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## Rather Than to Seem: Black and Indigenous Narratives in a Stormy, Swampy South

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Rather Than to Seem: Black and Indigenous Narratives of a Stormy, Swampy  
South

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Dissertation submitted  
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences  
at West Virginia University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in  
English

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## **Abstract**

### **Rather Than To Seem: Black and Indigenous Narratives of a Stormy, Swampy South**

**Jennifer Denise Peedin**

I examine the narratives of the South that have been historically overlooked, ignored, or hidden in order to establish a dominant narrative of the region. The narratives examined here are by southern Black and Indigenous authors who restore lost knowledge and offer histories that help complete the South culturally and ecologically. The conceptual methodology develops from LeAnne Howe's tribalogy which explains that Indigenous people create stories and histories that transform the space around them and offer an understanding of the world around us. Another methodology used is Anthony Wilson's ecocritical swamp studies; each chapter analyzes a narrative centered around a swamp, a low-lying area, or a hurricane. I also use the concept of ecotones or spaces of transition, necessary spaces of invisible work as each author supplies a space created by knowledge, history, and story to do the necessary work of leading their readers through the middle of a dominant narrative to the unburied truth. The selected texts offer perspectives of a violent past and how this violence affected the ecology of their home as well as how the natural world was seen and cared for. Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is an example used in one chapter that illuminates what has been lost due to colonization and white supremacy. I examine Black and Indigenous authors as these two people groups have suffered the most under colonization in the South and have witnessed the most violence. Their voices offer the South a way to confront its past and renew both land and human relations with access to hidden stories and forgotten knowledge.

## Acknowledgments

Land acknowledgment: This project was written on Osage, Shawnee, Massawomeck, and Monongahela ancestral lands. The works discussed here are based on the traditional lands of the Lumbee, Tuscarora, Catawba (*Let the Dead Bury the Dead*), Seminole, Miccosukee (*Power*), Natchez, Biloxi (*Salvage the Bones*), and Choctaw (*Shell Shaker*) lands, and many other tribes that suffered under the hands of colonization to the extent that their names are now unknown.

The phrase “it takes a village” always seemed cliché to me...until I needed a village. This project would be in utter disarray without the encouragement and support of many.

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After my mom’s passing there were a handful of women who held my hand, allowed me to grieve, and saw me through the darkest days of my life and while writing this project. Gabby and Madison, your friendship is both life-giving and lifesaving. Thank you.

Most of this project was written at Annie’s Coffee and Creamery, and when I say the baristas gave me the liquid strength to type on, I do not exaggerate. Abby and Heather, thank you for celebrating each milestone within this project. Your kindness and incredible coffee kept me going. No barista will ever hold a candle to either of you.

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And lastly, thank you to my momma, who started all of this. She never asked me to live as a Southerner who forgot the past because she always preferred her magnolias made of steel anyway. She gave me the courage and confidence to do the thing. My momma always told me I could do it.

So, I did it.

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## Introduction

### **Esse Quam Videri: To Be, Rather Than to Seem**

North Carolina's state motto is "esse quam videri": to be, rather than to seem. This project aims to be. It sounds simple. To be. To exist. But North Carolina and the South have trouble existing with the past. We tend to dwell in the "to seem" rather than the "to be" as we celebrate a violent past and adhere to the misleading history that we want to remember rather than what we should remember. So this project works to be, to expose all of who we are, to remember what we'd rather forget, to acknowledge the terror that occurred on Southern soil, and to listen to the voices that have been silenced. Their stories created the South and shaped the way we carry forward in a world that is desperate to erase those memories. It is time to be whole, rather than to only seem that way.

In the South, we know how to tell stories. The history of the landscape has provided an abundance of material, particularly in the way of memory, ghosts, and haunts. My home, eastern North Carolina, is founded on stories of the unexplained, mysterious, and troubled. Every child knows the story of The Lost Colony, an entire colony of English settlers that disappeared and the only clue to their disappearance was the letters CRO carved into a tree. It is in our state-produced history textbooks and is a consistent source of awe and adventure, spurning truth-seekers in search of that colony, lost so long ago. Every Southern state claims its own anthology of stories of the ghostly and macabre nature. This has heavily contributed to the aesthetic of the South; the natural atmosphere and ambiance of harsh humid swamps and elaborate graveyards with floating Spanish moss set the scene for a ghost with a long memory. This is all part of the history many want to remember: the romantic version of the South and one of Southern exceptionalism. This version excludes why the South would rather focus on romanticism rather than reality.

The real reason for the ability to tell a “good” ghost story is due to the violent history of the South, the timeline dotted with war, genocide, racism, and slavery, and the stories told to hide the irreparable stains. This violent history makes it possible to tell the story, and by continuing this tradition, the violence continues in the South’s erasure of other narratives. In the folklore, myths, and stories throughout the dominant Southern narrative, it is the story of the soldier fighting for glory over the story of the escaped slave and what they were running from. Patricia Yaeger argues that “we have rather ordinary expectations about the South and what we find in Southern literature” (ix). These are the stories of settler colonial history and are the narratives told and remembered. I am tired of these stories.

My project is not only concerned with the narratives that have been ignored, but also their circulation, and once they are mobilized how they change the way the South understands the land, race, values, epistemologies, and ways of existing. The writings analyzed throughout this project reject white supremacy writing and challenge the traditions upheld in Southern literature, particularly the Southern Gothic. As I center my writing on the hidden and forgotten narratives of the South, I also draw conclusions on how two people groups, Indigenous and African American, challenge and shift the grounds of knowing, specifically the knowing of the relationship between the land and race. These two groups have experienced the most violence and acts of terror within the South, and the land, as shown through the following narratives, has soaked up their blood and witnessed genocide, slavery, and forced removal. Southern Indigenous tribes were forced to leave the land, their home, while African Americans were forced onto the land and to work it under the bondage of enslavement. Their relationships with land are complex, and their knowledge and experience of the land can change the South’s understanding of the landscape.



In examining the relationship between land and race, I utilize the term “ecotone” which traditionally is used to define the transitional spaces between two ecosystems such as marshlands and estuaries. This project investigates the ways in which ecotones are shared terrain of natural and social places, where the inner and outer experiences of the South are told with non-traditional voices. I assert that the ecotone is the meeting place of specific physical landscapes in the South and the redefinition offered by the voices of Southern Indigenous or African Americans who have a very different relationship with the landscape and their history within that space from that of the colonizer.<sup>1</sup> I employ ecotone as a place that is revealed within the texts that is uniquely Southern but also challenges the settler colonial idea of that space. The swamp and places where mud abounds are spaces of ecotone in this project. Ecotones that appear in each chapter lend themselves to the idea that land and place have altered and there are new understandings of the relationship between humans and earth. The results are a growing understanding and deepening of Southern culture and history.

Ecotones exist in ecology as a middle place a space of mire and muck that you have to wade through to get to the end. Much of their work is invisible yet necessary such as offering protection to the bordering ecosystems, absorbing pollutants, and preventing further damage. They produce tremendous balance. Only certain animals flourish in ecotones, animals that have adapted to such a convoluted space. Ecotones also provide space for hidden potentials as well as hidden dangers, and they are a sensitive indicator of global climate change. In the narratives discussed in this project, the ecotones of the South are voices that have been ignored yet offer an intimate view of potential, danger, and warnings for the future. Continuing to ignore these

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this project I have chosen to mostly employ “colonizer” rather than “colonization” for the fact that the former humanizes the system. Colonization was personal and deeply wounding to an innumerable percent of the world’s population and it was done through a system created by people. The term colonizer gives actual agency and people to the process of colonization.

ecotones, prevents the South from reaching the end, a place where each voice is heard and every story known.

I began my study of the hidden stories of the South after reading LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker* and was shocked by the traditions, culture, and history of Indigenous tribes of the Southeast. Like many non-Natives, I was taught, and believed, that Native folks had 'vanished' and their presence in the South was layered with mystery and haunts. Wading through the stories that circulated in my community of the South's past, I quickly ascertained that I knew very little about the true histories of my home. The Tuscarora War occurred in my backyard, and Harriet Jacobs escaped from a plantation down the road from my hometown, but I knew next to nothing of these stories. I heard one story, the settler colonial story, while the region did a fine job at attempting to hide everything else. So, I set out to find the stories I was missing, that were absent from the classrooms and the Sunday after-church dinner table.

Southern history has only recently, within the past two decades, made an eager effort to move outside of the frame built by the settler-colonial narrative.<sup>2</sup> Studies of the South have fixated on slavery, the Civil War, the Lost Cause, Reconstruction, and Civil Rights, all predominantly from the point of view of the wealthy property owners, the enslaver, and the European immigrant; it is a white-centric story of ownership rather than stewardship. This project investigates late twentieth and early twenty-first century Black and Indigenous literature in the Southeastern United States that unhinges and disrupts the Southern canon to tell hidden

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<sup>2</sup> For advancements in Southern literature in Native studies see Jodi Byrd's "A Return to South," Eric Gary Anderson and Chadwick Allen's writings on Indigenous earthworks, Kirstin Squint's studies on LeAnne Howe and the intersections of the South and Indigeneity, Gina Caison's *Red States: Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, and Southern Studies*, Taylor Hagood, Daniel Cross Turner's *Undead Souths*, and ethnohistorians Tim Alan Garrison and Greg O'Brien. In swamp studies see *Swamp Souths: Literary and Cultural Ecologies* edited by Kirstin Squint, Anthony Wilson, Scott Romine, Taylor Hagood, and Eric Gary Anderson. See Zackery Vernon, Delia Byrnes, Scott Obernesser and Christopher Lloyd for Southern ecocriticism.

histories of the South. It works to interrupt and disperse the stories of the property owner, the enslaver, and white-centric standard history.<sup>3</sup> The texts I study offer counter-narratives that examine how Southern spaces and occurrences such as swamps, bayous, and hurricanes are places where Black and Indigenous authors reveal hidden racialized histories, uncovering areas of their conflict and the details of their conflict that the dominant narrative has desperately tried to hide. The texts that I examine from Indigenous authors LeAnne Howe and Linda Hogan, and Black authors Randall Kenan and Jesmyn Ward, are narratives that rewrite and reexamine the complex shift from memory to fact and truth. As Eric Gary Anderson writes, “the South before the South remains very much a living presence, a transcultural complex that, geographically as well as rhetorically, operates on Native ground” and it is on this Native ground that I argue the texts offer a different truth (*Native South*). Their truth reshapes and redefines the South and the landscapes they write from.

Throughout this project, I have used the words land, space, place, and dirt according to the intentions and backgrounds of the authors and cultures. Throughout American history, stewardship and cultural relationship between land and human have shifted from Indigenous to colonizer. Rhetoric over land ownership and a "divine right" to own and cultivate the land was fuel for many Southerners and politicians in planning the Great Removal; it also became a rallying cry during the Lost Cause era promoting the construction of memorials and statues of the Confederacy "heroes" that were built on Southern soil as if to lay claim again to the dirt below. In the 1920s, the Southern Agrarians pushed the popular idea that land was for agricultural cultivation and fought the idea of industrialism and progress, two ideas that would

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<sup>3</sup> I have refrained from engaging with scholars that primarily focus on strictly white authors, particularly Faulkner and Agrarian studies: see *The New William Faulkner Studies* (2022). While these studies may be examining Faulkner in a new way, I want to avoid studies focused entirely on white authorship.

destroy the South. For most of Southern history, the terms land, place, and space are racialized, radicalized, and used to construct patriotic doctrine. White Southerners have viewed land as a way to establish residency, identity, and inclusion. They belong; they *are* Southern because of the Southern land they live on, which in many cases has been in the family for countless generations. In addressing the colonizer falsehoods between land, ownership, and identity, Melanie Benson Taylor argues that "Southerners have turned repeatedly to a fable of origins and exceptionalism to preserve a receding sense of cultural distinctiveness, certainly, too, they revisit its principles to sanction and justify the region's survival and resurgence" (6).

Many of the stories within this project contain the ideas of what Southern soil has the power to do when challenged, and its purpose restored according to the Indigenous and Black ideas of land, place, and space. Southern literature relies heavily on the idea of place and homescape, and the work of the authors I discuss in this dissertation seeks to reclaim Southern space as a non-settler colonial home and place. Some stories, as I will discuss, make the land more than objects of ownership and cultivation. They give it life, and it moves.

Black and Indigenous communities continue to grapple with a racially charged and divided society in the South as they reclaim heritage and assert identities distinct from their colonially imposed ones. The texts I examine offer counter-narratives that propel different stories, those hidden among colonizer voices, about marginalized places and those that live there. For example, swamps and wetlands are narrated beyond the white-centric view of a snakey flooded plain to a place of community and resistance in my first chapter's text, *Let the Dead Bury the Dead*, by Randell Kenan. Out of the swamp marched the Choctaws and Chickasaws when Andrew Jackson ordered their removal; their South was stolen, and their stories of ancient mounds, earthworks, and creation became narrated by the colonial system. Through the

examination of twentieth and twenty-first-century Southern Indigenous and African American literature, I argue that Southern history is retold, reexamined, and rewritten.

As hidden histories are revealed, and silenced voices heard, the plantation narrative, economy, and ecology are replaced with Indigenous and African American stories which illuminate human connections with non-human society, stewardship rather than domination. They delineate methods of preservation, conservation, land management, and care that are innately cultural. Often, these cultural practices have been ignored or appropriated by colonizer culture. But by understanding that so many ecological practices belong to these hidden Southern voices, the ways in which Southerners identify with the landscape and practice land management are further challenged. The voices from the texts unflinchingly confront the ignored connection between Indigenous and African American history and the continued influence on distinct Southern landscapes.

Much of Southern identity relies on landscape and place; the humid bayous, crunchy pine forest floors, and flooded swamp plains are all places that Southerners lean into for history and culture. Not only do these texts challenge how the South uses and preserves these Southern spaces, but they also deconstruct the foundation of Southern culture, disassembling the scaffolding that was built by colonizers. Instead of perpetuating a land of jasmine on the breeze, I claim that these texts shift the focus from the old Southern studies that continued to build on fantasies of settler colonialism South to a deconstructed region by rewriting the South as a site of resistance and rebirth.

The old South is deconstructed as authors of color narrate their version of the South, a version that is very different from the colonizer one. In her poem "Everybody in America Hate the South," Jacqueline Allen Trimble confounds the idealized "Magnolia memory" that was

concocted to obscure the long history of white terrorism against Black people, memories made to create a mystical place of plantations while ignoring the enslaved fingerprints' in the foundational bricks (Trimble). I further challenge the magnolia memory as I claim that the hidden histories reveal a South beyond that of the Agrarians and provide a deep intimacy and reliance on ancestral knowledge of the land that reimagines Southern landscapes and people. By examining the Indigenous South, the Black South, and the waterlogged and flooded South, I argue that the South is being redefined by these narratives that confront ghosts of the past, guide Southern voices of the future, and shape work being done now to heal both land and person.

There is much to heal regarding the Southern past and present. However, as climate change threatens the globe, I am interested in the joining of race and environmental concerns. While much of the western US suffers under fire and smoke, the South floats and floods. With this defining element in mind, much of the content within the chapters center on water, watery landscapes, and how water shapes Indigenous and Black stories. Water is a natural element that has often overwhelmed the South. The Atlantic Ocean heard the screams and prayers of captured Africans as it carried them in a diasporic wave to the Americas. Several Southeastern Indigenous tribes' creation stories begin with water and mud. Southern history is full of images of flooded red-clay fields and roads of the Mississippi delta and eastern North Carolina. Hurricanes bash the coast and the gulf every year while Southern inhabitants wonder if that new storm on the horizon will be the next Katrina. But beyond the physical representation of water and its often-destructive ways, water is also memory, and the South lives and builds on memory: memory that many in the South would rather be erased. Toni Morrison wrote that "all water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was" (Morrison). My project rearranges the Southern canon by examining memory and forgotten histories through Indigenous and Black

authors who hold those memories and histories sacred while showing a new way to function in a rapidly changing environment.

In her book, *Choctalking on Other Realities*, LeAnne Howe writes, "what is missing from the story of America is a discussion of reciprocal embodiment between people and land as part of a tribalogy" (Howe 173). Howe's theory is the foundation of this project. I argue that the future of both nonhuman and human culture lies within untold tribalographies. The story of the people is the story of the land. Although this is not a new concept within ecocriticism, as the future of the natural world is highlighted rather than the human culture, I claim that Southern ecocriticism must advance towards the embodiment that Howe mentions: the embodiment of both land and people. The South has been the setting for violence and trauma, and to heal a broken land and preserve these landscapes, stories of tortured land and people from those misused voices need to become prominent figures within Southern studies. It is my belief that my studying these stories, written within the past three decades advances the future of Southern studies and Southern ecocriticism.

To render a more comprehensive reach of history and story buried within American culture, I use several frameworks. A few of the texts naturally lend themselves as Southern gothic literature and because of the ways this project counters the use of landscape and race within the region, I draw from work in literary landscape studies and Southern ecogothic criticism to establish an argument between Southern tropes, a narrated past, and an alternative ethnohistory. I utilize a theoretical framework based on the concepts of the Southern Gothic, which allows me to apply an ecogothic analysis of the low-lying landscapes while building an argument for what scholars call the "New South" in which the stories of the old South mentioned above are replaced with transnational ones. To redefine the storied South, the transnational

effects of the genre are reflected with a reliance on Indigenous study and race theory. Diaspora through removal plays heavily in Native South studies, and rather than focus on identity through location or birthplace, I am arguing along the same lines as Craig Womack when he claims “that tribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the tree, the oldest literatures in the Americas, the most American of American literatures” (Womack 6). Where the story starts is the defining moment and the shaping of a region for the texts within this project. Though land claim, sovereignty, and regional identity are all thriving arguments within the new Southern studies, this project is primarily focused on the tree tribal literatures and Black narratives built within the South, its recognition, and how it changes a region.

By using ecocriticism, race, and Indigenous theories, and positioning my studies in the field of Southern studies, I analyze texts such as LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker* to reveal that a Southern ecological identity will continue to be misinterpreted and will remain incomplete without an ancestral knowledge of ecological practices. Although I draw from several areas of study, the design of my project results in a diversified Southern canon that encompasses the study of the Southern landscape through non-traditional voices. Yet, I question what is traditional. Though it is easy to assume that Southern Renaissance authors are the tradition, I argue that this tradition is challenged and easily altered through the authors in my project. Tradition is not easily broken or amended in a place where it is so staunchly observed. However, as many of my texts challenge the story of the South, it also elbows their way in for new voices to change tradition and change what is normal or expected. To do this, I engage with my primary texts as counter-narratives to texts such as Delia Owen's *Where the Crawdads Sing* that



sometimes oppose but always stretch the narrative and disturb the understanding of the Southern culture and relationship to a natural place.

The results of this disturbance are a growing understanding and deepening of Southern culture and history. In Melanie Benson Taylor's *Reconstructing The Native South: American Indian Literature and the Lost Cause*, she admits that the work within the intersections of Southern studies and a Native South was gaining momentum as "the tyranny of its white elite mythologies had been dissolving rapidly" (Benson Taylor 14). The ecotone created by this dissolution revealed through the texts in this project extends Southern studies by concentrating on the return of the dispossessed through relation and reliance on soil and land that runs deeper than any other human inhabitant of the South. Benson Taylor writes, "the New Southern Studies has hardly begun the thorny work of summoning the South's first inhabitants and most deeply repressed ghosts" (Benson Taylor 22). A step towards this thorny work of summoning the missing is investigating how contemporary Black and Indigenous authors are interacting with ancestral land, the physical earth, that holds memory.

I was unaware, when I began this project, that I would encounter a fair amount of scholarship that has continued to build upon the fantasies and ideas of settler colonialism. Southern studies conferences are full of panels considering William Faulkner with few focused on the Native South. At the 2022 Society for the Study of Southern Literature conference, one panelist presented on the magazine "*Garden and Gun*" while two scholars who attended a presentation of my paper on LeAnne Howe questioned Howe's use of an Indigenous narration without the incorporation of Black narration. Many, both within and without academia, cling to the magnolia memory South ignoring the bloodied ground the magnolia grows from. However, there is change happening, in public-facing ways. For example, at the same conference mentioned

above, LeAnne Howe was awarded the Richard Beale Davis Award for Distinguished Lifetime Services to Southern Letters, a land acknowledgment was given, and Joy Harjo was a featured speaker. So, while the old South still lingers and clings with a tight grasp, it has begun to weaken. Within this project, I hope to help weaken the magnolia memory and take up issue of this memory and performance of a *Garden and Gun* South and analyze the intersections of the complex narratives and histories both Black and Native Southerners weave of their experience in the South surrounded by exceptionalism and white supremacy.

In chapter one, I examine works by Randall Kenan, and extend theorist Anthony Wilson's work on Southern swamps, particularly those of eastern North Carolina, and his ecocritical methods of examining swamps as a form of resistance. My arguments stretch past the nineteenth-century history of the swamp and wetland landscape that is the focus of much swamp study and discuss how this notably undesirable landscape has become a place of reclamation and renewed identity for the communities built from the marooned and becomes an enslaved peoples' haven. This chapter employs works by William Bartram, William Byrd, and Monique Allewaert to illuminate the dominant narrative compared to Randall Kenan's intimate understanding of the swamp and how this space becomes a home and a place of power. This [what?] directly opposes early American scholarship but aligns with Allewaert and Wilson's research in how space is used by the disenfranchised. By interweaving a landscape that is a physical representation of resistance with communities formed through resistance, my work challenges the long-held understanding that this watery setting is a ghost of the gothic past and became a place of life and endurance.

Chapter two turns to examine Linda Hogan's novel *Power*, an Indigenous text that utilizes traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and ecocriticism. Hogan challenges Southern

spaces by incorporating TEK, ceremony, and an imaginative tribal history and story. I use works by Robin Wall Kimmerer, Kyle Whyte, and Logan's works on ecology, environmental justice, and TEK to argue that Hogan is reshaping our understanding of the relationship between human and non-human. Ceremony and storytelling become pathways for sovereignty and reclaiming the future from the colonial trajectory. Hogan uses stories deeply embedded in the fictional tribe that she creates, the Taiga, that link their culture to reshaping how we understand the delicate balance and mutual dependence on the land. Throughout the chapter, there is evidence of the power struggle between the past and the present, the traditional and native vs. the colonizer. Hogan maintains that the natural world is off balance due to the mismanagement of land use and a refusal to hold the land sacred but returning to a belief in traditional practices is the way to restoration.

Chapter three focuses on the Gulf Coast and its bayous that have become centers of Southern ecological writing thanks to Hurricane Katrina. In this chapter I analyze Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* as a post-Katrina narrative. This ecological-based narrative centers on the agency of hurricanes and climate crisis within the South and draws attention to the roles environmental racism plays in creating Southern identity. Ward responds with a crisis narrative that forms a new Southern identity founded on racial ecology, environmental justice, and reconciliation from a violent past. I incorporate works by environmental justice scholars such as Robert Bullard and Rob Nixon, as well as scholarship on Katrina by Dianne Glave, Christopher Lloyd, and Anissa Wardi, to argue that Ward's narrative confronts racial disparities in the South that result in environmental injustice. Criticism from Bullard, Nixon, and Wardi supports my arguments that racialized history has set up specific communities for failure and privileged others. However, I argue that novels such as Ward's work to dismantle colonial restoration after

a disaster and land management and urge a union between race and land. I apply Wardi's work on the African diaspora and its connection to modern environmental concerns to Ward's Southern communities and extend through storytelling. Ward incorporates these voices in her writing to encourage healing and a renowned sense of belonging in how communities may respond and enact change in a South constantly faced with disaster.

Chapter four is a close reading of LeAnne Howe's *Shell Shaker* that invites discussion of ways in which the South suffers because of the removal of Southern tribes and the resulting colonial-centric narrative of land. This text narrates a history of the pre-colonized South and contextualizes how the problematic displacement of Indigenous citizens has implications for the current state of the South, including cultural identity, land rights, and history ignored by colonizers. Howe uses mud and Indigenous mounds as ways of rewriting the relationship between humans and land. Eric Gary Anderson, Matthew Guinn, Kirstin Squint, and Annette Trefzer were essential to the evolution of my argument that Howe confronts Indigenous history, gives space for the buried voices to be heard, and connects those voices with what Southerners perceive to be colonizer practices in human and land relations. Essentially, Howe writes about what should not be, but has been, ignored within the story of the South: its barbarity, the reverberated curse from those acts, and how they affect the modern South. Southern history and story are invalid without the Indigenous story.

To conclude my project, I offer reflections on the ramifications of incorporating overlooked histories and BIPOC ecocritical perspectives on the future of Southern studies. This is a region that is haunted by genocide, slavery, and forced diaspora, but I argue that the South has the potential to become a place known for its varied ways it relates to the land, rebalancing the relationship between land and human. It would be irresponsible for me not to bring up what

continues to stand in the way of that healing, namely a continued rejection, and misunderstanding, of critical race theory and stories that tell of past cruelties as these texts do. While writing this project, many state, county, and city government systems have flocked to ban any study of what these stories demand we pay attention to. The conclusion will work to unpack the repercussions of continuing in the reorientating of land, race, and narrative, and what that means for a growing community of scholars and authors that are doing their best to heal the South.

What follows is a history of the South. What follows are stories. What follows is truth.

## Chapter One

### Things He Knows: Randall Kenan's Reckoning with the South

*"The Garden of Eden, some say, lay within a swamp." -Anthony Wilson Swamp: Nature and Culture 27*

In Taylor Swift's "Carolina," the theme song to the film *Where the Crawdads Sing*, she croons there are "things that only Carolina will ever know." This is in reference to the corpse of a murdered lover hidden in marsh mud concealing the identity of the murderer. However, the line is easily applicable to all manner of hidden sins, dangers, and stories throughout eastern North Carolina, home to this chapter. The eastern part of the state is home to thousands of acres of swamp: squelching and saturated land that teems with secrets buried in the mud in the hopes they'd be forgotten; things that only the briny Carolina soil might know. Like much of the country, this landscape is saturated with more than swamp water and mud, but the false stories of long-gone tribes creep silently around the cypress knobs. Clues to the communities that were comprised of escaped enslaved folk who found freedom under the thick canopy of Spanish moss are sucked into the mud. Some of these stories have been found and told, some are being discovered and brought to the light, and some will remain buried, never to be told.

Randall Kenan is an author who works to recover the stories of the African American community in eastern North Carolina and offers the South the story of a queer Black man growing up in a conservative, religious community. Hailing from tiny unincorporated Chinquapin, North Carolina, in Duplin County, Kenan infuses much of his own experiences growing up Black and queer with his writing: writing that is folklore, porch talks, fantasy, and history, all inspired by the voices of a community that have been overlooked and ignored. He begins by creating a parallel town to Chinquapin called Tims Creek, in which prominent families of the real Duplin County area are easily identified, thus crafting a reality in the fiction. Randall

Kenan's writing works to unbury narratives that reencode how the South understands its relationship to history, land, and ways of being in the world, rejecting white supremacy and complicating the lineages of the Southern gothic tradition. He does all of this by drawing our attention to the Southern swamp landscape as a site of necessary reckoning and rewriting its Southern gothic and historical legacy.

Within this first chapter, I use a theoretical framework based on the concepts of the Southern Gothic, which allows me to apply an ecogothic analysis of the low-lying landscapes that are utilized within Kenan's writing. This framework also provides a way to privilege the Black uncanny by upsetting previous existing ideas of the uncanny within the Southern Gothic, namely as used by William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. Kenan's work gives the Southern Gothic, as well as Southern literature, an unabashed examination of the South's violent and explicit racialized histories, in a traditionally feared landscape that well remembers the hopeful beginnings of freedom from enslavement. The colonizer mentality of swamps has enforced the belief that swamps are dangerous and dangerously wild, yet Kenan addresses these tensions between land, belief, and genre in confronting what these spaces have meant to the enslaved community and in the violence over their freedom. He is reorientating our understanding of place by turning the swamp into a life-giving site. Kenan uses motifs and tropes that readers who are familiar with the Southern Gothic will recognize, such as the uncanny, ecogothic, the macabre, and ghosts; however, Kenan uses ghosts, victims of violent death, and zombies to signify hope, rebirth, and power when the genre of the Southern Gothic has used these identifiers to mourn the romantic past, to mourn a white past. Kenan writes for a Black South that can celebrate in ghostly apparitions, swampy homescapes, and a remembering of deeds from the past the colonizer society would rather forget.

