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Advanced Unmooring: Louisiana Shrimpers in a Civilization without Boats

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An abstract of

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Abstract

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By Christopher Lirette

The story goes that the Louisiana shrimp fishery, once lucrative, has fallen into decline, beset by global markets, environmental calamity, and industrial and governmental malfeasance. And yet, some fishers still cling to shrimping, an increasingly anachronistic form of work. I went to coastal Louisiana to ask them: why continue shrimping? Shrimpers answered: shrimping is in our blood; in shrimping, we are free to be our own bosses. To fathom why shrimpers might persist in an ebbing industry, this dissertation revives an old nautical definition of the word “unmooring”: to reduce to a single anchor, using the final mooring to position the boat before departure. I argue the shrimping life is a game of unmooring—an embodied, imaginative negotiation of freedom and connection—that offers shrimpers the possibility to imagine themselves as something other than bound to the relentless, totalizing control of twenty-first century social institutions and global capitalism, while still belonging to *something*.

“Advanced Unmooring” traces practices of unmooring based on two summers of participant observation and interviews with shrimpers, archival research, and a scholarly practice that foregrounds interdisciplinary, experimental, lyric, *unmoored* writing. The introductory chapter theorizes unmooring and engages five disciplinary areas: Louisiana studies, utopian thought, industrial history, experimental anthropology, and creative writing. The three body chapters focus on governing images of the shrimping life: blood, water, and nets. “Blood” takes seriously the claim that shrimping is in a shrimper’s blood, re-centering shrimping as a corporeal, embedded practice that posits a fantastic, historical kinship in opposition to an uncertain future: a sacrificial rehearsal of haunted labor to found a livable world. “Water” explores a primal, asignifying function of unmooring: the sea—an inhuman, deathly form of freedom. By standing against nature *and* institutional humanity, shrimpers enact a model of survivability based on agency and surrender. “Nets” imagines how trapped the shrimper must feel: caught by the tight mesh of biopolitical regulation. Nevertheless, shrimpers have, miraculously, *made a life*. This dissertation discovers shrimpers practice an alternative possibility of freedom—through improvisation, hope, mooring and unmooring—that tears an opening in a fixed world where it is, still, possible to live.

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Acknowledgments

The story goes that the scholar—solitary, lonely—lives a life devoid of human contact. The scholar, instead of people, takes refuge in the smell of old books, the reverb of tiny sounds (a pencil scratching, a page turning) in cavernous libraries and reading rooms, the cozy swaddle of a cluttered office. After a period of time—let us say five years, the suggested duration of a doctoral program in the humanities—a work of original research springs forth, proof at last that the scholar has thought deeply and critically about a topic and is capable of documenting those thoughts in a book-length text. The scholar, instead of conversation and companionship, has interlocutors. If you are impatient to know who they are, you can flip to the end to read an alphabetized list of scholarly works that, theoretically, the scholar has read and engages with.

In my case, this story has some truth: after five years of graduate study, I have emerged with a dissertation in hand. You can see my scholarly interlocutors by flipping to the end. I spent hours reading old and new books, writing by hand and keyboard, curled over a desk in a cluttered but sunny office. But on the whole, this story is false and dangerous. This dissertation would not have been possible without a vast network of people, opportunity, and support. The acknowledgements section in scholarly works is a small way to recognize that constellation.

Foremost, I want to acknowledge the heroes of “Advanced Unmooring”: Steve Billiot, Glynn Trahan, Kimothy “Kim” Guy, O’neil “ChaCha” Sevin, David Chauvin, Chad Portier, George Sevin, and Claude Lirette. These men entrusted me with their stories, their hope, and their practices of labor. I hope I did right by you. Thank you for your openness and for trying to make a world more survivable. Also, thank you for the shrimp, crabs, crawfish, and

squid. Thanks also to others who let me interview them, hang out on your boats and docks, and provide me with information crucial to this research: Carla Ghery, Carolyn Tillman, Mr. Houston, Mr. Harris, Trudy Luke and Angela Portier, Joseph Doan and the docks and shrimpers moored in Intracoastal City, and my pawpaws, Clyde Lirette and Dudley Eschete.

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I would like to thank the late Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts, which counted me among its final cohort of doctoral students. The ILA, founded in 1952, was among the oldest interdisciplinary programs granting PhDs. For over sixty years, it housed experimental scholars and artists whose imagination and curiosity transgressed the boundaries of traditional disciplines. I was one of those lucky enough to be part of its vibrant, creative, and rigorous community, even if it was in the final days of the graduate program. Emory University and the Laney Graduate School, despite closing my program, has been quite good

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I have been lucky in this life to be a student to phenomenal teachers. Thinking that went into this dissertation was first cultivated in courses taught by Tanine Allison, Jonathan Goldberg, Lynn Huffer, Sean Meighoo, Michael Moon, Bobbi Patterson, Bobby Paul, and Elizabeth Wilson. These teachers modeled both rigor and enthusiasm, and I am grateful I could work out my preliminary theoretical agenda under their tutelage. In Professors Meighoo's Postcolonial Theory class, I wrote an early version of my writing on the Boat Blessing, the disciplinary narratives about Louisiana, and my methodology of writing, and I thank him for his keen critique and willingness to let me turn in a monstrous essay as a nonlinear, online essay/website. This dissertation would also have been impossible without my experience in Cornell University's creative writing MFA program. I am so grateful to my advisors and teachers there: Alice Fulton, Ken McClane, Ellis Hanson, Bob Morgan, Jane

Juffer, and Jonathan Culler. The seeds of this dissertation, as I found out near the end of writing it, could be found in a trilogy of poems I wrote at Cornell: “Unmooring for Beginners,” “Intermediate Unmooring,” and “Advanced Unmooring.” At Cornell, I also had the leeway to practice scholarship and art in concert. A first-generation college graduate, I am also greatly influenced by my earliest experience in higher education at Loyola University New Orleans, especially in the mentorship of Katie Ford and Marcus Smith. Marcus opened the door to studying Louisiana to me, both in class and out as he hired me as a personal assistant to recover his archive of New Orleans material flooded during Hurricane Katrina. Katie was my poetry teacher and thesis advisor. The third chapter of this dissertation, “Water,” begins with an extended close reading of “The Idea of Order at Key West,” a poem I memorized and recited for her Introduction to Poetry course. During my undergraduate years and since, Katie has supported me with encouragement, advice, and friendship.

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Finally, thanks to Chauvin, Louisiana, a small hamlet on Bayou Petit Caillou, an hour southwest from New Orleans, a thirty-minute drive to the end of the road at the Gulf of Mexico (Figure 1). I am lucky to be born there. I hope that you, Chauvin, prevail for others to be so lucky.

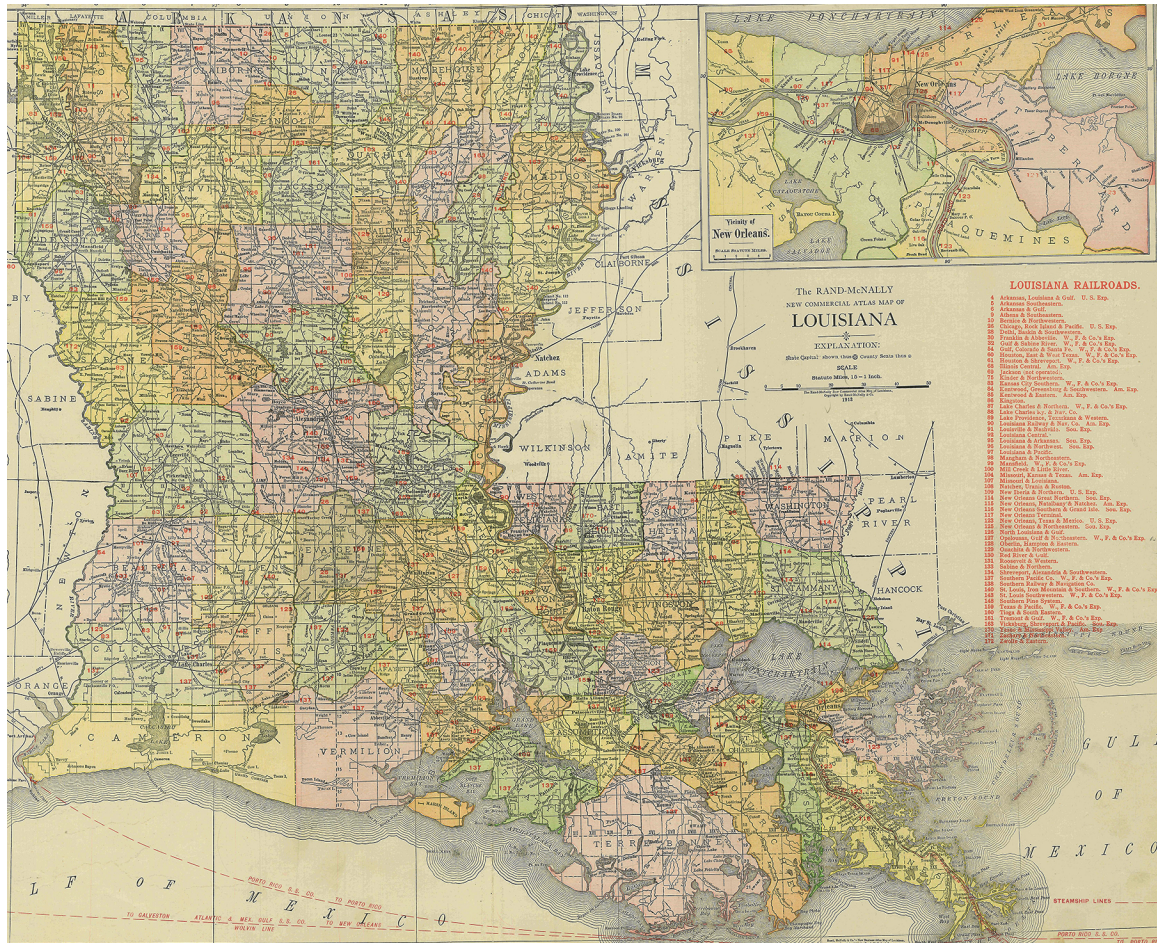
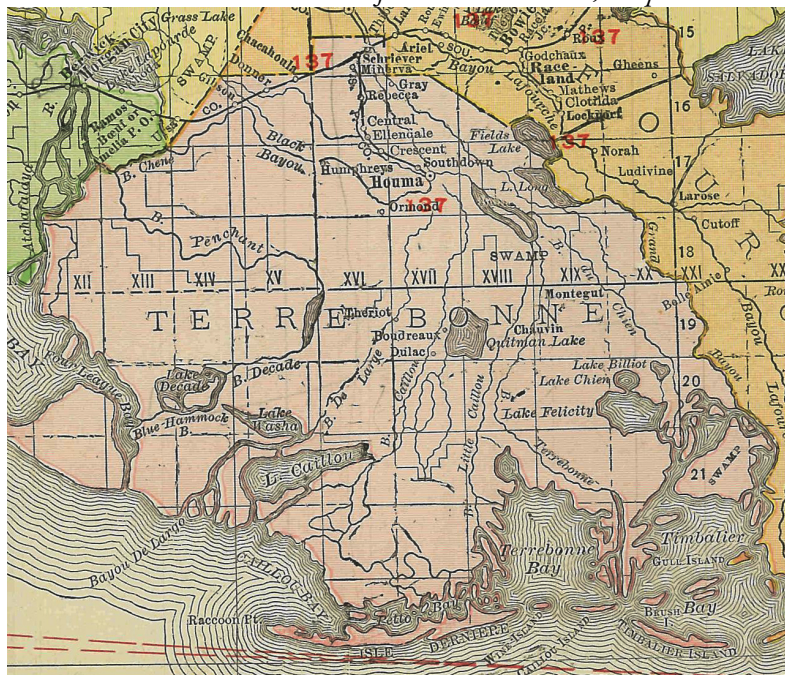


Figure 1: The Rand-McNally New Commercial Atlas Map of Louisiana. Courtesy of United States National Archives. Below: detail of Terrebonne Parish, the place where this dissertation is set.



for

Myrian “Blond” Lirette & Marie Eschete

my granny and mawmaw

who in life fashioned a world worth living in

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Unmooring for Beginners

This book deals with nothing other than hoping beyond the day which has become.

—Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*¹

Say you have a ship. Say it is propelled by sails. Say you need it to be parked in a single spot for a while. You need to moor it: you drop several anchors into the water to secure the boat from drifting out to sea or tipping over. You anchor from bow and stern, or perhaps use two anchors from the bow, one 180 degrees from the other. If you have a mooring, such as a pier or jetty or anchor buoy, you can tie up your boat from different locations along a side. In this case, we are talking about a ship, a sailboat, that is moored just off a coast in, let us say, the Gulf of Mexico. We use two bowers, anchors dropped from the bow, one heavier than the other. We position the ship in such a way that keeps it equidistant from the two anchors, one ahead of the bow, the other abaft the stern. This is what mooring is: to secure a boat by one or more anchors.

Say you want to sail away somewhere. The first thing you must do, is unmoor. Today, to unmoor means a lot of things. It means to be adrift. It means to be cut loose from the things that anchor us. We use the word unmoored to describe a person or an idea that has slipped

¹ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, vol. 1 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 10.

free from a kind of social, ideological, or imaginative bondage: a way of saying a person disregards conventions of propriety or reason, a way of saying that a person has gone off message or off script, or that an idea has taken on a life of its own and cannot be controlled by the fashioners of that idea. But for a sailor, to unmoor means a very specific thing. It is a set of actions a crew takes before unfurling sails and sailing. To unmoor is to reduce the number of anchors to one so that after the sails are ready, the last anchor can quickly be hauled up and stowed for travel.²

It is easy to understand why we use unmoor to mean unanchored. For the nautically disinclined, it may be unclear why one would even want to reduce anchors to only one, when the goal is to sail away. That final anchor does get hauled in before the voyage. Consider, however, the concept of a sailboat, floating just off shore in the Gulf of Mexico. Waves rock it, pitching it this way and that. Without an anchor (or a drogue, which does not reach the seabed, but exerts drag on the boat), it would be nearly impossible to steer the boat in a way that would make the sails catch the wind. Unfurling the sails without regard for wind direction is extraordinarily dangerous. The last anchor gives the captain of the ship a chance to control the ship's orientation. Let us say this ship is, instead, moored at a wharf among other boats. A sudden tide or wake or wind on an unanchored boat might crash it

² From a mid-nineteenth century nautical manual, to unmoor is "To reduce a Ship to a single Anchor, after riding by two" (William N. Brady, *The Naval Apprentice's Kedge Anchor, or Young Sailor's Assistant: Appertaining to the Practical Evolutions of Seamanship, Rigging, Knotting, Splicing Blocks, Purchases, Running Rigging and Other Miscellaneous Matters Applicable to Ships of War and Others* (New-York: Frye & Shaw, 1841), 244). Today, this usage is archaic.

into other boats, a mistake amplified into mayhem. The last anchor limits the reaches of human error or meteorological chance. The captain can control the unmoored boat through the anchor before she controls it through canvas and wind and rudder.

The kind of unmooring that was practiced when most large boats required sails to get anywhere lends itself to a much more limited, nuanced metaphorical application than the kind of unmooring that means adrift. This kind of unmooring is not adrift at all: it is a stage of cutting ties in order to go on a journey. It is a controlled freeing, a shift from one type of control (anchored) to another (commanding sails). Instead of the adjective unmoored describing the state of, say, a politician who cuts loose his ramblings from political convention, accepted fact, and reason, it might describe an act of a politician whose utopian thinking never loses connection with the material and political conditions of a recognizable world, a politician whose unmooring is a thought exercise on the way to substantive policy change. Instead of using unmoored to characterize a population that feels ignored and unsupported by a dominant culture, we might use unmoored to characterize a small group of people who live experimentally but in conversation with a mainstream culture. One type of unmooring, we might say, is bad: being lost at sea, unable to find purchase on solid ground. This type, the common usage, can also mean a type of freedom: being unfettered by restrictions, able to move through the world without obstacles. In the United States of America, this unmooring is idealized. It is the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness that we want to believe are not only unhindered by regulation, but entirely unshaped by government and tradition. We want our freedom to be original. We want to be born equal to pursue that freedom. But our freedom is neither unregulated nor original. We are not born equal, at least

not in terms of ability to exercise freedom of self-determination. The nautical unmooring explains this tension between competing forms of freedom and control. Instead of endless possibility, events are anchored in preparation to shift control from one agent to another. Instead of absolute control of these agents, all we have are a series of complexly engineered but imperfect safeguards against the threat of accident and chaos.

Say now that it is 2014 and you have a boat moored just inshore of the Gulf of Mexico in the state of Louisiana. Say you are a fifty-year-old white man dressed in a ratty t-shirt, torn jeans, and white shrimp boots. Say your skin has taken on the hue of skin just before a sunburn, but darker, with the texture of a leather welding glove. You need to finish attaching large nets tied to twin outriggers before you are ready to begin the May shrimp season. Say that shrimping is something that you learned from your father and that he learned from his father. Say that you tried working onshore at a machine shop or as a truck driver, but could only imagine yourself on the water, pulling sustenance from the water. Say that you have shrimping in your blood. Say that you love being on the water. Say that you want to be your own boss.

Whatever you say, you've yoked your work to something you call freedom. Shrimping affords you something a job onshore does not. The trajectories of your life—the confluence of family and finances, of the hope to survive and the desire to be left alone, of the menace and comfort of a nautical disposition—have unmoored you. This unmooring is the unmooring of using the final anchor to reposition. It is an unmooring that does not drift too far from the networks of power relationships that have, according to you, left you high and dry. Being autonomous is the hallmark of your work ethic, but that autonomy does not

come at the cost of seeing yourself as part of a network of blood relationships, of an uncanny past reemerging to steer you into a future that, you hope, will be somehow better or, at least, more or less the same as a present wherein you can provide for your household by dragging the waters near your home and divesting them of some of their sea-life.

Say you cling to this work, the work of fishing, an industry which has been endorsed by no less a god than Christ himself. Say you cling to this work even when the sparsity of food inspectors let through a pink tide of foreign shrimp bred in fetid ponds on a diet of stiff antibiotics. Say you cling to this work even as your brothers quit it, finding fortune in oil and machines. Your children, even your little girl, could not be pried from the gunwale on the second-hand skiff you got from your dad. But now, none of your progeny wants anything to do with a life of trembling marsh grass, brackish water, and crustaceans. But say you cling, nevertheless.

To this, I ask: why shrimp when there is no future in shrimping? Why persist in a job when you know, because you are not stupid, that there will come a time when there may be no more trawl boats moored in the bayous across coastal Louisiana? I went to Louisiana, to my hometown, Chauvin, and asked shrimpers why they kept shrimping. I interviewed men who either made livings on the water or men who used to, and I interviewed them at the beginning of a shrimp season many of them felt was the worst in recent memory. The dockside price of shrimp bottomed out to forty cents a pound for medium-sized shrimp during my fieldwork in spring 2015.

Even then, at the nadir of the shrimp price crisis of 2015 that extended throughout that year and the next, the shrimpers I interviewed would not consider retiring their boats and getting a job in offshore oil, an industry which, unlike steel and coal and other iconic American blue-collar industries, still offered lucrative and mostly stable employment opportunities. They told me that shrimping was in their blood. They could not imagine doing anything else. Over the course of my conversations with shrimpers, I began to understand that their insistent dedication to a life on the water went beyond cultural inertia or a willful myopia about their own prospects. Shrimping, for these men, offered a possibility to imagine themselves as something other than bound to the relentless, totalizing control of social institutions and twenty-first century global capitalism. Instead of surrendering to the market, to cultural prescriptions that cultivate a certain upwardly-mobile, cosmopolitan selfhood, to tightening and expanding social networks wrought by new communication technologies, these shrimpers built a life based on the intense space of the boat, a place that collapses family and work and nostalgia and hope into a kernel of freedom.

This is not to say that shrimpers are beyond the influence of government or outside of capitalism. This is also not to say that shrimpers have a progressive agenda that rejects oppressive power dynamics or that they offer an unproblematic way of living. Although most of the shrimpers I spoke to were friendly, garrulous, charming, and generous (at least to my face), their stories revealed that they could be competitive, vindictive, hypocritical (especially in their simultaneous rejection of government regulation and pleas for government aid), xenophobic, misogynistic, and ill-tempered. And while they imagine themselves living on the borders of institutional governance, they, like any other American, find themselves subject to

laws. They are also consumers of regular American stuff, like television and fast food and brand-name clothing. And yet, through an embodied performance of an increasingly anachronistic form of work, these shrimpers carve out a new space of possibility: one that is both free and unfree, nostalgic and utopian, corporeal and immaterial. They long for a world that is organized differently than the one they find themselves in and set about achieving it in the small ways of anchoring themselves in a cultural mythology, a limited network of belonging and utility, and a negotiation with an environment that is often as deadly as it is nourishing. Most importantly, they build their worlds not through a series of political actions, but in a subtle, quotidian orientation towards living a life worth living—even if it kills them.

They do not wish to transform society to fit their poetics of the fishing life, but they do want to bring their family with them into a world of salt and sea and wriggling life hauled on deck. They want to eat from animals minutes-separated from life. They want to be lit by the sun and the moon and halogen work lamps. They want to be free, for a time, from their phones and the constant obligation of visiting and attending appointments and paying debtors and driving on routes predetermined. They want to be free to go back onshore when they feel like it. They want a mode of escape that also feeds their family, that ensures their progeny make it to the next generation, that continues a tradition of making a living that ties them to their parents and grandparents. They want the viscosity of a blood vocation. And so, they play a game of freedom I am calling unmooring: the strategy of releasing, as best you can, all anchors but one. The anchors they (attempt to) release are the ones that lock the landed firmly in recognizable networks of power: schooling, salaried or waged labor, upward

mobility, the accumulation of cultural knowledge, the divorcing of the self from environment, the division of the self into quantifiable data points, the surrender of the self to norms. The final mooring is the complex linkage I term in the first chapter blood.

This is the blood of “It’s in my blood.” It’s the blood of the kinship diagram. It’s the blood that is the body’s potencies, delivering oxygen as the body moves the body’s muscles in order to perform labor. It’s the blood, sweat, and tears shed by the father and grandfather doing the same actions, but in the past, ghostly now, but still buzzing with the vital force of a life in the making. It’s the blood that courses through the next generation, most of whom will only retain the blood memory of their family on the water. And it’s the blood that the shrimpers of coastal Louisiana use to orient themselves, to connect themselves to the land, and the final linkage before setting off to sea. It’s the blood magic that transforms the boat from merely a tool into a transformational space, a machine of possibility.

This blood magic creates a space that anthropologist Kathleen Stewart defines as “a space on the side of the road”: “the site of an opening or reopening into the story of America.” She writes,

in other like “occupied,” exploited, and minoritized spaces, [the space on the side of the road] stands as a kind of back talk to “America’s” mythic claims to realism, progress, and order. But more fundamentally, and more critically, it opens a gap in the order of myth itself—the order of grand summarizing traits that claim to capture the “gist” of “things.”³

³ Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3.

Stewart's project finds narrative rifts that challenge what we might call the American story, the one wherein individuals triumph in a wilderness through confederation, democracy, and capitalism. The story goes that driven by persecution, religious minorities braved the big Atlantic and set up a small world where they could get by on their own gumption and know-how. Later, taxed and oppressed, descendants of these settlers fought, died, and lived for the right of self-sovereignty. Over the course of 250 years, America becomes the land of opportunity to make it big if you have enough grit. It becomes the land of cul-de-sacs, plentiful groceries, and pensions. It becomes the global keeper of democracy, one where everyone, no matter how much money they have, is middle class, middle brow, and normal. Stewart looks for lived stories that punch holes in the American story, ones that create spaces wherein new stories, ones less granite, might emerge. In the game of mooring and unmooring, shrimpers open these rifts by living stories that counter the stultifying project of becoming a good economic citizen, one who buys into the myth of what Lauren Berlant calls the fantasy of the good life: "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy."⁴ Although some shrimpers, particularly those born into successful shrimping fiefdoms, reach a sort of bourgeois class position, there does not seem to be a desire to actually jump classes. I spoke to shrimpers who owned and operated their own boats, and all they wanted to do was continue shrimping. The shrimpers who became the head of a fleet longed for the days when they were merely captains. Unlike other blue collar workers, shrimpers have few illusions about job security. Even before the influx of foreign

⁴ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

aquacultured shrimp in the 2000s and the 2010 oil spill, shrimpers understood that a single bad hurricane or a downturn in the oil industry could spell doom. The shrimp market boomed and busted. Shrimpers left the fishery for work in the oil fields, in shipyards and machine shops, and in service sector jobs throughout the history of shrimping. Shrimpers also feel minoritized, left behind by what they see as political malfeasance, mainstream popular culture, and fetishization of technological capitalism.

This feeling minor extends throughout the small hamlets that cluster along the bayous of southern Louisiana, where shrimpers moor their boats. Self-identifying as Cajun, the people of Chauvin, Louisiana, like to tell stories of their difference. The story goes that fleeing religious persecution and ethnic cleansing, Acadians—the French settlers who lived on what today is Nova Scotia and New Brunswick—sailed to Louisiana. It was a land of plenty. It was a land where they could be left alone and develop their Cajun qualities. Cajuns don't read, but they're cagy. They subsist off the words old people say. They are different from any group of people in America. They have a knowledge that needs to be carried on, a knowledge that is a birthright, scrawled in blood and story. They speak. This is how the knowledge—which is not only knowledge but *wisdom*—transfers from generation to generation. Wisdom: how to do things, how to do them the right way for the right reasons. Doing, for the Cajun, is a type of pedagogy, a way to teach children how to be Cajuns. How to peel crawfish and shrimp. How to eviscerate a crab. How to cut thistle from an overgrown lot at just the right time to make a salad with the tender stalks. If you cut the plant too late, you just as soon eat wood. A Cajun needs to know how to harvest the knowledge from his or her family, which elder knows how to tie knots useful for trawling, which ones knows how to heal maladies,

which ones know the particularities of the local language. A Cajun must be a life-long learner, a graduate student without the reward of certification. A Cajun must enjoy music made with accordions and fiddles and washboards. A Cajun must endure spicy food and *enjoy* it. A Cajun must eschew the insidious influence of the sitcom, the hip-hop joint, the animated GIF. A Cajun must live in the world (of mainstream culture) but be separate from it. A Cajun must be wrought of mud and floodwater and gumbo and muscadine wine and boats. A Cajun must have a nautical imagination. A Cajun must speak French. A Cajun must be a trickster.

The self-perception of people in coastal Louisiana as a minor people, Cajuns, who have a mythic predisposition to oppose the tenets of the American story, is not yet a rift in totalizing narratives. Instead, it is a counter-story, a story whose minor status does little to mitigate its totalizing force. The space torn open by the trawl boat, the blood mooring, and the embodied practice of unmooring is elusive, precarious, and flickers in and out of existing. It is a tiny world, a tiny living, where shrimpers can renegotiate the stories that govern their lives, whether those stories be the American story of the good life or the Cajun story of the autochthonic folk crafting a premodern life in places hidden from the colonizing force of American culture. These stories, including the Cajun one, anchor shrimpers to what has already been proven to be possible: the governance of people by both centralized institutions and distributed networks of control, the imagination of work as an entry into the good life, the impossibility of cross-cultural understanding, and the inevitability of globalized relationships. What “Advanced Unmooring” seeks to do is offer a course of study of how a group of people, clinging to a declining industry, carve out a space where they create

survivable worlds through a simultaneously corporeal and discursive act of storytelling: the repetitions of labor, the sensory experience of working with animal life and machines on the water, the self-elaboration that seeks to imagine that the life they make is a beautiful one. They are suspended between the hardness of landed institutions, of prefigured modes of living, of totalizing stories, and the freedom of the deadly, mercurial, life-giving sea. They, of course, do not escape the pull of the good life entirely. They do not escape the blood-red politics of the white South. They will not survive if technology and global trade and climate change continue progressing on their epoch-shattering courses. But they also do not give in entirely. They carve holes in the good life where they can live. They carve holes where life and work are livable.

Lesson One: Rigorous Disloyalty

This is a story History tells: the Acadians, gentle folk in concupiscent hills, loyal to God before the king, were uprooted and deranged by the British in the year of *dix-sept-cinquante-cinq*. Half died at sea. Some fled expulsion into New Brunswick, into the forests governed by the Mi'kmaq, learning to scalp redcoats in a brief guerilla campaign and reemerging only later when the politics of Canada stabilized into something like modernity. Some were packed in a miserable ship ready to land at Williamsburg, but the governor of Virginia let them rot at sea, refusing them entry, sending the survivors to a prison in England. Half or so died in the Atlantic. The bulk of the survivors went back to France, where they lived in seaghetos in Nantes and Rochelle, waiting for the next boat to arrive. Under Spanish rule, immigrants to Louisiana could cash in on attractive land grants, and a bunch of Acadians, many now intermarried with the continental French, left again for America. Prisoners in Canada, such as Beausoleil Broussard, the Che Guevara of Acadie and my great-times-seven grand uncle, were eventually offered passage to Saint Domingue, and arriving there, they left for Louisiana. This is where Cajuns come from. Then they all became again a gentle folk in

concupiscent alluvial plains, loyal to God before the state, until Uncle Sam forced them all to watch TV and speak English.⁵

This is a story Sociology tells: Cajuns, economically disadvantaged due to linguistic maladaptation and cultural insularity remained a minority class in Louisiana until the oil industry made them all middle-class cowboys. Traditional work such as trapping, fishing, and farming gave way to industrial labor, exploited first by rich Creole plantation owners-cum-foremen who built the first refineries in Cancer Alley, the stretch of dyked river between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Louisiana's petroleum industrialization coincides with the rise of mass communications technology in the years after World War II, an event that exposed the Louisiana French to a broader world for the first time in a century and a half. Then, Cajuns became dupes: of the culture-machine, of the various industries that colonized their quiet Arcadia, of the US government that demanded their acquiescence to humanistic democracy and laissez-faire capitalism. Cajuns chose, for the most part, the wrong side during Reconstruction and later Civil Rights, nearly elected Ku Klux Klan grand

⁵ For Acadian history, see N. E. S. Griffiths, *The Contexts of Acadian History, 1686–1784* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); John Mack Faragher, *A Great and Noble Scheme: The Tragic Story of the Expulsion of the French Acadians from Their American Homeland* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005). For a comparative historical analysis of Acadian life that refutes much of romantic notions of pastoral Acadie, see Gregory M. W. Kennedy, *Something of a Peasant Paradise? Comparing Rural Societies in Acadie and the Loudunais, 1604–1755* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014). For early Cajun history, see Carl A. Brasseaux, *Acadian to Cajun: Transformation of a People, 1803–1877* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992); Carl A. Brasseaux, *The Founding of New Acadia: The Beginnings of Acadian Life in Louisiana, 1765–1803* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Carl A. Brasseaux, "Acadian Education: From Cultural Isolation to Mainstream America," in *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture*, ed. Glenn Conrad, 212–224 (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1978).

wizard David Duke into office as he ran *against* the first Cajun gubernatorial candidate in history, Edwin Edwards. They perceived themselves as dispossessed and underprivileged, especially as the oil industry evacuated Lafayette and New Orleans for Houston, but barely whimpered when the community leaders bungled attempt after attempt to reintroduce French language and folk culture with public institutions and nonprofit organizations. Today, they are pawns in the claws of industry and state players, placated by a tourism economy and the spectacle of difference. But then again, who isn't? Cajuns are just like other middle-class groups in America, only perhaps more obvious in their nostalgia.

This is a story Politics tells: Louisiana is an odd state. It once had the largest free black population in the country and its most terrifying slave auction. It springs forth from a contested geography: France, Spain, Britain, and the United States of America all staking claim at one time or another. It is a reduction of the largest landgrab in American history, when Thomas Jefferson personally bought the Louisiana territory from Napoléon without the blessing of the legislative branch of the government. It's unconstitutional, but it gave us the port of New Orleans, which, in the 1840s, was the third largest city in North America and the one with the most wealth. It is the only state in the US to derive a body of law from the French Civil Code rather than British Common Law. Louisiana seceded from the US in 1861, and New Orleans celebrated with a parade. A little over a year later, the Union took New Orleans and land along the Mississippi River and the coast, and support for the Union among the citizenry convinced the US to welcome occupied Louisiana back as a state. In the 1930s, it was ruled by the Kingfish, Huey Long, who was more or less a communist autocrat. He modernized Louisiana with paved roads and free books and a university system and a

public medical infrastructure. Sinclair Lewis thought Long might be the next Hitler, and published a novel that imagined a Long-like president of the United States who embraced concentration camps and a private army as a way of exercising political power. Lewis wrote his novel to damage the Kingfish's campaign for presidency in 1936, when Long planned to primary FDR *from the left*. Instead, Senator Huey Long was assassinated by a doctor he may or may not have aggrieved through heavy-handed political machinations. Cajuns, mostly illiterate like other rural Louisianans, learned to read through Long's programs, entering the arena of American politics around this time. They tended toward the Democratic party, voting in line with other groups of immigrant Catholics. Then they met the Bible-belt, liked what they saw, and became socially conservative. Louisiana is a red state where opinions on abortion matter during every election, where the continuity of big oil is the desired outcome of elections ("Drill baby, drill!") even after events like the 2010 explosion of the Deepwater Horizon platform, which put everyone connected with the fisheries in Chauvin out of non-cleanup work. Populism, whether conservative or liberal, is always a good political strategy, appealing to a folkloric yearning for a pre-critical ethos where everyone performs heritage roles in a democratic economy.⁶

⁶ For studies of Louisiana politics, see Wayne Parent, *Inside the Carnival: Unmasking Louisiana Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); Ernest Zebrowski, *Hydrocarbon Hucksters: Lessons from Louisiana on Oil, Politics, and Environmental Justice*, ed. Mariah Zebrowski Leach (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014); Frank Joseph Wetta, *The Louisiana Scalawags: Politics, Race, and Terrorism During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012); Donna A. Barnes, *The Louisiana Populist Movement, 1881–1900* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2011).

This is a story the Arts tell: Louisiana has a special connection to art and especially music. This probably has to do with the dusky bazaar that was the nineteenth century French Quarter, embracing the expressions of transient people in a temporary city. It probably has to do with the strength of fantastic history in the imaginations of its peoples: the memorialization of the deportation for Cajuns, the horror of slavery, the hope of the redemptory community of former slaves, the threat of extinction made each storm season, the culture of evacuation, the derelict aesthetics of Old South nobility meets urban density, the crazy reptiles that lurk and swim and bite, the tension between Catholic spookiness and Voodoo spookier-ness, the cities of the dead where bodies rot in marble singles, duplexes, and mausoleums, the draw of the Gulf munching away at the coast, the enigmatic names of waterways (Bayou Go-to-Hell, Petit Mamou, etc.), the strange, Gambian-French-Chitimacha-Spanish-Choctaw-German-Cameroonian-Portuguese-Haitian-Italian-Mi'kmaqian-Isleño-Filipino-Irish-Houma-Dalmatian-Creole-Cajun mélange that constitutes local cuisine, the literature that reiterates the sublime properties of New Orleans, the relationship between nineteenth century New Orleans and the Parisian salons whose members vacationed in the former colonial capital, the hybridity of its cultural and its artistic forms, and vampires (we must not forget vampires). Louisiana is the birthplace to jazz in the ghettos of Treme. It is the home of bounce, whether Jazz Fest wants to admit it or not. It is home to the first opera house in the United States, the Old French Opera, built at the intersection of Toulouse and Bourbon in 1859. Or was it the Duchamp Opera House in St. Martinville, erected in 1830, the focal point of a place known as Petit Paris? It rested on the grounds of what was formerly Fort Attakapas, the place Acadian refugees were sent by acting

the interregnum French *commissaire-ordonnateur* Denis-Nicolas Foucault, who revolted alongside Acadians and French Creoles against the Spanish governor of Louisiana, was thrown in prison, then ascended to the position of *intendant des îles de France et de Bourbon*, a position that saw him overseeing French colonial interests in Mauritius, Réunion, and Pondichéry. In other words, the Arts tell us, Louisiana culture was always already a global one.

These are the stories that undergird the stories we might tell next. Jesuit philosopher Michel de Certeau, when outlining his intellectual heritage in a chapter of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, writes, “[I]n spite of persistent fiction, we never write on a blank page, but always on one that has already been written on.”⁷ Telling stories, especially repeating them, is a way to write something—a history—into a shared imaginative space. These stories flicker in and out of material spaces, encroach upon them, shape them. In Louisiana, as it is elsewhere, there is a mythology of culture and a genealogy of the forms culture might take. The page of Chauvin, the epicenter of my research, is well scribbled, slick with polished carbon and gum arabic and iron gall. For the most part Chauvin’s specific location has passed unnoticed by scholars,⁸ but the way people in Chauvin understand their cultural life and how they fit into

⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Stephen F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 43.

⁸ Most scholarly work that specifically addresses Chauvin, Louisiana, appears in unpublished dissertations and theses from sociology and linguistics: Una M. Parr, “A Glossary of the Variants from Standard French in Terrebonne Parish: With an Appendix of Popular Beliefs, Superstitions, Medicine and Cooking Recipes” (MA thesis, Louisiana State University, 1940); Walter Joseph Pierron, “A Sociological Study of the French-Speaking People in Chauvin, a Line Village in Terrebonne Parish” (MA thesis, Louisiana State University, 1942); Nolan Philip LeCompte, “A

broader cultural and politics and spatial networks is shaped by the discourses that have sought to characterize, interpret, and define Louisiana in general. Both scholarly accounts and local histories, of course, are fictions in the way all fictions are: crafted by a certain education, a certain imagination, and ample perversity. Bolstered by the enthusiastic scholarly arm of Louisiana culture, these stories threaten to become enclosures, cells, and walls. They threaten to weigh down the people who must live in constant negotiation with these stories and authorize outsiders to be able to compartmentalize those people into fixed, restrictive categories.

Until recently, the main scholarship on the people of the Louisiana Gulf Coast concerned Cajun culture and history. This work includes histories of Cajun identification, explications of the particularities of Cajun ethnic heritage, and the collection of a vast archive of oral histories and local musical performances. The scholars responsible for building the foundations of contemporary Louisiana studies in the 1970s and 80s—led by Glenn R. Conrad, Barry Jean Ancelet, Carl Lindahl, and Carl Brasseaux—understood the study of

Word Atlas of Terrebonne Parish” (MA thesis, Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, 1962); Barbara Elizabeth Gordon, “The Rhetoric of Community Ritual: The Blessing of the Shrimp Fleet at Chauvin, Louisiana” (PhD dissertation, Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, 1991); Shana L. Walton, “Flat Speech and Cajun Ethnic Identity in Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana” (PhD dissertation, Tulane University, 1994); Kevin James Rottet, “Language Shift and Language Death in the Cajun French-Speaking Communities of Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes, Louisiana” (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1995); Nathalie Dajko, “Ethnic and Geographic Variation in the French of the Lafourche Basin” (PhD dissertation, Tulane University, 2009); Audriana Hubbard, “The Blessing of the Fleet: Heritage and Identity in Three Gulf Coast Communities” (MA thesis, Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, 2013).

Louisiana culture as legitimate scholarly pursuit. They legitimized a “Cajun revival” through scholarly discourse. Their work also set the primary academic idioms for future scholarship: history, folklore, and sociology. Conrad’s *The Cajuns: Essays on their History and Culture*,⁹ the Center for Louisiana Studies’s first scholarly treatment of southern Louisiana culture incited a proliferation of cultural histories, from sensationalist and nostalgic accounts of Cajun life to serious projects with social scientific aspirations.¹⁰ Today’s work on Louisiana has not strayed far from its intellectual heritage. Scholars are still concerned with issues such as cultural

⁹ Glenn Conrad, ed. *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1978).

¹⁰ For a well-cited history written in a “local color” style (replete with a bewildering section of portraits of Cajun “celebrities” and concepts, as well as a discussion of “Cajunism” as a “neo-pagan” practice) see William Faulkner Rushton, *The Cajuns: From Acadia to Louisiana* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979). For the first serious treatment of Cajuns from a sociocultural perspective, see James Dormon, *The People Called Cajuns: An Introduction to an Ethnohistory* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1983).

identity,¹¹ representation,¹² the articulation of “traditional” life,¹³ the collection of folklore

¹¹ See Shane Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003); Marjorie Esman, “Festivals, Change, and Unity: The Celebration of Ethnic Identity among Louisiana Cajuns,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (1982); Joe Green, “The Louisiana Cajuns: The Quest for Identity through Education,” *Theory into Practice* 20, no. 1 (1981); Jacques Henry, “From ‘Acadien’ to ‘Cajun’ to ‘Cadien’: Ethnic Labelization and Construction of Identity,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 17, no. 4 (1998); Mark Rees, “From ‘Grand Dérangement’ to Acadiana: History and Identity in the Landscape of South Louisiana,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 12, no. 4 (2008); Charles Stivale, *Disenchanted les Bons Temps: Identity and Authenticity in Cajun Music and Dance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Stephen Webre, “Among the Cybercajuns: Constructing Identity in the Virtual Diaspora,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 39, no. 4 (1998).

¹² See Barry Jean Ancelet, “Negotiating the Mainstream: The Creoles and Cajuns in Louisiana,” *The French Review* 80, no. 6 (2007); Carl A. Brasseaux, *French, Cajun, Creole, Houma: A Primer on Francophone Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005); Cécilia Camoin, *Louisiane: la théâtralité comme force de vie* (Paris: PUPS, 2013); Sylvie Dubois and Barbara Horvath, “Sounding Cajun: The Rhetorical Use of Dialect in Speech and Writing,” *American Speech* 77, no. 3 (2002); Maria Hebert-Leiter, *Becoming Cajun, Becoming American: The Acadian in American Literature from Longfellow to James Lee Burke* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009); Rocky Sexton, “Cajun or Coonass? Exploring Ethnic Labels in French Louisiana Regional Discourse,” *Ethnology* 48, no. 4 (2009); Rocky Sexton, “Cajun Mardi Gras: Cultural Objectification and Symbolic Appropriation in a French Tradition,” *Ethnology* 38, no. 4 (1999); Eric Wiley, “Wilderness Theatre: Environmental Tourism and Cajun Swamp Tours,” *The Drama Review* 46, no. 3 (2002).

¹³ See Barry Jean Ancelet, *Cajun Country* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); Barry Jean Ancelet, *‘Capitaine, voyage ton flag’: The Traditional Cajun Country Mardi Gras* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1989); Barry Jean Ancelet, “The Theory and Practice of Activist Folklore: From Fieldwork to Programming,” in *Working the Field: Accounts from French Louisiana*, ed. Jacques M. Henry and Sara LeMenestrel, 81–100 (Westport: Praeger, 2003); Malcolm Comeaux, “The Cajun Barn,” *Geographical Review* 79, no. 1 (1989); Steven del Sesto and Jon Gibson, *The Culture of Acadiana: Tradition and Change in South Louisiana* (Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1975); Lawrence Jr. Estaville, “Changeless Cajuns: Nineteenth-Century Reality or Myth?,” *Louisiana History* 28, no. 2 (1987); Philip Gould, *Les Cadiens d’Asteur* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991); Christopher Hallowell, *People of the Bayou: Cajun Life in Lost America* (New York: Dutton, 1979); Carl Lindahl, “The Presence of the Past in the Cajun Country Mardi Gras,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 33, no. 2 (1996); Rocky Sexton, “Cajun and Creole Treasures: Magico-Religious Folk Healing in French Louisiana,” *Western Folklore* 51, no. 3/4 (1992); Rocky Sexton, “Ritualized Inebriation, Violence, and Social Control in Cajun Mardi Gras,” *Anthropological*

and music,¹⁴ and the boundaries of the Cajun population.¹⁵ This work can be roughly

Quarterly 74, no. 1 (2001); Mike Tidwell, *Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003); Carolyn Ware, *Cajun Women and Mardi Gras: Reading the Rules Backward* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

¹⁴ See Barry Jean Ancelet, *Cajun Music: Its Origins and Development* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1989); Barry Jean Ancelet and Philip Gould, *One Generation at a Time: Biography of a Cajun and Creole Music Festival* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2007); Barry Jean Ancelet, *Cajun and Creole Folktales: The French Oral Tradition of South Louisiana* (New York: Garland, 1994); Joshua Clegg Caffery, *Traditional Music in Coastal Louisiana: The 1934 Lomax Recordings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013); Shane Bernard, *Swamp Pop: Cajun and Creole Rhythm and Blues* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996); Les Blank and Chris Strachwitz, *J'ai été au bal: Roots of Cajun and Zydeco Music* (Brazos Films: 2003); Florence Borders, "Researching Creole and Cajun Musics in New Orleans," *Black Music Research Journal* 8, no. 1 (1988); Ryan Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown: The Emergence of an American-Made Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Ryan Brasseaux and Kevin Fontenot, eds., *Accordions, Fiddles, Two-Step, & Swing: A Cajun Music Reader* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2006); Sara LeMenestrel, "French music, Cajun, Creole, Zydeco: Ligne de couleur et hiérarchies sociales dans la musique franco-louisianaise," *Civilisations* 53, no. 1/2 (2006); William Dean Reese and Charles McKinley Allen, *Mamou: Acadian Folklore, Natural History, and Botany of the Mamou Plant* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2004); Lindsay Smith, "Cajun Music: The Oral Poetry of the Cajun People" (PhD dissertation, Emory University, 1995).

