁶⁵ I use "Zora Neale" as a name for Hurston's characterization of herself in her 1942 autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, to distinguish between Hurston herself and the fanciful, if elusive, narration of her life in Eatonville. See Dr. Maya Angelou's foreword to *Dust Tracks* for another meditation on Hurston's fascinating narrative shiftiness throughout the autobiography.

¹⁶⁶ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 30.

¹⁶⁷ Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 52.

Jody slaps Janie for not preparing dinner to his liking, Janie feels as if something “fell off the shelf inside her.”¹⁶⁸ As mentioned earlier in this section, that “something” is Janie’s image of Jody, shattered and lying on the floor of the store. Johnson notes that Janie’s interior is figured as “an internalization of the outer,” the outer being the public general store. The general store is where “Joe has set himself up as lord, master, and proprietor[,] but here Jody’s image is broken, and reveals itself never to have been a metaphor but only a metonymy of Janie’s dream: ‘looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over.’”¹⁶⁹ After this instance of domestic violence, Janie “had an inside and an outside now and she knew not to mix them.”¹⁷⁰ For Johnson, this division of selves poses two generative implications. The first is that Janie’s interior and exterior could not be merged into one identity, and the second is that if these selves must remain separate for Janie’s survival, she “has stepped irrevocably into the necessity of figurative language, where inside and outside are never the same.”¹⁷¹ This splitting is especially generative for Johnson as it means that Janie’s “authentic voice” need not be revealed through a “search for wholeness, oneness, universality and totalization,” but a deep exploration of “self-difference.”¹⁷² I share Johnson’s curiosity about the division of interior and exterior, however, where I diverge from Johnson is her relegation of this study of Janie’s fragmented selves to the architectural edifice of the general store. To expand our critical understandings of Janie’s interiority, I turn my critical curiosities to limnological figurations of Janie’s interior, and how those aquatic interiors interact with Nanny, Pheoby, and Tea Cake.

¹⁶⁸ Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p. 68.

¹⁶⁹ Johnson, Barbara. “Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” Pp. 109-125.

¹⁷⁰ Johnson, p. 49.

¹⁷¹ Johnson, p. 49.

¹⁷² Johnson, p. 50.

Limnological reading: Interiority and relationality

I use limnology in two interrelated ways in this chapter: First, I use the limnological materiality of the Floridian freshwater systems in the novel to deepen my understanding of Janie's relationship to her central and southern Floridian ecologies. Second, I see the multiple insurgent Floridian waterscapes in this novel as constitutive of Janie's limnological interior. In relation to the static, fixed positions of the porch and general store, Janie's limnological interior is dynamic and mutable. As a field of study, limnology

Encompasses an integration of physical, chemical, and biological components of inland aquatic ecosystems with the drainage basin, movements of water through the drainage basin, and biogeochemical changes that occur en route, and within standing waters and exchanges with the atmosphere. The lake ecosystem is intimately coupled with its drainage area and atmosphere, and with its running waters and ground waters that flow, and metabolize en route, components of the land being transported to the lake."¹⁷³

I find limnology useful here because it integrates waterscapes across various states of matter and location, and foregrounds the multidirectionality of freshwater systems. As I demonstrate in the following close readings of interactions between Janie and Nanny, Phoeby, and Tea Cake, these characters' limnological interiors assume the shape of interrelated Floridian waterscapes¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Wetzel, Robert G. "What is Limnology?" University of North Carolina (2003); Association for the Sciences of Limnology and Oceanography. <https://www.aslo.org/what-is-aquatic-science/what-is-limnology/>

¹⁷⁴ In *Undercurrents of Power: Black Aquatic Cultures in the African Diaspora*, Historian Kevin Dawson defines "waterscape" this way: "waterscape expresses how freshwater and saltwater systems actively informed group identities while articulating how water and land seascapes were interlaced into amphibious culturescapes" (p. 4). Waterscape seeks to actively include freshwater, as "seascapes" is a more historically utilized term.

material and metaphorical. Lake Sabelia, the Everglades wetland, and the Lake Okeechobee floodwaters waterscapes are interspersed and bookended with figurations of the Floridan aquifer and a tropical storm system. Further, these limnological interiors use the materiality, movement and structure of Floridian limnological waterscapes to make interpretive room for the recomposition and redirection of familial and romantic bonds and notions of black women's propriety in the novel. Through the freshwater spring figuration, Nanny and Janie become relational aqueous figures, and we learn that her interiority is recomposed via the Floridan aquifer and spring. On Lake Sabelia, Phoeby and Janie renegotiate Black women's propriety while fishing, redirecting an expectation of immense grief after Jody's funeral to the stillness and capaciousness of the lake. The "muck" of the Everglades wetland and the Lake Okeechobee floodwaters are spaces that facilitate the recomposition of Janie's relationship to Tea Cake via the misogynistic, "corrective" slap and the rabid dog bite. Finally, I return to the figuration of the freshwater spring in my interpretation of the "fish-net" scene at the close of the novel, arguing that the freshwater spring, emergent from the Floridan aquifer, becomes Janie's place of rest after the unruly yet clarifying devastation of the Lake Okeechobee flood. The material multiplicity of Floridian freshwater systems challenges the neat splitting of Janie's "inside" and "outside" selves. Her interiority, which encompasses her emotions and desires, assumes the shapes of the Floridian waterscapes. Janie's freedom is found in and shaped by the clarifying, destructive, and peaceful waters.

A freshwater spring and a tropical disturbance: The limnological recomposition of Nanny and Janie

One of the first things I observed about Janie Crawford is that she is a tropical storm system unto herself. Janie's girlhood dissatisfaction, frustration and grief manifests as rising humidity and gusts of wind, particularly in her interactions with Nanny as she protests her marriage to Logan Killicks, a local farmer several years her senior. After leaving the architectural edifice of Killicks' farm—bored, uninspired, and disgusted with her husband's work ethic at the expense of his hygiene—Janie tells Nanny that she “wants to want him sometimes. Ah don't want him to do all de wantin.”¹⁷⁵ Nanny intervenes by reminding her that she should be grateful for a home, a safe place to live:

Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road and...Lawd have mussy! Dats the de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love! Dat's just what got us uh pullin' and a haulin' and uh sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de mornin' to can't see at night. Dat's how come de ole folks say dat bein uh fool don't kill nobody. It jus' makes you sweat.¹⁷⁶

Here, Nanny pleads with Janie to understand the institution of marriage and its attendant accumulation of land and property as beneficial and necessary for her survival. For Nanny, Janie's architected “parlor” is a place she should be happy to be in; a reception room in which to remember that she is safe among her people. The relative safety and comfort of the house and parlor conflicts with Nanny's embodied, aqueous perspective on romantic love. The architectural edifice of the Killicks home becomes a symbol of freedom, autonomy and prestige in Nanny's episteme. Interrupting herself to call upon her God, she moves from Janie's localized lament to a

¹⁷⁵ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 22.

¹⁷⁶ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 22.

broader collective of Black women and their relationships to romantic love. Dreams of romantic love become a “prong” that pierces Black women into a cycle of fruitless labor. Love demands “pullin,” “haulin,” and “sweatin,” a fate for Janie that Nanny desperately wishes to avoid. For a Black woman to allow love to guide her life is a foolish thing. The effort of loving with no land or home to love in only results in needless perspiration.

What can we make of this sweat?¹⁷⁷ Nanny understandably rejects the longing for needless exertion as she straddles the embodied experience of once being property with the relative newness of freedom in a new state. The sweat produced by “throwing up a highway” for herself and her daughter Leafy and escaping the Georgia plantation through a dangerous swamp full of “moccasins and other bitin’ snakes” is an integral part of Nanny’s love.¹⁷⁸ The sweat produced from anxiety about whether her breast milk, filled with worry, would “kill [her] chile” was a part of the effort of loving. The sweat potentially produced from a potential infection of her lash wounds, as she “knowed [her] body wasn’t healed” when she took to the swamp and the nearby river, was a part of her love.¹⁷⁹ I do not cite these particular lines to posit Nanny as only a sacrificial figure, but rather to see how she may discern between the sweat and humidity produced by fugitivity and that produced by chasing a romantic love that does not guarantee safety in a formerly confederate state in the early twentieth century.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ See Hurston’s 1926 short story “Sweat,” originally published in the singular issue of *Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*. The story centers a Black washerwoman named Delia Jones and her abusive husband, Sykes, meditating on the sweat produced by endless domestic labor and the endurance of and resistance to domestic violence.

¹⁷⁸ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 17.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 17-18.

¹⁸⁰ The 1923 Rosewood Massacre (Levy County) and 1920 Ocoee Massacre (Orange County) were examples of mass racial violence against Black towns in 1920s Florida. See Hobbs, Tameka Bradley: *Democracy Abroad, Lynching At Home: Racial Violence In Florida*, pp. 1-32.

After Nanny attempts to reassure Janie that she can learn to love Killicks, we see Nanny's intimate retreat to her "private shack" to reflect on her efforts to protect her granddaughter. Though this reflection takes place in the relative safety of the architected, enclosing shack, Nanny's interior assumes the depth and elusiveness of a freshwater spring:

Nanny sent Janie along with a stern mien, but she dwindled all the rest of the day as she worked. And when she gained the privacy of her own little shack she stayed on her knees so long she forgot she was there herself. There is a basin in the mind where words float around on thought and thought on sound and sight. Then there is a depth of thought untouched by words, and deeper still a gulf of formless feelings untouched by thought. Nanny entered this infinity of conscious pain again on her old knees. Towards morning she uttered "Lawd, you know mah heart. Ah done de best Ah could do. De rest is left to you. She scuffled up from her knees and fell heavily across the bed. A month later she was dead.¹⁸¹

Water is not immediately visible, but via a limnological reading, I contend that the shape of a Floridian freshwater spring surfaces here. Nanny's consciousness takes the shape of a "basin," where words "float," held up by a conscious thought and then in the realm of the aural and ocular. Deeper still, Nanny senses a "gulf" of amorphous feeling, a depth too difficult for conscious thought to reach. The materiality of the freshwater spring factors into Nanny's limnological interior. I read this "gulf," as a part of the Florida aquifer system which underlies the entire state, as well as parts of Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia.¹⁸² The Floridian aquifer holds invaluable groundwater that sustains freshwater ecosystems of plants, fish, reptiles

¹⁸¹ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 23.

¹⁸² Odum, Howard T. "Springs 101: A Comprehensive Educational Resource for Understanding Florida Springs." <https://floridasprings.org/springs-101/>. Florida Springs Institute.

and insects, and provides drinking water for nonhuman and human animals. This cold freshwater remains in the underground reservoir of the aquifer until it rises high enough to apply pressure on the porous limestone, or is pumped out via a man-made well. The freshwater bubbles up out of the ground, thus creating a spring.

The aquifer and freshwater spring that forms Nanny's limnological interior allows her, for a moment, a sense of physical weightlessness—despite her tired knees— among the emotional magnitude of grief and knowledge of her impending death. Underneath the private shack, she plunges into the spring, briefly touching the aquifer. There, she remains so long in a position of prayer that “she forgot she was there herself” (22). As our human bodies acclimate to water temperatures and remain still, it can take a swift swimming stroke or other aquatic disturbance to remember that we are indeed submerged. In this deep blue “infinity of conscious pain” and feeling, she surrenders the effort of loving Janie to her God, allowing the pressurized water to seep through the stone of her consciousness. Ever aqueous, Nanny hurriedly “scuffles” or rises to her feet, bubbling up and onto her resting place. The aquifer and its freshwater spring is one of several places where water journeys in its life cycle. Nanny's limnological interior, as an aquifer and freshwater spring, demonstrates how her presence shaped and supported Janie's development, whose love and desire for a freer life for her daughter and granddaughter spills out of the confines of an architectural edifice. In West Florida where Nanny's shack is constructed, the Floridan aquifer is more confined, meaning that there are layers of “relatively impermeable” rock that bound the groundwater, thus restricting its movement.¹⁸³ In the material-metaphorical

¹⁸³ SWFWMD. West-Central Florida's Aquifers—Florida's Great Unseen Water Resources. 2017. Available online: https://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/sites/default/files/store_products/flas_aquifers.pdf

freshwater spring and Floridian aquifer, Nanny is given a space to surrender and offer one of her final prayers for Janie.

The aquifer and spring and the sweat/humidity/tropical disturbance figurations of Nanny and Janie's inner lives show that these limnological interiors are necessarily relational. Janie's storm system begins to form when in contention with Nanny and her expectations of marriage and propriety. In this surge of emotions, Janie's grief and frustration are recomposed into the realm of the seasonal and atmospheric. After Nanny's death, Janie "wait[s] a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time. But when the pollen again gilded the sun and sifted down on the world she began to stand around the gate and expect things. What things? She didn't know exactly. Her breath was gusty and short. She knew things that nobody had told her."¹⁸⁴ These things she knows are the whisperings of the flora she lived among: Janie "often spoke to falling seeds and said, 'Ah hope you land on soft ground,' because she had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed."¹⁸⁵ The shift from bloom, to green, then to orange indicates Janie's seasonal knowledge of the life of an orange tree, flora that Hurston knows well, as orange groves and other citrus were common in her neighborhood in Eatonville.¹⁸⁶

In this moment of waiting and uncertainty, Janie's limnological interior assumes the shape of a growing tropical disturbance. A tropical disturbance can be associated with a "detectable perturbation of the wind field" of a given area.¹⁸⁷ Via the aquatic, atmospheric Janie's "gusty [and] short" breaths, she begins to bluster away from the "familiar people and things [that] failed her" as she gazes at the road in front of her.¹⁸⁸ Logan Killicks, the house, the

¹⁸⁴ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 23.

¹⁸⁵ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 24.

¹⁸⁶ See Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, pp. 1-45.

¹⁸⁷ National Weather Service. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). https://www.weather.gov/mob/tropical_definitions

¹⁸⁸ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 24.

parlor, the small farm, and even Nanny—these familiar people and familiar architected spaces are failing her in that they disrupt her journey to delight in the sweat of life—the erotic effort of “finding out about livin’ for herself.”¹⁸⁹ Janie’s interior tropical disturbance, though not yet a fully formed storm, signals a dissatisfaction and wistfulness that guides her on her journey down the Lake Okeechobee watershed. This expression of frustration as a nomadic tropical disturbance diverges from Nanny’s urgency around remaining safely enclosed in a confined aquifer. When read limnologically, the diverging interior desires and contentious yet loving relationship between grandmother and granddaughter is rendered environmentally, and their divergent philosophies of love, safety, and a fulfilled life can be expressed atmospherically.

Marriage, fishing and the redirection of mourning on Lake Sabelia

Lake Sabelia¹⁹⁰ is a waterscape in Maitland that Janie and her best friend Phoeby Watson escape to in the wake of Jody Starks’ death. After Janie emerges from wearing black into wearing white—signaling the transition from grief into mourning for Jody’s death— she feels the latent desire from a host of suitors asking after her well-being. This desire is not always spoken aloud, but Janie nonetheless feels it: “[T]hey felt it was not fitting to mention desire to the widow of Joseph Starks. You spoke of honor and respect. And all that they said and did was refracted by her inattention and shot off towards the rim-bones of nothing.”¹⁹¹ Here on the lake is the beginning of a redirection of Janie’s feelings about the condition of being a widow: her apathy becomes a force that redirects the “sho[oting] off” of the suitor’s desires. Janie steps out

¹⁸⁹ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 183.

¹⁹⁰ I use Hurston’s spelling of “Sabelia” with an “a” for consistency in my limnological reading. The modern spelling is “Sybelia.”

¹⁹¹ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 88.

of the carefully architected home, shedding her suffocating title of “Mrs. Mayor Starks” and stepping out to Lake Sabelia with Phoeby to fish.¹⁹²

She and Phoeby visited back and forth and once in a while sat around the lakes and fished. She was just basking in freedom for the most part without the need for thought. A Sanford undertaker was pressing his cause through Phoeby, and Janie was listening pleasantly but undisturbed. It might be nice to marry him, at that. No hurry. Such things take time to think about, or rather she pretended to Phoeby that that was what she was doing.

‘T’aint dat Ah worries over Joe’s death, Phoeby. Ah jus’ loves dis freedom.’

‘Sh-sh-sh! Don’t let nobody hear you say dat, Janie. Folks will say you ain’t sorry he’s gone.’

“Let em say whut dey wants tuh, Phoeby. To my thinkin’ mourning oughtn’t tuh last no longer’n grief.”¹⁹³

As they fish, Lake Sabelia’s material expanse becomes a waterscape where Janie can not only bask in a newfound, if momentary freedom from Jody’s patriarchal suppression; it is also one where she can renegotiate notions of a proper Black womanhood. “Basking in freedom” is certainly not the proper response to a mourning period, shown through Phoeby’s urgent hushing of Janie’s vocalized relief. On the 84-acre lake,¹⁹⁴ Janie lets her “inside self” breathe, plunging a curious, searching line into the awaiting freshwater of a “pleasant, undisturbed” new life.

In the 1920s when Janie and Pheoby gathered to fish in the literary Lake Sabelia, the lake in reality was simultaneously leisurely and dangerous. Open to the public, the lake hosted

¹⁹² See readings of Janie and Phoeby’s relationship as a lesbian and/or queer one (see Carla Kaplan, “The Erotics of Talk.”)

¹⁹³ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 88-89.

