BLACK QUEER ECOLOGY IN THE SOIL OF CANCER ALLEY: HOW BLACK GEOGRAPHIES DISRUPT OPPRESSIVE NORMS

by

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Inspired by a range of disciplines, most prominently Black feminist thought and queer ecology, I introduce Black queer ecology as a practice of queering the way we understand, interact, and relate to our environment from a perspective informed by Black experiences. I'll be applying this Black queer ecology to the ongoing environmental injustice in southern Louisiana known as "Cancer Alley." I'll reveal gaps in common discourse of Cancer Alley and showcase Black queer ecology's potential to challenge social constructs and norms that act as key ideological pillars to systems of oppression, while also offering pathways for Black people to reclaim themselves by reclaiming their environmental relationships.

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Introduction: Black Queer Ecology as a Tool for Engaging our Own Imaginations

> "I often feel I am trapped in someone else's imagination and I must engage my own imagination to break free."
>
> — adrienne maree brown
> *Emergent Strategy*

Our collective imaginations make up the realities we experience and our imaginations are influenced by our experienced realities. We exist in a wonderful cycle of creating and being created. Though it would be futile to try to separate the real from the imagined, certain imaginations, those that work to uphold systems of oppression, can't be left unquestioned. These imaginations have been repeatedly forced upon us through both violent and insidious means such that they've become dangerously overlooked to the point of naturalization.

The only way to fight against oppressive imaginations is to engage our own. Oppressive constructs, norms, structures, ideologies, institutions, etc. have become so embedded in our Westernized societies that even after we've recognized their false infallibility, we still struggle to imagine alternative ways of being. The people, things, and concepts that do challenge these oppressive imaginations and what they stand for are often rejected, misconstrued, or dismissed as unrealistic. We even see this repudiation in ourselves to ourselves whenever we shut down our own world-breaking "what if?"s. We've been taught to shy away from our own imaginations, but we must push against that instinct.

This issue of conceptual domination has been described by adrienne maree brown as an "imagination battle." Challenging what we've been taught to see as unchallengeable may seem impossible, but I promise those of us who want to see a world that's led by love have not been losing this battle. The following words from Walidah Imarisha embodies this truth:

> "… we are the dreams of enslaved Black folks who were told it was 'unrealistic' to imagine a day they were not called property. Those Black people refused to confine their dreams to realism, and instead they dreamed us up. Then they bent reality,

reshaped the world to create us."

This quest is intergenerational. We can gain strength from those before, join with those today, and have faith in those after; as we individually and collectively continue to combat imagination degradation. As a methodology that centers marginalized ways of being, I offer Black queer ecology as an additional tool for embracing our own imaginations.

"Nature is not a hiding place from ideology but often its location."

— Katie Hogan

Undoing Nature

I am not the first to use a term like "Black queer ecology." In 2021, Zsea Bowmani wrote an article highlighting the potential for a Black queer feminist ecology. According to him, a Black queer feminist ecology is equipped to comprehensively challenge, "…structures of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other forms of oppression." Although implied, I would like to directly recognize ableism, transmisia, and naturism– defined as, "…the domination and oppression of nonhuman nature," (Warren 132)– as part of this list as well.

Bowmani's vision for a Black queer feminist ecology builds on Black ecology, Black queer feminism, and ecofeminist traditions. It's widely established, in these schools of thought and beyond, that systems of oppression are interconnected. Ecofeminists, such as Karen J. Warren and Val Plumwood, have explained their conceptual links as being based in value dualisms– pairs of social constructs where each counterpart is viewed as opposite or exclusive to the other with one side being made out to be superior. Ecofeminism began by acknowledging the connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature. From analyzing their corresponding value dualisms, male/female and culture/nature respectively, ecofeminism grew to recognize a larger dualistic structure imbuing western culture. Below are sets of dualized pairs identified by Plumwood as "key" to Western thought and its resulting forms of oppression:

culture / nature	rationality / animality (nature)	civilized / primitive (nature)
reason / nature	reason / emotion (nature)	production / reproduction (nature)
male / female	mind, spirit / nature	public / private
mind / body (nature)	freedom / necessity (nature)	subject / object
master / slave	universal / particular	self / other
reason / matter (physicality)	human / nature (non-human)	

Greta Gaard, in her call for a queer ecofeminism, would later argue for the contrasting pairs white/nonwhite, financially empowered/impoverished, heterosexual/queer, and reason/the erotic to also be recognized as crucial to this dualistic structure. This combined list is still incomplete. For instance, I

believe that ecofeminism would benefit from investigating the dualisms able/disabled and normal/abnormal as well and there are likely other significant dualized pairs.

In anycase, all of these dualisms relate to each other, connected by explicit and implicit assumptions woven into Western culture. For example, as masculinity is associated with reason and production, femininity is associated with emotion and reproduction; as whiteness is associated with rationality and civilization, nonwhiteness is associated with animality and primitivity; as heterosexuality is associated with the mind, queerness is associated with the body; and so on. Based on this dualistic structure, the "master identity," associated with humanity, rationality, masculinity, whiteness, etc., is the subject– his perspective is universalized; he and his contributions are known (public); his selfhood recognized (Plumwood).

At the center of this dualistic structure is the reason/nature contrast. As Plumwood explains, "…virtually everything on the 'superior' side can be represented as forms of reason…" while, "…virtually everything on the underside can be represented as forms of nature," (44). As nature is made out to be inferior, whatever is associated with nature is also deemed inferior. This presumed inferiority is then used to justify the subordination of nature and humans who are judged as closer to nature, establishing what Warren names a "logic of domination."

All of these value dualisms mutually reinforce each other, creating an "oppressive conceptual framework" that works to naturalize the master identity and therefore the domination and oppression of all those excluded by it (Warren). Consequently, a main argument of ecofeminism is that all systems of oppression are dependent on each other and thus to end one, we must end them all– a goal commonly shared in the Black radical tradition as well. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

This brings us back to Bowmani. Per Bowmani's depiction, a Black queer feminist ecology is able to more holistically oppose systems of oppression by examining how Black people are animalized and naturalized; how nature is racialized; and how both are queered, eroticized, and feminized in a culture that devalues women, people of color, LGBTQ+ people, as well as sexuality, animals, and nature. To put another way, it seeks to expose and confront our society's oppressive conceptual

framework. The goal being to create a world in which Blackness, queerness, femininity, and all other supposed "inferior" identities are self-defined and free from a relationship of domination/subjugation; a world where we hold a "loving perception" toward each other and non-human nature (Warren).

Hannah Skjellum has also articulated a form of "Black queer ecology." In their ecocritical analysis of Barry Jenkins's film *Moonlight (2016)*, Skjellum introduces a "radical queer Black ecology." For some context, *Moonlight (2016)* follows the life of Chiron, a gay Black boy, as he grows up in an impoverished area of Miami, Florida during the 1980s crack epidemic. One focus of this film is Chiron having to navigate the opposing relationship between his queer identity and the heteronormative and hypermasculine expectations attached to his racial and gender identity. The film can be broken down into three stages: Chiron's childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. However, Skjellum is interested in how Chiron's experience of Black queerness relates to space and instead divides the film by its cultural, natural, and naturecultural settings. Skjellum's overall goal from examining this film's spatial storytelling is to identify and present the radical queer Black ecology within it.

Like for Bowmani, Skjellum's description of a radical queer Black ecology is informed by a range of intersecting disciplines, including Black studies, Black ecology, Black feminism, and queer ecology. A central feature of Skjellum's, or rather *Moonlight's*, radical queer Black ecology is that it challenges "...the certainty of space," (284). Though often treated as a neutral background to our lives, space too is a social product. Physically, we construct and change space, but we're also responsible for giving space meaning. By how we form and engage with it, we ultimately decide the purpose of a space– who and what it is for. Reflective of the dominant culture, space is often produced in ways that support oppressive agendas and ideologies. In this analysis, Skjellum focuses on the role the nature-culture binary has in sustaining systemic racism and heterosexism. They then go on to show how *Moonlight (2016)* complicates this binary.

In alignment with the film, Skjellum first characterizes cultural space as oppressive and natural space as liberating in relation to Black queerness. This isn't to mean that natural spaces can't be spaces of oppression as well. In fact, Skjellum is very clear that all space in the United States is founded on anti-Black violence. However, Skjellum describes there being more pressure in cultural spaces to follow or enforce oppressive racial, gender, and sexual expectations:

> "...the cultural space depends upon the constant maintenance by [the] people within its perceived borders… By conforming to these spaces' expectations and thus performing those expectations, those trapped in cultural space can then gain some leverage, some power, through the perpetuation of oppressive ideals and structures. In this way, relationality seems to do the work of 'producing' space by interpersonally enforcing the expectations of what it means to exist in different spaces," (294).

So, alongside practices of segregation, environmental degradation, systemic disenfranchisement, etc., spaces of oppression are also shaped by how we behave and interact with each other in these spaces. For instance, like how *Moonlight (2016)* shows, cultural spaces push Black men and boys to conform to heteronormative and hypermasculine ideals. These social expectations are set by how people interact with each other and the difference in reactions towards those who are able to present themselves in accordance with sexual and gender norms and those who cannot. The rejection of any queer gender or sexual expression is a result of general queerphobia, but Black communities also feel additional social pressure to adhere to heteronormative standards. In an attempt to assimilate into the dominant class or even just to try to avoid being discriminated against, those part of a marginalized group often end up shunning and punishing whatever traits or behaviors within themselves and their communities that don't align with the dominant culture. As we exist in a culture dominated by both anti-Black racism and heterosexism, queerphobia becomes a common feature of respectability politics within the Black community. However, this method of self-policing only makes all of us more vulnerable to systemic anti-Blackness, like how Chiron's ostracization leads him into the school-to-prison pipeline. Denying queerness in ourselves and rejecting those who are visibly queer is one way we (re)produce spaces of oppression by how we relate to each other.