¹⁵ Marc David, "(Re)Turn of the Native: Insider Ethnography and the Politics of Fieldwork in South Louisiana," in *Working the Field: Accounts from French Louisiana*, ed. Jacques M. Henry and Sara LeMenestrel, 101–120 (Westport: Praeger, 2003); Mark DeWitt, *Cajun and Zydeco Dance Music in Northern California: Modern Pleasures in a Postmodern World* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008); Sylvie Dubois and Barbara Horvath, "Creoles and Cajuns: A Portrait in Black and White," *American Speech* 78, no. 2 (2003); Jacques Henry, "What Has Become of the Cajuns of Yore?," *Louisiana History* 46, no. 4 (2005); Jacques Henry and Carl L. Bankston, III, *Blue Collar Bayou: Louisiana Cajuns in the New Economy of Ethnicity* (Westport: Praeger, 2002); Romy Heylen, "Kill the Devil or Marry an American: Descent and Consent among the Cajuns," *The French Review* 67, no. 3 (1994); James Natsis, "Legislation and Language: The Politics of Speaking French in Louisiana," *The French Review* 73, no. 2 (1999); Kevin Rottet, *Language Shift in the Coastal Marshes of Louisiana* (New York: P. Lang, 2001); Rocky Sexton, "Cajun-French Language Maintenance and Shift: A Southwest Louisiana Case Study to 1970," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 19, no. 4 (2000); Dorice Tentchoff, "Ethnic Survival under Anglo-American Hegemony: The Louisiana Cajuns," *Anthropological Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (1980); Cécyle Trépanier, "The Cajunization of French Louisiana: Forging a Regional Identity," *The Geographical Journal* 157, no. 2 (1991).

characterized by the following methodologies: historical analysis, ethnographic fieldwork consisting of qualitative interviews and participant-observation, the statistical accounting of demographic data, thematic analysis of a folk or ethnomusicological corpus, and cultural critique on the politics of identity and representation.

While there is much value in the existing apparatus of Louisiana studies and in the methodological models within the field, I fear that an overemphasis on cultural identity and a faith in positivist, empirical research isolates Louisiana researchers from important conversations in cultural theory. It seems that with few exceptions, these researchers rely on outdated modernist and structuralist theories, ones that promise the comfort of stable identity formation, of simplified narratives of historical change, and of an essentialist, activist stance that paralyzes the very culture these scholars hope to champion. I hope to intervene in the current echo-chamber of Louisiana studies by becoming unmoored from it. Instead of trying to articulate the static, recognizable cultural groups, I rack focus on the improvisatory half-agency of connecting lines of relation between people, groups, virtualities, and environment. The worlds summoned into being by coastal shrimpers are hard-won constellations of work and narrative, of a care of place and a care of environment. These worlds are rifts in the kinds of cultural formations well-described by Louisiana scholars. I draw on scholarly work about Louisiana the same way I draw on scholarly work in general: unstable discourses that may intersect and echo the lives and dreams of my field informants. I hope my work is rigorously disloyal to the corpus of existing Louisiana scholarship. I hope my work can be part of the great work of shifting the conversation away from questions of authenticity, legacy, and folk practice into the realm of intensities embedded in

environments, of embodied labor, of histories of the present, of mapping heterotopic imaginations.

Lesson Two: Making Space

Say you are drinking Miller High Life ponies and being sunned out and say you just saw everyone for Easter and Good Friday, and now it's the Octave of Easter and your grandpa cracks open another pony with his left hand, which is mostly intact, save the ring finger which ends at the second knuckle and sticks out from his fist like a loose piling. You are bayouside, sprawled on folding chairs from the green and white 1980s. The junky pier jutting into the bayou gets worse every year, as the water eats away the pine planks, slowly prying the deck nails out of their holes. There are children who do not care about this or the splinters that catch their ankles or the gaps that yawn between planks, and they sit on the pier, they play on the pier, they are perilously close to falling into the opaque bayou water. Say you are watching the priest float by on a boat owned by Kimothy "Kim" Guy, the guy everyone agrees is one of the best shrimp fishermen in the Parish. About ten days ago, the priest washed Kim's feet in church in the lead up to Easter. Now the priest throws some holy water at you, and you bless yourself at him.

Say you are at the Boat Blessing, AKA the Blessing of the Fleet, AKA *la bénédiction des flots*. This is an old Catholic ritual wherein a priest smears God into the water so that fishermen, like the apostles of biblical time, might catch a miraculous draught of fish. Say you are in Chauvin, a "census designated place" in Louisiana, about an hour and fifteen minutes

driving southwest from New Orleans, about thirty minutes driving from the place where the road ends at the Gulf of Mexico. Chauvin is a clustered place: dwellings organized into subdivisions along the main artery, Bayou Petit Caillou, where, say, boats presently parade forth, trailing the priest ahead of the May shrimp season. If everything goes to plan, this ritual magic will result in nets creaking under the weight of shrimp and the things that come with filtering the water through rope: squid, perch, sludge, hydrilla, aluminum cans, and plastic bottles. Everything will be thrown back, save maybe the squids, which are a secret delicacy in Chauvin, prepared the same way you prepare any invertebrate from the sea: boiled with a seasoning mix called crab boil, served on newspapers, dipped in a dip made from mayonnaise and ketchup.

The story goes that the livelihood of Chauvin depends on the water to yield shrimp. Trawlers harvest and sell shrimp to dockside processors who sell to seafood distributors who sell to grocery stores and restaurants. In Chauvin, you have the luxury of buying directly from trawlers at dockside prices, say \$1.50 per pound of 21/25 raw head-on shrimp from a neighbor rather than \$8.60 per pound at the Rouses Supermarket or \$17.99 at Whole Foods.¹⁶ But the story, as it stands, is wrong. The livelihood of Chauvin depends less on the shrimping industry—which has become less and less profitable each year—than on the willingness of people to imagine that the life of Chauvin depends on the water. Although the

¹⁶ Sarah Mine et al., *Louisiana Shrimp Value Chain: Price Dynamics, Challenges, & Opportunities* (Datu Research, 2016), 15. 21–25 is a size designation, indicating between twenty-one and twenty-five shrimp per pound.

port of Dulac-Chauvin continues to land, on average and without adjusting for inflation, about \$50 million worth of seafood per year for the last twenty years, its rank among ports

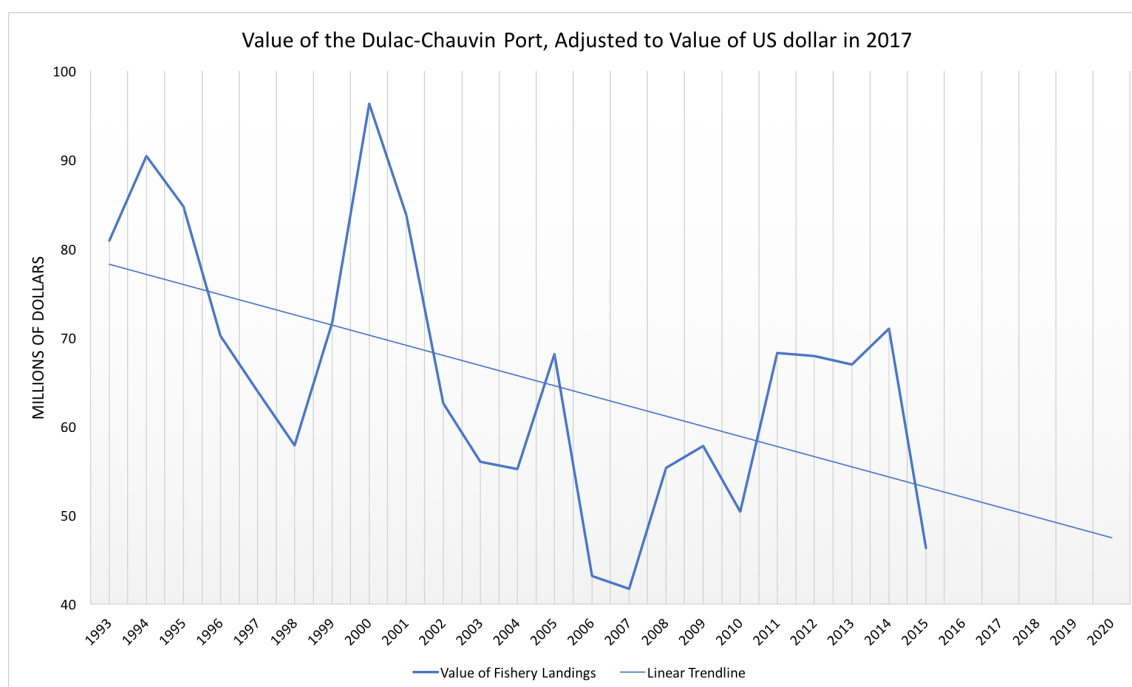


Figure 2: Value of the Dulac-Chauvin Port in 2017 US dollars. This chart shows both the boom and bust nature of the fishery and the downward trajectory of its value, and forecasts value through 2020 with a linear trendline. Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service, Fisheries of the United States, 1995–2015, Silver Spring: Fisheries Statistics Division, 2015; Bureau of Labor Statistics, All Items Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) for the U.S. City Average, 1982–84 = 100, United States Department of Labor (2017).

has dropped precipitously over the same amount of time (Figure 2). Even accounting for cycles of boom and bust and inflation, the value of the port is going down. People know that they work on an offshore oil platform or a machine shop or an industrial shipyard, or at the Piggly Wiggly or Chase bank or local schools. And yet, each year, the priest at St. Joseph Catholic Church leads a procession of trawl boats down Bayou Petit Caillou for the boat blessing. Shrimping is the only occupation to get a nod from the Lord. If we try to measure the success of the fishery by the value of its landings or the amount of new commercial licenses or the market share of the products, we will find that wild caught shrimp is

becoming a niche industry incapable of supporting the people who work in it. The people watching the slow parade of boats know that there is no future for shrimp in Chauvin.

But still, they pray for it. That this year might not be the last year to imagine oneself as one used to be. That this year be full of hot crustaceans leaking juices onto newsprint. That this year be the one that their children ask them to tell a story about the good old days when everyone spoke French and got along, about a heritage that bleeds over into sacred nostalgia. A story about themselves as they imagine they should be: unique, humble, simple, hardworking, crafty, funny, pure, free. Voracious in appetite for food and God. Tenacious when it comes to weathering weather. A story of a race of idiot-savants, tellers of tales, men who have successfully escaped a life of tedium and wage-labor, who have made themselves in the images of their grandfathers, who have yoked their family and its domestic sphere to a boat, an insular place, both enclosed and mobile, serene, productive, real and unreal.

Needless to say, every year is a year of stories, whether one wants to hear them or not. This year, like other years, onlookers complain that there are fewer boats than the year before. They fear the day when their children finally rid themselves of the shrimp and ammonia stink of the Triple T processing factory on Highway 56. They fear the day when their children have left their stories behind for different ones, shared over cuisines that are utterly foreign to them, in cities and landscapes not scrawled in estuarial mud and sunset and seagull. This is a story of decline: people are abandoning traditional culture and labor, assimilating, selling out. But while we tell a story of romantic loss from shore, trawlers are creating worlds on their boats, worlds that may not prevent the ultimate end of the shrimp fishery, but ones that allow them to improvise a life worth living, a world that is bearable for

a time, one that connects an uncanny past to a utopian future, flickering in and out of sight but burrowing deep into the physicality of environment: wind and marsh grass, the smell of peat, the viscosity of the estuary, the heat of sun and engine, the screech of winch and bird, the jerky slip of a sea creature in hand.

It is tempting to characterize the trawl boat, set in opposition to the imperatives of twenty-first century American capitalism driven by instantaneous communication, commerce, and immaterial labor, as a utopian space. Utopia, literally “no place,” offers a dream of a different future, one where the ills of today are reversed, where history has ended. In the idyllic imagination, the boat offers just this: an enclosed reality wherein shrimpers, acting as their own bosses, reconfigure the world to include only the things they love: the corporeal experience of the marsh, the taste of fresh food, the tight-knit family life of intimate coordination, the transmission of knowledge from old to young, the assurance of a type of ecological continuity. Imagined this way, the trawl boat is a non-place, an optimistic direction for the future, the pure freedom of being entirely unanchored by material reality. Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, who attempted to recuperate the concept of utopia from its less than positive connotations among Marxists,¹⁷ might term this unfettered fantasy of the

¹⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels specifically use “utopian” as a slur to mean unrealistic political projects based in fantasy rather than reality. They used this term against other systems of early nineteenth century socialist thought advocated by Henri de Saint-Simon, Robert Owen, and Charles Fourier. While Marx and Engels acknowledge the revolutionary potential of imagining a utopia that is critical of contemporary society, they conclude that followers of “Critical-Utopian Socialism and Communism” ultimately “endeavor [...] to deaden the class struggle” and become conservative and reactionary (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 6, 477–519 (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 516). In addition, Marx and Engels critiqued

idealized boat as an *abstract utopia*, which has prevented the revolutionary potential of a future oriented politics. Bloch writes,

Pure wishful thinking has discredited utopias for centuries, both in pragmatic political terms and in all other expressions of what is desirable; just as if every utopia were an abstract one. And undoubtedly the utopian function is only immaturely present in abstract utopianizing, i.e. still predominantly without solid subject behind it and without relation to the Real-Possible.¹⁸

The abstract utopia is the idle hope we all have that things will get better. The hope for the good life. Banal optimism that never progresses beyond daydreaming of what could happen. When people deride Marxism as impractical and leftists as feckless dreamers sheltered from the cold reality of the world, they characterize progressive goals as abstract utopias.

To counter the impotency of the abstract utopia, Bloch introduces the concept of the *concrete utopia*, a possible future that lies just beyond the present moment, which can be anticipated through mediation with a specific, concrete history. This concrete utopian impulse spurs action towards a better future, hopefully, rather than leaving hope stuck in an ahistorical wish for a world where wrongs are righted. Returning to my governing metaphor of unmooring, the concrete utopia allows for the drift of hope and speculation while still attached to solid ground. It is a way of positioning towards a future. Bloch writes that the concrete utopia “is concerned to deliver the forms and contents which have already

economists such as Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi, who critiqued capitalism from a non-socialist perspective, as simultaneously “reactionary and Utopian,” because this type of thought valorizes pre-capitalist economic systems, specifically the petite bourgeoisie (ibid.: 509).

¹⁸ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 145.

developed in the womb of present society.”¹⁹ We might imagine what shrimpers are doing—continuing to fish despite the conventional wisdom that their industry is failing—as trying to reach toward a concrete utopia by bringing forth forms of living embedded in their understanding of history: an anachronistic return to the memory of their parents on a boat, of small families unfettered by mobile devices and extracurricular activities, of simplicity, of a form of self-governance that renders institutional regulation and even statehood irrelevant and moot. Queer theorist José Muñoz might, much to the chagrin of the shrimpers of Chauvin, describe this utopian dream as queer futurity. He resurrects the concept of utopia in the spirit of Bloch, proposing that queerness *is* futurity: “We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.”²⁰ He calls for a haunting, an imagination of a fragmented past that inspires utopian visions. Queerness, like utopia, is that which is out-of-sync, an anticipatory mode that finds no home in the present. Like Bloch, he argues for a concrete utopia rooted in materialist history, one that longs for something other than the catastrophe of history. The remains of the past, the No-Longer-Conscious, living undead lives through memory and material traces, allow us to imagine the Not-Yet-Here, the anticipation of a world to come.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 623. In describing youth and newness that accompany changes in society, Bloch uses another gestational image: “a society pregnant with a new one” (ibid.: 118). This metaphor has a decidedly different tone than the violent image from Marx and Engels *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: “The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 490).

²⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1.

To imagine a future involves attending to the invisible force of the past impinging on the present. Muñoz defines this as an act of worldmaking, of performing a future:

world-making here as functioning and coming into play through the performance of queer utopian memory, that is, a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated—a utopia in the present.²¹

For Muñoz, it is through imagining the past in concert with the future that we might construct some concrete utopia enacted in a troubled present. This practice is wrought with desire, specifically the desire for a future of new and not-yet-conscious pleasures and relations: Eros, the combination of sexual pleasure and the will-to-live that, according to Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse, is a “unifying force that preserves all life.”²² Marcuse sets Eros in opposition to what he calls the “performance principle,” the condition of labor alienation under capitalism. It is the performance principle, the normalcy of repressive civilization founded on exploitation, that designates utopian practice as unrealizable fantasy.²³ Combining Marcuse’s Eros-driven refusal of capitalist normalcy with Bloch’s utopian thinking, Muñoz imagines a queer utopia that finds itself in the ghosts haunting shuttered spaces of counternormative sex practice and experimentations with new forms of connectivity. The desire, too, is hope—specifically the affirmation of hope over fear as the primary anticipatory affect. Hope is still of the potential, the magically possible. Fear is the

²¹ Ibid.: 37.

²² Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 27.

²³ Marcuse writes, “The relegation of real possibilities to the no-man’s land of utopia is itself an essential element of the ideology of the performance principle” (ibid.: 150).

imagination of a self-same future: a future that is, banally, today, locked in to the same systemic impressions of an eternal now. For shrimpers, however, the hope is both an orientation towards a freedom from the structures that configure and manage the forms of social and economic life *and* a mooring to a self-same present that persists into the future. The shrimpers I spoke to would call Muñoz a dreamer, a communist, and much worse if I suggest to them that the future is queer stuff. Rather than the Not-Yet-Here, shrimpers want to live in the On-The-Verge-Of-Disappearing, the Just-Past, and for some, the Olden-Days. Although their attraction to the shrimping life is adjacent to Muñoz's formulation of an out-of-time queer utopianism, they desire a future still structured by heterosexual reproduction, organized around the family even as they desire to escape the logic of capitalism and expansive social networks.

While queer temporality figures into the imaginary of the trawling life, it does so in service of creating another space where shrimpers can live differently. The no-place of the utopia, even in its most concrete form, is simply not appealing to shrimpers, who delight in their embeddedness, their rootedness, even though they spend their lives on rootless water. For this reason, it might be best to describe the space that shrimpers inhabit on the trawlboat as a place between utopia (no place) and topia (a place). Philosopher Michel Foucault argues that "*Utopias* afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold."²⁴ Even the concrete utopia

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1989), xix.

functions as a way to find a way to a better future, to console oneself with the hope that there is a way forward. The trawl boat does not offer consolation, or at least not consolation that is untroubled. Although there is a structure of escape, there is the necessity of return. Although heterotopias collapse future and present, they do so in place, in a real place, in the materially rich space formed on the deck of a boat, on the rapidly encroaching littoral waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Instead of utopia, the trawl boat is what Foucault calls a *heterotopia*: a space of disturbance formed by the alchemy of movement and story and improvisation and the game of mooring and unmooring from larger, totalizing cultural logics. He writes that heterotopia are sites that unsettle us “because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names.”²⁵ He writes that “they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.”²⁶ In other words, they can cut through the tightly woven nets that discipline the way we live: cultural narratives, institutions and their capacity to name, the quantification of human behavior by a statistical imagination. Heterotopias render us speechless, or, at least, they challenge the discourses that have structured the conditions for our possibility to act as self-identical subjects. They are ephemeral laboratories wherein those inside can experiment with the terms of living. Heterotopias are places (perhaps on the side of the road, perhaps on the water) that allow us to practice different ways of thinking, of surviving.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Although he only mentions heterotopia once in his written oeuvre, Foucault elaborates this term in two speeches. In one delivered to a group of architects, posthumously published as “Of Other Spaces,” he again contrasts utopia and heterotopia: the utopia is a “placeless place” and unreal, whereas a heterotopia is simultaneously real and unreal.²⁷ In the second speech, delivered as a radio address in 1966, Foucault describes heterotopias as “counterspaces” and uses several nautical metaphors that I find especially appealing when describing the world shrimpers are creating on their boats. He illustrates the counterspace of a potential heterotopia in an uncharacteristically cheery description of childhood make-believe:

It’s the Thursday afternoon in the parents’ bed. On the great bed, they discover an ocean where one swims beneath the covers, and then the bed’s a sky when one bounces with the bedsprings, and then it’s a forest where one can hide, and then it’s the night when one becomes a ghost in sheets. It’s the pleasure, at last, when, upon the return of mom and dad, one gets punished.²⁸

Here, Foucault figures a heterotopia as overlaying extant reality, a possible reconfiguration of experience, a modality of play. The bed, which is the boundary, can become something other

²⁷ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 24.

²⁸ This speech has yet to be translated and published in English. This is my translation. Here is a transcription from the French:

c’est - le jeudi après-midi - le grand lit des parents. C’est sur ce grand lit qu’on découvre l’océan, puisqu’on peut y nager entre les couvertures ; et puis ce grand lit, c’est aussi le ciel, puisqu’on peut bondir sur les ressorts ; c’est la forêt, puisqu’on s’y cache ; c’est la nuit, puisqu’on y devient fantôme entre les draps ; c’est le plaisir, enfin, puisque, à la rentrée des parents, on va être puni.

For the audio, see Michel Foucault, “Les hétérotopies,” *Utopies et hétérotopies* (L’Institute national de l’audiovisuel: 2004). The French text has been published in Michel Foucault, “Les hétérotopies,” in *Le Corps Utopique—les Hétérotopies*, ed. Daniel Defert (Fécamp: Éditions lignes, 2009), 24.

than a bed. It can become the ocean, an image that not coincidentally suggests a type of freedom, of unknown danger, of adventure. The heterotopia, like the reconfigured life shrimpers lead on the boat, dissolves after a point. Here, the parents, who bookend the play of children with discipline, form the temporal boundary. In a heterotopia, like in Stewart's place on the side of the road, we can attune ourselves to the virtual, to the possible, to an opportunity to make for ourselves a world between and within the various pre-ordained stories that structure our life. For shrimpers, their voyages on boats have a start and an endpoint, are seasonal, and like the bed the children play on, take place away from the disciplining gaze of some authority. The specter of regulation exists, but, for a time, shrimpers can imagine themselves as free.

In both version of the heterotopia speech, Foucault ends with an elegant simile about boats.

In the radio address, he says

The ship—this is a heterotopia *par excellence*. Civilizations without boats are like children whose parents have no bed upon which they can play; their dreams dry up, espionage replaces adventure, and the ugliness of police effaces the bright beauty of pirates.²⁹

Back on the shore of Bayou Petit Caillou during the Boat Blessing, you hear your grandpa complain, “They don’t have the same amount of boats they used to.” You want to say “We

²⁹ In French:

Le navire, c’est l’hétérotopie par excellence. Les civilisations sans bateaux sont comme les enfants dont les parents n’auraient pas un grand lit sur lequel on puisse jouer ; leurs rêves alors se tarissent, l’espionnage y remplace l’aventure, et la hideur des polices la beauté ensoleillée des corsaires. (Foucault, “Les hétérotopies,” *Utopies et hétérotopies*; Foucault, “Les hétérotopies,” 36)

are becoming a civilization without boats,” but you don’t, because it seems rude: an apocalyptic complaint that is still out of place as a boat passes and blasts “Boogie Shoes,” writhing with half-dressed twenty-somethings dancing around silent, smiling matriarchs and patriarchs, white-haired, on aluminum folding chairs. It’s true, however: there are fewer boats this year. The boats themselves have less flags. Perhaps the music itself is just a little less loud. The boat, the lynchpin of the Chauvin imaginary, may end up a relic of the olden days, like the tools from when men giftwrapped colonies of shrimp in purse seines, the trawl’s predecessor. But now, for what could be a few more years or many more years, the shrimp boat is both a real part of economic life *and* the memory of itself as a real part of economic life. We mourn its passing from the banks, my grandpa and I, as we watch it pass in front of us, bobbing under the weight of its revelers. Emblematic of southern Louisiana “traditional” culture, the privileged site of male providers in small communities, a sacred spot, the trawl boat is a refuge of shrimpers made anachronistic by technological and economic development, a place for people out of sync with their era. It is both impenetrable to outsiders, yet permeable. As trawlers give up and the salt water stretches further onshore, the trawl boat simultaneously fades away and moves further inland. It is a real place without a place, a threshold that collapses history and future, subjectivity and body, affect and myth. It is this fragile space, the space of the boat and the possible modalities it offers of living and understanding, that this project tries to touch. The space of the trawl boat, though a counterspace to the kinds of official spaces of economic and cultural productivity, is something that came to be through a century of people negotiating technology, economics, survival, culture, locality, and ethics. Shrimpers have not designed the trawl boat to be an

escape from mainstream life, nor do they talk about its revolutionary potential. The trawl boat is not particularly future-oriented, except as a site where people imagine raising a family. Shrimping is a humble job that acquiesces, grudgingly, to more powerful economic interests, like energy corporations and government bodies. It does not even offer a place where wrongs are righted. Instead, it is an odd space born from dwelling in an environment, of subsuming narrative to ecology and ecology to narrative. The boat, the heterotopia par excellence, is the imaginative possibility that springs from the game of mooring and unmooring, a possibility that brings with it both hope and fear, the chance that the way we think things differently will be better than the ways we already think, the fear that we are fooling ourselves. There is danger: the boat, the fleeting utopia in the present, the utterly real and unreal place of reconfigured possible, might just become the fixed ur-myth of a new, stable, oppressive story that returns to a chauvinistic, sepia-stained past. Another crypto-fascist holler. Another enclave that cannot live with others. And yet, it could also demonstrate that there are alternatives to assent in the techno-capitalist twenty-first century. Rethinking the boat, exploring the possible worlds made tactile by trawlers, we might be able to throw our dreams back into the bayou, the wet places, and see if we can grow back some adventure.

Lesson Three: A Brief History of the Pre-Bust Louisiana Shrimp Fishery

Before we can ask why shrimpers might refuse to quit shrimp, how they might attempt to live differently, today, in a fading industry on a disintegrating coast, we must understand how becoming a shrimper became possible and profitable. The industry rose quickly over the course of about fifty years to become the top Louisiana fishery through specific technological innovations (canning, the otter trawl, the diesel engine). Besides being profitable, shrimping also became paradigmatically different than other types of labor since its heyday in the 1930s–1980s. Most shrimpers have been owner-operators rather than employees since the early twentieth century. Unlike other blue-collar workers, they are, as they told me, their own bosses and have been since they can remember.

Before the rise and fall of the shrimp industry, the Louisiana fisheries were niche enterprises in a local world. The fishermen of the New England coast landed the bulk of American seafood when fish scientists and fishery officials began quantifying landings. While Louisiana was sucked into the Confederate States of America's war to own people as chattel slaves, long-line fishermen in New England began accusing fishers using traps of overfishing. This complaint, amplified by Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and naturalist Spencer F. Baird, led President Ulysses S. Grant to establish the United States Fish and

Fisheries Commission in 1871, the first institution to directly advocate for scientific research for the benefit to commercial fisheries. The commission compiled the first comprehensive study of the US fisheries, *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States*, in 1887.

Special agent of the commission Silas Stearns, who studied the fisheries of the Gulf of Mexico, writes,

It is to be hoped that the inhabitants of these shores will soon awaken to a realization of the store of wealth which beneficent nature brings to their very feet; if they do not, others will step in before them and bear away the first-fruits, for these well-nigh limitless sources of material prosperity cannot much longer remain unnoticed.³⁰

In this version of the Gulf of Mexico, the waters are a vineyard and the fishers the absentee vigneron, cavalier with their stewardship. Stearns uses the language of ancient religions: the first-fruits, the first harvests given over to God or clergy in tithe. Later, the first-fruits will come to mean resurrection: “But now is Christ risen from the dead, *and* become the firstfruits of those who are asleep.”³¹ Here, in a point in history favorable for those who count and measure the facets of humans, the first-fruits are the choicest commodities that will be exploited, sooner or later.

When the Commission of Fish and Fisheries compiled the 1887 study, the biggest fishery was New England finfish. Louisiana’s finfish fishery was limited to the New Orleans market,

³⁰ United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries, *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States, Section II: A Geographical Review of the Fisheries Industries and Fishing Communities for the Year 1880*, by George Brown Goode, Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1887, 535.

³¹ 1 Corinthians 15:20 (King James Bible). Firstfruits is not hyphenated in the Bible.

to a small retail trade at the French Market, the bulk of which supplied restaurants and hotels.³² In 1880, the year cited in the study's statistics, the oyster fishery was the most important, landing \$200,000 of product, versus \$45,000 for red snappers and \$41,000 for shrimp.³³ The oyster fishery, tended by Slovenians and Dalmatians who immigrated in the mid-nineteenth century and located chiefly in Plaquemines Parish,³⁴ was the top fishery until 1925, when shrimping took over. When the oyster fishery began to develop beyond the New Orleans market, it became more like farming: an oysterman harvests, but also seeds the reefs.³⁵ Shrimping throughout the United States has thus far remained a wild fishery.

Before shrimpers became trawlers and skimmers, they used seines—long, rectangular nets with a long edge of lead and a long edge of cork. A sailboat lugger would enter a shallow bay or lake, the men aboard dipping cast nets into the water to check for shrimp. When shrimp were found, the seiners would row out and encircle the water containing the shrimping, drawing the the seine around it, with the lead line dragging the bottom and the cork line dragging the sky. The tallest shrimpers had to enter the water, holding the lead line down

³² Goode, United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries, *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States*, II, II, 578.

³³ Ibid.: 576 \$200,000 would be worth roughly \$4.4 million dollars today, according to work by economist Robert Sahr. See Robert Sahr, "Inflation Conversion Factors," Oregon State University, College of Liberal Arts-School of Public Policy, Political Science, <http://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/spp/polisci/research/inflation-conversion-factors>.

³⁴ Donald W. Davis, *Washed Away?: The Invisible Peoples of Louisiana's Wetlands* (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2010), 339.

³⁵ George H. Seferovich, "A Survey of the Louisiana Fresh Oyster Industry," *Louisiana Conservation Review*, Summer 1938, 20–21.

with their feet as their co-shrimpers unloaded the catch with dip nets.³⁶ Sometimes, there were no boats, and crews of six to twenty men set forth from a beach carrying a seine, trawling with their bodies and their bodies alone.

Before the prevalence of ice—a hard, cold form of water—in the subtropics of Louisiana, men built platforms in the marsh to sun-dry the shrimp. First they boiled them and salted them, then let the sun desiccate them. The men who did this work were the nearly forgotten Chinese founders of Louisiana dried shrimp.³⁷ Information about these early commercial shrimpers is fleeting and contradictory: references to Lee Yim (or Lee Yeun or Chee Ken some other name), who came to Louisiana either during the American Civil War or in the early 1870s, father of the shrimp drying platform and potential namesake to Leeville in Lafourche Parish,³⁸ traces of Chinese (or Filipino) shrimpers in late nineteenth century newspaper articles,³⁹ the late establishment of the Quong Sun Company, which exported

³⁶ United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Fisheries, *Shrimp Industry of the South Atlantic and Gulf States*, by Fred Francis Johnson and Milton Jerome Lindner, Investigational Report No. 21, Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1934, 9–19; Thomas Becnel, “A History of the Louisiana Shrimp Industry, 1867–1961” (MA thesis, Louisiana State University, 1962), 6.

³⁷ Johnson and Lindner, Bureau of the Fisheries, *Shrimp Industry of the South Atlantic and Gulf States*, 40–43.

³⁸ Davis, *Washed Away?*, 306–307; George N. Hebert, “Shrimp Boats Is Anettin’ Millions,” *Nation’s Business*, May 1952.

³⁹ Lorillard D. Sampsell, “The Recent Storm on the Gulf Coast,” *Frank Leslie’s Weekly*, October 26, 1893, 270; “Mrs. Quong Is up to Date,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 2, 1896; “Louisiana’s Queerest Colony,” *Boston Daily Globe*, December 7, 1898; “Trade in Dried Fish,” *The Washington Post*, February 1, 1903. It is unclear to what extent the Chinese population overlapped with the Philippine population, and though contemporary accounts seem to conflate the two groups, the scholars seem to agree that the shrimp drying process comes from Chinese immigrants, though Filipino (as well as

dried shrimp from New Orleans to China,⁴⁰ and the names of ever-widening waterways such as China Bayou, Bayou Chine, and Chinamen Bayou. Dried shrimp is still sold in small packages at the Piggly Wiggly in Chauvin. It is a rare delicacy, an exotic bar food, a snack, a supplement for cooking Louisiana food when the bounty of Louisiana is far away. To transport shrimp at the birth of the Louisiana commercial shrimp fishery, you had to remove all evidence of water so that they would not rot.

Americans, being unaccustomed to dried shrimp, preferred their shrimp canned wet. Floating around the waters of Barataria Bay, George W. Dunbar and his sons George H. and Francis began canning shrimp in 1867, but the shrimp turned black due to a chemical reaction with the can.⁴¹ In 1876, they patented a textile can lining that kept canned shrimp pink and appetizing and moved their operation to New Orleans.⁴² By 1880, the Dunbars

Italian, Croatian, German, and Cajun) groups participated in this industry (Davis, *Washed Away?*, 305–310; Elmer Higgins, “A Story of the Shrimp Industry,” *The Scientific Monthly* 38, no. 5 (1934): 440).

⁴⁰ Quong Sun was not officially established until the early 1920s, but there is evidence that they operated at least as early as 1913 (Laine Kaplan-Levenson, “The Little Company That Could: How a New Orleans Immigrant Created a Global Dried Shrimp Business,” *TriPod: New Orleans at 300*, October 8, 2015, <http://wwno.org/post/little-company-could-how-new-orleans-immigrant-created-global-dried-shrimp-business>; Soards Directory Company, *Soards’ New Orleans City Directory for 1912*, vol. XXXIX (New Orleans: Soards Directory Company, 1912), 1282).

⁴¹ Johnson and Lindner, Bureau of the Fisheries, *Shrimp Industry of the South Atlantic and Gulf States*, 25, 37.

⁴² George W. Dunbar, George H. Dunbar, and Francis B. Dunbar, Improvement in Methods of Preserving Shrimps and Other Shell-Fish, United States, filed February 1, 1876 1876, and issued June 20, 1876.

nearly doubled the value of the Louisiana shrimp fishery.⁴³ The canning operation in Louisiana began a minor feudal system wherein processing plants would employ seiners to operate factory boats.⁴⁴ The first-fruits of the Gulf of Mexico were stuffed into tin cans bearing the Dunbar label.

The seine, requiring many bodies to operate, lent itself well to a factory model of labor: workers hauling in concert, earning uniform pay; assignments to work this boat, this location. The waters with shrimp were far from the navigable waters that led to distribution channels and fresh markets. Shrimp, vulnerable even in death, spoil quickly in their own liquids, their heads full of hungry enzymes.⁴⁵ Processors began to fill holds in boats with ice and motored shrimp and oysters from beach and marsh and island to canneries using new gas-powered two-stroke outboard motors sold by Evinrude in the late 1910s.⁴⁶ The shrimp fishery manufactured meat in an open air/open water assembly line: seiners pulled shrimpy life from the sea, icemen transported it via boat to the processing plant, pickers peeled the life of its carapace and discard its enzymatic head, cooks boiled and brined the life (which is

⁴³ United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries, *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States, Section V: History and Methods of the Fisheries*, by George Brown Goode, Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1887, 810.

⁴⁴ Becnel, "A History of the Louisiana Shrimp Industry," 14.

⁴⁵ Johnson and Lindner, Bureau of the Fisheries, *Shrimp Industry of the South Atlantic and Gulf States*, 30.

⁴⁶ Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission, "The Louisiana Shrimp Story," *Seventh Biennial Report: Louisiana Wild Life and Fisheries Commission 1956–1957*, by Viosca Percy, Jr., 102–106, New Orleans: Division of Education and Publicity, 1958, 102.

now just meat), canners filled and sealed the cans with meat and brine, and packers loaded the cans of meat into boxes and crates to be shipped all over.⁴⁷

In the 1920s, shrimpers became trawlers. The otter trawl, tried in 1915 and adopted by over a thousand Louisiana fishermen in 1923,⁴⁸ raked the sea floor of bayous and bays. An otter trawl consists of a long, conical net, held open by the shearing drag of two boards (called otter boards or otter doors).⁴⁹ The trawl could be operated by a boat with a small crew, and once motors winched the net in and out of the water, it could be crewed by one. The motorboats became a fleet of Lafitte Skiffs, combing through the water, gathering up all its life. Other motorboats were iceboats buying shrimp from trawlers in the bays and ferrying the landings back to the processors, and the trawlers would stay at sea for days and then weeks at a time. For the next seventy-five years, the people of coastal Louisiana could rely on the water to grant them life they could exchange for money. When wildlife conservation committees partitioned shrimping into legal seasons to give the shrimp stock a break from being caught, shrimpers strung crab traps in long lines baited with chicken necks and catfish

⁴⁷ Johnson and Lindner, Bureau of the Fisheries, *Shrimp Industry of the South Atlantic and Gulf States*, 23–40.

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 6; Percy, Commission, “The Louisiana Shrimp Story,” *Seventh Biennial Report*, 102.

⁴⁹ It is unclear why this gear is named for the otter. Perhaps it has to do with otter fishing, wherein trained otters chased fish into nets. Perhaps it has to do with the bobbing of the boards in the water if they are insufficiently weighted, as a Baton Rouge newspaper article from 1999 claims (Bruce Schultz, “Tests under Way on New Version of Trawl Doors,” *The Advocate*, August 23, 1999). Perhaps it is based on the boards used to stretch the hides of otters.

heads during the part of the year when they could not shrimp.⁵⁰ They strung gill nets and caught finfish. Oystermen collected oysters. Further inline, people farmed crawfish and hunted alligator. The store of nature washed life at their feet, and they noticed. The bodies of water were limitless.

So too was the appetite for shrimp. With the rise of refrigeration, Americans began enjoying shrimp further from the coast of Louisiana. By the 1950s, appetite for shrimp outpaced what domestic shrimpers could harvest. By the 1970s, this appetite outpaced what the world's shrimper could catch wild. Funded by large-scale agribusiness corporations such as Ralston Purina and CP Group (Charoen Pokphand), shrimpers in Thailand began to turn to aquaculture to capitalize on the demand for shrimp, whose scarcity in the mid-twentieth century made it a luxury food.⁵¹ CP Group—which runs shrimp feedmills, processing

⁵⁰ Typically, there are two open shrimping seasons for state waters up to three miles from the coast: a brown shrimp season from May to mid-June and a white shrimp season from August through December. See “Nets” chapter for discussion of shrimping regulation as it affects shrimpers I spoke to in 2015. Louisiana has had regulated open and closed shrimp seasons since 1910 after a law introduced by Representative Robert B. Butler of Terrebonne Parish (*An Act for the Protection of Salt Water Shrimp, to Provide the Manner in Which Said Crustaceans May Be Caught, to Fix the Season in Which They May Be Caught, to Authorize the Issuance of Licenses to Seine, and to Provide Penalties for the Violations of This Act*, Act 245, Sess. 2 (July 7, 1910)). It was not until the late 1930s that marine biologists began to understand shrimp populations in the waters of Louisiana to be able to thoughtfully designate open shrimping seasons (Craig Colten, “Environmental Management in Coastal Louisiana: A Historical Review,” *Journal of Coastal Research* 33, no. 3 (2017): 703).

⁵¹ Martin Skladany and Craig Harris, “On Global Pond: International Development and Commodity Chains in the Shrimp Industry,” in *Food and Agrarian Orders in the World-Economy*, ed. Philip McMichael, 164–194 (Westport: Praeger, 1995), 178; Jasper Goss, David Burch, and Roy E. Rickson, “Agri-Food Restructuring and Third World Transnationals: Thailand, the Cp Group and the Global Shrimp Industry,” *World Development* 28, no. 3 (2000): 516–517.

companies, and other aquacultural and aquacultural-adjacent ventures—expanded shrimp farming ventures to other southeast and south Asian countries since the 1980s.⁵² Unlike Louisiana shrimpers, workers in the Thai shrimp farms are waged-laborers. Because shrimp are fragile little things, piling them into agro-industrial vats requires chemical cleansing of the water and antibiotics to halt disease.⁵³ With an antibiotic banned in the United States, Japan, the European Union, and Canada—chloramphenicol—shrimp farms in southeast Asia began producing high quantities of viable, but chemically tainted shrimp. Although other countries rejected chloramphenicol contaminated shrimp in 2001, inspectors for the Food and Drug Administration in the US inspect such a low percentage of imported shrimp that they let shrimp brined in antibiotics from factory farms in the Indian Ocean cross the borders that year, which collapsed the price for domestic wild-caught shrimp.⁵⁴

Since the crises caused by the 2005 hurricane season, the 2010 oil spill, and the second plummeting of the price of shrimp in 2015, shrimpers in Louisiana have had increasingly difficult times sustaining themselves and their families. There was a reprieve in the decline of the Louisiana shrimp fishery between 2010 and 2014 as the price of shrimp swelled due to outbreaks of Early Mortality Syndrome (EMS) in aquacultured shrimp in China, Vietnam,

⁵² Goss, Burch, and Rickson, “Agri-Food Restructuring and Third World Transnationals,” 518–521.

⁵³ Thi Thu Trang Tran, “Food Safety and the Political Economy of Food Governance: The Case of Shrimp Farming in Nam Dinh Province, Vietnam,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40, no. 4 (2013): 25; Jill Ann Harrison, *Buoyancy on the Bayou: Shrimpers Face the Rising Tide of Globalization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

⁵⁴ *Import Alert: Government Fails Consumers, Falls Short on Seafood Inspections* (Food & Water Watch, 2007), 8; Harrison, *Buoyancy on the Bayou*, 22–25.

Thailand, and Malaysia.⁵⁵ Even large-scale agribusiness shrimp farms are subject to the precarious shrimp market, a global economy based on the fragile bodies of tiny marine creatures. In November 2013, the FDA issued a blanket rejection of Malaysian shrimp due to repeated contamination with chemicals, disease, and decomposition.⁵⁶ These factors led to a comfortable 2014 season, followed by the collapse of the shrimp price in 2015 (Figure 1). As shrimp farms began to manage the EMS crisis, aquacultured shrimp once more flooded the US market. As the price bottomed out, people in the US became aware of another sinister dimension of the global shrimp trade: some of the shrimp harvested in massive water farms were actually collected and processed by enslaved labor.⁵⁷ It is in this context—a recent, staggering shrimp bust—that I journeyed to my hometown spring of 2015 to begin asking shrimpers why they continued to shrimp. I might as well have been asking them why do anything at all.

⁵⁵ Peter De Schryver, Tom Defoirdt, and Patrick Sorgeloos, “Early Mortality Syndrome Outbreaks: A Microbial Management Issue in Shrimp Farming?,” *PLoS Pathogens* 10, no. 4 (2014): 1; “Thailand: Thai Shrimp Association Explains Impact of Ems Epidemic,” *Asia News Monitor*, December 20, 2013.