¹⁹⁴ “LAKE HAS LONG, RICH HISTORY AS COOL REFUGE IN HEART OF CITY.” *The Orlando Sentinel*. 13 December 1990. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/1990/12/13/lake-has-long-rich-history-as-cool-refuge-in-heart-of-city/?clearUserState=true>

swimmers, fishermen and fisherwomen. It also was the site of extractive dredging, where land developers sought to “build up low-lying land.”¹⁹⁵ This dredging created dangerous drop offs into the nearly 70 foot depth of the lake. This depth and potential danger in rushing the mourning process and building a relationship with Tea Cake does not seem to bother Janie, as she leaves behind grief and mourning enclosed in the Starks home. The lake’s qualities of serenity and danger become mirrors of Janie and Phoeby’s perspectives of a new romance and the expectations of widowhood. While Phoeby’s anxiety around mourning Jody and Tea Cake’s rebelliousness becomes the lake’s drop-off, Janie finds calm in the material expanse of the lake and what new love awaits her as she emerges from mourning.

The act of line fishing is also communal: in J.T. Roane’s study of Black Virginians and Marylanders’ relationships with line fishing in the Tidewaters, he writes that fishing is “part of the quiet expression of Black communal self-creation in intimacy with the aquatic and the sub aquatic [and] set against the backdrop of extractivism—the exploitation of lands, waterways, and resources for short-term profitability through industrial processes of removal rather than a long-term strategy of communal well-being.”¹⁹⁶ Quietness on the lake operates interestingly here: Phoeby tells Janie to be quiet regarding her joy in the newfound freedom in the wake of Jody’s death, and the quiet act of fishing operates as communal bonding for the two “kissin’-friends.” On Lake Sabelia, line fishing becomes Black communal self-creation in intimacy with the aquatic.

¹⁹⁵“LAKE HAS LONG, RICH HISTORY AS COOL REFUGE IN HEART OF CITY.” *The Orlando Sentinel*. 13 December 1990. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/1990/12/13/lake-has-long-rich-history-as-cool-refuge-in-heart-of-city/?clearUserState=true>

¹⁹⁶ Roane, J.T. “Black Ecologies, subaquatic life, and the Jim Crow enclosure of the tidewater.” *Journal of Rural Studies*, Vol. 94, pp. 227-238.

As they fish, Janie underscores the psychic limitations of the general store, the conversation with Phoeby continuing on the lakeshore:

Jody classed me off. Ah didn't. Naw, Pheoby, Tea Cake ain't draggin me off nowhere Ah don't want tuh go. Ah always did want tuh git round uh whole heap, but Jody wouldn't 'low me tuh. When Ah wasn't in de store he wanted me tuh jes sit with folded hands and sit dere. And Ah'd sit dere wid de walls creepin' up on me and squeezin all de life outa me. Phoeby, these educated women got uh heap of things to sit down and consider. Somebody done tole 'em what to set down for. Nobody ain't told poor me, so sittin' still worries me. Ah wants to utilize mahself all over.¹⁹⁷

Here on the lakeshore, Janie's limnological interior is restless to escape the confines of the Starks home and the general store. Janie corrects Phoeby when she mistakenly believes her managerial position in the store or her presiding at the Mayor's house was desirable: far from a place of peace and freedom, the "creepin'" walls constrict Janie, nearly threatening to kill her. Janie places herself outside the category of "educated" women who are likely sedentary in the architectural edifice of their schoolhouses. Instead, Janie desires to "utilize [her]self all over."¹⁹⁸ The desire for a more expansive, exciting, and perhaps more risk-filled life is articulated on the limnological expanse of Lake Sabelia, and as Janie moves farther south with Tea Cake down the Lake Okeechobee watershed, the opportunities for more expansive interiority occur on the limnological Everglades wetland and Lake Okeechobee floodwaters.

The recomposing and redirecting Everglades

¹⁹⁷ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 107.

¹⁹⁸ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 107.

Janie and Tea Cake move farther south to the Everglades, a recently drained wetland teeming with abundant agricultural labor opportunities and competition, transnational tension and collaboration,¹⁹⁹ and recreational pleasures. In Hurston's literary geography of the "muck," there are beans, tomatoes, and sugar cane to be harvested by what Hurston calls a "subterranean force" of Black Floridian and Black Caribbean migrant workers. Tea Cake enthusiastically predicts economic fortune for himself and his love, toggling between manual labor and gambling: "between the beans and the dice Ah can't lose."²⁰⁰ When Janie and Tea Cake arrive on the muck, we see its overwhelming largeness via Janie:

To Janie's strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big and new. Big Lake Okeechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything. Weeds that did well to grow waist high up the state were eight and often ten feet tall down there. Ground so rich that everything went wild. Volunteer cane just taking the place. Dirt roads so rich and black that a half mile of it would have fertilized a Kansas wheat field. Wild came on either side of the road hiding the rest of the world. People wild too.²⁰¹

The muddy expanse of the Everglades is defamiliarized here through Janie's "strange eyes," and Janie's unfamiliarity with this waterscape is expressed in Hurston's use of anaphora, with the adjective "big" at the beginning of the passage, and "wild" at its end. Janie sees "Big Lake Okeechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything," illustrating a swamp that, before

¹⁹⁹ See Martyn Bone's "The Extended South of Black Folk: Intraregional and Transnational Migrant Labor in the Writing of Zora Neale Hurston," pp. 753-779. Bone emphasizes the agricultural waterscape of the Everglades, and that Black Caribbean—particularly Bahamian and Jamaican migrants—and Black Floridian migrant workers labored together and often pitted against one another by agricultural corporations such as U.S. Sugar. In Hurston's series of articles for the *Miami Herald*, "The Migrant Farm Worker in Florida" or "Florida's Migrant Farm Worker," she described her home state as "the hot house of the nation," where citrus, sugar and other lucrative crops were grown and harvested by a "subterranean force" of migrant workers. This article series was a part of the Depression Era Federal Writers Project.

²⁰⁰ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 123.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 123.

massive drainage projects made for corporate agricultural interests, proliferates an immense amount of lucrative and exportable flora.²⁰² Janie notes a stark height difference between the plant life that grows in the northern areas of the Lake Okeechobee watershed; where she stepped out of Jody Starks' home, the climate didn't allow for the weeds to stretch past her waist. The sheer height of the weeds in the Everglades become a symbol of possibility for Janie, an ecological reminder of her desire to "utilize [her]self all over."²⁰³

The Everglades' "wildness" captivates Janie, the word itself encompassing the tall flora and biodiverse fauna that characterizes the wetland. The Everglades is an ecotone; a transitional waterscape neither wholly land or water that resists easy marking or mapping.²⁰⁴ The muck's "wildness" is also an obscuring force: it "hid[es] the rest of the world," a world that represented Janie's suffocation and fixedness in the architected home and store in Eatonville. As I read Hurston's literary Everglades limnologically, I argue that it becomes another waterscape that facilitates the redirection of notions of Black women's propriety, particularly through Janie's movement learning how to hunt alligators and engage in agricultural labor. This unconventional Black womanhood posits a generative contrast to their distant and "color-struck" neighbor Mrs. Turner, who visits with Janie inside the shack, preoccupied with racial propriety and purity. While Janie delights in transgressing these boundaries of propriety while navigating the swamp, bean and cane fields, the Everglades' indeterminate material composition also brings forth a collision of Janie and Tea Cake's romantic jealousies, which recompose in atmospheric terms via

²⁰² In "Zora Neale Hurston and the Environmental Ethic of Risk," Parrish discusses the drainage projects in South Florida as ones that created agricultural monoculture in favor of the sugar industry. These drainage projects were invested in by Northern and British interests. (p. 29).

²⁰³ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 107.

²⁰⁴ See Monique Allawaert's *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* and Tiffany Lethabo King's *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. Allawaert describes swamps as "quintessentially sublime spaces: they are vast geographies that defy measurement." P. 29.

sweat as riding humidity. Janie's rising interior humidity merges fiercely and pleasurably with Tea Cake's in a sexual encounter inside their shack on the shore of Lake Okeechobee, but this metaphorical tropical disturbance reveals a multi-pronged precarity of their life in the muck: Her romance with Tea Cake is made unsteady by the interior storm of jealousy in the unsteady architecture of the lakeshore shack. This interior disturbance precedes Tea Cake's domestic violence against Janie, which I argue in the following section is part of the disordering, redirecting force of the Lake Okeechobee flood.

On the muck, the conventions of proper Black womanhood that Janie learned in Jody Starks' store do not easily map onto the indeterminate waterscape she now calls home. Tea Cake teaches her how to shoot, and as she graduates from shooting cans to alligators, she gets to be "a better shot"²⁰⁵ than her husband as she navigates the swamp in the darkness. One evening when Tea Cake worries over whether Janie enjoys harvesting beans, tomatoes and sugarcane, she does not hesitate to reassure him: "Aw naw honey. Ah likes it. It's mo' nicer than settin' round dese quarters all day. Clerkin' in dat store wuz hard, but heah, we ain't got nothin' tuh do but do our work and come home and love."²⁰⁶ Tea Cake's worry represents an anxiety over his role as a masculine provider, but Janie's reassurance is as much for him as it is for herself: her role as a clerk, where she neatly arranged goods on a shelf and waited for a customer to engage with her, was a stifling enclosure. The agricultural labor and recreational hunting on the muck allow for a redirection of her sense of purpose: to labor and to love.

The routine of laboring and loving, however, becomes increasingly precarious as Janie discovers a fellow migrant worker called Nunkie and her flirtation with Tea Cake. In a

²⁰⁵ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 127.

²⁰⁶ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 127.

transitional space “where the beans ended and the sugar cane began,”²⁰⁷ Janie finds Nunkie and Tea Cake wrestling over his working tickets. Janie’s limnological interior recomposes into a stirring storm, as the typical humidity of the muck gives way to the temperature of her “cold rage.”²⁰⁸ Janie storms away from Tea Cake and Nunkie toward the shack, and as Tea Cake follows her inside, she hurls physical and verbal blows at him. The shack, the architected space where they retreat to love, soon resembles the aftermath of a storm:

They wrestled on until they were doped with their own fumes and emanations; till their clothes had been torn away; till he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with the heat of his body, doing things with their bodies to express the inexpressible, kissed her until she arched her body to meet him and they fell asleep in sweet exhaustion.²⁰⁹

Janie’s interior limnological storm shifts in direction and temperature as she moves from the field to the shack: as a tropical storm begins to form, the air pressure drops, cooling the temperature of the air. The subsequent rise in body temperature and sweat—their “fumes,” “emanations,” and “heat”—collide and threaten the sense of romantic security on an ever-precarious wetland, even when the encounter ends in erotic pleasure with their kisses, the “arching” of their bodies, and falling asleep in post-coital “sweet exhaustion.” Though Janie awakens to Tea Cake’s reassurance that he never loved Nunkie, it rests on the unsteady ground of threatened violence: “[Nunkie] ain’t good for nothin’ exceptin’ tuh set up in a kitchen stove and break wood over her head.”²¹⁰ This rejection of Nunkie within the walls of the architected

²⁰⁷ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 131.

²⁰⁸ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 132.

²⁰⁹ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 132.

²¹⁰ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 132.

lakeshore shack does not protect Janie from domestic violence, even in a waterscape infused with possibilities for a more expansive interiority.

Hurston extends this interior limnological storm figuration to Tea Cake as he justifies his slapping of Janie in the chapter preceding the onset of the Lake Okeechobee hurricane and flood. Mrs. Turner's insistence that Janie stop associating with Tea Cake—due to his dark skin and socioeconomic position—angers him so that he has a “brainstorm” when Mrs. Turner introduces her brother to Janie as a potential romantic suitor. Tea Cake justifies the slap to himself and to Sop-de-Bottom, his friend and fellow migrant worker. The slap is “corrective,” not due to Janie's behavior *per se*, but to show the Turner siblings that “he was boss.”²¹¹ Sop-de-Bottom expresses a colorist, near-libidinal jealousy at Janie's ability to show her bruises and disparages his unnamed dark-skinned wife in atmospheric, aquatic terms: “Mah woman would spread her lungs all over Palm Beach County, let alone knock out mah jaw teeth[...] git her good and mad, and she'll wade through solid rock up to her hip pockets.”²¹² Sop-de-Bottom's unnamed wife becomes an atmospheric force in the face of hypothetical domestic violence in the “spreading of her lungs,” making her self-defense known across the expanse of the entire county. Here, the Sop-de-Bottom imagines his wife in limnological terms: her determination is recomposed into the freshwater of the Everglades that erodes something as impenetrable as rock. This stormy image of Sop-de-Bottom's wife attempts to contrast the fantasy of Janie as a passive, quiet recipient of Tea Cake's corrective beatings. In the wake of Tea Cake and Sop-de-Bottom's fantasies of domination, the impending storm begins to stir Lake Okeechobee.

²¹¹ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 140.

²¹² Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 141.

The disordering and redirecting Lake Okeechobee floodwaters

The devastating Lake Okeechobee hurricane takes place within the third-to-last chapter of the novel. While the soon-to-be category 5 hurricane took shape as a tropical depression off the west coast of Africa, Hurston's literary Everglades was eerily quiet. Morning on the muck came to Janie "without motion[.] the winds, to the tiniest, lisp[ing] baby breath had left the earth. Even before the sun gave light, dead day was creeping from bush to bush watching man."²¹³ Impending death makes its presence known, and as the rains begin falling, non-human and human members of the Everglades waterscape make their way to Palm Beach. This is but one example of the redirecting power of the storm and subsequent flood: I argue that as Lake Okeechobee's floodwaters forcefully redirect Janie and Tea Cake northwest against direction of the watershed, the impossibility of Janie's return to her and Tea Cake's romance is painfully clarified. The impossibility of the return to their romance is rendered in the limnological floodwaters that cause the destruction of their home and of Tea Cake's body and mind via the rabies infection. The floodwaters insist upon disordering the precarious lakeshore homestead, despite Tea Cake's futile efforts to redirect the wind:

As soon as Tea Cake went pushing wind in front of him, he saw that the wind and water had given life to things that folks think of as dead and given death to so much that had been living things. Water everywhere. Stray fish swimming in the yard. Three inches more and the water would be in the house. Already in some. He decided to try to find a car to take them out of the 'Glades before worse things happened. He turned back to tell Janie about it so she could be ready to go.²¹⁴

²¹³ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p.147.

²¹⁴ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 147.

The floodwaters threaten Janie and Tea Cake's already precarious life on the muck. If the image of the lush, impossibly high vegetation ushers Janie into the Everglades, the encroaching waters of Lake Okeechobee breaching the four-foot dikes represent a swift disinvitation. Further, the floodwaters shatter the illusion of isolation from the ecological and atmospheric realities of the rapid agricultural development of Florida.

The stray fish in the yard and the uncontained water threaten to breach the tenuous architecture of the shack and the organization of living and dead organisms. Once they decide to leave their home, Janie and Tea Cake attempt to maneuver themselves against the floodwaters' direction but are nearly overcome by the lake. The two of them "had to fight to keep from being pushed the wrong way and to hold together. They saw other people like themselves struggling along. A house down, here and there, frightened cattle. But above all the drive of the wind and the water. And the lake." Hurston's positioning of the wind, water and lake as "above all" is totalizing in two different ways: first, it demonstrates the subsuming power of the flood, where a range of human and nonhuman organisms are submerged underneath and drowned. Second, the wind and water "above all" signals the disastrous power of the flood to displace, or redirect the inhabitants of the Everglades northwest to West Palm Beach, despite Janie and Tea Cake's attempts to escape.

Fear of the encroaching freshwater flood is shouted among the migrant workers of the Everglades: "de lake is comin'!" Their attempts to outrun the lake are futile as "the gushing water ran faster." The lake's "great body" was "held back, but rivers spouted through fissures in the rolling wall and broke like day."²¹⁵ Critical attention to the limnological specificity of Lake Okeechobee is significant here: as Parrish reminds us, Lake Okeechobee is fed by the Kissimmee

²¹⁵ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 153.

River floodplain, which was redirected by agricultural capitalist interest in the late nineteenth century.²¹⁶ In the disastrous “spouting” of rivers from the breached dike, Hurston’s personified “big, angry” lake could be seeking a return to its natural flow.

Hurston makes this tempest akin to a war zone, where missiles and other “floating dangers” abound. The hurricane’s rain and wind “drive” of the lake cannot be denied. In its waters, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog, thus developing the disease and its attendant hydrophobia after reaching relatively dry ground in Palm Beach. As he draws up water from the irrigation pump in the backyard, he at first delights in the coolness of the groundwater, but then the “demon” of hydrophobia seizes hold of his throat.²¹⁷ Here, the Floridian aquifer briefly surfaces in the text, calling back an elusive yet clarifying waterscape that Nanny immerses herself in at the beginning of the novel. While Nanny’s contained aquifer is a prayerful space of simultaneous surrender and anguish, the groundwater Tea Cake drinks is relatively unconfined, meaning the water’s movement is not as restricted under layers of limestone and therefore has increased contact with the floodwater on the surface. A limnological reading of Tea Cake’s consumption of the well water shows us that in addition to his hydrophobia, his aversive reaction could result in part because of the groundwater’s contact with the lake’s storm surge, saturated with the decay of human and nonhuman life.

After hurricane floodwaters seep into the uncontained aquifer, they have the potential to damage well casing and plumbing, allowing harmful bacteria to contaminate drinking water.²¹⁸ Even as Lake Okeechobee recedes and returns to its natural flow after the breaching of the dikes, the hydrophobia and potential contamination of the groundwater aquifer foretell the impossibility

²¹⁶ See Parrish, “Zora Neale Hurston and the Environmental Ethic of Risk,” p. 29.

²¹⁷ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 166.

²¹⁸ Thomas P. Van Biersel, Douglas A. Carlson, L. Riley Milner. “Impact of hurricanes storm surges on groundwater resources.” *Environmental Geology*. Pp.813-826.

of Tea Cake's return to a relatively harmonious engagement with the waterscapes he once made home, as well as his inevitable physical death.