Conversely, the film shows natural spaces and elements as offering moments of respite from the oppressive norms making up cultural spaces. As I said before, natural spaces can also be oppressive. They are common sites of racialized violence. They are also often first created by destroying racially marginalized communities, only to then be designed in ways that exclude them. Yet, oppressive social expectations appear to have less power in these spaces. As Skjellum explains, in nature there's more freedom for those that are rejected in cultural spaces to express and explore their true selves. In

Moonlight (2016), a beach acts as this setting. It's here where Chiron, as well as his friend who he shared this space with, are no longer burdened by the strict heterosexual and hypermasculine standards placed on Black boys. The beach enables them to shed away those expectations, allowing them to exist and interact in ways that would not be possible in cultural spaces. Skjellum again stresses the significance of relationality in forming space– not only between people, but also between people and the space itself. The connections that Chiron and his friend have to the beach, to its waters, winds, sands, and sounds, is what encourages them to form more genuine and intimate connections with each other. These connections are what makes the beach into a sanctuary.

Although these moments in nature are brief, the experience of existing here teaches these boys that space is malleable and that they too can shape it. In Skjellum's words, "Powerfully, the beach space imbues queer Black men and boys with connectivity to space and the right to affect and connect to earth— as well as the ability to understand that geography is produced and maintained," (294). However, the beach has limited range. Isolated and lacking in resources, the beach cannot protect Chiron from the violence of anti-Blackness and heterosexism after he rejoins society. Another space is needed to increase the reach of the beach's liberating effects.

Moonlight's radical queer Black ecology proposes that such a space can be created by blending nature and culture. Nature, as the non-human world, and culture, as the human world, have never actually been truly distinct from one another. *Moonlight (2016)* overtly displays this as well with elements of the beach bleeding into the city. It's important to remember that Skjellum has been analyzing the social constructs of nature and culture, which are conceptualized as exclusive from one another. Since natural spaces welcome queer Black expression while cultural spaces do not, destabilizing the abstract line between nature and culture can help bring this inclusive feature of nature into cultural spaces as well. By way of relationality, queer Black men can produce these naturecultural spaces. In *Moonlight (2016),* examples of such a space include the diner and home of Chiron's, now adult, friend. Though part of the cultural landscape, these spaces are also open and accepting like the natural space these men once enjoyed together.

To summarize, *Moonlight's* radical queer Black ecology disrupts the nature-culture binary in three key ways. First, as it depicts cultural spaces as being founded on violent anti-Blackness and

heterosexism, it also affirms Black queer existence in these spaces. Though we may be punished for it, our existence itself unsettles the "rules" of cultural space.

Secondly, it encourages more Black queer access to nature. When we were discussing ecofeminism, we established that "culture" or "civilization" is conceptually linked to whiteness and heterosexuality; while, nonwhiteness and queerness has been pushed into the realm of the "natural." Simultaneously, Black and queer people alike are generalized as not being in or enjoying nature. Rural life and outdoor recreation tend to be seen as primarily for white cisheterosexual men. Whereas, Black and queer people are associated with urbanity. In fact, homosexuality was once largely considered as being caused by the poor environmental conditions of urban areas and the larger populations of people of color in urban areas was also seen as one of the "pollutants" causing homosexuality (Mortimer-Sandilands). Oppressive conceptual frameworks are full of contradictions. That said, there is the issue of natural spaces being made unsafe and inaccessible to Black and queer people, so we are more likely to be nature deprived. Rather than seen as a consequence of systemic racism and heterosexism, our nature deprivation has instead been normalized. By showcasing queer Blackness existing and thriving in nature, *Moonlight (2016)* pushes against any narratives that view our discursive or physical absence from nature as "natural."

Lastly, as *Moonlight (2016)* redefines cultural and natural space, it also works to blur the line between the two in its advocacy for naturecultural spaces. The heart of this radical queer Black ecology lies in empowering Black queer people, especially men and boys, to rethink space. From this, "… this ecology permits the recreation and recultivation of new relationships between Black people, Black people and nature, Black people and culture, as well as nature and culture," (Skjellum 287).

> "African Americans struggle against the burden of societal scripts that make them ecological pariahs, yet they enjoy the beauty of liberating themselves and acting outside of these scripts. Their ecological outlook is informed both by the collective experience of being placed among those at the bottom of human hierarchies and their visionary responses to nature itself. This has resulted in traditions of figurative and actual ecological care that extend not only to fellow humans but also to nonhuman nature."
>
> — Kimberly N. Ruffin
> *Black on Earth*

Bowmani and Skjellum are who I've found to specifically name something like "Black queer ecology." Bowmani's "Black queer feminist ecology" exists as a liberatory framework focused on the intersections of oppressive systems and ideologies; while Skjellum's "radical queer Black ecology" describes a framework based on reconceptualizing space to uplift Black queer life. The Black queer ecology that I envision embodies both of these traits, but it also expands beyond them.

Like for Bowmani and Skjellum, this Black queer ecology is also a, "…harmonization of several theoretical frameworks," (Bowmani). My main inspirations come from Black feminist thought, Black ecologies, queer ecologies, and queer theory. The Black queer ecology that I'll be discussing in this paper is best defined as a practice of queering the way we understand, interact, and relate to our environment from a perspective informed by the imaginations and experienced realities of Black people. This definition of Black queer ecology is not to limit it– I believe there are no boundaries to the shapes it can take. The purpose of this definition is to just help make my vision of what a Black queer ecology can look like more clear.

This Black queer ecology operates with the understanding that people are not separate from the natural world. As ecology studies the relationships living things have with each other and their environment; the interactions between humans, between humans and non-human beings, and between

humans and their surroundings must also be investigated. Thus, Black queer ecology's investigation focuses on how oppressive systems and ideologies, especially anti-Blackness, have shaped these ecological relationships. Not only has space been physically constructed in ways to disenfranchise marginalized people, but, as Bowmani, Warren, Plumwood, Gaard, Skjellum and many more have explained, dominant social constructions that relate to the environment, nature, and space have also developed in ways to support and rationalize hierarchical difference and exploitative relationships. As these physical and social constructions work to naturalize oppressive systems and ideologies, their destructive impacts are being felt by everyone and thing at a multiscalar level.

However, Black people have purposefully and inherently challenged these oppressive constructions. Our ecological outlooks are often disregarded, but Black people from across the diaspora have long histories of distinctive environmentalisms, with their own philosophies, that have been informed by all our different experiences and cultures. With foundational Black Americans specifically, we too have developed a unique environmental perspective. There's diversity in this perspective itself, but I'm fond of Kimberly K. Smith's summarization. In her words, "The black [environmental] tradition… [conceptualizes] the American landscape not as pristine and innocent wilderness but as a corrupted land in need of redemption. Humans, in turn, are to be active, creative, co-equal partners in giving meaning to and redeeming the natural word," (ch. into).

This environmental philosophy relates to Black Americans'experience of, what Kimberly N. Ruffin names, the "ecological burden-and-beauty paradox." Though Blackness is conceptually linked to nature, we nor the spaces we occupy are considered as the type of "nature" worthy of protection. Rather, for us Black(ened) beings and landscapes, being of nature is how ecofeminism describes– a justification for exploitation. This link between Blackness and nature was once used to defend a race-based slavery system in the Americas. One way this exploitation continues to manifest is in Black communities being constructed into sacrifice zones for state and capital interests. Thus, Black people have continuously been burdened by being classified as "of nature" and by environmental degradation itself. However, this environmental otherization has led us to create environmental relationships independent of and oppositional to those of the dominant culture that seeks to divide and stratify. "Ecological beauty" describes these alternative environmental relationships. Informed by our experience with both general

and environmental racism, we grow to understand the connections between the oppression of Black people and the oppression of nonhuman nature. This understanding develops into ecological outlooks that push against these paired systems of oppression, emphasizing care to humans and nonhuman nature– ecological outlooks that seek to redeem the natural world.

Black queer ecology aims to bring attention to these already existing, yet overlooked, alternative ways of connecting to the environment, while also encouraging the development of new environmental relationships. In doing so, this Black queer ecology's liberatory potential lies in its ability to disturb some of the most normalized aspects of our society's oppressive conceptual framework.

> "It's not possible to constantly hone on the crisis. You have to have the love and you have to have the magic. That's also life."
>
> — Toni Morrison
>
> *WWTW Interview by John Callaway*

This paper has two main sections. The first focuses on detailing this Black queer ecology further, where I'll expand more on its theoretical foundations and explain how I've pieced them together to form this Black queer ecology. The second half will be showing how Black queer ecology can be applied to a current environmental justice issue. I'll be specifically discussing Black queer ecology in relation to "Cancer Alley." Cancer Alley refers to an industrial corridor along the lower Mississippi River in southern Louisiana where toxic industrial pollution is primarily harming historical Black communities. A Black queer ecology approach to Cancer Alley involves understanding this environmental injustice within the context of past and present forms of anti-Blackness, including chattel slavery, as well as connecting it to the wider web of oppressive constructs. Furthermore, Black queer ecology is interested in how the ecological burden-and-beauty paradox shows up in Cancer Alley. Despite the ecological burdens brought by mass industrialization, these communities continue to produce relationships based on care between each other and between non-human nature. As an example of the ecological beauty and of the alternative environmental relationships forged in this space, I'll be highlighting the many historic Black cemeteries in the area.

This paper will focus on the experience of foundational Black Americans. This is my identity and what I have the most expertise to speak on. However, I do not wish to limit Black queer ecology to just foundational Black Americans. Its influences are from across the diaspora and I would be curious to see what this Black queer ecology would look like in different cultural and geographical contexts. Furthermore, engaging in Black queer ecology is not only for Black people. If a person is sharing a subversive environmental perspective informed by Black histories and philosophies, then I would consider them as engaging in the practice of Black queer ecology. Additionally, because Black queer ecology's main objective is to join co-existing efforts in disrupting the conceptual foundations of oppression systems, there is strong potential for more intersectional approaches to Black queer ecology

as well.