⁵⁶ United States Food and Drug Administration, *Import Alert 16-127*, https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/cms_ia/importalert_29.html, Silver Spring: USFDA, 2013.

⁵⁷ Melissa Marschke and Peter Vandergeest, “Slavery Scandals: Unpacking Labour Challenges and Policy Responses within the Off-Shore Fisheries Sector,” *Marine Policy* 68 (2016): 40–41.

Lesson Four: Fishers of Men

I fish for words
to say what I fish for,
half-catch sometimes.

—James Emanuel, “Poet as Fisherman”⁵⁸

In Biblical times, a carpenter god put fishermen out of business by asking them to become fishers of men.⁵⁹ In that moment, the godhead made incorporeal the nets the fishermen apostles had held. In that moment, the fishermen apostles might entrap people with words and story. They, themselves, become figurative, the structure of their previous vocation as fisherman transposed onto the spiritual realm. This, as we know, was the specialty of the Christ: a god who spoke in stories, who is the apotheosis of story.⁶⁰ Fishermen, a species of liars, likewise, speak through story and exaggeration. At least, that’s how the story goes.⁶¹

⁵⁸ James A. Emanuel, “Poet as Fisherman,” in *Deadly James and Other Poems*, 78–79 (Detroit: Lotus Press, 1987), 1–3.

⁵⁹ Matthew 4:18–20 (King James Bible).

⁶⁰ “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1 (King James Bible)).

⁶¹ In fact, the idiom “fish story,” based on a fisherman’s supposed propensity to stretch the truth, means a story too incredible to be true.

Folklore indexer Stith Thompson included a subsection in his index devoted to the lies fishermen tell, †X1150, specifying eight variations of a fisherman's lie: the great catch of fish, large number of fishermen in one spot, fish caught by remarkable trick, unusual catch by fisherman, fisherman catches fish with amazing contents, man catches fish with larger fish inside, other unusual methods of catching fish, and fish caught with another's cries.⁶² The first variation, the great catch of fish (†X1150.1), appears twice in the Christian gospels: the first, in the retelling of recruitment of the fishermen apostles in Luke, the second, post-resurrection in John. In both fish stories, Jesus instructs tired fishermen to go out again, where they fill their empty nets. The second variation of a lie about fishing, a large number of fishermen in one spot (†X1151), might describe the governing lie of Chauvin, where, over the course of a few summers, I tried to become a fisher of men in order to gather the stories of people who might persist in a troubled fishery.

I talked to shrimpers and people connected to the shrimp fishery located in southern Terrebonne Parish. They were people I knew from growing up in Chauvin, from running a nonprofit and festival there, from my family and their vast knowledge of their coast and the people living on it. I had access to them because they knew who I was—if not directly, then through my father whose popularity along Bayou Petit Caillou has earned him the nickname

⁶² Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*, vol. 5 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), 524.

“Mayor of Chauvin.”⁶³ My first instinct was to capture my informants in story, which I could then explain. This is called thick description: to read a culture like a text. This definition leads to a corollary premise: that culture, like a work of literature, is a symbolic structure whose individual parts have meaning both separately and in concert. Clifford Geertz, famous for theorizing ethnography as thick description and for inciting an interpretive turn in anthropology, writes “As interworked systems of construable signs... culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described.”⁶⁴ For Geertz, culture comprises a network of meanings, an overdetermined web that governs the field of possibility for individual and collective behavior. Understanding culture, then, is a practice of deciphering the hidden meanings, prescriptions, and imaginaries that are the motors of life. It is a process akin to close reading, in the sense of the New Critics: not only should the critic attend to the minute particularities of language or symbol, but she should devise how each linguistic fragment functions to create the whole. Reading culture in this way is a type of structuralism: Geertz writes that we should see culture “as a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call ‘programs’)—for the governing of behavior.”⁶⁵ Ethnographers, who Geertz imagines conducting research through interviews and observation, are writing

⁶³ Chauvin has no mayor as it is under the jurisdiction of the consolidated Terrebonne Parish government.

⁶⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 14.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*: 44.

“fictions, in the sense that [interpretations] are ‘something made’ ... not that they are false, unfactual, or merely ‘as if’ thought experiments.”⁶⁶ Like a text, we can exhaust a culture through our interpretations, and in our precision, we can translate culture to those outside the field we study in a language comprehensible to them.

There is a lot to admire in this formulation of ethnographic scholarship. It relieves some of the tension about cultural anthropology’s scientific pretensions by proposing a definite object of study—culture and the web of significations that order human behavior—and clarifying a methodology—fieldwork followed by the analysis of encounter and observation. As Geertz writes, this work is “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”⁶⁷ Geertz’s model also satisfies an aesthetic sensibility in writing ethnographies while grounding them in concrete, observable phenomenon. Most importantly, it encourages precision in parsing subtle distinctions of behavior that carry ambiguous meaning. While this vision still holds value in its attention to the minute texture of lived experience and the aesthetics of documenting it, thick description as an ethnographic methodology reinforces problematic tendencies in anthropological inquiry. It upholds the authority of the anthropologist as one who masters her subjects through language and privileges a totalizing vision of culture that is deterministic. Geertz’s definition of culture, drawn from the language of computer engineering, suggests that semiotic contexts function like scripts, that like the biblical legion of demons possessing the demoniac, animate the

⁶⁶ Ibid.: 15.

⁶⁷ Ibid.: 5.

meat of a people who exist in a pre-programmed world. His ethnographer plays the part of an engineering consultant who works culture like an exorcist: tinkering with a system, grasping it, explaining it, so that in his explanation, he might banish any strangeness.

The emphasis on cultural explanation—a theory that enacts subjectivation, the production of legible subjects that can be subject to power—is haunted by the colonial history of anthropology as a discipline, wherein empires mastered subaltern peoples in acts of representation. This critique of ethnography comes to us from within anthropology—most famously in *Writing Culture*, a collection of essays edited by James Clifford and George Marcus—and from without—in work of postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak.⁶⁸ Writing an ethnography is a fraught endeavor. Without care, it can turn into the third variation of a fishing lie: a fish caught by a remarkable trick (†X1153). In seeking to understand people she met in the field, the anthropologist might fix them in representation, the remarkable and virtuosic ability to interpret, to demarcate, to capture in language the precarious and intensive moment of an encounter with others. This remarkable trick is an ethical quandary that the shrimpers I spoke to from 2013 through 2016 would recognize immediately. In fact, they are the ones who described this kind of relationship as tricky. After British Petroleum descended on Chauvin to repair the cataclysm it brought in

⁶⁸ James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California, 1986); Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271–313 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

the form of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion, which bled 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico,⁶⁹ several shrimpers described to me how BP manipulated interview footage to reshape the post-spill narrative. They were wary, even though they knew me, of the remarkable trick of representation. They worried that I would trick them with misrepresentation. This is a lie I hoped to avoid.

I did go into the field. I did interview shrimpers. I watched them work. I joined them on their boats. I ate crustaceans they pulled from the water on the day they were hauled aboard a boat. I identified myself as a researcher, an anthropologist. I identified myself as my father and mother's son, a son of Chauvin. I brought with me a camera, a field recorder, a shotgun and lavalier mic, a heavy tripod capable of withstanding the bob of the surf under a boat, and a big lens. Sometimes my brother, Brett, joined me, holding a bounce or leveling audio. Although this dissertation does not include any video, I filmed everything. I was (and still am) interested in producing a documentary that conveys the worlds created by shrimpers. Beyond an audiovisual product that can foreground the sensual, embodied experience of the field and produce knowledge and incite experiences the textual cannot, the work of recording also heightens attention (for everyone involved) to the relationship between

⁶⁹ United States Department of Homeland Security, United States Coast Guard, *On Scene Coordinator Report: Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill*, Washington, DC: 2011, 33.



Figure 3: Brett and Christopher Lirette. Brett (left), my brother and production assistant, with headphones, “A” clamps, and a portable five-in-one bounce/diffusion kit. Myself (right), with camera and field recorder. Video stills from fieldwork.

producer/researcher and performer/informant and the shared work of creating knowledge.

Armed with camera and mic, the issue of representation remained conspicuous. I tried to follow in the path of Jean Rouch, a filmmaker and anthropologist whose work offers a counter to Geertz a quarter century before his theory of thick description and which the colloquium of ethnographers of *Writing Culture* forgot about when trying to assess anthropology’s literary turn.⁷⁰ Rouch, extending the concept of *kinopravda* first theorized by

⁷⁰ While Geertz towered over interpretive cultural anthropology in the United States in the late twentieth century, he is not the first to combine aesthetic and “scientific” concerns in anthropology. See, for a brief sampling, Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1922); Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1928); Michel Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (New York:

Dziga Vertov, developed a *cinéma-vérité*, which “designates not ‘pure truth’ but the particular truth of the recorded images and sounds—a filmic truth.”⁷¹ Rouch recognizes the artificiality of both his filmmaking practice and his ethnographic one: he does not record naïve reality, and he certainly is no detached observer or documentarian. In an interview with filmmaker Enrico Fulchignoni, Rouch says, “I have a tendency, when I’m filming, to consider the landscape... as precisely the work of God, and the presence of my camera as an intolerable disorder. It’s this intolerable disorder that becomes a creative object.”⁷² In this quotation, the difference between Rouch’s practice of ethnography and Geertz’s is thrown into sharp relief: whereas thick description seeks to prove an ordered reality explaining social situations, Rouch seeks to incite a type of minor chaos in which people recreate a reality in collaboration with a researcher. This rift in the inertia of everyday life finds its origin in the unnatural presence of the filmmaker and his machinery. Considering ethnographic inquiry as playful, exuberant, but nevertheless incisive and communicative, Rouch envisions his work as “shared anthropology,” in which “Knowledge is no longer a stolen secret, devoured in the Western temples of knowledge; it is the result of an endless quest where ethnographers and those whom they study meet on a path...”⁷³ Rouch’s films enact this chaotic polyvocality: in *Moi, un Noir* and *Chronique d’un Été*, he actually gives his camera to his subjects, who

Criterion Books, 1961); Jean-Paul Dumont, *The Headman and I: Ambiguity and Ambivalence in the Fieldworking Experience* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978).

⁷¹ Jean Rouch, *Ciné-ethnography*, trans. Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 98.

⁷² *Ibid.*: 154.

⁷³ *Ibid.*: 100–101.

become collaborators in his project.⁷⁴ Furthermore, with his film *Jaguar* and continuing with *Moi, un Noir* and *La Pyramide Humaine*, he begins labeling his work “ethnofiction,” wherein “true” ethnographic knowledges combines with staged performances—emphasizing the “filmic truth” of shared aesthetic creation.⁷⁵

This theorizing of the work of anthropology as a type of fiction distinguishes itself from Geertz’s formulation (and predates it). For Rouch, what matters is the collision of worlds that creates the fiction. For Geertz, it is that culture is a process of constructing a web of symbolic significance and the anthropologist has a responsibility of remaining faithful to a pre-constructed fiction created by ethnographic study. I am putting these two figures in dialogue to determine what kind of fiction I might be able to tell from my fieldwork, what kind of lie that resists the totalizing narratives that box in human lives, what kind of lie that can open a space of maneuverability. Though my work takes shape as a text, Rouch was my model for fieldwork: inserting myself into an encounter with fishermen so that through conversation in the spectacularly artificial space of the camera, we might be able to do something other than capture the cultural practice, hopes, fears, and self-fashioning of “subjects” to be autopsied in the halls of academia. The presence of the camera, the physicality of attaching a microphone to the people I wanted to tell me stories, the ritual of pulling focus and levelling a tripod—these created a space wherein I could emphasize my

⁷⁴ Jean Rouch, *Moi, un noir* (Les Films de la Pléiade: 1958); Jean Rouch, *Chronique d’un été* (Argos Films: 1961).

⁷⁵ Jean Rouch, *Jaguar* (Les Films de la Pléiade: 1968); Jean Rouch, *La pyramide humaine* (Les Films de la Pléiade: 1961).

position as a researcher: a *producer*. No longer just a native son, I was something stranger. Also, the people I talked to performed, knowing the stakes, with the wound of misrepresentation still smarting. This relationship made clear the gift of story the shrimpers gave me. Following Rouch (contra Geertz) gave me the chance to embody the next variation (and its sub-variations) of a fishing lie: unusual catch by fisherman (†X1154), fisherman catches fish with amazing contents (†X1154.1), and man catches fish with larger fish inside (†X1154.1.1).

I wanted, like all fishers, to have an unusual catch: the surprise of new information, of rifts within systems of knowledge I previously held to be impenetrable. Even though the product of my fieldwork is literary, conducting research in the spirit of Jean Rouch elicited a specific, contrived, intrusive, and performative relationship between my informants and me. For the most part, the people I interviewed knew me at least through my family. They had children my age or went to high school with me. Instead of trying to use these people as “informants,” entry-points toward an articulation of cultural life, I engaged with them in conversation that was made formal by ritual tools: camera and lens, microphone and headphone, pen and paper. These people became partners, at least in conversation. In every interview, I brought to bear my own scholarly/theoretical agenda to the point of reciting the final passage of Foucault’s radio address about civilizations without boats (quoted above). After doing so for Glynn Trahan, one of my main Chauvin interlocutors for this research, he said, “Well, you just said a mouthful.” After a brief pause, he riffed for two minutes straight about boats, regulations, governmentality, and the sublime feeling of life on the water. Glynn has no college education, and, like other fishers from Chauvin, spent his educational career waiting

for the final bell of the school day, the border wall between him and his family's watercraft. Another shrimper, Chad Portier, snubbed me until I had my camera set up and a microphone aimed at him. Once I said, "Camera speed," Chad talked in effusive monologues for over an hour. During my first interview of the 2015 season, shrimper Steve Billiot went inside his house to don a homemade Elvis Presley costume and pompadour wig and performed a five-song set from the King's oeuvre.

Perhaps these people would have done these things in my absence or in my presence *sans* equipment, but like Rouch, I wanted to be an interruption in everyday life, to be a creative encounter, to elicit a performance. As a Chauvin native, I could too easily be swayed by my prior impressions of shrimpers I knew. My informants, likewise, knowing me, might skip over stories they assumed I knew. I brought my gear and the pageantry of filmmaking to encourage shrimpers to tell me stories they wanted to tell. By doing so, I had several unusual catches, some filled with amazing contents. Some, improbably, were filled with larger fish inside. The shrimper most connected to the fishery through his family rejected the idea that shrimping could be in someone's blood. Another delivered a moving ode to the swamp's majesty in one breath while suggesting a governmental turtle depositing conspiracy in another. One gruff shrimper told me how he often thinks of quitting, but keeps going to support a fleet of families that work his boats. One shrimper, on the weekends, dons shrimp boots painted glittery blue to do Elvis impersonations for weddings and family reunions. If I had tried to define the people I talked to by trying to uncover the totality of their "culture" through interpretation, I might have missed the stories that did not quite fit in with my interpretation of the whole. I was fortunate to be able to share a version of reality larger than

I thought it might be, an expanded field that included wide-ranging connections, potentialities, and the inkling of new worlds coming into being. Borrowing a term from William James, I consider my work to be radically empirical. James offers the following methodology for “radical empiricism”:

To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, *the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as ‘real’ as anything else in the system.*⁷⁶

James sets up this philosophical framework as a type of bridge between rationalism, or abstraction and an emphasis on universal truths, and empiricism, the study of concrete and material particularities of experiential facts. The linkages James sees between experiences include causality, meanings, and systems that join particulars together. It is a practice of attending to the *feeling* of experience, the associated possibilities and memories, and the networks of symbols tied to experience. Anthropologist Michael Jackson adapts radical empiricism for ethnography. He writes,

Unlike traditional empiricism, which draws a definite boundary between observer and observed, between method and object, radical empiricism denies the validity of such cuts and makes the *interplay* between these domains the focus of its interest.⁷⁷

For Jackson, the anthropologist in the field is constantly negotiating and renegotiating the viewpoints of his informants, as well as experiencing a full complement of sensory

⁷⁶ William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1912), 42.

⁷⁷ Michael Jackson, *Paths toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 8.

information. The experience of encountering others—sharing experience with them at work, on a boat, or in their carport—is temporal, constantly mutable. To be radically empirical is to widen the field of possible realities to include what Kathleen Stewart would describe as the atmospheric, heterogeneous, affective, relational worlds that constantly become and unbecome.⁷⁸ This enterprise neither privileges a rational stance of detached observation nor excludes the body of the ethnographer as potential site for sensory “data,” but seeks to form an account of a lived experience shaped and complicated by lines of force, affective relations, and the commingling of life-worlds.⁷⁹ Jackson’s radically empiricist project does not envision culture as a “finality,” but as a coextensive, co-constitutive “instrumentality” for the people who use it.⁸⁰ He writes, “Persons actively body forth the world; their bodies are not passively shaped by or made to fit the world’s purposes.”⁸¹ Here, Jackson critiques a version of

⁷⁸ Kathleen Stewart writes, “The ordinary hums with the background noise of ruts and disorientations, intensities and resting points. An atmospheric fill buzzes with the resonance of nascent forms quickening or sloughing off, materialities pressing into the expressivity of something coming into existence” (“Atmospheric Attunements,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 3 (2011): 446).

⁷⁹ Instead of culture, he proposes to study “life-worlds”: “a world whose horizons are open, the quotidian world in which we live, adjusting our needs to the needs of others, testing our ideas against the exigencies of life” (Jackson, *Paths toward a Clearing*, 1). Jackson borrows this term from phenomenological philosophy, and though he associates life-world (*Lebenswelt*), the term comes from philosopher Edmund Husserl (*The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 108–109). For the introduction of lifeworld in social theory, see Alfred Schütz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations: Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 72–78.

⁸⁰ Jackson, *Paths toward a Clearing*, 1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*: 136.

anthropology that would abstract culture from lived experience and action, giving it a life of its own to order, proscribe, and generally serve as a codex for human behavior. Following Jackson, I see one of my primary interventions into the understanding of “culture” in coastal Louisiana to be dispensing with culture as a pervasive, symbolic matrix that might explain the people who live there. Instead, I tried to perform an embodied, sensuous, and radically empirical act of communication that attended to a world, a big world constantly mutating inside and outside of the people I talked to.

The work of unmooring means to study the imaginative worlds that people carve into an over-dense web of meanings inscribed by such discourses as folklore, politics, tourism, history, and sociology—in addition to ones inscribed by family, neighborhood, region, and nation. But it cannot overlook the material world of people and crustaceans and blood and water. Instead, it must trace paths through the dense atmosphere of place. In my fieldwork and the process of writing it into an ethnography, I have attempted to enter a sensory field and feel my way through it, while allowing myself to be possessed by the imaginations of the people who gifted me their stories and performances. This radically empirical ethnography seeks to touch the work of creating worlds that cut across the worlds known through official channels of knowledge and accepted modalities of living. Unmooring, the process by which I identify how shrimpers in southern Louisiana cope with the various forces and accidents that conspire to wipe them out or trap them in statistical knowledge, calls for both a grounding in the worlds that exist and an openness to worlds yet-to-come. In other words, unmooring calls for being open to the possibility that within the fish you catch, you might be astonished to find even bigger fish. The poetics of my anthropological practice—to borrow the language

of poet-anthropologist Michael Jackson—is to linger in the tenuous worlds and practices and trace the delicate and vulnerable lines of relation that connect them to each other.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests a methodology based on a “*relational* approach,” using the image of the rhizome as its governing model. Referencing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of the rhizome, Ingold writes, “[The] rhizome is a progeneration, a continually raveling and unraveling relational manifold.”⁸² Deleuze and Guattari describe their project as a “pragmatics,”⁸³ “composing multiplicities or aggregates of intensity.”⁸⁴ Ingold’s application of rhizomatic analysis forms a methodology that exceeds and undermines the interpretive paradigm in ethnographic study, providing a methodology that traces the lines of relation that comprise the simultaneously hyperlocal and expansive and imaginative space where people live.⁸⁵ Connecting social formations and environment

⁸² Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 140.

⁸³ According to Massumi’s interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari, it shares with William James, associated with the American school of pragmatism, a “radical empiricism,” a term that Deleuze and Guattari themselves discuss as “When immanence is no longer immanent to something other than itself” (*What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 46). See also Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁸⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 15.

⁸⁵ Ingold writes, “To find one’s way is to advance along a line of growth, in a world which is never quite the same from one moment to the next, and whose future configuration can never be fully known. Ways of life are not therefore determined in advance, as routes to be followed, but have continually to be worked out anew. And these ways, far from being inscribed upon the surface of an inanimate world, are the very threads from which the living world is woven” (*The Perception of the Environment*, 242).

through the figure of the rhizome allows for an ecological approach to ethnography. An ecological approach acknowledges the singularity of experience while connecting each singularity to a continually unfolding practice of living that creates, dismantles, and recreates overlapping worlds. Ingold writes, “such a synthesis would start from a conception of the human being not as a composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind and culture, but rather as a singular locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships.”⁸⁶ Using an ecological approach for my fieldwork in Louisiana forced me to attend to how my shrimpers navigate a world of discursive, historical, economic, and environmental instability.

Put at risk by ecological and industrial disaster and overdetermined by symbolic frameworks erected by cultural industries and the thick descriptions written in the name of folklore, these shrimpers nevertheless *make do* with their lives, dwell within them, forge unforeseen relationships to locations, activities, artifacts, and representations of cultural heritage in popular media. They make a living.

The living these shrimpers make is accomplished through bodily practice, hopes, and self-elaboration. In intersecting my life with theirs, with the shifting roles we play, I attuned myself to sensation, my own, primarily, but also the evocation of what the sensory experience of shrimpers might be like. Although I do not presume to tell shrimpers what they feel, my writing attempts to posit, suggest, and evoke something of the possibilities of experience that

⁸⁶ Ibid.: 4–5.

could build literary worlds shared between readers and myself as author, which is itself a narrative space enacted from shared experiences I had with commercial fishers in my hometown over the last few years. In Rouch's concept of the *ciné-transe*, the body of the filmmaker and ethnographer undergoes a transformation: not quite participant, not quite observer, the anthropologist becomes a machine. During a presentation of his film *Tourou et Bitti*—documenting a possession dance among the Songhay-Zarma in Niger—Rouch says, “my ‘self’ is altered in front of their eyes in the same way as is the ‘self’ of the possession dancers; it is the ‘film-trance’ (*ciné-transe*) of the one filming the ‘real trance’ of the other.”⁸⁷ The ethnographer in *ciné-transe* dissolves his status as outsider, translator, interpreter, and scholar in a fit of improvisatory relationality, interacting with subjects, drawing performances from them, and inserting an exuberant provocation that is less about understanding how a cultural group functions than making a new filmic world with others. In other words, building relations, attuning to an atmosphere of affective connections. Rouch says he equates the potential for a film's success on “whether [he has] been able to free [himself] from the weight of filmic and ethnographic theories necessary to rediscover the *barbarie de l'invention*.”⁸⁸ What Rouch ultimately advocates is an ethnographic surrender: a surrender to the spark of recognition in the field, to the chance worlds that are on the precipice of

⁸⁷ Rouch, *Ciné-ethnography*, 99. For the film, see Jean Rouch, *Tourou et Bitti* (Comité du Film Ethnographique: 2005).

⁸⁸ Rouch, *Ciné-ethnography*, 100.

emerging, to an improvisatory friendship with the people one studies. This surrender is one of bodily transformation, one that *opens* the body to sensuous experience.

Anthropologist Paul Stoller defines “sensuous scholarship” as that “in which writers tack between the analytical and the sensible, in which embodied form as well as disembodied logic constitute scholarly argument.” Stoller identifies in academic ethnography a privilege accorded to semiotics, textuality, and structuralist accounts for human behavior at the expense of the lived experience shared by the fieldworker and the people she encounters. Sensuous scholarship “demands the full presence of the ethnographer’s body in the field... that ethnographers open themselves to others and absorb their worlds.”⁸⁹ This practice, like Rouch’s *ciné-transe*, is a provocation—not just for the subjects faced with the “intolerable disorder” of the anthropologist, but for the anthropologist herself. The ethnographer, seen now as a porous entity, incorporates the world of the other through sensual perception, makes contact with this world. This contact is less concerned with “knowing” in the sense of documenting and confining within the limits of acceptable discourse than with knowing as a form of connection. Michael Taussig, whose ethnographic practice might also be considered sensuous, might call this form of connection *magic*. Rehabilitating the concept of *mimesis* through the work of Walter Benjamin, Taussig writes,

To ponder mimesis is to become sooner or later caught... in sticky webs of copy *and* contact, image *and* bodily involvement of the perceiver in the image, a complexity we too easily elide as nonmysterious, with our facile use of terms such as identification, representation, expression, and so forth—terms which simultaneously depend upon

⁸⁹ Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 23.

and erase all that is powerful and obscure in the network of associations conjured by the notion of the mimetic.⁹⁰

In this passage, Taussig foregrounds the precise moment of seeing in ethnographic work as already a moment of embodiment. The things we see, the people we meet, talk to, hear, touch, the foods we eat—everything we experience in the field involves the body, its way of etching images (which are copies) into our own bodies. The filmmaker becomes a recording apparatus in ciné-transe. Taussig's argument is that in writing ethnographies, we produce reproductions of what we have experienced, and in attending to the strange alchemy of mimesis wherein we join with what we copy, our ethnographies might shift the focus from interpreting the formal unity of a culture to elaborating the lines of sensual and imaginative relationships we co-create with our subjects. He writes, "what happens is that the very concept of 'knowing' something becomes displaced by a 'relating to.'"⁹¹ Relating to someone, versus knowing something, attempts to dismantle the type of penetrative gaze of the interpreting ethnographer, who renders the other knowable.

The displacement in thinking mimetically relies on the simultaneity of mimesis's opposite: alterity. This same/other binary is not a recreation of structuralist paradigms that dominated mid-twentieth century anthropology and linguistics. Rather, it is a quality of Benjamin's "dialectical image," which Taussig defines as "dislocating chains of concordance with one

⁹⁰ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 21.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*: 26.

hand, reconstellating in accord with a mimetic snap, with the other.”⁹² Finding these images, the ones that decenter a potential reader while shocking her with the suddenness of recognition—this methodology destabilizes the authority of scientific styles of anthropology (including Geertz’s thick description) while inviting a plurality of relational configurations: ethnographer–subject, subject–reader, reader–regimes of power. These new possibilities broaden both the generosity and the political relevancy of ethnographic work. Like Rouch, Taussig’s methodology forwards a creative anthropological practice that favors connection over distance, uncertainty over structuralism, provocation over taxonomizing, and imagination over knowledge. To be unmoored: to find dialectical images that disturb common understandings while flickering with recognition, to absorb worlds both stable and nonce while sharing the ones I drag with me, in this case, back to the small world into which I was born. Against totalizing descriptions, judgments, and generalization, I let myself be surprised.

This is one way to unmoor: to tell a good lie. To practice an embodied, ecological anthropology that enacts a “barbarism of invention.” A central insight from Rouch is that fieldwork is a disruptive force that can generate creativity. That can forge (or whisper) counter-stories. When we enter a field in order to study people, we become part of the ecology of that field, and our presence is not always a welcome one. In my fieldwork, I followed Rouch’s lead: sharing my world, inviting people to co-create stories with me, to

⁹² Ibid.: 19.

treat them as interlocutors rather than subjects. I stayed attentive to my own body, the humidity of the estuary, the slick fish-blood beneath my feet, the strain of the body to right itself on water, the rumble of the diesel engines punctuated by the cries of seagulls. The sight of bodies at work. The sight of boats. Moreover, I listened to the stories that shrimpers told me and imagined them as the real but invisible linkages between particular facts. I imagined these stories as a reconstruction of facts in the forms of stories. I imagined these stories as types of lies, but really good ones, ones that were so compelling, so web-like in the way they gathered together the material world, that the people who told them forgot that they were telling fictions. Fish stories that are handed down from generation to generation, changing only in the number of fish caught in the miraculous catch, only in the surprising objects found in the bellies of unusual fish. To unmoor, as an ethnographic methodology, is not to reconstruct a culture through testimony and observation, but to create a new world that mimics the process of contact, of exchange, of absorption and bewilderment. This is a poetics of ethnography: both *ποίησις* (to produce) and in the sense of poetry. To subvert Clifford Geertz's analogy of interpretation as a fiction,⁹³ I take ethnographic practice as a type of poetry: one that produces something by relational and metaphoric creativity, by a frictional encounter of the body in the field with other bodies, by an imperfect, mysterious way of writing that something, that world, such that it draws out of readers new worlds. Michael Jackson writes that a certain impulse toward metaphor and poetry is therapeutic: "In

⁹³ Geertz writes that the texts ethnographers write are "fictions, in the sense that [interpretations] are 'something made' ... not that they are false, unfactual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments" (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, 15).

forging links between personal, social, and natural worlds and in reforging these links when we break them, poetry fosters wholeness of Being.”⁹⁴ This wholeness, like the dialectical image, contains both the rupture of meaning and a surprising recognition.⁹⁵ This wholeness is metaphor and parataxis, encounter and following the lines of imagination in conversation, of experiment and disruption, and of making, as best you can, a lie worth telling.

⁹⁴ Jackson, *Paths toward a Clearing*, 154.

⁹⁵ Taussig defines the dialectical image as “dislocating chains of concordance with one hand, reconstellating in accord with a mimetic snap, with the other” (*Mimesis and Alterity*, 19).

Lesson Five: Overwriting

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
 Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that
 there is in
 it after all, a place for the genuine.
 Hands that can grasp, eyes
 that can dilate, hair that can rise
 if it must, these things are important not because a
 high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are
 useful.

—Marianne Moore, “Poetry”⁹⁶

Seven years before I began my fieldwork in Louisiana, I wrote the following poem, titled, like this dissertation, “Advanced Unmooring”:

⁹⁶ Marianne Moore, “Poetry,” in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, 5th ed., 1329–1330 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 1–8.

Do you really think
 it only takes one storm to unmoor? Drill
 plywood into window. Chain and chain again
 your back to the road you're going to crawl
 as far North as you can. Dislodge
 anchor one with photograph left beneath
 your bed of a boat filled with people who believe
 the boatblessing the first day of skin.
 Consider why you slink back. Is it
 the burnish. The whipping post. Get me
 a switch boy and into car. Loose second anchor
 close the refrigerator for the last time think of meals
 to come this too shall be provided. Finger
 nail marks wherever there's a wrist.

Consider yourself lucky you were only
 tied up. Cypress splinter deep where you rub.
 The concrete washes fast as flood and in the rearview
 just the two of you staring back. Writ large the warcry
 of water. Turn around buster nothing
 this way but camera and guilt. You already dipped
 the hymnal in gold. You already supped
 on locust and snow. Cast anchor in mud
 hope dear God it catch lest you drift past into mouth.

Consider why I slink back again to this title, unmooring. Consider why, though filling these pages with philosophers and anthropologists and governmental reports, I keep finding my work in Louisiana, a place in which I no longer live. Consider the repetitions of this text, out of sync with the rhythms of academic writing that recommends *getting to the point*, of *making a point*, of arguing something convincing and part of a recognizable scholarly lineage.

Consider that many of the names I invoke in this introduction will not return to bolster arguments (though some will). Consider that certain passages ahead are fictions of a sort, presented not as ethnographic data, nor a paraphrase of the field experience, but just stories,

allegories, myths, and rank speculation. Consider the five-part methodology of this introductory chapter that spends more time on metaphor and thought experiment and defining a motif based on an obscure nautical term no longer in currency, a motif that I slink back to, over and over. Consider that I will spend a considerable amount of time writing in the second person point of view, a voice ill-suited to scholarship, but comfortable in poetry. Consider what a poem does that a scholarly text does not.

When poet-anthropologist Michael Jackson describes what a poetic practice of anthropology might be, it hinges on knotting ropes between person and environment, society and image, worlds and worlds, such that we might yoke a wholeness together from the multiplicity. How Deleuzian!⁹⁷ This understanding of poetry, a birthing forth of worlds through linkages is compelling and seems to be a possible answer to what I am doing with writing in this work: layering the tropes and tricks of poetry on top of traditional scholarship with its form of argumentation and proof or interpretive description based on empirical fieldwork or an analysis of history and symbols relevant to the plight of shrimpers in the twenty-first century, what might be known as the post-Deleuzian century, a century that might determine that, after all, the shrimping life is a life no longer worth living. Consider that I've been making the case for tearing a rift into the walls of culture, the walls written in levee mud and

⁹⁷ In what might be the most famous French poststructuralist comedy bit, Michel Foucault deadpans, "[P]erhaps one day, this century will be known as Deleuzian" (Michel Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum," *Critique* 282 (1970)).

statistics, of councils and the rehearsal of family meals. Consider too that poetry, at last, is not fiction.

Not exactly, at least. Jonathan Culler, literary theorist, takes issue with a certain paradigm in literary circles that weighs down the lyric as a vehicle for mimesis. Mimesis: the reproduction of reality. A second-hand copy. Not the mysterious transmutation that Taussig writes about, but the base understanding of poetry as something that stands in for a reality “out there.” In much the same way I criticize interpretive schools of ethnography by associating the practice with New Criticism, so too does Culler associate this emphasis on mimesis with New Criticism:

This is the conception of lyric promoted by the New Criticism: with the insistence that interpretation focus on the words on the page rather than the intentions of the author, it became a point of doctrine that the speaker of a lyric is to be treated as a *persona*, not as the poet him- or herself, and the focus becomes the drama of attitudes expressed by this speaker-character.⁹⁸

Culler identifies the treatment of the speaker of the poem as a *persona* to be the kernel that creates the fiction of the poetic world. Understanding a poem as a web of symbolic linkages that constitutes a closed, fictional world wrought by placing words on a page, Culler argues, is wrong. He argues that the poem is a type of “*epideictic* discourse: public poetic discourse about values in this world rather than a fictional world.”⁹⁹ Beyond this, there are things in poems that either make no sense or lose their value if we interpret the poem as a story:

⁹⁸ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 109.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*: 115.

changes in address, lyric techniques such as parataxis, chiasmus, and stranger ways of understanding what metaphor does. At worst, this fictionalization of the lyric defangs it, makes it self-contained and irrelevant to a world beyond its borders, and rips the communicative power of lyric utterance from the actual poet who authored it. Mimesis, as facile representation, is a treachery particular to the so-called “human sciences.” If we take poetry—its images and similes, its metaphors, repetitions, and utterances—as just a representation of some reality, then employing it in some kind of research context is not only a colonizing impulse, but one that obscures and prettifies that process.

In the game of mooring and unmooring, representation, at least in its totalizing aspect, its way of fixing something, killing it, is another anchor to be loosed. We are talking, as we have been, as we will be, about freedom. Culler writes that we imagine a fictional poetic speaker whose utterances we overhear because “we want to believe that our subjectivity is free and independent of contexts to which we might belong, and imagining the language of a poem as coming from a fictive, nearly contextless speaker, reflects back to us an image of the subject we imagine ourselves to be.”¹⁰⁰ This desire to be above the mud, above the institutions and ideas and systems and people that compete to fashion subjectivity, is a desire shrimpers expressed to me both explicitly and otherwise. They want to be free. They want their desires to not be manufactured by a national culture. They want their livelihood to not be contingent on a host of fragmentary and diffuse forces that entrap them. Like them, readers

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.: 116.

of poetry posit a specific yet ahistorical speaker: a role upon which they can co-create a fictional world that can explain away the strange, incantatory, sometimes atavistic voice of the poet. To consider the worlds authored into being by poetry as mere fictions would be to sterilize them, make them graspable and interpretable as closed systems of meaning, render their experiments and caesura and fragmentations curious artifacts: a terrarium in a velvet study, ornamental, fascinating, and impotent.

When Kathleen Stewart talks of the spaces on the side of the road that form fecund openings in the master narrative we call America, she is not talking about glass worlds in studies, but spaces that are performative, improvisational, and real. She writes,

At once concrete and ephemeral, tactile and uncanny, restive and caught in a deadly calm, [the space on the side of the road] exceeds the space allotted to it by its own history. It replaces bourgeois notions of order with its own more lyrical order, interrupting the hierarchy of system over accident or reality over fiction long enough to imagine something more or “Other.”¹⁰¹

The key word here is excess. Like the space on the side of the road, the worlds I encountered with shrimpers in Louisiana exceed the meanings ascribed to them by scholarly, institutional, and folkloric bodies of knowledge. The space of the boat, the imagination born of water and blood, the laboring body-in-motion are identifiable signs whose capacity for connection, fabulation, experimental living, and culture are infinite negotiations with materiality, happenstance, hope, and the ways shrimpers make sense of their lives through work and story. Fiction is not the enemy of the lyric, but a tool to complicate the pretense that

¹⁰¹ Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road*, 205.

language might encapsulate something as big as reality, a person, a subjectivity, a world brought into being. It is a tool for imagining something other than the fatal product of history. The lyric form, which poet Marianne Moore described as “imaginary gardens with real toads in them,”¹⁰² offers a methodology that mixes the real with the unreal, that can communicate fiercely in unreal ways, that creates a truth through the performance of the kinds of real but imaginative connections that William James (or Michael Jackson) places within the radical expansion of the real. By employing lyric techniques (metaphor, direct and indirect address, allusion, repetition, rhythm, rhyme, fiction), I tried to write a book that is both genuine and useful, that seeks not to define but to prod and play, that covers a diverse corpus of material and immaterial works, of people, and of voices that can suggest (but not fix) the possibilities of living and thinking differently.

My writing in the following chapters is an experiment, one of multiple genres, of using the long-form monograph as a space upon which I can enact and perform my theoretical and aesthetic concerns, mainly the ways in which work and culture are procedural, creative, heterogeneous modes that contain the possibility of workshoping and revising the systems of knowledge that seem to be all-encompassing. I write elliptically, riffing on themes that my main interlocutors, Louisiana shrimpers in and around my hometown, introduced to me during my fieldwork. I recreate and fictionalize my own experiences both conducting this research and growing up in Chauvin. I do not abandon the genre of scholarly writing, but I

¹⁰² Moore, “Poetry,” 24.

try to subvert it by making academic authority no greater than the authority of the blue-collar fisher or the authority of lyric utterance. I also draw from a capacious archive of texts, putting the scholarly and ethnographic voices in conversation—sometimes explicitly, sometimes silently—with poets, scripture-writers, fishing experts from the nineteenth century, mapmakers, government bureaucrats, among others. In doing so, I hope that this kind of lyrical scholarship exceeds the arguments it makes. I want to be a splinter that nags, a rope-burn, a threat. The theme of this book, unmooring, is fundamentally a story of how far a person has to go to be able to justify a constricted life, how much freedom can one carve into the walls, how much a person can use the given world, the master stories and environment and social connections as a spring board for an exploration. The danger is that the anchor I cast, the final mooring, does not catch, and that this writing is disoriented, unable to latch onto the real world into which a poet makes a lyric utterance, a desperate sort of communication. The hope is to be troubling and defiant, to return again and again to the site of the estuary, the space of the boat, the littoral plain, the body of person and literature, so that this time, during this workshop, during this improvisation, this experiment, we might be able to see a day beyond the day which has become. A day, I hope, that we can survive.

The following book is divided into three divisions: blood, water, and nets. These are the icons that shrimpers engraved for me while I was talking with them, everyday materials that might be easy to overlook in an ethnography of commercial shrimpers. Each division riffs on its icon, pulling from the stories of shrimpers and scraps from an archive of shrimping I compiled that includes governmental reports, trade magazines, advertisements, newspaper clippings, old pictures, maps, folklore, and scholarship. I bring in scholarly interlocutors as

participants in a conversation that also includes my shrimping interlocutors. I tell stories. I propose interpretations and then undercut them. I address you, o reader, and ask you to do things, to be a part of the lyric act. I repeat myself. I let the words of others stand, sometimes as an object of scrutiny, sometimes as a voice among others in a mosaic, sometimes without explanation, in parataxis, in tension or in silent agreement with the other voices.

The first division, “Blood,” takes seriously the claim that shrimpers made to me that shrimping was in their blood. While this phrase seems immediately comprehensible and a cliché, its meanings excessively pull together the anxieties and corporeality of the Louisiana shrimper. The blood vocation champions work as a genetic trait, something that is embedded in the body of the worker. The repetition of this blood vocation as an explanatory device stands at odds with the end of inheriting shrimping as a vocation, as the children of the shrimpers I interviewed, for the most part, want nothing to do with their father’s business. The blood vocation, beyond kinship, also re-centers shrimping as a work done by a corporeal body, a style of work quickly becoming obsolete. In the corporeality of the shrimper, the physical rehearsal of labor, attuned to a rich environment that is an immediate, sensory present, creates a rhythmic space wherein shrimpers raise the specters of an imagined past in opposition to a future that grows darker. The creation of worlds through work combined with mournful and genealogical orientation is a type of blood magic: a sacrifice cut out so that one might live, transformed. The magic of the shrimping life, born in blood and from a sacrifice of livelihood and relevancy in twenty-first century America, embeds—moors—shrimpers into their environment, their locality, and the matrix of blood that flows across family and cultural practice.

The second division, “Water,” diverts from individual shrimping experience (momentarily) to explore the sea, a primal, asignifying function of unmooring. I begin with a reading of Wallace Stevens’s “Idea of Order at Key West,” wherein Stevens wrestles with the ordering impulse applied to the inhuman chaos of the sea. Between the sea as unknowable freedom and the constriction of order and naming, we find the game of mooring and unmooring, of building levees and digging canals, keeping water at bay and bringing its fluidity into the solid parts of earth. Coastal Louisiana, which the Gulf of Mexico sips from, slaking its thirst for disordering things stable, is quite literally not on solid ground. In this division, I trace a local history of naming watery bodies and the erosion of the borders between formerly discrete places. In the water, there is a different play of memory and futurity: forgetting, letting some things drift back to a sea from which they slunk. I introduce the villain of the shrimping epic: the impersonal institutional agent, who names, unknowingly, local places, who enacts restrictions, and who let in the apocalyptic industry known as oil. I return to the shrimper, this time as a body on the water. Water is a deathly matter. Hurricanes rob the coast of its life periodically, scattering bodies across the littoral plane. I chart an alternative life on the sea, the one lived by an offshore oilman, one that becomes part of machines of mainstream capitalism and normalcy but also destroys the land. The life on the water experienced by shrimpers is a place of suspension, of self-erasure, of openness—and therefore, of possibility. Shrimpers described to me the sublime qualities of a life on the water, the majesty of birds and wind and spray, the menace of the dark cloud. But out there, in the ghost world of the sea, in the inevitability of a watery grave, exists also an opportunity

to stand against both nature and institutional humanity, a model of survivability based on both agency and surrender.

In the final division, “Nets,” I imagine how trapped the shrimper must feel. I wrote it in the wake of the political disasters of 2016, wherein nationalism surged as a legitimate threat to both conservatism and liberalism, upsetting the regular and predictable conflicts between the right and the left. Britain decided to leave the European Union. The United States elected an autocrat billionaire reality-television star. Both campaigns employed xenophobic tropes, especially ones that characterized immigrants and globalization as major threats to blue-collar (white) voters. In the fallout from both elections, pundits declared that coastal elites, intellectuals, the political professional class, and their fellow pundits have ignored the growing toxic discontent by rural and blue-collar whites, who feel left behind by a swiftly deindustrializing world and a media coalition intent on pushing technologism and progressive identity politics.¹⁰³ And so, I explored the concerns of the white, blue-collar men I interviewed from the perspective of their desire to be free from governmental intervention. The shrimpers spoke passionately about how regulations hurt them, about how they could

¹⁰³ Post-election analysis has revealed that, at least in the case of the 2016 US election, the concept that white, working class voters comprised the majority of Trump voters is false. Political scientists Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu demonstrate, based on an analysis of American National Election Study data, that “white non-Hispanic voters without college degrees making below the median household income made up only 25 percent of Trump voters,” which they characterize as “a far cry from the working-class-fueled victory many journalists have imagined” (Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu, “It’s Time to Bust the Myth: Most Trump Voters Were Not Working Class,” *The Washington Post*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/05/its-time-to-bust-the-myth-most-trump-voters-were-not-working-class/>).

not stand to be part of a traditional workplace where they would be made to follow orders. They lamented the fact that governmental bodies ignore the knowledge they gained by birthright and experience. But even in the midst of a controlling society that targets increasingly subindividual parts of a person for modulation, shrimpers have, against odds, *made a life*. This, I say, is a miracle. Or at least a model for a miraculous refashioning of the world. Shrimpers, without an agenda, engendered a world that they consider livable. They enact this world through gathering to themselves, in a network, like a net, the experiences and people that they care about. While they cannot escape the network of forces that seeks to control them, they can, for a time, form a local network where they can practice a world they imagine used to exist, a world which is yet to be.