Kenan's writing easily falls into the Southern gothic genre, a genre that first appeared in a 1935 review article by Ellen Glasgow "who used the term 'Southern Gothic' negatively to refer to the writings of Erskine Caldwell and William Faulkner, which she believed were filled with aimless violence and fantastic nightmares" (Marshall 3).<sup>4</sup> Now, the term, as described by David Punter and Glennis Byron, suggests an investigation into "madness, decay, and despair, and the continuing pressures of the past upon the present, particularly with respect to the lost ideals of a dispossessed Southern aristocracy and to the continuance of racial hostilities" (116-17). Bridget Marshall writes in *Defining Southern Gothic* that the "Southern Gothic also evinces a particular focus on the South's history of slavery, a fixation with the grotesque, and a tension between realistic and supernatural elements," where the plantation replaces the European castle and the aristocratic villain to 'master' (3). These are the foundations of the Southern Gothic, but as Kenan exploits the tension between the realistic and supernatural, the enslaved life and zombies, or ghosts and racism, he offers a replacement for plantation and master. His work reveals a way to circulate narratives of escaped slaves, and queer, Southern, Black men that help in the evolution of the genre from the investigation of the past on the present in dominant society to the unshrouded past on the present Black community.

The swampy landscape used in his work, which has been overwhelmingly portrayed as grotesque in early colonizer writings, enables Kenan to reject white supremacy and challenge the tradition of the Southern Gothic. Swamps also further align Kenan's work with the ecogothic, which is a subgenre of the gothic. In their work *Ecogothic*, Andrew Smith and William Hughes define ecogothic as "how the body as a site of Gothic fear—sexual, injured, dismembered and celebrated—can be seen and positively re-membered in a literary landscape" (8). The swamps of

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<sup>4</sup> See Louis Palmer's "Bourgeois Blues for more on Glasgow's article.



eastern North Carolina enable Kenan to spin his tales while dwelling within the Southern and ecogothic genres, rewriting this landscape.

Along with genre alignment, Kenan also employs two other Southern gothic genre particulars called “the uncanny” and “porch talks.” The uncanny originates from a 1919 article written by Sigmund Freud called “The Uncanny” and is concerned with “returns, disturbances, and phenomena that unsettle whatever constitutes reality for a subject” (Walsh 231). The uncanny can be anything that was meant to be hidden or kept secret that comes into the open, fear of the double, or some kind of haunting that is subtle, unsettling, and distinctly psychological (Walsh 232). Well-known examples of the uncanny are doppelgängers (seeing double), dolls, or zombies; even the wallpaper in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* is considered uncanny.

The porch is an iconic symbol of the South and within Southern literature, and signifies community and culture, a place that offers both shade and history. The porch is the space between outdoors and indoors, a liminal space between private and public, and on Kenan’s porches this space is reserved for the retelling of Tims Creek’s history and stories. While the porch is idealized in Southern culture mostly due to the sweeping porches of antebellum homes and Hollywood reproductions of the South, Kenan’s porches offer a way through the nostalgia of the South to a connection between community and storytelling.

I will use his short story collection *Let the Dead Bury the Dead* (1992) and *If I Had Two Wings: Stories* (2020), and his collections of selected writings *Black Folk Could Fly* (2022), which was published posthumously, throughout this chapter. His novel and short story collections are all connected through Tims Creek, and like many small towns in eastern North Carolina, Tims Creek is the result of a community formed by escaped enslaved folk who forged

a life of freedom in the desolation of the swamps. Stories of survival create the culture of both the existing area and the towns of Kenan's creation, and it is within these stories of survival that Kenan builds the layers of a South unknown to many and unburies the secrets hidden to establish a dominant albeit false narrative.

The swamps of Kenan's formative years offer ample space for the imagination with their plethora of ancient reptilian inhabitants and their ability to hold secrets deep in the forest of cypress knobs and mud. This landscape is hardly new to Southern literature. Swamps have become a trope within the Southern gothic genre representing rejection and elements of the grotesque. More recently, authors such as Anne Rice use the swamps as a backdrop to the mystery dealings and dwellings of vampires and other creatures of horror stories. Indeed, swamp lore becomes legend, and they "are rife with images of the underworld, of ghosts and specters, of death and undeath" (Wilson 2018, 24). The field of swamp studies has been on the rise within literary criticism and cultural analysis for nearly two decades. Anthony Wilson pioneered the beginnings of swamp studies, building his claims on early explorers William Byrd II and American botanist William Bartram and following the evolution of a racialized landscape succeeding the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Many of the ideas of swamps and swamps' function within Southern culture stem from the writings of these early explorers and writings from the Reconstruction Era. Bartram described the swamps as "unnavigable terrains and inextricable" (Allewaert 33). Bartram accurately describes the terrain in the colonizer's attitude, attributing what is "unruly" to be synonymous with unnavigable. There is no doubt that navigating a swamp is no easy business, but Bartram's commentary and description sum up the ideas long held by white colonizers who are faced with a terrain that does not match their idea of favorable and useful.

Because Bartram was unversed in how to navigate a swamp or to see the beauty in the unkept, the swamp was deemed what the Southern Gothic would call “grotesque.” This belief is carried forward two centuries after Bartram, when “members of William Byrd’s surveying team imagined Virginia’s Dismal Swamp as an alluring ‘terra incognita,’” but this fantasy disappeared once they entered the swamp and found themselves lost, sunk, and sick (Allewaert 33). The great “adventurers” of colonial America are unable to surmount the challenges the swamp proffers. Both the surveyors and William Bartram exemplify the underpinnings that would go on to define swamps and swamp culture. The terra incognita was muck and mire and nothing more for the early explorers and the dominant voice that defined a landscape.

Kenan is able to challenge this voice and attitude. While not denying the abundance of mud, he creates community and home in these low-lying areas where landscape knowledge offers abundance and freedom. He has created a place where the inhabitants do not get lost, sunk, or sick. Rather than sink, escaped enslaved folks are able to thrive. They are given freedom, means for providing for themselves, and safety and because of ideas curated by early colonizers like Bartram and Byrd, the escaped enslaved folks are able to live in relative peace from white society that.

Kenan’s narration from the swamp differs, not only as it showcases a way to live in the “unlivable” but also from slave narratives written by escaped enslaved people who trudged through the swamps in their pursuit of freedom. In Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she writes of her difficult passage through the Great Dismal Swamp, or Snakey Swamp as she calls it:

We were covered with hundreds of mosquitos. In an hour’s time they had so poisoned my flesh that I was a pitiful sight to behold... I saw snake after snake crawling round us. I

had been accustomed to the sight of snakes all my life, but these were larger than any I had ever seen... I passed a wretched night; for the heat of the swamp, the mosquitos, and the constant terror of snakes... But even those large, venomous snakes were less dreadful to my imagination than the white men in that community called civilized. (Jacobs 96-97)

Jacobs' narration does little to convince her readers that a swamp is a place anyone would want to set up residency. Her writing aligns with the colonizer's details of passing through the swamp, save one significant difference. She would still have preferred those snakes in the swamp over the white enslavers.

The above segment from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is what you would expect from a swamp description, yet Kenan reverses the meaning of the swamp from what Jacobs experienced. The swamp is a dangerous site that Jacobs must pass through on her journey to safety. It offers very little respite or sense of safety apart from the absence of white men. What's more, while much of the research into swamps, both archeologically and literary, is confined to well-known swamps, such as the Great Dismal Swamp, Kenan's stories take place south of the Great Dismal in no-name swamps. Many of these unnamed swampy areas dominate the landscape of eastern North Carolina and are unremarkable in size and storied history, at least, white storied history. In Kenan's hands, the swamp becomes a site of safety.

**Under the Mud: expand this title to give a sense of your arg.**

When early colonizers began venturing into the swamps, these spaces were quickly deemed uncivilized. This belief did not change in the antebellum era when the swamps of the South were the antithesis of the plantation South, a South crafted to exude gentility, Southern manners, and magnolia memories. This culture proved to be a myth, as festering behind the gentility of

Southerners was a system of racism that empowered the structure and implementation of slavery and the denial of human rights to Black people. The swamps were a representation of that reality. Anthony Wilson argues, “the swamp and the myth of the plantation South have always been at odds. For the Cavalier-era Southern mind, the ideas of control, purity, and dominion over nature (both within and without) were essential; in both literature and in the real world, the swamp always defied those ideas” (*Swamp and Shelter* 3). While the colonizers believed they were the epitome of civilization, it was the swamp that through defying those ideas, was more civilized.

Because swamps did not adhere to human law, as shown through the writings of Bartram and Byrd, and instead followed nature’s law, swamps themselves became spaces that threatened Southern whites. Scholar Lauren Lafauci claims that swamps, because they were ‘lawless,’ were seen as “the breakdown of the social hierarchies that privileged white supremacy” (Lafauci 191). The very nature of swamps “reified the unraveling portended by the American ethnologists in multiple ways: as a material manifestation of resistance to agricultural order; as an environmental example of unstable, watery land; and, importantly, as a site of black fugitivity and resistance” (Lafauci 193). This watery space of known and unknown terrors was now a site of resistance beyond an agricultural and economical order. The swamps’ control over those who entered was threatening in a way white society was unfamiliar with. This threat “where the desire for control, as well as the fear of losing the same or becoming slave to some more powerful controlling influence, plays out in swamps” (Ingaro 34). White society saw a space of fear, threats, and a reversal of roles where the swamp was now the overseer and white society, bowing to fear, was enslaved to a place it could not control.

The swamps within Kenan’s writings were not controlled by the enslaved people who sought refuge there. But this was also not the goal of these freedom seekers. Instead of trying to

master the swamp, they learned to live within the dense vegetation and mud, finding places the swamp offered as sites of life and safety. While narrating Tims Creek's history to his nephew in the short story "Let the Dead Bury the Dead," Ezekiel Cross says, "See, this here place started as what they call a runaway, or a maroon society. Heard of them, have you? Slaves, run off from their masters, built up little towns and villages in the swamps so as the white folks couldn't find them. Live as free men" (*Let the Dead Bury the Dead* 283). Dr. Dan Sayers, an archeologist from American University has been excavating the Great Dismal Swamp. In Sayers's archaeological excavations, he determined that "higher, drier ground located within the refuge and these topographic anomalies are prime loci of human settlement. In fact, every such hill, hummock, and island that [they] visited was deterred to be an archaeological site" (Sayers 22). This is evidence that the maroon residents of the swamp were able to recognize the swamp as a place of sanctuary and home. They made the swamp's advantageous spots work for them. So, this swampy space, once seen as a place that held such potential for only death, is also a place of life.

**Mami Wata: provide a conceptual framing here that corresponds to your arg.**

This junction of life and death and the space that holds both equally is where Kenan sets his short story, a founding Tims Creek story, "Mamiwata."<sup>5</sup> Mami Wata is a figure from African Atlantic mythology, a water spirit that is celebrated throughout much of Africa. Her name means Mother Water, and she is often depicted as a mermaid or snake charmer and honors the sacred nature of the water element. Mami Wata and the beliefs and practices surrounding her were brought over to America by enslaved Africans.<sup>6</sup> In Tims Creek, Mamiwata presents herself as a man standing

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<sup>5</sup> Kenan has spelled Mamiwata as one word, though traditionally Mami Wata is two words.

<sup>6</sup> The Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, where this information was compiled from, displays Mami Wata as a prominent figure in their "Currents: Water in African Art" exhibit which has been an ongoing exhibit since 2016.

in the middle of a small creek. Mandy, a citizen of the newly formed Tims Creek, or Tearshirt as it was initially called, sees a strange man in the creek who is “not exactly singing, more like humming but in tune and to a rhythm foreign to her ears, yet familiar” (“Mamiwata” 101). The Mami Wata figure is associated with the African diaspora, and here, Kenan is connecting Mandy’s ancestry with her present situation. Even if she does not recognize Mami Wata or even know who she is, she recognizes part of what she is. The waters Mandy knows now—the marsh and swamp, slow-moving rivers and creeks—are wholly different from the waters of her ancestral home, yet Mami Wata calls to her and reaches out to Mandy through the water, claiming that body of water home and a site of safety.

Mandy is still cautious, regardless of the man’s familiarity. She answers all his questions with questions, guarded. However, Mandy recognizes that a Black man still isn’t safe anywhere after dark though within the boundaries of the maroon society is safer. She tells the man it isn’t safe and he says, “You think you’re safe where you are?” (“Mamiwata” 102). Mandy is afraid of the alligators and water moccasins that hunt in the slow-moving waters, and she is unsuccessful in convincing the stranger to get out of the water. But back in the maroon community, her thoughts drift to the plantation she escaped from: “Mandy did not like to think too much about the plantation. She reckoned she liked it better here. No. She did not reckon. She knew” (“Mamiwata” 104). Later, she visits the river and the man again who gives her a catfish, and when Pharaoh, the community’s founder, asks about the man and the catfish he says, “Looks like we got a friend...Down by the creek. I prayed to her, and she sent a friend” (Mamiwata” 107-108). Pharaoh, who came from Africa, still practices, and believes in the folklore of his home. Mami Wata has provided his community with protection and food. In invoking African mythology and folklore, Kenan is revealing a layer of African culture that was essential in

developing the early Black community before those beliefs were forcibly erased by enforced Christianity or forgotten over time.

Belief in figures like the water spirit, Mami Wata, is a part of enslaved culture and narrative and is representative of how Kenan is mobilizing a forgotten South. By recirculating what was a public narrative for the enslaved community, Kenan recodes a space of fear into a space of home (mother), and a storied culture. Mami Wata is an example of an oral and literary tradition that enslaved folk were forced to leave behind and replace with the Christian god of their enslavers. But in recirculating the story, Kenan rewrites the swamp as a place of Black culture, memory, and storytelling, and in this recirculation, Kenan challenges the historical record of the swamp as Mami Wata helps to rewrite and reorientate its life-giving properties.

The swamp is a powerful place for a reactivation of the belief in someone like Mami Wata. Scholar Taylor Hagood, one of the editors of *Swamp Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature*, writes that this seemingly impenetrable landscape “stands nameless, ambiguous, and powerfully active” (129). As stated before, the swamp represented a rebellion against civilization, and the control white supremacist society wished to have over the space. Now full of people who have openly rebelled against society and its twisted idea of civility, the swamp becomes charged with the power of rebellion; add the return of African lore and spirits, and the swamp is a place of incredible power to the disenfranchised and oppressed. This power is shown in the last scene of “Mamiwata” as Mandy is talking with the man in the river and “by and by, she heard, in the distance, the baying of the dogs...Pharaoh always said they were bound to be found out, to always be ready to pick up and run deeper into the swamp” (“Mamiwata” 109). But Mami Wata is there to save Mandy. He pleads for her to jump in; he will protect her, so she goes to him. The water in the river “was not cool. Not cool at all. Warm like rabbit fur.



Warm like a belly full of hot chicken... Warm like a ripe tomato. Warm like Aunt Inez's hands" ("Mamiwata" 109). In the warm water, Mandy is saved and with her the possibility of believing in something that is more like home than anything outside the swamp. With Mandy's rescue and by invoking Mamiwata, Kenan rewrites the swamp as a space of Black culture, and history, and recodes it as a site of growth and flourish.

### **Let The Dead Bury the Dead**

In *Let the Dead Bury the Dead*, Kenan does a further rewrite correcting the historical record of North Carolina by telling the history of the white Kenan family, but he does so in a way that not only challenges the Kenan legacy, but also creates a public narrative around a family that is historied and engrained in the culture of North Carolina. Like his Southern gothic predecessor, Flannery O'Connor, Kenan uses thinly veiled attempts to represent actual members of the community within his works of fiction, and in *Let the Dead Bury the Dead* the Cross family of Tims Creek becomes the Kenan family of Kenansville. One of the most influential families in North Carolina, the Kenan family and their legacy are usually remembered for their large land holdings and generous donations to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), but Randall Kenan is determined to reveal the other side of their legacy. the family that once enslaved Randall Kenan's ancestors and whose name they took after emancipation.

Taking on the Kenan family legacy is no easy feat. The Kenan name is dotted throughout North Carolina. James Kenan High School in Warsaw, NC is a mere twenty minutes from Randall Kenan's hometown. The Kenan family plantation, Liberty Hall is in Kenansville, a small town less than twenty minutes north of where Randall Kenan grew up. In his creation of Tims Creek and the Cross family, Kenan is not so subtly exposing the truth of the past of his home and giving space for his community's origin and narrative, reckoning with the narrative of James

Kenan, namesake of Kenansville, who was a Revolutionary War veteran and politician. His descendant Owen Kenan was a state senator, Confederate congressman, planter, and, like his fathers before him, an enslaver. The family plantation, Liberty Hall, is now a museum open for tours and weddings. Owen Cross from “Let the Dead Bury the Dead” is a not-so-subtle fictionalized version of Owen Kenan.

The lines between fiction and reality are blurred in the final story, the collection’s namesake, “Let the Dead Bury the Dead” when Reverend James Malachi Greene, Tims Creek’s self-appointed historian who “quietly chronicled the Tims Creek of past and present, of public and private, of mythic and real, of virtue and vice” interviews Tims Creek residents and his uncle and aunt, Ezekiel and his wife Ruth, in what develops into a porch talk (*Bury* 277). Ezekiel says “You know all about the Crosses now, I know. They was *the* family in North Carolina in them days. Come here when it was just Carolina, see, no North nor no South to it. Said the Duke of something or other give them damn near all the Southeast” (*Bury* 297-298). A footnote related to this passage, though concerning the fictional Cross family, accurately describes the reality of how the Kenan family, along with many other white slave-owning families in eastern North Carolina, obtained their land. It was given to families who had not yet stepped foot in the colonies by English nobility who never would.

To rewrite the historical record, Kenan starts in eastern North Carolina, but the Kenan name follows him to university at UNC where he later takes them on again. Though the Kenans were from eastern North Carolina, it is at UNC where their name is found in even more abundance. Kenan Hall, Kenan Center, Kenan Institute for the Study of Private Enterprise, Kenan Labs, Kenan Music Building, Kenan Professorships, UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School, and the Kenan Memorial Football Stadium are all named as such due to land or money

donations by the Kenan family through the centuries. William Kenan Jr. left his mark on the campus with the founding of the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust which currently awards grants in the areas of K-12 education, arts and culture, health, and human services.<sup>7</sup> Information about his generosity, chemist work, and philanthropy are easily found on websites concerning UNC and North Carolina history. Randall Kenan, however, would have known the underlying story of the Kenans and the source of their wealth. Those were stories he lived with and carried with him throughout his life, the evidence in his surname.

Further evidence of the reality of the Kenan family is William Rand Kenan Sr.'s involvement in the 1898 coup d'état in Wilmington, North Carolina's largest city at the time. The city was heavily influenced by its Black citizens in the press and politics. There are differing rumors as to what started the riot, but by the end of the day, a mob had formed, mainly from the Wilmington light infantry, who armed themselves with a machine gun, took control of city hall, and forced the mayor and chief of police to resign. The mob grew to nearly 2000 men, some who patrolled the streets with the machine gun mounted on a horse-drawn wagon that led to shoot outs with citizens. In the end somewhere between fourteen and sixty Black citizens were dead. The man at the helm of the machine gun? William Rand Kenan Sr (Umfleet).<sup>8</sup>

William Kenan's involvement in the coup d'état is not the only evidence of the family's white supremacist background as shown by the UNC special collections. This collection holds the Kenan Family Papers, a varied plethora of deeds, last will and testaments, and other legal

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<sup>7</sup> Information about the Kenans can be found on [ncpedia.org](http://ncpedia.org), the Kenan Charitable Trust site, and UNC's virtual museum.

<sup>8</sup> The race riot of Wilmington remained a story of only local knowledge for nearly 100 years. Since then, the NC General Assembly established the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot Commission to develop historic record and assess the economic impact. Books written about the event include Philip Gerard's *Cape Fear Rising* and Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*. The documentary, "Wilmington on Fire" was released on Netflix in 2020. Many North Carolinians have still never heard of the event as it is not taught in schools or in the North Carolina history curriculum. However, recent historical events such as the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection have caused the Wilmington race riot to resurface once again.

documents that give evidence to the stories that Randall Kenan knew. Evidence of horror inflicted by the family, the reliance on forced labor, and dependence and participation in the systemic racism that enabled slavery appear throughout the papers. In his last will and testament, James Kenan bequeathed to his daughter Sarah his “wench Thull and all her children to her and her heirs forever” (Kenan Family Papers). James goes on to bequeath certain enslaved humans of his house to each member of the family, always adding “and [their] heirs forever.” His wife Sarah executes the same orders in her will and testament as do James’ ancestors.

Though the Wilmington race riot and the contents of the Kenan’s wills stayed out of the dominant narrative for several decades, they did not stray far from the eastern Black North Carolinian mind. Those in power had taken life and freedom by force and at the expense of the Black community. Randall Kenan walked the UNC campus surrounded by buildings bearing the name of a family that had once enslaved his ancestors. He also had to walk by a Confederate monument called Silent Sam. This monument was donated by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1913 in memory of the UNC students who died in the Civil War. It was named Silent Sam as his gun would be forever silent.<sup>9</sup> Silent Sam was toppled by UNC students in 2018, but his presence was hardly silent while he remained on campus. In his collection of selected writings *Black Folk Could Fly*, Kenan writes: “I was an undergraduate here at UNC in the 1980’s and walked past Silent Sam every day. It is not that I didn’t see it or know its history—on the day of its dedication, a local millionaire, Julian Carr, who paid for it, bragged about whipping a Black ‘wench’ until he shredded her clothes. Every Black student I knew knew that story and it cut us to our core” (“Letter from North Carolina” 241). Silent Sam and the

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<sup>9</sup> See Kenan’s essay “Letter From North Carolina: Learning from Ghosts of the Civil War” in which Kenan contemplates the existence the remaining Confederate monuments.

Kenan's presence on campus were a powerful reminder of the past and the present as Silent Sam's gaze remained on campus.

Yet, Kenan refused to let a white family with money from the low country of North Carolina remain the only narrative as he upended official North Carolina history in his creation of the Cross family within Tims Creek. Susan Thananopavarn argues that when stories such as "Let the Dead Bury the Dead" are "read against dominant (white) Southern history, [its] corrects the written record...[it] may best be understood as a swamp story in which the landscape of the Southern swamp haunts the names, places, and documents of the present" (119-120). In reading Kenan's works, readers, especially devotees of the Southern gothic, cannot help but call into "question the very ways in which we understand the past" (Thananopavarn 120). The truth haunts the dominant Southern history. William Rand was able to create an image of himself as a generous benefactor who was invested in the advancements of art and medicine and rubbed shoulders with Rockefellers, maintaining he was only a child when the race riot occurred, even though he was twenty-six. But just as Silent Sam was never truly silent, William Rand and the Kenan family cannot be separated by the swamps of their ancestral home that haunt and remain a reminder of the horrors committed there. The swamp haunts eastern North Carolina as it haunts all Southern history.

The hauntings of eastern North Carolina, in particular Tims Creek, are used to continue Kenan's rewrite of the historical record. Returning to the interview between Ezekiel and his nephew Reverend James which comprises the short story "Let the Dead Bury the Dead" in its entirety, Kenan continues to challenge the prominent narrative. Reminiscent of Zora Neale Hurston, Kenan's story presents itself as folkloric and archival. The fictional Reverend Greene interviews his family though it reads like a story lacking the formality of an interview. Greene

heavily utilizes lengthy footnotes throughout the story. Some of the facts and sources quoted in the footnotes are real scholars, such as Herbert Aptheker and his research on slave revolts, while others are fictionalized, such as Terrance Brayboy and M.F.K. Hall. The result of combining writing that seems overwhelmingly academic but reads like a porch talk is a break from the expected.

Ezekiel's tale and Kenan's way of interfusing an archival, academic writing mode and the Southern vernacular are examples of how Kenan is circulating Southern stories. Though porch talks may seem commonplace, especially in rural America, the mixture of writing styles helps to circulate these untold stories of the South in turn reject white supremacy writing. Kenan weaves the story of an enslaved man named Pharaoh through the voice of Ezekiel who spins the tale of Pharaoh's capture from Africa and his journey through the Southern states as an enslaved man. Ruth constantly interrupts him when a part of the story sounds too outlandish and says things like, "now you know he's lyin', boy," to which Ezekiel says, "hush now, woman" (*Bury* 293). Once in North Carolina, Pharaoh is enslaved by the illustrious Cross family, and slowly over time, Pharaoh gains the trust of his enslaver, Senator Owen Cross. While Pharaoh "play[s] that game for years, keeping that juju on Owen Cross...plotting and plotting behind his back" (*Bury* 300). His plotting consisted of figuring out whom he could trust and who among him was weak and likely to betray or who was strong and might help him and stockpiling enough ammunition and supplies to last years. On the same night of a terrible storm, Pharaoh, using the storm to his advantage, took the chance to escape. With those he had chosen, "they took and kilt as many overseers as they could get they hands on and old man Cross's oldest son Owen, junior, and set fire to that house and up and went. Gone like that storm, leaving death and destruction behind" (*Bury* 301). Here Kenan includes a footnote claiming that on March 12, 1856, a fire devastated

parts of the plantation, and eighteen slaves, Owen Alexander Jr., and five overseers were killed. In blending both storytelling and “factual” research, Kenan is creating a community that belongs in the world of fiction but also in reality, unabashedly playing with the rules of the Southern gothic and offering alternative narratives to the ones he and other Black students remembered as they walked past Silent Sam.

This community was built on death and destruction and exists within the confines of the realities of how the South was built, now told from make-believe yet familiar porches. The current South was also built on death, destruction, and violence, and Kenan’s story of the Tims Creek community continues the challenge of the Southern Gothic’s idea of the macabre world the genre usually takes up residence within. While the white macabre stemmed from the loss of the war and the decline of the economy, the Black macabre results from slavery and the repercussions of its system. Framing this challenge to the genre on the porch, Kenan offers a familiar place that aids in his parallel Southern Gothic tale. Brian Norman aptly argues, “far from a relic, the porches of Tims Creek are rich, interesting, and perhaps even sophisticated perches from which to view the modern world. Kenan playfully blends history and mythology to create a community that feels simultaneously past and present, urgent and removed” (Norman 122). Though it is not a relic, passing time on the porch evokes a time of the past, but in Kenan’s writing he is not changing the way the stories are circulated. In keeping the porch a central location, Kenan is keeping his readers in a familiar and safe place to draw tensions between the genre we know and how Kenan reckons with its tradition.

The story of Pharaoh after the revolt continues to reckon with both tradition and the swamp landscape. After the uprising, Pharaoh wanted to build an army, maybe even take over the state, and the place to build this home and prepare was in the swamps.

He figured in Tims Creek, to be the last place they'd find em. Pretty near jungle then, thick, snakey, water high, land mostly flooded, you know. Won't no white man coming out here. Even the Indians had let it be. Pharaoh's people hunted and fished to live, couldn't clear no land nor drain none; had to be careful with fire. But they survived out in them swamps somehow or nother. Multiplied. Had youngens. Raided plantations. Slaves disappeared. Dry goods disappeared. Livestock disappeared. And they thrived out there in them swamps. Growing, just a-growing strong. (*Bury* 304)

Tims Creek and the homes of other maroon societies are tangible spaces, moved beyond Daniel Sayers's excavation into a reality that we can see and imagine as known history. Ezekiel's story "is more about the viability of community in Tims Creek than proffering a feel good story" (Norman 122). This porch talk isn't just a story of survival but also a way for Kenan to shake up these swampy lands that have offered a quiet living and reveal the chaos below. The romantic version of the South that is offered on horse-drawn carriage rides in Charleston, South Carolina is challenged. Behind the antebellum memory with lingering scents of magnolia and jasmine are also the enrapturing venus fly traps and dainty trout lilies of the swamp, and among this flora are the people who killed and tore their way towards life. Tims Creek is a story that doesn't sell like the white story of the plantation, but it is a truer story of the South than what is sold on the plantation tours.

Through Randall Kenan, the unruly landscape of eastern North Carolina has become home when it didn't seem possible and African spirits dwell in the muddy waters, protecting the people of the enforced diaspora and claiming a home. Kenan "rewrites the history of eastern North Carolina to include suppressed narratives of resistance in the swamps. Kenan upends the 'official' history of North Carolina" (Thananopavarn 119). However, the swamp is far from



perfectly safe. As seen in “Mamiwata,” forces from within and outside the swamp constantly threaten the maroon communities. In these stories of early Tims Creek, Kenan does not want to portray the swamp is not always a haven free from danger. He remains true to the Southern gothic tradition in using the swampy landscape as home to haunts, ghosts, and the undead resulting in a continuation of Kenan’s challenge on the tradition of Southern Gothic.