Though Black queer ecology works to reveal just how deep rooted racism is in our culture, my hope is that engaging in Black queer ecology can still be an enjoyable experience. Learning about mass injustice can be soul draining. This is an unavoidable part of Black queer ecology. However, because Black queer ecology asks us to center our rich environmental histories, perhaps it can also be soul rejuvenating. adrienne maree brown has emphasized just how important pleasure is in activist work, writing "Pleasure activism is the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy," (*Pleasure* 7). Black queer ecology is a way to reclaim our whole, happy selves by reclaiming our environmental and ancestral relationships. As difficult as the work of a Black queer ecology can be, I believe it can help, "…make justice and liberation the most pleasurable experiences we can have on this planet," (brown, *Pleasure* 7). If residents of Cancer Alley come across this paper, I would like them to feel fully seen– that both their ecological burdens and beauties are being recognized. I would also like for them to find inspiration in this Black queer ecology as they have inspired it– that it may help guide a joyful resistance in Cancer Alley and outside of it.

Imagining a Black Queer Ecology

> "Queering… empowers us to think what is often the unthinkable to produce unthought-of pasts [presents and futures]."
>
> — Thomas Dowson
>
> Noreen Giffney, *Denormatizing Queer Theory*

The terms "Black" and "queer" have similar histories. Though these labels were once used derogatorily, they have since been reclaimed and redefined by those they originally demeaned. To be Black or to be queer are now identities we take pride in. Even further, Blackness and queerness have also developed into their own political ideologies based on resisting systems of power. Though inseparable from the experiences of Black and queer people, embodying Blackness and queerness in their ideological forms is not an inherent trait of people who are categorized as "Black" or "queer." We too can uphold structures of racism and cisheterosexism. Afterall, we've grown up in the same world as everyone else. In the context of this Black queer ecology, it too cannot be separated from the experiences of Black and queer people, however its Blackness and queerness also describes a state of disruption.

For our purposes, to be "queer" means to challenge oppressive social constructs and norms. This definition aligns with Noreen Giffney's descriptions of queer theory. In her article on "Denormitizing Queer Theory," Giffney, while drawing from other queer theorists, makes the case that queer theory shouldn't be limited to issues of sexuality and gender. As a critical theory based on embracing openness, plurality, fluidity, instability, etc., Giffney argues that it should be careful to not form its own boundaries. Under this interpretation of queer theory, queer theory's ultimate goal would be to erode, "…the 'net-like organization' of the norm and expose *all* norms for the way they define, solidify, and defend their shaky self-identities by excluding those (dissident others) who fail or refuse to conform," (Giffney 75). Black queer ecology, then, is about harnessing the capacity for Black environmental relationships to challenge norms.

I would also like to propose the idea of Blackness itself being queer. Giffney has clarified that queer theory has a place for all marginalized ways of being, which would include Blackness. But there is also an inherent non-cishetorosexuality to Blackness that is worth recognizing. To try to summarize the complex relationship Black people have to gender and sexuality simply; there may be Black people that are cis or heterosexual, but due to the anti-Black constructions of gender and sexuality, Blackness is excluded from cisheteronormativity (Jackson, Bey). In other words, cisheteronormativity is just too caught up in whiteness for us to really be accepted in it.

For instance, reproductive sex between non-white people has been attacked in similar ways to homosexual sex. We see this clearly in population control movements, which primarily target(ed) poor women of color. So, while homosexual sex is often criticized for not being procreative, non-white people are criticized for procreative sex. Neither of these kinds of sex serve the interest of white nation-building, rather they threaten it. Because of this they are deemed not only deviant, but even as toxic to the environment. Both eugenics and homophobia have been defended under the pretense of protecting the environment. Under such narratives, "nature" is just a stand in for nation. In these ways, non-white straight sex can also be considered queer (Gosine).

Furthermore, in our Western context, much of how gender is conceptualized, what constitutes a man or woman, has depended on the exclusion of Black people. The masculinization of Black women, the feminization of Black men, and the animalization and oversexualization of both have all worked to construct our gender norms. By design, Black people were outcasted from the categories of "man" and "woman" and our contrived gender nonconformity, independent of self-identification, was used to further justify our status as lesser beings. As Zakiyyah Iman Jackson states, "… purported observations of gender and sexuality were frequently used to provide 'evidence' of the inherent abject quality of black people's human animality…" (5).

So, although I am primarily using "queer" to describe a resistance to normalization, Blackness does also relate to the more common usage of "queer" in that its sexual and gender expression is fundamentally oppositional to (white) cisheteronormativity. Bowmani's Black queer ecofeminism that we discussed before shared this conclusion as well. As both "inferior" terms, Blackness is queer(ed) and

queerness is Black(ened). It may be tempting to try to disassociate Blackness from queerness, to defend our humanity by adopting cisheteronormativity; however, in addition to the fact that this would leave behind Black queer people, more so than trying to assimilate into the dominant culture, embracing queerness will always hold more potential for Black liberation.

> "If divided and disparate groups agreed to consider how nature is often a 'weapon of oppression' used against them, and, equally important, if these same groups saw how nature is also an opportunity for creative resistance, an unusually strong coalition could be formed."
>
> — Katie Hogan
> *Undoing Nature*

The connections between Black and queer oppression and liberation becomes even more clear when considering their environmental dimensions. Queer ecologies bring that environmental perspective to queer theory. As described by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, "…there is an ongoing relationship between sex and nature that exists institutionally, discursively, scientifically, spatially, politically, poetically, and ethically…" and the task of a queer ecology is, "…to interrogate that relationship in order to arrive at a more nuanced and effective sexual and environmental understanding," (5).

Troubling concepts of the (un)natural and complicating the nature-culture binary are key features of a queer ecology. The oppression of queerness is bound to social constructions of nature. Under an ecofeminist lens, queer oppression is explained by the West's dualistic structure that sides queerness with nature, thus categorizing it as "inferior" to its counterpart. Yet, queerness is also often charged as a "crime against nature." I repeat, oppressive conceptual frameworks are riddled with contradictions. In sitting with these contradictions, Greta Gaard writes:

> "The charge that queer sexualities are 'against nature' and thus morally, physiologically, or psychologically depraved and devalued would seem to imply that nature is valued— but as ecofeminists have shown, this is not the case. In Western culture, just the contrary is true: nature is devalued just as queers are devalued. Here again is one of the many contradictions characterizing the dominant ideology. On the one hand, from a queer perspective, we learn that the dominant culture charges queers with transgressing the natural order, which in turn implies that nature is valued and

> must be obeyed. On the other hand, from an ecofeminist perspective, we learn that Western culture has constructed nature as a force that must be dominated if culture is to prevail. Bringing these perspectives together indicates that, in effect, the 'nature' queers are urged to comply with is none other than the dominant paradigm of heterosexuality— an identity and practice that is itself a cultural construction," (120).

Thus, queerness is both too natural and unnatural. This is true for Blackness as well as Black people experience both animalization and environmental otherization. Challenging "nature," making either accusation pointless, presents an opportunity to knock out a conceptual pillar to both queer and Black oppression. Furthermore, since this would destabilize the West's oppressive conceptual framework as a whole, such an endeavor would benefit all "inferior" terms.

Mortimer-Sandilands' usage of "queer" in queer ecologies does differ from how I use it in Black queer ecology. Under her description, "queer," as a noun, relates to non-heterosexual individuals and communities and, as a verb, "queer" means to challenge heteronormativity. I prefer Giffney's definition of "queer" over Mortimer-Sandilands, because it better encapsulates the true scale of this project. Interrogating nature is a task that must be taken up by everyone. Expanding "queer" to refer to challenging social constructs and norms, I believe encourages the grand participation that's necessary to accomplish queer ecology's mission. The Black Intellectual Tradition, alone, already has a long history of queering ecology, especially in regard to questioning the human.

In particular, I'd like to highlight Sylvia Wynter's theorizations on Man. Wynter uses the term "Man" to specifically refer to European conceptualizations of the the human that developed alongside European colonization of the Americas and the transatlantic slave trade. Wynter explains that entering into the European "Age of Discovery," Europe's concept of the human relied on a Christian worldview, where the "human other" to Europe's "human" were those that could be categorized as enemies of Christ. However, encountering the Indigenous peoples of the Americas threw this definition of the human into disorder. Because they never had a chance to be exposed to Christianity, people of the "New World" couldn't be othered as enemies of Christ. Since their divinity couldn't be measured, neither could their "humanness." A new conceptualization of the human was needed, one that could justify settler colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade that followed.

Thus, the "human" was reinvented, from "the true Christian self" into "the rational self of Man," where the "human other" were those that were made out as irrational or subrational with race acting as the determining factor of whether one was rational or not. As explained by Wynter, "While the 'Indians' were portrayed as the very acme of the savage, irrational Other, the 'Negroes' were assimilated to the [subrational] category, represented as its most extreme form and as the ostensible missing link between rational humans and irrational animal," (266).

Supporting this invention of Man were European concepts of nature. During this period, Europe began to develop their physical and biological sciences and, in place of or in addition to religion, these scientific advancements would be used against non-white people. For instance, theories of evolution and natural selection would spawn the pseudo-scientific claim that non-white people were less evolved and thus their lesser social status was only natural. Furthermore, because it was simply the natural order for inferior beings to be used by the superior, chattel slavery was natural and settler colonialism was natural since Indigenous Americans wouldn't know how to make proper use of land. Christianity itself had already set the foundation for a hierarchical relationship between nature and Man and racial science exacerbated this further, while also positioning non-white people as closer to nature.

Under this framework of Man, non-white people and non-human nature are to be exploited for the interests of Man. This continues into the present. Wynter declares, "… all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources… these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle," (260-261). Through systemic violence and epistemic erasure, Man tirelessly works to naturalize itself. As it constantly reinforces difference, that difference begins to appear as natural. From that, Man has become "overgeneralized," such that it disguises itself as a universal conceptualization of the human.

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson further clarifies that more so than a linear process where naturism prefigured racism, racial oppression and the oppression of non-human nature developed together. Racism worked to reinforce the man-animal dichotomy in Western thought. To legitimize slavery and conquest, thus to defend a racial hierarchy in humanity, the hierarchical relationship between Man and

animal/non-human nature had to be maintained as well.