Blood

The inshore shrimp season had yet to start, so I hitched a predawn ride with Kimothy “Kim” Guy to go crabbing in Lake Boudreaux. His boat, a Carolina Skiff, had crates of icy catfish heads, stacked neatly on the port side of the wheel, next to empty plastic crates. Kim, a short but sturdy man in his mid-fifties, muscled wire traps yoked to foam buoys painted green and purple out of the water. He banged the traps on the side of the crates, loosening the locked grip of the crab claw. Then he baited the trap with a catfish head. As the sun warmed the April morning, the catfish heads seeped their blood onto the deck, slickening in.

My brother, who assisted me with sound recording during this crabbing trip, and I hung the bags and equipment we’d brought on our bodies so that we wouldn’t dip anything in fish blood. Eventually, we sat on folding chairs, our laps full of equipment and the soles of our shoes slippery.

That morning, Kim told me that shrimping was in his blood. The week before, a shrimper who moonlighted as an Elvis impersonator—Steve Billiot—told me shrimping was in his blood. The following week, shrimpers and people adjacent to the shrimp fishery in Terrebonne Parish told me that shrimping was in their blood. In each case, this claim was less information gifted by informant to anthropologist and more refrain: a rhythmic chant, an obvious truth, a prayer. Why else work the slow waters, this refrain asked. Why live there at all, if not for the simple blood truth of vocation?

Something must have knocked shrimping out of my blood, my family’s blood. Though my father learned French on trawl boats and his father met his mother over a trawl radio, no one in my dad’s family works the nets today. On my mom’s side, her father abandoned trawling

for carpentry, which he passed on to his sons. For those with shrimping in their blood, the pull of blood must be strong. The shrimpers who have persisted kept shrimping through oil and flood and imports. They persisted even as their children turned to more lucrative endeavors: working in a machine shop, programming computers, nursing.

Here, we embark on a journey back to basic anthropological concerns: kinship, genealogy,



Figure 4: Kimmothy “Kim” Guy, commercial shrimper and crabber. I interviewed Kim on his Carolina Skiff while crabbing in April 2015 and at his home in June 2016. Shrimping is in Kim’s blood. Photograph by Christopher Lirette.

social cohesion through imagining a sensical and sensible world of symbols like blood. Each Sunday, Chauvin Catholics, who are the moorings of Chauvin’s spiritual sensibility, consume the Blood of Christ at Mass. One time I went to a Mass at Saint Joseph with my mother. The homily was on the Eucharist. The priest said, “We eat blood all the time. When we fry up some meat, there’s blood in the pan. We eat that. It’s not gross.” This is an anecdote I like to tell people to ridicule the simplistic faith of a rural people because I am a bad son. But it also shows that I am at least as bad an anthropologist: blood is more potent

in Chauvin than in other places. The priest was explaining the mystery of transubstantiation in a way that makes sense to a congregation that wakes up before light to lure crabs with the scent of fish or pork or chicken blood, that hunts during hunting season, that spits out lead shot from braised ducks at an after-Mass dinner. Blood, here, means nourishment and sacrifice, a connection to your family and the transubstantiation that occurs when the food you share moors you to them.

Fishing, of whatever sort, is a bloody affair.

Every few days, Kim buys catfish heads for crabbing. The blood in shrimping is of a different sort. You don't use bait to catch shrimp. You trawl. This is a process whereby a boat lowers nets in the water and catches anything that can be caught in those nets until the nets are full. then the shrimper culls the catch. In the local French, this is called *trier*, which can be used in English this way: the shrimper triés the catch; he was triéing when he cut his finger.

Shrimp, like catfish, have things on their heads to hurt you. For catfish, it's the dorsal and pectoral fins: they have barbs with venom, which will puncture your skin. For shrimp, it's a serrated beak called a rostrum that juts out from between the eyes. Though it lacks venom, it can easily snag skin and tear it. It can make you bleed.

When triéing the catch, a novice shrimper will get picked. Even eating shrimp, an unsuspecting shrimp peeler might get cut. Over time, a shrimper gets better at triéing until either the cuts don't matter or don't land. O'neil "ChaCha" Sevin, a bait shrimper, has hands with hard skin, like saddle leather. It is doubtful that he gets cut easily. ChaCha holds

the distinction of being the only shrimper I know to outright deny, unprompted, that shrimping is a blood vocation.



Figure 5: George and his son, O'neil "ChaCha" Sevin, two generations of shrimpers in Chauvin. George tried to unionize commercial shrimpers, but met resistance to collective action. ChaCha is the proprietor of Bait Shop Seafood, a retail seafood and bait store on the bank of Bayou Petit Caillou. I interviewed them together after a morning bait run in May 2015. You might be tempted to say that shrimping is in their blood. Photograph by Christopher Lirette.

ChaCha has been a shrimper his whole life. His father, George Sevin, was a shrimper. His uncles shrimped and built boats. His brothers shrimped until the twenty-first century. The Sevins of Bayou Petit Caillou are locally famous for being shrimpers. George even tried to unionize shrimpers in the 1960 (to no avail). If anyone could claim that shrimping was in his blood in the sense of kinship, it would have to be ChaCha. But he denies that shrimping is in his or anyone else's blood. Instead, he theorizes that it's in the mind, a nonphysical addiction. He told me,

A lot of people go, "It's in my blood, it's in my blood." It's not in your blood. It's in your, I guess, your mind and your thoughts. It's always in your thoughts of knowing

what I can go catch. Or not knowing what you're going to have until you pick up your nets. And when you're always thinking about that, then you can say, "Yeah, I'm gonna always do it, because I'm not doing it for the money."



Figure 6: O'neil "ChaCha" Sevin, commercial shrimper. I interviewed ChaCha in June 2013 and May 2015. He told me that shrimping is not something found in blood. Photograph by Christopher Lirette.

It's sustenance. It's a slow gamble. It's a cycle of anxiety and surprise. It's living in a state of unknowability, of fear and anticipation, and the rush of dopamine that accompanies success against the odds. Shrimping, for him, is a focal point of his dreams. What will the catch be like, how much shrimp can he catch, how much money can he bring in—these questions haunt ChaCha's mind like a nagging cut from a shrimp head.

In 2010, the British Petroleum-operated Deepwater Horizon platform in the Gulf of Mexico exploded and dumped 210 million gallons of oil into the water over a period of eighty-seven days. Some of that oil bled into the Barataria-Terrebonne estuary. Besides ominous environmental impacts that will slowly reveal themselves over the coming decades, the spill dipped consumer trust in Louisiana seafood. Because some waters were closed and the public

was not interested in fish, shrimp, and oysters slicked with hydrocarbon oil, there were few people fishing. Because ChaCha is a bait shrimper, meaning that he trawls year-round for shrimp intended to be sold live to fishermen, his business dried up. ChaCha would have normally supplemented that income with selling oysters, but that business dried up too. He claims that he lost ninety percent of his income that year. The oil spill bled him dry.

In his rejection of the blood vocation—not just for him, but for other shrimpers—ChaCha strikes a Foucauldian posture: his argument traces the contours of the transition from a society of blood, wherein power speaks through blood, to a society of capital accumulation and biopolitical regulation. Michel Foucault makes this argument explicitly in *History of Sexuality I*: Europe, at the dawn of anthropological discourse, moves from a “society of blood,” in which “power spoke through blood,” to one governed by sex, biopower, where “the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate.”¹⁰⁴ But even in ChaCha’s disavowal, his emphasis on the quantifiable aspects of industry, the pull of everyday normalcy in obsessing on the job and its rewards—the hungry curiosity of surviving by dipping nets into opaque waters—ChaCha still finds something *more* than mere sustenance or accumulation in trawling. Something ineffable. Something that despite his protests is in his blood.

¹⁰⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 147–148.

To use Foucault's schema of the transition from older, corporeal forms of power and the increasingly abstract structures of biopower and global capital in rejecting to discount the power of blood to shrimpers who explain their attachment to the fishery would be a misreading of both Foucault's historical logic (older forms of power do not cease to exist as new ones gain prominence, but are reconfigured) and the logic of the blood vocation. There is a tragic puzzle in attaching to an industry that's bleeding out for reasons of genealogical loyalty. Saying "It's in my blood"—like a prayer to St. Jude, patron saint of lost causes—is defiant, but resigned, an incantation of sacrificial magic, a mooring in eroding silt. And yet, we cannot discount the fact that things *have* changed in terms of blood. At least on the Louisiana Gulf Coast, the shrimpers who trawl those waters are not subject to a power that spills blood, and the constraints of kinship no longer have the same influence over labor in a world of wires and capital. After all, look at me. A nonshrimper, the first in his family to theorize for an academic audience. Even as the shrimpers hold onto their blood, they too are concerned with futurity, the hope that they will have enough stamina to provide, that their children might grow up in health and live a prosperous life among others. They want to proliferate.

I propose, then, to rethink blood as both a symbolic *and* material force—an imaginative force—that anchors these fishers to their work, to their family, and to their world. Blood becomes a biopolitical metaphor for all sorts of things: genetics, vitality, economy. But it is also something felt, something nonmetaphorically real: the hydraulics of the body in labor. The use of blood as a justification for labor speaks to something that both encompasses and goes beyond kinship and a figure of speech. Blood speaks to the experience of labor, the

experience of longing and belonging, and the experience of loss. It is the goal and its inception. It's what proliferates. And it circulates, even to those for whom shrimping is not in their blood, who must content themselves listening for the whispers of blood. Blood goes beyond individual vocation: it is the basis for magic, memory, and an ecological model of care. It is the first and last mooring that anchors shrimpers to their work.

Bloodlines

Tharsalio: In this eie I fee
 That fire that shall in me inflame the Mother
 And that in this shall set on fire the Daughter
 It goes Sir in a bloud ; beleeeue me brother,
 These destinies goe euer in a bloud.

—George Chapman, *The Widdowes Teares: A Comedie*¹⁰⁵

Let's get something straight: blood means in ways that other things cannot. The mere sight of blood can cause someone to faint. When certain people see blood, their heart slows, their blood pressure drops. They feel hot and cold. They throw up. Perhaps there is some animal reason for this, related to a primordial hunt. Perhaps it is a fear of what is inside of our bodies. Whatever the case, blood has power, and its meanings are legion. The specific way the shrimpers I spoke to used it was informed by that legion, even though it might seem as though they were merely talking about kinship.

Janet Carsten, in her introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* on blood, writes, “the meanings attributed to blood are neither self-evident nor

¹⁰⁵ George Chapman, *The Widdowes Teares: A Comedie* (London: John Browne, 1612), 10.

stable across (or even within) different cultural and historical locations.”¹⁰⁶ Blood, unsurprisingly, is fluid. It flows across the surface of history and bleeds through the boundaries that might clot it. As a physical thing, blood is odd: a liquid that clumps together into a scab; a vital bodily fluid whose visibility outside the body can mean trauma; the medium through which our body maintains oxygen, nutrition, and warmth. Blood means life. Blood means death. Blood means passion when hot, the lack of passion when cold. When embarrassed, blood rushes to the surface of our skin and we blush. When horrified, the blood rushes from our face to give us an appearance of death.

We all know blood when we see it, but we might have a harder time understanding what it means in conversation. When Glynn Trahan, a former commercial fisherman from Chauvin, tells me about shrimpers, “They have it in their blood. They love to do it. It’s their way of life, and it’s the way of life they love,” what exactly does he mean by “in their blood”? At face value, Glynn claims that blood reveals the truth of love. What is in the blood is what one loves, and if you can identify the concept (figured as a substance) embedded in blood, you can discover the object of a person’s love, the vital essence of their subjectivity. Blood, after all, is the fuel of passion. When Glynn elaborates on the shrimping way of life, he offers a parallel interpretation of what it means for something, a labor, to be in someone’s blood: the near-biological imperative of habit that shrimpers have *grown* to love because it what they have always done. Blood: a rehearsal of industry that becomes increasingly comfortable, the

¹⁰⁶ Janet Carsten, Article, “Introduction: Blood Will Out,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2013): S2.

relief of following a well-etched path back home. The rhetorical structure of Glynn's riff underscores this interpretation, emphasizing not only the definition by homology of being in the blood to being a way of life, but the love that sustains the imaginative force of remaining in the shrimp fishery, which, at heart, is a familial love, one that is intergenerational. Perhaps shrimping becomes a way of life through a muscle memory, a blood memory, that stays with a body and accumulates there, that flows into successive generations of shrimpers.

The connection to kinship is more obvious in Kim Guy's statement. He told me, "My daddy [trawled] all his life. That's where I learned that from. And his daddy. So third or fourth generation. I guess it's stuck in our blood. We gonna have to do it." Here, blood means bloodline: the passage of traits from generation to generation. In Kim's genealogy, the process of inheritance includes the cultural and industrial knowledge that he learned at the feet of his father. Like genetics, the subfield of biology that studies heredity, the way that Kim talks about his bloodline feels simultaneously fatalistic and probabilistic: the inevitability of passed-on traits, predispositions that are not quite certain but which feel inescapable, not just likely but probable. The way Kim makes the blood vocation claim implies that the continuity of commercial fishing over four generations was happenstance. A chance, but one that becomes increasingly deterministic. He *guesses* shrimping stuck in their blood. This is the kind of repetition that happens intergenerationally: the body of shrimpers rehearsing the work of shrimping echoed by the bodies of their children rehearsing the same moves. The first daddy trawls, and the accretion of shrimping in his blood begins. If it sticks, he teaches his heir. Who teaches his heir. The bloodline flows into each instance of the Guy clan.

Jill Ann Harrison, fellow researcher of down and out Louisiana shrimpers, likewise heard the call of blood justifications. This is how she explains the blood vocation claim:

There was no phrase I heard more often throughout my conversations with both current and former shrimpers than ‘it’s in my blood.’ They used this phrase to explain why, despite all of the hardships and struggles, they continued to try to make it as fishers, and with this simple expression they demonstrated that trawling was not merely a job or a way to earn a living. Rather it represented the foundation upon which family history had been forged. In that sense, shrimp fishing constituted what they considered to be their genealogical destiny.¹⁰⁷

I imagine that this explanation of labor in blood would resonate with the shrimpers I spoke with in Chauvin, none of whom were the first in their families to go out on the water and drag nets. Their experience of labor, of shrimping, is caught up in their experience of being raised on and off of water, of being taught by fathers and uncles and mothers and grandfathers. Kim still calls his daddy “daddy,” and visits him daily, learning new things about how to be a trawler. You see the genealogical determinism from Harrison’s observation in Kim’s words. It is Kim’s destiny to trawl, for his daddy and his daddy’s daddy before him trawled the waters. He *has* to shrimp. The propensity to live the fishing lifestyle is a biological fact here, a gene. It’s the origin myth for generations of Guy men, a shared and sacred story that informs the relationships Kim has with his father, with his son, and with his grandchildren. Bloodline: the physical mirroring that happens between parents and their issue. Blood: the liquid that flows in the veins of family members. An identity. But blood is also stock, a genre: a metonym for the kind of creature who can withstand the maritime life,

¹⁰⁷ Harrison, *Buoyancy on the Bayou*, 76.

with its boom and busts, its prickly-full nets and the empty ones. The trawlers understand their work as requiring work—not just the physicality expected by blue-collar muscle labor, but the labor of surrendering to the fickle, abrasive forces that will, inevitably, leave shrimpers wanting.

Kim has three sons, only one of whom may enter the fishery. Kim said,

My wife always says that our older boy... that's why he didn't want to come back [to Chauvin]: he didn't want to be a commercial fisherman. When he was young, he was only three months old, and he was on his shrimp boat, and he stayed with us the whole time. He would never stay home, babysitting with nobody. He would stay on the boat. That's what my wife said, "We kept him too long on the boat. That's why he don't wanna have nothing to do with it." He comes in the summertime when he has to, but as far as being one, he'll never be one. That's not in his blood.

I asked, "Why do you think that is?" Kim responded,

The way that things is: kids these days get on the computer or the internet or play video games and the next thing you know, they never come out the house. They'll never know if the sun's shining or if it's raining. They stay in the house, and everything that they do is on the... on TV or computers and stuff. They don't have nothing to do with outside. It's different from us.

The quality of being in one's blood is both a marker of kinship and a marker of essential truth, even when those two things are at odds. Blood can do that: bleed through. For Kim, Senior, his bloodline, his genealogical destiny, involves shrimping. For his heir and namesake, T-Kim,¹⁰⁸ it does not. Shrimping is not in his blood, and he does not want to follow in his father's and grandfather's and great-grandfather's path. Kim and his wife believe

¹⁰⁸ The "T" is short for *petit*, the French word for small, but in this case, the Louisiana French way of saying "junior."

they spoiled T-Kim for trawling by forcing it on him from childhood, but this explanation does not cohere with the innumerable stories of boys growing up on boats to later become shrimpers. James Blanchard, one of the most successful shrimpers I talked to, went out with his dad trawling since he was ten. He and two of his brothers still shrimp. Steve Billiot tells a story about tying himself to his daddy when he was a boy such that when his daddy would leave to trawl, the string would jerk Steve awake. Steve would nag his daddy until he brought him along. Chacha started trawling when he was still in elementary school and got his first job as a deckhand at fifteen. If exposure to shrimping in formative early years could knock the industry out of blood, there would be significantly fewer shrimpers in Terrebonne Parish. Kim's story of his younger son rejecting the path of his father disrupts the genetic narrative of a vocation passed on through bloodline. He offers two possible reasons why his son and, by extension, his son's peers have been knocked loose of their genealogical destiny: first, overexposure has immunized them from the allure of the seafaring life; second, the world of Chauvin expands with the rise in technologies of mass communication, which connect the sons of Chauvin to vast networks of entertainment and opportunity if only they stay indoors. Shrimping, to the young boy in Chauvin for most of the twentieth century, symbolized the entryway to adulthood, to providing nourishment caught by hands roughened by salt and rope. On boats, boys became something like men. They learned how to give their bodies to the sea in exchange for commodities. They learned the ideologies of the self-made fisher, the owner-operator, beholden to no person, to nothing, save blood. Commercial fishing became a way to make a living and accumulate wealth, while still living at home, a place peopled by family stories and feasts, forging a tiny, insular, and immensely satisfying world. A world one

would eventually be responsible for maintaining. A world that shared a common blood, a destiny, a practical continuity. Imagining life cycles this way—the human body a vessel that pours its world into another human ewer molded by hand—ties a loop in the linear rope of history, a knot. Instead of an uncertain, dreadful future, we reset each generation in a never-receding past. There is no origin to blood, just the pumping repetitions that circulate it in the family body.

Until recently, that world of enmeshed bloodlines must have felt so stable, fixed, and bounded, especially in opposition to the world of typical blue-collar industrial labor in the United States. The history of shrimping, of using trawls on motor-propelled boats, begins in Louisiana in the years before the stock market crash of 1929 that set off a chain of events that include the Great Depression, the formation of a government-funded social safety net, and the transformation from industrial capitalism to informational capitalism that characterizes the second half of the twentieth century. Anthropologist Paul Connerton argues that pre-capitalist social formations created a mode of living where collective memory accretes slowly over a long duration through localized, small social networks such as families or interdependent systems of craftsmen and shopkeepers. These worlds are built through sustained, continuous relationships: master/apprentice, buyer/seller, father/son. Connerton writes, “There is an evocation of a whole lost world of more intimate social interaction here,” the nostalgia for which creates “a *remembered village* and a *remembered economy* that serve as

an ideological backdrop against which to deplore the present.”¹⁰⁹ This lost world, held in place by blood vocations and a cyclical temporality, stood in defiance to the labor idioms of the twentieth-century, the rationalization of time and career, and the imperative for each new generation to “do better” than the previous. What is ironic about this lost world is that it was only founded just beyond living memory: an ephemeral world of stability, offering a refuge under its veneer of timelessness and permanence, in the strange return of a pre-capitalist labor model during the peak years of industrial capitalism in the early twentieth century.

The return of kinship symbology through the blood vocation represents more than a retreat into the determinacy of filiation. Janet Carsten writes, “[B]lood in Euro-American ideas of ancestry and descent is also generally understood to stand for permanence and fixity.”¹¹⁰ A bloodline is what is continuous from one generation to the next: the traits one inherits, fixed in genetic fatalism. Nature trumping nurture. Blood being, as it were, thicker than water. Kim, though, argues that it was the call of the water that fixed his blood in place: “All we ever did was water.”¹¹¹ He is incredulous that the water might not be enough for a boy; he mourns his second son, the one he does not understand, the one who does not have shrimping in his blood despite nature and nurture. Kim resigns himself to a world where a son of his rejects the lost, placental world of his parents. In a world of instant global

¹⁰⁹ Paul Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 68.

¹¹⁰ Carsten, “Blood Will Out,” S11.

¹¹¹ I explore the call of water and this elegant phrase in the following chapter.

communications and mass multimedia, no one need be bound by heritage labor, at least not in their aspirations. T-Kim, computer science major and not a fifth or sixth generation trawler.

Blood, however, moves in unusual ways. It can seep or it can spray. It pumps. It bleeds through. Tim Ingold challenges us to look at ancestry not as the point-to-point genealogies that envision a lifetime as a discrete unit that can be connected to another, but as, after Henri Bergson, “a meshwork of intertwined thoroughfares along which organisms follow their respective ways of life.”¹¹² The dominant mode of genealogical charting, he argues, implies connections between stable, finished units: Kim, Senior, the father of Kim, my informant, the father of T-Kim. In this line, each person is a node, their name a metonym for a person as their status in a family tree. Instead, Ingold envisions bloodlines flowing like a braid, wherein the paths of of a person’s lifetime intersects with others between and across generations, where knowledge and traits are shared in an ecological process of becoming. Kim has two grandchildren who slept at his house the night before I went crabbing with him, who intended to go crabbing too, but were too “*honte*,” shy, when I showed up. Kim told me later that unlike T-Kim, these boys loved the fishing life, could not wait for summer to start so that they could go fishing with their grandpa. Sometimes blood leaps over a generation. Sometimes it flows into someone else.

¹¹² Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007), 117.

Blood here is also tied to sex and procreation. We call someone a blood relation when they have come from the same bodies we came from, or when they come from our own bodies. According to David Schneider, Americans distinguish between blood relations and legal relations, such as those bound to us by marriage. He writes, "The fundamental element which defines a relative by blood is, of course, blood, a substance, a material thing. Its constitution is whatever it is that really is in nature. It is a natural entity. It endures; it cannot be terminated."¹¹³ Blood is permanent and fixed. You can disavow it, but you cannot divorce it. Kinship that stakes its authority through sex becomes naturalized as relations of the highest natural authority, as relations of, to borrow the language of Mary Douglas, the foremost anthropologist of natural symbology, purity.¹¹⁴ The trawler's calling to fish is purified in the blood of his ancestors, is vindicated in the blood of his children. When Kim talks about T-Kim's apostasy to a world of computers and immaterial labor, he sinks with disappointment and perhaps shame. The same blood in his veins may not flow through his son's. His son has, in some ways, disavowed the father, the work of his hands, the knowledge passed from generation to generation, a shared love of physicality, estuaries, and the quiet of working among grass, water, and crustacean. Perhaps we can say that the shrimping blood is a recessive trait, but the genetic metaphor obscures the affective, visceral component of blood, abstracting the blood vocation to a trait, absorbing its slippery meanings, scrubbing its

¹¹³ David Murray Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 25.

¹¹⁴ See Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 2003); Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2003).

persistent stains, and reducing blood to a fully comprehensible symbol of social reproduction.

The tendency to clean blood, to have it mean the biological linkages between people on a family tree, is widespread, even among the shrimpers who I argue deploy blood in complicated ways. The process by which biology and quantification surpass the richness of blood metaphors in governance is what marks the beginning of what Michel Foucault terms biopower: “what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life.”¹¹⁵ Biopower—the collusion between state actors, biological scientific disciplines such as genetics and epidemiology, capitalist and often trans-national corporations, and statisticians—exsanguinates the human, metaphorically. Biopower, unlike earlier examples of sovereign power, need not shed blood to ensure existing hierarchies. It merely needs to encourage and cultivate certain lives at the expense of others. It softly weaponizes knowledge. Foucault argues that our society went “from a *symbolics* of blood to an analytics of *sexuality*.”¹¹⁶ In the exercise of sovereign power, the king signs a writ that results in an execution of a criminal. The body, in asylums and hospitals and dungeons, becomes subject to so many bloody invasions. Foucault’s symbolics of blood includes the blood taboos of kinship, which forbid incest, parricide, infanticide, fratricide. Blood formed a similitude between people. It could transform into the godhead in ritual. Blood sacrifice captured the dreams of ritualists

¹¹⁵ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, 143.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.: 148. Emphasis in the original.

everywhere. The analytics of sexuality, on the other hand, is more accounting than mystery, more interpretation and schematization than slippery symbol. Sexuality, a strategic deployment of biopower, seeks to define acceptable limits on human behavior, to valorize reproductive futurity. Most of all, it spread a desire to know—specifically to know thyself, to become subjects of knowledge. The exercise of power to end life had been eclipsed, according to Foucault, with the exercise of power to proliferate life, to shape it through both discourse and regulation, to allow its presence within reason.

The transition between blood and sexuality cannot be understood in the way of a discrete genealogical line, connecting two bounded and finished orders. Instead, the relationship between these two concepts of power looks more like a braid: blood continues to haunt the regime of sexuality. It recurs in nearly every aspect of life. Foucault writes,

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the thematics of blood was sometimes called on to lend its entire historical weight toward revitalizing the type of political power that was exercised through the devices of sexuality. Racism took shape at this point (racism in its modern, “biologizing,” statist form): it was then that a whole politics of settlement (*peuplement*), family, marriage, education, social hierarchization, and property, accompanied by a long series of permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life, received their color and their justification from the mythical concern with protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race.¹¹⁷

Shrimpers I spoke to deployed the thematics of blood in exactly this way. Blood comes to stand in for family, inheritance, and the familial project of settling somewhere and making a life. It also stands for education, especially intergenerational education, wherein men teach

¹¹⁷ Ibid.: 149.

their children how to be part of their family, how to carry on the family's blood through labor. The commingling of blood through marriage and procreation becomes a central concern, especially in marrying the right person. Kim's wife, for instance, accompanies him on every trawl, even though she gets seasick. This behavior is considered hearty and hale. It means she has good blood. When the vocation gets "knocked out" of the blood, it is a source of grief, disappointment, and shame. It dilutes the thickness of blood.

Blood, at heart, is who you are. The most consistent way shrimpers spoke of blood was that blood is their truest essence, and in that essence, you would find fishing. Blood is not just a way of life or a connection with kin: it is identity. Carsten argues that the most surprising quality of blood might be that "it is the stuff of truth."¹¹⁸ She writes,

But here the "symbolic overload" of blood, its capacity to be read in so many ways, suggests that any one truth already implies all the other truths that may be embodied in blood. And this may connect to the way in which blood seems in many contexts to be perceived as a kind of essence—of the person, and of his or her bodily and spiritual health, disease, or corruption...¹¹⁹

At heart, blood is the secret self you can confess to others in private or wear in public as a badge of pride. Invoking blood is the naturalized way of justifying proclivities, of staking ownership over behavior, of making it a deep, immutable, pure, biological truth. Blood partakes in familial mythos: kinship breeds identity. A family becomes a genre of persons, all of which behave in similar ways—or so the story goes. And the truth of that story becomes

¹¹⁸ Carsten, "Blood Will Out," S12.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.: S13.

compounded by all the other ways blood can be true: it is the water of life, pumped through a body to make it something other than a corpse. That blood is associated here with labor is telling: only through fulfilling work might a person live. Only through a way of life one loves. On this repetition, however, blood implies less the network of temporal and familial connections that make shrimping a possible genealogical destiny than the stuff of the self.

Shrimpers—both large scale fleet captains and small-time operators—informed me of their love of the commercial fishing life. They loved everything about it: the water and plucking food from it and the sounds of the diesel engine rumbling through the estuary and marsh, but most of all, they loved not being beholden to anyone, imagining themselves as part of a pre-capitalist fantasy where they worked solely because they wanted to. They loved being their own bosses. When Kim worked as a tugboat captain, his skin crawled. He felt anxious and trapped. As Kim told me, “I just couldn’t take the pressure of somebody telling me what to do.” Here is one of Karl Marx’s vampire similes: “Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”¹²⁰ For Kim to work on a tugboat, it would be about as rewarding as exsanguination. Because blood is life, and shrimping is in his blood. This, according to Kim, is the purest form of his identity, the best life he can imagine, the only one he can imagine. This dedication to

¹²⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1976), 342.

shrimping extends beyond the bounds of genealogical destiny or duty: it is a story of love and commitment that is marrow deep.



Figure 7: Glynn Trahan, former commercial fisherman. I interviewed Glynn told me about his love of the fishing life, an adventure, on Good Friday 2015. Photograph by Christopher Lirette.

This is what Glynn told me about love:

A job is not a job if you like what you do: it's an adventure. If you look at work because you have to go to work, and you don't like it, you despise what you do, but you're only doing it because you have to survive and feed your family, and it's your responsibility to do so, then that's a job. But if you go out shrimping and you love to do it, you do it because you're out there. The scenery is beautiful, you know? The ocean's pretty. The water, the land, the different animals you see, the dolphins, the seagulls flying. There is just so much beauty out there. Imagine sitting down in an office inside of the building, and all you see is a computer and a telephone and people just running back and forth and listening to their problems—whatever the company's problems are—and you're just locked inside that building. You don't see the outside, you know, for twelve hours. *Or* you're out on a boat. When you get up, you have the beautiful sunrise. You work all day, catching shrimp or crab or whatever you're doing, and you have all of this beauty. You're outside enjoying the fresh air, the wind blowing, the beauty of the waves washing against your boat, or whatever it is that you enjoy. And then you have in the evening, you have the sunset, which is so beautiful out there. You just look at it like that, and you'll understand why people love to do it.

This explanation comes directly after he tells me that fishermen have fishing in their blood. Being true to your blood self, your truest self, is to go on an adventure, to live with love and vigor. The idea of being enclosed in a cubicle, disciplined by a boss, seeing the generic gray of the same inside day after day is intolerable to Glynn. His body yearns for the touch of sun and salt and water, the oneness of an adventuring, maritime life. He invokes a picturesque world where a body can be part of an environment, where he is grounded in a location but free to move through it, to explore it, to let his identity likewise enmesh with the place. His aesthetics of trawling are contagious: blood borne. It is difficult to not want to live in the sublime world he describes, communing with dolphins and wind and harvesting raw life from the seas. This is the inverse of Marx's capital: it is labor as a progenitor of life. Shrimping, despite the hardships, is capable of sustaining a person, of making him buoyant and able to thrive.

Glynn recognizes the hardships that shrimpers face. He concludes that monologue by saying, "Even though a lot of people... they can't make ends meet, they still love doing it. Of course, you can't keep going in a hole, not making any profit, but..." For shrimpers to keep shrimping, they would have to have it in their blood, because there is little financial hope to get ahead. Commercial fishers have to remain dedicated and loyal to their love, their blood; otherwise, they will not survive. Kim told me

If you want to [shrimp], you stay in the business. You gotta love your job. If you don't love your job, you never gonna succeed. Everybody say, 'Boy I hate to leave.' No. You gotta like your job if you want to keep your job. You can be making millions of dollars and you can hate the job and don't want to wake up in the morning to go. Us, we know we like to do this, so we love to get up and come do it. Ask some of my friends: "Aw, I hate to go. I hate to go." No, not me. If I'd hate to go, I wouldn't do it. I love to come do this.

While there is obvious enthusiasm in Kim's words, there is also the ghost of hardship. Shrimping involves an element of hardening one's heart against the elements and fickle economics of commercial fishing: one must weather the bad times. One must stay in business and drag nets. One must love the labor. It must be in one's blood. But Kim also mixes metaphors here: for most shrimpers, there is no keeping the job because no one is hiring them. They go out and catch shrimp and then sell it. It is not the kind of work that warrants a job performance review. But it does require that the body work hard and consistently.

A typical shrimper, fishing state waters on a smaller boat, wakes pre-dawn. He leaves his family behind for up to two weeks at a time. He works in an environment that may contain another human body or two. He may hold conversations with buddies over the radio, but his socializing options are limited. He eats potted meat and crackers and fresh shrimp and crabs and speckled trout caught by hand. He drags nets, slowly. He pulls rope and fixes machinery and deals with by-catch. He operates a winch. He operates an engine. He steers a boat and hides among fading barrier islands when the weather is bad. He releases nets into bushel baskets, lifts the baskets onto a table, and culls. He ices the catch. He swabs the deck. He repeats these actions day and night. He tries not to drown.

Although some boats are equipped with televisions and DVD players, most still feature only a staticky radio and today's country hits. The work is lonely and hard and wet. Between drags, the shrimper's body is in constant, muscular movement: lifting and carrying and picking and throwing and jerking and flexing. The body comes into contact with animal life, grabbing live shrimp and sorting their herky-jerky bodies. Removing live eels and catfish and

turtles and sharks by hand, often ungloved. Fingers bear the marks of stingers and claws and jaws. The bodies of shrimpers are often wounded. The perils of blood-borne illness are rampant in the tepid Gulf of Mexico. Kim spoke of a friend dying of *vibrio vulnificus*, a flesh-eating bacteria found in warm salt water that enters the human body through a cut. But the most dramatic (physical) danger for trawlers is the threat of stormy seas, which can dash a trawl boat against sandbars and mangroves and rocky beaches, or just capsize the boat, sending all bodies aboard into the drink. The least dramatic, but most widely effective, threat is the physical toll of working on a boat for forty years.

In other words, the work of trawling is the work of the human body, and that work, in turn, transforms the body. All the men I spoke to in Chauvin had skin baked thick and red by the sun. ChaCha stands about five feet eight inches of wiry sinew and muscle. His forearms are thickly roped from years of triéing and pulling nets and hauling bushels of shrimp. When he speaks, it is the sound of wood cracking, his vocal chords leathered from years of talking over a diesel engine and Marlboro Lights. When he speaks, it's as if a statue has come to life, and the fissures in his deep skin make way for his muscles to realign his face. You can instantly recognize the places that ache him: the carpal bones and the elbow, the little bones of the ankle and the arch of his foot, the lumbar, the neck bones. For hours each day, ChaCha balances himself on water. He rocks when the boat rocks, and his fluidity of movement on the boat is aggressive and graceful. You can tell that it takes his blood some time to flow comfortably to his limbs each morning. His body is stiffening.

And whether he hates to go or hurts or is depressed, he wakes each morning to trawl. He knows the danger of stagnation, of not trawling when you must trawl, even if the weather is

bad and the catch is bad. He knows that he has to love trawling, even if it hurts him in the short term. He knows that to survive as a trawler, he has to love it even if it kills him. In the spring of 2015, the price of shrimp had reached historic lows due to a renewed flood of imported shrimp undercutting domestic prices.¹²¹ For a shrimper to justify remaining in the industry in this circumstance, after already weathering a cataclysmic oil spill and forty years worth of hurricanes and coastal erosion, however, requires more than mere love. It requires blood, and the truths it brings. Harrison argues that the rewards of shrimping transcend the obvious economic benefit, that trawling is caught up in the familial and cultural identity. I do not dispute this. Trawling, a blood vocation, is indeed caught up in kinship and genealogical destiny and cultural identity. The magic of it comprises these blood meanings and surpasses them. The blood truth of shrimping is that it is an entry point to a counter-narrative, opposed to dominant narratives that compel people to participate in the global logic of capitalism and that privilege the rationalization of kinship and time. And this truth is produced through an ecology and poetics of bodily practice and presence in place, one that has an audacious and anachronistic imagination. Seeing work through the call of a blood vocation requires shrimpers to envision work as something other than a means to survive.

¹²¹ Associated Press, "Louisiana Shrimping: Lower Prices This Year and Rise in Imported Shrimp," *Gulf Live*, March 29, 2015, http://www.gulflive.com/news/index.ssf/2015/03/louisiana_shrimping_lower_pric.html; Associated Press, "Louisiana Shrimpers Decry Low Prices, Damage Caused by Imports," *The Times-Picayune*, August 12, 2015, http://www.nola.com/business/index.ssf/2015/08/louisiana_shrimpers_decry_low.html; Associated Press, "Shrimp Prices Plummet in 2015," *Washington Times*, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/may/26/shrimp-prices-plummet-in-2015/>.

This magic is, of course, blood magic. The blood vocation of shrimpers speaks to the truth of the body and its place in an ever-proliferating world of work and water and blood kin and food and animal life and competing regimes of power and signs. More importantly, this blood magic is the last-ditch bulwark against a world that will not prevent these shrimpers from being crushed beneath the heel of the increasingly corpulent boot of global capitalism. Blood magic, as we all know, is a magic that requires a sacrifice.

Blood Magic and Cruelty

I shoulde loath the keeping of my blood, with the losse of my faith

—Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*¹²²

In 2007, I left Louisiana to live among distant and unknown blood kin in *Acadie*, the region in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia that still maintains an Acadian population. The idea was to enmesh with modern Acadian culture as a Louisiana Cajun. I was on a Fulbright Grant to write poems there. I had just finished an undergraduate degree in which I evacuated New Orleans for Hurricane Katrina and pre-evacuated the next year to Paris. The experience of forced and voluntary expatriation from Southern Louisiana left me yearning for the comforts of an essential identity that I could trace through my bloodline. And so I traced my way to the root.

Moncton, the urban center of Acadie, is a town about twice the size of Houma, the biggest town in Terrebonne Parish at a little over thirty thousand people. A small, French-speaking Acadian elite ran the cultural institutions, including Université de Moncton, my host

¹²² Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (London: William Ponsonby, 1590), Book 3, Chapter 9, Section Nn4, 277.

institution. The names of the Acadians I met were all names I grew up with: Boudreau, Thibodeau, LeBlanc.¹²³ I stayed with a man named Charles LeBlanc *dit* Chuck Emmrys,¹²⁴ a psychiatrist and impresario of the local arts scene.

When he met me, he embraced me as a *cousin*, for my dad's mom's maiden name was LeBlanc. He looked me over and said, "You look like you must have some Mi'kmaq blood in you." The Mi'kmaq are First Nations people who lived in the Canadian maritime provinces, and who were allied with Acadian rebels during *le Grand Dérangement* in 1755, when the British forcibly expelled the Acadian population from the region. A portion of Acadians took asylum with the Mi'kmaq and launched a rebellion.¹²⁵ They bled for each other until Joseph

¹²³ In Louisiana, people with last names end that would end in "eau" in Acadie added an "x" to the end: Boudreaux, Thibodeaux (more commonly spelled Thibodaux in Louisiana), Gautreaux.

¹²⁴ Chuck went by the last name Emmrys once married to his first wife, having made up the name with his ex-wife. Though raised bilingual, he lived most his life in English.

¹²⁵ Especially among the Acadians I met during my year in Canada and in a subsequent visit during the *Congrès Mondial des Acadiens*, it seems to be common knowledge that Acadians and Mi'kmaq intermarried. In my own family lineage, several branches end with "unknown Mi'kmaq woman" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries or have historical surnames associated with Mi'kmaq bands. For more on the Acadians, the Mi'kmaq, and le Grand Dérangement, see Brasseaux, *French, Cajun, Creole, Houma*; Carl A. Brasseaux, ed. *Quest for the Promised Land: Official Correspondence Relating to the First Acadian Migration to Louisiana, 1764–1769* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1989); Carl A. Brasseaux, *Scattered to the Wind: Dispersal and Wanderings of the Acadians, 1755–1809* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1991); Olive P. Dickason, "La « guerre navale » des Micmacs contre les Britanniques, 1713–1763," in *Micmacs et la mer*, ed. Charles Martijn, 233–248 (Montréal: Recherches amérindiennes au Québec, 1986); Olive Patricia Dickason, "Louisbourg and the Indians: A Study in Imperial Race Relations," in *History and Archeology*, vol. 6, 3–206 (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, Parks Canada, Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1976); Ursula Mathis-Moser and Günter Bischof, eds., *Acadians and Cajuns: The Politics and Culture of French Minorities in North America / Acadiens et Cajuns, politique et culture de minorités francophones en Amérique du Nord* (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2009); Rushton, *The*

Broussard *dit* Beausoleil chartered a boat to transport himself and six hundred Acadians to the French colony Saint-Domingue, known today as Haiti. Later, Beausoleil ends up in Louisiana and his people drop the “a” from *acadiens*, becoming Cajun. So the story goes.

In the construction of Native American or First People’s identity, blood reckoning plays an intense, bureaucratic role. Anthropologists Pauline Turner Strong and Barrik Van Winkle write, “Indian identity is fixed, quantified, and delimited through an elaborate calculus operating upon ‘blood’: pure, full, or mixed blood; Indian, white, or black blood; Blackfoot, Luiseño, or Cherokee blood; blood in fractions, blood in degrees, blood in drops.”¹²⁶ The quantification of blood matters for governmental control of who counts as being part of a particular tribe or nation. The United States has its legacy of one drop rules, most notably in early twentieth century legislation that defined a person as black if they had any black ancestry in order to draw boundaries around those subject to Jim Crow laws. Blood, the eugenic ideal goes, must be pure. Today, the distant blood of my own Mi’kmaq ancestors would probably not qualify me to become a member in a formal band. My family, in its move to Louisiana in the late eighteenth century, lost its connection to its first nation. For indigenous blood, one drop will not include you in a tribal roll, but, according to Strong and Van Winkle, it can “enhance, ennoble, naturalize, and legitimate” as long your blood

Cajuns; Tod Scott, “Mi’kmaq Armed Resistance to British Expansion in Northern New England (1676–1761),” *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society* 19 (2016).

¹²⁶ Pauline Turner Strong and Barrik Van Winkle, “‘Indian Blood’: Reflections on the Reckoning and Refiguring of Native North American Identity,” *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 4 (1996): 551.

contains “no more than a drop.”¹²⁷ For Chuck, some ghost of the Mi’kmaq he saw in my face legitimated me as a cousin in ways that our shared name did not.

The conventional wisdom for the boundaries of Cajun identity is that ancestry matters less than a surrender to a particular way of life in a particular place.¹²⁸ In other words, blood is not so important. There are Cajuns named LeBlanc and Boudreaux, but also Schexneider and McGee, when German and Irish immigrants married Cajun women.¹²⁹ My surname, Lirette, was never Acadian, even if the bulk of my family tree is. In addition to French populations, my family tree has branches named in the Canary Islands, in Italy, in Alsace, and in the Houma Nation, a Native American tribe that currently resides in Terrebonne Parish. The genealogical emphasis on the Acadian origin story belies how people live their Cajun identity. In the most recognized form, this expression takes the form of a particular music played on fiddles and diatonic accordions (from our Irish and German cousins), of rural cuisine featuring rice, meat, onions, and seafood. For this version of Cajun identity, you can read the institutional Cajun scholars, such as folklorist Barry Jean Ancelet and historian Shane Bernard. Imagining life among people who actually identify as Cajun

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ See Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 85–111.