Conclusion: Janie's return to Phoeby and the unconfined freshwater spring

After Tea Cake's funeral and her trial, Janie comes to terms with the impossibility of her return to the muck; for without Tea Cake, "it was just a great expanse of mud," emptied of its potential for labor and love.²¹⁹ The Okeechobee floodwaters, the impossibility of the return to the Everglades & the departure of Janie from the courthouse redirect Janie & facilitate her return to Phoeby as bearer of her story. She expresses pity for Eatonville's gossips who insist upon disparaging her, claiming that while she's been to "de horizon and back" along the Okeechobee watershed, they can only be described as "parched up," hopelessly dry in their insults.²²⁰ In response to Janie's recollection of her journey, Phoeby grows "ten feet higher," perhaps not unlike the massive flora of the Everglades. Phoeby expresses her desire to return to the communal Lake Sabelia, noting that she will ask her husband Sam to take her fishing to process Janie's story. As Phoeby takes her leave, there is an air of finality in Janie's movement into the house:

There was a finished silence after that so that for the first time they could hear the wind picking at the pine trees. It made Phoeby think of Sam waiting for her and getting fretful. It made Janie think about that room upstairs—her bedroom. Phoeby hugged Janie real hard and cut the darkness in flight. Soon everything downstairs was shut and fastened. Janie mounted the stairs with her lamp. The light in her hand was like a spark of sun-stuff washing her face in fire. Her shadow fell black and headlong down the stairs. Now, in her

²¹⁹ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 183.

²²⁰ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 183.

room, the place tasted fresh again. The wind through the open windows had broomed out all the fetid feeling of absence and nothingness. She closed in and sat down.²²¹

Janie's interior limnological relationship to Nanny is evident here. Just as Nanny registers her impending death in the figuration of the Floridian aquifer, Janie is immersed in memories of Tea Cake's vivaciousness, the quiet reservoir tasting of "fresh" water, clearing away a "fetid feeling." "Fetid" refers to an offensive stench, and typically describes a swamp or stagnant water.²²² Janie sits in this reservoir of feeling, unleashing a storm of "sighing and sobbing" at the memories of Tea Cake's love. In her return to Eatonville, Janie's limnological interior is recomposed as an aquifer, calling back Nanny's enclosed private shack at the beginning of the novel. Nanny and Janie's aquifers differ, however, in their relative levels of confinement. Nanny's aquifer in West Florida is more contained by limestone in the Floridan aquifer system, Eatonville's location in northern-central Florida position it where the highest concentration of freshwater springs are. It is in this part of Florida that aquifers are the "least confined," meaning that the groundwater is not as tightly constrained by layers of relatively impermeable rock.

Janie's bubbling spring, uncontained and flowing with the memories of her marriage to Tea Cake act as a resting place after traveling across various states of limnological, freshwater systems. As she pulls in the fish-net with "so much of life in its meshes," she rejoins Nanny in a limnological, atmospheric figuration. Janie, Nanny, Tea Cake and Phoeby relate to one another in aqueous terms, and this limnological reading unsettles an established telos of pear tree-porch-hurricane in ecocritical engagement with the novel. Further, critical attention to the freshwater systems in the novel allows for generative redirection and recomposition of notions of Black

²²¹ Hurston, *Their Eyes*, p. 183.

²²² "Fetid/Foetid." Oxford English Dictionary.
https://www.oed.com/dictionary/fetid_adj?tab=meaning_and_use

women's propriety and interpersonal bonds, both romantic and familial. Through a limnological reading, Janie's geographies can move beyond the porch and general store into the expansive waters of Florida, and reflect a Black feminist "emergent female hero"²²³ who acts *with* the freshwater around her in her journey toward self-determination.

²²³ See Mary Helen Washington, "I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left her Husbands: Zora Neale Hurston's Emergent Female Hero." P. 27.

Limne: The Black Pool of Genius

In a live cover of Stevie Wonder's "Superwoman (Where Were You When I Needed You)," Donny Hathaway's voice floats among the gentle notes of the keyboard, introducing the song: "*From the Black pool of genius...we'd like to give you our rendition of Stevie Wonder's 'Superwoman.'*"²²⁴ This introduction implies a collective reservoir of Black creativity, a renewable and cherished resource.

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The chlorination of water is a delicate dance: A salt cell and a stack of electrically charged plates mingle, and when electrical power applies itself to the cells and salty water pumps through, the water, which might have once belonged to a body of freshwater like the Charles River at Boston's Cabot Street Bath²²⁵—flows through an intricate system of pumps into the pool. The Cl₂ collides with the H₂O, and the new product protects against cholera, dysentery, and typhoid, among other diseases. The romance between me and chlorinated water was initially tumultuous, but we learned to love each other like no human and substance could.

~ ~ ~

"We're going to the movies," my father said to my twin sister Alexandra and I one afternoon in 2007. When we asked, almost in unison, "What are we gonna see?" He answered: "A movie about Black people swimming." *Pride* premiered that spring, a film centering Black teenagers in 1970s Nicetown, a predominantly Black neighborhood in Philadelphia. Jim Ellis, a

²²⁴ Hathaway, Donny. "Superwoman." *These Songs for You, Live!* (2004). [Track 8].

²²⁵See Jeff Wiltse's "Origin of Municipal Pools." *Contested Waters*, p. 22.

Black collegiate swimmer who became the coach of the all-Black swim team of the Philadelphia Recreational Department; an alternative name for PDR was Pride, Determination and Resilience. In one scene, Willamina—the only Black girl on the team—beat the white boys in a fifty-yard butterfly race. By the end of the movie, my cells were dancing. When asked about Black Americans staying involved in swimming, Ellis said “We are here. We're not going away. You can't close your eyes and we're going to be gone when you open your eyes. We're here, and we're going to stay here.”²²⁶

I closed my eyes and saw Willamina's arms stretched wide in the butterfly stroke—her body, as June Jordan writes, was “a long black wing.”²²⁷ Each of her aquatic movements, daring and *genius*.

²²⁶ Greenleese, Nancy. “The Teacher Behind the Movie ‘Pride.’” NPR, March 29th, 2007. <https://www.npr.org/2007/03/29/9209658/the-teacher-behind-the-movie-pride>

²²⁷ Jordan, June. “It's About You: On the Beach.” *Directed by Desire: The Complete Poems of June Jordan* (2005). P. 142.

Chapter Three: Geographies of Aspiration: Black Girls and the Swimming Pool

Introduction: Dajerria, 2015

On June 5th, 2015, Dajerria Becton, a fifteen year old Black girl, attended a pool party with a group of friends in McKinney, Texas, a predominantly white suburb of Dallas. This pool was a part of the Craig Ranch North apartment community. At some point during the pool party, an argument arose between a white woman resident and Tatyana Rhodes, a nineteen year old Black girl and the party's host, also a resident of Craig Ranch North. This argument reportedly began when the white woman expressed irritation at the number of "young people" at the pool, and it escalated when she reportedly told the group of Black teenagers to "go back to Section 8 housing."²²⁸ The resident called the McKinney Police Department to respond to the incident, and not long after they arrived at the scene, Officer Eric Casebolt grabbed Dajerria by her braids, threw her to the ground just outside of the pool gate, and pinned her there with his knee. When several other teenagers tried to intervene on Dajerria's behalf, Casebolt aimed his gun at them, threatening further violence if they did not back down.

Dajerria was eventually released from underneath Casebolt's knee, but the effects of the assault extended beyond her physical injuries. In the weeks following the assault at the pool party, Dajerria reportedly "had trouble sleeping and eating, and barely left her aunt's house."²²⁹

²²⁸ Ritchie, Andrea J. "Dajerria Becton Survived a Violent Arrest at a Pool Party and Went Viral." *Teen Vogue*, June 18th 2018. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/dajerria-becton-arrest-pool-party-viral>.

²²⁹ Ritchie, Andrea J. "Dajerria Becton Survived a Violent Arrest at a Pool Party and Went Viral." *Teen Vogue*, June 18th 2018. <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/dajerria-becton-arrest-pool-party-viral>.

Her family’s attorney, Kimberly T. Cole, filed a lawsuit against the City of McKinney and its police department, asserting that the “McKinney City Council and Chief [Greg] Conley’s failure to implement the necessary policies and the implementation of unconstitutional policies deprived D.B. [Dajerria Becton] of equal protection and due process under the Fourth Amendment and caused her unwarranted and excruciating physical and mental anguish.”²³⁰ Cole won the lawsuit for Dajerria, her mother Shashona, and several other minors affected by Casebolt’s violence in late June 2018, three years after the assault. According to the terms of the settlement, about \$184,850 was given to the plaintiffs. The Becton family received \$148,850.²³¹ According to Cole, Dajerria had not returned to a swimming pool since the incident. Cole further expressed to *Teen Vogue* that her wish was to “re-do” the pool party experience for Dajerria and her friends to celebrate their high school graduation. Beyond the viral video of Dajerria being brutalized by Casebolt and coverage of the successful lawsuit by local newspapers, coverage of the incident slowed to a halt after 2018, when *Essence* magazine reported that the “re-do” pool party celebration would occur in late June of that year.²³² Whether the re-imagined celebratory pool party occurred has not been reported.

Samantha, 2007

I was twelve years old when I decided I was ready to give up swimming pools. Not that my aquatic career was especially long—I had only begun swimming competitively with my twin sister at the Brown Deer YMCA when I was nine—but nonetheless, I was done. Located in a

²³⁰ Cole, Kimberly T. Lawsuit against City of McKinney, TX (Defendants), by Plaintiffs D.B., (a minor child) by and through her legal guardian, Shashona Becton. “NATURE OF THE ACTION.” P. 1.

²³¹ “Black Teen Slammed by Officer at Texas Pool Party Settles with City.” *The Washington Informer*. June 22nd, 2018.

²³² Rogo, Paula. “Black Teen Assaulted by White Cop at Texas Pool Party Wins Settlement—And Plans Celebratory Pool Party.” *Essence*. Updated October 23, 2020.

northwestern suburb of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the Brown Deer YMCA was where many of the relatively wealthy white girls and their families went to practice with state-renowned coaches. I soon discovered that my body was different from the thin, broad-shouldered white girls on our team. Like many twelve-year-olds, I began to see my soft belly and thighs as something to feel bad about. With this new self-consciousness, I was no longer swimming for the sheer joy of submersion as I did before, but rather to try to stay thin.

During one particular swim practice, our coach yelled a workout from his folding chair, the foam padding threatening to crack: 10 x 100 yards on 1:15; meaning, we were to do 40 laps total, in one minute and fifteen second intervals. I glanced at my sister next to me, and I knew tears were starting to form in her goggles, too. During the ten or so seconds I had to rest between sets, I might have had time to breathe three or four times, though there was certainly no time to think about anything but the very next set. The small white girls flew past me. When I finally returned to the wall, I muttered that I had to use the bathroom and rose out of the water, trudging away from the splashes and harsh red glow of the clock.

Instead of using the restroom, I walked up the bleachers to where my mother was watching us practice. By then, I was nearly weeping. I told her that I would never be as fast as the other girls, that they rarely stopped to talk to me and Ally, that they looked at us as if they weren't quite sure why we were in the pool with them. I told my mother I was done swimming, and that I wanted to focus my energy on school instead. My first swim coach, a Black man named Mr. Donald Moses, came to meet my mother and me and watched me cry for a little while. On the car ride home, my mother shared with me a story that Mr. Moses shared with her: when he swam competitively in high school in the 1970s, he was spit on, yelled at, and discouraged from getting in the pool. He saw potential in me and my sister and was excited to

coach us. He didn't want me to quit. I felt a quiet, persistent guilt inside of me, but how could I go back? I made a promise to myself that I would return to the pool when I was older.

I returned to competitive swimming during my first year of high school and felt the delightful pain of training my mind and body. When I am completely submerged in a pool, I can hear my own thoughts clearly. As I push myself upward and break the water's surface, I can hear myself breathe, each breath more deliberate than the last. The buoyancy I feel creates an interesting contrast with the resistance I create when I use my arms to pull and feet to kick. I grow curious about how my weightlessness can transform into resistance in a single motion. I encounter my curiosity about swimming pools over and over: as a lifeguard, swim instructor, former high school swim teammate, and lifelong swimmer.

The swimming pool as a geography of aspiration

In the third and fourth chapters of this dissertation, I ask: From the prewar twentieth century, across the battles of the Civil Rights Movement and into the present moment, how do Black girls/young women navigate swimming pools as geographies of domination and transform them into geographies of aspiration? As I think through Black girls and women's use of space and their relationships to swimming pools, I draw upon Katherine McKittrick's theorizations of racialized space in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle*. McKittrick asserts that the production of Blackness and the production of space are inextricable from one another. She writes that "geographic domination, transatlantic slavery, and the Black Atlantic Ocean differently contribute to mapping out the real and imaginative geographies of Black women; they are understood here as social processes that make geography a racial-sexual

terrain.”²³³ McKittrick introduces the term “geographies of domination,” referring to a space where racial, sexual, and gender differences are naturalized, and where “some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place” (McKittrick xv). In the Craig Ranch North community pool, Dajerria’s difference—her dark skin, her perceived socioeconomic class, and proximity to other Black teenagers—was naturalized as threatening to the apartment residents’ image of a private, white aquatic space. While I cannot know Dajerria’s inner life, studying her encounter with police brutality brings to the fore my own emotional attachment to the swimming pool as both a healing space and an alienating space. What my attachments teach me is that I hope for an aquatic space that is free from harm and violence even though I know that the swimming pool can be an exclusive place, where Black women’s “racial-sexual” and classed bodies are read and managed, thus categorized as “out of place.”

Adopting a feminist autotheory approach, I explore how Black girls and women across the twentieth century—Inez “Pat” Patterson, and Mimi Jones, and myself—have engaged with swimming pools as geographies of aspiration. These are women and girls for whom the pool is a significant political, personal, and communal space. From the late 1920s to her untimely death in 1942, Inez Patterson labored to make the swimming pool enjoyable for Black girls in New York City and Philadelphia, from Temple University’s Girls Swim Team to the Harlem Y.W.C.A. In 1964, then-seventeen year old Georgia native Mimi Jones (then Mamie Ford), protested racial discrimination of public accommodations in St. Augustine, Florida by swimming in the segregated Monson Motor Lodge swimming pool. The image of her hanging onto a fellow protester, both trying to avoid the muriatic acid poured into the water by hotel owner James

²³³ See McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xv.

Brock, is one that infamously sent President Lyndon B. Johnson's foreign policy "to hell," spurring renewed action around the Civil Rights Act of 1964."²³⁴

I define *geography of aspiration* as the multivocal, real and imagined space²³⁵ in which multiple subjects—white city planners, recreational directors, and Black women and girls—articulate visions of what the swimming pool could mean for American citizens. Ideally, white municipal figures in the 1930s and 1940s sought to make swimming pools communal—even democratic—spaces for play, interpersonal connection, and relaxation. While these visions were admirable in the fraught climate of the Great Depression and the rise of global fascism, they quickly shattered in the face of violent white backlash to the integration of public pools. For Black women and girls like Inez and Mimi, aspirational visions for the swimming pool had to work differently: where the visions of white municipal officials failed to include the realities of racial violence, from their racial and gendered standpoint,²³⁶ the violence of exclusion and segregation informed the endurance of their hope for what the swimming pool could be for Black Americans.

I use *geography of aspiration* in reference to swimming pools and not relatively natural²³⁷ forms of water (such as beachfronts, lakes, and swimming holes) for two reasons: first, due to the utopian visions of racial, gender, and class harmony that were literally built into and projected onto municipal swimming pools, which were usually shattered by racial violence; and second, due to the endurance of hope by the Black women and girls who insist on the swimming

²³⁴ This audio of President Johnson's frustration over the St. Augustine demonstrations is captured in the 2015 documentary *Passage at St. Augustine*.

²³⁵ See McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xv.

²³⁶ See Patricia Hill Collins' "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," pp. 526-541. Here, I am thinking alongside Collins and her formulation of Black feminist standpoint theory, wherein Black women have distinct—though not homogenous—material realities than their white counterparts.

²³⁷ I say "relatively natural" here because within the anthropocene, there are few, if any, bodies of water that have not gone untouched by capitalist interest.

pool as a significant space for belonging, joy and freedom. As Ava Purkiss and Samantha White remind us, these hopes occur within the constraints of hegemonic, racialized ideals of beauty, health, and femininity.²³⁸ As such, they speak to the swimming pool as a complex space of contention, community, violence, and (un)belonging. I see geographies of aspiration as both deeply cognizant of present conditions of oppression and as future-oriented spaces: in her regular column “Girls in Sports,” Inez Patterson expressed fear that the number of Black girl swimmers would dwindle but gained a renewed faith in the increasing of Black girls signing up for swim lessons, who would build a future Black aquatic community in Philadelphia. In a 2020 news interview, Mimi Jones reflected on the Monson Motor Lodge pool protest, stating: “I’ve never seen social change happen in this country without a battle. But I think there is a renewed awakening.”²³⁹ To aspire toward a goal is to give that goal a direction, an orientation: to aspire toward something is to be critically mindful of its future.

Given the relative lack of representations of swimming pools in the literary canon, I turn to African American periodical archives, a documentary film, recorded news interviews, photographs, and my own poetry to seek company with Inez, Mimi, and Dajerria. This archive spans nearly 100 years, and as this chapter can only span so many pages, my reach is limited. I turn to these materials as essential components of the swimming pool as a geography of aspiration: multivocal in that they include the images, voices and writings of Inez, Mimi, Dajerria, and myself. These aspirational visions are articulated across time and geographic space; from the 1920s to the 2020s, from northern urban centers to a southern resort town.

²³⁸ See Samantha White “Black Girls Swim: Race, Gender and Embodied Aquatic Histories” pp. 63-79 and Ava Purkiss’ *Fit Citizens: A History of Black Women's Exercise from Post-Reconstruction to Postwar America*, pp. 1-14.