The end of Pharaoh’s tale and the creation of Tims Creek is when Kenan introduces the uncanny in the form of the undead. Years after Pharaoh’s death, a preacher moves into the community, and once he hears the story of Tims Creek’s founder, Pharaoh, he proclaims that “Pharaoh wont nothing but a charlatan, a thief, a heathen, a ole faker. Said he was evil,” (*Bury* 319). Even through these proclamations, the preacher believed that Pharaoh had been buried with a great treasure, as though he was an Egyptian pharaoh in a tomb. He commanded his congregation to dig up Pharaoh and find the treasure. Ezekiel says, “that’s when the Horror was let loose,” to which Ruth replies, “Horror my left tit—” (*Bury* 319).

The horror Ezekiel refers to is the undead the community awakens when they try to dig up Pharaoh. Leaning into the trope of the undead in swamp writing, Kenan changes the entire tone of Ezekiel’s story. Tims Creek becomes the setting of a violent zombie uprising. The once brave citizens who risked their lives to escape slavery and build a home in the inhospitable become the undead. Ezekiel describes the horror by saying:

They all got up. Every last one of them what died and been buried in Tearshirt or Snatchit going back to the first who died when Pharaoh first brung em out of bondage. Clawing out of they graves...Some wanted to eat their favorite eats...Some killed hogs and smeared blood on the doorposts of their loved ones’ homes and whispered through the windows: Beware, the Evil Ones approach. These was the good ones, and they walked

out into the creek and was never to be seen again. But the wicked they stayed, and well, how do you stop a dead man? They ran into the houses of people they hated most and beat the shit out of them...Some raped. Others just tore up houses. Set fires. Killed livestock. People running and screaming. (*Bury* 327-328)

In the chaos and violence, Pharaoh rises from the dead, mounts a massive black bull, rides into town and says, “What began as good has ended in evil. We are not ready” (*Bury* 332). In true biblical vengeance, fire rains down on the land, leaving behind a mysterious mound on which nothing will grow. The only two people left start over and found what is now Tims Creek.

Zombies have been powerful tools used in exacting revenge within Black stories for hundreds of years. They are depicted quite differently than their modern counterparts who feast on the living in *The Walking Dead*. Zombies can trace their roots to Haiti and Haitian Creole in certain African, traditional, and religious customs. Zombies “tell the story of colonization,” says Joan Dayan, author of *Haiti, History, and The Gods* (41). These were beings without souls who appeared dead and then once removed from the grave, were sold into servitude (41). To be a zombie was to be a husk, a shell of a human, and a body with no conscious thought. You are no longer in control of your own destiny and are deprived of freedom. As a zombie, you may be manipulated by anyone, and it is the “ultimate sign of loss and dispossession” (Dayan 41). The Haitian slave revolts allowed Vodou tradition to use these symbols as vehicles for revenge. Infamous rebel, Jean Zombi was said to have a zombie attached as he brutally murdered white people in the 1804 Haitian rebellion.

However, Kenan does not write his zombie horde with these qualities: not all of them at least. As Ezekiel describes, some of the zombies, once they are resurrected, just want to be with their families, eat their favorite foods, and warn them of the danger to come. The rest of the

zombies encapsulate the brutality of Jean Zombi, killing and raping their way through the town. It is possible that the preacher or Pharaoh had control over these and had them carry out their bidding, but it is also likely that since for a time in their life, the undead were zombies in servitude, and were able to have control over their behavior once reanimated. They had suffered in life, and now, as the undead, they are given the choice of how to use their time as an undead. While it appears they had a choice in how they would respond to their undead status, the question remains why did Kenan evoke a violent Haitian Creole tradition to destroy a community that represented safety and life?

The zombies' presence and actions are elements of the uncanny. Zombies and monsters signify an uncanny instability in "Let the Dead Bury the Dead" because, in prior stories, it is obvious Tims Creek has a strong storied past that works to recover safety and independence to enslaved people. But as Wade Newhouse writes, these appearances of ghosts and zombies, "indicat[e] Kenan's recognition that narrating the contemporary Southern black experience is not one of simply testifying and signifying on tradition but of recording and managing ontological chaos" (238). Zombies are a way that Kenan rewrites the way we understand the way of being in the world, a Southern world. In his story, they create chaos but also represent chaos, the chaos of a community that began violently and now works to survive in a racially heterogeneous world. The zombies are Kenan's way of saying that happy endings do not always happen, and the "dead rising from their graves to kill off the town's residents...testify to the uncanny nature of the entire enterprise" (Newhouse 245). The way of existing in a chaotic world with violent beginnings is recorded by Kenan and his undead.

Violent memories are used to signify the uncanny in "Tell Me, Tell Me," another short story from *Let the Dead Bury the Dead*. In this story, Ida, a white woman, keeps seeing a Black

boy in her bedroom, in the middle of the road, at the entrance of the beauty parlor, the mall, and so many other places she begins to think she is being followed. She tells her housemaid, Bela “Oh God, Bela. He’s back. He’s *back*. He’s here. He’s in my bedroom!” (*Bury* 236). Set in the 1970’s Ida is an affluent, wealthy white woman whose husband, Butch, was a judge before he passed away. Ida begins to see this Black boy everywhere, but no one else can see him. Bela, Ida’s friends, and Ida’s son all believe she may be losing it in her old age. Her paranoia is evident when she believes she sees him in the road and swerves to miss him causing her to wreck her Buick. She thought she had hit and killed him, but the rescue squad never find any evidence of a boy.

It is after the car wreck that readers begin to understand there is something more sinister about Ida. While out to lunch, years prior to the accident, Ida is revealing in the Old Plantation Inn restaurant: “Ida remembered feeling so at peace in that setting: the warm, light conversation of the ladies in their soft Southern cadences: the civilized tinkle of ice cubes in crystal...the smart dresses and discreet glints here and there of pearl and gold and an occasional diamond” (*Bury* 246). But as she’s sinking into the comfort of being white and wealthy, she “felt something like a prick...a bad feeling, a moment of disquiet in her hard-won quietude. She could feel eyes” and there through the doors was the Black boy “gazing at her steadily” (*Bury* 246). She is hounded by the boy and his presence, but still, no one can see him.

The conclusion, an answer to Ida’s Black boy apparition, also exposes the uncanny in the story. Kenan writes that Ida felt “reclamation, doubt, swirling, and opaque obfuscation, nagging presentiments, dread fear, deep-rooted arrogance, proprietary pride, all thick and treacherous and ever-present, had built this wall. A wall against what? What did she forget? Where had it been?” (*Bury* 265). And then she remembers. In 1937, on the beach Butch, only a boyfriend at the time,

was pressuring her to have sex among the dunes and as she said that perhaps she shouldn't, Butch spies a Black boy watching them, the boys "eyes wide and his mouth hung open, what a sorry sight, like a scared possum" and Butch along with his friend Rafe chase him and take him to the water (*Bury* 266). Ida watches as they drown the boy: "Ida can feel the fear from the boy...'Let's see how far I can throw him'...blurred images of a child thrashing: splashing: calling caught up in the thunder of the surf...Butch with a peculiar grin on his face: like he has just made a touchdown or shot a great buck (*Bury* 267).

This was a memory that was meant to remain repressed, but the boy, the memory, refused to stay hidden. Kenan writes:

But some things you forget to remain innocent; some things you forget to remain free; some things you forget due to lassitude. Moral lassitude, intellectual lassitude, human lassitude. However, Ida had not cared to remember, not to remain innocent, not to remain free, not to spare herself worry, but because she simply did not care. She did not care to remember (*Bury* 268).

What Ida wanted to forget and tried very hard not to care about, was remembered anyway. Kenan's use of the uncanny here is presented in the persistent memory resurfacing over and over again, refusing to be forgotten. Ida was hounded for years as she sat content with such a racially motivated act of violence, like many in the South, but Kenan does not allow the past to be forgotten. Memory is uncanny in this way, refusing to leave the subconscious. In the boy's frequent appearances and the return of her memory, Ida's reality was disturbed. Whatever constituted her reality was false and the ever-present disturbance of this reality, the boy, gives the memory of the South that many hold, an uncanny return to how the South understands memory.

## Conclusion

Kenan's writing is a circulation of the history and narratives of Black people in eastern North Carolina in a literary field that has been dominated and written by anyone but themselves. The porch talks and oral history of Tims Creek's origins are used to shake up the known, to throw into question what is already written about his people and his home. The authors of that history were not swamp dwellers. Kenan, through Ezekiel, challenges any history of the area. His "swamp story destabilizes established Southern history; it also challenges central claims about that history" (Thananopavarn 117). The point of *Let the Dead Bury the Dead* becomes less and less about accreditation and facts, and more about who is speaking, who is weaving the tale, and building a history and an origin story. The Southern history that Kenan no doubt learned in his US history courses was a contradiction of the history he grew up hearing from his community. In his hands, Kenan gives his community a history that offers power in Pharaoh, bravery through those that uprose against their enslavers and built a home in swamp land, and lessons that are not from a church established by white people.

Kenan capitalizes on the nebulous surroundings he grew up in to compose a story that seeks to rewrite both the swamp and his history and offer new understandings of this particular landscape. His Southern gothic landscape that is home offers horror and violence, but also an alternative to the darkness the colonizer has always insisted was present in the landscape. Hagood argues that "beneath the dark surface of and within the even darker depths of the murky water of swamp lurk entities, things, meanings imagined and fetishized as indefinable and mysterious and yet interpretable" echoing what we know about the swamps and a Southern gothic homescape (Hagood 129). What has been fetishized, labelled indefinable and mysterious, and colonized, is now available as a history of the ignored. The stories in the waters are exposed.

The ghost haunting Ida urgently whispers tell me, tell me the truth. Tell me, tell me you remember what you tried to forget. The voices within “Let the Dead Bury the Dead,” Ezekiel, Pharaoh, and Ruth, are voices representative of the long ignored, silenced, and mocked. They are a direct contradiction to the voices we know and have heard and whose stories were deemed worthy to be written down. The stories in *Let the Dead Bury the Dead* have been sitting and waiting in the swampy waters for their turn to tell a history of a community, to infuse folklore, facts, fantasy, and horror, and spin it all into a tale of Southern history and culture. Keith Cartwright asks, “Who are the dead whose voices will be archived and anthologized, accredited and fed, whose word we hail (or will hail us) as bond?” (Cartwright 12). Kenan answers: these are the voices. I have them and know them; however unbelievable, however fragmented, these voices of the dead will be heard and fed. Other voices will be silenced over the timbre of Pharaoh and the banter of Ezekiel and Ruth, and the deafening silence of the dead.

The swamps of eastern North Carolina hold many secrets and hide the stories of escaped enslaved folk as well as the horrors of the South, both past and present. Randall Kenan’s work unburies these stories and their horrors and their triumphs. Working within the bounds of the Southern gothic genre, he utilizes the tropes of the genre, specifically the uncanny within an ecogothic framework to successfully rewrite our understanding of the swamp and Southern land. He capitalizes on his home of eastern North Carolina and low country to center his narrative, exposing the truths that have been well hidden by a dominant narrative. Tims Creek becomes a new quintessential Southern homescape, a familiar place with well-known Southern culture including biscuits and hog killings yet reaching into the depths of the events that led to the evolution of the South. Slave rebellions, African myths, ghosts, and the undead are revealed as a part of the South.

Kenan unabashedly exposed favored Southern families and their sons as those that perpetuated the system of racism and dominated the narrative of the South. Their violence and hate are made real and tangible in the oral histories of Tims Creek. The white Kenan family and UNC were never the same once their sins were uncovered, because they could not be covered again, smothered to silence. As he writes in *Black Folk Could Fly* “For me—a poor Black boy from the swamps of eastern North Carolina –the Civil War was far from a lost cause,” and so in his work, Kenan is sure to remind his readers that this history is never far from his community and never forgotten (*Black Folk Could Fly* 241). Just as the Confederate monuments toppled, so did the incessant understanding that the South was Faulkner and Capote. Kenan’s voice rises from the swamp to tell a story of the South in familiar places like our front porches but about unfamiliar events such as zombies in the swamp.

Eastern North Carolina is known for its hogs where bbq is a food made with an abundance of apple cider vinegar and hot spices; the birthplace of Nina Simone; marshes teeming with crawfish and mollusks; coastlines made notorious by pirates and its shipwreck graveyard, but Kenan calls our attention to the swamps. While North Carolina loves the thought of being remembered for Blackbeard and delicious food, Kenan’s imagination, and his creation of Tims Creek serves as a call to the past, reminding us that it haunts the region, haunts history, and voices that have always been silenced, will be heard. He challenges the white supremacy telling of the South and rewrites the story of the South in Tims Creek. The world that Kenan creates incorporates hog country and the love of a good collard green but offers more than the Southern gothic literary figures of the past. Adding to the tropes of the genre, Kenan brings back the dead through his zombies, a woman who cannot stop seeing the ghost of a Black boy killed forty years before, and the ghosts of those enslaved. His dead force a reckoning with the South,



exposing secrets that were meant to be kept once slavery had ended. Slavery is known but he forces his readers to face it, squirm with the knowledge of the system, and hear the voices of the dead.

Kenan's work is at times playful, but overall, he asks much of his readers. Jack Green, North Carolina poet and close friend of Kenan's, writes that her "Southern kin brother always stirred and invigorated intellectual awakenings about the unspoken power we collectively spun as brown children born out of red clay Carolina morning that forced us to *bear. Witness*" (Green 269). And bear witness we must. While Faulkner horrified readers with dead rotting bodies in locked away bedrooms, Kenan forces his readers to witness the evolution of the South, the sin that swamp mud attempts to hide. Disguised as simple porch talks between elderly people of the community, Ezekiel and Ruth spin the tales of the true horror their ancestors escaped from, and the society they built around snakes and mosquitoes, constantly hounded by slave catchers. When readers believe the characters are safe in the swamp, Kenan invokes the spirits of African folklore like Mami Wata to warn and further protect them. Mami Wata exists in the swamps, gliding with the water moccasins and providing the swamp and the South with a layer of folklore that helped create the South, but has remained hidden. Jaki Green may have called this ability "a fascinating insight into how to cope with what was going on inside of *our land*" (Green 271). But I believe it does more for eastern North Carolina than instruct on how to cope but rather draws our attention to the reencoding of the South's historical legacy, particularly on land and race. During Reconstruction, many people, such as Carr, made a show of building Confederate monuments and claimed that "the whole Southland is sanctified by the precious blood of the Confederate soldier," conveniently leaving out the enslaved Black blood spilled by white enslavers. No, says Kenan, this was how the South was "won" and what was going on in our

land was a direct result of that violent bloodshed and the South's desperate need to bury the memory. Not only does Kenan unbury the memory, but he also leads us directly to the land where the blood was spilled and makes us look.

Randall Kenan died at the age of 57 in 2020. What Kenan began, the truths and horrors he wrote to unbury, had seemingly just begun. In the Black Lives Matter movement era, Kenan's work is a beacon of the other South, the one that has been silenced. In an interview, Kenan says "In many ways I feel [my work] is a continuation... No one said it more eloquently, I think, than Eudora Welty...when she talks about how she started out reading and how, for her, writing came out of a desire to continue the conversation with the book. The more we've read, the more we have to talk back to, talk back with" (Rowell and Kenan 148). I see Kenan's work as a desire to continue the conversation of the real South: the swampy and miscoded South, the South missing from the history books and history of PWI websites. In Kenan's work are the conversations we must have, the history that must be heard, and the voices that are no longer silenced. In his work is the land that has never forgotten and, as he writes, it is the

Land of sorrow, land of sweat, land of memory, land of midnight trains, land of the screech owl and the bear and the katydid and the coon and the timber rattler and the panther, land of tractors, land of foreclosures, land of once-slave and now-freedom, land of money, land of hogs and cows and chickens and turkeys and farm cats and dogs, land of corn and soybean, land of cotton, land of fear, land of hate, land of painful memories, land of God, land of Satan, land of pine and sycamore and spruce and maple and magnolia, land of love, land of heartbreak, land of misery, land of hope...Land of grace. Yet, grace. (*Black Folk Could Fly* 246)

Even through the uncanny, the porch talks, the horrors of slavery, and, yes, even the zombies,  
Randall Kenan tells us that under the mud is truth and grace.

## Chapter Two

### The Power of a Blustery Indigenous South: Storm, Land, and Ceremony in Linda Hogan's

#### *Power*

*Humans colonizing and conquering others have a propensity for this, for burning behind them what they cannot possess or control as if their conflicts are not with themselves and their own way of being, but with the land itself. - Linda Hogan Dwellings, 44.*

As shown on the crooked Carolina coast in the first chapter, the landscape of the South is a steady witness to trauma and trauma response, the birth and reshaping of community and culture. In this chapter, the landscape joins with winds, storms, and hurricanes that destroy and rebuild the land and the people. To the people of the South, hurricanes are vessels of devastation and wreckage with the ability to drown and raze entire towns. However, the storm winds within Linda Hogan's 1998 novel *Power* reveal an Indigenous take on these dreaded storms, a take that skews from the settler-colonizer view and offers a storm-ravaged Native South renewal amid the calamity of a storm. Chickasaw author Linda Hogan shifts the American gaze from the well-known western US Indigenous presence to the humid South, penning an eco-Native narrative that illuminates the Indigenous presence in the South and Indigenous approaches to environmentalism. Beyond centering the readers' gaze in the Floridian swamps, Hogan commandeers a hurricane to be the catalyst for Native ceremony that results in a resurgence of Native power and a redefining of the power in Native interconnectedness between the human and non-human world. Hogan explores what is considered power, where it comes from, who wields it, and what that power offers for the future of the Indigenous community and the South.

Following the patterns made evident in her other works, such as *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* and *People of the Whale*, *Power* is a story that builds an Indigenous world, challenging long-held Euro-centric philosophies on relationships with land and animals. In this chapter, I propose that *Power* creates a world where Indigenous ceremony disrupts settler colonist ideas that the natural world was uncivilized, wild, and untamable because it did not fit the picture of a colonizer's ideal landscape; instead, *Power* creates a place for spiritual healing and reunion between the realms of human and non-human. It does this through the employment of a hurricane that triggers Native ceremony, which seeks to reestablish Native space, story, and culture in the South, challenging settler colonial constructs of the relationship between human and non-human. I argue that Hogan's use of swamps and swamp dwellers enacts the ceremony offering to heal ancient lands suffering from modernization that pushes society further from the natural world and ancestral ecological practices.

Throughout this chapter I utilize Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge, Native Southern studies, and an ecocritical framework to argue that Hogan's use of traditional knowledge and practice, such as ceremony, successfully mobilizes a new way of understanding the history between human and land. Of the people groups in the United States, Indigenous tribes have suffered the longest at the hands of the colonizer. Native customs and traditions in land relationships have been disturbed and nearly erased from history and practice because of colonization. However, authors like Hogan engage with traditional ecological knowledge and rewrite how humans relate to land and animals by mobilizing this traditional knowledge within their writing. In working with and resurrecting traditions and ceremonies in *Power*, Hogan successfully offers an understanding of how we relate to the land when colonizer beliefs are replaced by Native tradition.

The understanding that humans are a part of the ecosystem and not meant to lord over all the natural realm is essential in Hogan's writing and Indigenous ecological practices. In *Power*, Ama and Omishto are able to validate these claims in how they attempt to heal the rift between the human and non-human world. Ama's ceremony and Omishto's belief in Taiga story and knowledge are ways in which each illustrates their understandings of how the ways in which humans relate to the natural world need to be rewritten. In failing to respect the rules, the balance, and the sacred bond between human and nonhuman, the colonial system has broken the mutual dependence that the Indigenous community relied on before colonization. Hogan works to show how a return to ceremony and traditional knowledge offers a way to heal and restore the bond.

Defining Indigenous ceremony is a prerequisite for the chapter, and for this, I turn to Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*. Kimmerer, an enrolled citizen of the Potawatomi Nation, establishes *Braiding Sweetgrass* as a memoir that interweaves Indigenous storytelling and scientific writing, resulting in a parallelism between her and Hogan's work. Throughout the text, Kimmerer describes ceremony in Indigenous tradition and how it morphs to honor a world faced with species extinction and unalterable climate change. Acknowledging easily recognizable ceremonies, she writes, "the ceremonies that persist—birthdays, weddings, funerals—focus only on ourselves," but ultimately, "ceremonies transcend the boundaries of the individual and resonate beyond the human realm" (Kimmerer 249). Ceremonies in *Power* stem from the panther figure, a sacred animal with ties to the creation of their tribe. The tribe honors the panther with their stories and clan name, the Panther Clan. The panther was a central figure in ceremonies where elders would scratch the skin of an ill person with a panther claw to cure diseases. The

ceremony performed in *Power*, the killing of a panther, is a way for the tribe represented in the novel to recapture lost traditions and stories.

The representation of this ceremony also signifies Hogan's attempt at mobilizing the way the South relates to the non-human realm. It is easy for readers to assume that killing an endangered mammal is anything but a selfish act of evil, yet in *Power* killing the panther is a way to revive nearly forgotten beliefs in how to have a respectful relationship between human and non-human. Through this ceremony, Hogan affirms Kimmerer's claim that "many indigenous traditions still recognize the place of ceremony and often focus their relationship on other species" (Kimmerer 250). The brutal ceremony in *Power* becomes "a vehicle for belonging—to a family, to a people, and the land," but above all, the ceremony aligns with Kimmerer's elders' definition "that ceremony is the way we can remember to remember" (Kimmerer 37, 389). Ceremony is storytelling, the continued practice of customs that enhance spirituality (i.e., song, dance, gatherings in traditional dwellings), and "epistemologies [that] affirm the interconnected mental, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of lives experience in community" (Castor 452). The ceremony of killing the panther enables the novel to remember and enact the tribes' customs, ancient creation stories, and laws. Through this ceremony, Hogan equips stories that "are capable of affecting the environment but of actually building the world itself" (Harrison 5). Ceremonies can be any act that empowers Native culture, furthering tribes to rebuild the worlds lost to colonization, genocide, and erasure.

Hogan's world-building through her ceremonies is a reconceptualizing of human and non-human relationship and hierarchy that effectively deconstructs the colonial relationship that has led to utter devastation in the natural world. Her work, written before and after *Power*, creates and explores Indigenous stories interweaving the studies of law, sovereignty,

environmentalism, and indigeneity. Most closely related to *Power* are *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World*, *Solar Storms*, *People of the Whale*, and *Mean Spirit*. These works of both nonfiction and fiction are the result of Hogan's endeavor to expose settler colonialism's mistreatment of the natural world and to rebuild and encourage the interaction between human and non-human, which she believes is indispensable in the construction of character. Hogan's writings are narratives describing the dangers of forgetting respect and reverence for the natural world and in the benefits of reverence for the natural world. Hogan offers the world an understand of the value of an interconnectedness with the ecological world. Works like *Power* illustrate the incorrect colonial-minded response to conservation, exposing cruelty amid ignorance. Lanlan Du writes that Hogan's writing is rife with "deep concerns about the ruthless exploitation of natural resources in the pursuit of economic improvements, the rights of threatened Indigenous people, and the effects resulting from the dislocation of the individual from his or her natural and cultural landscape" (Du 788). Hogan's use of ceremony and her reverence for "the sacred interconnections between humanity and nature in specific ethnic, cultural beliefs" expresses the urgency and "deep concerns about the devastating impact of excessive development on indigenous ecosystems and ethnic, cultural survival" (Du 788). The colonial relationship with land and ecosystems has created a world that is on the precipice of climate catastrophe. Survival depends on a reliance of the sacred relationship between the land and human.

Hogan confronts three inevitabilities of the South: the perception of hurricanes, colonizers' violence on Southern soil, and the mismanagement of swamps. Hogan shifts the understanding of hurricanes from the predominant Eurocentric narrative to a distinctly Native one through Native character narration and the storm's initiation of ceremony. The storm also



exposes the South's history before colonization and European influence. Traditional ecological knowledge practiced prior to colonization relied on interconnectedness and when the South, in particular Florida as in the novel, was colonized by the Spanish, a new hierarchy placing man above all else in the natural world, rejected an interconnected relationship and effectively destroyed the balance created by Natives in the Floridian landscape. Southern land is storied with Native custom, and as scholar Silvia Schultermandl writes, "Hogan sees the landscape in its indispensable connection to the human beings inhabiting it...Hogan maintains that the interaction between human and non-human nature, as well as the disruption thereof, has an undeniable influence" on Native survival; therefore, her setting is intentional, as is her hurricane (Schultermandl 67). *Power*'s narrator, Omishto, expresses how the disruption of the relationship between human and nonhuman have reverberated from the time of the Spanish colonizers to the present moment when she is stuck in the middle of a hurricane. In Hogan's South, power exists in the violence of colonization, its continued hold on the Native community, and the hurricane. However, power also emerges in the reclamation of Native custom and ceremony. In an interview, Hogan states, "the Native tradition of respect for other species, for the land, and for the water, is a view of the world that informs my work. The more I study, the more I see that the traditional stories, the traditional ceremonies, and the ways of living in the world are superior to what has developed from the Western view" (quoted in Stein 114). She establishes this superiority in her character's survival of a hurricane that will symbolize the end of colonizer ways of existence in the swamp. An Indigenous power rises from the natural power of the hurricane.

In making a hurricane central to the plot, an inevitable occurrence on Southern shores, Hogan reorientates our knowledge of Indigenous thought and action to the growing

environmental crisis in the South due to ever-rising sea levels, encroachment on traditional land, and Native survival. It is the story of how two Indigenous women survived a hurricane. The act of survival is coupled with an Indigenous story that enables the characters and the readers to experience the storm as something other than a storm but as a herald of the rise in Native power. The fight for power is in the eye of this torrent of Native survival, hurricanes, and Euro-centered environmentalism. Hogan uses her narrative to manifest a way of perceiving power that contradicts the idea of power perceived by society. This idea is a colonizer and distinctly out of rhythm with the non-human world. Her characters can transcend colonizer violence and understand the storm's violence as something other than wind and rain through an interconnectedness between the human and non-human world in which they recognize their part of the ecosystem. Hogan writes, "our bond with water is more than metaphoric. It is primal" (*Dwellings* 108). It is here, Pamela Mittlefehldt argues, in this bond with the natural world and the recognition of their place within this unique swampy ecosystem, that "Linda Hogan reminds us that 'we are water people. Our salt bodies, like the great round ocean, are pulled and held by the moon. We are creatures that belong here'" (Mittlefehldt 138; *Dwellings* 108). The power within the novel's characters can represent what Hogan argues is the "one thing that indigenous people on all continents have been able to do is to keep a balance between all the relationships of what is now called ecology" (quoted in Stein 114). Hogan's characters assert Indigenous power by simply reclaiming and understanding their place within the ecosystem and fully rebuking the colonial idea that humans construct an ecosystem around their needs.

*In Power*, which is set in modern-day northern Florida, the fictional tribe, the Taiga, have survived amongst colonization and tried to maintain their ancestral beliefs. The novel is narrated by teenager Omishto who tries to stay away from home as much as possible. Her mother rejects

the ways of the tribe and turns to religion to become somewhat of a fanatic, pushing Christianity on her daughters. Omishto's stepfather is physically abusive, and her older sister is distant from her younger sibling in a way typical of most teenage siblings, where one does not want to be bothered by the other. So, instead of home in her mother's trailer, Omishto spends as much time as possible with Ama, a Taiga woman she refers to as auntie. Omishto and Ama have a close relationship bolstered by their shared interests and opinions. Ama lives as traditionally Taiga as she can in a small, nearly condemned cabin just off the swamp on Taiga ancestral lands. She often disagrees with Omishto's mother's lifestyle, much to the relief of Omishto, and Ama has a deep love for her ancestor's land and culture. Ama shares Taiga myth and folklore with the girl but believes the stories to be fact, encouraging Omishto to pursue the traditional Taiga life.

