

Torkwase Dyson

1919: Black Water

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INTRODUCTION

I make spatial systems that build upon the architectural typologies that people have used to liberate themselves. These systems also consider infrastructure and the environment to create a visual amalgamation that recognizes the ways that black people move through, inhabit, cleave and form space.

—TORKWASE DYSON

Combining expressive mark making and geometric abstraction, New York-based artist Torkwase Dyson (b. 1973, Chicago) works in painting, sculpture, drawing, and performance. She creates visual and material systems that explore relationships between bodily movement and architecture, with an emphasis on the ways that black and brown bodies perceive and negotiate space. Throughout her work, Dyson considers forms of environmental justice from historical and contemporary perspectives, seeking to uncover new understandings of geography and belonging.

For her exhibition [1919: Black Water](#), Dyson presents new paintings, sculpture, and drawings that respond to the 100th anniversary of the “Red Summer” of 1919, a period of heightened racial violence across the United States. Her point of entry is a tragic episode that unfolded in the segregated waters of Chicago’s South Side beaches. On July 27, 1919 five black teenagers went swimming in Lake Michigan with a homemade raft and drifted near the unmarked boundary that extended from the black and white beaches. As tensions between black and white beachgoers erupted on the shore, a white Chicagoan assaulted the boys in the water, throwing stones at them. One of the boys, Eugene Williams, was struck in the head and drowned. Upon news of his death, violence escalated on the beach and intensified when a white police officer refused to arrest the man responsible for the boy’s death, yet arrested a black man upon complaints from a white man at the scene. Over the next five days rioting and racial attacks spread throughout Chicago.

The story of Eugene Williams offers Dyson a historical framework to think through the relationship between race, climate migration, and the architectural imagination. She contemplates the industrial waste that flowed into the water where the boys swam, which warmed and cooled the lake, and the raft they built from infrastructural debris to navigate its “hot” and “cold” zones. For Dyson, the raft—designed and constructed by the boys—is an architectural structure of extraordinary

significance: a space of refuge, but also a space of liberation. Attending to these modulations of temperature and spatial agency, her paintings and drawings incorporate cumulative layers of washes, colors, textures, geometric markings, and sculptural modules, while an abstract sculpture grapples with the interstitial political and environmental conditions that the boys on the raft created and occupied.

The exhibition advances Dyson’s research on the ways that water, historically and in the present, operates as a contested geography and how climate change disproportionately affects people of color around the world. It connects her interest in emerging discourses on the plantationocene with her idea of [black compositional thought](#), a working term that considers how spatial networks—paths, throughways, water, architecture, and geographies—are composed by black bodies and how the attendant properties of energy, space, and objects interact as networks of liberation.

This publication offers a guide to [1919: Black Water](#), providing historical context for the exhibition’s subject matter and delving into the intellectual and artistic preoccupations that have informed Dyson’s project. An excerpt from historian William Tuttle’s [Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919](#) (1970) presents a detailed account of the fateful day that Eugene Williams and his friends swam in Lake Michigan. Architect and historian Mabel Wilson joins Dyson in conversation to unpack the artist’s concept of [black compositional thought](#) and its potential to uncover more equitable and inclusive forms of artistic and architectural representation. Dyson engages marine biologist Ayana Elizabeth Johnson in a separate conversation to discuss ocean conservation, climate migration, and the importance of recognizing water as culture. The following pages also include photographic documentation of Dyson’s working process, which encompasses artistic improvisation, rigorous drawing production, and material experimentation.

LIST OF WORKS

ALL WORKS
BY TORKWASE DYSON, 2019

Plantationocene

The Terror of Black
Indeterminacy, 2

Place, Raft and Drift

Black Shoreline

Pilot

The Terror of
Black Indeterminacy, 1

Being-Seeing-Drifting

Hot Cold

Extraction Abstracting

Just Below and Just Above

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The Red Summer and the Red Scare

1

Chicago Defender, July 5, 1919; *Chicago Whip*, July 5, 19, 1919. Some people called the beach the 26th Street beach, others the 25th Street beach.

2

Interview with Mr. John Turner Harris, Chicago, June 26, 1969. Now a social worker in Chicago, Mr. Harris spent the better part of a day describing the events of July 27, 1919. Fearing punishment by his mother for swimming on a Sunday, Mr. Harris never told the police what he saw that day; in fact, the only person he told was Eugene Williams' mother, at Eugene's funeral.

"The parks and bathing beaches," Chicago's leading black newspaper, the Defender, reminded its readers in July 1919, "are much more inviting these warm days than State Street. A hint to the wise should be sufficient." Specifically, the Defender recommended Lake Michigan's 25th Street beach, where there were free towels and lockers and where "every precaution is being taken to safeguard the interests of the bathers." The Whip, another of the city's black newspapers, also boosted the attractions to be found at the 25th Street beach. There were not only bathing beauties there but even a black lifeguard, who, unlike some of his white counterparts, was courteous and helpful. So come to 25th Street, the Whip urged, and help Chicago's black people "make this beach [their] Atlantic City."¹

For teenage boys, however, such advice was superfluous, especially as the temperature on Sunday, July 27, soared into the nineties. Fourteen-year-old John Harris was an energetic teenager, as were his companions that day, four boys named Williams.² Charles and Lawrence Williams were brothers, who with Harris and Paul Williams, unrelated, all lived on Chicago's South Side in the vicinity of Harris' house at 53rd and State, while Eugene Williams lived in another neighborhood, about fifteen blocks to the north. The four lads from farther south in the city had met Eugene at the beach.

The heat was already stifling by early afternoon when the boys hopped onto a produce truck driving north on Wabash Avenue. It was an Autocar, "a real speed wagon." At 26th Street, the truck slowed down again, this time to cross the streetcar tracks, and the boys alighted. They walked east and they walked fast, practically jogging the seven blocks to the lake. Perspiring freely and carrying their rolled-up swimming trunks, they were naturally eager to get to the cooling water and to the homemade raft that awaited them at the beach. But they also moved hurriedly because the territory through which they were passing was the domain of an Irish gang that had attacked them several times before with rocks.

The boys were not headed for the black-patronized 25th Street beach; nor did they intend to swim at the white beach at 29th Street, behind the Michael Reese Hospital.

THIS BOY'S DEATH CAUSED RACE RIOT



Eugene Williams

It was the drowning of Eugene Williams, 3921 Prairie Avenue, at the 29th street beach Sunday, July 27th, that caused the city to be thrown in a general uproar for several days.

Williams was knocked from a raft by a rock said to have been thrown by George Stauber, a young white boy. Stauber is being held on a charge of murder.

Announcement of Eugene Williams' death in Chicago Defender, August 30, 1919.