²³⁹ “Mimi Jones, activist in historic St. Augustine swim-in, dies at 73.” *The Washington Post*, July 29th, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/mimi-jones-civil-rights-activist-in-a-historic-st-augustine-swim-in-dies-at-73/2020/07/29/d32b6d20-d1a6-11ea-8d32-1ebf4e9d8e0d_story.html

I argue in this chapter that through studying the evidence of the aquatic lives of Inez ‘Pat’ Patterson, Mimi Jones, Dajerria Becton, and myself, a narrative of political endurance emerges and floats to the surface. There is no linear progress narrative of Black American relationships to swimming pools—one that neatly follows a pattern of demonstrations or the passage of laws—but if we study the swimming pools that these Black women and girls encounter as geographies of aspiration, we can see that two seemingly incompatible relationships to the pool are historically continuous: for the Black women I study, swimming pools are spaces of violent exclusion, (un)belonging, and alienation *and* they are *our* spaces of joy, athleticism, leisure, and activism. In our aquatic lives, we articulate, envision, and enact geographies of aspiration within and around the systemic restrictions of the anti-Black productions of space. I argue that Black women and girls I study transform swimming pools from geographies of domination into geographies of aspiration through embodied practices, which produce the political endurance of hope for how our aquatic lives could be. These embodied practices vary in scale—Inez writes directly to fellow Black girls in her newspaper column, encouraging them to swim for sport; Mimi jumps into a segregated swimming pool and smiles in a journalist’s photograph, despite muriatic acid being poured into the water; I redact/erase Dajerria’s attorney’s lawsuit, confronting my attachment to swimming pools, the limits of the law, and my ability to imagine a different return to the pool for Dajerria. Each of these embodied practices are enacted in particular material spaces: from small, circular pools in southern apartment complexes and resort towns designed for leisure and play to large, rectangular pools designed for developing athletic prowess.

As I mentioned, I draw upon McKittrick’s formulation of Black women’s geographies containing elements of the real and imagined. I engage the realities of our aquatic lives and I

imagine what exceeds the archival frame of these lives through poetry; what I term an ekphrastic sensibility. Though at times I have felt alienated in my aquatic life, my experiences in swimming pools have largely been physically, mentally, and emotionally fulfilling—this in no small part is due to the way colorism benefits me as a light skinned Black and biracial woman, my parents’ prioritization of swimming lessons from when my sister and I were young, financial capacity to afford swimming lessons, and my experiences holding positions of power as an Assistant Head Lifeguard in various public pools. Dajerria’s story cut me deeply, led me to the stories of Inez and Mimi, and pushed me to look deeper inward to study my attachments to the pools I encounter. I continue with an overview of my subjects and archive and with a gloss of the historical functions of swimming pools from the late nineteenth century to the present moment, an overview of my research methods, and the autotheoretical analyses of the aquatic lives of Dajerria, Inez, Mimi, and myself.

Four Black girls and Feminist Autotheory

I emphasize Black girls and women in this chapter—Inez, Mimi, Dajerria, and myself—because the physical act of swimming has historically been a gendered activity, geared towards improving the health of boys and men. Municipal politicians in northern cities such as Philadelphia and Baltimore emphasized swimming as a healthy part of boyhood, as an activity that attends to the pent-up energy accompanying burgeoning masculinity.²⁴⁰ Further, historical studies of interpersonal dynamics in swimming pools pertaining to race—of which there are few—have largely focused on the racial-sexual anxieties about physical closeness between Black men and white women in the water, which left me curious about how Black women

²⁴⁰ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, p. 10.

navigated those same pools. Ava Purkiss and Samantha White began this crucial work with studies of Black women's physical culture at the turn of the twentieth century. Black girls not only had to navigate structural racism in public space, they also had to navigate health and beauty standards associated with respectable and worthy citizenship.²⁴¹

In her monograph *Fit Citizens: A History of Black Women's Exercise from Post-Reconstruction to Postwar America*, Purkiss highlights a Black woman named Rebecca Lee Crumpler, a doctor who wrote *A Book of Medical Discourses* in 1883. Purkiss notes that Crumpler linked the pursuit of citizenship for Black Americans with "proper health regimens and wholesome physical routines...[and] refashioned bodily movement for a cohort of African Americans whose physical activity had once been confined to bondage and tied exercise to notions of Black civic advancement." As a part of a political imperative to show worthiness of full citizenship, Black women used physical culture to "contest the putative inferiority and physical depravity associated with Black womanhood."²⁴² For Crumpler, Black women and girls participating in physical exercise became a pathway toward a "bright future."²⁴³ In "Black Girls Swim: Race, Gender, and Aquatic Embodied Histories," Samantha White dives into the world of Black girls at the West 137th Street Branch of the Young Women's Christian Association, tracing a complex relationship to the pool: while Inez emphasized the importance of a swimming pool as a place for community, "for form, for speed, and for fun," there was also pressure to maintain beauty through the pressing of hair after wetting it, "centering beauty practices in their pursuit of athletics." White describes "embodied respectability" as the burden of creating and preserving a

²⁴¹ See White, Samantha. "Black Girls Swim," p. 63.

²⁴² See Purkiss, Ava. *Fit Citizens: A History of Black Women's Exercise from Post-Reconstruction to Postwar America*. P. 15.

²⁴³ See White, "Black Girls Swim," p. 63.

“clean, healthy, and beautiful” image of Black womanhood while simultaneously trying to have fun in the water.²⁴⁴

When thinking of Black girls’ subjectivity, I also draw from LaKisha Michelle Simmons’s definition of subjectivity in *Crescent City Girls*, her study of Black girlhood in segregated New Orleans. In the context of her study, Simmons defines subjectivity as “black women’s construction of self within the preexisting physical, linguistic, sexual, cultural, familial, and emotional boundaries in the Jim Crow South.”²⁴⁵ For Simmons, subject formation is anything but static; rather, it is a dynamic process defined by interpersonal experience, intraracial expectations of respectable femininity, and racist assumptions about Black girls’ sexualities. These dynamic forces, in turn, shaped Black girls’ inner lives. I share Simmons’s insistence on the dynamism that creates Black subjectivity, and am inspired by her emphasis on the interlocking nature of geography, sexuality, and affect as key categories through which to analyze and understand Black girls’ lives. I seek company with Black girls and women throughout history for whom the swimming pool is a personally and politically significant space. It is through feminist autotheory—which, for my purposes here, blends elements of narrative history and ekphrastic writing, erasure and free verse poetry—that I can find this company. It is through feminist autotheory that I can grapple with my hope for swimming pools to become spaces of healing and belonging for Black people who have been alienated from them.

I am drawn to feminist autotheory because of its emphasis on relational citation. In *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, feminist scholar Lauren Fournier acknowledges that feminist theorists have long known that theory and practice are deeply intertwined. She writes that “autotheory reveals the tenuousness of maintaining illusory

²⁴⁴ See White, “Black Girls Swim,” p. 69.

²⁴⁵ See Simmons *Crescent City Girls*, p. 5.

separations between art and life, theory and practice, work and the self, research and motivation.²⁴⁶ Fournier asserts the generative possibilities of feminist autotheoretical writing through her examination of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, in which Nelson engages in "lateral citation" as well as "citing up"—citing her trans lover Harry Dodge as a source of knowledge about pregnancy, gender, embodiment, and desire, alongside queer philosophers such as Roland Barthes and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.²⁴⁷ For Fournier, this practice of citation facilitates, in part, the creation of a feminist intellectual community that refuses to rely solely on "high" philosophy without taking into consideration the theory that emerges in the everyday lives of everyday people. Fournier names this citation practice "intertextual intimacy."²⁴⁸

I also draw on the work of Sara Ahmed in my understanding and use of an autotheoretical method. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed expresses a fondness for theory, as well as frustration over how elitist and abstracted it has become in academic circles. In order to use theory most effectively, Ahmed suggests that we must "drag theory back to life" instead of "pulling away, detaching, or diverting" from lived experience. My interest in studying the literary and material relationships between Black people and water is far from detached; it stems from my aquatic life—from always being in a swimming pool no matter how bitterly cold it grew outdoors, to advancing from the "guppy" level all the way to a "porpoise" during my early YMCA swim lessons, competing on a team in high school, spending the summers of my late teens and early twenties as a Milwaukee County Lifeguard, and teaching water safety to Black children. Ahmed's insistence on bringing theory back to real life teaches me that my experiences are legitimate and essential sources of knowledge about difference and power.

²⁴⁶ See Fournier, *Feminist Autotheory*, p. 3.

²⁴⁷ See Fournier (p. 3): Nelson specifically is inspired by Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* and how he "speaks within himself" to gather insights about romantic love and relation.

²⁴⁸ See Fournier, *Feminist Autotheory*, p. 136.

Even after leaving my parents' television, I kept running up against the image of Dajerria's arrest; I kept encountering it as I walked the pool deck, making eye contact with the police officers circling the park, or contemplating using my power to give a "time out" to a restless child who ignored safety rules. I keep running up against the image when I cannot seem to answer the question: why is this swimming pool safe and welcoming for some and not so for others? In Ahmed's words, I want to "be brought home by the inadequacy of [my] understanding."²⁴⁹ I want to take moments of difficulty—Inez Patterson's determination to integrate Temple University's Girls Swim team, Mimi Jones's fear of the muriatic acid fumes poured into the Monson Motor Lodge pool where she demonstrated—and bring them home. While I gradually learned of how racism functions on interpersonal and broad scales, I did not yet have a complete understanding of how racism worked in the particular context of swimming pools; a place I love and at times felt alienated from. I seek company with these Black girls and women to understand how they resisted racial violence and insisted on the swimming pool as a habitable space for themselves and their communities. I choose to study these Black women and girls because they insist on the swimming pool as a place to play, as well as a place to unsettle the racial status quo. I choose to study how they shaped their aquatic lives, how they transformed geographies of domination into geographies of aspiration.

The swimming pool and ekphrastic excess

Swimming pools assume various shapes: for athletic activity, they are square or rectangular with segmented lane lines, indicating where you must swim so as not to run into another swimmer, or, if you share a lane with someone else, where to begin "circle swimming"

²⁴⁹ See Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, p. 9.

so that you give each other adequate space to lengthen your bodies. For leisure in a hotel or outdoor water park, the pool is perhaps a winding “8” shape with rounded edges, or the perfect sphere of a whirlpool, the hot water bubbling to obscure your feet resting at the bottom. In ideal circumstances, the chlorinated water is contained within a hole dug into the ground that is then lined with plaster, tile, and gutters. At times, however, the water exceeds the pool’s confines; a child’s cannonball off the diving board might push water up and over the wall, or a swimmer’s quick flip turn might toss droplets onto the deck during their race. At Hamilton High School pool on the south side of Milwaukee, a pool where we frequently competed, the deck was almost always flooded; I suspect the pool gutters were faulty, old, or some combination of both. Each time my high school team and I swam at Hamilton for our South Side Invitational meets, the water threatened to seep too close to the bleachers, where our parents loyally watched us. As soon as we pushed ourselves out of the deep end after our races, little pools of water were there to greet us as we made our way back to our teammates.

From the physical walls of the swimming pools to our physical embodiment, excess became an expectation during swim season. After practice, we would eat communally and ravenously to satiate our tired muscles. As a result of our large communal meals, I gained a hyper-awareness of my body that vacillated between anxious and loving: at first, I feared my hips would be excessive as they pressed against the seams of my suit, but as I grew into my present body, I became grateful for its strength and beauty. Late in the season, we swam in comical layers of sweatsuits, scarves, or any piece of cloth that trained our bodies to acclimate to the “drag,” so that when the conference and regional meets came, we could fly through our events with relative ease and speed. When cheering each other on at meets, we yelled each other’s names until our voices were hoarse, flaunting our Lady General pride to the opposing

teams. Alongside the excess water flooding the pool gutters, my team and I played with excess in the way we ate, cheered, fit into our swimsuits, and practiced our strokes. Excess, therefore, is part of the organizing force of my autotheory, helping me see how elements of my own aquatic life flow into and apart from those of Inez, Mimi, and Dajerria. The vignettes of our aquatic lives in swimming pools exceed, flow into and against one another throughout one century, creating differing, yet recognizable shapes of endurance and beauty. In my autotheoretical writing practice, ekphrasis allows me to speak to the resonances and divergences of our personal and political relationships to the material spaces of swimming pools.

In its ancient Greek origin, ekphrasis is a form of poetry that responds to and accompanies a work of visual art. Ekphrasis is fundamentally participatory; it requires a poet engaging with the work of a painter, photographer, or visual artist. It is a process of image-response, the poet providing a “companion” to an image, or “the verbal representation of visual representation.” To skeptics of ekphrasis, the form is voyeuristic, mimicking, imitative, reductive. To others, it is a form of versatile, expansive, and detailed description that can act as a “joining or crossing” of ideas between artists, a way of “charging the imagination” and “honoring the full capacity of [our] mind[s].”²⁵⁰ Central to my use and understanding of ekphrasis is that it is “act of gratitude” for the work one feels inspired to describe. Throughout this chapter, I do my best to infuse gratitude and curiosity for the aquatic lives of Inez, Mimi, and Dajerria, both the elements of their lives for which I have archival evidence and those that I speculate on: the real and the imagined.

In *The Ekphrastic Writer*, Janee J. Baugher identifies three types of ekphrasis: *actual* ekphrasis is a form that describes a real work of visual art, sensed tangibly by the poet, whereas

²⁵⁰ See Baugher, Janee, *The Ekphrastic Writer*, p. 22.

notional ekphrasis concerns verbal and written responses to imagined work. *Metaekphrasis*, the third variant of the form that Baugher invents, is a call to “write the absent,” i.e., “what exceeds the frame.” Baugher’s call resonates with the work Saidiya Hartman undertakes in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. As Hartman examines a photograph of an anonymous young Black girl posing nude on a chair, a Black odalisque—“a female concubine or slave,” she calls this girl “a minor figure” and grapples with the violence of historical archives as she endeavors to create a counter-narrative “liberated from the judgment and classification that subjected Black women to surveillance, arrest, punishment, and confinement.” This counter-narrative is “an account that attends to beautiful experiments—to make living an art.” Hartman acknowledges the uncertainty that emerges from studying the photograph of the girl, noting that “the only thing I knew for sure was that she did have a name and a life that exceeded the frame in which she was captured.” As Hartman engages in close narration to create these liberatory narratives for the Black women she encounters in her archive, she writes not only out of a weariness of a visual narrative that illustrates early 20th century Black life solely by abject poverty, but also out of a desire to “recreate radical imagination and wayward practices of these young women by describing the world through their eyes.”²⁵¹

Hartman’s metaekphrasis inspires the aquatic narratives I tell in this chapter. I see resonances between her impulses and mine: I grew weary of the lack of attention to Black women’s athletic, leisurely, and activist lives in aquatic spaces, and I grew weary of the preoccupation with the sexual racism over Black men and white women sharing aquatic space. Like Hartman, who is fascinated by photographs that enable her to tell new kinds of stories, I am fascinated by photographs of the aquatic lives of Inez, Mimi, and Dajerria, and I come to

²⁵¹ See Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Stories of Social Upheaval*. P. 13.

description as a way to better understand how they shaped notions of beauty and endurance—physical, political, and personal. For Hartman, the stories of the wayward, beautiful Black women she studies “rush together” into a recovered narrative. I cannot claim to be recovering the stories of my subjects; the only aquatic life I know fully is my own, and those of Inez, Mimi, and Dajerria will always be relatively unknown to me. Instead of recovery, my aim in this chapter is to portray, or *limn* the various attachments and aspirations that these women and their communities associate with swimming pools. Furthermore, by limning my own aquatic life in relation to the evidence of these women’s lives in photographs, periodicals, and interviews, I hope to deepen my understanding of the swimming pool as a geography of domination and aspiration. These geographies—leisurely, oval-shaped resort pools, athletic, rectangular high school and college pools, shaped by different power relations and aspirations—emerge when I exceed the boundaries among decades, state lines, climate, leisure, activism, athleticism, and the material space of the pool. In other terms, these geographies of aspiration emerge when I allow those boundaries to become porous.

The purposes of the three poetic forms that comprise my autotheory—ekphrasis, erasure, and free verse—are description, clarification and speculation. I use an ekphrastic sensibility as I limn and describe the evidence of these girls’ and women’s aquatic lives with an eye inward toward my own, and what challenges and joys they might have experienced that exceed the photographs, articles, and interviews I encounter. While these descriptions do not necessarily appear as they might in traditional ekphrasis—i.e., the poem nestled next to the image, distinct stanzas and line breaks—their prose-adjacent form helps me explore the attachments of Inez, Mimi, and Dajerria to their swimming pools as they flow into and across my own.

My anger and grief over Dajerria's story led me back to erasure and free verse poetry. My ekphrastic sensibility encourages the joining and crossing of different time periods and subjectivities, where my use of erasure is a kind of distillation, a removal of noise, distraction, and unwanted elements in an effort to achieve emotional clarity. Gwendolyn Brooks and Audre Lorde, two poets whose work I cherish, have described poetry as a kind of distillation of experience. Brooks writes that "poetry is life distilled," a means of immediate and concise communication of feeling. In her essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Lorde writes of poetry as a force of "illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless—about to be birthed, but already felt."²⁵² Both Brooks and Lorde suggest that poetry helps us give language to what we experience. The namelessness and formlessness that Lorde notes feel familiar: My emotional response to Dajerria's treatment has felt amorphous but persistent, staying with me as I swim, teach swimming lessons, and step onto the pool deck to lifeguard. Erasure poetry helps me cut through the noise of news media attention and legal language surrounding Dajerria and the Craig Ranch North pool, while the free verse form allows me to speculate on Dajerria's potential return to the pool. Indeed, the water we swim in, our ideas and our feelings, can be distilled, offering clear and concise communication of our interior worlds. As a moving, flowing whole, my autotheory tends toward the speculative: in my ekphrasis, I hold what might have happened beyond the archival frame. In my erasure, I redact legal language to confront my own attachment to swimming pools and my desires for Dajerria's aquatic life. In my free verse, I bring my imagining of Dajerria's return to the pool into an expansive form, one that attempts to capture what could exceed the frame of news media coverage of her assault and its aftermath. I meditate on what it means to imagine an aquatic

²⁵² See Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury." *Sister Outsider*. P. 32-35.

return that may not have happened. In these ekphrastic meditations, my grief, anger, hope and joy overflow and spill into my encounters with Inez and Mimi. I do my best to infuse gratitude and curiosity for the aquatic lives of Inez, Mimi, and Dajerria throughout this chapter, evoking their experiences through archival evidence and efforts to imagine what exceeds the archival frame.