Ama's adherence to Taiga life both confuse and enrapture Omishto. It keeps drawing her back to Ama. The novel opens with Omishto in her rowboat on her way to visit Ama. Soon after arriving at Ama's, a hurricane that has been gathering unleashes its might. Ama and Omishto are caught in the storm; Omishto goes into the storm to secure her boat, so she does not lose it, and Ama waits on her porch. After surviving the storm, Ama tells Omishto that she dreamt about a panther, their sacred ancestor and namesake of their clan, and an endangered mammal. Following her dream, Ama grabs a shotgun and heads into the swamp to kill a panther. Conflicted over this decision, Omishto follows Ama deep into Taiga land and watches as she shoots a starving and emaciated panther. Ama quickly skins the animal, hides it, and forces Omishto to swear to never tell anyone about the condition of the panther. She is to keep the fact that the panther was a reduced version of the revered panther from their stories and history. The killing of the endangered panther propels the women to the center of attention in white society and Taiga. Both communities are disgusted and angered by Ama's actions and Omishto's

complacency. Ama is arrested; Omishto is bullied at school and home, yet she never reveals where the panther's skin is or the sad circumstances of the panther's existence. Eventually, Ama is taken to court, but her tribal leader convinces the court that this is a Taiga issue. The crime was committed on Taiga land, the panther is their sacred animal, and it is the tribe's responsibility to see that justice is done and their tribal member punished accordingly. The tribe decides Ama's punishment is banishment. She is last seen walking into the wilderness, and Omishto says that is the last time she sees her. Omishto ultimately decides she wants to live a traditional Taiga life, rejects the western world, and fully embraces her Taiga heritage.

Hogan most likely based the Taiga after the existing Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, a branch of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. The history of the Seminoles plays a role in the creation of the Taiga and their response to Ama and her actions. After the Second and Third Seminole Wars, many Seminoles became isolated in the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp. Though the Seminoles joined together for the wars, different cultural groups spoke different languages and had distinctive "settlement patterns and decentralized political systems" (Adams 174). By the mid-1960s, according to Adams, the Seminole tribe had split into three groups: the Seminole Tribe, the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, and the (politically) unorganized Mikasuki speakers. These divisions stemmed from a desire to live and adapt differently in a colonized world. The Seminoles believed they "should progress...live like the white people. This did not mean giving up traditional customs or language," but the tribe wanted education and work aligned with white society (Adams 204). However, the Miccosukee "wanted to have some of these conveniences...but they wanted to stay where they were [physically located]" while the Mikasuki-speakers "decided they would stay the way they had been for hundreds of years and so they still do" (Adams 204). Considering the desires of the existing tribes, Hogan's fictional Taiga

closely resemble the Miccosukee as the elders and other members, such as Ama, still live deep in the swamp, adhere to Taiga laws and forms of justice but have not fully attempted to sequester themselves as the Mikasuki have.

### **Power: Land and Man**

In *Power*, the swamps of Florida have faced many attempts at conquering and colonization. On these water-logged Taiga ancestral lands, Hogan sets a story "not only capable of affecting the environment but of actually building the world itself" (Harrison 5). The Taiga reside in an area that most colonizers rejected, in Florida and beyond. As they arrived on the shores of Florida, the thick swamps were far less appealing to the uninvited settlers than the lush green jungles that Juan Ponce de Leon and Columbus assumed the Tree of Life grew within. As in the first chapter, early colonizers such as William Byrd, Ponce de Leon, Columbus, land surveyors, and property owners evaluated the swamp as an area of danger due to its non-human and human nature inhabitants and its inability to offer easy colonization. Anthony Wilson argues, "initial attitudes towards the Seminole mirrored early, practical attitudes towards swamps. As a wild, dangerous warrior culture living in the untamed Florida swamps" (Wilson 47). These Floridian swamps were unknown, making them dangerous. According to colonizer bigotry, the swamp denizens mirrored their home: revolutionary, rebellious, uncivilized, and a danger to the colonized world. This landscape became a symbol of all that the colonizer loathed: something that was not easily conquerable. This thinking leads to what Monique Allewaert calls an "imperialistic project of revolutionary nationalism" (Allewaert 29). The project was to conquer the unconquerable and bring those who rebelled to heel. This project continues today as swamps are drained, making way for subdivisions and highways. It calls for what Allewaert identifies as "forgetting, or at

least managing, Indian pasts and making nature into a well-regulated space ensuring the good of the nation-state” and a profitable space that is no longer Indigenous but ‘controlled’ (Allewaert 29-30). By their continued existence in the swamps, they defy imperialistic expectations and attitudes and fight against those continued projects that threaten their world.

Attitudes towards swamps and their dwellers have mostly stayed the same since early colonization. Popular culture, such as the reality TV show "*Swamp People*," encourages the idea that the swamps offer little more than alligators, snakes, murky water, and a coarse population to match. The continuation of these ignorant beliefs relating to swamps and swamp dwellers give Hogan's portrayal of the Taiga home power concerning swamp studies, Southern studies, and Indigenous literature. She negates previous claims on swamps and swamp dwellers through Omishto and Ama, who provide a contradictory depiction of their home. Omishto says their swampy home is Ama's great love: "this cloudy place with its thick trees and swamps, oak islands, mosquitoes, snakes, and waters. It is my love, too, this place of million-year-old rivers and sloughs and jagged limestone" (8). As with every authentic love, Omishto accepts her home with all its faults: or what settler-colonizers view as faults. Mosquitoes, snakes, and thick vegetation are all elements that Omishto accepts. Her home can be a difficult place to live, with genuine danger dwelling in the waters and the mud, especially up trees. Nevertheless, Ama has made a home and life within the swamp's borders, and it is a life that Omishto, someone used to the comforts of the modern world, covets.

To the Taiga, the swamp is home, an ancient home, their place of creation and ceremony, and the hurricane winds that frequent that landscape are viewed not simply as destructive but also as a means of life. In Taiga tradition, Omishto tells us, "the wind is a living force. We Taiga call the wind Oni. It enters us all at birth and stays with us all through life. It connects us to every

other creature" (28). Quickly establishing the deep connection the Taiga have between human and non-human, Hogan explains that Oni, the wind spirit, is responsible for all of creation. Omishto says, "we were blown together by a storm in the first place. It was all created out of storms" (43). While the winds brought them into being, the panther, another swamp-dwelling figure and powerful symbol from their history called Sisa, "came before them and taught them the word for life, wind, and breath" (73). So as the Europeans passed by the swamps with repulsion and received hurricanes and the stalking panther with dread, the Taiga knew the wind, Oni, as a source of life, not simply an agent of destruction and the panther as a guide and protector to their traditions.

Hurricane winds are the merging of salt and water and earth and sea; Oni is the merging of life and land. The Taiga are interconnected with the water and the earth in their swampy home because Oni connects them at the very beginning of life. This connection directly correlates with Hogan's thoughts on the interconnectedness of human and non-human that she relays in her memoir: "interwoven with our human fates in this world we humans have diminished because we have failed to understand how each thing connects with all the rest" (*Woman* 25). Through Omishto's and Ama's bond to Taiga ancestral lands, as well as their battle with hurricane-force winds, Hogan exposes colonizer failures such as land mismanagement and hierarchical relationships between human and nature relations and reunite the practices of deep attachment and sacredness between the two realms. Although the Taiga are fictional, Hogan uses the realities of nearly every tribe still in existence in North America who are carving out a life and building community on the lands left to them after broken treaties and removal. These concerns stem from the encroaching human. That encroachment leads to overdevelopment and habitat

loss, forcing species such as the Florida panther to cross busy highways and hunt in ever-shrinking spaces.

Omishto is deeply linked to the land, as shown through her description of her home, flooded with adoration and intimacy. For example, the traditional swampy lands of the Taiga are beautiful: "this place I call mine, where clouds are born from water" (*Power* 2). Omishto's deep love for her home creates an internal conflict when Ama shoots and kills the panther. In the moments leading up to the shooting and through Ama's trial, Hogan offers an intimate portrayal of Indigenous thought in a predominantly colonizer society. This portrayal of Indigenous thought in the dominate society culminates into a story of opposition to mainstream thought and practice of nature writing that exposes cruel and unsuccessful colonizer practices in environmental management that further the gap in human relationships to the non-human realm.

*Power* begins dismantling the colonial-minded response to conservation and the cruelty amid ignorance as the storm approaches. Omishto reflects on the pre-storm weather, the wind, the smell of rain, and the warm downpour of rain that, rather than alarm, refreshes her. There has been a drought, and the "trees [are] taking it in as if they are swallowing" (*Power* 27). During the drought, a wildfire broke out, and as a wildfire-fighting strategy, Lake Okeechobee was undammed, leading to a different devastation:

This is the year of wildfire in places that were swamp, the year Lake Okeechobee was opened, and the water level down here rose so much it drowned all the fawns. The wardens had to kill all the starving deer that were standing up to their necks in water, and it broke my heart to see the little deer with their white undersides lying along the high roads in a line, counted out and numbered as if they were nothing more than rocks or coins. It seemed cruel to me, even though they said it



was the only thing to do, and they tagged them so they could examine their hungry insides later. (*Power* 27)

Here, Hogan demonstrates what the settler colonial system has done with its power, and it is depicted as heartless: the killer of young animals who already suffer at the cogs of the colonial wheel. Omishto's voice exposes the raw and perhaps seemingly insignificant ways that may appear to be "the small price you pay for progress" but is "the way to kill a world" (*Power* 27). The way to kill a world, Hogan suggests, is to promote progress, modernization, and development without thought to the repercussions. This has been the way the modern world has developed and brought about the extinction of species, the devastation of and ruin of entire landscapes, and the genocide of people groups who stood in the way of this "progress."

Settler colonialism is a system of simultaneous modernization and destruction. What one culture sees as progress, the natural world, and those that strive to live in line with that world see it as destruction. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang claim "the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence" (5). This is evident in Omishto's relationship with the land. It is not as clearly defined as Ama's or the elders of her tribe that reside in the swamp, but Omishto recognizes the killing of her ancestral lands.

Colonization and progress kill the way of the world: kill the way of the Taiga. Throughout the novel, readers are shown the internal struggle Omishto has as she watches her people and her ancestral way of life, lose the battle to colonization. Sisa has been pushed to extinction, and the land they have held onto is constantly threatened. In *Power*, the way of progress is simultaneously the way the colonizer system is killing Omishto's world; however, Hogan writes a story of remembering the power the Indigenous collective once had and how it may now save their world.

The Indigenous narrative collective that Hogan gives the Taiga is meant to hopefully save the world through their stories; in their stories, both the wind and the panther are central figures. Hogan has written how the doom of progress, a hardly fictional tale, has led to the near destruction of the panther and, thus, the Taiga. She writes, "Sisa is doomed, that humans have broken their covenant with the animals, their original word, their own sacred law" (*Power* 190). Omishto narrates the first time she saw a panther. Some white boys from her school had treed it. She "saw its eyes shining like stars behind the tangles of leaves. No expression in them except one that told us, Go away, but it was not afraid of any of us. I believe they would have killed it too...except Ama sent them away" (*Power* 57). Settler colonialism displays a broken hierarchy in the natural world: humans above all else at whatever cost. By doing so, colonizers create their ecosystem and ecological hierarchy, attempting to establish power over the natural world.

Florida is a Southern state whose ecosystem is well known for its swamps and the dangerous non-human dwellers in that distinctive landscape, and infamous for its constant destruction of the swamps and its inhabitants. Known for its retiree communities and theme parks, Florida knows how to make room for its colonizer-deemed necessities and its ecosystem. Florida has become the result of ancient lands suffering from modernization which pushes society further from the natural world and ancestral ecological practices. The idea "that settlement is an ecological process by which settler societies create their ecosystems by replacing Indigenous ones" is a significant theme in Indigenous scholarship (Dockry and Whyte 97). The violence and irreverence the panther sustains, coupled with the destruction of its home, are ways in which Hogan illustrates that "settler colonialism destroys to replace" and creates their definition of power (Dockry and Whyte 97). In creating their ecosystems, colonizers have replaced ancestral stories, an Indigenous collective, with stories of wants, greed, and a collection of materials,

including land. The panther is no longer known as sacred. Sisa has nearly disappeared from the collective conscience, but Ama, in her ways, takes back the story, reestablishing Sisa as sacred and believing Taiga story.

Ama embodies the sacred response to the natural world in her attempts to connect herself to the ancestral Taiga way of life. As Barbara Cook writes, a common theme within Hogan's work is to "help listeners and readers experience—thus better understand—sacred responses to and from the natural world" (Cook 21). Ama brings readers to this sacred experience in her small acts of her refusal to adjust to colonizer society: her house in the swamp, her belief in Taiga stories, and her devotion to the panther. When she is approached by a white man who asks her to sell her land, she explains that "He sees subdivisions. I see life. He knows the cost of things, but not their value" (*Power* 196). However, the dream that Ama has just before the storm insinuates that Ama is the key to breathing life back into the Taiga way of life. Just before the storm, Ama tells Omishto about her dream:

‘I dreamed of a golden panther. It came to me in a dream. It stood on two feet and said follow me. It stood like a person, and I could see its belly and eyes, and it gestured at me, that crooked-tail creature. But it looked so skinny and sick it broke my heart to pieces.’ It's not the first time she dreamed of a panther, but it's the first time one talked with her. Even the elders never see one anymore...I listen to her dream...strange-smelling wind that begins to blow in as if the world is also listening to Ama's words. (*Power* 24)

Ama's dream turns into a vision that leads to ceremony that will change the course of the Taiga's relationship with land and expose a new understanding of that relationship to a colonial system. However, the hurricane triggers the transformation of dream into ceremony into action. The

strange-smelling wind of the storm seems to have listened to Ama and knows it must pass through Ama for her to fully believe her dream is instruction.

### **Power: Wind and Water, Tempest and Gale**

Just as with realistic hurricanes, the hurricane in *Power* destroys anything in its path, breeds chaos and havoc, and shows no mercy to animal nor human. However, this hurricane is also employed to flood and uncover forgotten memories and truths of the Taiga. This storm severs Omishto's reliance on settler colonizer rules, sets Ama free to follow her Taiga intuition, and unveils the true human destruction of land and self. Directly before the storm, Omishto travels in her small boat over a body of water and treks to Ama's, a rickety house "that looks raw and abandoned, but isn't" and sits on the edge of Taiga land (6). Ama's house is near a tree the locals call Methuselah due to its age; it was planted nearly five hundred years ago. Omishto pointedly says, "it's a tree the Spanish brought with them here and planted. It's not from this continent" (*Power* 6). In her inclusion of Methuselah, Hogan identifies this novel's diegetic space as distinctively Southern, with its Spanish conquistador history, mammoth trees, and humid, wild spaces. The Methuselah tree offers proof of the scars that remain from the initial moment of colonization. Kyle Whyte points out that in "seeking to establish their homelands, settler populations...work to create their ecologies out of the ecologies of Indigenous peoples, which often requires that settlers bring in additional materials and living beings (e.g., plants, animals) from abroad" (Whyte 135). The tree—a stranger and a forced occupant in an Indigenous space—is a reminder that this space was once Indigenous.

Omishto is not in naive awe of the storm's force but instead predicts the violence that will force itself on her and Ama. She says, "the clouds will meet the way they do in this place. It is the rain coming. The clouds will join with one another, force themselves together like two

fighting-mad people and lend each other the strength to hurl a storm at us" (*Power* 26). Once Omishto realizes the storm is a hurricane, she runs back to secure her boat. The decision to run through the storm means giving herself to the mercy of the wind and rain. This experience places readers in the funnel of nature's power and violence. Omishto narrates, "I run into the deepening color of the storm, I don't recognize this place, this land that is screaming and drowning, and I know this is just the beginning;" as the storm builds in strength, its merciless temperament shows no partiality when Omishto sees deer flying, "caught by the strong wind, with terrified looks on their faces" (*Power* 33, 36). Scenes that are not captured on tv screens, or described by removed meteorologists and hungry reporters, are brought to life with explicit and intimate detail, as Hogan, unflinching, brings her readers further into the storm, into the gale that "has no apology" (*Power* 33).

Omishto gives the hurricane life, a personification that steers the narrative in the way the hurricane chooses. She struggles back to Ama's house, but becomes trapped in the forest, unable to move to safety through the wind, that wind that "has pushing hands...has a body. It screams like a train coming through. It hits so quickly it stops me in my running and throws me to the ground" (*Power* 34). The storm's force and violence further establish it as a supposed adversary against Omishto and every living thing it consumes. Omishto talks of the hurricane as if it were a living being. It hurls wind and fury at her. It has a voice. By detailing the storm through pages of overwhelming description and giving the storm a voice, Hogan crafts a character that is the personification of "the merging of earth and sea, salt and water" that does not claim the land for its own, only leaves its mark on the swamp-based lands of the Taiga (Caison 198). Native scholar Gina Caison's characterization of the hurricane lends itself to Hogan's hurricane. Those in low-lying, hurricane-prone lands can attest that hurricanes are unrelenting beasts of sea and

wind as the floodwaters rise, rivers crest, and levees break. However, this great storm in *Power* proves to be more than a deathly coalition of water and wind. It exhibits another definition of power, one outside definition of human conjuring or purpose.

The Taiga know wind to be Oni, their source of life, and the story of that power that created the Taiga offers an Indigenous version of storms and hurricanes. While readers follow the violence Omishto is experiencing in the current hurricane and have new knowledge of Oni, Hogan creates another Taiga story where Oni and Sisa are brought together. The story of Panther Woman illustrates the weaving of creation and guidance within Taiga culture. One is a beginning, while the other is an ending. Omishto narrates:

There is a Taiga story about Panther Woman ... Years ago, Panther walked on two feet. A woman lived in the dark swamp of the early world in those days. Wild animals raised her because her human family had rejected her, but the animals favored her. It was given to this woman to keep the world in balance. One day a storm blew with so much strength that it left an opening between the worlds. Panther Woman saw that opening and followed the panther into that other world... What she saw there were rivers on fire, animals dying of sickness, and foreign vines. The world, she saw, was dying. The unfortunate thing was that the door blew closed behind her. (*Power* 110-111)

Ama's strong belief in the panther and Taiga tradition encourages her to see herself and become the Panther Woman. This Taiga story is about how Panther became trapped in the human world, but Panther Woman was there to offer balance and later sacrifice. When Ama kills the panther, she embodies the Panther Woman figure and reenacts the story of sacrifice so the Taiga world will not die as it is dying in the story.

This storm is the second source of power. The first was the colonizers' show of conservation by drowning deer. With this new display of power, the hurricane brings us into Native territory. The storm is horrible and violent, but it is also a version of Oni, a source of life, and the same power that blew open the door that Panther Woman and Panther traveled through, then shut it again, blocking access back to their home. Hogan's parallelism to this hurricane and the one from Panther Woman offers an Indigenous vision of power in storms. The storm had the power to close the door on Panther Woman and Panther, effectively closing the door between different worlds and realms of existence. But it also has the power to open doors and paths of remembrance to Oni and Native story. Omishto also recognizes the power of the storm. It swirls around Omishto, and she knows "the storm was not just wind and rain, not just a house with a shutter thrown open, a door torn off its hinges. It was not just a dying house with a broken window and branches and leaves blown inside it. It was the beginning and the end of something. I feel what it is, but I don't have words for it yet" (*Power* 73). It is the beginning of the end of colonizer influence, as Omishto will discover through the felling of a tree, called Methuselah the Spanish planted during conquest. Using the hurricane's power, Hogan offers a way for readers to see colonizer influence and violence through this tree and how healing can begin.

Omishto is not safe within the full power of the storm. Still amid the storm, Omishto believes she will be safe "if only [she] can get back to the roots of Methuselah, who has lived through all these centuries of storm" only to find violent chaos and a falling Methuselah (Hogan 34):

I scream, and I see that I hear only the roaring voice of the storm. All nature is against us. It falls down on us. It throws itself at us. And then I say God! Calling out to what has never heard me before because, through the dark air of storm, Methuselah falls, and I

hear nothing but only see that what has lasted this long is being taken down now as if it were nothing as if it had never been anything that counted. (*Power* 37-38)

Methuselah, the constant reminder to the Taiga of the Spanish's violent land claim, is uprooted, falling to the ground with no noise, no fuss. Contrary to popular belief, when a tree falls, it indeed makes a sound. The crashing of a tree of this size, even within the throes of a hurricane, could have been heard. Methuselah's silent fall signifies that the time of the colonizer in that forest is starting the end of its reign. Systematically, Hogan begins "removing the visible burden of history...and its entrenchment in the lives of indigenous peoples" while unveiling a hurricane that begins redefining resilience (Hardin 140). Through the storm's violence, Omishto remains standing while the colonizer falls. Although her refuge within Methuselah's roots is gone, the significance of the fall is not lost on Omishto. She says this storm shows "history and flowered lands and people with the beautiful ways we Taiga were said to have before it was all cut apart in history. History is where the Spaniards cut off the hands of my ancestors. The Spanish who laughed at our desperation and dying" (*Power* 73). The beautiful ways of the Taiga existed in a paradisaical place but were interrupted by the fathers of Methuselah. Ponce de León named this land La Florida meaning "place of flowers." Ironically, the paradise Ponce de León found was later destroyed by him, his descendants, and other colonizers like him. For 500 years, Methuselah stood and watched this destruction, but the storm, Oni, toppled the great tree signifying an end to colonizer rule. Omishto proves that Indigenous roots run far more profound as she remains alive in the storm and Methuselah falls.

In creating such a storm, one through which Ama and Omishto struggle to survive, Hogan is crafting a relationship between a force so well-known in colonial and Native nature writing. While the field of Native Southern ecocriticism grows and expands outside of academia



into mainstream culture, so does the battle against Euro-American ecological knowledge and Indigenous practice. It would be easy to interpose here the troublesome stereotype that Indigenous peoples are more in-tune, more connected with the natural world, a stereotype that stems from a white perspective. As Eric Gary Anderson claims, "the prospect of linking Indians and ecocriticism is fraught with problems, not least among them the power of white American desires for and expectations of Indian environmental wisdom" (176). Anderson's claims concerning "Indian environmental wisdom" are not unfounded as white Americans continue to assert their expectations of Native knowledge into their understanding of Native tradition effectively white-washing traditional practices. These practices within the Native community and culture are a part of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). TEK has a vast practice base and "range[s] from historical practices like the creation of forest islands for the production of fruit...to currently practiced skill-based traditions like deer cleaning techniques and embodying community value systems" (*On the Role* 2). These practices are considered a base or "body of knowledge, though one embedded within multiple relationships among living beings, non-living things, and the environment" (*On the Role* 4). Ama uses TEK to repair the damage between the human and non-human realms as she adheres to Taiga teachings and story. Aligning with Robin Kimmerer, Ama fully believes that "knowing you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond" (124). For Ama and TEK, the bond between the self and the natural world is sacred. Ama knows the earth, through the Panther, has the power to change her tribe and the way the community sees her tribe.

In preparing Ama to become the Panther Woman from Taiga history, Hogan situates her as a woman in love with her ancestral home, where she embodies ceremony, and strives to

reconnect the Taiga with the natural world. Omishto's love of the land also sets her apart because it is "Ama's love, this cloudy place with its thick trees and swamps, oak islands, mosquitoes, snakes, and waters" (*Power* 8). Ama fulfills a role that embodies Hogan's urge for an ancestral relationship with nature to be reformed in modern society. Lee Schweninger writes that "for Hogan, what has been lost and must be recovered is a part of the human self, and thus reconnecting with nature for Hogan means reconstituting a very literal part of that self" (185). Ama becomes a representation of the part of that self Hogan is constructing while simultaneously embodying the power and progress "can only lie in the commemoration of times and cultures before human beings disassociated themselves from their non-human environment" (Schultermandl 82). In the story of Panther Woman, she had the power to keep the world in balance. She "was a person who sang the sun up in the morning and if she could do this it would keep the world alive. Like memory, she was there to refresh our thoughts and renew our acts," (*Power* 110). By becoming this woman, Ama refreshes Taiga memory and a belief in the power within those memories and stories. In her collection of essays, *Dwellings*, Hogan writes, "this world is in our blood and bones, and our blood and bones are the earth," but in *Power* there has been a separation between the world and the Taiga (*Dwellings* 108). A separation from the earth is to separate from yourself, but the hurricane in *Power* gives Ama the vision of the panther and a way to reconnect with their ancestral lands and look to the land for survival. The hurricane's power offers a way for Ama to complete her vision and start to rebuild the missing link between humans and nature, blood and bone.

### **Power: Claws and Ceremony and Reclamation**

Ama knows how to heal the land, or at least how to start the process. Kimmerer writes, “to love a place is not enough. We must find ways to heal it” (286). Ama’s way to heal the land is to kill the panther. Once the hurricane has passed, Ama grabs a rifle and tells Omishto to come with her. Omishto is under the assumption that they are tracking an injured deer to put it out of its misery. She soon realizes what Ama means to do as they finally approach the panther who has just killed and eaten a deer. Conflicted and scared, Omishto says, “I think she doesn’t want the outsiders to kill this cat. She doesn’t want it to die by poison or be hit by a car like the others. In this, maybe she is right. However, she is also wrong. I look around me at this world... There’s no one to steal here in this honest, decent land but us, and I’m already sick by this act Ama has entered into” (*Power* 62). Before shooting the panther, Ama calls Omishto to her side and “the cat looks up, and she shows me to the cat, and what she does is, she introduces me to it, it to me. She says my name as she looks at me” (*Power* 65). Then Ama shoots the panther.

Ama and Omishto move closer to see the symbol of their people. Their Sisa figure is a reduced version of what she once was. Looking down at its body, “Ama cries just to look at it...because once they were beautiful and large and powerful. [I]t is like the cut-up land, too...this is what has become of us, of all three of us here. We are diminished and endangered” (*Power* 69). Once ranging throughout the Southeastern US, the Florida panther is now restricted to a small breeding population in Southwest Florida near the Caloosahatchee River. The panther received federal protection under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 yet remains one of the most critically endangered large mammals in the world (Frakes and Knight 25). This is an example of world ending while the colonial system believes they are building worlds. Both in reality and in *Power*, the panther is diminished and threatened; within *Power* both the Taiga and

Sisa feel the disconnect between human and non-human realms acutely through every element of their lives depicting "the fragmenting world is ours as much as theirs and their songs are also our cries of mourning... This mess, this loss of life, this human ignorance or sense of superiority... is real" (Bowen-Mercer 162). Staring down at the emaciated, dead panther, Ama, Omishto, and the readers must confront the repercussions of a fragmented world that has ignored Indigenous teachings of how to live alongside the natural world.

Killing the panther is the beginning of the ceremony and reclaiming Taiga culture. Omishto is terrified of what Ama has done, believing it to be criminal and cruel. She cries, "Oh Ama what have you gone and done? You have gone and killed yourself" (*Power* 67). After reading this, readers might assume that Omishto means that in killing the panther, Ama has broken the law and will be arrested, removed from her home, and effectively killed in spirit as she pays the consequences for this act. But Ama understands that the ceremony has begun. She believes in the story of the Panther Woman and is recreating and then finishing the story as ceremony. In the original story, once Panther Woman and Panther enter through the door into the dying world, there needs to be sacrifice: "You will have to kill one of us," the panther, who is dying, tells her. 'It should be me. I'm not the oldest or the weakest, but I'm the one you know best.' A sacrifice was called for, and if it were done well, all the animals and the panther would come back again, and they'd be whole" (*Power* 111). Ama confirms the ceremony was sacrificial, saying, "It is a sacrifice. It all is. This whole thing" (*Power* 71). Omishto comes to believe that Ama follows this belief in the story and the need for sacrifice when she hunted and killed the panther. She says, "I think that cat called to Ama Eaton, the way it did in that old story... I think Ama Eaton went through that opening" (*Power* 112). More than sacrifice, it is an act of reclamation. Ama believes this "without a doubt in her heart, that this is redemption. I can

see it in her face, so calm, so quiet” (*Power* 74-75). Concluding the story of Panther Woman gives Ama peace as she understands her act has begun a chain reaction that will enable Taiga to rely on their ancestral beliefs, hopefully influencing Omishto to recognize the power in their stories and customs, reconnect her tribe to the natural world once again, and, in Omishto’s words “Ama is saving a world” (*Power* 224).