Peter M. Hoffman (comp.), *The Race Riots: Biennial [Cook County Coroner's] Report, 1918-1919* (Chicago: n.pub., n.d.), 20, 27-28; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 28, 1919; *Chicago Defender*, August 2, 1919; Joseph A. Logsdon, "The Rev. Archibald J. Carey and the Negro in Chicago Politics" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1961), 71.

They were going to their own, very private spot, which was located just in between. Familiar landmarks loomed up as they walked east on 26th Street—the Burnham Park Police Station, the Hydrox Ice Cream Company, the tracks of the Illinois Central, and finally, at the lake front, a little island which the boys called the “hot and cold.” Located behind the Keeley Brewery and Consumers Ice, the “hot and cold” got its name from the effluence discharged by these companies. The waters of Lake Michigan could be as cold as the melting ice from Consumers, yet the run-off from the vats at the brewery was not only hot but chemically potent as well. It could even temporarily bleach a black person white. “It was hot,” John Harris recalled, “and Jesus, I would be as white [as a white man] when I got done—so actually no women or nothing ever come through, so we [often] didn’t even wear a suit, just take our clothes off and go down to the bank....”

Tied up at the “hot and cold” was the raft. The product of several weeks of work by a dozen-and-a-half teenagers, the raft was “a tremendous thing,” fully fourteen by nine feet, with a “big chain with a hook on one of the big logs, and we’d put a rope through it and tie it.” Harris and his friends were far from being expert swimmers, but they could hang onto the raft and propel it forward by kicking; and, occasionally, “we could swim under water and dive under water and come up,” always making sure, however, that they were within easy distance of the raft. “As long as the raft was there,” Harris noted, “we were safe.” The goal of the youths that Sunday was a marker nailed on a post several hundred yards from



Chicagoans leaving 29th Street Beach on July 27, 1919.

shore. At about two o'clock, the boys pushed off, angling their raft south toward the post—and toward 29th Street.

Meanwhile, at the 29th Street beach, the fury of racial hatred had just erupted. Defying the unwritten law which designated that beach as exclusively white, several black men and women had strolled to 29th Street determined to enter the water. Curses, threatening gestures, and rocks had frightened the intruders away. Minutes later, however, their numbers reinforced, the blacks reappeared, this time hurling rocks. The white bathers fled. But the blacks' possession of the beach was only temporary: behind a barrage of stones white bathers and numerous sympathizers returned. The battle that ensued was frightening in its violence but it merely anticipated Chicago's long-feared race war. Sparked by the conflict at the beach, all the racial fears and hates of the past months and years in Chicago would explode in bloody warfare.³

Innocently unaware of the savage exchange of projectiles and angry words at 29th Street, the five boys continued to “swim, kick, dive, and play around.” Passing by the breakwater near 26th Street, the youths noticed a white man. He was standing on the end of the breakwater about seventy-five feet from the raft, and he was hurling rocks at them. It was simply “a little game,” the boys thought. “We were watching him,” said Harris. “He’d take a rock and throw it, and we would duck it—this sort of thing.... As long as we could see him, he never could hit us, because after all a guy throwing that far is not a likely shot. And you could see the brick coming....” For several minutes he hurled rocks; and “one fellow would say, ‘Look out, here comes one,’ and we would duck. It was a game that we would play.” It is not clear whether the rock thrower was playing the same game as the boys, or whether he was acting in angry retaliation against the black intrusion at 29th Street. One thing is certain, though: the next act in this drama brought pure tragedy.

Eugene Williams' head had just bobbed out of the water when one of the other boys diverted his attention. “And just as he turned his head this fellow threw [the rock] and it struck him... on the... forehead.” John Harris could tell that Eugene was injured, for he slid back into

Harris interview; *Chicago Herald-Examiner*, August 3, 1919; Hoffman, *Coroner's Report*, 27-28. It should be pointed out that Mr. Harris' relating of the events of July 27, 1919, conflicts at times with the coroner's version. The coroner contended, for example, that Williams was an excellent swimmer, but there is no indication of his source for this information, and the evidence seems to be to the contrary. He also held that "a superficial abrasion" on the decedent's body could not itself have caused death; true, but a rock hitting one's body, however, slightly, could cause panic and result in drowning. It is possible, too, that had the coroner had an opportunity to interview Mr. Harris, his findings might have been quite different.

Walter White, "Notes on Chicago of WFW," September 17, 1919, in NAACP Papers (NAACP-2), in the possession of the Middle Atlantic Youth Division at the NAACP, Washington, D.C.; Juvenile Protective Association, 18th Annual Report, 1918-1919 (Chicago: n.pub., ca. 1920), 23-25; Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 4-5, 11, 24, 34, 596-97; *New York Times*, July 28, 1919; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 28, 1919; *Chicago Herald-Examiner*, July 28, 1919; *Chicago Defender*, August 2, 1919; *Chicago Broad Ax*, August 2, 1919.

the water; not diving, "he just sort of relaxed." Harris dived down to try to help, but, as he remembered, Eugene "grabbed my right ankle, and, hell, I got scared. I shook him off." By that time the boys were in about fifteen feet of water. Gasping for breath and panic-stricken, Harris surfaced and "began to shudder." "I shook away from him to come back up, and you could see the blood coming up, and the fellows were all excited..." Groaning something like "Oh, my God," the man on the breakwater then ran toward 29th Street.

"Let's get the lifeguard," shouted Harris as he pushed off from the raft. Dog-paddling and swimming under water, Harris finally reached shore. Then he dashed to the 25th Street beach to tell the head lifeguard, Butch, who "blew a whistle and sent a boat around." But by that time there was nothing that anybody could do. Thirty minutes later, divers recovered Eugene's body.⁴

Also by that time, anger had begun to replace the panic and the awe of the black boys. With the black policeman from 25th Street, they marched to 29th Street and pointed out the man they believed to be the rock thrower to the white policeman on duty, Officer Daniel Callahan. But Callahan would not only not arrest the man; he even refused to permit the black policeman to arrest him. As the policeman argued, Harris and his friends ran back to 25th Street and "told the colored people what was happening, and they started running this way," to 29th Street.⁵

Panic had again overtaken the black youths. Hastily gathering up their clothes, they sprinted along 26th Street, "all the way to Wabash." "We were putting our clothes on as fast as we were running." Boarding the first bus that appeared, they rode to the 55th Street beach, where they collapsed on the sand, thoroughly shaken and still panting. "I wasn't going home [right away]," said Harris, "because I knew I had better cool myself down...." Also, he had left his cap and shoes at 26th Street, and he had to think of a way to explain their disappearance to his mother.⁶

The argument at 29th Street raged on. And in the midst of it, Officer Callahan, while continuing to ignore the exhortations of blacks to arrest the alleged murderer,

Harris interview.