¹²⁹ Although Black Francophones in Louisiana often share surnames, French dialect, and ways of living, few identify as Cajun, and are considered “Creole,” a highly contested term in Louisiana that can at turns mean people born in the new world of European descent or Black francophone. See Wolfgang Binder, ed. *Creoles and Cajuns: French Louisiana/La Louisiane Française* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 57–61; Nicholas Spitzer, “Monde Créole: The Cultural World of French Louisiana Creoles and the Creolization of World Cultures,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 116, no. 459 (2003).

through spectacular displays of cultural expression obscures everyday practices moored in specific locations. These practices open rifts in the established narratives—from the big governing stories of America that compel us to work for a better life to the smaller, more local narratives that establish folk identities. For the bayou communities in southern Terrebonne Parish, the trawl boat, a vehicle of work, one tied to bodily practice and intergenerational connection, is also a vehicle of cultural identity. To be a trawler holds a certain prestige: the continuation of a lost world into the uncertain future. The connection, however, of shrimping with blood, complicates a purely material understanding of how a culture that persists in valorizing an industry with a bleak outlook comes to be. Imagining shrimping as something in the blood imagines an ancestral connection. At worst, it suggests a longing for blood purity, where the magic elision between law and blood give rise to a family of people all alike and to which one can belong. In Chauvin, you still see “Registered Coonass” stickers.¹³⁰ People identify as Cajun. And though the stability of an ethnic label such as Cajun is undermined by its exclusionary mythology and inclusionary practice, the label allows the people who claim it to be proud, comforted, and knowable.

Strong and Van Winkle take on this type of essentializing, which they portray as the inverse of the quantifying, bureaucratic essentialism of blood reckoning. They write about Kiowa

¹³⁰ Coonass is the “official” slur for a Cajun. No one is really sure where it comes from, but most coonasses will give explanation a go for you if you ask nicely. Or you could read a scholarly exploration of the term: Sexton, “Cajun or Coonass?,” 273–274.

writer N. Scott Momaday's use of the trope that "memory is in the blood."¹³¹ Although the phrase first appears in a novel in figurative language, Momaday later uses it when discussing writing about the Kiowa: "The imagination that informs these stories is really not mine, though it exists, I think, in my blood. It's an ancestral imagination."¹³² Though one critic has pointed to this language as being "absurdly racist,"¹³³ Strong and Van Winkle argue that while it may be essentializing, it functions as a way of subverting the official reckoning of blood that creates the conditions for racial exclusion and fragmentation. They write,

To locate memory in the blood as Momaday does may be as essentializing as to locate identity in blood quanta, but Momaday's use of blood imagery aims not to differentiate but to relate; not to administer but to imagine; not to impose quantified identities upon others but to make sense of the intersubjective quality of his own experience; not to appropriate the land of others but to appropriate the experiences of his own ancestors [...] Momaday's "memory in the blood" becomes a refiguring of "Indian blood" that makes it a vehicle of connection and integration—literally, a remembering—rather than one of calculation and differentiation.¹³⁴

The image of memory residing in the blood, then, mobilizes an ecological attachment to place and people, and stands in direct defiance of the relentless quantification that seeks to make people knowable and therefore able to be governed. The enemy, as always, is subjectivation: the process by which a person becomes a subject of knowledge and subject to

¹³¹ N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), 7.

¹³² Charles Woodard, *Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 22.

¹³³ Arnold Krupat, *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 14.

¹³⁴ Strong and Van Winkle, "Indian Blood," 562.

power. One way to critique the “in my blood” trope is that it places identity back *inside* the person, into subjectivity, into the essential core of the human, whose whispered truth becomes vulnerable to normalization. But that is not exactly what is going in Strong and Van Winkle’s argument: the blood imagery aims not to administer, but to *imagine*. Imagination, here, is the activity of thinking things differently, of projecting into a past that is utterly unknowable, and owning that mystery, of placing it in the body. Certainly, the use of blood in this way still retains a tenor of genealogical facticity, but when Momaday disavows his imagination as being “really not mine,” he connects it to a shifting network of people, stories, and intensities that comprise his experience of belonging. His body and blood are also really not his, but are ancestral traces, the product of people interacting with and through their environment, together.

This is a type of magic: bringing the dead back to life. Bringing the self to the seat of ancestry, tracing connections to people who are no longer people but stories. Necromancy is the art of communicating with the dead to get advice about how to live now: a type of fortune telling. When I went to Acadie, I attempted to listen to the murmur of my dead ancestors in a foreign land. By the time I began my fieldwork in Louisiana, I was disenchanted. It is hard to power the engines of magic for long, in a world where the bordering and fragmenting of people into categories and identities is institutionalized, where labor never stops and few can get ahead. It is hard to believe in magic when the culture is algorithmic. In Acadie, there is an often-used term used for the type of nostalgic cultural celebrations that occur in Louisiana and New Brunswick, that imagine a life capable of being simpler, kinder, and more cohesive: *passéisme*. An obsession with the past. We can also call it

nostalgia, and mean a melancholic yearning for the past. The Greek roots of the word tells us that this dull ache is the pain of coming home, of being not quite there, of being just out of reach except in fleeting but vivid dreams.

So when shrimpers tell me that commercial shrimping is in their blood, I know that they are also talking about a kind of magic. In some cases, it is a particularly painful type of magic, one that requires sacrifice. Shrimpers sacrifice the security of a good, consistently profitable line of work. They sacrifice their bodies to the sun and salt. They sacrifice, increasingly, being able to relate to their children who embrace distributed networks of information and capital and the dream of, one day, jumping to a higher class. Shrimpers invoke their ancestral memory and in doing so—in imagining their ancestors toiling in the marshes and bays, raising children barefoot on cypress boats, surviving off land and sea—they are attempting to raise the dead and live among them. They reject a world in which family and history do not matter, where each of us is encouraged to live normal lives and yearn for a good life. Lauren Berlant defines this good life as a sort of humble American Dream: a validation of the belief that work will allow us to get ahead, that we will be valued in the political sphere, that we can find committed partners and love them into old age.¹³⁵ How shrimpers might define the good life differs. Instead of upward mobility, there is the sublime experience of an estuarial life. Instead of job security, there is the repetition of hard, fulfilling labor whose fruits are delicious meals. Instead of political and social equality, there is the tiny family, floating on a

¹³⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 2–3.

boat, connected to an extended fleet by radio and custom. Instead of durable intimacy, there is the strange return of ancestors lighting the way through a foggy now. Instead of disenchantment, magic. Instead of statistics, blood.

I first trawled with ChaCha the summer of 2013 when I began researching commercial shrimpers. Since moving out of state in 2007, I visited ChaCha every time I visited my family. He was my main oyster connection and sold oysters by the sixty-pound sack for thirty dollars or so. That summer I met Lindsey Feldman, a doctoral student working on an applied anthropology project in Louisiana on the effects of the 2010 oil spill. We chanced to meet in the Chauvin library when we both brandished consent forms to a group of elderly women playing dominoes. I became one of her fixers, helping her gain access to my network of connections of possible informants, find housing, and pass the time. She mentored me in ethnographic methods.¹³⁶ My dad arranged for Lindsey and me—as well as my wife, Linda, and an intern for our nonprofit, T-Possibility—to trawl with ChaCha during his morning bait run. We woke at 3:30 a.m. and despite the darkness, it was balmy and hot. We drowsed and burned our lips on coffee in travel mugs on the way to Bait House Seafood, ChaCha's establishment next to the Toussaint-Forêt Bridge in Chauvin.

It was still dark when we arrived, the light hours away, but the boat was awash in floodlights, bleaching out the white deck. We stowed our gear into a tiny cabin below deck at the fore of

¹³⁶ For more of the story of that summer, see Lindsey Feldman and Christopher Lirette, "New Adventures in Tandem Ethnography," *Southern Spaces*, October 7, 2013, <http://southernspaces.org/blog/new-adventures-tandem-ethnography>.

the boat. ChaCha's boat, which was unnamed, had few of the trappings of home that bigger boats have. The tophouse was recessed into the deck, furnished with bunks that served to store life jackets. The deck was all work: the engine controls near the stern, the nets and rigging directly abaft the shallow tophouse, with the culling table at center. ChaCha's deckhand, Joey, was browsing Facebook on his phone, and despite his hip hop and country music swagger, eyed us with caution. This boat was clearly a masculine space, and the entry of three women and an expatriate hipster like myself was at odds with the way the morning arrays itself on most days: damp, lukewarm air drawing the sweat out of bodies in silent work, straining muscles against the nets ChaCha's daddy had sewn, tangled with the sharp and slick edges of sea life. There was to be mud and foam, menthol Marlboros perched on lips. As far as we could tell, ChaCha and Joey rarely spoke except to bark commands over the diesel engine and grunt assent while the radio blared top forty country singles. Maybe they did talk, worrying over the way business had literally been decimated the year of the oil spill, sharing the knowledge ChaCha would not be able to pass on to his son, another twenty-something in Louisiana who had no interest in trawling, especially now. We wouldn't know because we changed the space by being in it.

Deleuzian scholar Charles Stivale, after falling in love with Cajun dance while stationed at Tulane, wrote a book that developed the concept of "spaces of affect," proposing to "reflect on [the] affective in-between through the rhythmic constitution of bodies within the

simultaneously sensory and territorial field of the dance and music event.”¹³⁷ He argues that the space of affect, a space that contains the haecceity, or *thisness*, of a moment, is a confluence of bodies in motion, stimulated by sensual cues (smell, sight, proprioceptive movement, touch, sound) caught in a network of physical things and histories and possibilities. Although his analysis focuses on dance, an event that is commonly understood to be in the realm of the aesthetic, it is useful too for understanding the way blood and body figure in attaching trawlers to their labor. My gesture of aestheticizing trawling complicates the figuration of trawling as labor, but also does not seek to destroy its structuration as labor. Rather, the event of trawling, as a space of affect, not only manifests as a moment charged with affect and physical connection, it uses its affective dimension to carve out a brief, fleeting moment where the terrible physics of power are momentarily suspended, where the body is freed of its language and overdetermination in improbable ways (always snapping back, at last, to determination). And it complicates the genealogical destiny component of this chapter’s refrain, “it’s in my blood.” For if shrimping is in a person’s blood, one place it enters is here in the moment of trawling, the physical rhythms that direct the course of blood to the task at hand. And this transmutation of labor into blood, of blood into family and memory and ancestry, into hope, is magic.

And by magic, I mean blood magic: the instrumentalization of the sacred or ancestral memory or imagination for a purpose, which requires some type of sacrifice. In this case, it is

¹³⁷ Stivale, *Disenchanted les Bons Temps*, 121.

the sacrifice of the body to the caprice of the sea, of waking hours into a job that does not promise a good life of upward mobility or even financial maintenance. It is the sacrifice of the self in service of a lost cause, of tragic hope. Blood magic is a cruel magic and not everyone believes in it. For the fisher who has fishing in his blood, he must surrender to a particular and precarious life. He must recognize, at least on some level, that what he is doing will no longer be sustainable as the twenty-first century erodes the small-time, family-based industrial model and replaces it with vast machines of industry and information. He must recognize, and cope with, the fact that what is in his blood may not flow in the blood of his children or their children and that what was once a given way of life will inevitably die out, and that his family of tomorrow will only be able to imagine what it must have been like to wake up before dawn and rumble through a marshy bay, capturing thousands of shrimps in butterfly nets. And for the short term, the fisher who must fish because it is in his blood, who needs to transport himself to a world-in-the-making where families worked on boats together, must reckon with his own dwindling economic prospects, especially in years of flood, especially in years of environmental cataclysm. Aligning the body to this doomed industry in an effort to appropriate and claim a connection to an imagined past, to make sense of the work of people to thrive outside of a world desperate to teach us to survive its own impossible systems, and to escape the tyranny of rational decisions is a hopeful and defiant act, and it is one that is necessary to these fishers' survival.

Envisioning trawling this way, as both cruel and magical, enables us to understand persistent heritage labor in a deindustrializing society in a new way: an embodied practice that feeds the senses, the imagination, and a sense of belonging not only to a community or culture, but to

a constantly changing and ever-haunted environment. This labor is still tied to the death-march of neoliberal futurity, but it speaks to the transformative possibilities of acting in concert with the myths of genealogical and cultural inheritance, creating a livable world based on memories that reside in the blood. It is optimistic in a world that does not warrant much optimism. Trawling is an act that gives the trawlers hope. We can find evidence of hope in more prevalent, everyday items: vitamins (hope for an eternal body) and food (hope for comfort and nourishment) and television shows (hope for a meaningful life). We desire things that give us hope. Lauren Berlant calls this optimism. She writes, “All attachments are optimistic. When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us.”¹³⁸

Promises reside in the regime of hope: they anticipate, expect, imagine something coming in the future. Desire, then, is a particularly future-oriented feeling, predicated on some incompleteness or inadequacy of the present. Or, according to Berlant, the things we desire and attach ourselves to are the things that make living livable. Except when they do not: cruel optimism. Berlant defines a relation as cruelly optimistic “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.”¹³⁹ She identifies a relationship of cruel optimism in the yearning for the good life: the American dream, self-sovereignty, health, romance, and economic success.

¹³⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 23.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*: 1.

Even though shrimping counters the myths of the good life, it clearly inspires a relation of cruel optimism. The shrimpers shrimp to survive, to be a part of a family mythology, to align their experience with an aesthetics of living on and through the water. But continuing to shrimp in an era when farmed shrimp from Vietnam, Thailand, and Ecuador undercut prices, when giant oil rigs explode and taint the water with oil, when the sea encroaches its boundaries—to continue shrimping when shrimping will soon be an utterly lost cause will eventually hurt the shrimpers irreparably. And by hurt, I mean they will go out of business, and they will suffer because they have no income. For shrimpers who claimed shrimping was a blood vocation, debt to do what they love is a puny hurdle. They told me, almost in chorus, “You have some good days. You have some bad.” Shrimping offers something other than financial stability, something that has the capacity to escape into a ghostly past, to understand the world as organized by blood and bodies and myths even as we must bend to the free-flow of markets and structural obstacles to flourishing. To not shrimp would be bloodless and unmagical.

ChaCha clearly recognized the cruelty of his attachment to shrimping. You could hear it in his voice, his gravelly voice cured on the boat, cutting through the thick noise of the engine. He spoke plaintively, resigned. This is how he described the situation:

When you go out to shrimp like this, some [shrimpers] shrimp in the morning hours, but a lot of them leave more at night. Some do a night and day, nonstop. I had a big boat where I worked night and day, but I got rid of it. My son showed no interest in it. I’d say about out of ten families, probably only two families stayed—in the last ten fifteen years—the rest got out of the shrimping industry. They saw the amount of work and hours and they just got out. In my family, my dad and brothers... pretty much I’m the only one, the last still doing this thing. They all got out of it. My family was raised on a shrimp dock.

He couched the narrative of his work in family, reiterating the loss of a family business. The families, according to ChaCha, were leaving behind the heavy labors of the trawl boat. For him, as for all the shrimpers I spoke to in Terrebonne Parish, the trawl boat, the shrimp dock—these are places charged with family ties, places that stood in for the site of family making. You could imagine the world ChaCha imagined as he talked: families staying close through sharing the physical burden of work, making a private world populated by diesel and water and marsh grass, surviving off of the bounty of a hard world that needed tending to. A blood family replenishing their bloodline through work and food and floating along in a private world of life and sensation.

This kind of narrative, the kind that romanticizes the labor that bends and breaks the bodies of shrimpers, was a common theme in my interviews. There was something *legitimate* about working on water, something different from the obvious realities that were equally liable to crush the shrimpers: the fast globalizing world, the changing ecosystem, toxic chemicals. It pained ChaCha that his son “showed no interest” in shrimp, instead working in oil, an industry that has eaten away the coast with its channels and pollutants. There is a cruel irony at play, the person of ChaCha’s son turning into a metaphor for the cruel optimism that characterizes his relation to trawling. The very things he hopes for in trawling—family, shared labor, connection to place and kin—keep him from connecting to a son who has industrialized as he struggles in a deindustrialized world.

ChaCha comes alive with movement and competency on his boat, managing a present with deft hands, creating a brief world that is something separate from his struggling life on land, something joyful. Trawling is not a frenzied activity. It involves riding a boat very slowly in

water with nets down, lifting them at a certain point, and culling what was in the nets.

Starting again. Restarting. Repetition. Giving up when you've caught enough or when you decide to give up. But ChaCha's movements had a rhythmic muscularity to them, a knowledge that flowed from bone to fish to water. He was caught in a network of intensities and stimulations. I was caught too, bringing with me identities and agendas that dissolved and resurfaced over the course of the trips I took with him.

On my first trip with ChaCha, the one wherein I brought another researcher and two people who just wanted to catch a ride, the presence of outsiders elicited a performance from the two men whose livelihood depended on executing successful morning and evening trawls daily. ChaCha's voice grated against the sound of the engine, telling stories of a family that made its life on the water, of feeling like the torchbearer for a punch-drunk industry trying to reclaim its legs. He humored general and leading anthropological questions. He led us through his day, its early waking, its many showers. All the while, his fingers sorted shrimp from crab from fish, the silver of tiny poggy fish tumbling across his hands the way a gambler in an old Western might walk a coin down his knuckles. Though I had been trawling before as a child and had fished for red fish and speckled trout in Lake Boudreaux with my dad and brother in a small outboard, the enthusiasm of my companions, ChaCha, and eventually his deckhand made the trip feel more exotic than it should have, as if we all stepped out of a sleeping world for a three-hour trip. We returned with the rise of the sun. When I embarked for the trawl, my identities as researcher, Chauvin-native, and activist rose to the surface to structure the relationship I would now have with ChaCha, a shrimper and lifelong resident of Chauvin and the water. I was a person who had no blood connection to trawling and

ChaCha did, even if he would later deny the possibility of the blood vocation. In this play, ChaCha played key informant, and played it well, teaching us about the *vents de Carême* (winds of Lent) that brought the shrimp in the position, the uncertainty of tracking crustacean migration, the ways of determining which shrimp are viable for bait and which are not. He told us what it was like to recover from the oil spill, the immediate cataclysm of it passing into a nagging memory.

Right after the oil spill in 2010, ChaCha was interviewed for a *New York Times* video feature about the human impact of the disaster.¹⁴⁰ In that video, he's torn apart. His voice strains under the thick weight of tears. His wife, Samantha, says that the stress has put a wedge between them. In a *New York Times* article that the video accompanied, ChaCha is quoted as saying, "My wife cried and cried over this. Just the other night she told me, 'Thank God there isn't a loaded gun in this house.'"¹⁴¹ Business was dead. The world closed in on him, and instead of embodying his work, in the video you can see him cleaning fish with a nervous intensity, hoping that time would pass quicker. He is mournful in the video, especially next to his son, Stanley, who talks about seeking employment elsewhere, seeing no future in shrimp. In the article, he encourages his family to sell the house and leave for good. In 2013, ChaCha is no longer on the edge of a breakdown. He recognizes the downward slide of the fishery, his prospects in Chauvin, but he is avuncular, proud of being able to pass

¹⁴⁰ Kassie Bracken, "Oil and Water," *New York Times: Times Video*, July 19, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/video/us/1247468464693/oil-and-water.html>.

¹⁴¹ Susan Saulny, "Cajuns on Gulf Worry They May Need to Move on Once Again," *New York Times*, July 19, 2010, A12.

on what he knows. During the trip, there were lulls where one could recede into the physicality of the moment, the feeling of the boat dragging across the surface of the water, the traction of thousands of marine bodies piling in the nets, the hypnotic process of culling, ChaCha's fat fingers dipping in water, stacking conclaves of foaming crabs, flicking fish and shrimp into bushels and tanks. It is impossible to say whether ChaCha was consumed with worry or whether he sank into the rhythms of work, unmooring from the dread of the shore where he would be faced with the prospect of selling his catch and staying whole.



Figure 8: ChaCha culling shrimp from pogy. Photograph by Christopher Lirette.

For me, I glimpsed a world that could be made on a boat. The sound of the engine roared around us, a force-field of noise. I smelled the muddy water, its salts, the rot of *paille fine* grass in the clumps of land that floated around Lake Boudreaux, the sweet smell of live shrimp before they die and smell like fish. My shoes slipped across the deck in the slurry of grease and silt and water. I grabbed the shrimp myself, the slimy bodies twitching in my fist. I felt the thin mesh of nets caked with alluvial mud, the rough ropes that pulled them

aboard. I was with my partner and a new friend and three people I barely knew, but even here, I could imagine how a family could form its bloodline on a boat: shared rhythms of bodies flexing and bending over for a common purpose, the shorthand instructions shouted over the engines, the enclosure of a small, bounded place floating along freely in an unrationalized landscape. It was a world of early morning skies, prismatic with new suns bleeding over the black night, of work and dexterity, of exchanging stories and acting in concert with others and the environment and industrial machinery. The utter *thisness* of the trawl is staggering: the scents and imbalanced proprioception, the pin-pricks of pain when gored by the head of a shrimp or the lateral spine of a skittering crab, the Doppler slap of another boat's wake against the bow. But even in this sensorium, trawling is an action of long duration, something that can easily lose its magic when the novelty of anthropology disembarks, when the rhythms of hand and shrimp become constant, it requires some spell to keep up the enchantment. Throughout this chapter, I have been calling this spell the blood vocation, the fantastic scenario that a job can become so precious and potent that it becomes part of the body of a person, that an industry can dissolve into our most indispensable fluid. What my peek into the trawling life in the highly artificial scene of research and industrial tourism in 2013 suggested to me is how this magic builds the foundations of an alternative, ephemeral, and potentially livable world, even if the cost of living there requires committing to an anachronizing way of life.

On that trip, our little party became part of an ecology that included bodies and watery ecosystems and animal life and temperamental weather and, above everything, stories. For that brief time, I could imagine a life that I had not previously imagined. Not an alien life: I

grew up on and off different types of boats. I worked at sea, on an offshore oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico. I have slept in cabins in the swamp after a day of trawling, feasting on the shrimp just pulled from the water. My dad taught me to hook worms and unhook fish. I grew up with guns—shotguns and rifles—even though my dad was always more fisher than hunter. I was raised to love the great outdoors, to ignore the sips of blood stolen by mosquitos, to harvest wild thistle and blackberries, to wade through shallow water. In another life, this could have been my blood vocation. In another time, it might have been the only option I might consider. The experience of trawling, in the specific trip in 2013 and others I have taken since then, offered a suspension of an identity I had worked hard to cultivate. It was a moment when a body gets tangled in networks of story and blood, of other bodies still and in motion, floating along in shallow water, extracting smaller, even more precarious life. In that moment, which constantly threatened to flicker away, disappearing back into the structure of my own everyday life, I had the capacity to get something stuck in my blood. It was a rebel magic I witnessed: one that let me touch a world that existed against the one we were all tired of knowing, the one where we would get back to worrying and disconnection and cynicism and fear about sustaining ourselves in a broken economy.

The sensation did flicker away, and I had to don the ethnographer's hat. I tried my damndest to bring back the sorry world. I began with a wounding question to ChaCha: how did the oil spill affect you? He answered,

It's hard to explain to, you know, get back to it. It just feels dead. I guess they should have stopped it eventually, or it would have wiped everything out of the gulf, or you'd have to find another way to survive. It's about having to go through change, not knowing what it's going to do to you. Until you experience stuff, you really don't

know first hand what usually happens. It makes you always have a question mark. Always have doubts.

ChaCha did not answer with statistics about profit loss, the future of shrimping, or the social reordering that occurred after the spill. Instead, he offered an answer based in feeling and anticipation. The difficulty explaining is the difficulty in recreating the lure of sustaining fantasy. The fantasy that the oil spill shattered was not the importance of blood, but the ability of industry to sustain a person. Too much has happened to get back to that fantasy; the seascape has changed. And now the industry feels dead: suspended, inanimate, a return to formlessness, to incorporeality. Like Berlant, he points to the sites of fantasy as a mode of survival. The oil spill, if left unchecked, would mean that he finally would have to abandon trawling. ChaCha's model of doubt also demonstrates the paradox of knowing in the space of affect: before something happens, you will not know what will happen; once something does happen, you will always have doubts. This movement is not a clear trajectory from innocence to experience; rather, it is a moment that colors both the prehistory and fallout of an event with anticipation, doubt, dread, discovery, possibility. The trawl boat, a bounded territory, is a place where things do not quite need to make sense, a place where trauma and hope bleed into one another, taking a person on a journey from hope to corporeality to suspension. The trip, however, is limited, offering nothing but the chance to be a body in motion, connected to a flood of sensation and story, for a few hours, holding life on shore at bay, if you can.

In 2015 I went trawling with ChaCha again. This time, there was no deckhand, and I did not ask what happened to him because I knew. ChaCha could not afford a deckhand. There were no extra tag-alongs except for my brother, who I again convinced to swing grip as I

filmed the trawl. We rode out later in the morning, in the golden hour, and the sun haloed ChaCha, and Bayou Petit Caillou was all green and brown bokeh. ChaCha spoke either in long monologues or in grunts of affirmation. He had made it through another few years, but it was obvious that it cost him. Diversifying through the year to stay afloat of the economy, he had made enemies with other locals. He had been harassed by people jealous of his year-long license. And worst of all, the catch was about eighty percent poggy, a stinky fish also called menhaden, which is used as fertilizer and in cosmetics but has little value for ChaCha who would not be able to compete in the commercial poggy fishery. Crabs were overfished. Oysters had not rebounded since the oil spill. And the price of shrimp was dipping to historic lows.

ChaCha obliged me. He is a good sport. He answered my questions. And in doing so, he enlivened. He passed on knowledge, some of which I had heard before, some of which I had not. But the spell from the previous trip was broken. Perhaps it was just me all along: the excitement of breaking the grasp of the ordinary and jumping on a boat before dawn en masse. Perhaps it was the direness of 2015's shrimp price crisis. Almost everyone I spoke to was afraid of not making it that summer. And I was bringing that fear to them in their last refuge. Late in the interview, ChaCha astounded me by rejecting the claim that shrimping could be in a person's blood. Consider, if you will, what this rejection means for someone like ChaCha: a man who is the last of his lineage to trawl, whose son rejected his father's industrial heritage before the crises of 2010 and 2015, whose whole life was spent dragging nets and skimming and culling and icing and fileting and shucking and winding down after a

long day trawling with a rod and reel in hand, pulling *sac-a-lait* and perch out of the bayou.

For ChaCha, some of the magic of trawling had bled out.

Ecology and the Body

On the day of the 2015 boat blessing, my gear was soaked because I was riding around on my motorcycle in the downpours of the day before. I was running late. I missed the priest processing into the boat, but I did catch the first boats leaving. I drove my brother's Mustang with my camera and field recorder past the slow parade down Bayou Little Caillou. The Toussaint-Foret Bridge was open to let the boats pass, and I parked next door at ChaCha's place of business, Bait House Seafood. ChaCha was nowhere to be found.



Figure 9: The lead boat of the 2015 Boat Blessing. See the priest at the bow of the Daddy Bucks, a boat owned by my Aunt Nadine's brother. Photograph by Christopher Lirette.

I sat in the middle of the road where the swing bridge would connect Highway 56 to Bayou Drive if it were closed. My feet dangled over water. After a while, the boats began

floating past me. A curious thing happens when you are trying to document the Chauvin Boat Blessing: when people on the boats see you, they wave. A couple of people recognized me from the beginning of the parade route at St. Joseph's. Fewer recognized me as a family member. But everyone waved. Some hollered.

When the fifteen or so boats passed me, I drove the Mustang to Boudreaux Canal. I parked just as the first boats approached the canal that connects Bayou Petit Caillou to Lake Boudreaux, the terminus of the parade. Instead of filming the boats from there, I turned the camera on and began walking along the levee. I followed the boats from land, crossing Highway 56, climbing the crest of the levee that comprises the sea wall at Boudreaux Canal. Then, the land became less civilized.

Rain had turned the earth to slush covered by dead palmetto branches and marsh grass and trash. The grasses grew up around me until I could only see the masts of the biggest trawlers. I could hear the loudest boats, too: not the roar of their engines, but K.C. and the Sunshine Band singing about the way they like it. The grasses parted in front of me. It was a trail. I had never been here before.

The grasses were thick, their bases clumped with aluminum cans and cracked Styrofoam and cigarette butts. Small trees vined out of them, raking me. There were unripened blackberries, and their vines scratched me. There was a cactus. I was able to avoid that one. The mosquitos bit through my socks and my shirt and my jeans and feasted on me. The earth slipped beneath me and my shoes plunged in and out of the mud. I was caked and bloodied. There were fine scratches along my forearms.

I could see Lake Boudreaux lapping towards my trail then dipping away as I climbed a short hill of mud. Eventually, there was a clearing. The lead boat, captained by my Aunt Nadine's



Figure 10: The Boat Blessing, from the shore of Lake Boudreaux. This location is near the Mare Bleue and Mare à Clay (see “Idea of Order at Mare à Clay” in the next chapter, Figures 11–13). Photograph by Christopher Lirette.

brother, Jerome, was dead ahead, but they were too busy munching boiled shrimp and crawfish to pay me mind. I could see them, though, hosting the priest, waiting until he finished the ritual blessing to drink alcohol, and I filmed them. The beach I was filming from was really just mud and dead grass, and I sunk into it. The water patrol that chaperoned the Boat Blessing ran their outboard up onto the bank and two police officers stared at me incredulously. I said, “I’m just filming the Boat Blessing.” They said, “You should have worn long sleeves.”

I had not planned on getting so close to the marsh that morning. I almost justified missing the boat blessing entirely. I had my own blood to attend to the night before: my wife was in town visiting for our baby shower. I rode my motorcycle just that morning from Kenner,

where her family lives, back to Chauvin to catch the annual parade. Instead of documenting the Boat Blessing outright, I wound up documenting an impromptu journey into an unknown marsh ecology, with my body catching and tearing on the foliage. When you enter into an ecology, things connect to you, touch you, change you. You affect it, stomping through it. You are affected.

Beyond the slipstream magic of blood and its attendant symbolism, the truth of blood arises ecologically. Or at least, the truth of what commercial shrimpers told me was in their blood arises ecologically, and we might as well name it a culture of labor. Tim Ingold does not agree that culture should be defined as a system of inherited knowledge that makes the world comprehensible.¹⁴² Instead, he imagines “culture” through what he calls a “sentient ecology”:

It is knowledge not of a formal, authorised kind, transmissible in contexts outside those of its practical application. On the contrary, it is based in feeling, consisting in the skills, sensitivities and orientations that have developed through long experience of conducting one’s life in a particular environment.¹⁴³

¹⁴² This view of culture has been a prevalent way of understanding culture in anthropology and elsewhere in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Here are two noteworthy definitions. Bronisław Malinowski: “This social heritage is the key concept of social anthropology. It is usually called culture... Culture comprises inherited artifacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits, and values” (Cited in A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge: The Museum, 1952), 47). Clifford Geertz: “culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns—customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters—as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call ‘programs’)—for the governing of behavior” (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, 44). See “Unmooring for Beginners,” the introduction, for more discussion of Geertz’s view of culture. Both definitions emphasize the status of culture as a system of knowledge and the passed-along nature of cultural knowledge.

¹⁴³ Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 25.

Instead of transmitting culture genealogically, from one generation to the next, Ingold argues that we are constantly becoming part of our environment, and that our knowledge and relationships (including kinship) are created by moving through and touching the particular environment in which we live. In other words, the idea of a culture of labor being in one's blood belies an orderly, genealogical schema that is at odds with the way that culture, kinship, place, and memory are generated.¹⁴⁴ Instead of abstract instances in a family tree, we are embedded processes in a rhizomatic manifold. As we move through the world, we touch one another. We touch the land under us, and if there is no land, we touch the water. We touch the animals we pull from the environment and eat them. We touch the razored vines of berries and are cut by them.

And the environment touches us back. Instead of imagining place as a blank stage upon which we live our lives, we constitute place as it constitutes us. The place itself becomes the substance of our bodies and vice-versa, and so we live in a world of blood forged fresh for

¹⁴⁴ He argues that our emphasis on genealogy has even penetrated and become naturalized by our scientific models. Instead of blood, we get genes. Ingold writes,

Nowadays, one is as likely to hear it said of some feature of a person that it is 'in the genes' as to be told that it is 'in the blood'. But the sense of such pronouncements has hardly been altered by the substitution of genetic for sanguinary metaphors. If anything, the science of genetics has not so much challenged as taken on board—and in turn lent authority to—the founding principles of the genealogical model, namely that persons embody certain attributes of appearance, temperament and mentality by virtue of their ancestry, and that these are passed on in a form that is unaffected by the circumstances or achievements of their life in the world. (ibid.: 137)

every encounter. Instead of linear transmission, Ingold argues for a much more complex path for the “passing on” of cultural knowledge *and* substance. He writes,

It is from their emplacement in the world that people draw not just their perceptual orientations but the very substance of their being. Conversely, through their actions, they contribute to the substantive make-up of others. Such contributions are given and received throughout life, in the context of a person’s ongoing relationships with human and nonhuman components of the environment. Thus, far from having their constitution specified in advance, as the genealogical model implies, persons undergo histories of continuous change and development. In a word, they grow. Indeed more than that, they are grown. By this I mean that growth is to be understood not merely as the autonomous realisation of pre-specified developmental potentials, but as the generation of being within what could be called a sphere of nurture.¹⁴⁵

The shrimpers I talked to, then, are not necessarily the tragic last generation of shrimpers with a well of cultural knowledge that will dry up when they die. Instead, they are constantly negotiating with an environment, both the brackish water of Barataria and Lake Boudreaux and Bayou Petit Caillou and Bayou Go-to-Hell *and* the lifeworlds of kin on land and on boats and across lines of telecommunications. They contribute to their environment, changing it. They feed people across the nation and especially they feed the people they live among. The environment undergoes a constant transformation from sun and sea to crustacean and fish to net and motor to people, and the people come back through, forging paths in the substance of the place, paths in which resides memory.

Ingold argues that memory, like ancestry or substance, should be considered an embedded, relational practice that cannot be separated from the act of remembering in a place. He

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.: 144.

writes, “[I]t is through the activity of remembering that memories are forged. This activity, moreover, is tantamount to the movement of the person through the world. Memories, then, are generated along the paths of movement that each person lays down in the course of his or her life.”¹⁴⁶ The physical act of trawling created the conditions for the fishers to remember: they were not just retrieving stored information from a database, they were re-enacting the times they’ve had on a boat, creating memories by a nexus of recognition: the work, my questions, the land and seascape, the weather. They recognized themselves in their memories and longed not necessarily for a return to the olden days, but for the ability to continue finding their way through a world of boats and blood. In writing about how hunters and gatherers remember their skills and survive, Ingold writes,

The important thing... is that the process should keep on going, not that it should yield precise replicas of past performance. Indeed ‘keeping it going’ may involve a good measure of creative improvisation. A skill well remembered is one that is flexibly responsive to ever-variable environmental conditions. Thus there is no opposition, in the terms of the relational model, between continuity and change... Just because people are doing things differently now, compared with the way they did them at some time in the past, does not mean that there has been a rupture of tradition or a failure of memory. What would really break the continuity, however, would be if people were forcibly constrained to replicate a pattern fixed by genealogical descent.¹⁴⁷

In certain cases, then, the danger for shrimpers would not necessarily be the increasingly hostile world they find themselves in, but their own *passéisme*, their own yearning to recreate the world of their fathers and grandfathers. A cruel attachment: yearning to recreate a past

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.: 148.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.: 147–148.

that would no longer serve you. Luckily, for the trawlers I spoke to, they are plenty adaptable. Even when they are at their most mournful, speaking of the lack of shrimping in their children's blood, they are still making their way into a complex ecology that transforms their individual blood into something more collective.

Blood is an extremely transmutable symbol. Take into account, again, the transformation of wafer and wine to the Body and Blood of Christ. Consider the vampire mythologies of Europe and America, wherein blood transforms to a font of life. Since the 1980s, the sharing of blood is death by AIDS. Since before that, mosquitos have been commingling drops of blood between the people and animals they suck on, transmitting yellow fever, a blood borne illness with a recognizable stain on Southern Louisiana history.¹⁴⁸ Today, we fear West Nile, Dengue, and Zika from mosquitos. We talk about blood money, money paid in service of murder, but money also appropriates the vocabulary of blood. For instance: In 2010, ChaCha hemorrhaged money to the tune of ninety percent of his yearly income. Money circulates and the market is stagnant. You inherit money the same way you might inherit your blood, by it flowing from your forebears. Poor economic conditions might suck you dry.

The words economy and ecology share a root: *οἶκος* (oikos), meaning household. One is the management of the household, the other is the study of it. The economy, though we abstract

¹⁴⁸ See Jo Ann Carrigan, *The Saffron Scourge: A History of Yellow Fever in Louisiana, 1796–1905* (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1994).

it with its definitive “the,” is actually an ecological system that also remains embedded in local, relational encounters. Though the shrimpers I spoke to suffered anxiety about the downturn in shrimp prices, some were better suited to weather a financial bust than others. Also, while the United States dipped into recession in 2008, Louisiana experienced stability until 2010.¹⁴⁹ Unlike other agricultural or extractive industries, shrimping largely consists of owner-operated boats with very few employees, working seasonally.¹⁵⁰ Recalling Marx, the trawler does not feed capital the way a factory worker does. ChaCha is self-employed with his wife, doing mostly direct retail business. And by 2015, it was clear that the dead-end labor was sucking him dry. He said that this was the first year he had considered quitting altogether. He was the last of his family to stay the course, and it was bleeding him. With a few exceptions, the rest of the fishers dealt with docks and processors, with whom they might feud over price, a situation that puts the shrimper at a disadvantage. It is hard to have negotiating leverage with two tons of shrimp on your boat in the Louisiana sun. If we understand household in the limited, blood kin way of genealogy, then things are dire indeed. If the shrimpers I spoke to were fulfilling their genealogical destiny, the ever pumping machine of genealogy would also be inscribing the destiny of their children.

¹⁴⁹ Jeff Adelson, “National Recession May Be Catching up with Louisiana, Census Figures Indicate,” *NOLA.com*, September 20, 2012, http://www.nola.com/business/index.ssf/2012/09/post_40.html.

¹⁵⁰ After the development of such technologies as the otter net, butterfly nets, ice boats, and refrigeration, shrimpers stopped working for the processing plants and starting working for themselves. See Harrison, *Buoyancy on the Bayou*, 17–19; Laura Landry, “Shrimping in Louisiana: Overview of a Tradition,” *Folklife in Louisiana: Louisiana’s Living Traditions*, 2003 (originally published in the 1990 Louisiana Folklife Festival booklet), http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/creole_art_shrimping_overv.html.

Their children are less interested in destiny.

Very few shrimpers I spoke to had any indication that shrimping might be in their children's blood, a blood they coauthored. Fewer still even had a mind to encourage them to join the fishing life. And why would they? The fleet can hardly bear new greenhorns, as one shrimper told me. With the competition from foreign shrimp and other burdens of fishing, it is hard to see how the son of a shrimper in the twenty-first century would even consider working a boat, unless his father already commandeered a fleet. The cost of entry is simply too high to ask. In Southern Louisiana, an eighteen-year-old man without a college degree would find a much more lucrative and stable income working in offshore oil. He would be able to advance more quickly than in commercial fishing, and because of the typical two-week on, two-week off schedule, he would still have the freedom to spend days on the water fishing if he felt it was in his blood. The sons and daughters of successful shrimpers found themselves in college, pursuing immaterial labor and starting families far removed from the trawlboat. One shrimper told me his daughter graduated from Yale Law and lives with her husband in Luxembourg. Kim's children were still in college. So were ChaCha's. I guess shrimping came unstuck in their blood.

In a broader view of a household, an ecological view, the boundaries of family and blood are more permeable. Janet Carsten writes,

As well as being subject to transformation within the body, blood can of course also be thought to be a vector of connection between bodies or persons. This may be articulated as occurring through the transfer of semen or breast milk (both, as noted, perceived as transformed blood), through maternal feeding in the womb, or through

habitual acts of commensality, which are perceived to produce blood of the same kind in the different bodies of those who share food.¹⁵¹

The family that eats together, sticks together, and shares one blood. Blood forms a homology among life-giving substances: food, water, milk, semen. Blood nourishes the unborn through the placenta. If we lose too much blood, we will die. Bleeding and hunger make us feel faint. In the act of sex, genitals become engorged with blood, concentrating the magical liquid to the possible locus of conception or at least connection. Blood's necessity to sustaining life is perhaps its most obvious meanings. The sharing of blood, likewise, marks the deepest bonds of interpersonal connection. We call our family blood relatives if they are related through birth. We become blood brothers or sisters when we cut our hands and press them to a wound on the hands of our closest friends. In the Christian Eucharist, the congregation becomes one body as they share the mystical flesh and blood of Christ. The feast, wherein one meal is transformed into the blood of several people, is a profound and common ritual that binds people together. In Southern Louisiana, there is a special emphasis on food as cultural expression,¹⁵² but perhaps the sharing of food is a more profound ritual than that, one that mirrors the sharing of blood.

The work of shrimpers enacts the transformation of shrimp to blood. Though the bulk of shrimp hauled onshore is sold to distributors to then sell to factories, grocers, and

¹⁵¹ Carsten, "Blood Will Out," S7.

¹⁵² See Paige Gutierrez, *Cajun Foodways* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992); Maggie Heyn Richardson, "The Local Diet," in *The Louisiana Field Guide: Understanding Life in the Pelican State*, ed. Ryan Orgera and Wayne Parent, 126–138 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

restaurants, locals of Terrebonne Parish are flush with retail shrimp bought directly from trawlers—some of whom are blood kin and some who are not. On a diet of shrimp okra gumbo, fried shrimp, shrimp spaghetti, shrimp boulettes, shrimp jambalaya, etc.,¹⁵³ the shrimp caught by Gulf Coast trawlers becomes literally incorporated into the bodies of their families and friends and neighbors. Here, the shrimpers' labor, the work of their bodies nourishes the bodies of others. Though their children do not retain the genealogical evidence of commercial shrimping, they experience the sacrament of breaking shrimp together with their families. People who have never set foot on a boat experience this proliferation of life through commercial fishing, and the economics of shrimp in small-town Louisiana touch more than the men who seem to be victims of the global economy.

My mom, for instance, spent years peeling shrimp for the Triple T shrimp factory. I grew up across from the factory, which left a stink of shrimp in the air that was sometimes blotted out by a miasma of ammonia. Even when no one in my family worked in anything connected to commercial shrimping, I can remember my mom, my granny, and my aunts peeling ice chests full of shrimp at the kitchen table. They had a bowl of white vinegar to dip their hands in, which would increase the finger's purchase on a shrimp shell and which would sting when the beak of the shrimp would lacerate the hand. Afterwards, my brother or I would drag an ice chest full of raw shrimp peelings back to the bayou, dumping the husks of shrimp life back whence it came, now a part of the sludge, returning what nutrition was left

¹⁵³ For a popular litany of shrimp dishes, see Robert Zemeckis, *Forrest Gump* (Paramount Pictures: 1994).

to what life could take it. Then the women in the family would distribute the shrimp into bags and freeze them. They would boil some shrimp for supper. They would later run water over the frozen tiles of shrimp, breaking off a quart at a time, to make the meals of the future. The family would survive.

The truth of blood goes beyond genealogical determinism, even if, as Carsten argues, its truth contains that meaning. The truth of blood, how a job can be in a person's blood, is the truth of a body making its way through a well-populated life, touching the earth, touching the water, and touching an extended and permeable household in which people eat together, play together, and work together. People come and people go. Necromancy is practiced as a course of belonging to an environment of people and places that have affected you. Ingold writes this about the dead: "the past may be absent from the present but is not extinguished by it. Death punctuates, but does not terminate, life."¹⁵⁴ An ecology of the world of the shrimpers of Southern Louisiana contains not only networks alive in the present, but the ancestral imagination that fuels new connections. And this magic, this uncertain projection, adapts to the exigencies the fishers face today: how to envision a world that includes them, how to belong to an environment that has only a tenuous grasp on its own continuity.

Back to the question of ChaCha's refusal to share the mythology of blood with his fellow trawlers: his ambivalence seems to come as much from a theoretical understanding of his life as the fact that of the trawlers I spoke to, he lost the most in the last fifteen years. The defiant

¹⁵⁴ Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 143.

anachronism and ability to weather anxiety and to suspend the totalizing either/or logic of success that characterizes most of the fishers I spoke to is not something that can withstand unlimited hardship. The hope that comes from the blood vocation cannot be sustained without imagining an impossible future that rejects the fatalism of capital and of the normalizing technologies of biopower, wherein we become knowable, docile, disciplined bodies. And even then, one can still be crushed under the heel of forces beyond one's control, whether those forces be hurricane force winds, a slow sinking into a gulf, crude black oil tarring up an estuary, or the price of shrimp from distant seas.