By reenacting the Panther Woman story, Ama has proven that she does not lord over the non-human realm but is equal to that realm's inhabitants. Even though she has killed the panther, she does it not to prove her power over it but to offer a sacrifice, completing the Taiga Sisa story. Through the reenactment, Hogan is deciphering "the language of a spiritual universe within the natural world” (Chandler 17). The ceremony is a language that has become ignored through colonization. It has transformed into a world where humans are believed to be separate and elevated above the natural world, rulers of the land and beasts. Many Indigenous scholars and elders emphasize that humans are *a part* of ecosystems rather than the captain at the helm. Newe elder and spiritual leader Corbin Harney says, "Native people are not separate from the environment. We are the environment”<sup>10</sup> and Ama becomes this statement. In her embodiment of Panther Woman, she is reviving Taiga ancestral knowledge. The Taiga live in a world where “white settler colonialism uses ecological transformation to remove native presence on the landscape and exert control over people and land” (Dockry and Whyte 98). This erasure is evident through obvious circumstances in modern society, which Omishto affirms, saying, "If it were a man shot a cat, a white man, he’d be free to come and go as he pleased. He’d be called a hunter” (*Power* 112). Erasure of a balance between human and non-human is an act of violence

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Melissa K. Nelson, “Lighting the Sun of Our Future: How These Teachings Can Provide Illumination” in Nelson, *Original Instructions*, 9-10.

that perpetuates that a hunter, a white hunter, is usually within his rights as a human to shoot and kill non-humans.

Hogan introduces the conflict between traditional Indigenous knowledge and the colonial system when Ama is arrested and brought before a judge and jury comprised of colonizers. After the Taiga elders argue this is a matter for their traditional laws to handle and impart justice, Ama is found not guilty by the American legal system. Although she is free of charges, as Jesse Peter argues, the court has defined “her and her beliefs as stereotypically and romantically ‘Indian’ while ignoring her voice and her reality” (Peters 115). Ama's ceremony is considered a Native act, separate from mainstream thought and idea. Just as earlier colonizers assigned Natives a neat box accompanied with a label because of their ‘rebellious’ way of life, Ama lives in opposition to the “evolved beings of the court, who live separate from their natural world. [She] represents the terrifying, encroaching natural world that science works to explain and map” (McCullough 15). The panther is a figure that is incredibly distanced from colonizer reality. It is a figure that is feared but also pitied because of its reduced life: a reduced life that colonizers created. The panther's reduced circumstances and endangered status result from a “ubiquitous failure to recognize and respect the ancient ‘rules’ of ecological balance and mutual dependency” (Cooper 151). These are the rules that Ama believes in, and it is because of these rules and her adherence to them that she is considered terrifying by colonizer standards. Adhering to these rules, completing ceremony, and recognizing the panther as Sisa has given the cat “hopes that the world still has golden evening light, will have it again and that the Taiga and the panther will recover and breathe again, that we all will sing once more in the swamps at night” (*Power* 192). The colonial world and court misunderstand Ama, but Omishto, who once also misunderstood, comes to believe that Ama “killed it for our people to go on, traded its life for our lives and that

it will return, new and healthy, and so will the world of our people" (*Power* 189). Ama had a vision; Oni opened the door for her to turn the vision into ceremony, which is an attempt to bring an equal and interconnected community between animal, human, water, soil, and air.

Though found not guilty by a jury consisting of colonizers, Ama is handed over to the Taiga, who promise justice according to their laws. Justice is her banishment from the community. Devastated, Omishto goes to Ama's cabin to pack up her things and take care of Ama's goats and chickens. While there, she believes she hears Ama and goes to the edge of the woods to see her, but it is a panther. The cat is large and healthy, and Omishto does not move, afraid it will kill her. She says in her fear, "we stand motionless and look at each other...I say, 'No shi holo,' I mean no harm, Aunt, Grandmother. I think this is the mate of the one Ama killed. Or maybe...it is the same one returned, fully grown and beautiful, or the one that was born alongside me at my beginning" (*Power* 233). After this encounter, she returns to Taiga land, Kili swamp, and sits with the elders, one of which has the panther's skin laid across her lap. Omishto begins to dance, "and as the wind stirs in the trees, someone sings the song that says the world will go on living" (*Power* 235). Omishto returns to the Taiga and opens herself and her lifestyle to Taiga culture. Oni, Sisa, and Ama allowed Omishto to live a life like the one "before the Euro-American intrusion, they are in harmony with nature and tend to identify themselves with trees, bears, beavers, and frogs. Human and non-human nature connected in a harmonious balance" (Du 790). This harmonious balance, described by the Taiga elders, is a time when "the animals used to help the humans, how they would teach them the plants that were healing, sing songs for them to learn, how they would show the people the way to renew the broken world" (*Power* 29). The hurricane, a form of Oni, shows Ama how to renew the world, and the panther, Sisa, offers

to be the sacrifice to bring about the start of this renewal. Hogan's story of Taiga beliefs creates a new beginning for and offers regeneration for Southern Natives and the South.

### **Conclusion: Power Is**

If we read *Power* with the idea that Ama and Omishto are constructs of the Euro-American idealization of the Native "who bears a silent, simplistic relationship to nature," then the narrative of Native identity, Native environmentalism, and the southeastern Native's story of their South continues to revolve around white supremacy (Anderson 176). Yet, Hogan defies any claim that non-Natives have contrived over how Natives exist within nature and how Indigenous authors write about that relationship. *Power* is an example of the stories Hogan and other Native writers compose that indicate that "when it comes to the topic of Indians and the environment, the knowledge that has been lost, destroyed, kept within a particular culture, or not yet fully attained is significantly different from the knowledge that non-Indians especially can claim they have" (Anderson 176). The storm in *Power* highlights this lack of understanding between human and non-human relations, but also a way to regain that knowledge and reclaim the concept of Native ecological tradition. Hogan describes Omishto as an Indigenous woman strengthened by her ancestral land, writing that she "knows this earth, the swamp, it's the same thing as grace, full of the intelligent souls of cat, deer, and wind. [She is] stronger in nature. There is something alive here and generous" (*Power* 231). Her relationship with her ancestral lands has been shaped by the Euro-centric narrative of her tribe and a colonial story of who she is because she is Taiga. Ama helps her fight this understanding to fully recognize herself and others within their stories of Oni and Sisa and how they all function in the combined realms of human and non-human. Omishto witnesses the power of a dominant culture, Taiga ancestral knowledge, and the natural



world. The hurricane becomes more than a storm that strips her but rather a storm that enables her to see through colonization.

Hogan uses the hurricane as a vessel that leads to Taiga ceremony and a return of their ancestral knowledge. Hogan “uses the storm as a rhetorical device to emphasize the significance of Indigenous spirituality. In other words, Hogan uses the storm as a harbinger of a more systematic approach to territory and its human and non-human occupants” (Altundiş 18). The storm is neither Native nor settler but rather a creation that seems to crave a return to its Indigenous roots, to Oni, the power that created the world out of wind and lashing rain. Just as the storm strips but does not kill Omishto, this storm is remembering its originary power. Water has been known to remember. In a 1986 New York City public library presentation, Toni Morrison said that water remembers “where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was” (Morrison). In the form of a hurricane, the water tries to return to Oni's origins by seeking out Ama and Omishto, reminding them of Indigenous dreaming and intuition leading Ama to the panther and initiating ceremony.

*Power* is an example of what Kimberly Blaeser calls “the sound of Indian people talking. The sound of singing. The sound of an Indian language. Conversation. Words for speaking not for print. Or transformation into the being of other creatures. The voices of other beings” (Blaeser 559). Hogan has brought the voice of the Southern Native, not out of the swamp, but has amplified it so it can be heard from the swamp. She has reminded us how much mainstream society does not know “how fictive indeed how absent such lives and experiences can be in non-Native cultural histories of the South” (Anderson 166). The Taiga voice Hogan has created is loud enough to remind us there is much we do not fully understand due to the break between the human and natural world. This is the history that has been forgotten and destroyed. Oni's history,

the Taiga history, is the original history of the South. The hurricane serves as a messenger reminding both the characters and the readership that "the dark inner seas seek us out like the song of ocean in a shell, and we turn back towards them, to our origins, our waters of birth," supporting the idea that water is memory, water is a primal force, and the water within humans urges us to accept the chaos nature provides (*Dwellings* 104). The wind and water of the hurricane draw Ama to Sisa and Sisa to Panther Woman.

Before colonization, the unique and distinct landscape of the South was a region that held the same natural dangers as it does now. However, this ancient landscape was balanced, and the first people, the original Southerners, honored their covenants with animal and land. *Power* provides "readers with a means for recognizing and reconciling nature and spirit" because, without reconciliation, the South, its people, and its humid land will eventually cease to exist (Cook 22). Hogan's narrative addresses many forms of power within the Indigenous and natural spheres. The powers of the Indigenous and nature are seen alongside one another through Taiga creation stories. They have taken an unavoidable part of Southern life and transformed it under Indigenous knowledge, challenging us to look beyond what we know about hurricanes. It brought Omishto back to her ancestral ways, which are unknown to colonizers but have the potential to save the South. As a Native environmentalist and author, Hogan challenges the definitions of power and seeks to separate those definitions of power by giving us two worlds: one that lives within the realm of ancestral knowledge, honors Sisa and Oni, and respects the equality between animal and man, and another world that has lived according to the Euro-American standard and capitalist beliefs that man has dominion over the natural world: a way of life that proved to be the beginning of the end of both worlds. Through the voice of Omishto, Hogan's warnings are brutal truths about the consequences of a break in the relationship between

human and non-human, the covenants that the Taiga hold between Sisa and their swampy ancestral lands. Power is the possibility of renewal and reestablishing the Indigenous way of life, ancestral knowledge, and honored covenants between the South we know and the potential of what the South could become again.

### Chapter 3

#### **A Ruthless Place: Surviving the Waters in *Salvage the Bones***

“Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large merciless hands, committed to blood, comes.” - Jesmyn Ward

The hurricane that ripped through chapter two revealed that its monstrous, destructive tendencies were the opening to Indigenous ceremony, a creature of Native lore that becomes the catalyst for change and path to Native sovereignty. The hurricane in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* is a different beast, careening through the South and illuminating a far different ceremony, revealing not only a merciless natural disaster but a merciless land. Hurricane Katrina was a moment in Southern history that became a defining image for the region. New Orleans became Mardi Gras, jazz, and Katrina. Louisiana became for po’ boys, crawfish boils, and Katrina. The images of flooded neighborhoods and Southern landscapes are difficult to erase from memory. But unlike Noah’s biblical flood, the flood waters of Katrina did not wash away sins or cleanse the earth. Largely documented in photo and video, Katrina littered beaches and streets with bodies of both the recently dead and the long buried. She exposed the racial disparities of the Gulf Coast and the horror of survival while most of the world watched from afar as cities and states drowned.

In the hands of Jesmyn Ward, Katrina becomes a body of water that tells a story through laying bare a landscape of salvage: salvaged earth, memory, and history. Salvage is defined as a rescue or to rescue, and Katrina offers the opportunity to salvage Black Southern history in terms of rescuing a sense of belonging and retrieving memories of oppression and stories of survival. The young, Black, female narrator, Esch is created so that Ward can confront institutionalized

racism within disaster preparedness and recovery which encompasses inequitably distributed resources and a racialized view of outdoor spaces. Esch offers a vehicle to salvage and share intergenerational memories of past hurricanes and previous disaster responses. In doing so, she becomes a challenger to the Southern storyteller in a genre once defined by white male authors penning an adventure story, but through Esch, pregnant and Black experiencing Katrina begets a defining Southern story of survival and continuance rather than adventure and exploration. Esch's survival amid Katrina in an unjust world, facing attacks from both the human and nonhuman world, which mirrors many Southerners' experiences, becomes a retelling of the Southern experience from a new and unlikely voice. But Ward would be incapable of telling such a story without Katrina and other bodies of water in the unique landscape of the Gulf. I argue that the bodies of water in *Salvage the Bones*, including the Gulf Coast, the Atlantic Ocean, Esch's home the Pit, and the anthropomorphized body of Katrina that swirls with warm coastal waters and teems with anger, tell stories, demolish [noun], and expose buried corruption. These waters enable Ward to tell the stories of systemic racism in the Mississippi gulf when destruction comes to shore.

Within this chapter, I utilize both ecocritical and critical race theory frameworks to analyze both Ward's storytelling and narrator against the backdrop of a hurricane. As in the first chapter, these frameworks, combined with Ward's specific narrator, privileges the Black voice and story by introducing an unlikely heroine in an unlikely space of both beauty and terror. Ward's ability to combine beauty and terror in the throes of a hurricane with a Black female narrator upsets the field of Southern literature while ecocritical and critical race theory frameworks work to expose and salvage the ignored bones in a wild South met with the wild winds of a hurricane. *Salvage the Bones* brings readers into the storm, into the chaotic despair, so

they may see disaster, and experience the dread and fear a hurricane slowly brings to anyone in its “mandatory evacuation” path. Ward, a survivor of Katrina, uses her experience to accurately depict the hurricane preparation process, the terror of rising waters, and the unsettling calm that follows the storm. In *Salvage*, Ward creates a narrative that is imbued with storytelling and raw and realistic action and emotion which ultimately forges a telling of the intimacy of surviving a hurricane. By doing so, *Salvage the Bones* expands not only the understanding of Katrina’s victims and Southern hurricane culture but also the South that lies in Katrina’s path—the South that is ignored even after disaster strikes—and creates a new dimension of Southern literature in which communities of color have an intimacy with their rural home. She unearths bones that have long been buried to reveal stories of survival, reclaiming ownership of land and space, and intimacies with the natural landscapes for Black Southerners. Throughout this chapter, I examine how Ward employs storytelling about the past, particularly past storms, and the Mississippi Gulf to create a heroine relatively new within the Southern literature genre who, through Katrina, sings the song of the South—a South of ignored and overlooked lives—and illuminates the relationship between the Southern rural Black community and their natural surroundings.

Unlike most Hurricane Katrina literature which solely focuses on Katrina the event, post-event trauma, and Katrina in New Orleans, Ward shifts our gaze of Katrina’s ruin to rural Mississippi. A quick Google search of Hurricane Katrina provides images predominantly of New Orleans. Christopher Clark states that by putting New Orleans at the center of the disaster discussion, the city “often became a stand-in for the South as a region and the US as a whole” (342). The world saw how the Lower Ninth Ward and St. Bernard flooded and people who had escaped to their roofs where they stayed long after the storm had passed. These images captivated viewers while most Katrina-affected areas went overlooked. Fellow Mississippian,

Natasha Trethewey writes that when she asked “what [her audience] remembers when they hear the words, Hurricane Katrina. Almost all of them say ‘New Orleans,’ recalling the footage beginning the day after landfall when the levees broke. Almost never does anyone answer, ‘the Mississippi Gulf Coast’” (2). But Ward removes us from the iconic French Quarter to the largely unknown bucolic Mississippi bayous and parishes such as the fictional Bois Sauvage, or “savage woods.” We are taken “beyond the pictures of choked rooftops of New Orleans and toward the washed-out, feral landscapes elsewhere along the coast” (Cunningham). Whereas the levees failed New Orleans, Katrina made landfall in Mississippi where no levee could protect the coast from this natural disaster. Readers are removed from the infamous Southern cities and urban areas and plunked down into dusty and rural spaces. Ward illuminates the plight of those outside the well-known neighborhoods of NOLA and carries our vision to that of Southerners, particularly Black Southerners, who live in pine forests, bayous, farms, and clay-dirt yards. These are the bodies who were also on their roofs, treading flood waters, or clinging to whatever object was close by as long as it floated. *Salvage* shows us survivors and a landscape that was left in ruin by what Ward calls a “merciless mother,” a landscape that wasn’t simply “ravaged, not [reduced to] rubble, but completely gone (Ward 253).

Ward writes that “bodies tell stories” and within *Salvage*, the Atlantic, the Gulf Coast, the Pit of Esch’s home, and the warm, briny water that Katrina brings all have something to say. These nautical bodies are reconfigured in Ward’s work to reveal a Southern landscape that is intimately connected with the Black community and upsets an ingrained definition of Southern literature and Southern space. Southern literature has a long and true history of neglecting Black spaces. While a sense of place has long been honed and relied upon within the genre capitalizing on the decayed, abandoned, and remnants of Reconstruction South, including Faulkner’s

Yoknapatawpha and Eudora Welty's Mississippi deltas, the genre has overwhelmingly failed to recognize the communities of color's sense of space and home. In Ward's hands, Katrina brings our attention to these smaller, Southern, Black communities, and we are finally allowed to see and begin to understand a Black South that is working its way out from under predetermined ideas from white minds of what it means to be Black in the South.

*Salvage the Bones* begins two weeks before Katrina formed in the Atlantic Ocean as all eyes are on Jose, a storm that is churning with an unknown path. The narrator, Esch Batiste, is a 14-year-old Black girl who lives with her father and brothers Randall, Skeetah, and Junior. Her mother had died giving birth to Junior while her father, an alcoholic, struggles to find work. The family lives in poverty, surviving on Top Ramen and eggs from their chickens. As the story opens, the children watch China, Skeetah's prize-fighting pit bull, give birth to her first litter of puppies. Soon after, Esch discovers that she's pregnant by Manny, a friend of her brothers. The story progresses and grows as Katrina grows and moves closer to the coast. Chapter titles are a countdown of Katrina's movements. In the days leading up to the storm, the children swim in the Pit, a manmade pond on their property, prepare for the storm as their dad instructs, and break into a white family's barn to get medicine for China. When the storm arrives, their home floods and they are forced to retreat to the attic, only to break through the ceiling as the flood waters rise and threaten to drown them in their home. The family soon realizes their home will not hold and they swim to their abandoned grandparents' home within sight on a small hill. While all the family members survive the swim to the home, the puppies drown, China is swept away by the water, and Esch's father finds out she's pregnant and nearly drowns her when he discovers the secret she has tried to keep. After the storm, the family walks to their friends' homes and surveys the damage of their home, community, and friends.



Although Esch's mother died prior to the story, her presence is a constant companion that accompanies Esch as she first traverses her thoughts of pregnancy and motherhood and then as her focus shifts solely to survival. Esch's mother is remembered in the same mode as the steady onslaught of storms in the South: through storytelling. Spinning a yarn is a favorite pastime of the South, whether it's remembering "the way things used to be," community gossip, town history, or lore, but nearly every Southerner has heard tales of past hurricanes: Hazel from 1954, Camille in 1969, Andrew in 1992, Katrina in 2005. Ward turns to the true Southern diversion of storytelling as Esch prepares for Katrina. Stories tinged with fear and awe of Camille, the last 'big one,' loom over the Batiste family. After Esch's dad announces that Katrina is a category five, the highest possible category on the Saffir-Simpson scale, Esch is stunned saying, "Oh I say, but it is more a breath than a word. Daddy has faced a category 5, but we're too young to remember the last category 5 hurricane that hit the coast: Camille, almost forty years ago. But Mama told us stories about that one" (*Bones* 213). That one. The storm is known only by a single name, and everything is explained and understood.

Before Katrina, Camille reigned supreme in the Gulf for a generation. Esch's mother remembers how the hurricane winds sounded like trains, and Esch thinks "I'd heard trains before...I could not imagine wind sounding like that," but when it is her turn to hear hurricane winds with incredible power, she understands her mother and says, "but now I hear, and I can [imagine]" (*Bones* 220). Storms such as Camille and Katrina become the stuff of legends, and in the stories of some, human resilience is hailed as strength in the face of god and myths of human survival against the raw power of nature. Ward infuses the new legend of Katrina and Esch's survival with the Greek myths that Esch has been reading in school, successfully paralleling the

art of Southern storytelling with Greek mythology. Esch becomes a modern-day bard throughout *Salvage*, mirroring Homer but emerging as Medea when Katrina is finished.

The clearest example of Ward's young, Black, female, Southern bard is the moment Esch surveys the damage of the town with her family, scavenges through a ruined liquor store and finds shards of colored glass from the broken liquor bottles:

I will tie the glass and stone with string, hang the shards above my bed, so that they will flash in the dark and tell the story of Katrina, the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered. Her chariot was a storm so great and black the Greeks would say it was harnessed to dragons. She was the murderous mother who cut us to the bone, but left us alive, left us naked and bewildered as wrinkled newborn babies, as blind puppies, as sun starved newly hatched baby snakes. She left us a dark Gulf and salt-burned land. She left us to learn to crawl. She left us to salvage. Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes. (255)

Katrina is transformed from a category 5 hurricane to an image of an ancient merciless warrior in a chariot meant to ruin all she sees. Esch's anthropomorphizing description of Katrina shapes a new, distinct form of storytelling in Southern literature. The bard, Esch, a young, poor, Black girl who lives in a rural space and likens The Mother of Destruction to a Greek myth, is Ward's way of deconstructing modern Southern literature and allowing a new Southern hero to be made.

In Jim Coby's study of rural spaces and rural women, he argues that Ward, through her narrator, Esch, "breaks down the orders of Southern literature, to deconstruct the idea that undomesticated rural spaces are inhabited only by adventurous young, white men (85). Prior to *Salvage*, the heroes, narrators, and subjects of the rural Southern adventure story were predominantly white men. Rich, landowning, white men such as William Bartram, Mark Twain,

and William Faulkner took the lead in shaping Southern stories and culture with stories of exploration and small white boys in river rafts. Esch gives us the opposite of what those male authors offered. Instead of Tom Sawyer and an adventure down the Mississippi, Esch experiences the South in terms of survival rather than adventure. Esch's story is of her barely surviving catastrophe rather than an exhilarating tale of near death and adrenaline. The exploration of the humid and muggy landscape and cultural definition made by the white, male authorship is also produced by Ward, who offers a much-ignored and silenced voice in the stories and history of the South, bringing to life a crucial identity in Southern landscape stories. Esch's "adventure" was survival in a world where human society tried its best to silence her voice while the nonhuman world sent storms of destruction to engage her in the battle for her life. The young Black girl of *Salvage* challenges the idea of living, belonging, and having a right to be heard in the rural spaces that are traditionally occupied by a white community. Ward creates a young Black girl to stand in the face of the storm, survive, and do it all while pregnant. Esch tells her story of the South and in doing so, tells *the* story of the South. Without Esch, without the voice of a Black woman, storytelling in the South fails to fully capture or define the South.

The stories of characters like Esch such as Tom Sawyer, both small, poor, and obscure, are the stories that are studied in classrooms and made into classics, but they do not reflect all sides of reality. Esch's story, once told, offers a more complete picture of the South, particularly in times of crisis. Her story of survival gives the South a new voice, a strong distinct voice that arises from the flood waters. Many stories from the South are tales of when nature showed its raw power and men did not arise from the ashes but rather floated to the surface. This is especially true for Black Southerners in hurricane-frequented landscapes. Hurricanes and the

stories surrounding them are used as forewarnings of the reality to come long after the storm is over.

Hurricanes have dotted Southern American history and for communities of color, they are significant reminders of the institutionalized racism that is exposed when disaster calls. Anissa Wardi writes that hurricanes and floods have “marked black life in America...Floods map the interstices of the human and nonhuman world, representing an ecosystem where water and politics meet” (117). In the middle of this meeting of water and politics are communities of color. Wardi uses the Mississippi Flood of 1927 as an example. She describes how “African American work crews...had been laboring nearly around the clock” to secure the levees, but when the levees broke many were drowned. Their deaths were “minimized, underreported, and unrecorded” (117). Wardi quotes John Barry’s *Rising Tide*, which states: “There is no accurate count of the number of men swept to their deaths as the levee broke. The Red Cross listed two dead...The National guard estimated more than 100 negroes had been drowned in the flood waters...The only official account, that of the National Guard officer at the crevasse site stated only, ‘No lives were lost among the Guardsmen’ (118). The Mississippi flood of 1927 is one example in which disaster strikes and the South reverts to an antebellum culture. The Black men who were rebuilding the levee after the flood were not given food unless they were tagged and they were forced to “obtain passes to leave their encampment and put to hard labor” (121). Flood waters tend to wash away any ways of hiding the truth of how a society treats one another and lays bare the underbelly of a community, a state, or a culture. So as Ward utilizes disaster storytelling, she also reveals and emphasizes how these flood waters devastate and demolish communities and expose buried corruption. Camille, Katrina: these storms work as an erosive element that unshrouds a truth of hurricane culture for the Black community.

Among the unshrouding, Esch arises as a powerful new voice of the South and disaster survival and brings her mother's voice with her. Further eroding our understanding of surviving hurricanes, Esch continues to recount her mother's stories about Camille, or as she calls it "The Legend: Camille...she said the smell afterward was what she remembered most clearly, a smell like garbage set out to rot, seething with maggots in the hot sun. She said the newly dead and the old dead littered the beaches, the streets, the woods" (*Bones* 218). This memory of Camille became reality during Katrina when hundreds of caskets and vaults were set afloat in some macabre parade of the dead once the storm had dissipated and the region was left to wade through the flood she left behind. Memory and current reality collide when Katrina finishes with the Gulf Coast. Before the storm, Esch's brother, Skeetah says "All these Batistes been living up here all these years through all these hurricanes and they been all right. I'm telling you," but Esch remembers the stories of bodies floating across the land, and this makes us wonder what else the South has forgotten from the past that hurricanes uncover (*Bones* 220).

Katrina spurned a wave of literature and music that highlighted the inequality within the disaster response. Musicians such as Mos Def wrote songs like the "Katrina Klap" in which "he connects the racially selective rescue efforts of the state with George Bush's larger biopolitical designs, such that the administration's response to Katrina serves as a synecdoche for the pervasive systems of racial oppression structuring American life" (Kish 681). The artistic world amplified the voices of those that waited on rooftops or, like Ward, went from house to house looking for refuge. *Salvage the Bones* is her Katrina story and a deep dive into how the history of the South echoes throughout the present. Katrina is merely the wind that clears the fog from our vision and the dust covering truths that many would rather be ignored.

The Gulf Coast is a unique cultural and ecological landscape within the United States. Swamps and deltas collide with ancient Indigenous cultures and those forged through their forced diaspora. Keith Cartwright and Ruth Salvaggio write that the Gulf is a substantial ocean basin that nurtured indigenous cultures for millennia; became a matrix of exchange during at least four centuries of imperial expansion; became, too, a creolized home space for millions of enslaved Africans and millions of world migrants; and has served as booty for Spanish and French explorers, United States planters and presidents, and global oil markets (3).

The Deep South is an area within the South that was too dependent on a plantation economy, and when the Civil War ended and plantations were no longer a reality, these states that lacked a diverse economy suffered. A broken economy, combined with a legacy built on racism, genocide, and both forced removal and forced placement, equaled a society with little direction and deep resentment. Present-day Deep South states such as Louisiana and Mississippi still suffer from their tortured past with struggling economies, high poverty rates, and consistently low-ranking public-school systems. In 2018, Louisiana and Mississippi public schools were given a D+ in terms of achievement by Education Week and Louisiana ranked third worst in the nation based on test scores, bullying rates, and teacher certification (Edweek and Guidry). These states are beautiful. Their never-ending deltas and dark, enigmatic swamps hold a magic that creates legends in America, but there is no doubt that there is darkness from racism and hate dwelling below the surface and often out in the open. In his article, “What Comes to the Surface: Storms, Bodies, and Community in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*,” Christopher Clark writes that the Southern landscape, particularly the landscape inhabited by Esch and her family, “is a violent and disturbing emblem of neglect, disregard, elision, and the throwaway” (345). It is

through *Salvage* that the South's past comes back to haunt in the face and among the aftermath of the storm.

This cursed past haunts Southern communities of color daily, but Katrina puts it on display for the world. She creates a reckoning. Katrina and “the Gulf draw us into a space where we may be overcome, but also awakened” to the realities of Black Southerners (Coby 14). Ward inserts subtle gestures towards this reality as Esch and her family prepare for Katrina. As the family takes stock of what little food they have, the children express their worry, but their father says “We make do with what we got...Always have. And will” (*Bones* 195). For many in the hurricane's path, the option to rely on family out of the hurricane's reach for shelter and supplies is non-existent. Esch and her brother Skeetah break into a white family's home nearby only to find it empty of people and resources: “There's nothing there. It smells clean. Probably took everything when they evacuated” (*Bones* 209). Statistically, those who evacuate are those that can afford to do so, and many Black families in the rural South like Esch's family cannot leave. Esch is paralyzed as she is informed of this reality: being forced to stand her ground in the face of an oncoming category five hurricane because there is no place to go and no way to get there if they had one. She is the one who answers the government's phone call a day before Katrina and hears the automated message that every person in a hurricane's path has heard.

*Mandatory evacuation. Hurricane making landfall tomorrow. If you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time, we are not responsible. You have been warned. And these could be the consequences of your actions.* There is a list. And I do not know if she says this, but this is what it feels like: *You can die.* This is when the hurricane becomes real. (*Bones* 217)

The reality of Katrina and the imminent danger she brings causes Esch to think and feel one thing acutely: She might die. Camille didn't kill her mother, but it killed plenty of others.