Jackson also pushes against binaural thinking around humanization-dehumanization. Rather than Black people suffering from a state of dehumanization, Jackson explains that us being included in humanity is the reason for our oppression; writing, "… animalization is not incompatible with humanization: what is commonly deemed dehumanization is, in the main, more accurately interpreted as the violence of humanization or the burden of inclusion into a racially hierarchized system universal humanity," (18). Per this understanding, Black people are not excluded from humanity, but are part of an *overgeneralized* version of humanity that produces racial stratification. Thus, Jackson uses the term "bestialized humanization" to more accurately describe the state of Blackness. Even further, Jackson describes Black being as plasticized, where plasticity describes "a mode of transmogrification whereby the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once,…" (3). Black being is manipulated, such that Black people are simultaneously animalized, mechanized, dehumanized, superhumanized, and humanized. Both Wynter and Jackson demonstrate that liberation for Black people, as well as for other marginalized humans and non-human nature, will not come from being included in Man or universalized humanity. On the contrary, we must free ourselves from Man and nurture other modes of being.

Wynter's and Jackson's theorizations of the "human" are examples of Black queer ecology. As they complicate Man, they are also overtly challenging the social construction of nature. In disrupting oppressive systems and ideologies, there are crucial insights that can only be gained by examining how Blackness relates to the environment.

This Black queer ecology, where Blackness guides a queering of environmental relationships, can be practiced in a multitude of ways. It can look like complex theorization like Sylvia Wynter's and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's works. It can be creating and analyzing media like *Moonlight (2016)*. There is also large potential for Black queer ecology in Black poetic sciences, Black fiction, Black art, etc. Black queer ecology can take many forms. This paper will focus on how Black queer ecology shows up in Black spatial relationships.

> "Human geography needs some philosophical attention… existing cartographic rules unjustly organize human hierarchies in place and reify uneven geographies in familiar, seemingly natural ways… these rules are alterable and there exists a terrain through which different geographic stories can be and are told."
>
> — Katherine McKittrick
> *Demonic Grounds*

To begin thinking of how Black queer ecology shows up in space, we'll first look towards Katherine McKittrick's work *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Building from Wynter, McKittrick targets her critique of Man on "Man's geographies." McKittrick defines geography as, "…space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations…" (x). This would include the physical landscapes, as well as the geographic imaginations and social relations of a space. McKittrick makes it known that, though they get taken for granted, geographies are a social production. Geography's illusion of being fixed, or, as McKittrick puts it, "...the idea that space 'just is'…" (xi), is a dangerous misconception as it leads to geographic inequality and sites of spatial violence to go uncontested. Furthermore, Man's geographies work to universalize Man by taking advantage of the assumed knowability of space. The naturalization of Man's geographies culminates into the naturalization of Man.

As explained by McKittrick, Man's geographies produce space by "...mapping and attempting to constitute the space of human Others as disembodied and then transparently abnormal," (McKittrick 128). Moving into the sixteenth-century, Man's geographies showed itself in how Europeans mapped land masses as inhabitable or uninhabitable. By way of cartographic abstractions, spaces were essentially designated as inhabitable or uninhabitable based on whether Europeans were there or not. Lands that have been out of their reach were labeled as lands of no one– they were established as peopleless, nonexistent, underwater, too hot, without God, and so forth. Learning that there were people already living on these lands did not deter the label of uninhabited. Instead, it was argued that because

these lands were “uncultivated” by the present people, they were still uninhabited. In part, exploiting nature was a requirement to be considered as both a rational and geographic being. Indigenous American and African people were perceived as lacking the ability to rise above nature, therefore inferior to the European people and thus any of their claims to the land were void.

Europeans and their way of life was the “normal” in which everything was measured by. Rather than embracing diversity in being, the difference of norms within Indigenous American and African cultures were viewed by Europeans as evidence of their irrationality. Likewise, Man’s geographies refused to recognize the spatial productions of non-white people. In sum, spaces were categorized as inhabitable or uninhabitable by how much they differed from what’s considered as the “normal,” where who and what counts as “normal” was determined by the formulations of Man. This abnormal-normal dichotomy can also be understood from a queer perspective. Man is effectively establishing who and where fails to conform to its norms– therefore, with our definition of queer, these spaces can also be understood as being queer-ed by Man. Overall, Man’s geographies created a dichotomy, the inhabitable versus uninhabitable, which designated people as naturally geographic or naturally ungeographic, normal or abnormal, and ultimately as human versus subhuman.

Man’s geographies worked to justify European settler colonialism of the Americas. Per the Doctrine of Discovery, uninhabited lands could be claimed by the European nation that discovered them. Discrediting Indigenous connections to the land authorized further European expansion. Thus, spaces of the uninhabitable were really sites to be conquered and used for state and capital gain. Mapping the (un)inhabitable is an ongoing practice with spaces continuing to be treated as “lands of no one” in more abstract ways. The (un)inhabitable replicates itself in the present through uneven geographies. Wynter and McKittrick term spaces of geographic inequality as “archipelagos of human Otherness.” Man’s “normal” continues to shape space by determining which people belong in spaces of geographical privilege or burden. Through spatial production, Man is able to reinforce its social hierarchies. Furthermore, for these archipelagoes of human Otherness, their modern designations as uninhabitable marks them for exploitation.

In the environmental justice field, we analyze a specific type of archipelago of human Otherness called "sacrifice zones.” As described by Cristina Mislan, sacrifice zones are sites where,

"…human lives and the environment in totality are perceived as disposable," (345). In the United States and at an international scale, sacrifice zones overwhelmingly align with poor communities of color. In these sacrifice zones, the people and land are made to bear the environmental costs of corporate and state interests. Consistently, poor communities of color are made to host waste disposal sites, mass industrialization, and resource extraction operations– resulting in them and their landscapes being disproportionately burdened by the pollution and environmental degradation that follows such activities. Sacrifice zones also include the communities near military infrastructure and test sites, prisons and their surrounding communities, the communities that have been displaced for public infrastructure, the communities that are extremely vulnerable to climate change, and more. In these spaces, the health of the people and environment are compromised for economic gain, for the sake of national security and imperialism, for the preservation of valued spaces, and/or simply for the "common good" of larger society.

Though sacrifice zones are sites that have seemingly been abandoned or neglected by governing bodies, sacrifice zones are ultimately created and maintained by them. Understanding sacrifice zones through Man further reveals this intentionality. The spatial management of sacrifice zones reflects the racial hierarchies and norms of Man. Those who Man judges as inferior are also judged as dispensable, leading to them and their landscapes being sacrifice-*zoned*. We've discussed how people of color can be naturalized to rationalize their oppression; sacrifice zones also show how landscapes can be racialized to excuse environmental degradation and exploitation. As sacrifice zones are produced by Man, they also work to reinforce Man. As McKittrick explained, space has strong ideological influence. As social difference is replicated in physical space through sacrifice zones, sacrifice zones help Man in making that difference appear natural.

Thus, the geographic domination of Man situates the oppression and exploitation of certain people and landscapes as natural. Geographic disruption is necessary not only to relieve spatial and environmental violence, but to also unsettle Man itself. This can be done by showcasing the alternative geographies to Man's that already exist. By design, those that live in these archipelagoes of human Otherness are made invisible, such that they and their interhuman exchanges go unrecognized. However, although Man's geographies can hide other imaginings, Katherine McKittrick explains that

"…encountering, saying, and living geography brings the subject into being– regardless of place," thus "… spaces of Otherness are 'palpitating with life,'" (133). In these archipelagos of human Otherness, alternative modes of being and relating to space are already present. Thus, geographies that challenge Man and Man's geographies are already around us.

Our society is in desperate need of a new normal, one without hierarchical relationships, or perhaps a no normal, where diversity in being is embraced– either way, at the sites that have been marked abnormal, as queer, there exists an everyday way of life that, if brought forward, can queer dominant environmental relationships, queer the human, and queer our normal. A main task of Black queer ecology is to reveal the alternative geographies that have been generated by Black people and their queering potential.

The focus of this paper, Cancer Alley, is an accumulation of sacrifice-*zoned* Black communities. At these sites, Black people continue to uplift each other and deny the social and spatial formations that locate Black people as dispensable. This communal care is largely tied to the alternative environmental relationships forged by these communities. Within these sites that Man has deemed exploitable, there are rich histories of Black environmental stewardship. While the environment has been physically and conceptually used to oppress Black people, within these Black environmental relationships, Black people and nonhuman nature become companions in their mutual liberation. As Monica Patrice Barra beautifully summarizes, at these sites Black people are "...making freedom a place from the grounds of crisis," (27).

A Black queer ecology approach to these sacrifice zones entails contextualizing these sites within the West's oppressive conceptual framework, while also bringing attention to the alternative geographies present in these spaces where alternative care-based human and environmental relationships are practiced in the everyday. Revealing the ecological beauty in spaces of ecological burden will hinder Man's attempt to label these spaces as uninhabitable– as sites of death– while empowering all of us to reimagine the material and conceptual relationships we have with our environment. In summary, with the goal of denaturalizing Man and Man's geographies, this space-based form of Black queer ecology is able to help disrupt oppressive constructs and norms that rely on dominant conceptions of the environment, nature, and space.

> "I want us to tend to the unrestorable places and ecosystems that are ugly, stripped down, full of toxins, rather than considering them unnatural and abandoning them."
>
> — Eli Clare
>
> *Meditations on Natural Worlds, Disabled Bodies, and a Politics of Cure*

As Black queer ecology challenges geographic domination, I believe it can also guide a different understanding of cure and environmental restoration. Dominant ideas of cure in the West is another place where (un)natural and (ab)normal binaries appear. Our idea of cure often shows itself as a desire to restore a body to what we've deemed a natural or normal state. Seeking to be in less pain or to decrease harm isn't the issue. However, this way of thinking frames disabled bodies as unnatural and abnormal, thus ranking them as "lesser than" as well. Similarly, the idea of restoration also holds the implication that there's some previous better or healthier state to return to. When it comes to ecological restoration, typically the goal is to shape an environment to be more like how we envision it was "naturally," to a time before humans or before there was any damage or degradation. However, like for many disabled bodies, for many environments a restoration project in this traditional sense is not possible. It is common for these spaces to instead be written off as a lost cause, excusing further damage. (Un)natural becomes another way to identify which spaces are dispensable, which can be sacrificed.