To imagine a better future: is hope deadly? Not necessarily. The way we fantasize about the future, the way we attach to things, according to Lauren Berlant, is based on misrecognition. She writes, "To misrecognize is not to err, but to project qualities onto something so that we can love, hate, and manipulate it for having those qualities."¹⁵⁵ We imagine (even as our imagination is accurate). We tap into the virtual aspect of felt reality. This imagination helps us get through the present. It is "what manages the ambivalence and itinerancy of attachment."¹⁵⁶ This fantasy life is the surprising continuity of things through the constant change, through the precarity of our lives. It is a flexible imagination born in blood. For the fishers, it is a way of understanding how their bodies form a nexus of belonging to a given place, to a given people, to a given haunted career. This constitutive misrecognition is what allows us to live; recognizing its importance in how people imagine their connection to their

¹⁵⁵ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 122.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

worlds better equips us to attend to address the systems that are slowly, sweetly killing people.

This fantastic worldbuilding does not lead to durable worlds—at least not in the sense of worlds that will shelter us and endure in stability. The world made by people that shrimp is one that is summoned through a combination of physical repetitions and immaterial possibilities, yearnings, and orientations. It is a world that only exists in the present, in the making. Blood, figured throughout this chapter as an imaginative force as opposed to either pure materiality or symbol, offers a way to understand why shrimpers might unmoor themselves from the norms of self-interest under capitalism and moor themselves to a fleeting, declining industry. This understanding must come from understanding the course of blood for shrimpers: from kinship and proximity in the material world to the realm of recurrent and mythic pasts reconstituted in the present, from the corporeal experience of work in a teeming sensorium to the hope that by working the nets, they might be able to forge new bloodlines in a world that still values them. Analyzing the oscillation between actual material conditions of shrimping and the imagination that allows them to still believe in blood magic also warns of danger of a blood borne imagination: shrimpers who persist shrimping, despite their strong blood, may one day find themselves sacrificing more than their full participation in the American paradigms of upward mobility and capital accrual and the forward march of industrial history. They might not survive their imagination.

For the nonce, however, there is the possibility to live. To build a small world that counters the stories of disenchantment and alienation and economic liberalism that characterize twenty-first century America. The blood vocation is a way for Louisiana shrimpers to enact a

covenant with their place and people and continue to find meaning in the labor of their bodies. It allows them to transform their memories of their families, all together on boat bobbing along on the edge of a great gulf, into something that can feed the people with whom they share the earth. Kinship, when thinking through blood vocations and blood magic and blood lines, must expand to include a vaster network of people, places, movements, embodied experiences, and lives. The shrimpers I spoke to coauthored their world in blood. In that blood, they placed an industry their bodies knew their whole lives, an industry that is being bled out by forces bigger than themselves. Their choice to heed the call of the blood vocation is dangerous, life-affirming, haunting. Though their descendants might not know the toil and peace of a life on the water, they will be indelibly marked with it. The people which whom the fishers share their catch are marked. As are the towns in which they live, the gatherings they attend, and the conversations they join. As soon as I stepped onto ChaCha's boat, shrimping was in my blood. It was in my blood when I first ate it, boiled, at my mother's table. It was in my blood the day I was born.

Water

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
 The water never formed to mind or voice,
 Like a body wholly body, fluttering
 Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
 Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
 That was not ours although we understood,
 Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

—Wallace Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West”¹⁵⁷

Genius loci: the spirit of a place. A protector ghost. The character beyond the physical manifestations of a place that imbues the place with its color, its memory, its atmosphere, its hope. In an ancient world, the *genii locorum* were spirits bound to certain physical locations, presiding over them like statued and invisible warlords or seneschals. Their territories had strong border police: *genii locorum* were stuck in their microstates, but guarded them well. The genius of the spirit: anchored in place, it could shore up its power, creating corporeal weight.

In the world of cartography, every feature has its name. We identify settlements, rivers, lakes, forests, mountains, and deserts. We name the water contained by mud embankments, trussed with steel seawalls meant to prevent the backflow of water into the hinterlands. We name the water when it flows or stagnates in deep and wide grooves in ground cut by older waters. We name overgrown sandbars that have become islands over six thousand years only to slip beneath gulf waves over the last hundred years. We name the water when, in the

¹⁵⁷ Wallace Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West,” in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 105–106 (New York: Library of America, 1997), 1–7.

Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Mauritania and Senegal, it joins the sky and spins towards America, bringing with it wind and flood. This instance, a genre of water we call hurricane, is less a feature of the landscape, but a fury barreling toward the land. The ghost over the sea.

Just before I turned one, water named Juan dumped itself over my house. It poured into Chauvin. It poured and poured. And then, the water, which was now called flood, rose. First, it occupied the space between the ground and the floor of my house. In coastal Louisiana, houses do not rest on the ground—that would be an invitation for the water to come in and bring with it the other machines of rot. Next, the water crept to the subflooring and flooring. Then, it took the foam cushion beneath the cut-pile brown carpet. And then, the carpet. My dad was there, sleeping on a sofa, then waking and sitting up ankle deep in flood.

In 1992, different water, this time named Andrew, paid a visit to Chauvin. After tearing the roofs off marinas and spraying everybody in sight, it too renamed itself flood. When it finally left, our yard was ankle deep in fish: redfish flopping drunkenly on the grass, drums with their heads hollowed out by maggots. These waters extended beyond the genius of the sea, overflowing the borders of named places. They went where they could go and nothing could keep them fixed in place.

Each time the waters came, they took flooring and roofs and cars and lives. They took water's opposite: land. As the story goes, Louisiana loses one football field of land every forty-eight minutes.¹⁵⁸ Here is a historical trajectory of that loss in three moments:

Cutting through Louisiana is North America's greatest river, the Mississippi, which bisects most of the continent, draining its heartland. As planet Earth warmed after the minor ice ages of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, melting ice and increased rain inundated the whole of the Mississippi watershed every three years or so, creating what environmental historian Mikko Saikku characterizes as "an inland sea."¹⁵⁹ The waters of the Mississippi, when the weather is less wet, contract back into its main artery and its lesser ones—the rivers Ohio, Arkansas, Illinois, Missouri, Red, Yazoo, Atchafalaya. On the coast of Louisiana, the mouth of the river is less a maw like the opening of the Saint Lawrence River than a cluster of capillaries bleeding out into the Gulf of Mexico. The European who discovered the mouth of the river, René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, dedicating it and the whole of the delta to France, misremembered where he left it when he returned two years later, mooring in Matagorda Bay in Texas. After two years of looking for the mouth, his crew executed him.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ US Geological Survey, *Land Area Change in Coastal Louisiana (1932 to 2010)*, by Brady R. Couvillion et al., <http://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo8208>, Reston: US Geological Survey, 2011; Bob Marshall et al., "Losing Ground," *ProPublica*, March 11, 2016, <http://projects.propublica.org/louisiana/>.

¹⁵⁹ Mikko Saikku, *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Floodplain* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 141.

¹⁶⁰ Lawrence N. Powell, *The Accidental City: Improvising New Orleans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 8–10.

After seventeen years, the brothers Le Moyne—Pierre, Sieur d’Iberville, and Jean-Baptiste, Sieur de Bienville—found the mouth with the help of members of the Bayagoula nation. Bienville, twenty years later in 1718, seized the land where New Orleans stands today and set up some huts, naming it *Nouvelle-Orléans*. Just before New Orleans turned one, unnamed waters, from the incontinent river, drowned it.¹⁶¹

Bienville thus began what we have been doing with the Mississippi since then: erecting levees, carving drainage canals, engineering the course of water. From this point on, landowners along the 2,320 miles of the main stem of the Mississippi River had to make their own levees to keep the river in its track—if they could. This model did little to stop the waters from flooding. The United States slowly began to brace the Mississippi with a “levees only” policy beginning in 1879 when the Mississippi River Commission, a federal agency, was tasked with stopping seasonal floods. We come now, to the second moment: The Great Flood of 1927, when the Good Friday storm felled the walls that would contain the river water. It was a cataclysm that claimed lives by the hundreds and homes numbering 637,000. The waters in the river reached sixty feet above sea level and cut *crevasses*, or breaches, in the levee walls. Water gushed through the crevasses with all the violence of Niagara Falls, turning the Mississippi Delta south of Illinois into an inland sea.¹⁶² The City of New Orleans blew

¹⁶¹ Ibid.: 43–51.

¹⁶² Saikku, *This Delta, This Land*, 156–159.

up the levee down river, sacrificing Saint Bernard Parish and the muskrat fur trade to preserve the French Quarter.¹⁶³

Congress passed the Flood Control Act of 1928, which transferred responsibility for flood control and the building of levees to the Army Corps of Engineers, as well as protecting the federal government from liability.¹⁶⁴ Instead of reimagining the control of water, the Army Corps of Engineers doubled down on a policy of building levees. The levees, stronger and taller than the ones chopped apart by the 1927 floods, walled off 3,410 miles of the Mississippi River and its tributaries, with another 2,786 miles waiting to be graded to design specifications by late 2005.¹⁶⁵ This bracing interrupts the regeneration of land through sediment deposits in the river's flood cycle in the flood plains and along the river mouth.¹⁶⁶ So we sink. This is called subsidence. At the same time as the Army Corps of Engineers toiled through its flood control projects, the oil industry began dredging canals in a lattice along the coast, introducing salt to the inland waters and making the land so much more permeable.¹⁶⁷ These large-scale rationalizations of the land, ordering the spongy dirt and

¹⁶³ Richard M. Mizelle, *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 44–47.

¹⁶⁴ *Flood Control Act*, Ch. 596, Sess. 1 (May 15, 1928).

¹⁶⁵ Raymond B. Seed et al., *Investigation of Performance of the New Orleans Flood Protection Systems in Hurricane Katrina on August 29, 2005* (Independent Levee Investigation Team at University of California at Berkeley, 2006), 4 - 8.

¹⁶⁶ Richard H. Kesel, "The Decline in the Suspended Load of the Lower Mississippi River and Its Influence on Adjacent Wetlands," *Environmental Geology and Water Sciences* 11, no. 3 .

¹⁶⁷ R. Eugene Turner, Opinion, "Discussion Of: Olea, R. A. And Coleman, J. L., Jr., 2014. "A Synoptic Examination of Causes of Land Loss in Southern Louisiana as Related to the Exploitation

chaotic waterways, create the third moment, the greatest flood: the reintroduction of the sea, which eats away at the coast. Coming up through shipping canals and brackish bayous, the sea kills plants holding the sandy dirt together with its salt. The wetlands fall away, and hurricanes maintain their mid-Atlantic strength as they break against the land. The relentless struggle to engineer water, to fix water in place, to contain its genius has, with cruel irony, made people more vulnerable to watery disaster. In 2005, a hurricane of middling strength named Katrina killed 1,833 people in five states, with 1,577 coming from Louisiana.¹⁶⁸ In the immediate aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (which fell on the Louisiana coast less than a month after Katrina), the sea also claimed 217 square miles of land.

While it is easy to blame disastrous attempts to order the water on governments and corporations, who in concert orchestrated the canalization of southern Louisiana over the twentieth century, they are not alone in reshaping the environment. My great-grandfather, for instance, Henry “Tchonque” Eschete, tore a shortcut canal through the marsh, named the Cut-off à Tchonque, to get to his shrimping camp easier. Lower Terrebonne Parish has canals bearing the names of its most embedded families—Sevin, Boudreaux, Falgout—dug by hand and spade. These lines, once the width of a pirogue, widened to boulevard, bayou, and bay. Now, they are open water.

of Subsurface Geological Resources.” *Journal of Coastal Research*, 30(5), 1025–1044,” *Journal of Coastal Research* 30, no. 6 (2014): 1332–1333.

¹⁶⁸ Richard D. Knabb, Jamie R. Rhome, and Daniel P. Brown, *Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Katrina, 23–30 August 2005* (National Hurricane Center, 2005), 11.

You can still see the names of the old places on maps, places that have been washed out to sea: Pelican Bayou, Big Misalle Bayou, Bayou Ne Touche Pas, Oak Bayou, Austrian Bayou, Crooked Bayou, Oyster Bayou, Bayou Big Parasol, Bayou Lucien, Flat Bayou, Lake Saint Jean Baptiste, Pelican Lake, Dog Lake, Caillou Lake, Hackberry Lake, Lake Raccourci, Lake Peltó, Bayou Go To Hell. Some of the bayous—slow-moving anabranches and distributaries of larger rivers—have become lagoons—fragile lakes with sandbars, reefs, and mangrove clumps as barriers to the gulf. Most of these waters have become bays: the toothmarks of the sea eating the coastline. The bays widen, concavity giving way to smoother arcs, and we call this the gulf.

In other words, we tried, really tried, to outsmart the sea. But we could not. Instead, we invited the sea in, to live with us, to eat us alive. We talk about bodies of water, and indeed, they are wholly body: you can feel these waters press against you as they encroach on the land, as they press into the floorboards of your home, as they spill over all your stuff. They wrangle other bodies further upstream and inland: the changing estuary, the northern migration of sea gulls and salt water fish and crustaceans into bayous that once were muddy but saltless. But water is also not a body: it spills, it seeps, it floods, it drowns. Its sheer fluidity obeys a different logic. Instead of accumulation, dispersion; instead of organization, repetition and rhythm; instead of fixity, a constant, variable cry.

The water caused constantly a cry in the fishers I spoke to. Life on the water is the only life they could possibly want. It is the only life they know. The sea calls to them, inviting them back again and again into the limitless world of water. Life on the water is in their blood, their internal sea. Water is an unreliable and dangerous siren. Over the past hundred years, it

has drowned leagues of land, land that was once settlement, farmland, and guardian estuaries. As the sea brings its salt inshore, it has changed the habitats of shrimp, crabs, and oysters. At first, the introduction of saltwater was welcome: it expanded the shrimp fisheries inland, coinciding with the expansion of the shrimping industry from dockside seiners (wage laborers employed in casting nets by hand) to a fleet of entrepreneur-captains that persists today. The returns diminished because the saltwater also has a poisonous quality, killing the plants that hold the land together. Brown and white shrimp need the fast-eroding, brackish estuaries of the coast to grow large enough for humans to eat. If the sea's encroachment is not stopped, there will be saltwater until the levees and floodgates surround some, but not all the human inhabitants of Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes.¹⁶⁹ If it is not stopped, the fisheries will be all gulf, the hometowns people have lived in for a couple hundred years will be gulf. And the fishers will have to move north, to where the land is sturdier and fishing jobs are scarcer.

Shrimpers can find a job in oil, the industrialized and toxic return of life on the water. In Louisiana, men can make a good living working on offshore oil production platforms, drilling rigs, crew boats, and tugboats. They can support the oil industry onshore, too, with welding, mechanical skills, and shipbuilding work. The security of the oil industry comes at a cost: the 2010 Deep Horizon blast blackened the Gulf of Mexico with its crude, viscous fuel. The oil coated fish and oysters and pelicans. It coagulated into tarballs, which were once an

¹⁶⁹ As of 2017, this flood control system, the Morganza to the Gulf of Mexico Project, is under the auspices of the Army Corps of Engineers until its completion.

occasional, nasty surprise in a trawl or on a beach, one that was a trace of industry that basically kept Louisiana financially solvent for the better part of a century. Oil is water's dreadful other in coastal Louisiana: a capricious, generous, and vicious genius loci of the Gulf of Mexico, its necessary mob boss. Though shrimpers cry constantly about the oil industry, they claim to not be able to do without it: if oil left Louisiana, their livelihoods would be over as much as if their homes would sink underwater. With government-subsidized channels and canals and pipelines and processing plants, however, the oil industry provided avenues for saltwater to drift inland. It drives the changing Louisiana geology, geography, ecology, and economics.¹⁷⁰ Oil has made life on the water complicated and the fishers ambivalent. It has introduced another dimension of fluidity *and* order.

In "The Idea of Order at Key West," Wallace Stevens writes of a great ordering a woman sings into being. She mimics the sea and so masters it in her singing. Her art is a rational worldmaking. But the water she mimics is inimitable: it is body and not body. It is a formless, unintelligent chaos, an inhuman. The singer entrains the sea to her worldmaking:

... And when she sang, the sea,
 Whatever self it had, became the self
 That was her song, for she was the maker.¹⁷¹

The sea becomes a reflection of the world the singer was making in the singing. You could not listen to the crashing of the waves without hearing the singer's meanings. This

¹⁷⁰ See Richard Misrach and Kate Orff, *Petrochemical America* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2012), 119, 131–135, 169–177.

¹⁷¹ Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West," 38–40.

worldmaking organizes the chaotic liquid world of the sea. But Stevens, the great rational transcendentalist, hedges: what self could the sea, a body and an empty shirt, have had?

What is the self of the Gulf, the same one that long ago played muse to Wallace Stevens, the same one that is invading the Louisiana coast?

When we imagine the sea as a body, wholly body, we do not imagine it with the organization of a human body. There is no liver of the sea, no spleen. While we might term the terminus of a river a mouth, it is a mouth that can consume the whole of the river's body in a nightmare grin. The features and structures of bodies of water are in constant flux, shifting in flows of water that constantly rearrange, make and unmake sea beds and dead zones of hypoxia that prohibit marine life and currents and waves. The most salient parts of the sea—the borders and the water itself—flutter like the empty shirt in the Stevens poem ("Like a body wholly body, fluttering / Its empty sleeves"¹⁷²). The empty body of the sea, a body filled with flattened intensities rather than discrete organs, recalls a concept from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: the *Body without Organs*. They write that the Body without Organs "is continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or circulate, and attributing to itself subjects that it leaves with nothing more than a name as the trace of an intensity."¹⁷³ An organism is an organization of life into a specific arrangement of organs—which are tools to maintain that life. The constituent parts

¹⁷² Ibid.: 3–4.

¹⁷³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 4.

of an organism have meaning and order. Deleuze and Guattari have a blessed rage to disorder. Stevens attributes a rage to order to the singer/world maker of his poem:

The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.¹⁷⁴

One way to read these final lines of "The Idea of Order at Key West" is that art's task is to order the chaotic world and our chaotic selves. Stevens champions artifice, the triumph of Man over Nature, the mastery of the self. This interpretation makes sense for the tightly ordered poem with its iambic pentameter and precise vocabulary. In the penultimate stanza, the order-making of the singer permeates the world even after she ceases to sing and the speaker turns back from the beach ("Why, when the singing ended and we turned / Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights, / [...] / Master the night and portioned out the sea"¹⁷⁵). Here, we can read the ordering impulse transferring from the singer to the speaker of the poem, who finds new order in the lights of fishing boats. The final lines support that reading, but we can also read the sea as a constant challenge to the will to order. The sea, a body without organs, introduces asignifying particles, pure intensities into the well-ordered world, disrupting our structures of meaning, our belief in the stability of identity or origin. And we rage.

¹⁷⁴ Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West," 53–56.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.: 45–46, 49.

With water, rage is futile rage. Consider how a rage for order imposed its levees on the Mississippi River. Consider how Hurricane Katrina drove up its mouth and found the best backdoors and canals and cracks and made New Orleans a lake. Consider how coastal restoration projects dump sediment and Christmas trees and old ships to try and rebuild barrier islands that lost the siege of erosion. Consider how a rage for energy and products and transportation and capital caused us—and by us I mean the living things on planet Earth—to lose the battle against the sea, as glaciers melt and join the horde of water. From aqueducts to dams to levees to freshwater diversion, we have been in an arms race with water since we decided to impose our order on it. Water, however, is not in an arms race with us. It is motiveless, inhuman, a fluttering and empty shirt, elemental. Its old chaos is unaware of us.

For shrimpers of coastal Louisiana, life oscillates between an ordered world of land, where they face the tyranny of capital, culture, kinship, and identity, and the disordered world of water, where they face an inhuman force of shifting allegiances, asignification, freedom of movement if you can learn to ride the waves. Life on the water is at once dangerous and peaceful, flexible and relentless, experimental and selfless. While it is certain shrimpers bring with them the traces of themselves, their origins, their ghostly demarcations, they also face a vastness that diminishes those things, including the ties of blood vocation and family that provide them with moorings. One thing that distinguishes a shrimper from a person with a conventional job is that the shrimper must learn to be suspended, to float in uncertainty. To ride the currents wherever they may go. Life on the water is attractive to fishers not only because of its nautical beauty and the inertia of heritage, but because it offers a method to cope with an ordered world that has left them and many other people behind. While

imagining shrimping to be in their blood provides shrimpers with a counternarrative that reimagines a world of hope and magic different from the banality of everyday American life, the blood vocation is still a way to anchor themselves, to be grounded in the physicality of work and the intimacy and belonging of shared familial destiny. Life on the water, in opposition, is a world of pure unmooring: the release of all anchors except for the one that compels a person to return to land. Getting on a boat and spending a few weeks beyond the three-mile limit, trawling for cheap shrimp is not escape, it is a therapy. It is listening for an inhuman noise that we might understand, and sing. Those who make their lives on the sea are like the singer in the Stevens poem: “there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made.”¹⁷⁶ Their encounter with the water reveals the possibility of redirecting the rage for order away from ourselves and towards making an inhabitable, mutable, and doomed world livable.

In this chapter, I will trace the contours of how different people and institutions have tried to tame the sea and of how the sea washes over those attempts. In the first section, “Bodies of Water,” which has its own subdivisions, I meditate on the limits of bodies of and on water, specifically how water challenges the stability of both institutional knowledge and foregrounds the fragility of the human body. In the second section, “Land’s End,” I conjure the generative possibilities of living with water, as opposed to trying to dominate it. Ultimately, in the following fragments of history and story, woven through with archival and

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.: 42–43.

ethnographic voices, I argue that to understand how shrimpers cope with their declining industry requires a return to the sea. Instead of mastery or rationalization, I aim to have a nautical acceptance of uncertainty, of offering instead of logical conclusions, an experience of an impossible rage for order against elemental disorder. Water, the sea, and the lure of it expose the limits of institutional, communal, and individual organization. The sea in Louisiana, literally, is antifoundational: the land erodes beneath our feet, in our lifetimes. To survive this, to weather the sea-like encroachment of capital into every facet of life, requires us to tell different stories of uncertainty, of mystery, and of wet forces. To survive this, we need to be buoyant, flexible, and experimental. To survive this, we need to rage, even as our ordering efforts are washed out to sea.

Bodies of Water

And God said, “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.”

—Genesis 1:6¹⁷⁷

The story goes that the day after God created the heavens and the earth and portioned off light from dark, he set to organizing water. Ground will not come until the third day. On the day of water division, the second day, God chooses sky to ply water from water: a portion of the water will cover the earth and a portion will be locked in the firmament, which He names Heaven. The next day, God raises dry land that collects the water into seas. This is the origin of the word *levee*, from the French *lever*, to raise. Sometime later, according to the story, He will break the sky and flood the earth of its scummy life. And yet, He chooses one small family to live on the waters that have drowned every breathing body. Once the waters go back to wherever they were before, Noah and the rest get to reapportion earth, to name the water between tracts of dry ground.

In lower Terrebonne Parish, the bayous and canals are separated by wet, marshy ground that is sinking into the Gulf of Mexico. At some point, the waters will tear down the dry land raised by God. Or, at least, water will do what water has always done with land: carry it bit

¹⁷⁷ Genesis 1:6 (King James Bible).

by bit out to sea. Coastlines, alluvial deltas, and islands have been shaped by millennia of rushing, trickling, rising, swelling, leaking, and relentless waters.

Joke's on us for believing in borders when it comes to water.

We imagine water as a body, something contained, the discrete fullness of an entity, whose depths are internal. A body: a fleshy organization, the beginning and end of an individual self, that which holds our vitality or soul or epiphenomenal consciousness, the limit and structuring principle of our experience of life. We use body metaphors for collections of things and people: a writer's body of work, the body politic, a multinational corporation, the Corpus Hermeticum and Corpus Aristotelicum, the United States Army Corps of Engineers.¹⁷⁸ We imagine these collections to be organized the way we are: into subcollections of organs, into structures that allow for individual differentiation working towards a common purpose, into hierarchy and demarcation and workflows. The body of work by a poet, such as Wallace Stevens, can be divided into categories like juvenalia, major books or works that might signify an aesthetic shift or the introduction of additional concerns or exigencies, prose that promotes their *ars poetica*, and unrelated prose. We would imagine that the major poetical works be the organizing principle for the rest of the body. It is easy to see how we might mistake a corporate entity for a person: there is a central command whose goals are divided into manageable tasks given to highly differentiated

¹⁷⁸ We use the Old English derived "body" and the Latin derived "corpus" for these corporate entities. Corporate comes from the verbal form of corpus: to make a body.

members of the organization. We might consider a corporation like British Petroleum, whose executive faculty sets the agenda for the company, whose public relations department speaks with its lips, whose engineers and inspectors see with its eyes, whose legal team listens with its ears and manipulates other entities with its hands, whose oilfield operators and roughnecks and roustabouts bend its back on the continental shelves. But what is the organizing principle of water?

To consider a body of water a corporate entity is ludicrous. The Gulf of Mexico is not a collection of water and fish and oil. It cannot be because the things in this body of water are in constant circulation. Unlike the God of the Bible, we cannot ply water from water, at least not on the global scale necessary for water to incorporate into something more discrete. And yet, we try. We cling to the idea that the water can still be body, wholly body. And why not? The human body varies between about forty-eight and sixty-five percent water.¹⁷⁹ The rest is all lipids and bone and fiber. The human body pulses with the currents of blood. We contain oceans within. Herein lies the difference: blood and the other waters of the flesh are, for the most part, internal; water—the sea—is external. There is no internal to the sea, at least not the way we mean internal as a signifier of hidden constitution, organization, subjectivity, and truth. We might say that we can feel our truths in our bones, that our vocation is in our blood, or even that we act in primordial lunges towards survival, a program etched into the stuff of our genes. With the sea, we might say that it rises. It drowns. Its waves crash against

¹⁷⁹ Arthur C. Guyton, *Textbook of Medical Physiology*, 8th ed. (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1991), 274.

shores, and sometimes the sky twists it into storms. The sea can contain anything, growing with each accumulation suspended in its waters, but not incorporated into its body. It can expel its contents in unexpected places: bodies blistering on beaches hundreds of miles from where they were once quick with life, tires caught in nets far from any road. No matter what falls into the sea or what is spit from it, the sea is still, ultimately, the sea.

Names of Water, or the Idea of Order at Mare à Clay

What kind of Beast would turn its life into words?

—Adrienne Rich, “Twenty-one Love Poems: VII”¹⁸⁰

The old people, as the oldest shrimpers I spoke to referred to their parents and grandparents, came up in the time of seines and cast nets, of canots and pirogues and challons.¹⁸¹ In the old days, as the oldest shrimpers referred to that epoch, each particular flow of water, each water limned with land was named, committed to a navigational memory. George Sevin, father of O’Neal “Chacha” Sevin, retired shrimper in his late 70s, described the way people inscribed their names on the waterways:

I’ve seen some places, like the families, that’s [no longer] still there, like some of them markers. Like the Mare à Clay [for] old man Clay Lecompte. Right there at Robinson [Canal], that point they got where Placid [Canal] is at, that would go all the way to the Mare Bleue back there. And they’d plough right there, make them a garden and all, and they’d hunt. We called the pond the Mare à Clay. Every one of them other ponds had a name. It’s unbelievable what they had in them ponds. They

¹⁸⁰ Adrienne Rich, “Twenty-One Love Poems,” in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems, 1974–1977*, 25–36 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), VII: 1.

¹⁸¹ Canot: a sailing lugger with a hinged keel designed for navigating shallow water. Pirogue: originally, dug-out cypress canoes; now flat-bottomed, sharp-hulled row-boats. Challon: like a pirogue, but with a blunt, flat-nosed bow instead of a pointed one.

had bass in there, neg—if that would be right there now, it would be unbelievable. And I think it's the oil industry that killed it.

In the old days of lower Terrebonne Parish, people ordered the small world by naming its small features. Ponds (*mares*) and ditches (canals, cuts, *coups*, cutoffs) were named for the men who were their stewards. Mr. George, remembering the slippery way names and families and ponds disappear from a world he could navigate by naming, does not believe that people today would believe the granular riches hiding in the watering holes. Back then, there was enough land to plough a garden and hold animals suitable for hunting. Back then, water had its edges, making it easier to name.

If you look at the comprehensive cartographies undertaken for over a hundred years by the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the mapping arm of the Department of the Interior, you will not find the Mare à Clay, the Mare Bleue, the Cutoff à Tchonque, or even Placid Canal (Figures 11–13). The USGS nevertheless represents the best attempt at recording the names of the waters of the Louisiana Gulf Coast. These maps divide the land and sea into quadrants of knowable places, naming each place with institutional aloofness. The 15 by 15 minute maps of the area are named for Dulac, even though Chauvin is at its center. The four 7.5 by 7.5 minute maps that comprise the Dulac quadrant are named Dulac, Lake Quitman, Montegut, and Lake Tambour. Lake Boudreaux, the larger and more important lake to both Dulac and Chauvin, was actually labeled as Quitman Lake in the 1894 survey, an error rectified in the more precise 1941 mapping (Figure 11). Lake Barré fills the Lake Tambour quadrant, whose namesake does not even appear on the 1894 survey. In the 2015 survey, Lake Barré is labeled Gulf of Mexico, even though Lake Tambour, which is still

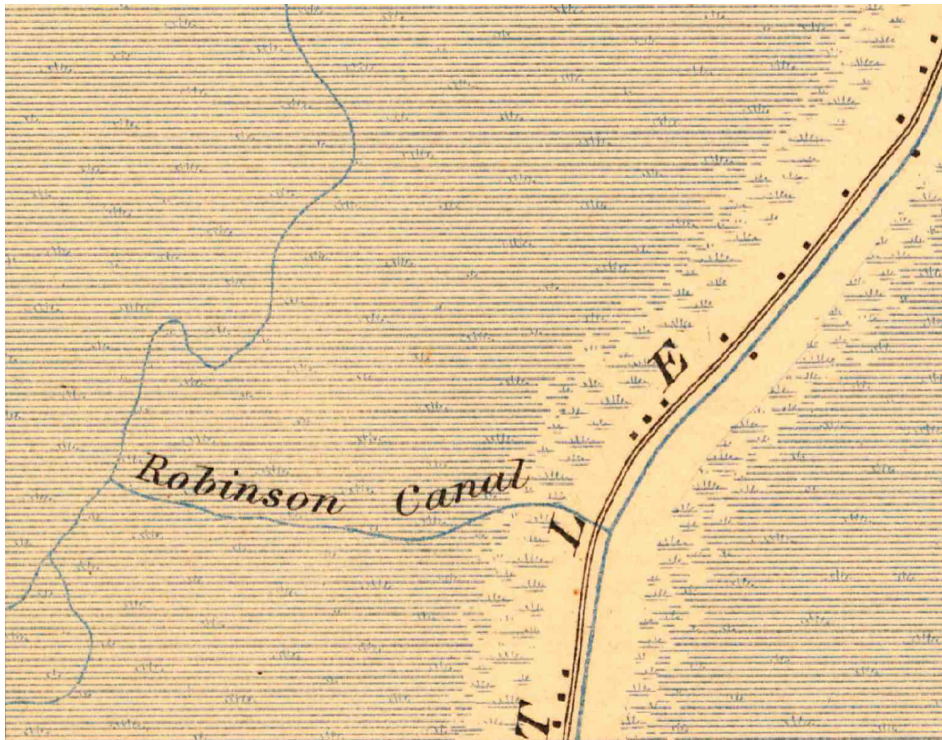
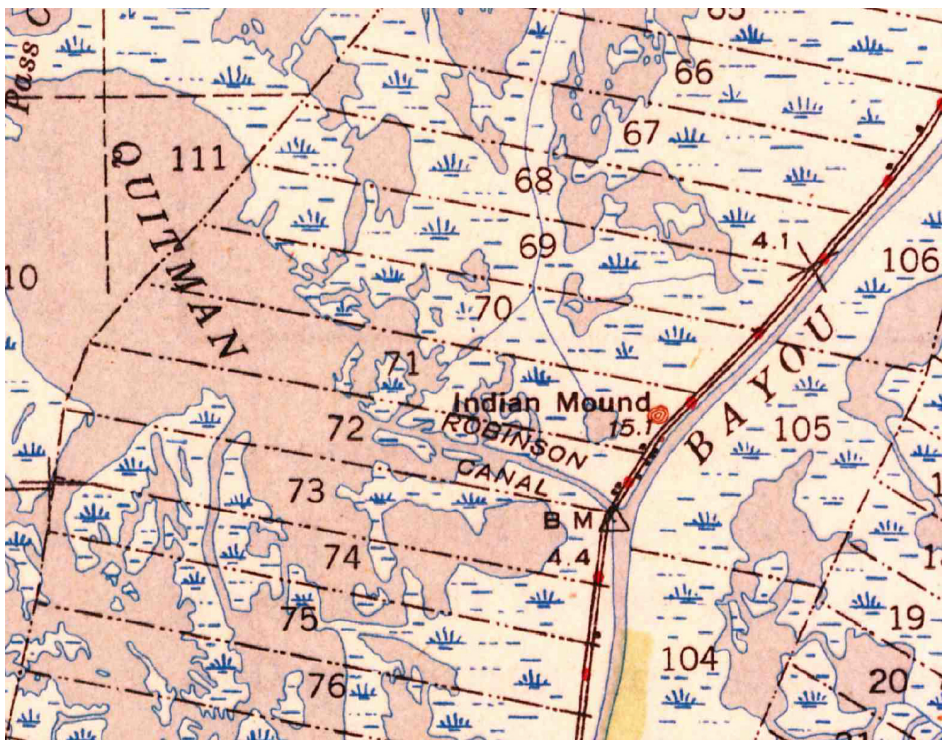


Figure 11: Robinson Canal, USGS, 1894 and 1941. Based on George Sevin's description, the approximate location of the Mare à Clay in 1894 (above) and 1941 (below), excerpted from USGS maps. The 1894 map does not chart the mares and cuts George describes. In the 1941 map, the mare may be in one of the various ponds surrounding Robinson Canal.



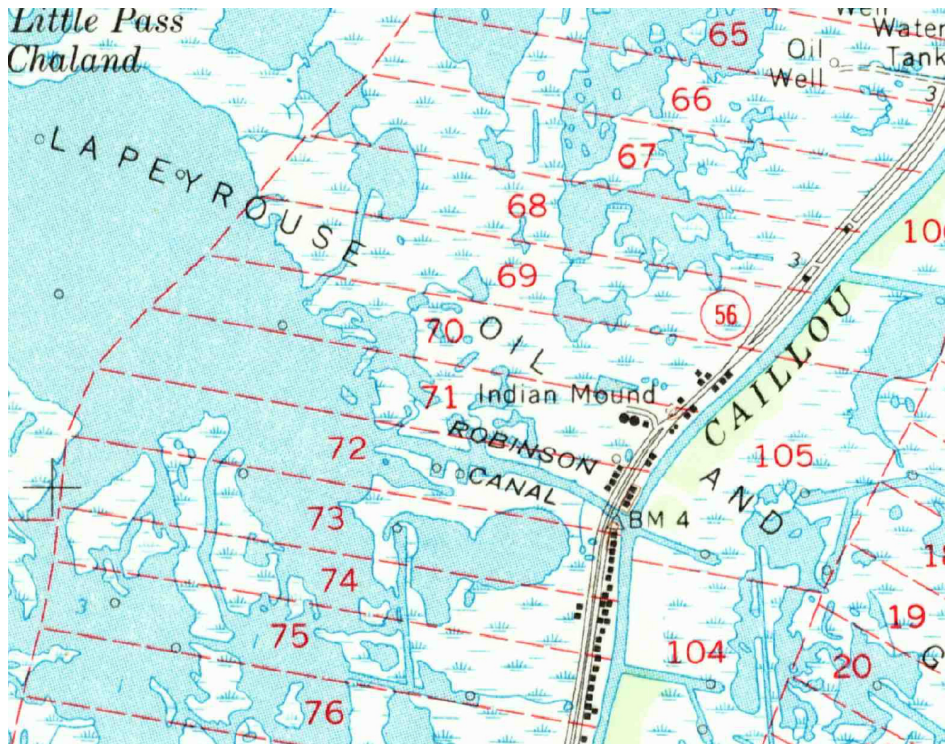


Figure 12: Robinson Canal, USGS, 1964 and 1994. Based on George Sevin's description, the approximate location of the Mare à Clay in 1964 (above) and 1994 (below), excerpted from USGS maps. Note the combining of ponds into larger bodies of water.

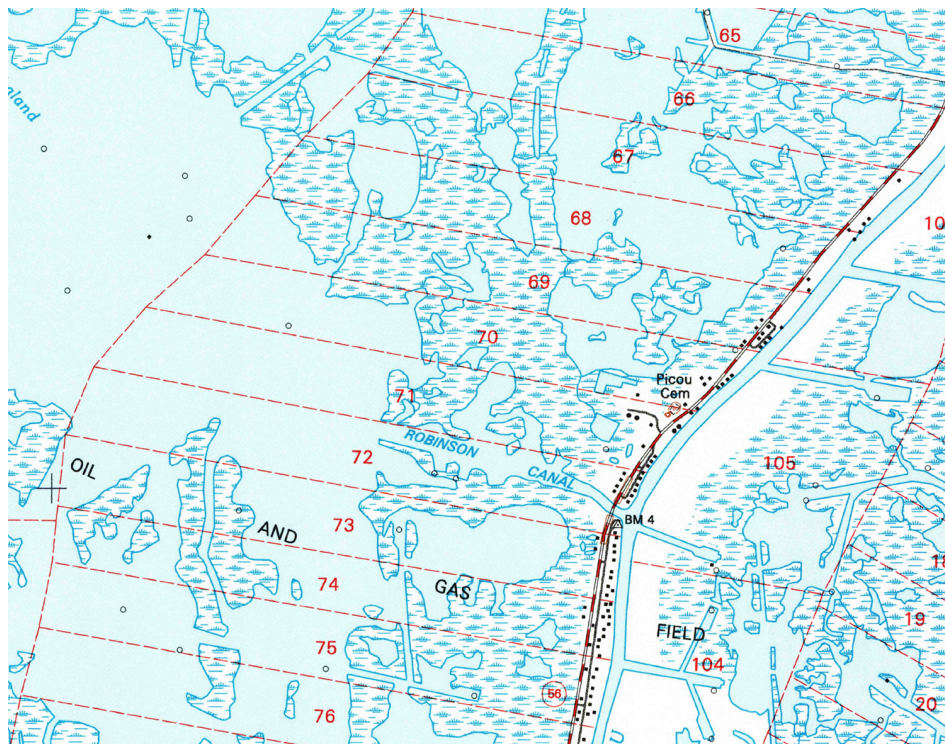




Figure 13: Robinson Canal, USGS, 2015. Based on George Sevin's description, the approximate location of the Mare à Clay in 2015, excerpted from the current USGS map. which, unlike previous maps, includes satellite imagery as well as shaded relief (the deep green is shallow water, whereas the brighter greens and browns are dry land or trembling marsh). In the earliest map, either the ponds did not exist or were not surveyed by the cartographers. In the most recent map, ponds have been replaced by shallow open water flanking isthmi revealed by the rising water and sinking land.

labeled, likewise lost its southernmost shore to the Gulf. These maps, though lush and useful, impose an order on these areas only possible for those who must not daily navigate the marshes and ridges and waterways.

Would the USGS, today, believe the quality of bass in the *mares* right there at Robinson, where Placid is? Would they believe the bounty contained in those ponds, the biodiversity, and wealth of life, which was so remarkable that it became a historical and spatial marker for Mr. George?

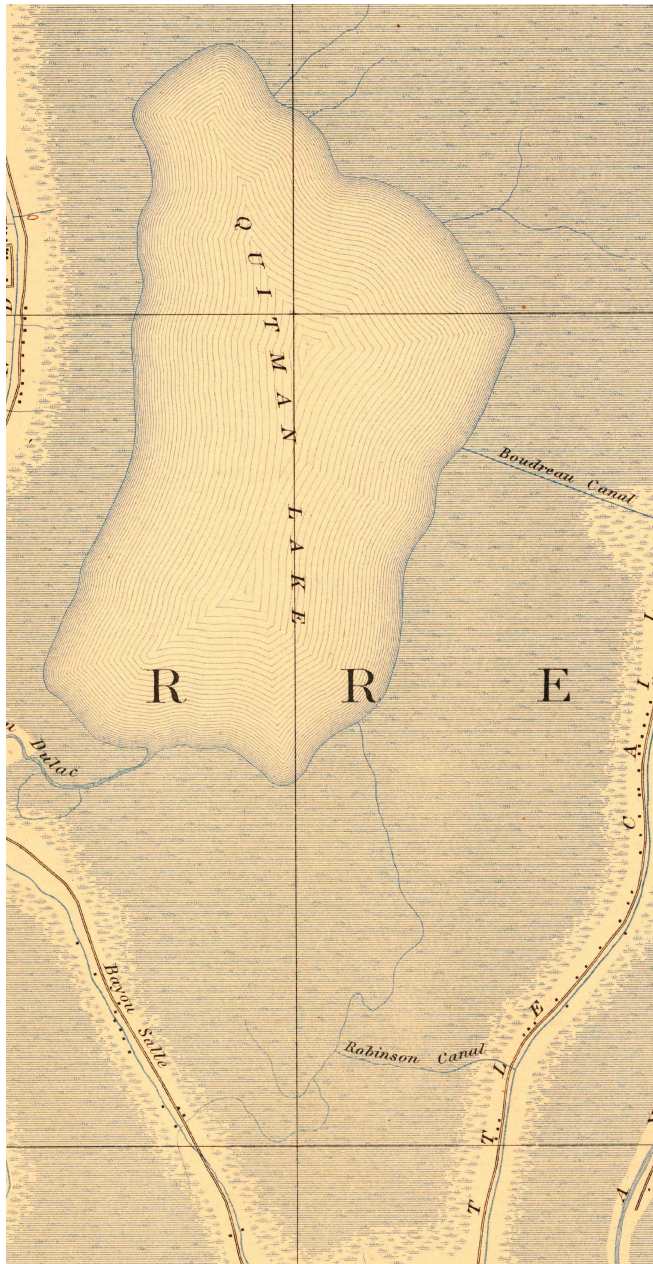


Figure 14: Lake Quitman, USGS, 1894. Note the absence of Lake Boudreaux.

The answer, as we must know, is yes. Governmental surveyors and scientists believe what they can measure, and with enough time, funding, personnel, and political will, we could have measured the Mare à Clay, even then, in the old days. Today, if we could find the pond, we could plumb it, catalogue it, and overwhelm it with our prowess at knowing. Our measurements, written on ledger or typed into a spreadsheet, would then become facts: markers—historical, spatial, and schematic—that we could then use to navigate the broader corpus of knowledge about wetlands, biodiversity, hydrology, subsidence, erosion, industry, crustaceans and

fish, marsh grass, mud, people willing to live on saturated earth that is falling into the sea, people who yoke their livelihoods to the life they find in water and estuary and forest and field, people who are getting older but still can remember when the littlest things had names

and landmarks and seamarks were not just coordinates on the way to a destination, but stories.