Though I cannot speak directly with a majority of the subjects in this chapter, I seek intimacy with their words, experiences, and relationships to swimming pools in order to understand why swimming pools are psychically, politically, and personally significant. I am interested in learning about the water narratives of a multitude of Black women and girls across time—to see divergent and common emotions, associations, and senses of place and belonging in the swimming pool. I am interested in how the swimming pool itself reflects and/or fails to reflect the desires and aspirations projected onto it across time and space.

The functions of the American swimming pool

In order to dwell in the archive with Inez and Mimi, I sought a more robust understanding of the history of American swimming pools, and how their sociopolitical meanings have changed over time.²⁵³ Before the advent of American public swimming pools in the urban centers of Boston and Philadelphia, working class youth of the mid-to-late nineteenth century would flock to relatively natural bodies of water like creeks, dams, ponds, or lakes to play and bathe. The first public pools were not necessarily intended for recreation, but for the literal bathing of working class immigrants who did not have access to housing with sound plumbing. These pools were

²⁵³ See introduction of *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, pp.1-8. Wiltse traces the shifting meanings that the swimming pool has accrued since its introduction in America in the mid-nineteenth century to the present moment of privatized, exclusive recreational spaces.

segregated by gender, where the water was supposed to refine a rowdy masculinity and discipline the bodies of working class girls to create a more refined femininity. Public nudity in the water, while still considered indecent, was not considered as offensive for men and boys as it was for women and girls.²⁵⁴ As a class-making project, swimming pools were built to combat the xenophobic fears of immigrants bringing diseases to densely populated urban centers.

The 1920s to the 1950s saw the desegregation of swimming pools by gender, a massive increase in the construction of public pools thanks to the New Deal's Works Progress Administration, and the revelation of an eroticized anxiety about Black men swimming with white women. Some municipal officials constructed swimming pools for the purposes of bringing communities together. However, reactionary racist violence quickly fractured their utopian visions. In 1939, Allegheny Recreation Director Nathan Kaufman declared: "Let's build bigger, better and finer pools. That's real democracy. Take away the sham and hypocrisy of clothes, don a swim suit, and we're all the same."²⁵⁵ For Kaufman, clothes seem to be a disguise, unnecessarily stratifying Americans and concealing their potential to connect with one another; potential that could flourish in the swimming pool. Not only should swimming pools foster interpersonal, communal connection, they should reflect an egalitarian society. This hope, while admirable, was tenuous at best.

This tenuousness is exemplified by the 1949 riot at St. Louis, Missouri's Fairgrounds Park Pool. It was designed to resemble a beachfront, with the pool's area and depth and its bright-colored stone "shore." Its aspirational design, however, did not shield it from bloodshed. When between thirty to forty Black St. Louis residents approached the pool fence, they were met

²⁵⁴ See Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, p. 10. Anti-swimming ordinances were drawn up in Milwaukee, Boston, and Philadelphia in response to public nudity in rivers, creeks, and dams.

²⁵⁵ See "The Swimming Pool Age," *Contested Waters*, p. 104.

with verbal threats, knives, clubs, and fists. While no one was killed, the city was shaken and forced to confront its hardly latent racism. Fairgrounds Park signaled to the nation that swimming pools were emergent battlegrounds for the struggle for integration of public accommodations. As individual swimming pools gradually integrated throughout the second half of the twentieth century, another form of white resistance emerged: the establishment of private swim clubs in suburban enclaves. As white residents refused to swim with Black people in municipal pools, revenue slowed, and it became cheaper to close down these pools instead of persuading white families to use them. With the mass closures of municipal pools and the emergence of private clubs only accessible to residents of suburban neighborhoods, Black American communities were left with few safe places to swim.²⁵⁶

This historical overview of the functions of American swimming pools is just that: There are faces I saw in photographs, names of swimmers I saw in Black periodicals, and blurred images of Civil Rights organizers and demonstrators whose names I do not know. While the structural limits of a dissertation chapter prevent me from including all of them here, each of their stories are precious and vital to the understanding of the American swimming pool as a space of political battle, leisure, violence, and freedom. I begin this narrative journey by dwelling in Philadelphia with Inez in the late 1920s to her untimely death in 1942, learning from her stubbornness and determination to recruit young Black girls to swim at local YWCAs. I then travel south to St. Augustine, Florida in 1964, where Mimi Jones defiantly leaps into the Monson

²⁵⁶ As a result of this financial and governmental neglect and a sharp decrease in the number of employed lifeguards, we face in our present moment a critical shortage of public pools, which has contributed to a drowning crisis. Compared to about 10 million private pools, there are only about 309,000 public pools in the nation. According to the 2023 United States Water Safety Action Plan—the first of its kind in the nation—drowning death rates of Black Americans are 1.5 times higher than that of white Americans. As drowning disparities between Black and white Americans grow, the number of publicly accessible swimming pools is shrinking.

Motor Lodge Swimming pool in protest of racial segregation, after facing white mob violence at preceding ‘wade-ins’ at St. Augustine beach, located just across the street from the hotel. I return west to McKinney, Texas and home north to Milwaukee, Wisconsin as I think through the resonances and divergences between my personal and political attachments to the swimming pool, and those of the women and girls I study.

Each of the autotheoretical sections that follow focuses on different forms of embodied practice that *produced* political endurance; what endures throughout these women’s aquatic lives is the insistence upon the swimming pool as a geography of aspiration. The first section focuses on Inez Patterson’s practices of intracommunal writing and athletic rigor, and the second section examines Mimi Jones’ enduring bubblyness, smile, and buoyancy. Drawing from Black feminist scholar Tina M. Campt’s “archive stories” in *Image Matters*, I examine my “encounters with the images” and stories that influenced and affected me,” allowing for “tensions, points of contact, overlap, and convergence among multiple temporalities.”²⁵⁷

Intracommunal writing and athletic rigor: Inez Robie Patterson

Fairmount Waterworks, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, September 8th, 2022

On a balmy afternoon before fall came in earnest, my sister and I walked down a steep staircase into the Fairmount Waterworks building nestled along the east bank of Philadelphia’s Schuylkill river.²⁵⁸ The white stone and towering columns usher us into a spacious vestibule, where a welcome sign for the exhibit was placed: “POOL: A Social History of Segregation.” On

²⁵⁷ See Campt, *Image Matters: dArchive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*, p. 18.

²⁵⁸ The Fairmount Waterworks building was constructed in response to a yellow fever outbreak in the late 18th century.

the cement ground in front of us, a moving image of sunlight hitting the bottom of a swimming pool was being projected. One by one, disembodied voices bounced around the hall, describing what swimming pools have meant to them: Simone Manuel, first Black American woman to win an Olympic gold medal in swimming; Dr. Jeff Wiltse, Historian of American aquatic culture; Jim Ellis, founder of the Philadelphia Department of Recreation swim team, one of few predominantly Black swim teams in the country; Dr. Miriam Lynch, member of the educational organization Diversity in Aquatics, among several others. As I looked around the room, I saw Inez's face, captured right before she dove off the side of the pool wall. Her triceps were flexed, arms straight back with palms facing the ceiling. Her knees were bent and toes touching a thin black tiled line on the pool deck. Her hair was neatly covered in a white swim cap, her eyebrows beautifully thick, mouth closed in a slight smile. Her white swimsuit had a lifeguard corps insignia, signaling her expertise in water safety. Her muscular chest and shoulders were bent forward, perhaps in an effort to demonstrate how to dive properly. Her silhouette repeated behind her twice; once black, and then a subtle gray.

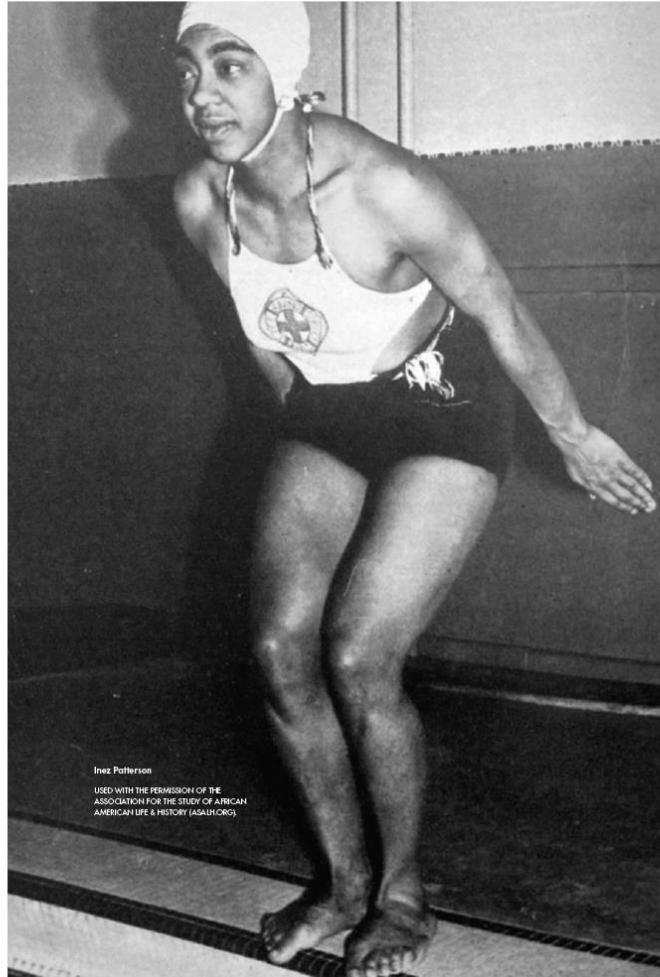


Figure 8 Inez 'Pat' Patterson demonstrating a dive, Philadelphia Art Museum

I found Inez's words on her experience on the Temple University's women's swim team. She was quoted as saying: "Up to this time [1929], no colored girls had taken part in any swim meets...the purpose of this event was to foster intercollegiate spirit among the students so, 'why shouldn't I go?' I asked myself. Out of 500 girls present I was the only colored."²⁵⁹ These words demonstrate the defiance ingrained in Inez's spirited personality and athletic life: these spaces were hers, there would be no question about it.

²⁵⁹ Inez Patterson quoted in the *Philadelphia Tribune*, 1934.

I argue that Inez Patterson created an aquatic culture for Black girls in Philadelphia and Harlem that emphasized generating camaraderie and athletic rigor among her students. The embodied practices of dedicated inter-communal writing and rigorous swimming practices produced political endurance of a geography of aspiration that insisted upon Black girls' belonging in the sport of swimming. Through her direct writing to Black Philadelphia girls and their families in her "Girls in Sports" column, the participation in community-based swim meets and performing strenuous swimming events such as the underwater swim, 100-lap swim, and the somersault, Inez placed physical rigor and endurance and Black feminine grace in uncommon proximity for the 1920s and 1930s. In addition to her individual athletic performance, Inez's refusal to use Temple University's Pearson Hall pool at the "colored" practice time, her recruitment of Black girls to the Harlem Y.W.C.A girls swimming club, and her insistence on teaching lifeguarding skills to and encouraging camaraderie among her Black girl students pushed back against constructions of swimming as an activity for men and boys. Inez's geography of aspiration endured long after her untimely death: through a former student's tribute to her in a 1989 Temple University Hall of Fame induction to the 2022 Fairmount Waterworks POOL exhibit, her insistence on the swimming pool as an essential communal space for Black girls endured decades of de facto segregation of aquatic space.

Black Girls' Aquatic Beauty and Athletic Rigor

West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1926 & September 8th, 1927

Inez Robie Patterson's love of sports endured from an early age. From when she was a girl in Chester, Pennsylvania, she excelled in hockey, basketball, and track and field. I found, however, that the *Philadelphia Tribune* took a particular interest in her aquatic life, and those of

other local Black children. One of the first issues that *The Tribune* takes an interest in Inez's affinity for swimming in its September 8th, 1927 issue. Within this extensive chronicle are stories that highlight the importance of swimming for attaining strength, grace, and beauty; as well as the ways that Inez pushed back against gendered swimming standards. As a high school student at West Philadelphia High, Inez entered the McCoach Recreational Center Swim Meet and reportedly took home six first-place finishes: the underwater swim, the side stroke, the standing front dive, the running front dive, the swan dive, and the front somersault.²⁶⁰ I can only visualize a few of these events; swimming underwater, perhaps for one 25 yard or meter length of the pool, would likely take many weeks of hypoxic training—swimming increasing lengths of the pool without breathing—which every pool I have swum in forbids due to risk of losing consciousness. To accomplish an underwater swim in a slightly safer manner, Inez would have had to physiologically condition her body—inhaling slowly before she pushed herself off the pool wall, increasing the distance swam underwater with each pool length, mindful of the lactic acid present in her legs, core, and arms. I was curious about how much gymnastics—or at least the sport's attendant language—figured into competitive swimming in this part of the twentieth century. Never would I have to do an aquatic somersault or swan dive in my high school swimming days, but perhaps it might have been fitting for the 5'4" Inez. Though her height might have been a small contributing factor to the ease with which she somersaulted in the pool, it seems that the Black girls of West Philadelphia who competed in swimming meets were expected to participate in events that demonstrated a sort of feminine grace in the water as well as skill and endurance.

²⁶⁰ Bishop, Al. "Inez Patterson Stars in McCoach Swimming Meet." *Philadelphia Tribune* (1912-), 08 Sept., 1927, pp. 11. ProQuest, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/inez-patterson-stars-mccoach-swimming-meet/docview/530914495/se-2>.

A year prior to the publishing of Inez's McCoach Swimming Meet results, the *Tribune* reported on Black West Philadelphians gathering in large numbers to see the "mermen" and "mermaids" of their community demonstrate their talents. The boys and girls swam separately on subsequent days, competing in form and distance-based events like the 30-yard breaststroke and the half-mile swim. The boys excelled—a John Marques Jr. took first place in the breaststroke and diving contests, and James Gibson "proved too fast" for the competition in the half mile swim. The girls competed in what the *Tribune* called "less rigorous" events: in the breaststroke form contest, Dorothy Lewis is described as a "graceful little mermaid." Seven year old Lillian Reed shone in her versatility in the pool as she did a combination of "plain" and "fancy" strokes.²⁶¹ The article concludes with praise of a girl named Billy Prince Griffin, who won the 1926 girls' half mile swim. Her photograph graces the article; atop it, the caption reads "Pretty Mermaid." In the photo, she wears a one-piece bathing suit and a swim cap, her head just slightly cocked to the side. Her mouth is slightly open, curved into a soft smile. One hand rests on her hip while the other is bent upward, elbow high in the air. The palm of her hand must be resting on her neck, elongating her body. She's described by the article's author as "graceful...talented...an entertainer by profession and a fine swimmer by virtue of her love for the wild waves." The picture of Black feminine youth and grace, "Miss Griffin is to be envied."²⁶²

²⁶¹ "Youthful Swimmers Stage Exhibitions." *Philadelphia Tribune*. August 14, 1926.

²⁶² "Youthful Swimmers Stage Exhibitions." *Philadelphia Tribune*. August 14, 1926.



Figure 9 Billy Prince Griffin poses in her bathing suit, Philadelphia Tribune



Figure 10 W.M.E. Griffin poses in his bathing suit, Philadelphia Tribune

Billy's pose differs slightly from that of Mr. W.M. E. Griffin, the Director of the Southwest Philadelphia YMCA, and yet beauty and swimming are still closely related, whether the benefits of swimming are described in relation to Black boys or girls. The Tribune's 1924 photo of Griffin evokes a sense of masculine strength and pride. Like Inez's photo, it is too grainy to make out what exactly he is standing on. It appears to be an uneven surface—perhaps large stones near the shore of another body of water? He stands tall with a gleaming smile, shoulders back, chest slightly puffed. The muscles of his arms are toned, and he dons what appears to be a one-piece bathing suit, the familiar triangular YMCA logo on its front. Not only does Mr. Griffin host swimming classes for boys in the city; he aims to fill the “gap in

swimming” by teaching life-saving courses to his young students through guidance from the American Red Cross.²⁶³

I acknowledge a bit of nostalgic longing as I sit with these articles. Though the article does not detail what exact skills will be taught, it leads me to imagine the varying types of water rescues I learned as a young guard. The front-approach-cross-chest-carries almost felt like dances; we swam to our ‘victims’ in the water, never breaking eye contact with them. We reached one of our hands toward their opposite hand, gently twisting them 180 degrees, then brought them close to our chests. We secure them to our own bodies, then dip underwater, hoisting their bodies up out of the water with our hip, kicking our way to the pool wall. I admit to a bit of romanticization here: a lot of my first attempts at such rescues ended in my eyes burning with chlorine, as we couldn’t wear goggles on the lifeguard stand. Sometimes my ‘victim’ would thrash around atop the surface of the water, testing my strength by attempting to push me down toward the bottom of the pool.