Though her dad has assured her that the Batistes have survived several hurricanes through the decades, Katrina is different. It is Esch's first major hurricane, and she has never experienced a dread like the one Katrina brings.

Though Katrina brought, like all hurricanes, a feeling of impending doom, the force and severity of destruction revealed a legacy not of survival, but of marginalization. Katrina revealed "the persistence of Southern history, arguing the storm's effects on Black Southerners recollected the historical legacy of denigrating African Americans to a form of 'bare life.' Those who were marginalized before the storm's arrival—through entrenched poverty and structural racism—were further marginalized after it" (Crawford 247). Esch's profound realization that her family is left to die reveals how little help Black families are given in the face of nearly certain death, now and in the past. In New Orleans, while all neighborhoods were affected, those inhabited predominantly by Black communities were hardest "hit." *Hit* usually implies that the strongest forces of the hurricane were concentrated in particular areas. However, New Orleans as a collective suffered from broken levees rather than a direct hit from Katrina. The neighborhoods shown on the media, were the historically Black neighborhoods such as Tremé or the Lower Ninth but historically white neighborhoods such as the Garden District suffered far less. The Garden District was built from the Livaudias plantation in 1832, an area with higher elevation claimed by white colonizers (Hawkins). As colonizers, white settlers inserted themselves on whatever land seemed the most advantageous and while it has long been understood that city districts and rural spaces have been the result of a racist system, *Salvage* gives those spaces a



face. The Katrina victim is no longer a nameless person on a roof or evacuee, but a Black girl who has had no say as to where she is from and where she lives.

While *Salvage* removes us from the Lower Ninth and shows us the faces on roofs in pine forests and swamps, it also expands our understanding of just how vast and deep systematic racism dwells beyond neighborhoods in New Orleans and within the deep South. Christopher Lloyd concurs by writing that “*Salvage* suggests that the long-term and deeply rooted historical structures of dispossession in this region are still rigidly in place, particularly in Mississippi” (255). Ward sets up this story of dispossession and exposure, relying on a history of land management. Land management and land reparations are part of these historical structures that have been contentious at best after the Civil War. In Sherman’s “march to the sea” during the closing months of the war, Sherman issued a special order now known as the 40 Acres and a Mule Promise. Families would be given 40 acres of land and a mule to till it so they could finally benefit from their own labor. Confederate land along the coast was to be distributed to thousands of recently freed Black families after nearly 200 years of bondage and forced labor. However, this promise was soon reversed after Lincoln’s assassination and the land was redistributed to white families. Black families were then forced to rely on sharecropping and servitude once again.<sup>11</sup> The land they were finally able to afford was often less than ideal. This is seen through the land the Batiste family lives on and how it responds to Katrina.

The Batiste’s live on land that Esch says her great grandfather, Papa Joseph, owned, fifteen acres in all. Her great grandfather nicknamed his land the Pit. In her first description of the Pit, Esch describes how the land was misused and taken advantage of by Papa Joseph for

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<sup>11</sup> See [NPR’s article](#) on the 40 acres and a mule deal based on an interview with Susan Arden-Joly, preservationist of the Green-Meldrim House in Savannah GA where Sherman held meetings to plan and discuss this deal with Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and local Black leaders.

money. The men he allowed to do this ravaged his land, left it unworkable, and nearly destroyed his home:

Papa Joseph let the white men he work with dig for clay that they used to lay the foundation for houses, let them excavate the side of a hill in a clearing near the back of the property where he used to plant corn for feed. Papa Joseph let them take all the dirt they wanted until their diggin had created a cliff over a dry lake in the backyard, and the small stream that had run around and down the hill had diverted and pooled into the dry lake, making it into a pond, and then Papa Joseph thought the earth would give under the water, that the pond would spread and gobble up the property and make it a swamp, so he stopped selling earth for money. (*Bones* 14)

The land owned by a Black family was seen as dirt for foundations, of whose homes we don't know, and then used to the point of breaking. When Papa Joseph stopped selling the earth, there was hardly anything left. The Pit, which is another body of water that was created from greed and little forethought into the consequences of their actions, is a body that tells a story of land that was seen only as profit. Robert Bullard, writes in his book *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* that "the rise of the South intensified land-use conflicts revolving around "use value" (neighborhood interests) and "exchange value" (business interests)" (154). The Batiste family land is an example of exchange value that ultimately left families and land debilitated and limping. The Pit, created by these land-use decisions, affected the Batiste family for generations, as we see when Katrina comes through.

The Pit tells its story of land misuse and racialized spaces. This is not a pond of clear, clean water but one that Ward describes as looking like "a scab" (*Bones* 16). The Batiste children swim in the Pit alongside their friends, but they are under no delusions as the dive under the

muddy waters littered with leaves and muck. When Katrina lands on top of the Pit, the Pit nearly kills the entire family as it floods over, spilling into their house, forcing them into the attic. As Katrina's waters start to flood the yard, the danger doesn't become imminent until they reach the Pit when it will grow from a pond to a hungry river. The flood waters turn into a "lake growing in the yard. It moves under the broken trees like a creeping animal, a wide-nosed snake. Its head disappears under the house when we stand, its tail wider and wider, like it has eaten something greater than itself, and that great tail stretches out behind it into the woods, toward the Pit" (*Bones* 226-227). When the waters reach the Pit, Esch says "the snake has come to eat and play" (*Bones* 227). Both the flood waters and the Pit combined have become violent reminders of a racialized history in land claim and land ownership in the South. As these bodies of water become the stories of fear and survival in the face of their encroaching mercilessness, they also tell the story of the repercussions of violence, a violence that started as a subtle action leading to the snake threatening to devour the Batistes now.

Familiar with violence towards both human and non-human beings, colonizers-initiated acts of violence towards Southern ecology and the landscape began the moment of contact. They ignored ancient wisdom of plant care and land management as they forced original occupants from their homes; they filled the landscape with enslaved people; they saw land as a place for domination, to use however they wanted for their own "needs" and regardless of the damage inflicted. All of these actions, which culminate in climate injustice and create racial disparities in disaster survival, are examples of what Rob Nixon defines as slow violence. According to Nixon, slow violence is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). The marked violence from contact in the pre-colonial period

through to the Civil Rights era was “spectacular and instantaneous” while the repercussions from those violent actions are “incremental and accretive...calamitous [when] playing out” (Nixon 2). The violence presented in the Batiste yard during the hurricane, the snake that seeks to devour, is a result of the slow violence leading up to hurricane Katrina. Katrina merely exposed the steps leading to the evidence. This exposure “of the South’s inhabitants to social, historical, and natural forces during Katrina revealed a kind of creatureliness; humans and nonhuman animals were simultaneously stripped of security, defenses, and bodily stability” (Lloyd 248). Katrina exposed a racialized system of land ownership as the Batiste’s grew up around the Pit and the hazards it brings with flood stage waters. Jim Crow segregation, sharecropping, and the slow environmental depletion at the hands of industrialists and profiteers (like those who excavate the Pit) were not immediate in their repercussions or clash so catastrophically at their conception that it was nearly impossible for society at large to foresee the results of such systems. The American South, as much of the world, has suffered from slow violence, but the American South saw Katrina pull the evidence out of rural Mississippi and put it on the TV screen where it was unavoidable.

Katrina’s wrath was unavoidable for everyone in her path. Along with families on roofs, the catastrophic destruction of the coastal communities was on display for the world. As Esch and her family ride around after the storm and see how others fared, she noted areas, typically those with a majority white population, all suffered the same or even worse, physical destruction as they did. She observed “the yacht club, and all the old white-columned homes that faced the beach, that made us feel small and dirty and poorer than ever when we came here with Daddy...are gone. Not ravaged, not rubble, but completely gone (*Bones* 253). The difference for most of the occupants of the yacht clubs, old stately homes and Bois Sauvage was how they

survived. The residents of Bois Sauvage weathered the storm and prayed to survive, while many white coastal residents were able to evacuate. Katrina saw to exposing this difference and forced the rest of us to ask why. In an interview, Ward describes her survival story that was undoubtedly the inspiration for Esch and her family: “we did what we could to survive; we went out into the storm, wading through water chest deep, children clinging to our shoulders, and swam and scrambled for higher ground” (*Bones* 262). Hurricanes are masters of displacement and whose ruin knows no discrimination, but they do demolish physical structures so we may see societal structures with a clear field of vision. Ward describes the hurricane’s exposure when Esch says “there is a pushy wind blowing, the kind that drags at my clothes and shows my body for what it is. The light comes from everywhere and nowhere” (*Bones* 196). Katrina’s waters and her wide curving body reveal the bones of the South. Her flooding, raging waters force many Black Katrina victims to scramble for higher ground and escape the rising waters of their own version of the Pit, mimicking their everyday reality in the racialized system that has been created around them.

### **Dismantled by Winds**

Linking Katrina to Esch, Ward also upsets conceptualizations of the Black community in rural spaces. In the days before Katrina, as the storm brews off the coast, Esch’s character is crafted in her description of the natural world around her, which she does with deep observation, intimate knowledge, and an affection for the rural space she grew up in and calls home. Just as Katrina reshaped the South, Ward reshapes the field Southern literature “by populating an undomesticated, poor area with typically underrepresented characters and by revealing their affinity and interaction toward such a space” (Coby 87). So now, not only is the voice of the

Southern outdoor adventurer changing, but so too is the long held understanding of Black families in the outdoors, which are, unfortunately, not wholly unfounded or untrue. While, at times, wilderness proved a respite for African Americans, as seen in the swamps of Chapter one, from colonial America into the Civil Rights era of the 1960's wilderness "provided cover for unspeakably cruel acts of violence" (Coby 86). The outdoors was unsafe, and this had little to do with the dangers normally associated with nature such as venomous snakes, poisonous plants, or large, predatory mammals. No, these dangers were lynching, self-enacted justice for trespassing, and other racist acts to establish dominance and instill fear.

After emancipation, very few formally enslaved people owned property and any sort of foraging could also result in bodily harm for a Black person (Coby). As African Americans began a mass migration into northern cities after the war, "the increasingly urbanized North distanced them from the rural experiences of their parents and grandparents, who lived and worked in fields, gardens, and woods" (Coby 86). The natural world "initially serves as sites of abuse and neglect...but would later become an almost foreign environ as large swaths of the population migrated to more urban environments" (Coby 86). So, when Ward uses the storm as a backdrop for Esch's intimacy with the outdoors, she once again offers a disruption in Southern literature for rural place and the African American community by establishing a Black girl as her narrator. Diane Glave, a Black environmental historian, explains that while "African American authors often set scenes in rural environments, rarely and not without good reason, do these authors celebrate such environments in the same way that Whitman or Annie Dillard has" (5). The Southern ecological environment has rarely been a friend, and rarely has it been something the Black community embraces with the intimacy that Esch does. Glave writes that "feelings of distaste are long-standing for African Americans whose forefathers and -mothers experience

nature entwined with fear and violence” (5). In this, Ward is breaking through generational trauma, placing Esch in the fields and clearings that generations before were places of fear, where she would have been a in danger, a stranger, and an outsider. As Ward continually throws expectations into disarray, she chooses to do so in the middle of a hurricane, as if things were not chaotic enough.

Hurricane season and the days before a storm are some of the most anticipatory days in the South. Fear of the unknown is palpable in communities, as people wait for the hurricane churning offshore. Will it shift and miss them or stay its forecasted course? How soon will it weaken as it hits land, or will it grow stronger in the warmer waters of the coast? Supplies in stores such as gas, firewood, fresh water, etc. are all gone within a few days of the storm. Aside from the preparation, nature begins to shift and those paying attention notice as something completely primal begins to take over their home, engulfing everything they know. It is in these days that Ward creates and displays Esch’s connection with her home. Esch describes the area near the Pit as “a clearing where the pines had been cut brutally away so that stumps dotted the field beyond the fence like chairs that no one would ever sit on. Egrets picked their way through the grass, attentive and showy as fussy girlfriends at the cows’ side” (*Bones* 64). The Pit and the land around it have been instrumental to the Batiste children and for Esch, this is a place that seems to transport her away from poverty and loneliness and enhance the goddess figure that Ward has infused throughout the novel. Esch is still the girl from the Pit, but through Esch’s eyes, both she and the Pit become mythic in their existence. Trees are alive, storms sing, and she belongs among them. Esch says:

away from the Pit, the pine trees reach skyward, their green-needled tops stand perfectly still. Once in a while, they shiver in the breeze that moves across their tops. They seem to

nod to the breeze that moves across their tops. They seem to nod to something that I cannot hear, and I wonder if it is the hum of Jose out in the Gulf, singing to himself.

(*Bones* 66)

Ward employs Esch to describe a normal, around-every-bend of the South scene. Pine trees shiver and move as if communicating with the other elements, but as Esch describes this commonplace scene, Ward transforms the normal into a space that we may have seen but never recognized. Esch knows this place, recognizes the trees as they react toward Jose, and notes this subtle shift.

Esch continues to notice these shifts, a progression of the advancing storm and nature's response to the oncoming fierce product of mother nature. She notes her "chickens have made their own plans for the storm; they have packed their eggs away, hidden them well" and while the family prepares, so too does the natural world (*Bones* 198). With the harried vigor of Esch's preparation and observation, it would be safe to assume that when Katrina does arrive, barreling towards her bringing terror, that they would be set advisories. Indeed, Ward does pit the two against each other in the classic nature vs. human battle, and given the reality of Katrina, this is required. However, even with this levied against them, Ward still conveys how intimately the storm is intertwined with Esch. Ward writes that Katrina's winds, "the wind which yesterday only made itself known by sight, sighs and says *Hello*," greeting Esch (*Bones* 219). Later, as the flooding worsens and the family is forced into the attic, Katrina "screams, *I have been waiting for you*" (*Bones* 230). Esch sees the storm as a being, as an entity that talked to her and which she further anthropomorphizes, seeing the storm as more than a work of nature. Rather than simply a hurricane, or a natural inevitability of living in the South, this hurricane reaches out to connect to Esch, to help her tell her story. As Esch escaped her home and jumped from her roof



to a tree, she said “the hurricane enfolds me in its hand. I glide,” and it seemed as if Katrina ensured her survival, so she could speak her story when Katrina was done with her (*Bones* 232).

Ward is careful, though, not to portray Katrina as a civilized, humanistic work of mother nature. Instead, the storm is not kind to Esch, just as she was unkind in reality. Though she is used as a vehicle that gives Esch the ability to tell her story, Katrina is still the merciless mother, emulating the unkindness that Esch and her family have endured from an unjust system.

Although Katrina at first enables Esch to glide from roof to tree, she falls and is swallowed briefly by Katrina. Terrified, she thinks: “my head goes under, and I am tasting it, fresh and cold and salt somehow, the way tears taste in the rain” then wonders, swirling in the water: “who will deliver me?” (*Bones* 235). Here Esch’s life mirrors her continual reference to Greek mythology as Ward tosses Esch into Katrina, into the mouth of the monster that could easily kill her and we are reminded of Esch’s earlier reference “in ancient Greece, for all her heroes, for Medea and her mutilated brother and her devastated father, water meant death” (*Bones* 216). But this water does not kill her. Esch has, so far, felt at home in the waters of her home, reinforcing her connection with the nature she has lived among for her entire existence. Katrina, a stranger to Esch and her home landscape, comes and leaves her and her family a “pile of wet, cold branches, human debris in the middle of all the rest of it” (*Bones* 237). Esch survives the hurricane, survives Katrina, and leaves us to grapple and understand what Katrina has done to Esch, the young, Black, pregnant girl who recites Greek mythology and has an affinity for her Pit, successfully upending expectations of Southern literature and previous hurricane literature.

Katrina may have muddied the waterways in the South, but it cleared the way for families like the Batistes and girls like Esch to be seen and heard. Many Southern “critics have sought to understand Ward’s text through a muddled framework of loose assumptions about what

‘Southern literature’ should entail” but as Coby explains, Ward uses Katrina to deepen Esch’s relationship with both water and the Southern landscape (Coby 84). The framework that Southern scholars have relied on for too long, based on an overwhelmingly white canon, was indeed muddled when Katrina came through and exposed an array of voices like Esch’s that now can clear space for themselves and their home. As Esch sees clearly through the damage, so too do her readers. Esch may have at first glided through the air when exposed to Katrina, but just as she is unwillingly submerged in Katrina in a forced baptism, so Esch resurfaces familiar with Katrina and the raw power and terror nature possesses, as well as with a different view of her home. She sees Bois Sauvage ravaged in a way that she’s never seen. When she rides around to survey the damage Katrina has inflicted on her town, she sees the bayou and the river beyond what they have been before and personifies and mystifies them. The bayou has “drowned” and perhaps for the first time, she wonders what’s below the surface: “I wonder what the storm has stirred up from the bottom of the bay, and what it has dragged in and left in the warm, mud-dark water” (*Bones* 249). Katrina has exposed the Southern world and led us to want to see what further lies hidden. Esch notes this exposure as she looks up after the storm and thinks “there is too much sky,” leading us to wonder what was revealed, and what lies under that mud-dark water, waiting for the next hurricane.

### **Water Means Death**

Quoting Medea’s Greek mythological tale, Esch says that water meant death, and this was as true for those in Katrina’s path as it was for Medea. However, the water in *Salvage the Bones* is also the death of what had been fundamental ideas and constructs of Southern literature, Southern Black identity, and Black Southerners in nature. Katrina has reshaped the way modern America

sees the power of hurricanes. We had forgotten, or were too young or too removed, to remember Camille, but in the days and weeks following Katrina, the media was flooded with images and video of her destruction and wrath. Survival stories like Ward's overwhelmed the American senses. We could imagine her and others' survival when they would narrate, as Ward does in an interview about their harrowing journeys: "and then there was the wind. It snapped the pine trees around us in two, razed the forest to the South of us. It pulled the weaker trees from the ground by the roots, and it threw them in the air. I thought we would die—that the wind would flip our cars or toss a tree in our direction, which would sweep us away like a broom" (*Bones* 262). Just as the world has been introduced to a new reality, so Esch and her family are forced into the attic by flood waters and then must break through the roof to avoid drowning, mirroring real stories. Katrina's water has brought the end of an overwhelmingly white hero and given life to a new one.

As time has passed and the initial shock of Katrina has worn off, scholars, authors, journalists, and politicians have been able to see the reality of what Katrina had exposed. For Southern authors, like Ward, Katrina's exposure has offered an opportunity to tell their story and to offer a voice that had been silenced, ignored, or was absent from the Southern canon. Ward has created a character that has become the voice of Katrina's Gulf Mississippi. Through Esch, readers and scholars listen to a voice they had rarely heard tell a story they had never imagined. Readers of Southern fiction and non-Mississippians have seen the state through Eudora Welty and her deltas, through Faulkner and his stories of death and decay, and now they see it through a Black girl, living in poverty, pregnant, quoting Greek mythology. Esch successfully helps the Southern canon turn a corner from stories of white men and women to Black girls, a voice that Ward says is often misunderstood and ignored. Now, it is no longer William Bartram and

Faulkner who tell us about the South and its humid bayous and decaying towns. In a 2011 interview with *Paris Review*, Ward says

The first time I read *As I Lay Dying*, I was so awed I wanted to give up. I thought, ‘He’s done it, perfectly. Why the hell am I trying?’ But the failures of some of his black characters—the lack of imaginative vision regarding them, the way they don’t display the full range of human emotion, how they fail to live fully on the page—work against that awe and goad me to write. (Ward *Interview*)

Ward has surmounted Faulkner’s failures to offer a fuller vision of Southern Black America. Infuriated by the response to Katrina survivors, Ward wrote *Salvage the Bones* and gave the South and America a whole picture of what it meant to be poor and Black in the rural South, facing hurricane-sized monsters. Because of Katrina, Ward has been able to “use the backdrop of the storm as an opportunity for reevaluation of place and as an opportunity to dismantle and reconstruct fundamental misconceptions about the field of Southern literature, specifically those pertaining to African American Southerners” and their connection to nature (Coby 84). Katrina meant death to many. To the Southern canon, it also means new life.

It may seem that the Mississippi of Faulkner and Welty has not changed significantly since their publications and in many ways it has not. Mississippi’s reality is still that of generational poverty and a legacy of Jim Crow, slavery, and lynching. Ward confirms that yes, those all still exist in the South, in Mississippi. Ward does not gloss over the landscape in which Esch grew up and Esch does not romanticize her home or paint it to be anything other than a salvage yard of broken vehicles and appliances. The Pit looks like a scab and tends to flood and cover the yard in red clay, and when Katrina arrives, the Pit nearly kills them all. No, Mississippi’s natural landscape is not painted as a peaceful paradise removed from racial and

environmental injustice. Once again removing us from a painted idea of what the South's literary landscape is supposed to be, Ward "position[s] them within the detritus-strewn environment of the Pit" (Coby 94). However, rather than strictly enforce a stereotype and barricade her character into a box built by a realistic racially constructed system, Ward proves that so much more exists within that world of Gulf Mississippi. Beauty is evident, often hiding itself or danger. Esch receives joy from the waters of the Pit, swimming in those clay-red waters with her family; she remarks on the sway of the pines; she finds calm in the shushing and dark of the pine forest. Through each of these circumstances, Ward creates a Southern belle unlike any other written before. This belle is Black, poor, pregnant, and closely connected to the undomesticated natural landscape that is her home, a far cry from the unrealistic Scarlet O'Hara who will think about her Southern landscape, Tara, tomorrow.

Southern landscape plays a pivotal role in Southern fiction, just as it does in *Salvage*; however, the relationship between the landscape and the hurricane reveals deeper "roots considerably deeper than recent demographic and cultural changes would suggest...The most evocative instances for interpreting this relationship are not Wordsworthian paeans" but accounts of reality and hidden truths (Spoth 146). Esch's affinity for her natural home is no longer unrealistic or unseen. Authors such as Ward have paved the way for the Black community who loves the outdoors and wants to build that community a foundation and a voice. On social media, both Twitter and Instagram, Black outdoor influencers are gaining popularity, and proving that Esch is not alone. Influencers such as @thegirlyblackfarmer, @blackforager, @blackmenoutdoors, and @countrygentlemen cooks are showing their communities traditional ways of foraging and growing food therefore granting access and offering representation to the outdoors community. Their content spans from eastern North Carolina to Ohio. Katrina made it

possible for Ward to illustrate a truth of the South ignored and unknown by many. The Southern landscape can be brutal and unyielding, and it was forced on enslaved people, but Ward has reclaimed that narrative, and is able to retell the reality of that past and the reality of modern trauma.

The Gulf that Ward lives in and writes about has a complicated past and present. Katrina, with her deadly waters, disrupted and ended life there, but in the hands of Jesmyn Ward, Katrina has become the vessel that propelled the truth about Black people in rural Mississippi. Esch has become the young Black bard singing true songs and stories that the South had been ignoring. Ward uses the age-old tradition of storytelling with a hero that the South had been unfamiliar with. Richard Campanella calls this “songs of pain and rapture [that] keep circulating” (15). But it haunts us, haunts the South. It’s a “song [that] keeps telling us that deep water and drowning are not the same thing” (Campanella 15). In a landscape where it has historically meant the same thing, Ward offers a story where you can survive the deep water. Water does not always mean death.

## Chapter Four

### **Momma Was Made of Mud: Earth, Water, and The South in *Shell Shaker***

*"This is our land; it's the homeland. The homeland affects you directly; it affects your body, it affects the collective mind, and the collective heart, and the collective spirit. And so we feel it because there is no separation."* -Joy Harjo (Interview, 1989)

Swamps and hurricanes have dominated the previous chapters, weaving tales of a South overwhelmed with political, ethical, and ecological encumbrances and Southerners surrounded by humid, tepid waters and hurricane winds strong enough to play pick-up sticks with ancient trees. However, this chapter is a culmination of the two physical elements, earth and water, seen throughout the first three. This chapter deals in dirt and mud. Such a pronouncement may seem odd, yet within the make-up of hurricanes and swamps, mud and dirt become an integral part of the foundation of an ecosystem and cultural identity. Mud is an unavoidable and annoying result of a storm that then cakes the bottom of shoes tramped through homes, staining floors and carpets. After a particularly nasty storm, mud is shoveled out front doors, cursed back from where it came. This mixture of earth and water can be dangerous. It is a residue to be dealt with. However, as in previous chapters, the idea of what something should be, and preconceived notions of purpose, are challenged again. In LeAnne Howe's (Choctaw) novel, *Shell Shaker*, mud becomes more than earth and water and transforms into an agent of creation, reconnection, and homecoming. Mud transforms into the sticky vehicle through which the removed nation of Choctaws of Oklahoma can reopen the connections with traditional ceremony and homeland and renew relationships with the Mississippi Band of Choctaws. Through dirt and her conception of land, Howe offers an alternative history, a Choctaw history, that created the story of the South.

In this final chapter, I argue that Howe circulates Southern Indigenous history through her use of Indigenous earthworks and her employment of ancient Choctaw spirits that possess and animate mud, effectively reorientating how the South understands its relationship to its violent history and its understanding of the relationship between Indigenous presence and land. The Native population of the South has long suffered from colonization and the destruction of their culture, beliefs, and land. After the Great Removal, vital narratives and practices were lost. But Howe uses the land to reanimate Choctaw beliefs and practices and reject colonial assumptions of how humans relate to the land. She incorporates Choctaw beliefs based on land and reckons with the Indigenous South by confronting the horror the land has witnessed. connecting Choctaw nations and building a bridge to history that has been forgotten and overwhelmed with the dominant colonizer narrative.

I will utilize Native Southern studies and ecocriticism in this chapter and apply them to an analysis of Choctaw history in the South, from removal and into the present, and Howe's reckoning with this history. I also examine earthworks, meaning both the physical mounds across the Southeast and their renewed spiritual connection to Southern tribes as well as the dirt these mounds are comprised of. *Shell Shaker* gives us a strong idea of how these structures are regarded in the pre-colonization era and illustrates their use today in decolonizing Southern spaces. Earthworks are rising in modern society as a representation of how the land and ancient Indigenous thought are combined and connected to build strong communities. The Indigenous mound used in *Shell Shaker* works as the link between Southern Indigenous history and the Southern literary genre. It is through these ancient layers of mud and sacred dirt I argue that LeAnne Howe's intersections of Southern landscape and Choctaw history work to accomplish three components of Indigenous literature. First, earthworks aid in retelling an Indigenous history



and story, filling in the gaps of Southern history and thought lost to a settler colonizer's established narrative. Second, Indigenous mounds offer a way to decolonize physical land and Southern placehood by offering an Indigenous voice to the physical history of the Southern landscape, overtaking the Euro-American voice. Lastly, earthworks reestablish the Southern Gothic genre outside its overwhelmingly white authorship and purpose by presenting the genre with the horror of Removal and ghosts that heal rather than simply haunt. *Shell Shaker* and its dirt, in all its forms, assert that Choctaws came from mud and mud is what calls all of us back to an Indigenous South.

Investigating the Choctaw South in *Shell Shaker* first involves Howe's use of tribalogy, a term introduced briefly in the introduction, and its situation among both the physical South and the storied South. In her essay "Tribalogy: The Power of Native Stories," Howe defines tribalogy as the rhetorical space surrounding "Native people creat[ing] narratives that were histories and stories with the power to transform" ("The Story of America" 118). *Shell Shaker* is one of Howe's contributions to the growing canon of tribalogy. She further writes, "Native stories are power. They create people. They author tribes. America is a tribal creation story" ("The Story of America" 118). *Shell Shaker* is a powerful and necessary addition to the tribalogy of America and the Indigenous South. This novel narrates the beginning of the Choctaws according to their beliefs and in turn, narrates a beginning for the South.

*Shell Shaker* is often described as a time travel story, a novel with parallel timelines moving between Choctaw ancestral homelands of Mississippi in the 1730s-1740s to 1990's Oklahoma, where many of the Choctaws were removed. Howe follows one family lineage, that of Shakbatina and her daughters and their descendants, the Billy family in the 1990's. Published

in 2001, *Shell Shaker* opens in 1738 Mississippi with the execution of Shakbatina, satisfying a blood sacrifice for crimes blamed on her daughter, Anoleta, but committed by tribal leader Red Shoes. These acts of sacrifice and deceit propel the novel's plot as the spirit of Shakbatina cannot rest and it seems the spirit of Red Shoes has no desire to. Shakbatina resurfaces to possess Auda Billy, her descendent, and kill the Choctaw chief and Auda's partner, Red McAlester, a reincarnation of Red Shoes. Indeed, many characters in the 1990s timeline are a reincarnation of a 1730's character. Shakbatina and her daughters are now the Billy family, Susan Billy, and her daughters, Auda, Tema, and Adair, and just as Shakbatina took the blame for Anoleta, Susan takes the blame for Auda. The murder and Susan's incarceration bring the Billy women home, including aunties Delores and Dovie. It is when all the women are gathered in Susan's kitchen in Durant Oklahoma that ancient Choctaw spirits, spirits from their Southern ancestral home, flood in. They flood in through Mississippi mud from the mother mound and replaces the biscuit dough Delores kneads and quickly overflows onto the table. They speak to Delores and instruct the family to bring Red and bury him in a mound on their ancestral Southern home, and effectively put his and Red Shoe's spirit to rest. Throughout both family's timelines, mud and mounds are the connector to culture, physical space, and spiritual knowledge. They are home and solution.