See footnote 5; and interview with Mr. A. L. Jackson, Chicago, June 27, 1969.

For a detailed description of the riot, see Chapter II.

arrested a black man on the complaint of a white. In the meantime, distorted rumors of the drowning and the brawl had assumed exaggerated proportions on the South Side. Whites told each other in alarmed voices that a white swimmer had drowned after being struck with a rock thrown by a black. A rumor in the nearby "black belt" was that Officer Callahan had not only caused Williams' death by preventing expert swimmers from rescuing him, but that he had even "held [his] gun on [the] colored crowd and permitted white rioters to throw bricks and stones at [the] colored." Hundreds of angry blacks and whites swarmed to the beach. The crowd was tumultuous when a patrol wagon pulled up at 29th Street to put the arrested black man in custody. Volleys of bricks and rocks were exchanged. Then a black man, James Crawford, drew a revolver and fired into a cluster of policemen, wounding one of them. Suddenly other pistol shots reverberated. The restless onlookers, many of them armed, had their cue. The gunfire had signaled the start of a race war.⁷

Once ignited on July 27, the rioting raged virtually uncontrolled for the greater part of five days. Day and night white toughs assaulted isolated blacks, and teenage black mobsters beat white peddlers and merchants in the black belt. As rumors of atrocities circulated throughout the city, members of both races craved vengeance. White gunmen in automobiles sped through the black belt shooting indiscriminately as they passed, and black snipers fired back. Roaming mobs shot, beat, and stabbed to death their victims. The undermanned police force was an ineffectual deterrent to the waves of violence which soon overflowed the environs of the black belt and flooded the North and West Sides and the Loop, Chicago's downtown business district. Only several regiments of state militiamen and a cooling rain finally quenched the passions of the rioters, and even then sporadic outbursts punctuated the atmosphere for another week. The toll was awesome. Police officers had fatally wounded seven black men during the riot. Vicious mobs and lone gunmen had brutally murdered an additional sixteen blacks and fifteen whites, and well over 500 Chicagoans of both races had sustained injuries.⁸

Excerpt from William Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

Black Compositional Thought

TD

One of the conundrums in thinking about climate change, climate migration, water as geography, and water as culture is this: If we are to understand the Middle Passage, we are to also understand the ocean as geography. If we are to understand water as a geographic site, then we can also understand the ships that were built to enslave and transport people as a kind of architecture, and that ship architecture then evolved over the years specifically to house black bodies. Black compositional thought—a term that I'm using to understand the idea of liberation and how black people navigate through spaces—considers that within the ship's hold (and here I'm drawing on the work of Christina Sharpe and Fred Moten¹) was an architecture where people plotted, made conversation, and where there were different tiers of time, but which was also a space for possible liberation and self-actualizing. In that crazy architectural and geographic condition of terror, you can still center yourself, even in trauma. Black compositional thought asks: if this spatial condition [of the hold] was the first architectural condition of the becoming of blackness, how does that then fold over into chattel slavery, emancipation, and from reconstruction to today?

So black compositional thought is a working term that considers how paths, throughways, waterways, architecture, objects, and geographies are composed by black bodies, and then how additional properties of energy, space, scale, and sound all work together in networks of liberation. There is a physical, material space of composition and then there is an energetic space of composition: how do they work together so that black people use those entities towards liberation? With climate change,

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(2016) and *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* (2012). She is currently developing the manuscript for her third book, *Building Race and Nation: Slavery and Dispossessions Influence on American Civic Architecture*.

1

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); and Fred Moten, *The*

Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

we're going to need to understand these histories to deploy a different kind of black compositional thought within the current conditions of increasing water levels, land being continuously exhausted, climate migration, and global warming.

I think about my paintings as compositional studies of the systems formed by black people who have used architecture as a space to self-liberate, and as a visual language moving forward within the conditions of climate change and global warming. It's a matter of not only thinking about representation as identity, but also representation as function, as tool, and as a new kind of visual thinking that has to do with the agency of space and people taking that space to liberate themselves.



“The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown,” from William Still, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, Etc.* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1872).

For example, I draw on the stories of Anthony Burns, Henry Box Brown, and Harriet Jacobs to point to people who made and found spaces of liberation.² And of course Eugene Williams, the young man

2

As a teenager, Anthony Burns gained freedom by stowing away on a ship docked in Richmond, Virginia and travelling hidden in its cargo to Boston, Massachusetts—only to be sent

back after being tried and ruled against in 1854, under the Fugitive Slave Act. Despite the result of Burns' case, the abolitionist protests in support of his freedom are widely credited

who died in 1919 and who is the person I am basing the exhibition 1919: Black Water around.

MW
TD

He is the person who made the raft. He and his friends made the raft. I'm not representing the raft in the show, but I am representing what it means to be above and below a horizon line; what it means to find interstitial space between spaces that have been legally segregated, and then to make objects on which you can be free and have self-expression. The raft acted in that way. The boys could jump off it and play around it. They had to tie it up and sustain it as a place where they could just be kids and play. And that takes engineering, found materials, and the making objects. So in my imagination I see it as a sculptural form, but I also see it as space of the brilliance of those young men, and the show is really about their black compositional thought around that moment.

MW
TD

And they were liberated. They went into the water. Time and time again, despite all of the environmental pollutants that were in that water.

MW
TD

That's true. Factories were dumping everything imaginable into the lake.

TD

I have a fidelity to building up compositions that come from stories like these, which I think we need in order to understand how systems are represented.

MW

Box Brown is such an amazing story, and Harriet Jacobs—I've been fascinated by her for years. When I first read about her, I [thought] “wow, she just made that space.” For her and her gaze. How long was she in there?

with fueling the anti-slavery movement across the North leading up to the Civil War. In Henry Box Brown's case, Brown escaped slavery in Virginia by physically mailing himself in a wooden crate (a “Box”) to abolitionists in Pennsylvania, in 1849. Harriet Jacobs' legacy is in large part known through her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, written under

the pseudonym Linda Brent in 1861 and rediscovered following the War as one of the first first-person accounts of the fight for liberty by female slaves. In the book, Jacobs describes living in her grandmother's attic (nine feet long and seven feet wide, by her account) for years after having fled slavery, hidden even from her children living downstairs, for fear of being discovered.

TD Supposedly, eight years. Some historians find that impossible, and are trying to push back against the years in her own narrative. But what interests me is how she burrowed a hole in the roof to try to hear her children and to get light into the space, and how she sat in that space from season to season to season, and when winter came she knew she would hear her children's voices, [which she heard] much less in the summer. The things that stick in my head are that irregular triangle [of the attic interior], the hole in the floor, her body, and the up and down. And I believe black women, so it's both legend and truth, and it's remarkable. I dream about it.