I wonder—though keeping in mind the constraints of segregated swimming facilities—what it might have been like to look around the swimming pool and see only fellow Black lifeguards-in-training. Perhaps Griffin’s boys learned different types of rescues than I did. Perhaps they were tested with their parents looking on from the bleachers. What I knew for sure was the close relationship between swimming and strength: an enduring sense of physical vitality was promised to Black youth if they practiced swimming. The author concludes the *Tribune* article by affirming that “exercise without strain, vigor, increased heart and lung capacity, an

²⁶³ "Y. K. C. A. STARTS WIDE CAMPAIGN FOR YOUNG SWIMMERS: COACH GRIFFIN TO GIVE FREE INSTRUCTION TO SCHOOL BOY ENTHUSIASTS AT 'Y' SWIMMING MEET IN JUNE." *Philadelphia Tribune* (1912-), 24 May, 1924, pp. 11. ProQuest, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/y-k-c-starts-wide-campaign-young-swimmers/docview/530833698/se-2>.

active skin [sic], and a healthy appetite are the returns from regular swimming and water sport.” The *Tribune*’s continuous coverage of the swim meets and performances chronicles many Black Philadelphians’ investment in swimming as a critical part of the health and development of their children.

The late nineteenth century construction of swimming as a gendered activity fashioned primarily for correcting boys’ ‘rowdiness’ seemed to evolve in the *Tribune*’s coverage of the swim meets, classes, and performances in West Philadelphia. Black boys and girls alike were encouraged to swim, with Inez’s weekly letters to Black girl aspirants a unique recruitment feature for her time and place. However, this seemingly equal recruitment effort did not fully erase gendered expectations in the sport. The differences in the literal positioning of Billy Prince and W.M.E Griffin for photographs speaks to the gendered expectations that came from athletic swimming in the 1920s.

By the end of the decade, the Great Migration of Black southerners to northern states brought Philadelphia’s population to 11.3% Black, and West Philadelphia’s Black population, hypersegregated due to racist housing ordinances, grew exponentially from over 15,000 to over 36,000.²⁶⁴ W.M.E Griffin and Inez Patterson were speaking and writing to a population who were seeking ways to exercise and support their children in the midst of political disenfranchisement. While the *Tribune* emphasized that swimming was important for Black youth writ large, boys’ speed and strength were emphasized first while mentions of the girls’ speed and physical endurance were accented by mentions of their grace and allure.²⁶⁵ For Inez

²⁶⁴See Finkel, Ken. “Roots of Hypersegregation in Philadelphia, 1920-1930.” *The Philly History Blog*. phillyhistory.org.<https://blog.phillyhistory.org/index.php/2016/02/roots-of-hypersegregation-in-philadelphia-1920-1930/>

²⁶⁵ See White’s “Black Girls Swim: Race, Gender, and Embodied Aquatic Histories,” p. 64. White writes: The construction of the healthy body included attention to beauty practices that emphasized the role of femininity since hair symbolized an extension of visible health. Finally, the healthy body also required the

and her young cohorts of Black girl swimmers, beauty and strength were close-knit, and both were achievable through participating in swim clubs. I recall Historian Samantha White's formulation of "embodied respectability," here: while the pools were spaces for fun, they were also creating a "construction of the healthy body" and "embracing middle class aesthetics and conduct through their physical bodies."²⁶⁶

Inez became known as the "Mermaid of Philadelphia" by her community for her efforts in teaching Black girls to swim and lifeguard. It seemed that the quality of fantasy radiated outward from her efforts: she joined the ranks of her little "mermaids," one for whom physical beauty was merely a byproduct of community in the swimming pool.



Figure 11 The author for Lady Generals picture day, September 2012

performance of disciplined displays of fitness and athleticism, made visible by those such as Inez Patterson, who orchestrated the swim show in Harlem" (p. 64).

²⁶⁶ White, "Black Girls Swim," p. 64.

Figure 3-3: Photograph of the author (Samantha Adams) Taken at Washington High School Pool, September 2012.

October 2012 and 2013: Lady Generals Picture Day, Washington High School Pool, Northside, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

I pushed open the heavy door that led to Washington's pool and my mother greeted me with a boar bristle hairbrush. I had pressed my hair and waited all day for this occasion. It was getting cold in Milwaukee by then; fall had arrived. With the humidity leaving the air, it was time to break out the flat iron. I ran back and forth to the mirror in Washington's girls locker room, checking to make sure each strand of hair was in place. It was a somewhat futile effort: the top of my head began to sweat indoors, and after the camera flashed and we exhausted all our poses, we dove into our lanes to begin our workout. All the work of my hands and the flat iron, the brush and the gel, all gleefully undone; my body quickly letting go of the expectation of beauty and instead preparing for a part of practice affectionately known as "puke sets"; where we dive off the blocks and repeat sprints until we exhaust ourselves.

In a May 9th, 1942 article of the *Philadelphia Tribune*, I encountered a different image of Inez; put simply, she was all done up. She had her hair pressed and curled at the ends, and in spite of the photograph's quality, I can tell that her hair shines, perhaps with the help of a hot comb or chemical relaxer. Her dark lipstick frames a wide, proud, toothed smile, and her eyebrows are raised in an elated expression. The headline of the article I encountered in the *Philadelphia Tribune* reads: "Inez Patterson First Race Girl to Qualify as Swimming Official." When I looked at the long, rectangular, grainy photo of her, I could not help but smile. Where is

she looking? Who else is there with her? Most importantly, what does the article's author mean by "race girl?"²⁶⁷

ANOTHER FIRST



Figure 12 "Inez Patterson first Race Girl to Qualify as Swimming Official," Philadelphia Tribune

²⁶⁷ "Inez Patterson First Race Girl to Qualify as Swimming Official." *Philadelphia Tribune* (1912-), 09 May, 1942, pp. 12. ProQuest, <https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/inez-patterson-first-race-girl-qualify-as/docview/531689114/se-2>.

Figure 3-4: "Inez Patterson First Race Girl to Qualify as Swimming Official." *Philadelphia Tribune* (1912-), 09 May, 1942.

Inez wears a halter-top one-piece swimsuit. The material appears to be satin, though I cannot be sure. (Perhaps the shine is an effect of the camera's flash?) Her arms were bent at 90 degrees in a graceful "L"; her hands gathered at her lower waist, her fingers interlaced. When I saw her hips, thighs, and quadriceps—strong and poised for movement—I am comforted. As a high school swimmer, I recall worrying that my thighs were too big to squeeze through the high-cut leg holes of my racing suit. My teammates and I were advised by our coaches to size down when we ordered our suits because the closer the lycra is to your body, the longer it will take for the suit to stretch and fade; by wearing a smaller swimsuit, we would minimize the potential for it to drag in the water and slow us down. Though my high school swimsuits bore slightly more of my leg, I wonder if Inez had to teach the fabric of her suit the power and strength of her body—to force it to stretch.

Intracommunal Writing and Camaraderie between 'Girls in Sports'

Harlem YWCA, 1929 and Milwaukee Public Schools, 2012

As I dredged the *Tribune's* archive and that of my own high school swim career, I recognized that physical endurance and the endurance of team morale were inextricable. As I looked at the exhibit's photo of Inez on the diving block at the POOL exhibit, knees bent and ready for the plunge, I recalled my stomach nervously churning before the Milwaukee Public School conference championship swim meets. We were the Rufus King Lady Generals, and our main conference rivals were the Lady Tigers of Riverside High School. Both high schools were predominantly Black after white flight reached our beloved rustbelt city in the late 1950s through the 1970s, though our swim teams were still mostly white. Even so, I could always count on the

Lady Tigers to have a handful of Black girls on the team, as ours did. The Generals and the Tigers had a call-and-response chant that we'd do before every meet—the words escape me completely, but what I do remember is the playful vibration of our voices bouncing off the walls of the small natatorium. No matter how fierce our rivalry became, maintaining our sportswoman spirit was paramount. As the swim season progressed after competitions within our conference, fewer teams from the Milwaukee Public School Systems qualified for regional meets. The Lady Generals made the cut, and we traveled to a majority white, suburban city called Waukesha to compete. When we arrived at the Waukesha North pool, my 12-year old anxiety returned: I had on my off-brand speedo suit with thin, fraying straps, while the suburban girls had racing suits that looked more like rompers, sleek and compressive. I was surprised to find my uneasiness subsiding as I recognized some Lady Tigers sitting on the bleachers, waving us over. Once I let go of the prospect of me placing among the top swimmers, we became one large Milwaukee Public Schools team. I could joke with my fellow teammates, and more closely commune with the Lady Tigers. I felt the class differences between our “MPS team” and the Waukesha girls acutely: they had a small higher-temperature warm-up pool to the side of the lap lanes, where you could train your muscles in between races; their scoreboards were updated and they certainly had more advanced technology for timing the events. In retrospect, however, I didn't necessarily feel jealous of them or their facilities. I could return home with a newfound sense of fellowship with girls who were our athletic rivals.

I discovered that camaraderie was a priority for Inez as she recruited her Black girl swimmers. Wherever I encountered Inez, whether walking through the Fairmount Waterworks in Philadelphia or reading the *Tribune*, she seemed to be looking forward to the progress being made by Black girl swimmers, and the camaraderie shared in the water. As she created

swimming groups for Black girls of various age groups, she created a “Girls in Sports” column encouraging more to join her. Though she feared low interest in swimming among the girls in her community, she soon realized that “we now have some young aspirants that show bright prospects in the swimming world...I want to compliment these ‘little girls’ on their success and I hope they will continue in this comparatively new sport for women.”²⁶⁸ In other editions of “Girls in Sports,” Inez encouraged the Black West Philadelphia community to “come out” and support the girls as they “make wonderful showings”²⁶⁹ in the water, and wrote directly to the girls: “there are many reasons why you should join...first of all you have the honor of being a member of the first ‘Colored Swimming Club’ in West Philly High, second, you will learn to swim if you are a beginner, and if you are advanced you will learn life-saving; third, you will develop yourself physically and add another popular sport to your list, and fourth, you can gain athletic credit.”²⁷⁰ At the time of this October 1929 column, Inez was only 18 years old; a Black girl on the cusp of legal womanhood, speaking directly to other Black girls about the importance of swimming for physical and professional development. Here, endurance emerges as camaraderie—between aspiring Black girl swimmers joining Inez’s club in 1930s Harlem, and between playful rivals in 2010s Milwaukee, recognizing that the farther they advanced throughout the season, the fewer Black girls they might see.

The Lady Generals wrote to each other as well, albeit in a different form than Inez’s news column. With the encouragement of our Head Coach, Patricia, we started a tradition of writing signs for one another to display at swim meets. First, we were assigned a teammate to write to during practice. During our pre-meet spaghetti dinners, we brought out stencils, sequins, glitter

²⁶⁸ Inez “Pat” Patterson, “Girls in Sports.” *The Philadelphia Tribune*. October 24th, 1929.

²⁶⁹ Inez ‘Pat’ Patterson, “Girls in Sports.” *The Philadelphia Tribune*. October 24th, 1929.

²⁷⁰ Inez ‘Pat’ Patterson, “Girls in Sports.” *The Philadelphia Tribune*. October 24th, 1929.

and gel pens, and metallic markers to design our signs. The end result was a joyous, mobile mosaic of signs to display at the forthcoming meet, showing our names and the events we were to swim that day. These signs felt like little public love letters—each time we emerged onto Hamilton High School’s flooded pool deck, we could see our teammates uplifting our names, complimenting each other’s effort and success.



Figure 13 Lady Generals at the 2012 MPS Conference Meet

The aquatic Race Girl's enduring impact

Belmont Branch YMCA, South Philadelphia, 1989

I soon met a new face in the *Philadelphia Tribune*: A woman named Anne Marques Garrott was inducted into the Belmont-Southwest YWCA Athletic Hall of Fame, the first swimmer at that branch with this particular honor. The article details Anne's insistence on being in the pool: she entered swim meets "wherever she traveled" and taught Naval cadets how to swim at the University of Southern California," despite the pervasiveness of prejudice against

Black swimmers.²⁷¹ She credited her parents for encouraging her, and another mentor by the name of Inez Patterson. Anne testifies: “She was one of the best-educated Black women I ever met. She was also a powerful swimmer and she broke a lot of barriers.”²⁷² Inez’s lessons endured beyond her untimely death, and found renewed life in her students.

I argue that transforming the McCoach Community Pool, the Temple University pool, and Harlem YWCA pool, into geographies of aspiration was Inez’s work as a “race girl.” Inez’s insistence on teaching life-saving aquatic skills to Black girls and encouraging them to swim longer-distance races work against the expectation that Black women and girls swim “less rigorously” than Black boys. The acts of teaching Black girls challenging water safety skills in addition to “fancy strokes,” showing them how to swim long distances, and writing directly to them through her column in *The Philadelphia Tribune* were Inez’s ways of transforming the pools she knew into geographies of aspiration. The evidence of Inez’s aquatic life showed that the duties of a “race girl”—to benefit her community with attention to the ‘moral and social character of the race’²⁷³—could not be confined to the realm of the terrestrial.

Bubbliness, Buoyancy and the Political Endurance of a Smile: Mimi Jones

Monson Motor Lodge, St. Augustine, Florida, 1964

On June 18th, 1964, Mamie Nell Ford²⁷⁴ jumped into the Monson Motor Lodge swimming pool of St. Augustine, Florida as a part of an organized demonstration by the

²⁷¹ At 75, Anne Garrott became first swimmer inducted: Hall of Famer taught notables Wright, Barnett.” *Philadelphia Tribune* (1912-); Aug 8, 1989; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Philadelphia Tribune, pg. 1A

²⁷² Ibid, *Philadelphia Tribune*.

²⁷³ See Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women*, p. 11.

²⁷⁴ Later in life, Mimi married a man named John Jones, though I have not yet found out exactly when she began to be referred to as “Mimi” instead of “Mamie.”

Southern Christian Leadership Conference against the racial segregation of public accommodations. At seventeen, she was already a self-proclaimed “veteran” of civil disobedience, having learned of the principles of nonviolent demonstration by her family’s local Reverend as a young girl in Albany, Georgia. Members of the SCLC had been plotting on the Monson Motor Lodge for their next “swim-in,”²⁷⁵ in spite of the violence faced by protestors and journalists at swim-ins at the nearby St. Augustine beach. During a planning meeting for the Monson swim-in, SCLC members quickly realized that no one in the room was able to swim. Mimi was one of the young demonstrators called upon from out of state, and she eagerly volunteered for the swim-in, saying “I could swim, and yes, I could do that.”²⁷⁶ Monson Motor Lodge was the perfect location for such a demonstration. Several journalists, photographers, and other members of the press patronized the hotel during the protests and uprisings, and James “Jimmy” Brock, the owner of the lodge, was not known to be very vocal about his segregationist views for the sake of his business. Monson Motor Lodge was a byproduct of the tension palpable across the city: it was, according to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a place of “raging tempers and flaring violence.”²⁷⁷ As demonstrators gathered in the parking lot of the hotel, Brock grew increasingly agitated, yelling to the crowd of rabbis, journalists, and Black college students that his hotel was private property. While Brock was pushing and herding the parking lot demonstrators, Mimi Jones, J.T. Johnson, and other SCLC members leapt over the hedge and into the water.

²⁷⁵ Another term I’ve seen and heard usually used to describe demonstrations at beach fronts is a “wade-in.” “Swim-ins” seem to be typically reserved for man-made swimming pools, whether public or private (*Passage at St. Augustine*).

²⁷⁶ *Passage at St. Augustine* (2015).

²⁷⁷ *Passage at St. Augustine* (2015).

This defiant leap is one of several embodied acts of resistance to white supremacist constructions of space that Mimi Jones enacted. I argue that Mimi Jones and her fellow demonstrators transformed the Monson Motor Lodge hotel pool into a geography of aspiration in the midst of violent attempts to dominate and harm SCLC organizers. In addition to the leap into the pool, she created this geography of aspiration through the embodied practices of buoyancy while in the water, and smiling in a lesser-known photograph of the protest, in which the hotel's owner James Brock threw muriatic acid onto the protestors in an attempt to "decontaminate" the water from the presence of Blackness. Through her embodied acts of resistance at the protest and throughout the rest of her life, the hope for the swimming pool as a space for leisure and play endured.

The Political and Affective Register of a Smile

I find Mimi in a documentary film titled *Passage* at St. Augustine made fifty-one years after the swim-in. The only thing I'd ever known of her before then was the infamous photo of her and a fellow Black girl demonstrator named Brenda Darten hanging onto a white demonstrator, Al Lingo, as James Brock dumped muriatic acid into the pool. Her hair might have been straightened at some point, but northern Florida's humidity and the pool waters began to tighten her curls. Her face is marked with fear, her eyes squinting at the acid which "bubbled up like a volcanic eruption."²⁷⁸ She recalled that she "couldn't breathe" as the acid fumes entered her mouth and nose. The photograph I had never seen before I read Mimi's obituary, however, was shot just before the first few drops of acid fell into the water. She was still hanging onto her fellow demonstrators, but she appeared to be smiling; I am curious about the origin of that laugh. In the documentary, J.T. Johnson mentioned that what sent James Brock into a fury was that "we

²⁷⁸ Mimi recalling the protest in a 2020 news interview in Boston.

[demonstrators] started laughing at him” when he resorted to the acid. I wonder at the courage to laugh at such bitterness. I understand the nationwide circulation of pained expression as a catalyst for urgency around the Civil Rights Act of 1964, but I also feel a sense of loss and confusion at the fact that I had never encountered her smile until now.