In this example of tribalogy, Howe capitalizes on a compulsory and established component of Southern literature: a sense of place. For this Choctaw story and, by extension, the story of the South, much of this sense of place relies on earthworks, and for *Shell Shaker*, that earthwork is an Indigenous mound located in Mississippi called Nanih Waiya.<sup>12</sup> Nanih Waiya is the essence of Choctaw creation and power. The Choctaw tribe refers to Nanih Waiya as the

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<sup>12</sup> See the Mississippi Band of Choctaw's webpage has a section devoted to Nanih Waiya <https://www.choctaw.org/culture/mound.html>

Mother Mound, the Nanih Waiya. A place of creation and birth, Nanih Waiya is the nucleus of the Choctaw origin story. The earthwork becomes an active character who calls the main characters, the Billy family, home to the South and establishes an Indigenous sense of place that within Southern literature, particularly the Southern gothic, has been instrumental in defining the South. Nanih Waiya sidles up next to notable Southern gothic visions from authors such as William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. Their conception of the dilapidated rural South in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha and O'Connor's strange and macabre towns and folk are now neighbors with the Choctaw places of the South, the earthworks such as Nanih Waiya that uses haunted mud and mounds to shift the trajectory of the South's future into an Indigenous one. In this next section I will describe what the mounds are to Indigenous culture, Southern history, and the Southern Gothic.

### **Mounds: Ignored and Forgotten History in the Open**

Chadwick Allen's *Earthworks Rising* (2022) opens with a quote by Henry Clyde Shetrone, an anthropologist who studied Native mounds in the 1930's: "Mound-Builders! ... an epitome of all that is romantic and mysterious in human experience! Mere mention of the name suffices to conjure visions of a shadowy race dimly viewed across the ages—come from no one knows whence, gone no one knows whither, or when" (1). Earthworks, or Indigenous mounds, have graced the North American landscape from as early as 8000 BC and their purposes range from urban hubs such as Cahokia in Southern Illinois to effigy, platform, and burial mounds where ceremony and other communal activities took place.<sup>13</sup> Mounds have been an object of wonder, fascination, and exploit since settler arrival. As Shetrone wrote in 1930, we have shadowy

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<sup>13</sup> These dates are provided by Chadwick Allen's *Earthworks Rising*, but more archeological detail can be found through individual states' archeological councils or their Department of Natural Resources, and the Federal Register.

information on the majority of the mounds in America, and much of what we do know is knowledge from non-Native research.

Native earthworks have been traumatized by colonizer society and curiosity, particularly within the twentieth century. In her book *Disturbing Indians: The Archaeology of Southern Fiction*, Annette Trefzer writes in detail about one of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal relief programs, archaeology in the South. One of those archaeological projects centered around Native mounds. This major civil works project "brought to the fore thousands of Native American artifacts and remains from historic and so-called 'prehistoric' times as archaeologists cataloged, photographed, recorded, and excavated many sites, including stone mounds, burial mounds, earth mounds, caves, cemeteries, and village sites" even though consultation of tribal elders and leaders most assuredly did not take place (*Disturbing Indians* 1). This federal program, among other government-sanctioned digs, has left many mounds scavenged by anthropologists, archeologists, and grave diggers since at least the eighteenth century. Most earthworks have become places of non-Native ownership, their true purpose forgotten and ignored.

In the place of truth and fact, non-Natives have created elaborate answers and provided wild explanations for mounds' existence and their construction. Allen argues that non-Natives have "sought to control the narratives that frame evolving approaches to earthworks stewardship, research, and understanding" (Allen 3). Some examples of the theories that surround the earthworks architects range from an ancient race of aliens to Viking explorers. While wild ideas abound, one has been constant; these were not the work of Indigenous communities. Shetrone, the leading earthworks expert in the early twentieth century, staunchly believed that these mounds were constructed by anyone *but* Native Americans. When colonizers such as De Soto and Columbus "discovered" the Americas, they were met with elaborately engineered

landscapes. These lands that were reportedly virgin and unoccupied had ceremonial, urban, and village spaces, and since this discovery, settlers have struggled for answers. Many tribes with mounds on their ancestral lands do not know exactly who built their mounds, although many understand through oral or tribal history that the mounds were built by their direct ancestors. Those without exact construction knowledge, however, are fervent in their reverence and love for these earthworks, as exemplified by Chief Glenna Wallace of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, who writes, “My ancestors treasured these mounds. They were sacred. No, they did not build them, but they loved them, protected them, revered them” (Wallace).<sup>14</sup> Although the origin and purpose of the mounds is unknown, Wallace, along with Howe, agrees that the mounds are spaces of reverence. This is a contradiction to the colonizer's actions and beliefs towards mounds who play golf on top of them, unbothered by the sacred space they occupy. Non-native representation and understanding carry over into how mounds are portrayed within Southern literature, creating a non-Indigenous understanding and narration of land within the South.

Non-Native accounts of Indigenous earthworks have given them purpose that does not align with Indigenous history. Mounds have appeared in the Southern canon in works such as Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and William Faulkner’s *The Wild Palms (If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem)* (1939). Returned to Indigenous hands, earthworks’ purpose is revealed. In Howe's hands, the Choctaw mound Nanih Waiya has many functions for the Choctaws. It is a place to bury the dead and the site of their creation. In *Shell Shaker*’s opening chapter, on the day Shakbatina will be sacrificed to bring peace between the Choctaws and Chickasaws, she narrates, "On this day I will follow our Choctaw ancestors to our Mother

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<sup>14</sup> From her guest column in the *Newark Advocate* July 20, 2019, after touring the Newark Mounds located on an Ohio golf course.

Mound in Nanih Waiya. When released by the bone picking, I will grow and sprout like green corn. From the mound, I will watch over our people. Do not cry for me. I am a fast grower" (*Shell Shaker* 8). Shakbatina refers to green corn alluding to the Green Corn Ceremony, another pillar within Choctaw culture and history. The Green Corn Ceremony has best been described by Lucy Cherry, a Choctaw born in Oklahoma in 1869. According to Lucy, the ceremony lasts for four days with men hunting and families gathering what food they can and meeting at the dancing grounds. On the second day of the ceremony, everyone would fast while the third day is full of feasting and dancing until sunrise. Everyone in attendance would then occupy themselves with visiting friends and family on the fourth day (Lucy). A significant community event, Shakbatina invokes this ceremony connecting her death to a place of regeneration and community, most likely culminating at Nanih Waiya in the 1730s.

In the South, mounds narrate an origin story of the region's culture and history, as well as offer an ancient understanding of the region long before a colonizer narrative took hold. Eric Gary Anderson and Melanie Benson Taylor call the mounds structures of "deep time and high ground," a place of rebirth (Anderson and Benson Taylor 8). *Shell Shaker* wields earthworks as a tool that dramatically unravels Southern history, delving into deep time. The Choctaw earthwork Nanih Waiya is a sacred site that Shakbatina refers to as the Mother Mound, offering the idea that Southern history did not begin in 1492 with Columbus' arrival. The South, for the Choctaws, began in a mound. According to Choctaw belief, Nanih Waiya is the birthplace of the Choctaws. They emerged from her cave and were brought into the world. Born from this earthwork constructed of dirt and water, Nanih Waiya offers an intimacy between earth and the Choctaws and an attachment that illustrates a bond between earth as Creator and humans as descendent

unlike any colonizer legend. Because of this belief, earthworks within Southern culture could redefine the South away from an exclusive colonizer construction as illustrated by Howe.

Although there are no Indigenous accounts dating from earthworks construction, mounds are representative of sacred spaces based on archaeological findings and affirmed by Indigenous authors such as Howe. Anthropologist James F. Barnett Jr writes that “earthen mounds first appear during the Middle Archaic period, indicating a growing emphasis on ceremonialism and strong ties to particular places for spiritual reasons” (24). Mound construction began once Indigenous tribes became less and less nomadic, and anthropologists like Barnett assume that putting down roots gave tribes the opportunity to construct the mounds and have a formal site for ceremony and religious practice.

LeAnne Howe offers an Indigenous history of the mounds that supports Barnett and Allen’s claims that mounds had a spiritual purpose. In her essay “Embodied Tribalography,” she writes about the oldest Indigenous mound, Poverty Point:

Indigenous architects and their families came to Poverty Point and used all means available to them from the sacred to the scientific. Astronomers, mathematicians, geologists, engineers (for soil analysis and design), storytellers, the young, and the old all came together to create the mound in approximately three months (Kidder, Ortmann, and Arco 9– 12). Natives in the Southeast literally moved a mountain of soil, some 238,000 cubic meters in approximately ninety days, to create the story of the Bird Mound... What would have been the significance of ninety days to these people that they would demand such labor of themselves? Considering the size of the effigy, I suspect she, the mound, is a bird of prey, and even more specific, the representation of a red-tailed hawk. Red-tailed hawks embody special meanings for Southeastern Natives, especially Choctaws (82).

Howe is able to bring mounds out from the unknown and from non-Native claims as the Mother Mounds wakes up. In his essay, "Earthworks and Contemporary Indigenous American Literature: Foundations and Futures," Anderson writes that "because of this historical, personal, and cultural significance, earthworks are not relics of 'lost' or dead pasts but living texts that help activate, guide, and support Indigenous intellectual and artistic work now and into the future" (Anderson 1). Howe brings the Choctaw history into the present, offering a revolution of Southern history by waking up the Mother Mound. As Delores and Isaac bear Red McAlester's body to Mississippi to bury him in Nanih Waiya with the aid of their Mississippi kin, Delores is shown that the mound is indeed awake.

In her waking, Nanih Waiya reminds the two branches of the Choctaw tribe of ancient practices by resurrecting their descendants' voices and spirits and illustrating a Choctaw history that is more than a storied past:

Together with a thousand hands, they help the warrior open Mother Earth's beautiful body. Slowly and lovingly Mother Earth turns herself inside out and a gigantic platform mound emerges out of the ground. When this sacred ovulation rises to meet the Sun, a private blush sweeps over Mother Earth and becomes grass. A gift. Thoughts, Voices, and Grandparents plant corn on top of the sacred mound and hundreds of years come into view in the dance of the Green Corn and tomorrows. Delores marvels at creation and wants to remain forever with her ancestors. (*Shell Shaker* 159)

Community and sovereignty are once again connected through the reference to the Green Corn ceremony and its ancestral connection to Nanih Waiya. In this passage, Nanih Waiya offers visions of intimate and incredible ceremony through the Green Corn, then spreads to encompass



Mother Earth transforming from Mother Mound to Mother Earth. Howe writes that Delores marveled at creation, the creation of the Choctaw earth and tribe, and allows the Mother Mound to function as more than an Indigenous earthwork but also as a “highly structured environment, highly encoded space, elaborate sets of relationship—spatial and temporal—[a] places where worlds and generations can intersect, overlap, superimpose” (Allen 322). In her employment of Nanih Waiya, Howe recodes Indigenous sites of ceremony and sites of significant Indigenous history and culture. The mound functions as more than a space of reverence and takes an active role in reviving Choctaw practices as it travels to the Billy family.

Nanih Waiya is the gate to ancient Choctaw practices and their revival in present-day Mississippi. This deep South state is not commonly associated with healing or restoration. As of 2022, Mississippi has approximately 40 confederate monuments that have detracted away from restoring peace to the state.<sup>15</sup> This is certainly not the restoration that Howe accomplishes by reuniting the Choctaw tribes and healing past trauma through ceremony. Mississippi is notorious for its racialized society, politics, culture, and land claim history. *Shell Shaker* contributes to the decolonization of Indigenous homelands such as Mississippi, exposing soil that both haunts and heals, revealing the truth of its horrific history. But rather than segregate, this soil mends and rebuilds. Howe's narrative "exemplifies how reading and writing earthworks, particularly their rich and complex transhistorical and multigenerational overlays, contribute to the work of survival, decolonization, and land claiming" (Anderson 16). While Howe is not attempting to actively claim land, she is employing earthworks to recode the South's understanding of the land. The mound is not about ownership because no one could own Nanih Waiya. Instead, the space

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<sup>15</sup> These statistics come from the Southern Poverty Law Center where they have a detailed database of monuments that are live (still standing), pending removal, relocated, removed, or renamed. The statistics in this project were live as of December 2022.

needs to be seen as a site of Southern Indigenous history and a rewrite of the values affixed to land according to Choctaw custom.

### **Rewriting the Land**

Howe rewrites the history of the land as she describes the birth of the mound and a continuation of the sacred reproduction as the mound releases part of herself to epitomize creation and beginning. The Mound is a character that represents the beginning of the Choctaws, a story in the canon of Southern narratives. In including Nanih Waiya, Howe offers a counter-story to the "settler narratives that erase or otherwise mystify the history of colonial land theft and dispossession" (Anderson 1). Howe uses earthworks to demystify layers of Southern history as a possible present state of the Choctaws by centering Nanih Waiya as the character that is and has been actively guarding Choctaw custom and practice but is now returning itself to the Choctaws.

Howe has already begun to offer us an alternative story of the South, and an alternative way of thinking about our relationship to the land amid a narration of Choctaw history with other tribes, ceremony, and Choctaw culture in her opening scenes of 1740's Mississippi. Shakbatina is sacrificed, her body left in the opening to decompose and take part in the bone-picking ceremony in which her flesh will return to the earth through scavengers and decomposition. Nanih Waiya has played her part in the beginning of the novel by offering Shakbatina and other Choctaw dead a place to return to, a resting place from where she may watch over future generations. It is through this posthumous observation that Shakbatina realizes she must return to aid her kin, but she returns through Nanih Waiya, taking on an elemental form of the Mother Mound. The novel shifts from its opening scenes of Shakbatina's sacrifice in the 1740's Mississippi to Oklahoma in 1991 where Auda Billy has just murdered her partner and the

Choctaw chief, Red McAlester. McAlester was corrupt and abusive, much like Red Shoes. When Auda is arrested for the murder, her mother Susan admits (untruthfully) that she killed Red Shoes. In the aftermath of the murder and the subsequent arrests, the Billy family does what many others do. They leave their far away homes and go to the Billy family home where they comfort, aid, fight, cook, and provide safety in a desperate time of need. Auda's sisters Adair and Tema, and her aunties Dovie and Delores arrive, and the Billy house is filled with story, memory, and Choctaw community. Through the family's return, the Billy ancestors also return, creeping in through the mud of Nanih Waiya.

Howe [insert missing verb] Southern identity for the Choctaw people in a particular scene when the mud returns to the kitchen. Entering a scene that many Southerners are familiar with, the Billy women sit in the kitchen preparing food for the floods of Choctaws that will arrive due to Auda's ordeal. They talk, argue, and cry while the smells of notably Southern and Indigenous dishes permeate the room. Howe writes that "steam rising from the frying chicken covers the walls with droplets of a greasy elixir only Southerners appreciate" (*Shell Shaker* 151). We are successfully drawn into the intimate scene of family and comfort as the past returns with answers and mud. Delores sits at the table among her family kneading biscuit dough when "faintly uttered words reach her as if through a keyhole. *Ohoyo OmishkeA numpa tillofashih ish hakloh. Attention woman, listen to my remarks. It is time for you to return to your homeland. You must bury the dead chief there*" (italics original) (*Shell Shaker* 157). She continues to knead biscuit dough believing she imagined the voice. But then a surge of several voices in multiple languages can be heard and she understands them all.

Ohoyo Omishke a numpa tillofashih ish hakloh. Attention woman, listen to my remarks. The gravediggers are wrong. Not all ancient burial mounds were stuffed

with beloved leaders. Some contain bad people who were given everything in death that they had coveted in life. Shell beads, copper, axes, knives, pottery bowls, baskets, animal skins, blankets...make them comfortable so that they would not want to leave their resting place and harass the living. But when the mounds were opened by grave diggers, these flawed spirits escaped like flesh-eating flies. They passed through many changes. Always becoming predatory. Put your dead chief in a mound so he will be protected from escaping again. Give him everything in death he wanted in life. That way he will never leave it again. (*Shell Shaker* 157-158)

Reviving from her trance-like state, Delores looks to her biscuit dough to find that it has been replaced with mud from the mother mound, and the ancestral home in Mississippi replaces the biscuit dough and slowly starts to fill the kitchen: "Delores raises her hands in the air and reveals black sticky fingers. Her sister shrieks, sucks in a gulp of air, "Where did that mud come from?" "Mississippi" (*Shell Shaker* 160). In the powerful monologue above, Choctaw ancestors instruct Delores on how to connect ancient ways and ceremonies to modern Choctaws. With her mud-stained hands, she shoves the bowl of mud to her family who aren't quite sure about Delores claim of the mud's origin and says, "the whole Nanih Waiya area represents the cradle of Choctawan civilization. A long time ago, people came from all directions to settle there. It takes a sacred space like that to heal a troubled spirit," (*Shell Shaker* 161). In this scene of a mud- and ancestor-filled kitchen, Howe used Nanih Waiya as a signal of a return from removed lands back to ancestral lands and decolonization and sovereignty over earthworks and their purpose.

Nanih Waiya and the mud from her walls are no longer a simple earthwork or mound, but the link that binds Indigenous history and the South together, unable to be separated, effectively

rewriting the South's values placed on land and sites of Indigenous history. As Nanih Waiya is animated and calls to the Billy family, Howe realizes the importance of also deconstructing non-Native ideas towards mounds and their actions that held incredible repercussions. The ancestor speaking to Delores through the mud says, "but when the mounds were opened by grave diggers, these *flawed spirits escaped like flesh-eating flies*" (*Shell Shaker* 158). Just as there were several theories as to the identity of the builders, there are just as many theories about the purpose of the mounds. Grave diggers, as Delores calls them, also known as archaeologists and anthropologists, theorize that the mounds are graves of illustrious tribal members, much like ancient Egyptian pyramids, or that they were temples, sacred places for ceremony, or simply domestic uses. But Howe claims that mounds are also places where flawed spirits, evil wrongdoers like Red Shoes and Red McAlester, were buried to protect the tribe from their sinister spirits from escaping. Readers run the risk of correlating the idea of evil buried in the mound to the Hollywood and American folkloric idea that disrupting Indigenous burial grounds results in evil consequences such as in *The Poltergeist*, *Pet Sematary*, and countless campfire stories that conjure damaging Indigenous tropes that obscure and damage Indigenous culture. Yes, the grave digger's actions resulted in evil, but it was what they released rather than their desecration of the mounds. They allowed the flawed spirits to escape when opening the mounds.

Colonizers' actions broke Native practices in how they related to the land and perceived the purpose of the land. Where colonizers saw treasure and artifacts, the Choctaws saw a space that should only be handled with reverence i.e., no touching. As Howe reverses the white-washed ideas of the Mother Mound, she casts protection "of the community but also for the protection of the flawed spirit itself. The interment is thus an act of care meant to promote personal as well as

communal healing” (Allen 314). This has the possibility to overturn ideas and ways mounds and Southern land is valued and cared for.

Previously, Nanih Waiya and other earthworks in nearly every Southern state were used as archeological sites functioning as doors to an ancient world with little to no written documentation; these doors served American history as mythical unknowable foundations that were impossible to engage with since all living remnants have "disappeared."<sup>16</sup> Though neither mystical nor unknown, these structures serve as state monuments, museums, golf courses, or as city parks like the Criel Mound in South Charleston, West Virginia, where one can hike to the top using the winding concrete sidewalk and take in the sights of the city resting on the bench at the mound's peak. Some mounds such as this are absorbed into the city as part of the landscape, disguised as a park where children play, or where modern art is displayed, their entire purpose and history whitewashed, nearly erased. The belief that a Native presence faded without reason is reinforced with this disregard. In the South and Southern literature, this idea of entire civilizations fading is supported by a minimizing and sometimes complete nonchalance of truth. In *Beyond Katrina*, Natasha Trethewey illustrates how most Southern history is told through monuments and memorials: "man-made monuments tell a different story. Never neutral, they tend to represent the narratives and memories of those citizens with the political power and money to construct them... In Auburn Alabama, a plaque in the center of town meant to describe how the town was founded, reads simply ‘After the Indians left...’” (Trethewey 55). While it is

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<sup>16</sup> Southern Indigenous mounds are located in Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Oklahoma and South Carolina. South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida are also home to Shell Rings. These structures are made of shellfish remains (clams, oyster shells, etc.) and thought to be religious sites. Unlike Nanih Waiya, Shell Rings are not burial sites. A detailed study on rings and mounds was done in 2006 by the National Parks Service and can be located at <http://www.nps.history.com/publications/nhl/theme-studies/archaic-shell-rings.pdf>.

true that the ancestral Indigenous tribes in many areas that have earthworks were eradicated through colonial genocide or removed in the 1830s, they did not disappear. Western historiographical tradition treats Southern Indigenous history as if it were an episode of the X-Files in which the Native Americans... vanished. This is a narrative perpetrated in the South through Southern storytelling, school textbooks, and, as Natasha Trethewey pointed out, even in government-funded signage.

Howe's use of earthworks sustains the idea that there is a living relationship between Southern Indigenous folks and the South. Twenty-first-century Native authors engage with earthworks not to focus on what they were but "as what they are, how we can best make their contemporary artistic and political relevance more visible, and what they will be" (Anderson 4). Howe places focus on what Nanih Waiya was in the past just as much as what it is in the present, how the mound can push Choctaw influence into the present South. She urges us to recognize earthworks as a foundational piece of the South, and since they predate any colonizer structure, they only further provide evidence that the South is Indigenous. Nanih Waiya and other earthworks are more than a random hill in a park or an object of antiquity but restore and replenish tribal presence and history, sending a rousing call to the South, declaring it Indigenous both in place and time. These earthworks become an entryway into the origin of their tribe and the beginning of a return home.

For the Billy family, the foundational mud from Nanih Waiya that coats Delores' hands is a clear sign of revival and homecoming. She tells the other Billy women in that kitchen in Oklahoma that "somehow I know it will reunite the two Choctaw communities: the ones in Oklahoma with the ones in Mississippi. We've been separated too long, she says sadly. Each of us has only half a heart until we're rejoined" (*Shell Shaker* 166). Delores's irrefutable

interpretation of Nanih Waiya's muddy presence further pushes Howe's idea of Indigenous returning and emerging within Southern culture and story. Howe writes of this in her essay "Embodied Tribalography: Mound Building, Ball Games, and Native Endurance in the Southeast," by noting, "I am interested in continuances rather than disappearances" and by employing Nanih Waiya as a physical embodiment of the Choctaw past that reaches into the future, Howe continues the story of the Choctaws, refuting any idea of disappearance (75). Although their story has never reached a stopping point, it is omitted from the white narrative of the South. Despite that omission, Nanih Waiya emerges as tribalography, a continuance of Native story and practice, and becomes the catalyst. This earthwork is the site of return.

To return to the South and offer a new understanding of the South's relationship with land, the two Choctaw nations must reunite. Delores and Isaac carry Red McAlester's body to Nanih Waiya and are met by the Choctaws who stayed behind in Mississippi. Their cousin Earl Billy tells them that "on this day the Chahta people who've been split apart by circumstances beyond us—we've come back together to put this man's spirit at peace" (*Shell Shaker* 196). A Choctaw woman named Edith from Mississippi reiterates, "we've been separated for so long, it's hard for us to remember that we once thought of ourselves as one body with different parts, but with one heart. However, we always believed this day would come" (*Shell Shaker* 196). Nanih Waiya and her purpose reunited the Choctaws who walked the Trail of Tears and those that remained behind. There is a literal return to the ancestral lands and practices in the burial of Red McAlester; there is also a return of Indigenous thought on place, space, and the dirt within.

The earth functions differently in *Shell Shaker* from a colonizer's point of view; it rebels against foundational Southern agrarian ideals. In this work, the dirt, the earth is not simply a space for cultivation for profit. Land is valued as a deep home that returns lost identity and



culture. Clark and Powell note, "land should not be understood as abstract or understood as private property but particular places, distinctive homescapes that generate unique, restorative expressions of different tribal identities and peoplehoods" (Clark and Powell 5). Choctaw identity connects to the Mississippi dirt and mud, and in *Shell Shaker*, the mud is restorative and defines a homescape for the past and future of the tribe. But Howe also employs dirt and dust, another ecological residue, to return home and extend the Native narrative. Only slightly removed from the mud of Nanih Waiya, dirt—physical particles that compose ancestral lands—also functions as an element of restoration and sovereignty. When many of the Choctaws were forced from their homes in the South, they carried handfuls of dirt from their homes with them to Oklahoma. In an interview, Howe discusses the transference of Choctaw names from Mississippi to Oklahoma. Cities such as Tupelo were Choctaw and after Removal, Choctaws renamed their new home with their ancient names. But they did more than rename places. Howe states, "The Choctaws took handfuls of earth from the land around Nanih Waiya, our mother mound in Mississippi, as they began their journey on the Trail of Tears. When we brought our earth, when we brought our people, we brought our names" ("Choctawan Aesthetics..." 223). My continued arguments about dirt are built around this fact and through the novel: through more of Delores' visions, which emphasize the very real importance Choctaws placed on the physical ancestral lands carried in their pockets.

Land was not about ownership in Choctaw history, but rather the relationship and bond to the land. As in the third chapter, a balance existed based on mutual dependency. However, due to colonial influence, land also can inspire capitalism and a need for ownership. Prior to Delores's vision in the kitchen where mud flows freely, she is hailed by a vision where her mother's cherished Queen Anne dining room table is the center of attention. This piece of furniture was

the family's "first attempt at buying colonial" (*Shell Shaker* 158). Her mother kept the table in pristine condition, but in her vision, the table is covered in dust. Seeing the neglect of an object her mother loved and to honor "her mother's teachings, Delores uses the hem of her black dress to wipe the surface clean, but the dust has turned into layers of dirt. She grabs handfuls of earth, but the more she scrapes off, the more there is. She begins filling basket after basket, and still, the earth grows higher and spreads like a lake of mud" (*Shell Shaker* 159). Delores' dream of an earth-covered table, highly valued by her mother, introduces the idea that dirt is not just dirt and dust is not just dust covering an unused object. Delores is no match for the dust and dirt as she cleans in vain. This haunted dust becomes the vehicle through which her ancient ancestors reveal themselves. As Delores watches, "soon relatives appear out of shadows to help the young girl. Memories dressed in thick bearskins with ice in their hair. Voices with long black braids and flint hoes give rise to ancient arguments on how best to move the Earth" (*Shell Shaker* 159). More than dirt, more than earth, this ecological residue becomes the voice of the Choctaw past. Physical land affirms a passage for the Choctaw past to enter through and show Delores the conflicting reality that dirt isn't a nuisance but an element that calls them to her and her to home.

The dust covering the table has duality; it is both the agent of communication carrying the memories of ancestors and an overpowering metaphor of anti-colonization. Once Delores tells her family of the vision, her niece, Tema, says, "The dining room table represents consumerism. The things the English and the French taught the Indians; to love foreign things above all else. Auntie, you're describing internalized colonialism" (*Shell Shaker* 162). Just as mud from a flood engulfs everything in its path, so this dirt wraps itself around the colonization that overtook Indigenous communities, but the dirt overflowing in her vision reveals a way back home, to the necessity of their Choctaw culture and rituals. Tema confirms this, saying, "if you

think foreigners' things, ideas, and religions are better than what your own culture has, then you're internally colonized. Then you don't care about your own things, culture, or land. In Delores' vision, one Indian can't do anything alone but needs the help of ancestors and young people to build the future" (*Shell Shaker* 162). In the translation of her vision, dirt defies colonization, contradicting ownership and revealing the deep relationship between the Choctaws and their home and their community. Dirt strips the layers of decades of colonization and foreign occupation to expose the physical earth's healing abilities. It offers a strong reminder of the harm of colonization and the distance colonization can create between culture and community.