MW I believe her when she says eight years. She knew.

TD Because you wear the time on your body.

MW She's completely aware of the time because that's what she inhabits, more than anything.

TD The time ends up shaping your body. Sometimes you don't know which direction you're going [when you're] on the ship, but we always wear time on our bodies. I'm obsessed with this. So that's where the trapezoids [in my work] come from.

MW Do you know what ship curves are? They were [tools] used to model the aerodynamics of ships.

I remember reading, many years ago, that the development of those curves actually impacted architectural representation, and they become key for how European architects started to draw sections—cuts. I think of the “Brookes” [slave ship] and the moment that you can see the section through the hold. Ship curves are tools of composition, but are also tools to craft those spaces. I was thinking about the way in which you were describing your interest in the architecture of the ship and the hold, and how these tools were developed to make those things, to draw them, [and how] architects then started to use them to draw as well.

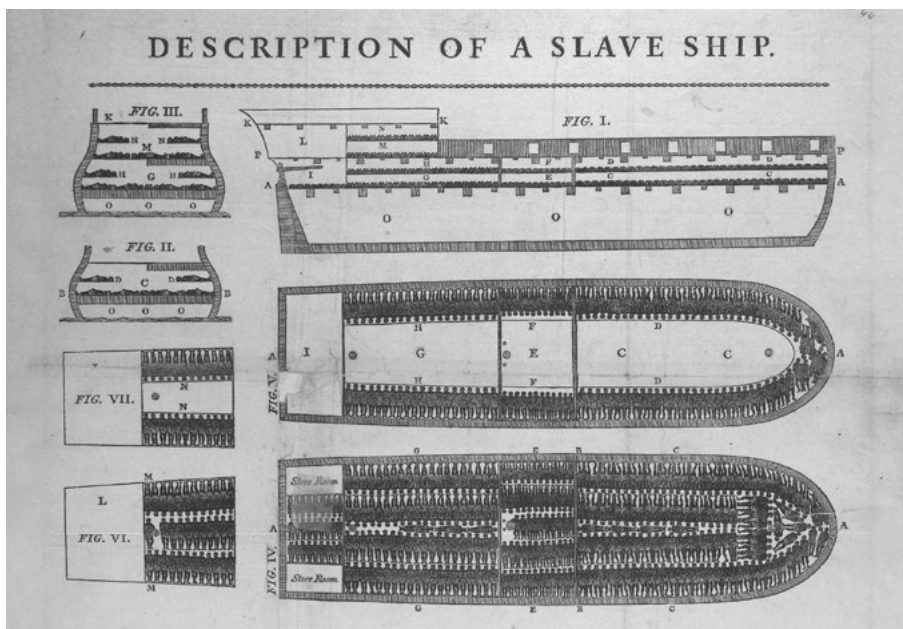
TD I have a set of ships curves because of Anthony Burns, who hid in the hold of a cargo ship. But I didn't know the history of using them as an architectural tool.

MW If you're thinking about the architecture of the ship, that tool actually does become a tool for building architecture. It's important because it allows you to cut the section to see relationships inside and outside, or above and below, which is really important.

Thinking about sections: I've been obsessed with Thomas Jefferson. I went to the University of Virginia, so in my education it was daily fodder that Jefferson was God. [More recently], I've been thinking about the section and Jefferson because he so strategically uses it to disappear slaves. He's incredibly clever. He's an architect, so he knows how to arrange space. He can arrange a space that envisions his values of the wilderness, the pastoral landscape, the cultivated land that will yield everything that's going to make Americans—specifically, white Americans—thrive, but making sure that he does not see those black bodies that he owns as wealth and that make his wealth. He did it at Monticello, as well. He built all the dependencies below the house, so you didn't see them.

The section, for Jefferson, becomes a really important tool, just like the above and below of the hold. He uses this at the University of Virginia. There is the lawn, and behind it is this interstitial space that is now filled with

18 Diagram of the “Brookes” slave ship, 1787.



ornamental gardens. And then there are the outer Ranges, which also have student rooms and buildings where students ate. Actually, that space in between, which is on a slope, was for work yards, not gardens. That's where the smokehouse was, where people did laundry. They are enclosed by these beautiful serpentine walls. The aesthetic of the brick hides the reality of what made that place possible, both in terms of wealth investment in slaves and slave labor. He is very clever at making people disappear. I never thought about it before in relationship to the ship, but it's exactly that condition of the hold.

MW

I've been writing about Jefferson's architecture. I'm trying to unpack the paradox of how America was conceived to ensure freedom, but solely was dependent on slavery and how that plays out in the built environment—and it does. It's very clear. I'm trying to understand that on many different registers, particularly the question of property and why property is so necessary for modern subjectivity—property, whiteness, and citizenship. The hold is an enclosure, but so is the plantation. It just never stops.

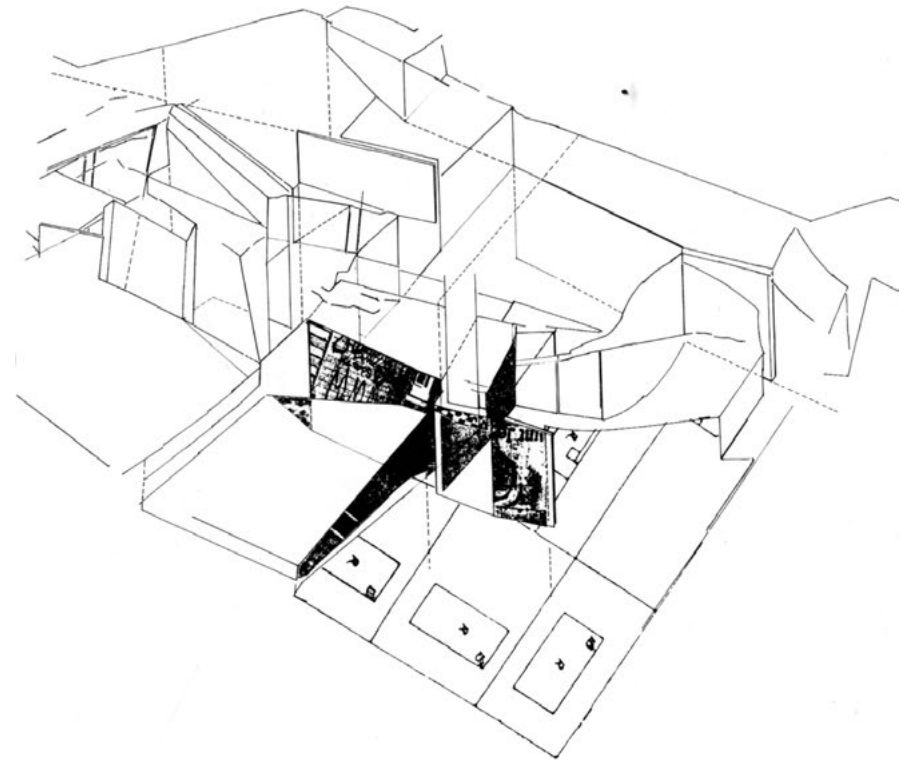
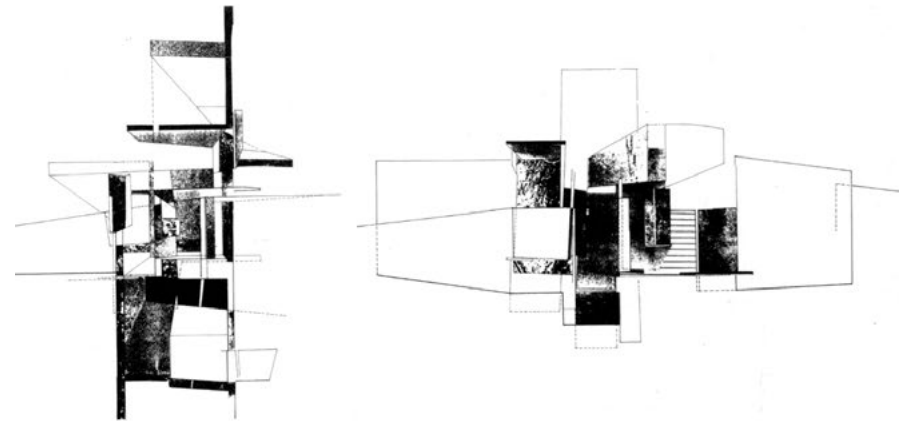
TD
MW