For example, let us return to Lake Boudreaux, erstwhile Quitman Lake. Despite fishing Lake Boudreaux and its marshy passes since childhood, I had never heard of Quitman Lake (or Lake Quitman) until I began scholarly research on the area. My dad had heard of it because my dad is interested in local history and genealogy, but he only knew two things about it: that historian Alcée Fortier described Chauvin as “a post-hamlet in the central part of Terrebonne parish, [...] situated at the head of Quitman Lake,”¹⁸² and

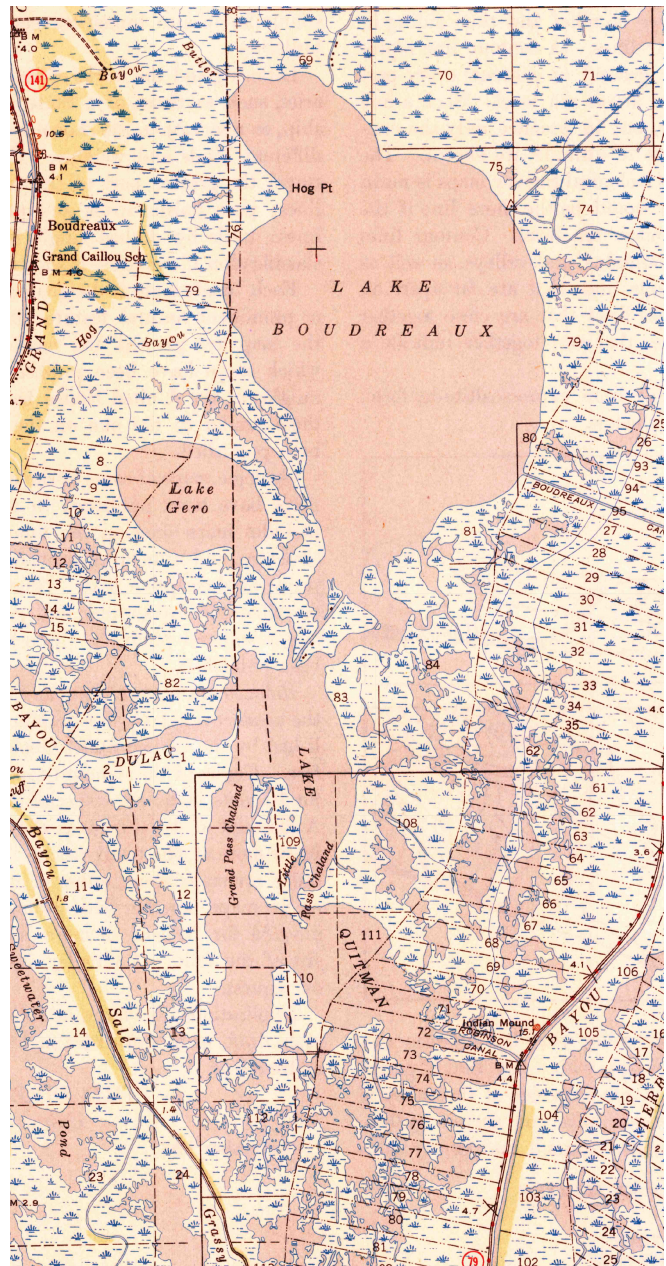


Figure 15: Lake Quitman becomes Lake Boudreaux, USGS, 1941.

¹⁸² Alcée Fortier, *Louisiana: Comprising Sketches of Parishes, Towns, Events, Institutions, and Persons, Arranged in Cyclopedic Form* (Madison: Century Historical Association, 1914), 201.

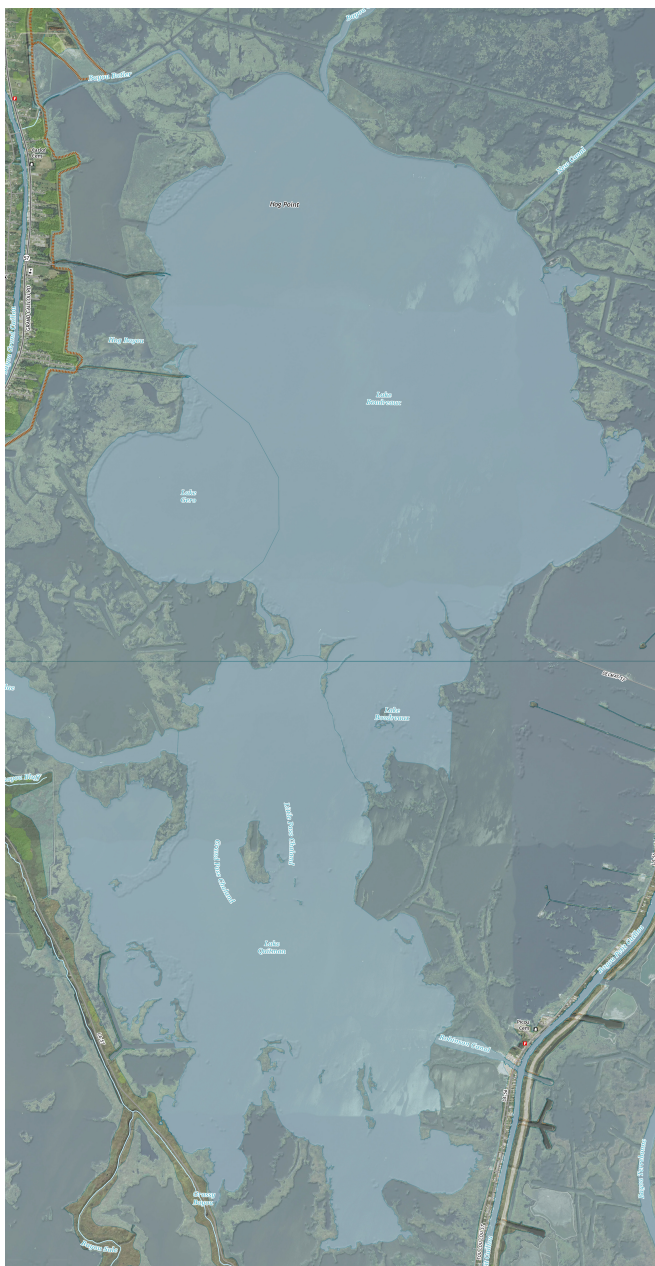


Figure 16: Lake Quitman and Lake Boudreaux, USGS, 2015.

that the name Quitman referred to a soldier.¹⁸³ I asked my grandfather, whose daddy cut the Cutoff à Tchonique and ran a shrimp drying platform in marsh below Lake Boudreaux, whether he had ever heard of Quitman Lake. He said no. In the 1938–1939 session of the United States Board of Geographical Names, a body within the US federal government ordered into existence by President Benjamin Harrison in 1890 to oversee naming conventions, it was decided that the body of water now known as Lake Boudreaux is correct, “not Quitman Lake.”¹⁸⁴ *Houma Courier* columnist Bill Ellzey flirted with this mystery in 2012, but seems

¹⁸³ He could not tell me where he learned about the Quitman origin nor any more details.

¹⁸⁴ United States Department of the Interior, *Decisions of the United States Board on Geographical Names: Decisions Rendered between July 1, 1938 and June 30, 1939*, Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1939, 8.

to have stopped at acknowledging the discrepancy.¹⁸⁵ It is here that this story becomes a story of remembering and forgetting names.

The people of Chauvin, for instance, have forgotten that Quitman Lake is named for John A. Quitman, a general, congressman, pirate, plantation owner, and governor of Mississippi. He gave Narciso López soldiers and money to wrest Cuba from Spanish control in order to add it to the roster of US slave states. When this failed, he resigned his governorship. He owned a plantation in Dulac (though not Dulac Plantation), called Live Oaks. He never quite lived there, but he sent overseers, including a brother and a son, to force enslaved black people to produce sugar and molasses.¹⁸⁶ Historian Robert E. May describes Live Oaks as “particularly fearsome,” writing, “Labor conditions were brutal, and transfer to the Louisiana place was sometimes used as a punishment for unruly slaves at Quitman’s other holdings.”¹⁸⁷ For Quitman to get to his lake, he would have to go through John M. Pelton’s Dulac Plantation. There is no compelling archival or ethnographic evidence that suggests an answer why the people of Chauvin have forgotten the radically pro-slavery Mississippi governor who owned and punished human beings the next bayou over. In contemporary maps, Quitman

¹⁸⁵ Bill Ellzey, “Flooding Sparks a Lawsuit for Crop Damage,” *The Courier*, Jan 18, 2012; Bill Ellzey, “Lake’s Name Change Is a Mystery,” *The Courier*, Jan 21, 2012; Bill Ellzey, “Time for the Lights to Be Turned On,” *The Courier*, Jan 25, 2012.

¹⁸⁶ New Orleans District US Army Corps of Engineers, *Houma Navigation Canal Deepening Project Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana: Cultural Resources Literature Search, Records Review and Research Design*, by Joanne Ryan, Richard A. Weinstein, and Charles E. Pearson, Contract no. DACW29-01-D-0016, Delivery Order no. 0005, Baton Rouge: Coastal Environments, Inc., 2005, 59–60.

¹⁸⁷ Robert E. May, “John A. Quitman and His Slaves: Reconciling Slave Resistance with the Proslavery Defense,” *The Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 4 (1980): 556.

Lake is surrounded by “Impassible Swamp,”¹⁸⁸ so perhaps those on Bayou Petit Caillou just did not know what was going on with Bayou Grand Caillou. Or perhaps the presence of large-scale institutional slavery was too distasteful a memory to cherish. The people of Chauvin, for instance, have also forgotten Colonel James Baker Robinson who owned a plantation and a crew of slaves near present-day Robinson Canal and about whom there is scant information. And yet, the names of slavers and their plantations trace the waterways and lands of lower Terrebonne: Sarah Bridge after Sarah Plantation, Woodlawn Ranch Road after Woodlawn Plantation, Barrow Canal after plantation owner R. R. Barrow, Quitman Lake, Robinson Canal.

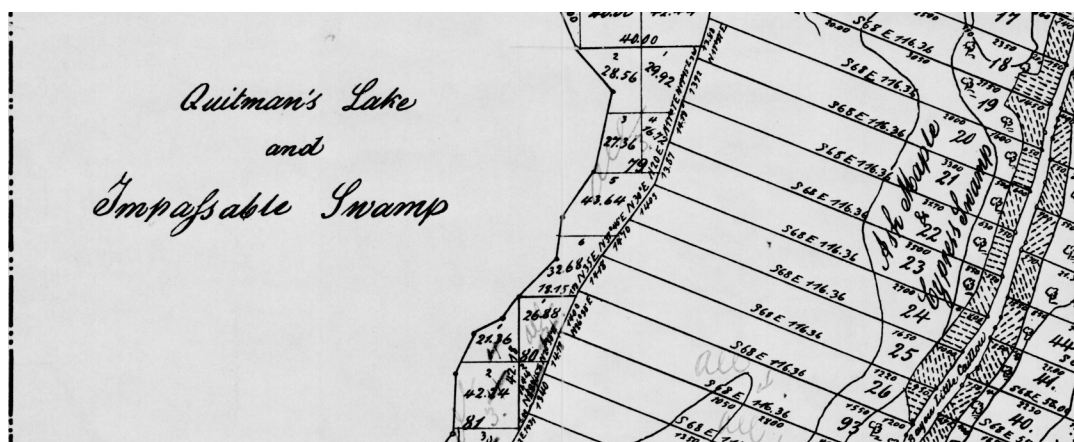


Figure 17: Excerpt from the 1856 plat map of Chauvin area. You can see the impenetrable Quitman Lake and swamp. Plat maps often include names of people granted land (before the US Land Act of 1820), but this section included no “grants,” which is not to say that it was uninhabited. This map also does not show Boudreaux Canal, indicating that it, perhaps, came later.

¹⁸⁸ See Figure 3: William McCulloh, *Township 19S, Range 18E, Southeastern District West of the Mississippi River*, Official Plat Map (Donaldsonville: Surveyor General Office, 1856).

Instead, people in Chauvin have reordered its ghosts, so that the only ones that remain are the ones that are stories of survival. So the story goes for Lake Boudreaux: when an unnamed storm washed Old Man Boudreaux's house out into the lake, he cut a *trainasse*¹⁸⁹ in the trembling marsh to where it moored. The bank was solid enough for men and beasts to stand on along Boudreaux's Canal, and they pulled by rope pirogues full of beams and flooring and other architectures. Old Man Boudreaux rebuilt his house where it stood. We can guess that this would be the site of the future Boudreaux Canal Store and School. Instead of memorializing the breaking of black bodies across an "impassable" swamp or the carving of the wetlands to make it easier to transport sugar cane, we instead celebrate the way we might tame a landscape with our shovels and boats and frontier ingenuity. But names, like the floodwater of Old Man Boudreaux's unnamed hurricane, have a hard time letting the dead stay buried.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold writes,

[P]laces do not have locations but histories. Bound together by the itineraries of their inhabitants, places exist not in space but as nodes in a matrix of movement. I shall call this matrix a 'region.' It is the knowledge of the region, and with it the ability to situate one's current position within the historical context of journeys previously made—journeys to, from and around places—that distinguishes the countryman from the stranger. Ordinary wayfinding, then, more closely resembles storytelling than map-using.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ The local word for a small canal cut by hand for the use of a single person or family to reach a larger waterway. It comes from the French word *traîner*, which means to drag.

¹⁹⁰ Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 219.

Ingold's project of embedding spatial knowledge in a dynamic unfolding of reality through movement and environment correctly returns our conversation to storytelling. For Ingold, movement in a place is a re-enactment of local movement, and this wayfaring is both a way to get from place to place and create a world knowable by the people who must live in it. His regional matrix with crisscrossing paths beaten by old feet and waterways traversed by old hulls is especially seductive when thinking of the isolated marshlands along coastal bayous in the nineteenth century. To the twenty-first century eye, a world of *trainasses* and shrimp drying platforms and lonely pirogues piled high with muskrat bodies looks rough in a cozy way: a world small enough to name its smallest features, small enough to not need to commit those names to paper. Like other lost places, lower Terrebonne Parish is full of lovely stories, and their repetition orders how we think of it today, how we imagine its future, how we mourn its return to the sea. And though I do not wish to disbelieve those stories, as a countryman of Chauvin, I must speak up on behalf of the stranger.

Space, geographer Doreen Massey warns, is the suspension of multiple histories, “an inherently dynamic simultaneity.”¹⁹¹ She writes, “Such a way of conceptualizing the spatial, moreover, inherently implies the existence in the lived world of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism.”¹⁹² The estuaries of coastal Louisiana, like all space, contain

¹⁹¹ Doreen B. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 3.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

incongruous accidents of histories. It is a permeable waterscape. A palimpsest of stories, remembered and washed away, negotiated by the living interacting with a changing environment and the material and immaterial things the dead have left behind. Ingold, who does not cite Massey in his theory of place and region and storytelling, privileges local knowledge of the countryman, who is happy to reorder his world in his image. The countryman, though, is forgetful. Governor Quitman and Colonel Robinson, two strangers who were neither born nor died in Louisiana, let alone in some impassable swampland at the edge of the country, demonstrate that they can shape that local knowledge from afar. They had money, slaves, and incentive to remake the land in their image and to name it. Although Quitman's lake was renamed by both locals and no less a governmental body than the

United States Department of the Interior, his name still lives in the opening waters that once, unofficially, bore names such as Mare Bleue and Mare à Clay. Robinson lent his name to not only one of the most heavily trawled waterways off of Lake Boudreaux, but also to the village of fishermen whose legacy stretches from the old days until today, fishermen such as my great-grandfather Henry “Tchonque” Eschete, Old Man Clay Lecompte, and Kim Guy. Beneath the names of Quitman and Robinson lie the sinister ghosts of a slave economy that tore through human bodies in the same cavalier way these planters tore through the marsh to transport their sugar and indigo.

The stranger, abstracted as an institutional force, becomes the charting of land rights and ownership in the township plats, the tactical mapping of the swamps for use in the US Civil War, the topographical surveying of the United States Geological Survey, and my project of making my local knowledge strange enough to comprehend the contradictory yet comprehensive mapping of a land drowning in gulf. All of us strangers and all of us countrymen—we rage to order the external world. We name bodies of water as if they are people we know: whole, discrete, with discernable characteristics and identities. But in an ironic turn of events, the lake that strangers once knew as Quitman, which became Boudreaux at some unknowable point in time, has now subsumed the lesser bodies of water in its proximity. In other words, Lake Boudreaux has swallowed other lakes, lakes with names like Gero, Robinson, and Quitman. If not for a few ridges and *marais flottant*,¹⁹³

¹⁹³ Floating marsh.

knotted together with loose clumps of peat, Lake Boudreaux would have swallowed what the old people might have called the Mare à Clay, a place that, thick with unbelievable bass, people could tell stories about, recognize as a marker and find their way around a large, indiscrete world.

Bodies on the Water

Water makes many Beds
For those averse to sleep –

—Emily Dickinson, 1428¹⁹⁴

In the old days, when old shrimpers felt a storm was coming, they would drop anchor and sleep. Here is the story of the Picou Cemetery, a hundred-year-old graveyard built on a thousand-year-old mound erected by people in the Coles Creek culture. A hurricane from the era of naming storms after what they destroyed came—the 1909 Grand Isle Hurricane. Old man Picou, out fishing, felt the atmospheric pressure dropping, saw the shadowing of the sky. He moored himself right in his oyster reef. He rode out the storm, rocked to sleep in marsh. When the weather cleared, he rowed back home. He found his wife and children in the trees that used to grow on the banks of Lake Boudreaux. He buried them in the Indian mound.

Conventional wisdom today holds that land is safer than water when it comes to cataclysmic storms. Today, an era when we can watch weather forecasting and receive storm warnings by

¹⁹⁴ Emily Dickinson, “Water Makes Many Beds,” in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas Herbert Johnson, 609 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 1–2.

push notification, an era when there are roads and cars and GPS, conventional wisdom holds true when we evacuate to the hinterlands. But for those who live on the wettest edge of the land, who ply their trade on water, sometimes it is safer to just ride out the storm in a boat. This is not to say that the Gulf represents safety to the fishers of coastal Louisiana. How could it? As a serial hurricane survivor, I can vouchsafe that leaving a flood zone by land is preferable to dropping an anchor on a skiff. But the waters that saturate the marshes and swamps and make the border between land and sea diffuse have a rich and ironic relationships with its tenant bodies. Every fisher I know tells me of the pleasures of being “on the water”—never *in* the water, because that would be death or some other failure. A person drowns in water. A body floats on the water. The fishers I know *live* on the water, buoyant, floating on a sea whose inchoate and capricious ungovernability buffers them from a world of order, docility, and discipline. Speaking of the pull of the sea, fisher Kim Guy said, “[When] we grew up, us, it was water. All we ever did was water.” His body could not wait to get back to the water. It could not bear to be moored.

I pressed fishers on what drew them to the watery life, besides the fact that shrimping was in their blood.¹⁹⁵ They said that life on the water was peaceful. Quiet. Isolated from the quickening world on shore. Throughout their lives, it was water. All they ever did was water. Though several fishermen said they took the still moments between catch and cull to pray or meditate or obsess over the size of the landing, the physical immediacy of dragging nets and

¹⁹⁵ See the previous chapter.

floating through widening waterways enclosed by *paille fine* marshes, the steady intensity of the Gulf's pulses, rocking them, the alchemy of sun and storm and seagull cry and diesel engine—these bodily responses allowed them the shield against the banality of life and death among people. Former shrimper Glynn Trahan told me of the shrimping life: “It’s probably one of the best lives I’ve ever lived.” What other lives has Glynn lived? The life of a father raising children in a world that will not protect his favorite life. The life of a husband suddenly within arm’s reach after a life at sea. The life of a son who struggles to maintain a legacy he traces through his father. The life of a man whose friends are dying. The life of an American citizen in an age of global military police actions, mass shootings, ethnic nationalism, hyper-partisanship, and hyper-connectivity. He told me,

Because you’re out there, you don’t have this everyday thing, where you’re hearing about somebody got killed in an automobile accident or this plane went down or these bunch of soldiers got killed fighting in a war, or—every day, you find out somebody near you or somebody you know has been diagnosed with this terrible disease, and they’re not going to live for another two or three months or whatever. This person worked his whole life and getting ready to retire, and he’s—you only hear these bad things. Out there, you don’t hear all of that. Now, with the cell phone, now, you can kinda get all that news, thing is not as good as it was, let’s say thirty years ago. Because thirty years ago, when you was out on a boat for a week or two weeks, you knew absolutely nothing that was going on unless, you know, somebody sent you a message by VHF radio or whatever. Everything was just so tranquil out there.

Out there, on the water, you can escape the quotidian world of information. You can take pleasure in not knowing. Blood ties, whereas water unties. On the water, you are incommunicado. You do not have to face the fragile bodies of loved ones, bodies that threaten to become merely bodies and soon. Later in the interview, Glynn does mention the things most of us would first mention as components of the everyday: the business of

errands, commerce, and obligations that sustain life. Life on the water, it is clear, offers an escape from these things. But Glynn's identification of life on shore with banal grief and communication touches on the capacity of water to wash away the very networks that give us significance, that make us selves.

The unmooring of the body on the water echoes my earlier assertion that the sea, with its seething planes of intensity, functions as a Body without Organs, one that can free a person to the possibility of thinking and living differently. The life of the body on the water offers escape from both the banal everyday *and* the intense events whose interpretations tentpole a life's meaning. Deleuze and Guattari offer a therapeutic suggestion:

Where psychoanalysis says, "Stop, find your self again," we should say instead, "Let's go further still, we haven't found our [Body without Organs] yet, we haven't sufficiently dismantled our self." Substitute forgetting for anamnesis, experimentation for interpretation. Find your body without organs. Find out how to make it. It's a question of life and death, youth and old age, sadness and joy. It is where everything is played out.¹⁹⁶

The body at sea, unlike the body on land and among people, is one devoid of signification: there is only work and rest. The body pulls the nets and releases the marine bodies trapped therein. The body culls the product from the trash. The body waits. The body must become attuned to the wind and tide and sun, but it must also be willing to improvise, to try things that might not work. The body has to let go of a self and surrender to work. This is not to say that the trawler or fisher does not take with him articulate and inarticulate knowledges and skills, or that he somehow achieves the eldritch Deleuzian ideal of the Body without

¹⁹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 151.

Organs. The former would result in no productive fishing. The latter is either death or nirvana, each being the horizon of possibility, but not an actual way to live, and not one that Deleuze and Guattari actually recommend.¹⁹⁷ When Deleuze and Guattari write “The BwO is what remains when you take everything away,” they follow with, “What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole.”¹⁹⁸ What life at sea offers is a brief and bodily collapse of being an orderly subject expected to control one’s own destiny. On the water, a body *can* bracket the dreams that make it a self onshore. The shrimper onshore faces the insurmountability of the global flow of seafood that has determined his profession as anachronistic. He faces the pressure of living up to his blood, the internal waters that can pump strict and contradictory identities into being, a matrix of genealogy and inner truth. He faces the expectation we all face: to lead a good, orderly life, one where you provide for yourself and yours, one where you accumulate wealth and feed yourself at regular intervals and pay attention to your weight and cholesterol and try to avoid addictions and crutches and fantasies. Life at sea may require a certain acquiescence to a fantasy of control and competence, but it does not require you to be who you are.

This is also not to say that fishers intentionally use fishing as a way to escape identity or people or the crush of global capital or their modes of living. Several shrimpers described trawling as “a cruise,” a vacation, full of the sublime encounters of beauty and a respite from

¹⁹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari write, “You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn; and you have to keep small supplies of signifiante and subjectification, if only to turn them against their own systems when the circumstances demand it” (ibid.: 160).

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.: 151.

the stressors of their onshore life. It is a respite, but not a pleasure that remains stable. Chad Portier, a commercial shrimper and boat builder, manages captains and crews, runs his fleet with his wife Angela, and also captains a boat with a crew. In the middle of explaining how he succeeds in commercial fishing, he reveals his anxiety of staying in place, especially on land:

We fish twenty-four hours a day when I fish. I don't care what it is, I fish. I can't sit on an anchor; it drives me f—crazy. I just can't stay in the house. I'm not that kind of guy. I'm inside like I'm in jail or something. I got to get out of there. But when I'm on a boat, I use it to—and she would try to—she would come fishing with me all the time when we first got married, she was one of the best deckhands I had actually. She would cook. She would pick. She would just take one drag off. Some of the best times of my life, really.

Chad runs an insomniac, wandering operation: he needs the constant movement of the water, the constant productivity of seafood extraction. But more than that, he needs to not be moored, whether at sea or on land. The stability of solid ground is the worst kind of anchor: a chain sunk deep into the ground, something that thirsts for the relief of a hammer and chisel and a weak link. Though both Chad and Angela are born-again Christians—an identity that sets them apart from the sensual Catholicism of their neighbors—Chad's fear of being grounded nearly caused him to say *fucking crazy* in front of his wife, before disciplining his speech back to merely *crazy*. He is not the kind of guy to be yoked to the domestic sphere. There is something he wants to say about what he uses a boat for, how it remedies the doldrums or cabin fever or whatever it is you call the state of wishing you were elsewhere, adrift, and subject to the vagaries of the elements and the harvest and the mystery of what bodies the water holds. His marriage was forged in that elsewhere, the flow of labor in and

out of the flow of water. It is not hard to believe that those were, indeed, the best years of his life. The best life he ever lived.



Figure 19: Chad and Angela Portier. Chad is a commercial shrimper and boat-builder. Angela runs their retail operation and is renowned for her singing. Photograph by Christopher Lirette.

The male body at sea is the ideal body on the water for the fishers I talked to.¹⁹⁹ When Chad and Angela honeymooned on their boat, Angela played deckhand to Chad's captain. The restless, muscularity of the young shrimper is a signifier, on and off the water, of potency and

¹⁹⁹ Carla Ghere and Carolyn Tillman, two women in the fisheries whose stories are out of the scope of this project on shrimpers, were notable exceptions to this ideal during my fieldwork. Both ran crab boats, alone or together, that acted as the only female-bodied space available to them in the fisheries. This world, too, was permeable and highly visible. Others on the water noticed and hailed them. Carla, adopting a persona that was brash, profane, and skillful, was well-respected by nearly every fisherman I talked to, who admired her drive and success in furthering her family's fishery legacy. Her younger sister Carolyn, who also maintained a job at a grocery store that she went to after crabbing in the morning, was less rough, but did not need to secure herself as a fleet leader. When I asked Carolyn what was the most challenging thing about being a woman in the masculine world of the fisheries, she replied, "Peeing."

ability to provide for self and community. Chad was not the only one to eliminate sleep from the commercial shrimping playbook. Shrimping czar, ex-trawler, and activist David Chauvin told me that he scheduled two two-and-a-half hour naps when he captained boats in his mid-twenties. Dropping his sleep allowed him to manage both daytime and nighttime drags. I met David in his office at his fleet compound in Dulac. Though he has been in the shrimp fishery for about thirty years, making him roughly the same age as Chad Portier and Kim Guy in his late 40s, David had less of the sun-hardened, ropey look. He wasn't stout or



Figure 20: David Chauvin, shrimp dock owner, processor, activist, and former shrimper. Photograph by Christopher Lirette.

sunburned. His face did not have a hard-earned topography of cracks and craters. With his dark hair tapered into an Ivy League haircut and his pressed polo-shirt, David looked like a senator from Central Casting on his day off. He and his wife, Kim, travel to seafood expos in Boston and fundraisers in Washington, DC. They advocate for down and out shrimpers online, and David knew more about the global trade of seafood than any other person I talked to in Terrebonne Parish. And though his appearance might suggest that his was a life

of white-collar comfort, his alert, aggressive movements—from the explosive way he stood to deal with some urgent shrimp business to the coiling anger in his posture when he described the conspiracy of loopholes and lobbyists that threaten his livelihood—support his tales of asserting his leadership as a young captain on the water. Chad said that “The way [a fisherman] walks is the way he’s gonna fish. You can see. If he’s always going, always doing something, he’s a good fisherman, because he’s always gonna be thinking of the next place to go check or the next place to do this or do that.” David was not one to drag around. The male body on the waters of coastal Louisiana, according to its shrimpers, should have a nervous competency, a nautical wanderlust, and a willingness to both throw itself onto the sea and persist there.

But the body, no matter its hardness, can break against the sea. The same anxious spirit of adventure and prospecting that propels successful fisherman onto the water chances to leave the bodies of fishers imperiled. Boats break down. Engines break down. And when the storms come, a body needs to prepare. Kim Guy described a time when the storms came when he was on his dock near Robinson Canal, a story of his body on and in water:

We got stuck in a couple of storms at the dock at my house. We couldn’t—we couldn’t go anywheres. The engine in my boat was broken and we was trying to get it repaired and we couldn’t go up the road and we stayed stuck, tied up at the dock. I had pieces of my engine in my truck on the road, and I knew it was going to start getting—water was gonna get high outside. So I took off walking on the levee to get to the road. And I went move my truck further up on the road over there, to where I wouldn’t lose the parts on my engine. And when I came back the current was going pretty good and I’m—I slipped on the levee and I missed the rope and I didn’t stop til I got to the road. I couldn’t catch onto nothing. They had so much current, and I didn’t stop til I got back to the road. And then they had to throw my life ring all the way from the boat with a long rope, so I can get back to the boat. That wasn’t too fun. I didn’t think I was going to make it back to the boat. And they didn’t have

nobody around because everybody had left for the storm. Everybody went up the road. And we was stuck down here... My wife would remember because she was scared to death. She was trying to throw the rope to me and she don't know how to swim and—I didn't have no choice, I just—tried clinging onto the steps of the house, and I miss a step to the house, and—I didn't stop til I got back to the blacktop on the road in front of the house over there.

This is a story of a body caught in the current, washing it back again and again to a place of danger. Kim could not tell me which storm this was for, but it happened in the last fifteen years, an age of cell phones and weather reports and paved roads. As tranquil as the water seems when it is contained within its borders, it threatens to spill out and bring with it the full-force of a murder-drunk god. A genius loci with incomprehensible motives. When a body drowns, the body loses first its ability to panic.²⁰⁰ Shouting and splashing precedes event of drowning. In the final minute before losing buoyancy, the body uses its arms to push the water down and tilts its heads to the heavens. This is not voluntary. If the drowning body bobs its nose or mouth above the surface of the water, it only breathes and continues pushing down. When a body drowns, it loses the ability to swim or grab a life ring. The body cannot kick its way to safety or give constantly a cry. It cannot invite another body to save it. If another body—one that is not drowning—swims out to trawl the drowning body out of water, the drowning body will grab the live one. This is not a choice. The rescuing body, weighted with a drowning body, begins to drown. The method to save a body from

²⁰⁰ For more on what it is like to drown and save the drowning, see Frank Pia, "Observations on the Drowning of Nonswimmers," *Journal of Physical Education* 71, no. 6 (1974).

drowning is to first let it drown. Once it sinks, it is safe to fish it out and perform revival methods. But, savior beware: at this stage, it is also easy to let go.

Land's End

The body begs for a system that will not break—

—Katie Ford, “The Vessel Bends the Water”²⁰¹

Say you are in New Orleans and need to travel to lower Terrebonne, but you are in an age before water control efforts killed the forks of the Mississippi River. Say you want to visit the pre-ruin resort on Last Island. First, take an upriver steamboat to Donaldsonville, where the Mississippi forked into Bayou Lafourche.²⁰² Embark on a skiff, travel downstream to Lockport, to where the Barataria and Lafourche Canal Company cut a channel into Field's Lake, to where the B & L Canal Company cut a channel into Lake Long, to where the Company cut a canal into Bayou Terrebonne, which B & L kept navigable by dredging its

²⁰¹ Katie Ford, “The Vessel Bends the Water,” in *Colosseum*, 28 (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2008), 1.

²⁰² Bayou Lafourche means Bayou the Fork, and if very old maps are to be trusted, it was previously considered “La Fourche des Chetimacha” and the “Chetimacha River,” and later it appears as “Bayou la Fourche des Chetimachas” in Church Records (Decercelier, *Carte du Missicipy ou Louissiane depuis la Baye de lascension jusqu'a la pointe de la Mobille*, Map (1718–1729); Lieutenant John Ross, *Course of the River Mississippi, from the Balise to Fort Chartres; Taken on an Expedition to the Illinois, in the Latter End of the Year 1765*. (London: Robert Sayer, 1765); Monsignor Earl C. Woods and Charles E. Nolan, eds., *Sacramental Records of the Roman Catholic Church of the Archdiocese of New Orleans*, vol. 6, 1796–1799 (New Orleans: Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1991), 28, 198).



Figure 21: Excerpt from *Carte du Mississipy ou Louissiane depuis la Baye de lascension jusqu'a la pointe de la Mobille* (1718–1729), by Decerclier.



Figure 22: Excerpt from *Course of the River Mississippi* by Lieutenant John Ross.

floor.²⁰³ Follow Bayou Terrebonne until it widens into ocean. To the East, there are the Timbalier Islands, and if you follow them, you will eventually arrive at Chenière Caminada and Grand Isle. Right ahead and stretching to the West is Caillou Island, which itself hosts a resort that includes a few hotels.²⁰⁴ To the North is Terrebonne Bay. To the South is open Gulf, broken by Wine Island and then Last Island, *Isle Dernière*. There, book a room at Eliza

²⁰³ Major D.C. Houston, *Military Approaches to New Orleans*, Department of the Gulf Map No. 10, prepared by order of Major General Nathaniel P. Banks (New Orleans: US Department of the Gulf, 1863) (Figure 18); Thomas Becnel, *The Barrow Family and the Baratavia and Lafourche Canal: The Transportation Revolution in Louisiana, 1829–1925* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 46–57.

²⁰⁴ “Caillou Island House,” *Thibodaux Minerva*, May 6, 1854; Jonathan C. White and Louis F. Anderson, “The Gulf House,” *Thibodaux Minerva*, July 14, 1855.

Pecot's Ocean House, wage your wealth at Captain Dave Muggah's Billiard House, forget your troubles at Mr. Martin's Fine Bar.²⁰⁵ Say you want to drink to the end of the land.

In the 1850s, the landed gentry could escape the humdrum life of a slave-owning planter or a high-profile politician by repairing to an "island of tranquil delights."²⁰⁶ The bourgeoisie, the teachers and merchants and doctors and tailors, too, found themselves on the last islands. Being so close to the mouth of the ocean and away from land when railroads and steamships were only beginning to connect people to people may lead to a type of revelry that borders madness. Take, for example, the inscrutable case of John Thuer, a music teacher at the Thibodaux Female Institute, who spent the summer of 1854 on Caillou Island. He proclaimed himself Finn-Fon-Boo, the Vice-Governor of Rogue's Harbor, Caillou Island, sending the *Thibodaux Minerva*, a four-page Know-Nothing partisan newspaper, an allegorical satire of island fauna in the form of an advertisement for a "Sub."²⁰⁷ In Vice-Governor Finn-Fon-Boo's telling, the tribes he governs consist of Finns, Pokers, Scarlatinos, Shakers, Singing Filibusters, Sneaks, Pietists, and others, that seem to roughly correspond to sharks, rays, shrimps (or dogs), otters, mosquitos (or seagulls), roaches, and crabs, based on puns littered through their descriptions. Or perhaps there is a deeper or double satire occurring: *poker*, slang for penis in the nineteenth century²⁰⁸; *scarlatina*, a word used for

²⁰⁵ Bill Dixon, *Last Days of Last Island: The Hurricane of 1856, Louisiana's First Great Storm* (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press, 2009), 22.

²⁰⁶ Jonathan C. White and Louis F. Anderson, "Notices," *Thibodaux Minerva*, September 22, 1855.

²⁰⁷ Finn-Fon-Boo [pseud.], "Sea Shore Correspondence," *Thibodaux Minerva*, September 23, 1854.

²⁰⁸ "poker, n.2," Oxford English Dictionary. December 2016. Oxford University Press.

scarlet fever, which can develop into rheumatic fever, a symptom of which is rheumatism, a condition for which Thuer sought relief on the island²⁰⁹; *shakers*, the name of a religious sect that included both ecstatic trembling and equality of men and women and celibacy; *pietists*, the name of an anticlerical strain of Lutheranism. Finn-Fon-Boo also repeatedly refers to the “lords of creation,” a highly arch term that by the mid-1800s was used to mock male dominance over society.²¹⁰ It is difficult to understand Thuer’s motives for writing and publishing this account. Though the text describes itself as a job advertisement, it includes no instructions for applying. Thuer has no other published output, and his Swiftian prose is either silliness or diffuse mockery of something lost to printed memory. Perhaps the islands were infected with a mirth. Perhaps vacationers were energized by the impossibility of the fragile world of recreation, of sea breezes and fresh seafood, of dancing with strangers, and of shirking the landed life of responsibility and industry. Perhaps they were drunk on the dangers tucked into the delights of the water.

Another missive from the barrier islands, this time from Last Island:

Standing at sunset on its beautiful beach... stretching along its semi-circumference of some twenty or thirty miles; tessillated, as it were, by the inimitably fine tracery of the surf, and your brow fanned by the cooled and invigorating expirations breathed from the lips of Æolus—the mind becomes largely excursive, not to say romantic, till its whole history seems at once comprehended by the magic of your intuition, or you find yourself almost unconsciously weaving the thread of your imaginings into the woof of reality. The intonations in the voice of the surge seem to laugh for a moment at the folly of reckless adventurers, then to chaunt songs of applause at their success,

²⁰⁹ Jonathan C. White and Louis F. Anderson, “Notices,” *Thibodaux Minerva*, October 7, 1854.

²¹⁰ Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760–1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 98–106.

or sigh a sad requiem at their misfortunes. Regarding its crescent form, you think of its adaptedness to piracy, and are told that it was one of Lafitte's favorite haunts.²¹¹

This description of Last Island appeared under the name "STUDYX," a faux-Latin nom-de-plume consistent with the ostentatious diction of the sketch, in the *Houma Ceres*, a four-page newspaper published by Know-Nothing partisan Eugene William Blake in partnership with the editors of the *Thibodaux Minerva*. Like Finn-Fon-Boo, Studyx uses florid language, but instead of aimless satire, his writing imitates Ralph Waldo Emerson in both theme and tone. For Studyx, as for Emerson, the encounter with nature is occasion to discover truths that create and exceed meaning. Emerson writes,

Nature is the incarnation of a thought, and turns to a thought again, as ice becomes water and gas. The world is the mind precipitated, and the volatile essence is forever escaping again into the state of free thought. Hence the virtue and pungency of the influence on the mind, of natural objects, whether inorganic or organic. Man imprisoned, man crystallized, man vegetative, speaks to man impersonated.²¹²

The mind is a storm whose waters form the world, which evaporates back to mind. For Studyx, the watery mind takes an excursion to the shark-shaped islands, carved by water and air and, most of all, thought. Studyx, witless prophet, flattens history into place, his magical thought creating a mythic truth of the last island heard in the inhuman cries of ocean: this haunt for pirates, this watery grave. For Emerson, the co-creation of reality is a volatile event. Stories gain heft and flesh and pop into the world. They lose form and flesh and disappear. Emerson, a naturalist who disputed the existence of things unnatural, saw the mark of God

²¹¹ Studyx [pseud.], "Last Island," *Houma Ceres*, August 30, 1855, reproduced as published.

²¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: Second Series* (Boston: James Monroe and Company, 1845), 212–213.

carved into inchoate things, into the things we become. Studyx, who imposes order onto the island by way of fancy, writes that he is disappointed when confronted with reports that, in some prehistory of Last Island, a wild horse, rising from the foaming sea, was not the devil and thus was tamed. Emerson writes, “There is throughout nature something mocking, something that leads us on and on, but arrives nowhere, keeps no faith with us,” and “The beauty of nature must always seem unreal and mocking.”²¹³ The gulf exceeds our imagination. It speaks to a person on vacation, mocks her, and sighs a sad requiem for her misfortunes. And the person, impersonating the surreality of the limitless waters troubling the beach of Last Island with its mouth, trusted it to keep faith and not kill her.

August 10, 1856: the waters rose and silenced the party on Last Island. Those with summer homes saw their summer homes splintered and rushed out into the open island. A witness said they were “hemmed in between the rush of waters in front and rear.”²¹⁴ Bodies were pinned between gulf and bay, water and water. Those with families sheltered in the hotel, which shattered and cast them into the sea. The bar splintered. The pool hall splintered. Bodies sheltered in overturned cisterns and tried not to drown. The tight embrace of parents and their scared babies: the water smashed it and took the babies. During the eye of the hurricane, when the storm becomes death-still before resuming, humans chained themselves, arm in arm, toward the beached and broken ship, the *Star*, that was supposed to rescue them

²¹³ Ibid.: 205–206, 193.

²¹⁴ Quoted in Dixon, *Last Days of Last Island*, 72. The summary of the storm that follows relies on Dixon’s scholarship and narrative.

but crashed instead. These people survived. The waters rose in the night, swallowed more people. Then the flood followed the storm to crash against the mainland, bringing the dead with it. The living left behind by the waters made their way to the *Star*. They, the 250 spared, were half of the resort, and they stayed in the boat for three days.

Last Island went underwater. What emerged were two islands: *Isles Dernières*. There were no signs of human habitation left. In 1962, the Whiskey Pass Association, a group of well-to-do businessmen in Houma, erected a 12-foot-tall cement pyramid on the shore at Whiskey Pass, a *trainâsse* dug by the Hurricane of 1856. On top of it, they erected a 6-foot-tall, 1,376-pound statue of the Virgin Mary carved from Carrara marble. They named her Our Lady of the Sea. In 1967, the shore fell out beneath the statue, so they moved her inland on pilings by the grace of the Louisiana Land and Exploration Company. In 1982, the waters rose to overtake the statue, so the Whiskey Pass Association mounted Our Lady on a sixty-foot-tall piling, jutting out of her sea. LL&E became Burlington Resources. Burlington Resources became Conoco-Phillips. They wanted Our Lady off their land in Houma. Roxanne Sevin, ChaCha's sister, offered her land in Cocodrie, and so the Whiskey Pass Association commissioned a 40-foot piling to be thrust into the mud, and Our Lady bolted to a steel armature.²¹⁵

²¹⁵ John DeSantis, "Labors of Love and Many Helping Hands," *Point of Vue*, July 1, 2015, <http://www.povhouma.com/labors-of-love-and-many-helping-hands/>.

The fall of Last Island, like the effects of the hurricanes in 2005 that sunk the fisheries, like the oil spill that doused the Gulf in tarry oil in 2010, was an accident. Philosopher Paul Virilio theorizes the accident:

The word *accident*, derived from the Latin *accidens*, signals the unanticipated, *that which unexpectedly befalls* the mechanism, system, or product, *its surprise failure* or destruction. As if the “failure” were not programmed into the product from the moment of its production or implementation...²¹⁶

The body begs for a system that will not break, but the point of systemic failure, according to Virilio, is built into the system. For the last vacationers on Last Island, the system that broke was a system that trusted the sea not to swallow it, that imagined a sandy oasis away from the rot and swelter of Louisiana in the age of yellow fever, that invited people to come and see the fun of aquatic revelry and reverie. An accident, according to Virilio, results from a failure of imagination: something takes us unawares, something we should have seen from the beginning. Or perhaps those erased by the sea on Last Island knew. Historian Alain Corbin, who documents the transformation of the sea from abyss to beach resort, writes, “The discovery of the dangerous beauty of the shores refreshed the pleasure that individuals could experience in simulating their own destruction.”²¹⁷ Corbin cites the new delights of sinking feet into wet sand, of swimming out into the surf, practices that gained popularity as vacationing rose in the mid-nineteenth century. But he could also have described the feeling

²¹⁶ Paul Virilio, “The Primary Accident,” in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. Brian Massumi, 211–220 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 211–212.

²¹⁷ Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750–1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 249.

of perching in a cypress hotel, floating on the brief mound of sand, dancing above the swirl of tide and eddy. The land at Last Island, as we know, ended. Those that danced upon that doom danced in spite of its pressing failure. It was an accident, one that, in the final accounting, people did not prepare for, even if they could feel it coming. And so they disappeared.

Shrimpers of the Louisiana coast, like other residents, recognize a primary danger to their livelihood that has less to do with economic realities than it does with the existential threat of the water that is ending the land. When I was a child, my dad brought me to a beach cleanup event on Isles Dernières, which was, as far as I can remember, a series of large sandbars in open water with marsh grass and sea gulls and empty plastic bottles and chip bags and cigarette butts and the crushed bodies of crabs and broken, salted branches. When Mr. George Sevin was a child, the old people drove horse and buggy all the way to Caillou Island, fording the bay which was shallow enough not to swallow man and beast. The shrimpers I talked to believe that the oil industry and the United States Army Corps of Engineers are to blame for the erosion of their land. The oil companies dug canals, conventional wisdom goes, and allowed saltwater to enter the brackish and fresh estuaries inland. They believe the levee system built by the Corps of Engineers prevents sediment depositing, which would rebuild the coast as the Gulf reshapes it. They see the commercial and governmental reshaping of their landscape as a profound and misguided ordering of a natural system. Their rage against this ordering is also a rage against their own precarity, hemmed in by the rush of water to the south and the relentless works of those would remake the sea into a colony of the land.