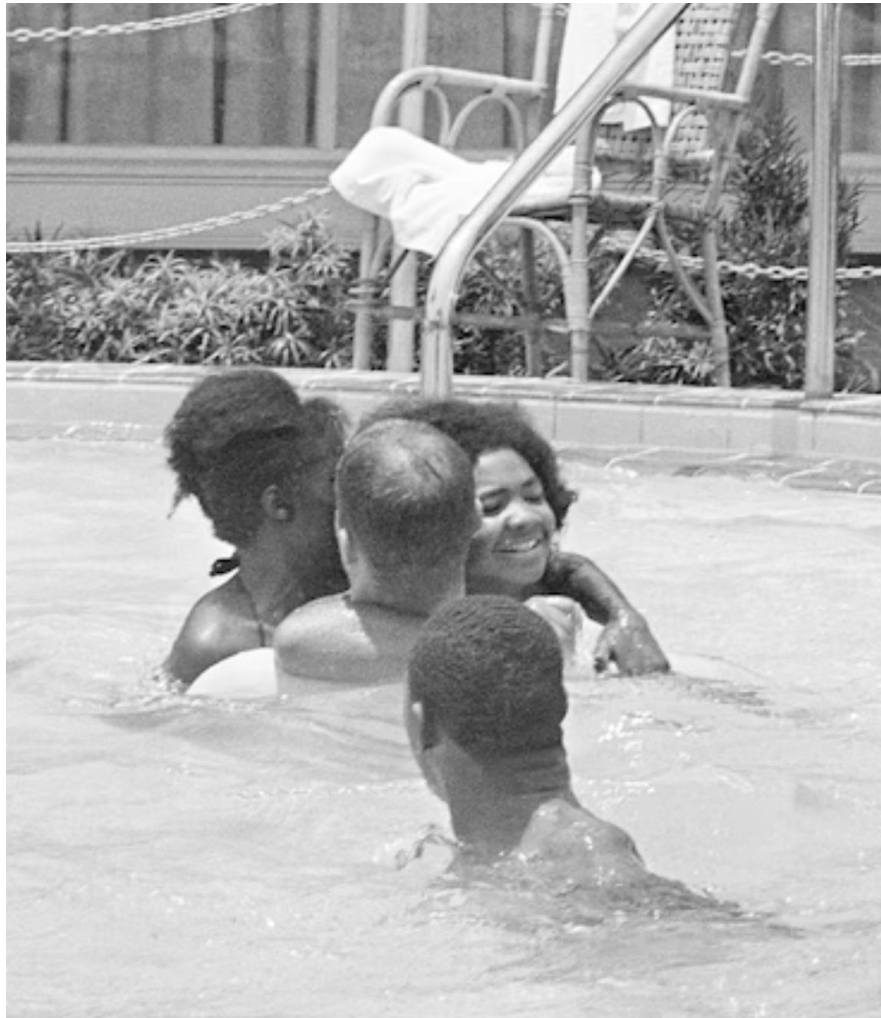


Figure 14 Mimi Jones, Brenda Darten, Al Lingo, and J.T. Johnson in the Monson Motor Lodge Pool, June 18th, 1964, Associated Press

In *Image Matters*, Tina Campt examines the low frequencies, the sonic and haptic dimensions of photographs of Black people; how we as students of the image feel when we

encounter it; how it moves us and *registers* to us as viewers. While Campt's archive is everyday amateur photography (what she terms as 'vernacular photography') instead of photojournalism or documentary photography as mine primarily is, I resonate with her assertions that photographs are objects of "feeling and relation, aspiration and desire" and that when we study photographs with our affective image-response in mind, we might "describe the excess of what registers in and through the photographs beyond the visual."²⁷⁹ As Martin Berger notes, much of the photojournalism from the Civil Rights movement in northern white-owned and operated newspapers unsurprisingly focused on instances of spectacular violence to agitate public readership and sell as many papers as possible.²⁸⁰ But the photograph of Mimi smiling as Brenda Darten drapes a protective arm across her seemed to have a much quieter circulation: it is one I only discovered in a 2020 Washington Post article announcing her death. Affectively, the photo registers within me a deep sense of gratitude for her defiance; I want to laugh along with her.

Buoyancy in the face of muriatic acid

In the Associated Press' digital archive, I find one newsreel covering just over two minutes of the Monson Motor Lodge protest. The shaking camera captures the shrieks, splashes, and footsteps in the moments after Brock pours the acid. Suddenly, the microphone picks up a voice from inside the pool saying, "don't worry about it...keep your head up out of the water. Keep your head up." I recognize this: I say something similar to my students when we practice treading water together. They feel hesitation and fear when they realize their feet cannot touch the tile at the bottom of the pool, but I try to remind them that they can learn to trust their bodies in deep water. Close your fingers tightly together, make your hands into fins, push the water out,

²⁷⁹ See Campt, *Listening to Images*, p. 16.

²⁸⁰ See Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*, p. 6.

then down. Find a kick that keeps your head above water. Chin up. A mother of two of my students, a Black woman with fraternal twins, tells me after lessons one day that she always tells her kids to “let their bodies remember” how to be in the water whenever they feel afraid of its depth. It can be difficult to push through fear into trust.

As an Assistant Head Lifeguard in Milwaukee, I often handled muriatic acid, or hydrochloric acid. This acid is reserved for when the pool is contaminated by feces, vomit, or blood. There were strict rules in place when approaching it: we were required to wear personal protective equipment, including gloves, goggles, and a face mask; we had to pour the acid directly into the contaminated area, prohibit entry into the pool for a half an hour, then let the water pumps regulate the chlorine levels once again. It was a process we casually termed “shocking the pool.” I look at the news footage and photographs of James Brock and see his desperation: So desperate he was to “clean” the pool of Blackness that he risked burning his own skin, or creating lesions in his lungs. He drained the entire pool after shocking it and refilled it, desperate to regain a sense of “cleanliness.”²⁸¹

The Monson Motor Lodge demonstrations became an embarrassment to the country, with even the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* covering the story, complete with the image of a fully-dressed white police officer jumping into the pool. President Johnson’s phone call records reveal a sense of defeat in the aftermath of the protests: “our foreign policy will go to hell over this.”²⁸² So, it seemed, did Brock’s business in the hotel industry after the passing of the 1964 Civil

²⁸¹See Heather McGhee’s *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. In it she offers the term “drained pool politics,” which refers to the dual detriment of white property owners and pool patrons responding to struggles for integration by draining the pool of water, depriving themselves of a place for aquatic recreation. Pp. 38-56.

²⁸² *Passage at St. Augustine* (2015).

Rights Act. He was forced to sell the property, claiming that while integrationist policy might slow business down, reactionary segregationist activity will certainly kill it.²⁸³

Mimi's enduring bubblyness

In one of her final interviews before her passing in 2020, Mimi recalled how fearful she was during the Monson demonstration, but nestled alongside that fear was a deep sense of hope. She says that “[the protest] only strengthened my resolve, and my lifelong commitment to challenge racism, inequality, and lack of social justice.” Water safety and access became one of her life’s passions, and at the time of her death at 73, she described herself as “still hopeful.” She returned to St. Augustine in 2014 with St. Augustine Historian David Nolan, eager to go to the beach and dip her feet into the water. Nolan remembers “seeing a smile on her face” upon her feet touching the water. The geography of the old, small, resort town has since morphed. The Monson Motor Lodge was eventually bulldozed to the ground and replaced with a beachside Hilton in 2003. Mimi’s defiant immersion revealed a deep anxiety about the chlorinated water’s potential to bring Blackness and whiteness into proximity.

In another 2020 photograph from the Washington Post, Mimi poses with the infamous photograph of herself cringing at the muriatic acid, her mouth open wide in a yell. She literally exceeds the frame of the galvanizing photograph, and her contemporary expression is one of pride and satisfaction. This expression is an accumulation of decades advocating for water safety, and a persistent “bubbly vivaciousness” that transformed a pool that once had a Confederate flag raised over it into a space of hope and political struggle.

²⁸³ *Passage at St. Augustine* (2015).



Figure 15 Mimi holds the infamous Monson Motor Lodge photograph, The Washington Post, 2020

Mimi's embodied practices of buoyancy, smiling, and immersing herself in dangerous waters produced forms of political, physical, and emotional endurance that touched a generation after her. The geography of the old, small, resort town has changed since the 1964 protest. In 2003, The Monson Motor Lodge was eventually bulldozed to the ground and replaced with a beachside Hilton. The small leisure pool's geography was altered to fit corporate interests, but a visit to the Hilton by Ms. Cheryl Jones—daughter of Ms. Brenda Darten, Mimi's fellow organizer—presented a fleeting moment of freedom in the space where her mother's very presence in the water was perceived as unclean. According to a journalist from Florida's *First Coast* news, as Cheryl dipped her foot into the new Hilton swimming pool where the Monson

Motor Lodge once was, she said to the air around her: “This is for you, Mom. No police, no fire marshalls, no screaming.”²⁸⁴ The journalist describes the moment as “an unspoken understanding of the woman who Jones loved.” Cheryl offered an intimate affirmation to her mother: her brief immersion would not be possible without her mother’s immersion 59 years ago. Her contemplative return to the site of her mother’s defiant, embodied act of immersion demonstrates an emotional and political endurance of hope for the swimming pool as a geography of aspiration, even as the corporate, standardizing geography of the Hilton attempts to obscure the pool’s white supremacist past. Cheryl’s return to the pool, her brief wading and her call to her mother’s memory affirms that Mimi’s and Brenda’s embodied practices produced forms of endurance that extended across time and continue to enable Black women like Cheryl to approach pools as geographies of aspiration. In the news interview, Cheryl mentions her mother’s reticence toward discussing her days as an activist, saying that her “emotions behind [the Monson Motor Lodge protest]”²⁸⁵ were difficult to verbalize. After she places her foot in the water, she senses her mother’s presence telling her: “now you know.” After Cheryl’s brief wade into the pool, she can finally know the political magnitude of her mother’s immersion. Cheryl can share her mother’s aspiration toward a sense of safety and belonging in a pool that violently naturalized her racial difference.

²⁸⁴ Schindler, Anne. “Family of infamous 'swim-in' protester visit site of acid attack.” First Coast News, June 1 2023. <https://www.firstcoastnews.com/article/news/local/family-of-infamous-swim-in-protester-visit-site-acid-attack/77-661fd836-d709-4f2b-86f9-9655eb36f2a9>

²⁸⁵ Schindler, Anne. “Family of infamous 'swim-in' protester visit site of acid attack.” First Coast News, June 1 2023. <https://www.firstcoastnews.com/article/news/local/family-of-infamous-swim-in-protester-visit-site-acid-attack/77-661fd836-d709-4f2b-86f9-9655eb36f2a9>



Figure 16 Cheryl Jones, daughter of Brenda Darten, looks out at the swimming pool



Figure 17 Cheryl Jones waves one foot above the steps into the Hilton hotel pool in St. Augustine

Though our temporal, political, and geographical circumstances diverge, I recognize the evidence of Inez and Mimi's lives as catalysts for the creation of geographies of aspiration by dredging the historical archives of written and spoken words, images, and news reels, and film. All of us, between 15 to 20 years old, were at the cusp of girlhood and womanhood and did not use swimming pools in precisely the same ways. Even as Inez straightens her hair and wears makeup for the photograph of her in her swimsuit, it is clear she prioritized the rigor that came with swimming for sport, and used it as a way to encourage community building and push against intra-communal gender norms of beauty and physicality. Mimi's use of the Monson Motor Lodge swimming pool was intended to disrupt a leisurely space, as the possibility for that

leisure necessitated the violent exclusion of Black St. Augustinian residents. Studying the aquatic lives of Inez and Mimi allowed me to see more clearly the historically continuous violence, hope, and desires for community that is contained in the construction of the American swimming pool.

Coda: Dajerria and Samantha: Distilling the law toward aquatic freedom

Craig Ranch North Apartment Complex, McKinney Texas and Schulz Aquatic Center at Lincoln Park, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, July 2015

Each time I flipped on the television that week when I first learned Dajerria's name, I was bombarded by video footage of her arrest. I was twenty years old and heading into work as an Assistant Head Lifeguard at my neighborhood's water park. When the Head Guard was not on schedule, I was in charge of my 24-member crew, the chemical balance of the pool, and the safety of the patrons. The way we started each day was a bit militaristic in nature: my crew lined up in front of me, toes skinned and burning on cream-colored pavement, sun helmets and sunglasses on, fingers interlaced behind their backs. I went over responsibilities and reminders: try to keep your back straight on the stand. If you feel any hesitation when a patron takes a swim test, don't let them into the deep end. Be firm but respectful. After finishing my speech, I watched them scatter to their assigned stands. At times, I'd hear some of the guards snicker about how once 3:00 pm arrived, it would become what they'd crassly call "hood time," the patron population of the pool shifting from young white mothers and their infants bobbing in the shallow end to a patronage primarily comprised of Black families with children of all ages. I heard their voices through their megaphones grow increasingly impatient when they addressed Black children and young adults, and I had to check my own voice at times to make sure I wasn't excessively harsh while enforcing pool rules.



Figure 18 Milwaukee County Lifeguard Corps Picture Day, August 2015

By the end of my shift, I feared that I was unconsciously policing people as opposed to keeping them safe. As I walked the perimeter of the pool deck and watched over the patrons, I found it difficult to get the image of Dajerria being pinned to the ground out of my mind, no matter the effort I put into suppressing it. On the muggy days when pool attendance climbed to its capacity and Milwaukee Police officers circled the gates, I felt especially uneasy. I had to ask myself: Where was I located within these layers of surveillance as a light-skinned Black woman in an authoritative position? How were the police officers reading the people I needed to protect

from drowning or otherwise hurting themselves or others? How did the patrons read me as I walked the pool perimeter? I asked myself these questions in the years following my encounter with Dajerria's story to confront my capacity to harm as well as care for people in an aquatic space; a space so significant to my sense of self, my racial identity, and my perceptions of my own body. I began to see a harrowing connection between a coworker's racist mumblings, impatient voices yelling through a megaphone at "disruptive" patrons, and the violent removal of Dajerria and her friends from the Craig Ranch North community pool.

There is an immense amount of noise in my mind when I think of Dajerria's story and its brief moment in national news cycles. White reporters from several Dallas news outlets often referred to Dajerria as a "bikini-clad girl" and "the teenager in the yellow bikini," which makes me uneasy. I wonder whether this phrasing sexualizes her, renders her increasingly vulnerable yet deserving of brutality to the public eye. Fifteen year old Brandon Brown, a local white boy who filmed Dajerria, Casebolt, and the surrounding witnesses, explains his impulse to record the incident by saying, "My heart did drop...I was scared that someone was gonna get shot or possibly killed, so I knew I had to keep on filming."²⁸⁶ I felt a strange sense of gratitude for his efforts, and then couldn't help thinking of his silence behind the camera. I then encounter the voice of an anonymous white woman, whose hands appeared in the frame of the news camera as she explained how Casebolt was "doing the right thing" by pinning Dajerria on the ground:

He grabbed her arm and tried to handcuff her, and she was...she started resisting, and she should have just stopped at that point, like anybody, and sat down, and put her hands behind her back, and he said 'lie on the floor,' and she wouldn't...they were just doing the right thing when these kids were fleeing and using profanity and threatening security guards.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁶ YouTube, "Teen in McKinney PD Video Speaks Out." June 8th 2015.

²⁸⁷ YouTube, "Teen in McKinney PD Video Speaks Out." June 8th 2015.



Figure 19 Screenshot of anonymous white Craig Ranch resident's folded hands

My initial reaction to this white woman's response was anger and irritation; she was a coward for refraining to show her face on camera. I tried to imagine her reaction to Dajerria's arrest itself: Did she feel safer because of it? Did she look away from the scene and go about her leisure at the pool? Did regret ever flash across her face? As I distilled and clarified the noise of the news media coverage, I finally found Dajerria's voice. In one interview with *Inside Edition*, Dajerria says, "I was terrified about what he was gonna do to me...I was shocked and confused." In another interview with Fox 4 Dallas-Fort Worth, she says that Casebolt "getting fired isn't enough."²⁸⁸ The rest of the interview is edited out of the news story, and I was left to wonder what else Dajerria needed in the wake of the assault. As the news coverage of the assault dwindled, I turned to Attorney Kimberly Cole's lawsuit against McKinney's Police Department, and the broader City of McKinney.

²⁸⁸ YouTube, "Teen in McKinney PD Video Speaks Out." June 8th 2015.



Figure 20 Dajerria speaks out about the assault, June 8 2015

I originally sought a copy of the lawsuit against the City of McKinney and its police department because I *thought* I wanted to distill from the legal terminology Attorney Kim Cole’s desires for Dajerria’s life after the assault. It took me several years to realize, through a conversation with my advisor, that I was effacing myself in my search—that I erased the lawsuit because I needed to distill my emotional response to Dajerria’s assault, and confront my own attachment to swimming pools as a site of healing and joy. The erasure form allows writers to grapple with a preexisting text, to dig into its bowels to dredge up a new text, with new truths, questions, and provocations. My erasure of the original text seeks to distill the events of June 5th, 2015 and emphasize that there is no neat ending point to Dajerria’s physical and psychological pain in the

wake of the brutality of Eric Casebolt, white Craig Ranch North residents, and the City of McKinney.

To study the erasure form in relation to the study of Black life, I turn to Christina Sharpe's method of Black redaction, which she defines as the act of blacking out and obscuring an object to push specific fragments of that object to the fore.²⁸⁹ Sharpe takes up a 2014 *New York Times* article centering the case of Mikia Hutchings, a 12 year old Black girl who was charged in a juvenile court with "defacing school and personal property" for writing "Hi" on her school's gym bathroom wall. Significant here is the fact that Mikia's white friend was also disciplined for writing on the wall, but evaded juvenile criminal charges because her family could afford the \$100 "restitution fee" required by the school, where Mikia's family could not.²⁹⁰ While Sharpe acknowledges the article's intent to center Mikia, her muffled voice strikes Sharpe. She writes that "if we annotate and redact that first paragraph of the *New York Times* article, we might find Mikia's point of view. Through redaction we might hear what she has to say in her own defense in the midst of the ways she is made to appear only to be made to disappear."²⁹¹ The new introductory paragraph of the article, redacted by Sharpe, pushes Mikia's quotes to the fore of the reader's visual field. The only visible words are now: "Hi" / "I only / wrote one word, and I had to do all that," / It isn't fair."²⁹² For Sharpe, the result of this redaction is the visibility of Mikia's experience with state control, even if that visibility is momentary. For Sharpe, the visibility that Black redaction provides can be "a counter to the force of the state." In the geographies of domination that Mikia inhabits—her school building, the Henry County Board of

²⁸⁹ See Sharpe, "The Weather." *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, p. 115.