It never stops.

The prison, the red lined map, the Jim Crow laws, the slave code, the rape: it's all about forms of constant theft and enclosure. If that is the system that shapes your everyday existence, continually, where is the space of liberation? How do you make spaces—whether psychological or physical—to be liberated from that?

TD

I'm reading everything I can to find those stories, [to find out], how did this happen within that spatial terror? If everything—the architecture, the soil, the water, the food, the clothing, the travel—is built for degradation, subjugation, servitude, and invisibility, what does it take for one or two people, or masses, to end those conditions, to re-center oneself toward liberation? There has to be, for me, a hunt towards that. If I find one story and I follow that narrative, it opens up the system. It opens up how to understand that Box Brown did what he did when there was no mail system. He had to have trust and imagination with his collaborators and with a system that he couldn't even predict. Imagine the courage in that.



Mabel Wilson, *Single Family House*, Columbia GSAPP
Advanced Studio VI, Spring
1991.

TD I'm interested in the section as a tool for understanding how power works.

MW There's a book that Columbia GSAPP put out, probably more than 15 years ago, which is like an atlas or dictionary from A to Z on architectural terms.³ One of the terms was "section" and it was written by Stan Allen, who then taught at Columbia and went on to be dean at Princeton. For "section" he actually used my drawing from his studio that I took [twelve years earlier]. It was my last project [as a student] at GSAPP, and it was called "House for a Gris-Gris." Stan had asked us to look at the single family home through collage. I became interested in race and the single family house, particularly because we know Levittown was segregated. I suspected that blackness was hidden in it. So I just started drawing and finding those spaces. I completely unpacked and reworked the lexicon of representation. Because we assume a thick line means this, a dotted means that. I thought, I can make these lines mean whatever I want them to mean, and it can house whomever I want it to house. I started to take apart Levitt houses through the logics of drawing, or the illogics of drawing. I was using the section to find these spaces for Aunt Jemima. I found a nkisi embedded in the medicine cabinet. I was finding that there was blackness in these suburban houses; we just have to find those spaces. So Stan used one of those drawings as the idea of the section.

But the thing that lead me there was not architecture. It was Toni Morrison, actually, that led to me to question representation. In the beginning of The Bluest Eye she has that first passage, "see Dick run, see Jane run," and so on.⁴ In the [next passage] she takes out the rules. I thought, "oh, those are the rules of representation," just like a dotted line means something above or

3
Bernard Tschumi, Matthew Berman, eds. *Index Architecture* (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture, MIT Press, 2003).

4
Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (Washington Square Press, 1970).

below. You can read [her text], but it's hard because you don't know where the pauses are and you don't know the capitalization. You realize how much the rules structure knowledge. And then in the last passage she squeezes all the space, so the words aren't distinct; they're just letters. You can't inhabit it, because you can't see the beginning or ending. There's no space to breathe. It's madness, but that is the space of the little girl, Pecola, right? She's learning about this white world, but she's living in the world of violence, dispossession, disinvestment, and dehumanization. So how is she learning about the white house inhabited by white children, with their blue eyes, when that's not her world? It said a lot about the power of these systems of representations that we learn through, that we think are completely benign, but that are really ideological. They're loaded, they're racialized.

TD What was so genius about Toni not creating the space in the end is that Pecola, for all intents and purposes, actually loses her mind. Toni is very aware that she didn't have a way out. What happens when there is no way out and madness happens?

MW Or is madness her way out?

TD Absolutely. That's how she talks about it, too. Madness is the way out.

MW I've been interested in that as a critique of the modern subject, who is supposed to be more rational than the madman. The madman really is the antidote to the modern subject.

TD I think that's clear in Beloved. It's clear in Song of Solomon when Hagar kind of goes mad.⁵ Oh man, Toni. Toni and architecture.

MW Somebody should write a book about the architecture of Toni Morrison.

TD We should do it. We should collaborate.

5
Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987); *Song of Solomon* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

TD
MW

Is tackling Monticello the next big project for you? I'm working on a book called [Building Race and Nation](#). The first chapter is actually on Jefferson. But I want to show you this painting [[Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences](#) by Samuel Jennings] I'm obsessed with. I've been looking at it for years.



Samuel Jennings, *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences, or The Genius of America Encouraging the Emancipation of the Blacks*, ca. 1792.

TD

That's a difficult painting to make. It's very troubling to get to the history of painting through my new understanding of architecture and space. When I revisit these classic paintings and I understand different regional [approaches], like in Dutch painting, and the way in which different white ethnic groups built environments based on architecture and class, you understand a history of globalization. And you also understand how difficult that perspective is in relationship to something that's fixed—maybe you can help me unpack this.