Eli Clare has explored the idea of "cure" extensively. He poses these critical questions: "How do we witness, name, and resist the injustices that reshape and damage all kinds of bodies– plant and animal, organic and inorganic, nonhuman and human? And alongside our resistance, how do we make peace with the reshaped and damaged bodies themselves, cultivate love and respect for them?" (210). This natural-unnatural or normal-abnormal dichotomy has been used time and time again to determine which bodies, human and non-human alike, are valuable. As we try to care for human, non-human, and environmental bodies, we need to develop a politics of cure that doesn't replicate this harmful paradigm.

Black queer ecology can help inform this methodology of cure. In the context of environmental restoration, Black queer ecology first rejects any notions that separate humans from nature, thus it immediately denies the implication that "unnatural" landscapes are unable or undeserving of restoration. More importantly, Black queer ecology refuses to abandon sites of intense environmental degradation. Rather, Black queer ecology, with an understanding of the ecological burden-and-beauty paradox, has a deep appreciation and love for these landscapes and for the people who call them home. A Black queer ecology perspective recognizes that instead of forsaking these sites, we should be looking towards them to guide us in creating better human and environmental relationships. Overall, Black queer ecology acknowledges all landscapes as indispensable.

Considering the site of environmental injustice that will be the focus of this paper, Cancer Alley, a Black queer ecology approach has us recognize that there is not a time to reference for when this area wasn't hostile to Black bodies, while also being actively degraded itself. Black queer ecology shows that rather than a form of restoration with the linear timeline of before, during, and after harm; these environmental justice issues require an understanding of there being constant harm. Though informed by the past, Black queer ecology does not ask us to return to some idealized version of it. Instead, restoration becomes a future-looking imaginative project– one that's inspired by the ecological beauty in these spaces.

Black queer ecology's approach to environmental restoration may inspire a more inclusive form of cure towards disabled bodies as well. By rejecting the natural/unnatural dichotomy in landscapes, Black queer ecology also encourages a rejection of the normal/abnormal dichotomy that's applied to disabled bodies. Furthermore, as Black queer ecology recognizes the ecological beauty being generated in these spaces that have been harmed by environmental degradation and exploitation, Black queer ecology also recognizes that there is beauty and valuable perspectives being generated by disabled people. In fact, the ecological beauty that Black queer ecology centers around is being largely created by disabled people who were harmed by the same systems that are harming the environment. Furthermore, though, Black queer ecology recognizes that for both humans and environments their value is not tied to profitability or production-ability; Black queer ecology also advocates against relationships based on value in general and instead seeks out relationships based on care. These

thoughts of what Black queer ecology can offer disabled people are still incomplete, but I fully believe that there is a pathway for disability justice within Black queer ecology. Black queer ecology can at least do as Eli Clare asks and resist oppressive and polluting systems, while cultivating love and respect for the human and environmental bodies that have been damaged by them.

Reimagining Cancer Alley through Black Queer Ecology

> "I have a funeral tomorrow of a friend. I imagine myself laying in that casket. I really do."
>
> — Sharon Lavigne
> *In 'Cancer Alley' A Teacher Called to Fight*

"Chemical Corridor," "Cancer Alley," and "Death Alley" are all names that have been given to the over 85 mile industrial corridor along the lower Mississippi River. There are more than 200 industrial plants clustered between Baton Rouge and New Orleans (Younes et al.). Predominantly, these plants are petrochemical facilities and oil refineries. They have repeatedly been found to produce toxic air pollution, causing adverse health effects in surrounding areas with those most harmed being low income and predominantly Black communities. Consistent exposure to air pollution can cause a range of health issues. In Cancer Alley, the high cancer rates in the industrial corridor have been the most noticeable.

Louisiana has one of the highest cancer rates in the United States. In 2019, Louisiana had the third highest rate of cancer incidence and the fifth highest rate of cancer mortality (U.S Cancer Statistics Working Group). Louisiana's industrial pollution has caused many people to join these statistics. Zooming in, chemical manufacturing facilities– the industrial facilities that are responsible for the largest share of Louisiana's industrial pollution– are most commonly located in communities with the highest concentration of Black people (Terrell and Julien, Discriminatory Outcomes). These facilities produce pollutants that are known carcinogens, such as fine particulate matter, PM2.5, and ethylene oxide, EtO (Terrell and Julien, Discriminatory Outcomes, Robinson et al.). As such, the EPA has estimated areas like these, including Cancer Alley, as having high pollution-related cancer risk. Reflecting this, it's been found that where there is high industrial pollution, there are more people, overwhelming Black people, experiencing and dying from cancer (Terrell and Julien, Air Pollution). In

Cancer Alley, this has been observed by its residents for a long time. The petrochemical industry continues to deny its culpability, but studies and testimonies have repeatedly proven it indisputable.

The connection between chemical manufacturing, air pollution, and cancer are generally the main focus of attention for Cancer Alley. However, there are more elements to this environmental justice issue. Regarding health outcomes, air pollution has also caused those in these communities to be more vulnerable to respiratory diseases, including COVID-19. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw Black people across the country being disproportionately affected. This is true for Louisiana as well. In 2020, Black people, being 33% of Louisiana's population, made up 51% of COVID-19 deaths. During which, parishes of Cancer Alley had some of the highest COVID-19 death rates in Louisiana, doubling and sometimes nearly quadrupling the state average (Terrell and James). In addition to cancer and respiratory disease, pollutants emitted by these chemical manufacturing facilities (PM10, PM2.5, NOx, So2, CO, and VOC) have also been linked to cardiovascular disease, cognitive impairment, blood disorders, reproductive problems, and more. The effects of these pollutants are studied individually, so there's also the question of what combined exposure of these pollutants could cause (Terrell and Julien, Discriminatory Outcomes).

Coexisting with this environmental injustice are other systemic issues that exacerbate it. Namely, systemic racial economic discrimination and racial discrimination in healthcare are large contributors to the negative health consequences in Cancer Alley. This is not to distract from the blame of polluting industries, however it's crucial to recognize that environmental racism is part of a greater system and culture of anti-Blackness.

Cancer Alley's potential water and soil pollution, as a whole, has not been researched as much as its air pollution. However, industrial parks are known to pose risks to water and soil quality and this has been seen at individual sites of Cancer Alley. There is a history of leaks, improper waste disposal, and explosive accidents at the refineries and chemical manufacturing facilities in the region– a recent example being the 2023 Marathon Refinery fires in St. John Parish (Laughland et al.). Some of these accidents have gotten so bad they resulted in companies having to relocate entire communities, such as the massive 1988 explosion at the Shell Norco Refinery, which led to the relocation of Norco's Black community, Diamond.

Diamond's relocation should not at all be thought of as an example of corporations taking responsibility for their actions. After already experiencing never-ending pollution from Shell's refinery and chemical plants, the people of Diamond finally had enough after the refinery explosion and decided to force Shell to pay for their relocation. Previously, this community had already been forced to relocate from their original town, Belltown– which was founded by freemen– due to Shell's pollution, with barely any compensation. The people of Diamond ultimately had to plead to the United Nations and leverage international attention for Shell to finally agree to buy out their homes at a reasonable price. If not for the fact that Shell was already facing international scrutiny due to their disastrous oil spills in the Niger Delta and the Nigerian government's violent response against environmental activists, it may not have been possible for Diamond to make Shell take any meaningful type of responsibility. Afterall, Shell would constantly deny any adverse effects they were having on Diamond's community– in similar ways to Marathon presently, who are adamant that surrounding communities weren't impacted by their massive tanks of oil catching fire (Pelot-Hobbs, Laughland et al.).

So, although the amount of water and soil pollution occurring at Cancer Alley may not be as clear as its air pollution, the industrial plants of Cancer Alley are undoubtedly poisoning the water and ground as well. This pollution is also harming the local environment. These facilities are exposing local fauna and flora to pollution, while furthering habitat loss and degradation. Seeing plants around them die is a common testimony from people in Cancer Alley. Susan, an experienced environmental justice advocate for Cancer Alley, has lived along the Mississippi River all her life. During her childhood, her father nurtured a beautiful garden with all sorts of crops, including pecan and fig trees. Such a garden is not possible on this land anymore (Mislan). These industrial facilities are causing environmental degradation and as they do so the local communities who cared for and were cared for by the land share in the pain.

Often, the presence of industry is defended by its supposed employment and economic opportunities. However, whatever benefits of industrialization are not being felt by the Black communities of Cancer Alley. Louisiana gives some of the largest tax breaks to industrial companies. Under Louisiana's Industrial Tax Exemption Program (ITEP), new industrial facilities do not have to pay 80% of their property taxes for their first 10 years. To put into perspective the size of these tax

breaks, in 2018 and 2019, the amount of taxes that ITEP exempted in St. James Parish was more than the amount of taxes the parish itself collected. So while burdened by their pollution, the towns that host these industrial plants miss out on millions of taxes that could be going back into their communities. The extreme tax subsidies are said to be for the jobs these industries create, however their level of job creation is not at all comparable to the tax breaks. Furthermore, whatever job opportunities that are made mostly benefit white people. In the oil and petrochemical industry, even when accounting for education, people of color are overrepresented in low paying jobs and underrepresented in the highest paying positions (Terrell at al.). Industrial companies used to be more overt in their racial discrimination. Returning to Shell Norco Refinery, their oil refinery and chemical plants were built closest to the town's only Black community, however they hired only white people and even built a well-funded company town for them. The white people of Norco were also harmed by Shell, but by playing on racial tensions, Shell was able to avoid any unified resistance against them (Pelot-Hobbs). Though at a lesser level, industrial companies continue to racially discriminate and politically divide local populations, allowing them to continue dangerous practices that harm all involved.