²⁹⁰ Sharpe, "The Weather." *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, p. 115.

²⁹¹ Ibid, p. 115.

²⁹² Ibid. p. 115.

Education building where her disciplinary hearing is held—Black redaction is a way of making the fullness of her girlhood visible.

My practice of erasure is inspired by Sharpe's even as it slightly diverges from it. We both center care as we write about the Black girls we encounter; as Sharpe approaches Black redaction with the intent to make Mikia's truth more visible—specifically by redacting a text that includes one of her direct quotes— I work with a document that does not contain any of Dajerria's words, but was composed by her attorney, who outlines specific legal demands from the City of McKinney and its police department.

A part of my concern with the way Dajerria's story has been told via news media is what I see as an overexposure of her body. Local and national news channels see little of her face but a blur as she is shoved to the ground. While Mikia's writing of "Hi" was not recorded, only witnessed off-camera as the two girls were "caught red-handed," Dajerria's brutalization was filmed and repeatedly broadcast on local news stations; for days on end, at 5:00pm and 11:00pm, white Texan reporters referred to her as "bikini-clad," or "the girl in the yellow bikini." As I dwelled with this overexposure, I turned to Tanisha C. Ford's formulation of a "black feminist material culture" and her celebration of Dajerria's bathing suit. Ford meditates on the colors and textures of the suit and its contrast to Casebolt's uniform:

Then we see her. Truly see her. She's wearing an eye-catching bathing suit, the style that many fifteen-year-old girls would adore, a multicolored neon bikini, with a long fringe that hung from its top. The light, elastic fabric of Becton's suit stands in stark contrast to Casebolt's dark, heavy, starched police uniform. Without a doubt, when Dajerria Becton first saw the bikini, first tried it on her toned, brown body, she marveled at the way the vibrant pink, orange, and green hues accentuated her skin. She probably stood before a mirror, looking at herself at every angle before determining that this suit was "the one." In this bikini, she would stand out in a crowd. Her

friends would compliment her. And with Becton's long, carefully plaited box braids serving as the perfect accessory to the tie-dyed, two-piece garment, she must have thought, 'I *am* black girl magic!'²⁹³

In her "Black Girl Song for Dajerria," Ford exceeds the boundaries of the constantly-circulated video of Dajerria's assault to imagine the moment Dajerria bought her bikini. Ford's vision of her trying on the suit is filled with colorful "vibrance," countering the flat, reductive naming of her by news media as "the girl in the yellow bikini." With Ford, we can register the dynamic interplay of warm and cool colors in the bikini's fabric and its playful textual variation in its fringe piece. In Ford's vision, we can exceed the punitive, violent, and most well-known image of Dajerria at the pool party.

Knowing that Dajerria's inner world is something I cannot directly access except through abbreviated news interviews, I focus my erasure on what my emotional response to Dajerria's assault might reveal about my attachments to swimming pools. In the process of redaction/erasure I encounter fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, and hope. My poem's title, **"FACTS,"** is taken directly from the section of the lawsuit that details the events of June 5th, from Dajerria's attendance at the pool party, to her physical assault at the hands of Casebolt, to the inadequacy of the McKinney Police Department's de-escalation training and nearly immediate resort to excessive force. I try to exert force on the words describing the event, precipitating the magnitude of the assault:

"Casebolt / arrived / yelling shouting / obscenities / his baton raised / dragged her face /
toward the concrete D.B.'s hair / her back / her neck in pain repeated / continued");

²⁹³ Ford, Tanisha C. "A Black Girl Song for Dajerria." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*. p. 158.

Here, I reveal my own desperation for Dajerria to have a sense of safety, and the accompanying sense of helplessness about the harm she has endured:

(“Defend / Ms. Becton, push / his gun away / disobey / reason, / she / only
15 years old barely / over 100 pounds / excessive / a crime.”).

I use redaction/erasure to make more visible the naturalization of Dajerria’s difference—her body, her pubescent girlhood, her Blackness cannot be allowed in proximity to white pool patrons. Her very being is far too divergent from the white residents’ imagining of what the pool must represent and be; a haven for relaxation, away from the racist assumption of “rowdiness.”

FACTS

9. [REDACTED] D.B., a minor child, [REDACTED] attended a pool party [REDACTED]
10. The CITY [REDACTED] called [REDACTED] for a “disturbance.” [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Casebolt [REDACTED]
11. [REDACTED] arrived [REDACTED] yelling [REDACTED] shouting obscenities [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

PLAINTIFF’S ORIGINAL COMPLAINT

Page 3

Figure 21 "FACTS," page 3

[REDACTED]

12. [REDACTED] his baton raised [REDACTED] [REDACTED] dragged [REDACTED] her face toward the concrete [REDACTED] D.B.'s hair [REDACTED] her back [REDACTED] her neck [REDACTED] in pain [REDACTED] repeated [REDACTED] continued [REDACTED] Defend [REDACTED] Ms. Becton, [REDACTED] push [REDACTED] his gun [REDACTED] away.

13. [REDACTED] disobey [REDACTED] reason, [REDACTED]

14. [REDACTED] she [REDACTED] only 15 years old [REDACTED] barely [REDACTED] over 100 pounds. [REDACTED]

15. [REDACTED] excessive [REDACTED]

Figure 22 "FACTS," page 4

16. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] a crime. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

17. [REDACTED] D.B., [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

18. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] pronounce [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

19. The CITY [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

20. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

21. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] an [REDACTED] assault [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

PLAINTIFF'S ORIGINAL COMPLAINT

Page 5

Figure 23 "FACTS," page 5

The last section of the poem is addressed to Dajerria on its surface but it is also a confrontation of my own hopelessness about the limits of the law in its capacity to repair physical and psychological harm. ("D.B., / pronounce / the CITY / an assault / evidence /

of / a governmental function / show the result / the wrongful and reckless / CITY"). I dredge up these lines to affirm the responsibility of the entire city in its assault of Dajerria. I argue here that the assault did not begin with Eric Casebolt's arrival; it began when white Craig Ranch North residents glanced at the group of Black teenagers and deemed them a threat.

22. [REDACTED] evidence [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] of [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

23. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] a
governmental function.

24. [REDACTED] show [REDACTED] the result [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] the [REDACTED] wrongful and reckless [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] CITY [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

25. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] D.B. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] believed [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] justified [REDACTED]

26. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

27. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Figure 24 "FACTS," page 6

To see and distill my own response to this assault, I found company with my own numbness, helplessness, and discomfort about my long-held aspiration for the swimming pool to be a safe place for Black people. I sought company with Attorney Cole's words, and found my own anger embedded within the lawsuit. I sought company with the embarrassment I felt when my joyful

memories of the swimming pool were disturbed by my witnessing of Dajerria's assault at the pool party. The process of erasing the lawsuit made the limits of the law clearer to me. While I do not deny the importance of the \$148,000 restitution, would it help Dajerria pick up a fork to eat in the weeks following the assault? Would it help her sleep? Would it repair her relationship to the swimming pool?

Legal time and age are such strange phenomena. I keep thinking about the time elapsed between Dajerria's assault at fifteen and the age of eighteen when she, her mother, and her friends received financial restitution—what sorts of behavioral expectations Dajerria had to consider as she left girlhood and entered legal adulthood. What of her life, her return or refusal to return to the swimming pool, exceeds the news coverage, the photographs, the video of her assault from various angles? "Another Time" is a free verse imagining Dajerria's 18th birthday and high school graduation, potentially a "re-do" of the interrupted pool party. I begin with an epigraph from the General Release, Settlement, and Indemnity Agreement, which emphasizes Dajerria's legal adulthood. When Dajerria is eighteen in 2018, her entire name is spelled out instead of shortened to initials found in the lawsuit (D.B.), and it is emphasized that she can now "manage her own affairs." I needed the free verse form, as it allowed me to speculate on what it might feel like to emerge into legal adulthood after a moment of leisure you attempted to experience as a child (or "minor") was so violently interrupted. In this poem, I use an epigraph of the lawsuit to reintroduce Dajerria Becton, which uses the full length of her name. Exceeding the limits of legal time, Dajerria is still very much a child; however, I want this free verse poem to demonstrate a straddling between childhood and legal adulthood in the space of the swimming pool.

“And by such suit sought damages and relief from Defendants as more fully described therein, and thereafter Dajerria Becton attained 18 years of age and is now an adult fully competent to manage her own affairs and agree to the terms of the Agreement;”

—United States District Court for the Eastern District of Texas, Sherman Division, May 2nd, 2018

today, the muscles of her chest are loosened
by cool water,
her nostrils inflame with chlorine,
and her spine bears nobody’s knee.

she looks over her shoulder
to zach disappearing by cannonball
to a couple nuzzling under an aging tree
to tatyana striking a poolside pose
to ladariene hitting a handstand, spindle-brown legs breaking
the surface

to her mother on the phone perched on a deck chair
toes so dazzlingly white and pruned
flinching at an unruly splash.

She arrives at 18 breathless,
with the pressure in her ears
that lingers after a prolonged plunge
her dark brown eyes squint at the sliver of world above
and this is enough.

It seems I am not alone in my hope for the swimming pool. In my autotheoretical exploration of my response to Dajerria’s story, my waterborne life, and those of Inez Patterson and Mimi Jones, I maintain that these Black women’s geographies of aspiration require embodied practices of many types: from intracommunal writing and athletic rigor, to insisting on buoyancy and a smile in the face of great harm, to erasing legal text and speculate a return to the swimming pool through free verse. To create habitable aquatic spaces while navigating racial segregation, restrictive health and beauty standards, and police brutality, Inez, Mimi, and Dajerria teach me that we must aspire to them through embodied acts of resistance. For these

Black women, these embodied practices are necessarily informed by anti-Black violence. They vary across geographic space and time: from de jure and de facto segregation and redlining in 1920s Philadelphia, to the heated Civil Rights battles in 1964 St. Augustine, to the physical and psychological effects of police brutality in the context of contemporary Black Lives Matter movement; but each geographic and temporal moment refuses to give up on the swimming pool as spaces of joy and belonging.

I am grateful to join other Black women scholars in their fascination with aspiration as an analytic. Toward the end of *In the Wake*, a text teeming with water, Christina Sharpe insists on aspiration—not only hope, but the act of breathing. She joins Dionne Brand’s wish to return to “the necessity of breath, to the breathtaking spaces in the wake in which we live; and to the ways we respond, ‘with wonder and admiration, you are still alive, like hydrogen, like oxygen.’”²⁹⁴ At the end of *Fit Citizens*, Ava Purkiss ponders the significance of aspiration in her study of Black women’s exercise. She writes that studying Black women’s aspirations can show us both the “forces that squelched their desires”—standards of beauty, racist exclusion—and their “dream[s] of longevity” and their imaginations of a “future of Black wellness.”²⁹⁵ Swimming pools are spaces in which community and alienation are felt, peace and violence is experienced. Each time I feel naive about insisting on the swimming pool as a place of personal and political significance for Black people, I must ask myself: who am I to let go of this aspiration? It has had an enduring life before me.

²⁹⁴ See Sharpe, Brand, *In the Wake*, p. 105.

²⁹⁵ See Purkiss, *Fit Citizens*, p. 170.

Conclusion: The waters we see

“Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as ah been able to find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see.”

—Nanny to Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

In an early chapter of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nanny soothes an upset Janie by imagining a distant place where “de black man is in power,” a place several hundred miles from her and her granddaughter’s geographical location in Orange County. As Nanny admits to the limits of humankind in the face of an omnipotent and mysterious God, she also does important geographic and imaginative work: Shirley Toland-Dix convincingly identifies Nanny’s “far off place” as Haiti, long held in African American cultural imaginaries as the first and enduring example of an independent Black Republic. Toland-Dix’s reading is a compelling one: Hurston wrote her watershed novel in Haiti in about six weeks, while simultaneously completing her fieldwork for her ethnography of Haitian and Jamaican folklore, *Tell My Horse*.²⁹⁶ Surely, Black subjects’ ecological knowledge crosses geographical and sensorial boundaries across the Atlantic Ocean and what is immediately visible to us. However, in addition to this generative diasporic reading, I read this moment of intergenerational reassurance toward “knowing what we see” as a prompt for us to turn to and learn from the geographies that are proximal to us. In other terms, by

²⁹⁶ See Toland-Dix, Shirley. “Zora Neale Hurston and the Challenge of Black Atlantic Identity,” pp. 139-150.

turning inland, we can attend to the inland, extra-Atlantic waters *we see* and study how they shape our senses of self, community, belonging, and homeplace.

This dissertation has worked to offer multitudinous understandings of relationships between African American literary and historical subjects and bodies of water beyond, yet not estranged from the Atlantic Ocean and the horrific rupture of Middle Passage. The early twentieth century constitutes a “rupture” of its own: massive demographic shifts across the country, the establishment of Black cultural institutions and print cultures, violent white supremacist backlash in the forms of lynchings, discriminatory policing, and inequitable housing and labor practices. Though these forms of violence produce McKittrick’s inventive formulation of “geographies of domination,”²⁹⁷ the lakes, storms, freshwater springs, and swimming pools in this study act together with the Black literary and historical subjects to fashion lives of irreverence, resistance, and joy in an anti-Black climate.

In chapter one, the material-metaphorical murkiness/turbidity of Lake Michigan produces a conundrum: Limnological reading allows us to see how the murkiness of the lake informs the murky details of Eugene’s murder, just as it offers protective coverage for Eugene’s potential afterlife underneath the waves. Chapter two offers alternative freshwater figurations of the psychic and emotional interiority of Janie Crawford and her relationships to Nanny, Phoeby and Tea Cake. From the subterranean Floridan aquifer, to Lake Sabelia, to the Everglades wetland and the devastating hurricane, these waters offer material and metaphorical space in which to negotiate, redirect and recompose her interpersonal relationships, as well as restricting notions of Black women’s propriety. In the third chapter, I encounter and linger with Black girls and young women for whom the swimming pool is a vital sociopolitical space through which to resist white

²⁹⁷ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xv.

supremacist violence, cultivate athletic rigor, joy, and a sense of belonging. I employ my own ekphrastic sensibility—a detailed description, a kind of *limning*—to portray what I see of their aquatic lives in a diverse archive of periodicals, photographs, and documentary film. Through this limning process, I theorize that Inez, Mimi and myself construct the swimming pools we encounter as geographies of aspiration through embodied practices of swimming, intra-communal writing, athletic rigor, and protest. The coda that precedes this conclusion meditates on the devastating brutalization of Dajerria Becton at a McKinney, Texas pool party, and employs Christina Sharpe’s poetic practice of “black redaction”²⁹⁸ to distill my interpretation of the “emotional truth”²⁹⁹ of the incident; by blacking out text from the lawsuit against the city and the McKinney Police Department to create an erasure poem, I can glean what “the nerves and skin remember.”³⁰⁰ Paired with this black redaction, “Another Time” speculates upon a “re-do” of the pool party, to imagine a healing return to the pool that might echo that of Brenda Darten’s daughter in the decades after the Monson Motor Lodge protest.

As I have expressed in this dissertation’s introduction, my hope is that this project might be another offering in ongoing critical conversations within Material ecocriticism, Black ecologies, Black geographies, Black feminist literary criticism, and the Blue Humanities. Particularly, I see this project as an entry into the unsettling of Michelle M. Wright’s formulation of “the middle passage epistemology,”³⁰¹ through which we might understand Blackness as not a stable, linear “what,” but a multidirectional “when” and “where.”³⁰² In accordance with the theorizations of Katherine McKittrick, Kevin Dawson, and Hortense Spillers, this dissertation

²⁹⁸ Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, p. 113.

²⁹⁹ Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” p. 19.

³⁰⁰ Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” p. 19.

³⁰¹ Wright, Michelle M. *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, pp. 4-5.

³⁰² Wright, Michelle M. *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, pp. 4-5.

insists upon Black literary and historical subjects as agentic producers of restless, rebellious sociopolitical waters. I have endeavored to demonstrate how limnological reading allows us to interpret the material features of freshwater not as passive context for these Black subjects' lives, but as agentic matter that acts *with* them to co-produce these insurgent waterscapes. I hope that material ecocriticism and the Blue Humanities' insistence upon the interaction of material and matter can continue to bridge Black literary and historical lifeworlds, and I hope that this project demonstrates the vitality of aquatic recreation to studies of Black ecologies and geographies. I am also excited about this project's relation to the generative potential of Chelsea Frazier's formulation of Black Feminist Ecological Thought, which "can help us critically interpret and create not only art and literature, but can also help us to criticize (when necessary), reimagine, and create other elements of culture including our legislation, our economic sensibilities, or engagement with material resources like water, flora, fauna and land."³⁰³ In our relationships with water—both turbulent and tranquil—we are agents of and subjected to our own redirection and recomposition. We are storm and lake, swamp and swimming pool. We are bodies and movements of freshwater unto ourselves.

³⁰³ Frazier, Chelsea M. "Black Feminist Ecological Thought: A Manifesto. *Atmos*, October 1st, 2020. "<https://atmos.earth/political-landscapes/black-feminist-ecological-thought-essay/>

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