There is the idea of the scalar in architecture or geography: the spatial condition where, say, one of the characters in [that] painting is standing on one of the squares, and then they are looking out into the distance. Maybe they see a home on the right, a smaller home on the left, people in the background. They are thinking and looking into the perspective landscape. I'm interested in how

geography and architecture consider how [the enslaved] on an auction block would look out into a distance and think about scale. It's a question. We were on the auction block, and we were alive, and we were thinking. We were looking out—depending on the location, but particularly in Virginia, where auction blocks were kind of architectural objects. How were we reading those kinds of landscapes from our interior perspectives, our minds? We never see representations of that question in space. It would all have to be through the imagination and the understanding that there was an interior first. And to think about the kind of genius that someone would have, standing there, especially if you had been on the auction block several times. You would understand the geography, the economy, the purchasers, the systems, the houses depending on the water—all of this information.

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I've never seen it depicted.

I don't know how to talk about it in geographic terms, but assume the auction block is an architectural object that can be modular, because the auctions happen in different places. It's an architecture of modularity.

MW

That's definitely an architecture. My last chapter [in the new book] is on the Smithsonian. I'm looking at the context in which the Smithsonian comes into being, around 1840-1850, right before the Civil War. In D.C. in the 1840s, there was a very lucrative slave trade run by different individuals. I started reading newspapers, because I wanted to figure out the geography of it. The trade took place where the National Mall is. There was a market right where the National Archive is. That was one site where people were being sold. Right along there, just to the north and to the south of the National Mall, is where they sold slaves, where they kept the pens, the houses—and a lot of the business was either done in the market or in taverns. There were the proprietors of Franklin and Armfield, who figured out how to run a massive business through financing, for about fifteen years, selling slaves from the north down

to the South. One office was based in Alexandria. It was a system to barter and transport enslaved bodies. Their operation owned ships that sailed between Alexandria, New Orleans, and Natchez.

TD See, that's what we need to be making paintings about. We need to figure out that that is truth. We have a problem with representation and if we don't figure out how to use geometry to tell those stories about movement and dispersion and systems, we're not going to be able to get ahead of it. But we don't even know these histories.

MW No, we don't.

There are all these Civil War photographs of [the house of] Franklin and Armfield. It's this innocuous house. Nobody would know that it was the center of this massive movement of enslaved people in the United States, and one that made its owners millionaires.

TD If you understand the system and how it works, and you understand communication, distribution, how to read and write and calculate, and then how to think about transportation—you can mold and propagate that kind of thing from one room.

MW It was definitely a system, and there were people who got out of the system, who ran away. It was an infrastructure. That's what was really amazing about the way in which they dominated the [slave trade]. They mastered time and space. They had an operation with ingenious forms of financing.

TD So, I have a question. You have the architecture and you have the infrastructure expanding and contracting based on the economy of a site. Can you talk a little bit about the importance of understanding infrastructure and how it works, and how architecture is deeply tied to infrastructure?

MW Infrastructure is what makes colonialism possible. Because you have to have a system to get from here to there, and you have to have a system to get what you find there back here. Making that work requires an entire infrastructure, and capitalism is really good at mobilizing geography to achieve that. I think about the ways in which Europeans invented the art of building

as both a technological project and an aesthetic project. The technological is the one that is figuring out how infrastructure works, while the aesthetic one considers when we see the infrastructure, and it conveys meanings that mask the degradation and violence that it produces. The roadways, the water system, Flint or Newark. The systems can be deadly.

TD Can you talk about the memorial project at the University of Virginia?

MW I'm part of a team of people who three years ago began working on a memorial to enslaved laborers at the University. The University was trying to come to terms with its history of slavery, of which it knew little about. For all those years, it didn't know much about those enslaved laborers. They never combed the archives. It's been an interesting project of reckoning. Part of what we had to do, and help the University with, was reach out to the local black community. It was very interesting and hard to work through that history. There were difficult conversations, but it was amazing because we were a very open group. People understood we had to develop the language through which to talk about what had gone on there: the violence, the dehumanization, and the project of white supremacy.

This beautiful, hallowed Rotunda building [designed by Jefferson]—people come from all over the world to see this monument to the Enlightenment and to the future of humans, but it was built with this unbelievably dehumanizing system. We had to somehow figure out a language and a form to do that. It's hard because the slave archive is silent, it's violent, and the form of the monument—as a Western form—is completely inadequate.

TD Completely inadequate.

MW So how do you make architecture at that moment? We had to be wildly inventive in order to do that—to find our black compositional thought! The typical Western monument form, which is clearly borrowing from sources from all over the world, assumes you know the history, the archive, what people look like, the physiognomy of people. And slaves weren't considered people, so we don't know what the enslaved at UVA looked like.

TD I think we are on the precipice of new form and I think it's going to come from collaboration. Because if we as visual artists, as people who invest in literature, who invest in the study of space, collectively agree that the history of representation in all its forms—the painting, the archive—are completely inadequate in terms of getting at some kind of truth of history, future of liberation, or any kind of justice, then we've got to invent what it means to use form to tell a story. We don't have a form in front of us, because the forms that we inherit have a predetermined meaning that—

MW It's not been decolonized.

TD It has not been decolonized at all. Right.

MW The book, the argument, the essay, the memorial.

TD We have got to invent something.

MW None of these forms work. That's why we all end up working across all of these disciplines.

TD Absolutely. Especially now. Even the idea of painting atmospheres—for example, painting the atmosphere in Harriet Jacob's space, and the atmosphere of the plantation—in terms of the history of representation and painting, [existing] visual forms are completely inadequate. So we need to partner, I think, to produce a new black compositional thought and name it something and keep doing it, so it has a power to say: this is a place to go. You are making this new monument at the University of Virginia. The form that you come up with, that's a place to go. That's kind of submitting to the power of form. It's not predetermined. And I think that's a powerful, collective agreement.

MW We have this [design element] on the exterior, which are the eyes of the only woman recorded in photographs: Isabella Gibbons. Her eyes are on the exterior, and they appear and disappear, depending on where you are and what time of day it is. She is like this ghost that appears and disappears. I call her "the watcher and the witness."

TD Should we talk about ghosts? Can we talk about black hauntology and the power of that? We more than live and we more than die, right? So we exist in

these permutations, this always-in-between space, a hauntological space. What do you think about ghosts?

MW I think Isabella is the ghost in that project. She has an amazing quote about the truth of slavery and what she remembered: the violence. But that is slavery. Because to make a slave, one enacts violence. You aren't born a slave; you are made into one. She talked about that, and she's spot on. She's like, that's what I'm going to remember. All of the beating, the collars, the deaths. It's grisly, but it's the truth.

TD As a black person, I can't think about circumference without thinking about those collars. There's no such thing as an innocent circle. There's no such thing as a passive circumference because of those collars.