Overall, the oil and petrochemical industry in Cancer Alley isn't good for the local people, environment, or economy. Yet, further industrialization continues to be pushed in the area. For instance, despite protests, a massive plastics manufacturing plant, named "the Sunshine Project," is still planned to be built in St. James Parish. The Sunshine Project would be the largest plant of its kind in the country. It would span across 2,400 acres and would only be a mile away from an elementary school. It's estimated it could double nearby communities' exposure to cancer causing chemicals, perhaps even triple for those closer. Ignoring this, the former governor of Louisiana, who is a Democrat, praised the project, advertising how the facility will have a positive impact on Louisiana's economy (Younes). In 2022, the air permits that were carelessly granted to Formosa Plastics, the Taiwanese company behind "Sunshine," actually were revoked by a district court. However, the victory was short-lived when two years later an appellate court reversed the decision. The local community continues to oppose the Sunshine Project, and Formosa Plastics has yet to pass certain environmental assessments, however the Sunshine Project is just one of many proposed plants that these communities are having to fight against (EarthJustice).

It should be obvious at this point that Louisiana's government does not just passively allow Cancer Alley to continue, but has been actively endorsing it. This is made clear by their policies, such as the industrial tax breaks and their pattern of permits. They indeed permitted the Sunshine Project, but also Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality's (LDEQ) consistently give permits to the most polluting industrial facilities in communities of color, while the least polluting are given permits in white communities, even when they have the same level of industrial infrastructure (Terrell and Julien, Discriminatory Outcomes). Furthermore, Louisiana applies the lowest air pollution limit allowed by the Clean Air Act. This aligns with the national pattern in which states that are mostly white tend to have more protection against pollution than states that have larger non-white populations (Terrell and Julien, Discriminatory Outcomes). So, Louisiana intentionally attracts industrial development by giving tax breaks and being lax on environmental regulations and then stacks the most polluting industries into communities of color. Thus, the lower Mississippi River was deliberately formed into a toxic environment– a sacrifice zone for the state and nation to support an oil and petrochemical economy.

Cancer Alley's global impact also cannot go ignored. As an industrial corridor based on oil and petrochemicals, it's a major contributor to the climate crisis. Furthermore, with one of its main products being plastics, it is also advancing the worldwide issues of waste production and plastic pollution. The effects of Cancer Alley are far-reaching. Though the impacts of climate change and plastics production will eventually be felt by everyone, those who will be the most harmed will be people, communities, and countries of color. Nationally and internationally, poor people of color have been made the most vulnerable to the climate crisis and their communities are consistently targeted to be waste disposal sites. To put it simply, Cancer Alley is contributing to and sustaining other sacrifice zones as well.

> "Instead of history as progress, we are left with history as necromancy– a history of revived forms characterized by processes that are at once old and new, eluding neat periodization."
>
> — Siobhan Angus
> *Chemical Necromancy*

Craig E. Colten, a historical geographer whose research has focused on Louisiana, has described Cancer Alley as a sacrifice zone caused by "...disconnected actions that over time had an undeniable and lasting cumulative impact," (90-91). Rather than being "...a coordinated assault...," Cancer Alley is the accumulation of "...negligent behavior by industries and government authorities," (91). Per Colten's explanation, the racial demographic of Cancer Alley was first caused by the fact that Black people lived in more rural areas and, after being attracted by little regulation, industrial plants would settle on the outskirts of New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Then, as the industrial park grew, white people migrated out of the area and Black people migrated into the area in search of jobs; while whatever buffer zones that were initially between the industrial and residential zones faded away. This framing makes Cancer Alley's disproportionate impact on Black people seem like an unfortunate circumstance. However, though there may have not been a masterplan to create the pollution corridor, there is still a level of intentionality behind Cancer Alley that shouldn't go ignored. Colten does a lot of work to understand why space is the way it is; but by not investigating the role of race further in the creation of Cancer Alley, he ends up missing crucial context that has him still seeing parts of this space as "just is."

Firstly, most Black communities in Cancer Alley would argue that the river was their home before any industries moved in. Secondly, as we discussed before, these industries weren't that eager to hire Black people, in the past and presently. Besides that, before the Jim Crow Era even ended, there were already hundreds of industrial plants in Cancer Alley. Considering segregation; alongside housing, voting, and employment discrimination; plus every other racist practice– the Cancer Alley we know today just would not have been possible without the intentional anti-Blackness in Louisiana culture and

policymaking. All of those pro-industry policies– pro-Cancer Alley policies– that I shared before are dependent on anti-Blackness. To understand Cancer Alley, we must understand its historical and current modes of anti-Blackness. With a Black queer ecology approach the role that oppressive systems and ideologies have in producing space do not go overlooked, but are instead centered. Thus in applying Black queer ecology to Cancer Alley, we can better explain this space of environmental injustice.

Before the first industrial plant ever moved in, the lower Mississippi River has been a site of environmental racism. The area now known as “Cancer Alley” was once known as “Plantation Country.” Before industrial plants, the river was enclosed by cotton and sugarcane plantations. In the 1850s, the land between Baton Rouge to New Orleans was practically all sugarcane plantations (Plantations of the Mississippi River). By the time of the Civil War, there were over five hundred sugarcane plantations that lined the lower Mississippi River (Forensic Architecture). In multiple ways, Louisiana was a pillar to this country’s slave economy. At its peak, one sixth of cotton grown in the U.S. came from Louisiana and nearly all sugar was produced in Louisiana. While Louisiana enslavers were some of the wealthiest people in the U.S., the state also had one of the largest enslaved populations in the country. Furthermore, after the 1807 Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves, which outlawed the international slave trade, New Orleans led the domestic slave trade as the nation’s largest slave market (Bardes).

After the Civil War, the Freedmen’s Bureau distributed small plots of land to Black people. However, the largest plots of Louisiana's Plantation Country remained in the hands of their white owners, past enslavers. Due to few job opportunities, many Black people would continue to work on these plantations as sharecroppers and often in conditions similar to that of slavery. Many of these large plots would eventually be sold to industrial companies, thus the small plots of land housing Black people would end up surrounding an industrial plant instead of a plantation, transforming freedman communities into fenceline communities (Agnus).

As the first industrial plants moved in, environmental regulations were pretty much nonexistent. Not because the negative impacts of pollution weren’t known, but simply because Louisiana's government did not care enough to and decided to leave pollution management up to the companies (Colten). Thus, in the early rise of industry, the Black communities of the lower Mississippi River were

undoubtedly being exposed to toxic industrial pollution as well. Some chemical manufacturing facilities were producing, thus also leaking, chemicals that have since been banned due to their extreme toxicity, such as endrin (Colten). However, even before these industrial plants, Black people were being disproportionately exposed to toxic chemicals.

Before some of the white owners sold their land to industrial companies, to make up for the labor difference, the owners of these plantations began to rely more on chemical insecticides and fertilizers. The Black sharecroppers were the ones made to spread these chemicals, usually without protection. For example, on cotton plantations, Black sharecroppers were having to spread toxic arsenic insecticides by hand (Angus). Prior to Cancer Alley, the death of Black people was already normalized as a necessary part for capital gain. Furthermore, the normalization of their deaths being caused by chemicals or pollution was already in motion.

It wasn't just people in Louisiana enslaving other people. Louisiana, as a state entity, was an enslaver as well. In the South, state slavery was a common practice of state-building. As Aaron R. Hall explains, "…Louisiana mobilized the expropriated human power of racial enslavement to govern nature for state growth. Through law, officials expanded the footprint of slavery from plantations, urban enterprises, and municipalities to peripatetic state steamboats overseen by elite engineers. Louisiana embraced slavery as means and end, using the institution to facilitate ever more extensive commercial agriculture," (533). Enslaved people were clearing the Mississippi for ship travel, building its levees to protect against flooding, and cutting down forests to make space for plantations. The infrastructure built by enslaved people to enable Louisiana's plantation economy is the same infrastructure that enables its current oil and petrochemical economy. The main features that attracted these companies to the lower Mississippi river: the little environmental regulations, a navigable river, a federal levee system, and large cheap agricultural land; are the socio-geographical echoes of slavery. All in all, these industries were able to exploit the fact that this manicured landscape overlapped with a population that had little political power and was largely seen as disposable by those who did.

Even after emancipation, Louisiana, as a state, continues to practice slavery just in a different form. In the immediate aftermath, Louisiana replicated slavery through Black Codes and its convict leasing system. Though these practices have since been banned, Louisiana's Work Release Program is

in many ways a modern version of the convict leasing system. The state continues to this day to have a prison population disproportionately made up of Black people who are made to work in multiple industries, including in agriculture and in oil and petrochemical facilities, for little to no pay (Berlin). As an especially poignant example, the former plantation, now prison, of Angola was found liable for forcing its predominantly Black inmates to pick and tend crops, including cotton, by hand in dangerously hot fields with little to no safe drinking water (Dodson). This is to say, in the past and present, Louisiana is very comfortable with using and abusing Black people. Cancer Alley is a continuation of that state tradition.

Siobahn Angus has compared this transformation of plantations into industrial plants to necromancy, the act of raising the dead. Essentially, at Cancer Alley, these industrial plants are reviving the racial capitalist systems of the plantations they were founded on. Angus also draws a connection between these industry's literal plastic production to Jackson's theorizations on the plasticization of Black being. In this sacrifice zone, Black being is plasticized such that it can take whatever form that enables Black people and their landscapes to be sacrificed to mass produce plastics. Plastic production can be thought of as a form of chemical necromancy– plastics are created by processing oil and natural gas, thus repurposing energy that was stored by ancient life– and also as a form of sacrificial necromancy, where plastic manufacturers are being powered by Black death. This metaphor of necromancy emphasizes the cyclicality of oppressive structures, systems, and ideologies. As Critina Mislan puts it, "Time has not moved forward; instead, it spatially expands," (347).