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betsamosake Simpson offers further ideas on land and dirt as viewed through an Indigenous lens. Simpson begins her essay "Land as Pedagogy" with the story of Binoojiinh and the discovery of maple sap and making sugar. She writes that the discovery of maple sap and the benefits of this sticky substance led to "sheer joy. The tribe learned both from the land and with the land. They learned what it felt like to be recognized, seen, and appreciated by their community" (Simpson 151). The dirt in *Shell Shaker* approaches decolonization through Delores by drawing her and her family back to Choctaw custom and community; the land for the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg accomplishes the same, albeit through sap. Simpson writes the relationship between land and her tribe "lacks overt coercion and authority, values so normalized within mainstream...The land, Aki, is both context and process. The process of coming to know is learner led and profoundly spiritual in nature" (Simpson 150-151). Simpson's essay supports Howe's ideas that the land is spiritual and alive. Within many Indigenous cultures, culture, customs, and ceremonies are interwoven around perceptions of the land. Howe shows that this can be through mud, dirt, or dust. Land in any of

its forms can draw Indigenous people back to community and, in the case of *Shell Shaker*, an Indigenous South.

Colonizer-settler perception of the land overwhelmed Indigenous ideas of land and community through colonization and recoding the values set on the relationship between human and land. This recoding and rewriting began as the trickle of colonizers invaded Native ancestral land, eradicated entire tribes, and systematically destroyed nearly all Indigenous ways of life. Shakbatina describes this invasion as a terrible story that traveled down the road from tribe to tribe: "a dangerous enemy has arrived on our shores with weapons of fire... He will devour your family. Soon he will be on the move again. He's a very different kind of Osano, bloodsucker, he always hungers for more" (*Shell Shaker* 2). This enemy refers to Hernando de Soto, a Spanish colonizer that began to "devour" the South; colonizers' ravenous appetites paved the way for the South to be home to the gothic and horror of America. Indigenous genocide, coupled with slavery, poisoned the soil with blood and fury, resulting in a land ripe for a gothic homescape.

Southern Gothic authors have capitalized on the landscape that was made gothic through decades of violence, genocide, and diaspora. The landscape that was once known as the birthplace of the Choctaws and sacred space for the Green Corn ceremony has been used as an inspiration to all things nightmarish; lifegiving swamps are now sites of the macabre and shadow where evil lurks and civilization ends. The Southern Gothic and its tradition of landscape were now full of graveyards and sprawling oak trees draped in Spanish moss, New Orleans voodoo and vampires, swamps full of prehistoric amphibians, and a plethora of haunted homes, plantation tours, and a reverence towards the Civil War rather than the brutality pre, during, and post-war. To remember what happened on the land and its new relationship to the South,

highway markers have been placed along the Southern roadways. Often, these markers only mention the white blood spilled on the land.

Indigenous authors such as Howe work to rewrite this relationship with the land while not ignoring the past but also offering the land as a site of rebirth. The colonial system ignores and refuses to investigate why the South is home to the dark and grotesque, and why there is such a platform to celebrate the macabre of the region. Recent bans on the study of Critical Race Theory have only confirmed that the South's dominant storytellers, white colonizers, do not want to see the truth: do not want to see the origin of the ghostly supernatural that has made the South notorious. Louis Owens (Choctaw and Cherokee descent) writes that "we live in a world full of buried things, many of them very painful and often horrific...and until we acknowledge and come to terms with the past we'll keep believing in a dangerous and deadly kind of innocence, and we'll keep thinking we can just move on and leave it all behind" (Owens). Owens could be deftly describing the way the colonizer South has buried its brutal past, ignoring its genocidal practices and initiatives to ensure white supremacy. But rather than leave it all behind, Indigenous narratives like *Shell Shaker* remind the South that the landscape witnessed horror; the land comes alive with memory, and the land remembers all. Tema accurately says, "the past haunts us all" (*Shell Shaker* 38). Howe uses the land to haunt and remind the South the details of the landscape's Southern Gothic origins.

Howe centers these origins on the Great Removal of the 1830s, which shifted the trajectory of the South's story. In her essay "The Indigenous Uncanny," Annette Trefzer writes that in Howe's "fiction, the figure of the ghost hails from the spectral landscape of the native South to settle old scores and unsettle contemporary readers" (200). Howe effectively narrates this tectonic shift with her use of land, dirt, and mud, illustrating a turning point in the study of

Southern history and literature towards an Indigenous narrative. Nanih Waiya and her kinetic mud revives the Choctaw presence within the South and ushers the call for homecoming to the original Southerners, the Indigenous tribes of the Southeast. While Nanih Waiya calls the Choctaws home and aids in Indigenous futurity, the mud that pours into the Billy's Oklahoma kitchen is a product of the past, an Indigenous past, and the Southern colonizers' great cruelty that would lead to the ruin of the South. In her use of mud and dirt, Howe “attempt[s] to reformulate the workings of the Southern Gothic not only by invalidating the region’s apparent exceptionalism but by revising and adapting the literary strategies of the gothic genre” (Trefzer 200). White Southern authors have proudly shouldered the job of capitalizing on the gothic South. Authors such as O’Connor, McCullers, and Faulkner relied on the sins of the South, through slavery, and its physical proof in depilated and decaying plantations to generate stories and placehood through the eyes of someone in post-Reconstruction South. Howe rewrites the gothic with the Indigenous voice carried through the physical land of the South. The mud and dirt carry hauntings that “reinstate memory and ancestry crucial to Indigenous survival in the past” carrying the gothic beyond a colonizer narrative (Trefzer 201). As Howe demonstrates, it is impossible to escape the memory attached to the land and the brutality wrecked upon the Southern landscape.

In *Shell Shaker*, the physical land holds memory and it bears witness. In the past, Choctaws held the land to be an extension of themselves; as they carried jars of their Mississippi homeland soil with them on the Trail of Tears, their connection to the land and earth was integral to survival and a continuance of their identity even after removal from their ancient home. The horror of removal in the 1830s was the culmination of what produced the original gothic story of the South, the gothic that white authors and others would build their worlds. Southern soil is

gothic, cursed, and haunted due to the genocide and removal of Southeastern tribes beginning in the sixteenth century and this past continues to haunt the South. The Southern Gothic tradition is infamous because of a past that has had little reconciliation. However, Indigenous works such as *Shell Shaker* help to quell the repression and dismissiveness of "such a wounding and insupportable sin of human and American history" by narrating this past through an Indigenous voice depicting all the unspeakable details (Benson Taylor 7). The work of writing a new relationship with the land is only possible through the narration of the past through an Indigenous voice, depicting all the unspeakable details, and offering a rewrite of how we relate to the land.

Howe's narration of Indigenous history is also an opportunity to add details left out of the dominant narrative. At a lecture on Choctaw history, Auda recounts the removal to an audience made up of settler-colonizers and explains that "Choctaws were the first tribe to be removed from our ancient homelands. Our people walked all the way from the Lower Mississippi Valley to Oklahoma with very little to eat or drink" (*Shell Shaker* 43). The story of the Trail of Tears is known to most Southerners through in sparse detail in elementary history lessons, and many are taught and still believe that only the Cherokee nation walked this road. Just as Jackson forced Southeastern tribes to a "better" home in Oklahoma, so white history excludes the horrors of the journey. Howe illuminates the truth, revealing that "the road to the promised land was terrible. Dead horses and their dead riders littered the way. Dead women lay in the road with babies dried to their breasts, tranquil as if napping. A sacred compost for scavengers" (*Shell Shaker* 43). There is no censoring in *Shell Shaker*. Without mincing words, Howe depicts the realities of the atrocities the Southern soil witnessed as it held the corpses of Choctaw warriors, mothers, and

babies. This "road" of dirt, dust, and mud holds the story of America, the South, and the Choctaws.

The story that *Shell Shaker* shares is the roots, grounding Indigenous literature as the foundation for future gothic trees and tales. The land, covered in Choctaw corpses, is not a branch of history, nor is it merely part of the story, but the cause of a cursed South preparing the land for a future history of slavery, lynching, and war. The "sacred compost" established the "trunk" of Southern literature. The gothic and haunted South was born from the bodies that littered the South from Mississippi to Oklahoma, all hinging on the physical earth. *Shell Shaker* stays true to Howe's definition of tribalography, creating people and authoring tribes but also sharing the creation of a gothic South. It does this through the memory of Southern soil. The tribalography in *Shell Shaker* connects people and the land through time. Before the traveling mud, Howe must explain the dual responsibilities of the earth that made up Nanih Waiya: when it created life and when it cradled the dead.

Further driving a curse into the Southern landscape littered with the Trail of Tears dead was the absence of funeral rites for those victims. For the Choctaws, this was the bone-picking ceremony. Susan and Isaac Billy's great-grandmother, Nowatima, speaks of this further destruction of the Choctaw people and stripping of their dignity to Delores Billy. Delores goes to Nowatima to learn Choctaw funeral songs to revive Choctaw funeral practices. As she teaches Delores the songs she remembers, she describes how this practice was nearly forgotten when funeral songs and bone picking ceremonies were not possible on the Trail of Tears. In 1831 "throngs of ragged children, my descendants' children, were forced out of Mississippi... There was no one left who could tell them the stories of how their grandmothers had once turned themselves into beautiful birds in order to fly to safety. There was no one who could conduct a



proper funeral. No one to pick their bones afterward. Imagine my agony" (*Shell Shaker* 137).

From earlier in the novel, it is understood that the bone-picking ceremony and other funeral rites were the physical releases of the Choctaw spirit into both the physical world as their remains were consumed by scavengers and decomposers of the natural world and their spirit released to join their ancestors. Shakbatina describes this in her dying moments: "big Mother Porcupine walks into view and takes me by the hand. I open my mouth to speak but my thoughts escape into the wind" (*Shell Shaker* 16). Without the bone-picking ceremony and funeral songs, room is left for hauntings, curses, and restless spirits. The Trail of Tears and the undignified deaths of Southeastern Indigenous peoples would cause cataclysmic retribution to the Southern colonizers.

Shakbatina's spirit has waited through time and witnessed everything her people have suffered but specifically the effects of the Great Removal. She reveals exactly how, because of the colonizer's actions, the South was cursed and became a gothic land full of ghost stories and haunted, dilapidated mansions.

But their sweet remains, their flesh and blood, seared stories into the land that kept account of such things. Mother Earth would exact a price. Twenty-nine years later, the white people who pushed my children out of their homelands were driven insane. Witness the destruction of their Civil War and the decades of waste and ruin that ensued. Plantation children were turned into homeless beggars who would one day birth the Ku Klux Klan. Today, their descendants drive by the Nanih Waiya, our beloved Mother Mound, with their car windows rolled up for asylum trying to drown out the ghostly screams of Choctaw children who were walked to death on the road to the new promised land. But they cannot. (*Shell Shaker* 137-138)

Howe deftly explains that the repercussions of removal and Indigenous genocide resulted in the racial violence of Southern history as witnessed by Nanih Waiya and the Southern land. Mother Nature kept the balance. Brutality for brutality. Cruelty begat violent deaths that begat war that begat white supremacy that begat a haunted South. In their critical analysis of the gothic genre, David Punter and Glennis Byron proclaim the Southern Gothic to be an "investigating mad-ness, decay and despair, and the continuing pressures of the past upon the present, particularly concerning the lost ideals of a dispossessed Southern aristocracy and to the continuance of racial hostilities" (Ellis 116–17). Though I believe this claim is accurate for much of the work from the Southern Renaissance, I would argue that investigating the "madness, decay, and despair, and the continuing pressures of the past upon the present" is being challenged well beyond the lost dispossessed Southern aristocracy and ideals. Southern Gothic literature remains a substantial and continuing genre because of the enormity of the crimes done in the South. It is "seared into the land" (138). *Shell Shaker* illustrates how deeply the sins of the South are seared into the earth.

The physical land is key to Howe's story, the Choctaw story of the South. Mother Nature exacts a price revenging the Choctaws for the misery of the Great Removal; it is the land that remembers, and the horrors of racial violence seared into memory; it is Nanih Waiya that is home to the Choctaw ghost children. *Shell Shaker* is an Indigenous gothic story posing dirt and mud as memory holders and revenge seekers. Beyond the dusty roads that were the final resting places for masses of Choctaws and swampy waterways that remember Shakbatina and the bone-picking ceremony, the Southern soil travels through space and time to communicate with present-day Choctaws. The mud from Nanih Waiya that prompts Delores and the Billy family to bury McAlester within her to appease his spirit communicates in a way that signifies a new

means to relate to and value the land. Nanih Waiya shifts from an earthwork to a physical manifestation of the Choctaw past, providing further supernatural elements to a story already filled with horror. Eric Gary Anderson reads the mud flowing in the Billy's Durant, Oklahoma kitchen as "an Indigenous poltergeist" and it would be easy to identify Nanih Waiya as a poltergeist with its otherworldly movements (Anderson 14). It even has the ability to stain the hands of each Billy family member, even those not in the kitchen such as Susan, who "holds up her brown stained hands and answers mysteriously, "These are the mud of the Nanih Waiya," so we cannot brand Nanih Waiya a poltergeist (*Shell Shaker* 164). Nanih Waiya has the power to move, but not to harm the Billy family, as is normal poltergeists' behavior. Rather than a malevolent spirit, Nanih Waiya is charged with carrying the memory of malevolence. Once again, Howe is not conceding to the trope of "Indian graveyard, Indian ghosts," etc. Instead, Howe has used the Mississippi mud of Nanih Waiya to instruct, as a mother does firmly, and her children know when to listen: "Dovie holds up her brown-stained hands to the crowd. 'We've got a sign from our ancestors. I think we'd better do what they ask'" (*Shell Shaker* 165). The Billy family heeds the message and takes McAlester and his millions to Mississippi to bury him and finally settle the spirit of Red Shoes and McAlester. The Southern landscape is often viewed as unforgiving with its heavy red clay, flooded delta plains, and hurricane-heavy coasts but the soil of Nanih Waiya proves to be restoring and nurturing to the Choctaws. As she reaches through space and speaks to Delores, Nanih Waiya proves that Southern soil has the power to bring back what has been forced away and heal. Kirstin Squint makes a similar distinction between the colonizer "Indian ghost story." Predominately, the ghosts in *Shell Shaker* "are not haunting Euro-Americans; instead, they are helping to heal Choctaw communities haunted by a history of genocide and the continuing implications of U.S. settler colonialism" ("Burying the (un)Dead")

197). Nanih Waiya stands as a reminder to the colonial population about the horrors brought upon Indigenous peoples, but the ghosts pouring from the Mother Mound aims to heal her people rather than haunt and seek revenge for them.

## Conclusion

In the waning days of his presidency, Donald Trump visited Oceti Sakowin land to give a speech at the base of Mt. Rushmore, a symbol of stolen and colonized earth and dirt that was created by white supremacists. Indigenous protesters faced Trump and told him that he was not welcome on their lands; he was trespassing. Several protesters were arrested, and Trump ironically delivered a speech railing against the "merciless campaign" of the removal of confederate statues. Since contact, the merciless campaign against Indigenous peoples has been to remove their right to ancestral lands and utterly annihilate the Indigenous values of the land. Dirt has been weaponized, racialized, and divided. In *Shell Shaker*, Isaac Billy accurately says, "if you controlled the land, you controlled all things" (*Shell Shaker* 72). Wars have been fought over land, and the dirt has soaked up the blood of both Native and colonizer alike. What Howe creates with bloody earth is not only a story of survival amid colonization but of a mysterious haunting, unable to be controlled or owned.

The dirt in *Shell Shaker* is an example of how the South can return to valuing the land before colonization and existing with the land in a new way. The dirt from the Choctaw South at work in *Shell Shaker* is an unusual voice to employ to answer the call of Land Back and to aid in decolonizing history and memory, and yet "earthworks are creative forces of great power in the tribalographies of ancient and emerging America (Cartwright 23). Howe merges the ancient and emerging versions of history by bringing Nanih Waiya to life, the epicenter of ancient creation in

the South, and the way forward in recognizing and acknowledging Indigenous claim to the South and Southern history. *Shell Shaker* proves “the ancient Earth and the ancient earthworks remain productive, generative, alive in the present, actively building Indigenous futures” (Allen 312). While greatly acknowledging the past, Howe builds a future with the Indigenous story in the beginning of the canon of Southern literature. *Shell Shaker* shows that there is always “another story to tell, and that is a story of ... mixed histories” and story (Gerhardt 362). Like many of her contemporaries, Howe's storytelling weaves the past, present, and possible futures together connecting them with the land and the people. She pulls all the elements of the hidden story in the South together to create a new way of experiencing the South and a rewrite of the Southern land.

Through the unlikely muddy catalyst, Howe can prove that “a native creation story was one of America's authors. If not acknowledged in the historical credits, American Indians are certainly the ghostwriters for the event, the story of America” (Howe 30). The Choctaw story beginning in Nanih Waiya is a Southern creation story that has not been given credit in the dominant story of America and the South. This gothic story overwhelms white history, exposing a bloody trail that was the beginning of the great sins of the South. Fictional Choctaw chief Red McAlester accurately told Auda, “America ... has grown out of the mouths of ravenous white people .... Our lands, our foods, our bodies have been the hosts the whites have fed on, until we're nearly all dead” (*Shell Shaker* 113). In saying this, Red wants revenge for his people, but instead, he is returned to Nanih Waiya, where it all began. Howe does not seek revenge for the blood-soaked Choctaw story but instead calls for returning to ancient tradition, culture, and belief. *Shell Shaker* asks that Native mounds become more than a sign of the past: that we roll down our windows and acknowledge the cries of the ghost children emitting from Nanih Waiya

and believe in the power of the mud on the bottom of shoes. Here, mud has the power to bind, cleanse, carry ancestors' spirits, and reveal the dark past of the South. Here, mud calls out to them and brings them home.

## **Conclusion**

### **Waking Up**

The South is beautiful. The swamps and lowlands I have examined in this project are stunning with their black river water and Cypress trees. I know that many do not share this sentiment; in fact, at two different presentations on swamp literature, I asked my audience what some of the first things were that came to mind when they thought of swamps. I heard humidity, snakes, mosquitoes, mud, and even an actual shudder. While I agree that in the dead of summer, the swamp is not a place I would want to pitch a tent, I was disappointed but not surprised at the overwhelmingly negative feedback. Perhaps it was one of those “you must be a local to understand” moments, I thought. Lumbee tribal citizen, Duke professor, hydrologist, and fellow eastern North Carolinian Ryan Emanuel studies the watery places of the South, particularly those associated with Indigeneity. He writes that there were “a variety of factors [that] attracted the Lumbee and their ancestors to the river basin,” which this tribe still calls home (28). These factors are still present today. In particular, the “wide floodplain forests with expansive canopies of bald cypress, river birch, and other flood-tolerant trees flank the Lumbee River and its tributaries. These riverine corridors provide shelter and habitat for wildlife and for a wide range of dietary, medicinal, and other culturally significant plants” (Emanuel 28). It met their needs, and what’s more, it was home. While the Lumbee have been able to mostly remain in their ancestral home, nearly all other tribes were removed from the South, their homes stolen.

African Americans did not see the South as beautiful when they arrived on these shores after capture and enslavement. It was foreign land that they were forced to work and cultivate. They could not reap what they had sown. They died either cultivating this land or were killed in their escape; even after emancipation, the land proved to be dangerous. Black people were lynched for “trespassing” on land. The Southern landscape left them exposed and offered no

protection. The relationship between Black Americans and land remains complicated and complex. However, Michael J. Bielfuss argues that “despite this historical rift between African Americans and the natural world ... there exists a parallel, or perhaps more accurately a perpendicular, tradition in African American culture and literature of deep connections to nature, connections where nature and culture are entangled in positive ways” (486). Part of my job in this project was to examine both the literature that explored the negative relationship between African Americans and the land, due to enslavement and racism, and the literature that explored the relationship between a culture that, in trying to heal, developed ways of rewriting their history with the land. William Cowan writes, “all the inhabitants [of the South] “are either in harmony with their surroundings or victimized by them” (102). The inhabitants of the South and the way they relate to their surroundings hold the key to rewriting these spaces of violence into spaces of healing.

Randall Kenan offers literature that reevaluates the understanding of sites of violence and oppression. Kenan’s intimate relationship with the ecology of his home heavily influences his writing and later aided him in crafting a fictional community that set out to reorientate our understanding of place and rewrite the swampy landscape as a place of fear to a place that offers life. His work is an example of what Bielfuss calls the connection between the land and culture. Kenan’s engagement with North Carolina history rejects white supremacist writing by mobilizing hidden narratives of his community that had been overshadowed by a dominant narrative desperate to sweep the past under the rug.

Linda Hogan also works to recover what has been swept away and engages with ceremonies to recover traditional knowledge and culture. Hogan takes on the immense task of recirculating stories and culture based in TEK and dismantling the colonial hold on these stories,



cultures, and bases of knowledge. Jodi Byrd writes, “at its most basic level, colonialism patterns itself in the new world through systemic processes of extractive, interventionist, bureaucratic, white supremacist, and eliminationist modes of domination to literally strip lands, cultures, languages, and resources away from indigenous peoples” (615). Throughout *Power*, Hogan challenges the colonizer's attempts to control land by illustrating the application of TEK to restore the balance between the human and non-human world. The ceremony within the novel, *Panther Woman*, offers a way for the restoration of the mutual dependency between humans and non-humans.

Jesmyn Ward’s writing concerns itself with salvaging Black Southern history and that history’s repercussions on environmental justice and institutionalized racism within that system. Ward tackles the complicated history of the Black community and land while centering her discussion around Hurricane Katrina. In doing so, she exposes injustices around disaster response and recovery and rewrites assumptions of the relationship between land and the Black community. She uses her narrator, Esch, to challenge the southern literary tradition by placing a young, pregnant, and Black female where traditionally a white male has stood narrating life or death circumstances. The white male has narrated this story as an adventure, but with Esch it is a survival story. By complicating the narrators of this story, Ward rewrites traditions within the Southern Gothic genre. Ward’s work effectively mobilizes knowledge of an unfair ecological situation and mobilizes stories of a regenerative relationship between the Black community and the land.

LeAnne Howe intersects Indigenous earthworks with her theory of tribalography to overwrite a colonial understanding of earthworks and Indigenous history. She uses the intimate relationships between the earthwork known as the Mother Mound to the Choctaw and Choctaw

stories to connect the past and the present and rewrite the values of those relationships. By relying on the Mother Mound's storied history, Howe shows "that tribalogy comes from the Native propensity for bringing things together, for making consensus, and for symbiotically connecting one thing to another" ("The Story of America" 42). The Mother Mound becomes tribalogy that mobilizes an understanding of the Choctaw's relationship with the land. Howe tells the story of the Choctaw past and the central figure the Mother Mound plays effectively providing an understanding of the values of the relationship between ancestral home and land and Choctaw culture.

The complexity of each of these works, and the stories and histories they reveal, offers a new understanding of Southern literature, land, and culture. Black and Indigenous histories and stories have the ability, as shown in this project, to rewrite spaces offering values and grounds of knowing removed from the white colonial writings that have dominated Southern studies and literature. Because of the violence these two groups have faced on Southern land, their rewrites of place and land challenge the nation's knowledge of relating to these spaces. They correct the historical record, drawing necessary tensions between what we thought we knew based on a colonial system and what is possible based on alternative knowledge. The narratives in this project seek a reckoning with the past, specifically the past relating to the Southern landscape, and in their reckoning, they rewrite how the landscape functions in their history and in the southern literary tradition.

The work these authors do is a challenge to an oppressor-ruled system. As they circulate their stories full of their culture and a retelling of American history, they ask us to reevaluate our understanding of our relationships with history, nature, and ways of existing where we are. These authors ask us to return to the South and to these spaces that have a difficult past to understand

these relationships. Jodi Byrd writes that “to return continually to a region, a text, or a place is to ruminate, to root, to be captured and enraptured by something that unsettles, troubles, or defies” (613). It is not easy work and “it is a gesture that requires constant if not frenetic engagement, thought, worrying, and repetition. The right to return, however, is not one that is universally granted or always allowed” (Byrd 613). Byrd is referring to an Indigenous return to the South, the home that Indigenous peoples were forced to leave in the Great Removal. The removal and the inability to return haunts the nation as a grim reminder of the past. But what if a return is possible?

An Indigenous return offers to heal to a land that is overwhelmingly abused by a colonial system. Howe and Hogan give us a preview of what a return would mean for the South. According to Hogan, there would be a return to balance between human and non-human, and with this reverence would come healing. Howe argues that a return to Indigenous knowledge would offer the land a chance to heal. She writes that “Native stories, no matter what form they take (novel, poem, drama, memoir, film, history), seem to pull all the elements together of a storyteller’s tribe, meaning the people, the land, and multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieus” (“The Story of America” 42). As Native stories combine elements that make up the culture of the South, they rewrite our ways of connecting and understanding the south’s troubled past.

The Native stories that call for a return and the Black stories that rewrite history acknowledge the persistent practice of erasure and call for action among allies, both within the academy and the population as a group. Erasure stops when scholars choose to study the hidden voices, we acknowledge the gaps in scholarship, and ask for a quell in the incessant studies of the white-centric voice and history. Scholar Rain Prud’homme-Cranford suggests that

“relationships between Indigenous-descended peoples and allies in the academy means we must call upon our history as transitional and transnational culture-brokers” (22). Alliances can create and demand space for these ignored voices. As scholars, we have a responsibility to listen to these stories, to become “transnational culture-brokers” in the pursuit of understanding culture, literature, and how we relate to both. Prud’homme-Cranford argues that “those of us working in new southern studies, let us create dialogues/dialectics dismantling borders, old Jim Crow binary separatism, moving towards decolonizing structures of dominance and working with critical mixed race studies” (22). Their searing call to action enables the voices of the ignored and the forgotten stories of the repressed can rewrite the dominant narrative and leads to a successful reckoning with the past.

Prior to his death, Kenan challenged his employer, the University of North Carolina, to take up this call to action, as their failure in doing so was obstructing his and others’ reckoning with the south. In his essay “Letter from North Carolina, he claims “the country’s oldest public university is truly haunted by its mythical Confederate past. Even ghosts can teach us a thing or two” (Letter from North Carolina” 243). Silent Sam was representative of a south that UNC could not let go of. This holding on to the dead and the past is rampant throughout the south. Kenan’s *Let the Dead Bury the Dead* is a reference to a Bible verse Jesus says “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (*English Standard Version*, Luke 9.10). By using this verse as his title, it is safe to believe that Kenan and Jesus had the same message: Live among the living. The celebrated dead of a racist and violent past should be buried. Clinging to a history that celebrates terror is the dead burying the dead and remaining dead. Acknowledging the past and listening to the narratives of the oppressed will be like waking up.

Political and cultural events since 2020 have shown that this reckoning is not limited to the south. As a scholar of southern studies, my research and interests draw me to the region, and I engage with all that the South has been in its long and troubled history, from genocide to slavery, the annihilation of culture, land, and ecosystems, and to “racial capitalist violence, dispossession of property, labor exploitation” (McInnis 20). Jarvis McInnis argues that yes, “the South is indeed all of these things. But, if the recent outrage against police brutality and the #BlackLivesMatter outcry reverberating across the nation have taught us anything, it is that racism is an American problem, not simply a southern one” (20). Systemic racism is evident in recent attempts by the United States government to overhaul public education and access to Black and Indigenous history.<sup>17</sup> Erasure, as this project demonstrates, is a form of violence that prompts more violence to Black and Indigenous peoples and hinders the reckoning work these authors are doing.

The danger, as a white scholar, is in making the same mistakes as my predecessors. In analyzing a text, it is easy to assert our own understanding and apply the implications the texts make to our circumstances. This was difficult for me especially as I read Randall Kenan, a Black queer man who grew up forty minutes from my home. Our experiences were complete opposites. The stories and histories I learned from my community were wholly different from what he learned from his community. His deep history with the swamps introduced a new way to see and value the landscape. If we had been able to meet and share our experiences of growing up in eastern North Carolina, I assume our conversation would have been limited to bbq. I hope that

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<sup>17</sup> According to edweek.org, as of early 2021, 44 states have introduced bills or taken other steps that restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers discuss racism and sexism, according to an Education Week analysis. While eighteen other states have imposed these bans and restrictions either through legislation or other avenues.

we would come to the conclusion that vinegar-based is obviously better. But Kenan did to me what he did to others and called me out in my ignorance and told me there was more to my home, much more. I hope I listened well.

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