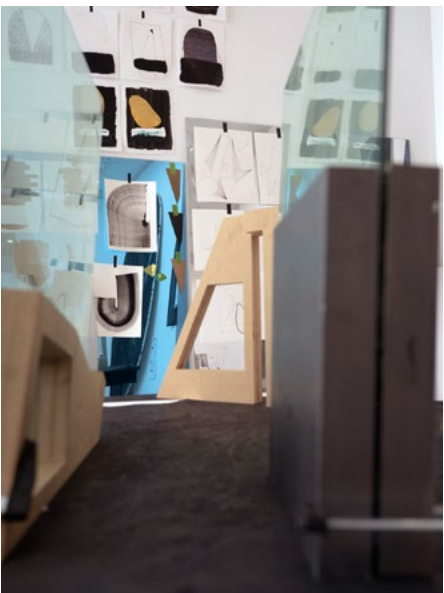
I'm really into the in between, the tertiary, the ghosts, the hauntological, the more than life and more than death. But you—as an architect-artist—you are making an aesthetic, right? You are making a form. You are communicating something about an individual; it's not just about a life and a death, but the making of an enslaved person.

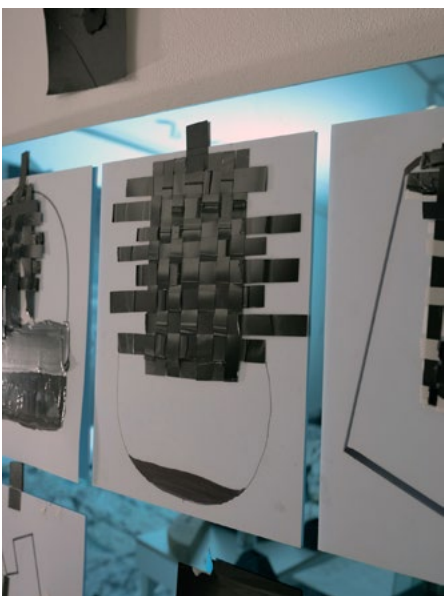
MW The shoes, the clothes—they made a lifestyle for someone to live. And it was ruthless and it never stopped. Except those moments when people could "steal away." I love that term. People "steal away," however they can, into the forest, or into the mind.

TD Those are the things we're hunting down. I think the premise of the show is to really elevate those things. Within the history of the "Red Summer," the segregation is talked about; the migration is talked about; individuals coming back from the war. But I really wanted to talk about that moment where those boys periodically "stole away," moved in between, and the legacy of that, right? Because they were 13, 14, 15 years old, and—

MW They still have imagination. They understood the power of imagination.







Water Is Culture

Ayana Elizabeth Johnson is a marine biologist, policy expert, strategist, and Brooklyn native. She is founder and CEO of Ocean Collectiv, a consulting firm for conservation solutions grounded in social justice, and founder of Urban Ocean Lab, a

think tank for coastal cities. You'll find her at the nexus of science, policy, and communication, passionately advocating for coastal communities, and building solutions for ocean justice and our climate crisis.

TD

The exhibition [1919: Black Water](#) is prompted by the 100-year anniversary of the “Red Summer” of 1919, and in particular an incident in Lake Michigan. I am from the South Side of Chicago and grew up swimming in those waters; I was a child who was born in and of water. Today, I am a certified diver and have dived in most of the waters around the world, which leads me to think about issues of extraction, climate, and water as geography. Because of this, the topic of the “Red Summer” has been inspiring to me, and specifically the story of Eugene Williams and his friends.

I wanted to talk to you about your work, and how you think about water as it pertains to power and access, as well as to global warming and its disproportionate effect on black people. I know that you've done quite a bit of work on these ideas since your early research on fishing methods and policies, and your work with the local fishing communities in Curaçao.¹

AEJ

That work was a really pivotal moment for me professionally, in terms of thinking about the role of technology. You could argue that a fish trap is a piece of technology, but it's low tech. It's not a drone or a robot. And so when I think about the role of technology and conservation, I think about things that a community can use and maintain on their own without needing constant outside technical support, or parts that are hard to come by. In Curaçao, we used construction rebar for the trap designs, making it possible to retrofit their existing traps for under a dollar each. To me, it meant thinking through what it actually is to come up with a solution that works locally, but that can also become a broader policy.

¹ As part of her doctoral research, Johnson worked with local fishing communities in Curaçao to redesign fishing traps that would minimize the number of fish unintentionally caught by fisherman, thus improving the sustainability of

fishing practices, and dually preserving the ecosystem and the local economy. The designs were tested and successfully implemented in Curaçao, and have since been adopted by communities in East Africa, Barbuda, and elsewhere.

TD Can you talk about the role of ethnography in your work, and how ethnography then speaks to what you are doing around environmental justice and global warming, and also what it means to be a citizen activist?

AEJ I'm a New Yorker who's done a lot of work in the Caribbean. The most important element to my successes has been putting in the time. You can't just swoop in with your outside solution. In all scenarios, I was there in a given place for years, trying to figure out how my work fit into the broader context: where I could be helpful, what dots I could connect, and what outside resources or expertise I could bring in to complement what was already there. I'm thinking of my work in Barbuda, Montserrat and Curaçao, working on the broader scale of island-wide ocean zoning and partnering with the island government and communities to make sure they had the tools they needed to develop what are essentially master plans for how they wanted to use their ocean space. And of course, the answer to that is not up to me or my American colleagues, but what we could do is provide GIS and mapping tools, scientific assessments, information, legal expertise, and communications support, or whatever was needed to augment the capacity that already existed in that place. We could provide the resources that would enable people to make autonomous decisions in a way that made sense for their culture, their economies, and in the context of their history.

That work takes a long time. But the only way that things last is if they are done respectfully within a sociocultural, political, and economic context, and not just in terms of the scientific and technical. As a person who in my individual work cares deeply about efficiency and speed, it's really important for me to remind myself every time I get off a plane and enter another community is that I don't get to define the pace of anyone else's work or their acceptance of me or my work. That's been a lesson that I've tried to very deeply internalize.

More broadly, to answer your question about climate: when I think about climate in a lot of places I work, I think about sea level, the loss of coral reef, the risk

to food security, the risk to safety from strengthened, larger and more frequent storms. I think about the cultural risks. The thing that motivates me to do my work perhaps most strongly is cultural preservation. I think of ocean conservation as a cultural issue. Yes, it's about making sure that ecosystems, biodiversity and clean water are intact, but it's also about making sure that grandparents can still take their grandkids fishing. That you can still go in the water because it's safe enough. And that the ecosystems are in place—the mangroves, the sea grasses, and the reefs that protect the communities from storms. That's the primary motivating factor for my work. When I think about the intersection of ocean conservation and climate change and culture, I'm really thinking, what does the future look like for people? How can we design a future that looks out for communities? Which is really tricky because of how quickly and dramatically things are changing.