Not all plantation sites have been replaced by industry. Remaining plantations sit side-by-side to industrial plants. Few of these sites are used constructively. Instead, most are used as resorts or event venues in which they ignore or dismiss the bloody history of the land. Take for instance, the Nottoway Plantation. This plantation has been making headlines recently due to a major fire that destroyed its mansion. This building was one of the largest remaining plantation manors left in the South. Advertised as a resort, the past slave plantation was used as a vacation and wedding spot. For the sake of creating a profitable tourist-friendly atmosphere, Nottoway actively omitted its violent and racist past (Ruffin M.).

While Black communities of Cancer Alley mourn the loss of their pecan trees, these plantation sites are often quite beautiful with towering oak trees and luscious greenery. It's been noticed by Elaine,

a resident of Cancer Alley, that as her community and other Black communities struggle during climate crises, these plantations remain in pristine conditions. Rather than being repurposed in ways that would benefit the descendents of enslaved people, many of these plantation sites instead replicate the racialized spatial constructs that they were originally built upon (Mislan). Alongside these lasting plantations, industrial plants are also some of the most protected landscapes from natural disasters. Returning to Norco, Shell owns more than 70% of the town's most flood-resistant lands (Pelot-Hobbs). I wouldn't want an oil refinery or a chemical plant to be vulnerable to floods, but as communities of color are still trying to pick up the pieces from Hurricane Katrina, where much of the damage can be attributed to state negligence, there is a clear message about who is valuable and who is not (Klein).

This spatial history of Cancer Alley demonstrates how Cancer Alley is a physical manifestation of the West's oppressive conceptual framework, which can also be understood as the overgeneralization of Man. As we've established, Man is founded on both a hierarchical division between man and nature and a racial hierarchy, which work together to exploit nonhuman nature and to exclude and/or manipulate Black being so that Black(ened) people can also be exploited.

Under Man, systems of racialization and naturalization justified the racial slave plantations in the lower Mississippi River. Post-Emancipation, these same systems permitted mass toxic industrial development in the area. Man's geographies established the many freedman communities that sprouted within the lower Mississippi River as spaces of abnormality and uninhabitability. Though Black people were still discriminated against, these sites represented Black people's newfound freedom, and thus existed outside of Man's normal. Furthermore, these sites were "uninhabited" because these pockets of lands were not being cultivated by nor for Man. Through mass industrialization, Man re-normalized these sites, such that Black people were again spatialized as less than and such that the uninhabitable became productive to Man. Thus, as a sacrifice-zone, the lower Mississippi River was re-produced as a site of racial and environmental exploitation and violence. With Cancer Alley, Man continues to recreate itself through its spatial formations.

> "In the afterlife of slavery… attend to the dead and dying with care and with an acknowledgment and reverence to Black life that persists in spite of immanent and imminent Black death."
>
> — Tianna Bruno
> *More than Just Dying*

In most environmental justice literature on Cancer Alley there is a focus on death. Admittedly, my introduction to Cancer Alley does this too. There's many who try to dismiss the harm industrial development is having on the people and environment of Cancer Alley, so I desperately want to show that it's undeniable. For the same reasons, environmental justice literature will focus on the health impacts of Cancer Alley and rely on statistics. Such work has its purposes, but, as Tianana Bruno explains, this being the overwhelming literature results in a reduction of the people of Cancer Alley to just flesh and numbers– unintentionally contributing to Black dehumanization. Thus, it's crucial that as we bring attention to Black death, we also showcase Black life.

By recognizing the history of Cancer Alley, we've pushed against any overt and subvert narratives that make Cancer Alley seem natural, inevitable, coincidental, and so forth. In doing so, we are challenging the domination of Man's geographies. Further disruption will come from showing the ways in which those who Man placed as ungeographic are homemaking in this space that Man has categorized as uninhabitable– the ways in which the people and places Man doomed-for-death continue to live. To complicate the binary opposition between inhabitable and uninhabitable and between life and death, we'll be looking towards the historic Black cemeteries in Cancer Alley and explore the ways life is generated at these literal sites of death.

Rivelletown is another Black community of Cancer Alley that had to be relocated– of course, not without a fight from their polluting aggressors, Georgia-Pacific chemical plants. Revilletown is in Plaquemine, Louisiana, 20 miles outside of Baton Rouge. It was founded in 1881 by Black people who were once enslaved. In this case, the land wasn't given as a form of reparations by the Freedmen's Bureau, but was actually purchased by them. Rivelletown was a small town. It only had two streets and

around 100 people– most of which were related to each other, either by blood or marriage. More so than a town, it was a family (Hawkins).

In the mid-1970s, Georgia-Pacific, attracted by nearby salt domes, built its first large-scale chemical plant just 1,000 ft from Revilletown. As it continued to expand, its pollution became impossible to ignore. Everything in the town began to be coated by a thin layer of white powder, polyvinyl chloride (PVC), that was spewing from the plants' smokestacks. PVC is one of the main products of these plants. It's a versatile and widely used plastic. Plant life began to die and residents also noticed the water changing colors. Later tests would show that, alongside the high amounts of microplastics, there were also toxic levels of air, soil, and water pollution. One of these pollutants was vinyl chloride, a main component of PVC. Vinyl chloride is a potent carcinogen, exposure to it can cause an array of health issues. Residents of Revilletown did not have any faith in the state to regulate the industrial pollution, so when the town sued Georgia-Pacific, they collectively decided to settle with the stipulation that the company will pay for their relocation. After residents left, the company demolished nearly every sign of the town's existence. The only thing remaining is the town's cemetery (Hawkins).

Throughout this, Georgia-Pacific changed its name multiple times before it was eventually absorbed by Westlake Chemical Corporation. As previous Revilletown residents wished to visit the cemetery, Westlake was adamant that the property belonged to them. This led to the people of Revilletown having to sue a chemical company again, this time for property rights over their ancestral cemetery. This lawsuit was dragged on for years, during which no one was allowed to be buried at the cemetery. A funeral was even interrupted by law enforcement. The lawsuit was dropped when Janice Dickerson died. From the very beginning, Janice Dickerson has been leading Revilletown's fight against these chemical plants. So that she could be buried next to her ancestors, the remaining descendants of Revilletown made the difficult choice to drop their lawsuit (Hawkins).

Now, you'll find Revilletown's cemetery behind a coded gate. To visit, you must get permission from the plant. It has no name– that is, you couldn't search for it on Google Maps. Only a fence separates it from the nearby chemical plant. However, the descendents of Revilletown have not given up. Marla Dickerson, the daughter of Janice, carries on her legacy. It is Marla's vision that descendants

of Revilletown will have full control over their ancestral cemetery and that all who are buried there will be able to rest in peace (Hawkins).

When I first heard about Revilletown, I was so baffled by these companies' stubbornness about the cemetery. It felt like such unnecessary cruelty. Chris Meeks, the attorney who worked with Janice Dickerson and who is now working with Marla, has expressed that a historically white cemetery would not have faced the same challenges as Revilletown's (Hawkins). Disrespect towards historic Black cemeteries is a common feature of Cancer Alley. As another example, down the river, two historic Black cemeteries were abandoned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE).

The Mississippi River is controlled by levees and spillways, including the Bonnet Carré Spillway. This spillway, between the towns Montz and Norco, was crafted in response to the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927. Like the rest of Cancer Alley, it is built on plantations and is now surrounded by industrial plants. Large parts of these towns were destroyed by the USACE in the creation of the spillway, including two former plantation cemeteries. These cemeteries were the final resting places for people enslaved on the nearby plantations. Soldiers from one of the first all Black regiments of the Union Army were also buried here, as well as freedmen and descendents (McDowell).

It's also believed that these cemeteries hold some of the people who participated in the German Coast Uprising of 1811, the largest "slave rebellion" in America, and their descendents (Kang). In 1881, Charles Desondes led 200 to 500 people in an organized 22 mile march for freedom, beginning at a plantation 6 miles upriver of the spillway, passing through Montz and Norco, and nearly reaching New Orleans. Thus, it's likely that some of those who joined him were buried at these cemeteries. Furthermore, these cemeteries could have also acted as a site of mourning for those that may have never been buried. Many people who participated in this rebellion were executed, after which enslavers would display their heads on spikes. Left to rot or perhaps even stolen as "curiosities" by white people, these people may not have ever gotten a proper burial. However, these cemeteries could have still worked, as a general site of mourning, to restore the dignity of even the dead who could not be physically present.

These cemeteries were still in use up till the construction of this spillway. The USACE was informed of them. They even promised to re-inter the people buried here at a different location, but they

never followed through with this. In 1975, USACE were reminded of their broken promise when, after the fifth time the spillway was opened, human remains began to rise from the mud. This sparked an investigation, which led to a wide collection of artifacts, oral histories, and genealogical charts. However, despite recommendations from the leading archaeologists, the USACE continues to refuse to make this information easily accessible. The cemeteries were simply added to the National Register of Historical Places with the names Kenner and Kugler after the white owners of their respective plantations (McDowell).

Then in 2012, an article about the cemeteries pressured USACE to hold a public meeting, resulting in the formation of "Project Resting Place" with the goals of marking the cemeteries, renaming them, and commemorating the people buried there. This will also end up being an empty promise. The USACE has not even returned the remains or artifacts they took during the archaeological investigation. They also refuse to share the location of these cemeteries (McDowell).

USACE's excuse is that they don't want these cemeteries to be disturbed, thus their locations must stay secret. They cry that there's a risk of grave robbing, even though they themselves are grave robbers. Nevermind the spillway's recreation activities, which do include ATV and motorcycle riding, where people unawares are disturbing these sacred sites. In her personal investigation of these cemeteries, Robin McDowell, an expert on Louisiana's history of environmental racism and justice, came across a more honest answer. When talking with the Freedoms of Information Act records manager regarding these cemeteries, he told her that he cannot give her access to these records because there are "lots of angry Black people out there."