TD I'm very interested in the connection between that work and geographic choices. Why these particular geographic sites? Why not Durham, North Carolina, for example? You could pick anywhere in the globe where these kinds of things are questioned. Do these choices have anything to do with your ideas of belonging and being? Do they have to do with your narrative as a researcher and how you move across the world?

AEJ There are a few answers to that. The boring one is happenstance. The research project that brought me to Curaçao meant that I was meeting these fishermen and these fisheries officials, and I found an opportunity to do something really practical. I have no interest in abstract science; I want to do research that is useful for people and for conservation. So that was a really clear opportunity to contribute something that wouldn't just become a paper collecting dust.

The thing that keeps me going back to the Caribbean is that my father was Jamaican. Jamaica's great ecosystems were some of the first in the Caribbean to really become severely degraded because of how many people were there and how intensely the resources were

being used. Anything I can do to help that part of the world, I am really grateful for the opportunity. I ended up as executive director of an operating foundation that wanted to work really closely with small island governments, and so I developed a growing program in the Caribbean, which is ongoing.

Perhaps a more exciting answer to that question is that three years ago I moved back to Brooklyn, a block from the house where I grew up, and only then did it really sink in that I grew up in a coastal city. New York has nearly 600 miles of coastline. It's an archipelago made up of dozens of islands, and the reason that New York exists is this incredible national harbor. So my work now is shifting toward coastal cities. I've founded a think tank called Urban Ocean Lab. It's focused on the future of coastal cities, imagining what they can look like in a way that cares for both people and nature, and is really about what future climate impact will be.

In a lot of cases, when we think about climate change and how to respond to it, what we're missing is a vision of what the future could look like if we get it right. We have all these apocalyptic visions, but we don't actually know, if we're facing two or three meters of sea level rise in New York City, what could a future look like that's actually positive?

That's where a lot of my work is going right now. It's coming home, it's thinking about how I can be helpful in a place where I'm from, and expanding that more broadly to coastal cities in the US. There are plenty of problems here in New York and in America. I don't need to go to another country to do ocean conservation and climate work. In fact, to me, it's a moment in history when a lot of people can and should go home and figure out how they can help the place that they're from. I'm part of what I see as a movement in that direction. A lot of people are moving back to where they came from and seeing how they can contribute the skills and the networks that they've built to give back and be part of a solution. My mantra now is "building community around solutions." That's really helped me in the last year with how I spend my time.

TD These are the kinds of conversations that are going to shape new form—in cities, design, and art. The work that you and other ocean conservationists are doing will shape how we think about abstraction, too.

AEJ I wanted to add that there's this concept of managed retreat, or planned retreat, which poses the question: at what point do we just move away from coastal areas that will be inundated by sea-level rise? That's a conversation that's really hard to have, but that people are finally starting to realize is unavoidable. When I think about managed retreat, I think there is a real opportunity and a real risk, and that risk has to do with justice. What are we doing to protect coastal communities—communities of color, poor communities—that are certainly bearing the greatest burden of the impacts of climate change? How do we make sure that doesn't continue to be the case as the ocean comes more and more onto the land? Thinking through the opportunities to redesign the way we use the coast and the ocean, as opposed to people continuing to get kicked out of places they have really strong cultural ties to, I think, the next wave of really important climate and ocean justice and conservation work.

TD These issues relate to my interest in the horizon line in painting. There is a long history of artistic representation of where the water meets the sky, and as that meeting point is changing—where liquidity butts up against the ground—and our understanding of our horizon line changes, the tradition and trajectory of landscape painting is therefore also fundamentally changing. In my painting, I'm thinking about this very clear threshold that we've crossed. The history of landscape painting is really about an idealistic condition of the environment—one that notably does not include the black or brown body, or climate change or global warming.

As we cross that threshold, we have to figure out how to have new relationships and new maritime practices as relationships between water, earth, and people transforms. Can you talk a little

more about the way in which you're thinking about these changes, as things that are happening now?

AEJ There is a mass migration that's going to happen. We think about it most often in the context of low-lying Pacific islands. We think about the Maldives or maybe Bangladesh, where millions of people are going to have to move from as the sea rises. But we don't think often enough about what's happening in Louisiana, Georgia, Alaska, the Carolinas, or even New York. We have an entire community on Staten Island that had to be relocated because they were wiped out by storms too many times. We have climate refugees in the United States.

The sooner we can stop seeing climate change as a problem for people somewhere else, and instead see it as something that's already affecting people that we know and care about, where we live, the sooner that we can actually start to ask ourselves what we can do about it. There are multiple levels of climate denial: there's denying the science, which is unconscionable at this point, and then there's denying the need to do something about it by arguing "it's too expensive," or "it's going to happen later," or "it's not going to affect me." It's going to affect everyone, and it's already happening.

The thing that drives me is thinking about how we do conservation and respond to climate impact in a way that preserves culture, and how we build community around solutions. Communities who have been living in and with these ecosystems have so much local knowledge that we would be foolish to ignore. And I would hate to see the loss of culture along with the loss of ecosystem. I think if we're thoughtful, there's a way we can preserve a lot of that.

TD As a water baby, I believe water is culture. But there is a growing understanding of water as pollution, too. This idea is illustrated in the episode in Chicago that the exhibition focuses on. It's a dual conversation about water as culture and water as pollutant.

AEJ Water is a cultural life source, but it is also dangerous. The part of the story you are telling about these boys that, perhaps oddly, sticks out to me is that they actually

knew how to swim. Because we know that a lot of black kids and brown kids in the US never get the chance to learn how to swim because their parents didn't learn—because the pools were segregated or the beaches were closed to them. So you have this intergenerational fear of the water that means black kids are not learning to swim, which means that they are drowning at much higher rates than white kids in America.

And so there is an element in which ocean conservation can only be inclusive and successful if everyone even just has the chance to learn to swim! Because otherwise, the ocean will always be something that is other, that is to be feared, instead of something that is rejuvenating and spiritual and loved. There are a million intersections there of race and class and justice and climate, and an opportunity for art to help us understand that complexity.

Torkwase Dyson
1919: Black Water

September 27 - December 14, 2019

Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery
Columbia GSAPP, Buell Hall
1172 Amsterdam Avenue
New York, NY 10027

Wed.-Sat., 12-6PM

The exhibition 1919: Black Water is organized by Columbia GSAPP and curated by Irene Sunwoo, GSAPP Director of Exhibitions and Curator of the Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery.

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Fabrication
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Production support
GSAPP Making Studio

Special thanks
Mario Gooden, Ayana Elizabeth Johnson,
Mabel Wilson

The publication 1919: Black Water is edited by Irene Sunwoo.

Editorial assistant
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Studio photography
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