Both of these cases show that there is a systematic effort in Cancer Alley to disrupt Black senses of place and to historic Black cemeteries in particular. In truth, in Cancer Alley there are an unlimited number of historic Black cemeteries like Revilletown's, who are isolated by industrial infrastructure, and like the Kenner and Kugler cemeteries, whose existence have been purposefully obscured.

In 2020, Forensic Architecture, a research group based out of the University of London who uses detailed spatial analysis to expose state and corporate violence, was prompted by RISE St. James to

investigate Cancer Alley. Their work provided further proof that Cancer Alley's Black populations are being disproportionately burdened by toxic industrial pollution, but they also found hundreds of potential burial sites of enslaved people within Cancer Alley. By piecing together aerial imagery of plantations, the Forensic Architecture Team identified many sites of topographical anomalies in the largely uniform landscapes. Some of these anomalies appear to be broken down structures, but many appear to be small isolated groves of cypress trees. It's suspected that these groves were burial sites for enslaved people.

Louisiana's sugarcane plantations were especially brutal. They were infamous in the U.S. for their excessive fatalities. There was little care for the safety of enslaved people and there was danger at every step of harvesting sugarcane. It's even said that the average life span after someone arrived at a sugarcane plantation was 7 to 9 years (Staples). However, despite there being mass amounts of deaths, enslaved people weren't really given proper burial sites. They would instead be left to choose an area on the outskirts of the plantation to bury people, where there would still be some of the original forest. As plantations expanded, these forests would continue to shrink away till these burial sites became a little pocket of cypress trees surrounded by a field of sugarcane. These spaces being burial grounds for enslaved people is further supported by 19th century maps of plantations and oral histories passed down within Black families and communities.

The Forensic Architecture Team analyzed about a third of Cancer Alley. In 1940 aerial images, they identified nearly 1200 topographical anomalies that could have potentially been a burial site for enslaved Black people. In 2021, less than 350 anomalies remain. Industrialization has been destroying these sacred sites and we don't even know how many potential sites there could have been before 1940. This a symptom of a bigger problem, where Black cultural sites aren't really seen as worthy of preservation. Once again, the norms of Man are being reflected in our physical landscape.

These cemeteries of Cancer Alley represent sites of ecological beauty within burden. At these plantation burial sites, enslaved Africans were creating alternative environmental relationships based on mutual care. As these trees gave space for enslaved people to commune, to grieve, and to ultimately recognize each other's humanity, enslaved people also cherished and nurtured these small forests. Despite the ways in which slavery alienated enslaved people from the environment and each other, these

burial groves are a physical representation of how enslaved Africans continued placemaking and homemaking even after being violently separated from their families and ancestral land. The relationships between these groves and enslaved people also worked to protect this environment from being fully destroyed. If these areas did not become the necessary burial sites for enslaved people, they surely would've been erased completely to make room for more sugarcane. Though these spaces held no value for the plantation economy, enslaved Africans produced meaning for them. In doing so, they developed an ecological outlook that affirmed both Black life and the existence of these "non-productive" landscapes.

Though many of these groves have since been destroyed by industrial development, even where these trees are no longer standing and even for the cemeteries that we are unable to directly re-know, these spaces continue to oppose the social constructions that position Black people and non-human nature as under Man. They are evidence that alternative ways of being are possible. They demonstrate that, as Skjellum says, we have the power to create naturecultural spaces that reject oppressive constructs and norms. Through our everyday relations and interactions between each other and the environment, we can plant the "...seeds of a different world…" (Roane).

Other historic Black cemeteries of Cancer Alley, those like Revilletown's and those like the ones at the spillway, are also sites of geographic disruption. There are many fenceline cemeteries similar to Revilletown's. They exist in stark contrast to the industrial landscape like the burial groves on plantations. They are an immediate visual disruption to the mass of industrial infrastructure. As those benefiting from Cancer Alley desperately try to erase the historical connections that people have to this space, mourning and simply just existing in these cemeteries can further challenge the normalization of this sacrifice zone.

Unmarked cemeteries offer ways of creative resistance too. At the Bonnet Carré Spillway, though the specific sites of the cemeteries are unknown, we can still treat the spillway as a sacred site, spread the word of the existence of these cemeteries, and further pressure state institutions about their neglect. Thus, all historic Black cemeteries, the marked and unmarked or the known and unknown, inherently resist the obscuration of Black people's spatial relationships in Cancer Alley.

These Black burial sites have the potential to combat Cancer Alley's mass industrialization. As it is now, concepts and laws around historic preservation tend to exclude Black cultural sites, especially if these sites don't have the typically respected markers. These plantation cemeteries are unlikely to have any physical monuments that would've lasted over the years. Corporations are, in theory, supposed to report if they come across anything of potential historic significance, but they can bypass this rule with low quality investigations from private archaeological firms (Forensic Architecture). Despite these barriers, a greater understanding of these cemeteries' existence could create a cultural shift. By the design of the state and corporations, these cemeteries are not common knowledge. Thus, one must wonder what could blossom from a greater awareness. There's at least a lot of potential for cross-spatial and intersectional collaboration. Afterall, Cancer Alley is not the only place where historic Black cemeteries are being overlooked and mistreated. Furthermore, this greater issue of who and what is worthy of historic preservation does not only affect Black people and our cultural sites.

These cemeteries have even further disruptive potential if we imagine how the Black environmental relationships developed in these spaces can further queer our interhuman and human-nonhuman nature relationships. I understand these cemeteries as ultimately representing a care for the dead that expanded into care for living humans and nonhuman nature. Accordingly, I envision that a restoration project for Cancer Alley that's inspired by and centered around these historic Black cemeteries would have a focus on the connections between: death care and environmental care, history and the present, ancestors and descendents, reparations and restoration, and spiritual health and physical and environmental health. Ultimately, it would concentrate on the connections between Black liberation and the liberation of nonhuman nature. Such a project would have the communities of Cancer Alley's ancestral and environmental relationships leading the resistance against Cancer Alley, or better put, leading the method of care towards Cancer Alley. This form of environmental restoration would work to fully redeem Cancer Alley by healing the environment while healing the pains of slavery.

Furthermore, this way of challenging Cancer Alley's toxic industrial development is not limited to state intervention. Not to discredit the work that advocates for Cancer Alley have done through state systems, but seeking justice through the state is a slow unguaranteed process. Afterall, the state is a manufacturer and beneficiary of Cancer Alley. Though this work though the state cannot be abandoned,

further resistance beyond the state is needed. Restoring relationships to these cemeteries can be a joyous community-led project.

Undoubtedly, a resistance/restoration project focused on Cancer Alley's historic Black cemeteries would further denaturalize Man and Man's geographies. It would inherently bring into focus the ways of being that Man seeks to exclude, conceal, and exploit. Furthermore, though we have not talked about it here, the way we handle death is also wrapped up in the larger network of oppressive constructs and norms. In dominant American culture, there is a disconnection with death. This can be attributed to the growth of America's for-profit funerary industry that began in the late 19th century. This industry moved death out of the home and into a space where even bodies after death can be exploited for the generation of profit (Mitford). In doing so, a distance was created within our culture around the phenomenon of death. Alienation from death further alienates us from our histories, ancestors, and environments, thus allowing more space for Man's narratives to grow. In connecting the liberation of ourselves and our environments with cemeteries, we'll be also mending our relationship with death.

By seeking out the ecological beauty within Cancer Alley, in the past and present, we can become inspired to envision new futures for Cancer Alley and beyond. In considering the historic Black cemeteries of Cancer Alley, we've imagined a way of environmental restoration whereby restoring the landscape also entails restoring the health, the spirit, and the autonomy of the impacted Black communities; leading also into a restoration of our greater environmental and human relationships where all beings are treated with love, care, and respect.

Conclusion: Imagining a Future with Black Queer Ecology

> "If I say 'descendant,' it means I'm a person that descends from ancestors that I love. I'm acknowledged in that rootedness. It also means that I am here, I am here in the now. I'm not just a placeholder."
>
> — Joy Banner
>
> Anya Groner, *They're fighting polluters*

Black queer ecology is a way of queering our dominant environmental relationships by uplifting Black environmental perspectives. Through it, we can denaturalize oppressive constructs and norms that position certain beings and spaces as inferior, exploitable, and dispensable. In applying Black queer ecology to Cancer Alley, we can recognize that it's a produced site of racial and environmental violence; therefore beginning the process of disrupting the ways in which oppressive systems and ideologies attempt to naturalize themselves in space. Furthermore, by focusing on the ecological beauty generated in Cancer Alley, Black queer ecology has us develop ecological outlooks that can sprout ways of being that can liberate both humans and non-human nature. A wider praxis of Black queer ecology can push this even further.

In all of our own ways, we want to make this world a better place. This idea of Black queer ecology is my drop in the pond. Black environmentalisms carry so much world-changing potential. It's a shame they are overlooked. I want people to seek these environmentalisms out. I also want people to seek out the divergent environmental relationships in their own communities. By bringing forward and by creating alternative environmental relationships, we can nurture different ways of being and new futures free from oppressive imaginations.

As my final thought, I want to recognize how the name "Cancer Alley" itself contributes to the naturalization of Cancer Alley. The names "Cancer Alley," "Chemical Corridor," and "Death Alley" certainly have their uses as they bring attention to this environmental injustice. However, these names

also obscure the complex and diverse ways of living that occur here. Having these names alone makes the area seem uninhabitable, like how Man established it as.

It’s true that for many it's not a financial possibility to leave Cancer Alley and that for many that had or gain the ability to leave do, but there are also many people who are choosing to stay in Cancer Alley. Despite the risks, they want to live on and protect the land that they have personal and ancestral ties to. As the historic Black cemeteries of Cancer Alley show, Cancer Alley is more than just despair. As such it should gain an additional name that better reflects what the people of Cancer Alley are trying to hold on to and what others ultimately ended up having to grieve leaving. I have no new name to suggest here, but I want this to be a point of consideration as we continue to discuss and fight this environmental injustice. I look forward to the day when “Cancer Alley” isn’t only known as such and, even further, when the lower Mississippi River outgrows the name completely.

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