Oil and Water

The year is 1992 and the man wishes he were still a shrimper. It is four in the morning. The smell of the pogy plant lacquers the insides of his rusted-out Toyota pickup, gas station coffee cooling in cups made from petrochemicals. The pogies in the factory rot on conveyor belts a hundred yards off, and their stink will settle into the vinyl and felt of the parked truck while the man sleeps on an oil production platform in the Gulf of Mexico. Each week when he returns, after driving three hours back to Chauvin with the windows down, the man's wife—who keeps her hands well-vinegared in the shrimp factory across from their small house—will not kiss him until he has rinsed the scent of pogy off of him. When he shrimped, his wife was with him, and they stunk together.

He goes to the heliport. There are men from nearby Eunice and New Iberia and Jeanerette and men—like him—from the bayou parishes Terrebonne and Lafourche and Assumption. There are men from Dallas, Texas, and McDonough, Georgia, and Philadelphia, Mississippi. An eighty-year-old black man, who has never and will never be hired as a company man, tries to lift his eyelids and fails. There are some white men by a freshly-made canteen of coffee. They are large and boisterous. One—a redhead with glasses and clean overalls and clipboard—bellows a story about a certain type of industrial grease used on the platforms. The man remembers the story because he has told it himself: a stupid, young coworker, after

a day spent cranking wrenches goes to take a leak, forgetting to wash his hands raw beforehand. He drives home where he and his wife, well, you know. The next day, the woman complains of a funky discharge. Suspicious of her husband who, it must be admitted, had a problem with infidelity, she seeks the counsel of a doctor. Everyone knows this bit, and they laugh the punchline into place. The sad hilarity of swapping fluids. The industrial slapstick.

It's the man's turn to tell a story. During his seven days off, he was putting up a fence around a backyard because his children were entering the age of walking too far. There comes—and this never happens, he swears in a way that implies that of course it always happens, we're in Louisiana for Christ's sake!—a gigantic alligator. Being not a man of the law, he had to act like a beast. He grabbed a barely-used twelve-gauge shotgun, and lock his tendons into a shooter's stance. His first-born is with him. He shoots at the alligator, and strangely, people have gathered to watch. They clapped to see the geyser of blood spurt from the place where the buckshot tore a hole in the alligator's belly, flipping it over. It was a proud day of improbable ballistics, and the man might have ended it with a Southern and Seven had the man not given up alcohol in 1988 after he killed a man he never knew, stoned on beer and Percocet. He brought his son inside and called Wildlife and Fisheries to dispose of the body. He hoped he wouldn't be fined for this, and he wasn't. You can kill an alligator if it threatens you. This is known as self-defense.

In the helicopter, the man floats over the coast, latticed with canals and pipelines. He floats over one hundred miles of water, to a scaffold of steel and oil, towering over the water. In another time, the man would have been on a boat burning cheaper fuel, collecting shrimp

into a net to sell to families he had known his whole life. Instead of fulfilling what others in his hometown thought of as a blood vocation, he chose a world of metal islands that sucked the black blood of earth the way you suck water through a straw. In his mind, this is still a world of water. The men on this platform, in what is known as the Eugene Island field, check charts and valves and keep the pipeline clot-free. These are not the cowboy days of drills and the loss of limbs. The day starts at six in the morning and stretches to six in the evening, full of vigilance and boredom and answering alarms that signal something is slightly off and the machines need tending. The man eats hearty meals cooked by a man who drives in from the Westbank in New Orleans, the only African American on his platform. They watch hours of HBO and LSU football and cooking shows together. Onshore, the man will rent movies he watched offshore, to share with his family. He leads a symmetrical life: one in damp mud into which he and his family have planted themselves, living and dying in continuity with larger families and networks; the other in the Gulf of Mexico, where a new society is recreated week-by-week. He is a lead operator, but not a foreman. When he's left in charge of his platform, his attitude shifts from deferential to commanding, and his favorite command is "Listen." He's a storyteller even though he is rarely a good listener, talking through his coworker's stories, remembering details that were almost surely lost to time until the exact moment he recollected them.

Onshore, he's a storyteller. He tells stories of the days when he was a drinking alcoholic. Of days when he trawled. Of days when his mother trapped furs during the winters when she was 13 years old. Of days of labor and days of loss. Of days on a water teeming with life, not surrounded by a water from which he cannot harvest. These stories are the only way in



Figure 23: Kurt and Claude Lirette. My dad, Kurt (foreground), and his uncle, Claude (background), both left the shrimp industry for offshore oil. Photograph by Christopher Lirette.

which he connects to other people. He learned French not as a child (his parents kept the language to themselves, a private speech), but as an adult, working the trawls with older men who chose a life of water and fish over land and money. Still, he is embarrassed by his French, speaking only a few sentences, ones he's memorized well over the years, returning to the harbor of English once a conversation has moved into the realm of content. Over time, he has amassed hundreds of acquaintances upon whom he might readily ask for a favor. He rarely has use for favors owed.

His doctor, a man with whom he has a cousin-like relationship, looks forward to his visits, except that it becomes clear over time that years of drinking have wrecked his body: he has cirrhosis, he has hepatitis C, he bleeds easily, etc. There's a tragic jocularity between them. The one man making light of his own frail body, almost (but not quite) desperate to please a man who has the kind of wealth and privilege he sometimes (but not always) wishes he had.

The doctor isn't sure what to make of him, whether the man and his sick body and his life of day-in-day-out toil are conspiring to tell the kind of joke a doctor would never understand or whether the man is like he is: precise and overflowing, in a state of constant repair, a person who by some grace became recognized by others as having the power to heal.

Back offshore: barometric pressure is dropping. The horizon becomes dark as the sea and it is hard to see the jack crevalle skimming the surface of the Gulf. The waves are rough. They are sending helicopters to evacuate the platform because Hurricane Andrew is crossing Florida and coming to flood his home. The man waits out the storm with his wife and two children with his brother's family in a new house built at five feet above sea level, about five miles north of his home. His eight-hundred square-foot home is on land at four below, but is on stones. Flooding has more variables to factor than mere elevation. Like the strength of levee and pump. Like the slowing power of the barrier islands and the marsh and the cypress ridges. Like the height of the storm surge and tide. Like the precise location the water tears a rift in the levee. The day after the storm, he brings his family back to their house via pirogue for the road has been flooded. There are only a few houses until they can see what damage Andrew wrought when the flash of silver marks the passage of a fish from flood to boat. His wife screams with equal parts shock and delight. The children grab the fish and put it back to water, where it swims away. Later, this memory will be the inverse of the day the floodwaters retreated: finding shovels so that his two boys could help him shovel rotten drums and redfish from the yard.

As soon as his household and hometown are in living condition, he drives his truck to Intracoastal City to begin another hitch, on an oil production platform in the same waters that deposited fish in his yard.

This is the story of the shrimper's shadow, the offshore oilman, who decided at some point not to go down with the shrimp fishery, who found the possibility of making a living, a good living, on the water. Like the life of a shrimper, the life of an offshore oilman requires a dual living arrangement: life on land, life at sea. But unlike the shrimper, the oilman's time is precisely bisected, time here and time there demarcated, accounted for, adhered to with discipline. Working for the oil companies is to work for a vast and bureaucratic corporation, to be regulated vassals to a distant and potent political and economic machine that requires docile bodies to show up on time and not make a mess of the job. The job is, like the job of a shrimper, extractive. One pulls living bodies from the sea. One sucks the remains of bodies long dead from rocks. One extracts a commodity to sell on the open market. It would be easy to mistake the life of an offshore oilman as a seafaring life: it requires that people work, in this case, in the Gulf of Mexico. Like shrimping, working offshore is mostly a lonely world of men, isolated from family and society. Like shrimping, the work of working offshore is simultaneously back-breaking and boring. It is unsurprising that shrimpers turn to oil when shrimp prices bottom out. According to Jill Ann Harrison, who studied the industrial

choices shrimpers made once it was clear that the industry was in decline, the oil field attracts shrimpers because they already have the necessary skillsets to be good workers.²¹⁸

The year is 1956 and a man, an uncle of the man in 1992, wishes he had better equipment: an engine that didn't require so much wrenching, nets that didn't require so much mending, a bigger boat with better quarters, a taller draught, a more impermeable hull. He wishes his shovels didn't have pockets of rust brushing the tiny seabob shrimp with a faint red sludge. Seabobs are a species of small, unregulated shrimp mostly sold to shrimp drying platforms, to be further sold to Asian markets. They are called seabobs because their legs and antennae make them look as if they have six beards, *six barbes*. The man wishes the Chinese guy still owned that platform in Dulac. When he did, a man could make a living catching seabobs. But without the bigger engines and better nets and nicer boat and, most of all, a capable and willing crew, he can't compete with the slick skiffs crowding Lake Caillou and Oyster Bayou. He heels his skiff against the wake from a ship. There is an oil well in Bay Sainte Elaine, and the way out to Caillou Island is perilous: the wash from the different industrial boats pushing schooners and skiffs onto banks and clumps of flotants, the sharp hulls of the ships cutting through skiffs darkly trawling the night waters, the sheen and rainbow of the oils they float on the water. Take the man's uncle, Nonc Natole, for instance. A short man with ropey arms and a nut-brown face. One night he was out trawling out by Pass la Poule in Lake Pelto in a forty-foot skiff. He had a few deckhands with him, but maybe they were drunk or snoozing

²¹⁸ Harrison, *Buoyancy on the Bayou*, 32 and passim.

or playing a good game of Pedro while the night skimmers drug the waters and collected the soft bodies of shrimp. A big ship with a sharp v-shaped hull cruised right through them, and shattered Nonc Natole's boat. The guys on the ship, who were transporting something or other to a new oil rig beyond the islands, could barely see the half-drowned men, bobbing and splashing with the half-dead shrimp cut free of the nets, among the cypress splinters and diesel slick. The oil guys hauled them in, and the coast guard had to land them back home. You can't very well ask a big oil boat to turn back inland.

The next week, the man gets rid of his skiff and fills out an application in shaky ink. He isn't the first. Old man Tchonque had to sell his oyster leases to the Boudreaux Canal Store to get out of the debt accrued from years of not breaking even, keeping only the salt-cured camp and drying platform on a small, sandy island surrounded by a ditch he'd started calling the Cutoff à Tchonque. He was getting into carpentry with his son. This man has his eye on oil. Years of tuning his inboard skiff motor have turned his hands into an extension of a machine, fingers nimble enough to coax dead metal back to hot life. The next week, he's out on a rig with a roughneck salary, overalls with his name embroidered on them, and a good hard hat. He's not even that far out, travelling by crew boat out of Morgan City, down to Vermilion Bay, near a peninsula called Cypremort Point. The man wonders why the hell somebody would name that spot Cypremort, which means *dead cypress* in French. But then again, he has buddies who come trapping almost as far West as Cypremort Point, and there are lots of strange names for the coves and cuts and bayous and lakes on the way, places that in English would mean Bayou Don't Touch Me and Mean Bayou and Bayou Carrion Crow. On the rig, the man lives in a world structured by tool and platform and hierarchy. Instead

of himself or his daddy, he listens to the foreman. His main job is to change the oil on the engines, to keep the pistons lubed and pumping. The man would be happy with anything as long as it paid more than the 1,800 dollars he made the previous year, surviving mostly off of the shrimp he could barely sell.

It wasn't long before the Crown-o-matic, a jaunty machine that keeps the drill block from hitting the crown block, cut the fingers of his right hand off.

The Crown-o-matic needed to go higher, to give the drill block greater momentum when pounding the drill into the earth, and the man was the one with the right wrenches. He was hanging on to the drill line a metal cable that guides the drill into the well—and was working the wrench with his other hand. There were two bolts you had to loosen up to slide it where you wanted it to go. But some guy threw the clutch while the man was on it, and he couldn't let go. He would have fallen to the bottom, to the black and viscous underneath of the water. The man, blacking out for loss of blood and shock and the ghost fire frying his lost fingers, was glad, in that moment, that he hadn't lost sight of land. The rig was in swimming distance of the Louisiana coast, and men covered in oil and gray silt and industrial lubricant ferried him into a small skiff. He regained consciousness in the back of a pickup truck. He lost consciousness and woke to the blinding pain of a scour and water, knocking loose the dirt and sludge from his hand of stumps. He was in Lafayette, in a hospital, and it looked like he was going to survive minus a few digits.

He lived the rest of his working life in shifts: seven on, seven off, fourteen on, seven off, etc. He eventually switched over to a production platform, where injuries are often less grievous.

His brother, not content with the known oil field, got hired on with Diamond M and pulled hitches in Cameroon for three months on, one month off. His brother saw the world. He told stories of the small oilfield villages he lived in outside of Douala where he could live in a French-speaking world and collect buckets of oil cash. His brother had a boat commissioned while he was in Africa and spent the shrimp seasons in Lake Tambour and Lake Barré catching shrimp with his wife and oldest son. Sometimes the man would go with his brother. By then, he had learned how to shift his dexterity into his left hand, into his knuckles and wrist. He'd never lost the muscle memory, and he went to his bunk nursing the sore muscles of his ghost fingers. He didn't go back out west to Cypremort Point on these trawling trips. Once, as the Blond and Clyde, his brother's boat, turned east before Point à Mast, the man had an uncanny feeling. Ahead there was a *cyprière*, a cypress grove, on a nearly submerged island. All the cypress trees were black and dead.

As every conversation I had with commercial fishers turned to erosion and the necrotic turn in the ecosystem, I heard them blame one entity more than any other: oil. The older the fisher, the more venomous their accusation. After all, they had seen firsthand the death of the lands and waters on which they plied their living, on which they raised their families. Mr.

George Sevin said,

The grass don't wanna grow. The dirt is so salty. It's been there just like if you had it in some big pits: in other words, it's brown water, salt. All over, you can pass over the bayou—that's what killed them trees. An oak tree is hard to kill, and they're all along the bayou. You can see them, they're all dead now. That's salt-water intrusion. It started around Betsy. That was 57—1957. The oil companies started before that.

The great canalization of the Louisiana coast occurred to facilitate the transport of goods and machines to a fledgling and highly profitable oil field in the early twentieth century. But

before that, fishers dug *trainasses* to get to more productive water. Before that, the planters and business owners affiliated with the production of sugar harvested by enslaved people dug canals to get the cane to the refineries. Before that, the Chitimachas and Houmas and the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the Louisiana coast shaped the land and water to make it easier for them to live. The difference with the oil industry is that the Louisiana coast had, finally, entered an age of mechanization and large-scale public works and federal subsidies for big businesses. The Houma Navigational Canal, begun in 1958 and opened in 1962, connected the Intracoastal Waterway, another federally maintained canal, to Cat Island Pass, the open waters between what is left of the Isles Dernières and the Timbalier Islands.²¹⁹ Shipping canals, however, are only part of the story. Mincing the coast are also twenty-five thousand miles of pipelines that transport oil and natural gas from reservoirs and wells to onshore processing facilities.²²⁰ These pipes, embedded in swamp and marsh and sea bed, required ditches to nestle in. Larger pipelines require full canals. The nearly fifty years of dredging and wash from barges dissolves the fragile marshes. The canals to the gulf welcome the Gulf inland. The Gulf becomes a maw and its sharpest tooth, the hurricane, gnaws at the canals and widens them.

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded and coated wetlands of the Louisiana coast in oil, spoiling oysters, killing shrimp, smothering pelicans, and doing

²¹⁹ Ryan, Weinstein, and Pearson, US Army Corps of Engineers, *Houma Navigation Canal Deepening Project*, 1.

²²⁰ Misrach and Orff, *Petrochemical America*, 143.

unknowable damage to the Gulf of Mexico and the Louisiana wetlands. You would think that armed with the knowledge that the oil industry has mangled the coast with little regard for the collateral damage to canals, losing legal battles and lobbying battles to require the companies that tore up the marsh to repair the land,²²¹ the fishers would turn against the oil industry. This is not the case. The fishers I spoke to, while unflinching in accusing big oil of gross, homicidal negligence, recognize the presence of the industry as an essential part of their livelihood. ChaCha Sevin, whose business was decimated during the oil spill, told me that President Barack Obama's six-month suspension of new oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico following the oil spill was a mistake:

As far as for the moratorium that the president put on offshore drilling, I mean that crippled us bad. You know it's coming back slowly, but you know and I was the first one that said they gotta cut that out, we don't need that. I mean, we could lose our livelihood completely and then what would we do. But then once I realized what was taking place, well if there's no drilling offshore with all these companies, then my business ain't gonna survive anyway. So yeah. If the oil spill would have never hit, I wouldn't have felt that or experienced that and realized it. That you need that industry. It's got to be there. It gives so many jobs, it's unbelievable. You know a lot of the products I buy to operate my business is made from petroleum, so without those products, I mean, I guess you'd find ways eventually, but without those products, you wouldn't make it.

²²¹ For instance, in the Louisiana State Supreme Court Case *Terrebonne Parish School Board v. Castex Energy, Inc.*, the state ruled that an oil lessee was not required to remedy the damage they caused by digging pipeline canals, even though the damage was unequivocally acknowledged and the damage was not contained to a plot of land, because the original lease allowed the company to alter the land (Jason P. Theriot, *American Energy, Imperiled Coast: Oil and Gas Development in Louisiana's Wetlands* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 212; *Terrebonne Parish School Board v. Castex Energy, et al.*, No. 04-C-0968, Supreme Court of Louisiana (2005)).

Technically, the moratorium was never actually in effect because US District Court Judge Martin Feldman granted an injunction against the administration's policy, and by the time the case reached an appellate court, over six months had passed and the appeal was moot.²²² Furthermore, the moratorium would have prevented new drilling leases, not the continuation of oil production, and so Terrebonne Parish was largely unaffected by what became a *de facto* moratorium. In fact, the employment impact of the oil spill and moratorium in Louisiana was minor in comparison to the 2007–2009 recession.²²³ Terrebonne Parish saw an increase of unemployment between 1 and 0.3 percent between April and December 2010.²²⁴ What ChaCha realized, with the help of the strong oil lobby that helped characterize oil companies as benevolent masters and benefactors of the Louisiana coast, was that his whole life was infrastructurally linked to the oil industry. As Kate Orff argues, “Louisiana’s natural geography has been radically repurposed into a vast network for extracting, storing, and transporting oil and natural gas.”²²⁵ She argues that today’s hunger for petroleum products, from plastics to fuel, have created a Petroleum Age,

²²² *Hornbeck Offshore Services v. Kenneth Lee Salazar, et al.*, 2:2010cv01663, Louisiana Eastern District Court (2010).

²²³ John Coughlan, “Gulf Coast Unemployment Trends, 2000 to 2010: Hurricanes, Recessions, Oil Spills,” *Monthly Labor Review* (2012): 17. While there was a slight unemployment increase during the six months following the 2010 oil spill, the effects of the oil spill cannot be separated from the unemployment trends begun with the national and global recessions sparked by the US financial crises in 2007–2008.

²²⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Local Area Unemployment Statistics: Houma-Thibodaux, LA Metropolitan Statistical Area, Not Seasonally Adjusted*, United States Department of Labor (2006–2016) <http://data.bls.gov/>.

²²⁵ Misrach and Orff, *Petrochemical America*, 131.

wherein our primary modes of living are expressed through oil products.²²⁶ While ChaCha might be overestimating the deleterious effects of a government regulating the industry that doused his livelihood with oil, he is correct in observing that oil is an integral part of the economy, especially for people in coastal Louisiana, who regularly find refuge on oil platforms when other industries tank.

The damage the oil industry has wrought on the marsh, however, has invited the Gulf inshore, bringing with it the potential to swallow southern Louisiana, pipes and all.

²²⁶ Ibid.: 127.

Gulf

And we do know, don't we:
We will be overcome by waters

—Katie Ford, "Seawater, and Ours a Bed above It" ²²⁷

Witness the genius of the sea, raw and incoherent. Witness the theatre of dissolution that commenced when machines carved straight lines from river to gulf. Witness the theatre of grief: a place made living by story and the hope that memory brings, scoured of its human life. For fishers of the brackish marsh where the Louisiana land becomes water, home is a buoyant, watery thing, capricious and nurturing, precarious, renewable, and dangerous. To fish the waters is not only to be comfortable with uncertainty, it is to thrive on it, to author a place in a slippery world, where success and family and the play of naming and forgetting, of mooring and unmooring, and the sweaty work of dragging things out of the depths must, deliciously, be balanced lest they blink out. The sea is simultaneously forgiving and unforgiving: it brings a source of protein that can feed and support, and it swells and brings death. The improvisatory spirit of the fishers I spoke to in lower Terrebonne, even in

²²⁷ Ford, "Seawater, and Ours a Bed above It," 20–21.

speaking of the hard things, was joyful. I learned about the exuberant tricks fishers played on one another as they fished what they believe is a nearly limitless resource. They pretended their engines were dead to gain better positions in choice trawling spots. They were taught to love a life that had goals but no clear path to reach them. One shrimper's father suggested his son could not join him on the boat until he could rig a skiff. The son, at eight years old, figured it out. The shrimpers I know are full of stories like this. Witness the gulf of knowledge that can be overcome by testing it. Witness the theatre of artifice where the sea and its joining with the land becomes a metaphor for identity and imagination.

Philosopher Brian Massumi, in theorizing how a person might navigate a reality that includes the virtual and the actual, characterizes imagination as a methodology. He writes,

Imagination is the mode of thought most precisely suited to the differentiating vagueness of the virtual. It alone manages to diagram without stilling. Imagination can also be called intuition: a thinking feeling. Not feeling something. Feeling thought—as such, in its movement, as process, on arrival, as yet unthought-out and unenacted, postinstrumental and preoperative. Suspended. Looped out. Imagination is felt thought, thought only-felt, felt as only thought can be: insensibly unstill. Outside any given thing, outside any given sense, outside actuality. Outside coming in. The mutual envelopment of thought and sensation, as they arrive together, pre-what they will have become, just beginning to unfold from the unfelt and unthinkable outside: of process, transformation in itself.²²⁸

This passage illustrates how imagination, which Massumi defines as “The involuntary and elicited no-difference between perception, cognition, and hallucination,”²²⁹ plays a key role in holding together the incongruent desires, accidents of history, and potential futures in a

²²⁸ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 134.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*: 207.

fast-eroding place like the Louisiana coast. Land, the blood of kin and story, and the structured histories handed down formally and informally are agents of the actual: anchors to a shared reality. The sea is a plane of the virtual, the possible, the vague threat, the hope of freedom. Imagination, in its capacity as alchemist of the actual and virtual, produces possibilities, possible stories, possible reorderings. What it does not produce are fixed artefacts or authority. As felt thought, imagination is both embodied and disembodied. It is playful. It moves. Like the estuary, the plane of imagination can flood, threatening to wipe out actuality. But the flood waters can recede, leaving the landscape revised, transformed, capable of being rebuilt or reflooded. Thinking of imagination this way enables us to foreground the experience of life on the water as procedural, continually negotiating bodies and geographies and structures and institutions and stories both monumental and ephemeral. The shrimper, in contact with both land and water, in a place where the land turns to sand, turns to water beneath his feet, is constantly becoming. The encroachment of water, of the chaos of the virtual, that destabilizes the land can be a hard trial of disidentification, of being unmoored from the self.

Sociologist David M. Burley, who conducted a large-scale ethnographic study of those affected by coastal land-loss in southern Louisiana, writes that “when people identify with and define natural places as being regenerative, the decimation of those places simultaneously erodes part of their own self-definitions.”²³⁰ In my interviews with shrimpers, I also found

²³⁰ David M. Burley, *Losing Ground: Identity and Land Loss in Coastal Louisiana* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 54. Burley was a research assistant with the Center for Hazards Assessment, Response and Technology (CHART) and the University of New Orleans, which

that people considered their environment regenerative. They were optimistic about the prospects of shrimp returning year after year. They were skeptical that their actions upset the ecology of the bayou. They considered the hazards of weather and flood to be nadirs on a cycle of death and rebirth. They were pinnacles of the more pagan shades of Catholicism: a life of figurative death and resurrection, mirrored in nature, something to both surrender to and to alter with acts of creativity and will. South Louisianans, according to both Louisiana scholarship and themselves,²³¹ are survivors. How can they not imagine themselves as survivors? They have found a way not to tame the sea, but to live with it. It would stand to reason that Burley's assessment is correct, that the deterioration of their land is tantamount to the deterioration of their self-definitions. Though Burley's contribution to documenting the human toll of erosion and subsidence in coastal Louisiana is invaluable, he misunderstands the relationship a coastal people has with stable identities. Furthermore, he is a poor reader of Wallace Stevens.

In "Idea of Order at Key West," the singer on the coast does not reflect the senseless chaos of spray and wave, she creates it through her singing: "there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made."²³² Though the shrimpers I spoke to certainly imagine their environment as regenerative, it is their stories of survival that have made it so. One man

employed a team of ethnographers to interview people in coastal parishes. CHART is an applied sociology think-tank that develops disaster response strategies for Louisiana communities.

²³¹ Carl Brasseaux, Cajun historian *par excellence*, writes, "it is clear that the story of the Acadians is one of survival against all odds" (*French, Cajun, Creole, Houma*, 6).

²³² Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West," 42–43.

with feet in both oil and seafood, told me, “For the real shrimper, like Kim Guy and the ones who do it all their lives, the economy is gonna go up and down for them, but they never gonna give up. It’s just something that’s in their blood.” The theme of blood destiny, discussed in the Blood chapter, explores some of blood’s valences as a governing metaphor. But blood is not the only polyvalent thematic at play: the water itself becomes place and ideal and an endlessly evocative image for the polyvocal imaginary of southern Louisiana. The economy becomes tidal: up and down. The “real” shrimper becomes *oceanic*: never yielding, vast in capacity, something that tides roll through but, ultimately, do not affect. Here, we see the most potent external liquid transformed into the most potent internal one. The shrimper, who spends his life at sea, lost to the landed who must submit to the tyranny of solid ground, knows something about staying the course, about adapting to changing currents and winds and ecosystems. Unlike the landed, the moored, shrimpers never ever get sick at sea.

What is terrifying to the shrimper is not a loss of identity, it is loss of place. And their amphibious place is unlike the place of people who live inland. They have access to alternate forms of navigation, of a littoral ecosystem consisting of other life-forms that survive on the fringe, and if their characteristic is survivability, it is because they live in a place that is otherwise hostile to human civilization according to rational people.²³³ The effects of a

²³³ Diane E. Austin, “Coastal Exploitation, Land Loss, and Hurricanes: A Recipe for Disaster,” *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 4 (2006): 687–688; Roy K. Dokka, “Modern-Day Tectonic Subsidence in Coastal Louisiana,” *Geology* 34, no. 4 (2006); Roy K. Dokka, “Louisiana’s Coast Is on Life-Support. Can the Coast Be Saved?,” Presentation to the LSU Law School (2010). Dokka further argues that our current efforts at coastal restoration are misguided at best because while it is certain

hundred years of unchecked land-loss, saltwater encroachment, canalization, subsidence, and global sea level rise due to global warming are stripping coastal people of their liminal place. Several fishers explained to me that a certain amount of saltwater encroachment—which kills salt-intolerant marsh grass, cypress trees, and oaks whose roots hold the incontinent land together—actually benefited the fisheries by expanding the estuary. The brackish water that resulted is necessary for shrimp, who take refuge in the estuaries to spawn. As the sea claims more and more land, amplifying the destructive potential of hurricanes, the landed fought back with stricter levees. As shrimper Steve Billiot told me,

Now that they building the levee system—which is good because of the hurricane protection—they're stopping a lot of the water from shrimp migrating, so we're catching less. And especially back in this area where I'm working at. They working right now, the trucks passing, they're building a dam, and they're building a levee system from Bayou Lafourche to Morgan City all the way towards the West. And that stops a lot of the water, which in turn is going to help the hurricane flood waters so we don't get flooded out, which is good. But on the other hand you got to go where the shrimp are at, where normally we're catching them in my backyard. And that's a matter of speaking. I can leave my dock and go twenty minutes away and start making money. And now that the dam is there, the levee system, I have to go further out.

Once the levees are complete, it will become increasingly difficult to find the brackish water necessary for a shrimp population. Witness the fascist order of the seawall: where once the sea transitioned to land, there is only sea, a demarcation, and land. Land, where people yet persist, is now governmentally the sea.

that human activity has caused damages to the wetlands, it does not account for the tectonic forces that are sinking the landmass.

Nowhere is this principle more elegantly expressed than Benh Zeitlin's 2012 film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.²³⁴ It was filmed in Isle de Jean Charles, a hyper-precarious stretch of road with stilted houses and a startling lack of land, a few miles from Chauvin. In May of 2016, the *New York Times* declared the inhabitants of the island America's first "climate refugees," as the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development apportioned forty-eight million dollars to resettle the community of Houma and Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Indians elsewhere.²³⁵ The residents of Bathtub, a fictional coastal village modeled on places like Isle de Jean Charles, have no such support. Instead, a hurricane comes and floods Bathtub. This time, however, the floodwaters do not recede because Bathtub lay outside an effective seawall levee, which echoes the real-life Morganza to the Gulf project that similarly excludes Isle de Jean Charles from its perimeter of flood protection. The people of Bathtub, floating on boats made from the beds of pickup trucks, punching catfish, and crushing crabs in their hands, exhaust their capacity to live at sea, having become accustomed to straddling water and earth. So they blow up the levee. Where once they were claimed by water, now they are claimed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency on behalf of the bureaucracy of man. This, too, is untenable, and they escape their shelters to live and die in the muck.

²³⁴ Benh Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Cinereach: 2012).

²³⁵ Coral Davenport and Campbell Robertson, "Resettling the First American 'Climate Refugees'," *New York Times*, May 3, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/03/us/resettling-the-first-american-climate-refugees.html>.

This parable is made all the more poignant by the mythological point of view of its six-year-old protagonist and narrator, Hushpuppy, played by Terrebonne Parish native Quvenzhané Wallis. Hushpuppy, like the trope of the improvisational and scrappy fisher, can cope when the world is drowning. She knows how to eat the living meat of the waters. She knows how to make her way back home. But, let's face it, she is a six-year-old who has to face down death on multiple fronts: her erratic and dying father who tries to raise her to be muscular in a treacherous world, the daily chore of snuffing out the life of animals so that she might live, the sudden and severe flood that persists until her whole world is drowned. These confrontations with death are made manifest in the figure of the "aurochs," a prehistoric bull that Hushpuppy imagines as a giant tusked pig, suddenly free from its glacier, stomping across the globe to wreak havoc on her. In the most iconic scene from the movie, Hushpuppy, a tiny child, looks into the eyes of the aurochs *and does not blink*. The aurochs turns away because this is a movie about hope, but the optics of beast versus girl makes stark the stakes of environmental cataclysm: the people outside the levees are precious and fragile and they are fighting a chaotic and violent force that might as well be a god from an ancient story, a determined and unrelenting genius loci. The courage to face a destructive spirit and stake a claim on land soon to be called water is prideful and stupid. But it is also romantic, creative, thrilling, and generative. As Stevens writes, "It was her voice that made / The sky acutest at its vanishing."²³⁶

²³⁶ Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West," 34–35.

The plight of shrimpers and others who live on the edges of land, who have been facing routinized environmental disaster for almost a century or more, is perhaps a last stand against the oblivion of water. Witness the eschatological truth of coastal Louisiana: it will be overcome by water. Sooner or later, whether by erosion or subsidence or the rise of the sea, whether we mitigate the loss and restore a coast or not. It is tempting to see flaunting this inevitable fact by living, persistently, in quickly dissolving mud as a type of nihilism: a romantic and communal suicide, a captain and crew sinking with their ship. And to deny the pervasive melancholy that accompanies what I've been characterizing as joyful improvisation would be to deny the rich and contradictory feelings experienced by those that make their home in disappearing places. Perhaps, instead, we should take the cue from those on the frontlines of the battle between land and water, the coast dwellers and fishers and people wild about ambiguity, and plunge into the gulf, inviting an aesthetic politics of unknowability and guesses and stories. The geographical philosopher Henri Lefebvre writes, "No space ever vanishes utterly, leaving no trace."²³⁷ If the spirit of the coast is to live on, it will be through holding in suspension the devastation and possibilities of the gulf as well as the structuration and networks of the land. The embrace of suspension and liminality in the littoral zone, the estuarial openness to contradiction and experience and self-mythologizing and self-effacement—these are strategies to cope with a globalizing world. These strategies recognize the doom and ecocide caused by a corporate and governmental rage to order, and

²³⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992), 164.

in seeing that failure, trace the outlines of a ghostlier world, one still perilous, but one flexible enough to be livable.

Nets

In April in the bayou hamlets of lower Terrebonne Parish, thick, muscular fingers pinch ropes into knots, knots into nets. Hands scaly with callouses grip brush and roller, whitewashing the stained hulls of trawlboats. White paint speckles navy blue work coveralls, the one-piece long-sleeve uniform of mechanics and men older than thirty-five in Chauvin. Grease smears on everything: clothes, faces, roping, gears, pulleys, wrenches and plyers, the busted seats on old Dodge trucks, the Formica kitchen counters. It is a dirty time, and one that is urgent. The boats have been moored for a good four months of bad weather, and we know, thanks to William Butler Yeats, that things fall apart. Like the price of shrimp in May 2015 that tumbled from \$3.75 for a pound of 41–50 shrimp²³⁸ to \$2.85. Or the price of shrimp in May 2016, which fell to \$1.66 a pound.²³⁹ Mechanical failure plus cheap shrimp might mean having to lean on a social safety net like food stamps or welfare. It might mean having to find something else to do entirely to make it through the year.

Shrimpers, especially the ones on small vessels who trawl by season in inshore waters, have a narrow window of time in which they must harvest enough shrimp for a year's income. The waters beyond three nautical miles until the international limit at two hundred nautical miles, known as federal waters, can be trawled year-round, but require a big boat, a crew, and an upfront investment in ice, fuel, and food that would set a captain back upwards of \$30,000. The state of Louisiana divides its waters into two regions: outside waters extend

²³⁸ Shrimp are classified by size: 41–50 indicates that there would be between forty-one and fifty shrimp per pound. Bigger shrimp sizes include 26–30 and U15 (under fifteen shrimp per pound).

²³⁹ Bichnga Boulet, *Shrimp Statistics, May - 2016*, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (2016) https://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/st1/market_news/doc45.txt.

from the three-mile limit to the coastline, and inside waters are the waters inshore of the coastline. Generally, fishers can harvest shrimp from the outside waters from May until December, while the inside waters can only be fished during a brown shrimp season in May and a white shrimp season in autumn. Each year, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries sends out a cadre of scientists who cast nets into the fishing grounds and measure the shrimp they catch. These scientists and other government employees confer and determine when and where to open the waters to trawlers.²⁴⁰ For many shrimpers, these people—bureaucrats, scientists, and policy professionals—are the villains of their story.

Imagine you learned to drag nets from your daddy. He taught you about proper mesh size and throttle control. He taught you how to determine when to shrimp by feeling the *vents de Carême*, the winds of Lent. He taught you to divine where to drag by looking for muddy water, where frenetic shrimp activity sweeps the muddy seafloor creating pillars of underwater mud clouds. Your daddy himself learned these things at the knees of his daddy, who can remember standing chest deep in a lake holding the end of a seine net, who could pick leeches off his ankles as casually as he might pick an orange, heavy and fragrant, off a tree. Imagine you remember going to your daddy's daddy's camp out in Lake Tambour. It was just a little cabin on pilings and you could see marsh grass and waves if you pressed your eye to the cracks between wall planks. Your daddy was teaching you to fish for speckled trout, how to squeeze worms onto hooks, how to cast a line, how to jerk the pole to give a

²⁴⁰ Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, *Commercial and for-Hire Fisheries Rules and Regulations*, Baton Rouge: LDWF, 2017, 12.

little extra life to the quartered worm. But what you remember most is your daddy's daddy, your pawpaw, in a ribbed white sleeveless undershirt, tucked into pleated khakis, arms red until midway up his bicep, thick-framed glasses that magnified his green eyes, and a busted Panama hat shading his face. After putting the fish in the ice chest and just as the sun dipped below horizon, he would go out on the pier and light a kerosene lantern and hook it to a piling and light himself a filterless Parliament cigarette. You remember that once lit, the cigarette smoldered in the corner of his mouth, pluming smoke glancing off the side of his spectacled left eye. Shrimp would flick against the border between water and air, and your pawpaw had a long pole with a net at one end he would dip into them. That night, you, your daddy, and your pawpaw would eat these shrimp boiled over a butane burner, heavily brined in salt and spice, dipped into a mix of ketchup and mayonnaise brought with you in an ice chest. It was the beginning of April, still tolerable to sleep in a cabin in the marsh. You loved the way the world looked lit by kerosene and the mosquito netting hung over your bunk. And you loved listening to your daddy and pawpaw speaking to each other in hushed French, fragments of which you'd whisper to yourself later. *Là, la merde a pris. C'est pas de quoi.* You could not quite understand what they were saying, but you imagined it to be some kind of secret method to catching shrimp, some kind of sacred knowledge that you were confident, if you could get better at worming hooks, they would pass on to you one day.

Now imagine that after a lifetime on a boat, the wealth of intergenerational fishing knowledge quickening your muscles and tendons to efficiently pull thousands of shrimp from the water, you get an envelope full of new rules about shrimping. Imagine that officers from a government agency interrupt your rough ballet of raising nets and releasing a catch

and culling and icing and steering and navigating. They want to make sure you are not keeping the speckled trout caught by your trawl. Imagine them inspecting your nets, to determine whether your mesh size is appropriate, a mesh you learned by manipulating the cords with your fingers, a mesh you would never have considered measuring. Why would you? Your daddy made nets this way, still does even though he is no longer as seaworthy as he used to be. Each year, you catch a lot of shrimp. Each year, you feed your family with the proceeds from all that shrimp. Imagine another document sent to you requiring you to cut open your nets and install a Turtle Excluder Device. Sure, you've caught a turtle or two in the last twenty years of trawling. One was so big you kept it and got your brothers and in-laws to come out on the boat to pose with it, while your wife took a few Polaroids of you men and your big reptile. You cannot imagine that catching a turtle every now and then is really that big a deal. If you catch one, nine times out of ten you are going to eat it anyway if it's dead. If not, it goes back in the drink. But you can imagine the problem of creating an escape hatch in a net. Each net-full will now yield less shrimp, so you will have to work harder and longer to maintain your income. You wonder when having to wait for and receive mail became a crucial part of a career you chose precisely because it licensed you to work with your hands, to be your own boss. You suppose it happened gradually as a governmental body claimed more and more parts of your business.

The worst of it, growing angrier every time you remember it, is that your knowledge of time and ecosystem, the secret, sacred knowledge your dad did eventually pass on to you—in English—a few years after your pawpaw died, this knowledge was now worthless. Instead, you are instructed when to shrimp and when not to. At first it was April 15th through June.

Then the opening of the spring shrimp season crept toward May. You hear about the scientists this and the scientists that, but you know, in your heart, that these people cannot know what you know, because you know the things you know because you have a hundred years of practice: you, your daddy, your pawpaw, his daddy. It's in your blood to know. You do not need a measurement because you were taught to be responsible and not catch tiny shrimp. Who would you sell them to anyway? You feel caught in a net thrown by strangers. Any way you try to move just makes that net tighter. And you know who cast that net. The Bureau of Wildlife and Fisheries. The State of Louisiana. The United States of America. Politicians. Global fish mongers who have lately brought in foreign shrimp that sell for less than the ones caught in American waters. The wound of taking your inherited knowledge away from you and replacing it with regulation mailed to you, regulation you basically paid for when you bought your commercial fishing license, is raw and achy, and it makes you want to wrangle your kids and wife and parents onto the boat and drift away from land for good.

But that network, the one comprised of your family and your obligations to them and the love for them that threatens to spill over into a protective wrath against the institutions that harm them by restricting you, is what prevents you from quitting this land. You want them to live and live well. You want your kids to join the social networks you will always be excluded from if they want to and can work hard enough. You want your town to survive and have festivals and fresh seafood and sport fishing. You want grandchildren who can come visit from Houston or Atlanta or, God forbid, New York City, and see the kind of man you are: one who can competently seize a life worth living from a wild environment,

who can manage to live despite constant interference, who can demonstrate his love by passing on useful knowledge and good food. And the only way to achieve this, to secure the webwork of your family and their security, is to work and work hard and work happily. On days when you've finished your painting for the day or had to stop rigging the nets because of a flash downpour, you stop by your daddy's, where he sits under the carport, in an old white undershirt tucked into khakis, bifocals sliding down his nose as his still nimble fingers weave the shuttle between cords, knotting together a net. He reminds you of this lesson, his most important: just keep working.

This chapter explores the dynamics of being caught in nets, whether those nets be physical, governmental, familial, economic, or social. Networks, those assemblages of decentralized nodes that connect people in varying configurations, can also do things that nets do: capture, bind, harvest. Shrimpers, like anyone, belong to a series of overlapping, sometimes contradictory networks, and those networks, when properly identified, can invite a host of constricting actions. Governing bodies regulate them, familial bonds discipline them, scholars study them. During my fieldwork and in my conversations with commercial fishers over a life lived among them, fishers consistently complain about governmental interference with their trade. Whether it be the Turtle Excluder Device (TED) requirement or the micromanagement of fishing seasons and zoning, shrimpers feel trapped in a net cast from afar. And they know their acts of resistance (disregarding seasonal limits, selling dead shrimp off a bait license, using nets without bycatch release devices, protesting certain regulations) amount to little, even if they somehow escape notice of the water police. In addition, shrimpers recognize that the global economic network is nearly godlike in its ability to

utterly ignore the needs of commercial fishers in a declining regional fishery. There is only one thing they can do if they want to maintain their livelihood in the shrimp fishery: keep working and bending to the movements of various nets that seek to constrict them. At the same time, these shrimpers are weaving nets of their own, nets of work and family and the shared experience of living in a landscape. Although shrimpers feel moored by obligations and family ties, they rage most against the encroachment of governmentality and capitalism in every facet of their life. In their struggle against a master narrative of the American good life, they collect in their nets the ingredients that make it possible to imagine a life lived otherwise: a life of connection, of networks of support and responsibility, a life worth living even if it is impossible.

Ghost Nets

In the early 1860s, the “President of the Fisherman of the North Coast” (of England), Richard Crick recognized the deep danger of the trawl:

The ever-gaping jaws of this life-destroyer thus receives everything that is loose in the bottom of the sea. Living and dead fish, pieces of stone, iron and coals, masses of sea weed and spawn, and the bones of many a shipwrecked mariner, who lies “nine fathoms deep” in the dark blue sea, and other relics which the storm has laid beside them, are all jolted along together until the net is filled with this *debris* of the ocean.²⁴¹

To trawl is to strain the sea through mesh, collecting its solids. Crick describes bottom trawling, where the net rigging skims the sea floor, and his concern, as a line-fisher, was the mechanical and industrial processing of sea-life, which can be a grisly affair: the delicate bodies of fish crushed against other bodies, some delicate, some with the toothy carapaces of crabs. The expanding weight of the collection churns the first-caught to fishy gristle. Crick uses the imagery of the indiscriminate maw of the trawl to attack a problem that

²⁴¹ This quotation is part of a reproduction of a “large sheet” written by Crick in a pamphlet intended to refute this anti-trawling jeremiad: *Trawl Fishing: The Arguments against Trawling Considered and Refuted. Being an Attempt to Clear the Important System of Trawl-Net Fishing of the Serious Charges Brought against It by the Promoters of the Present Agitation, the Object of Which Is to Induce, If Possible, the Government to Abolish This System of Fishing Altogether* (Hull: Yorkshire Printing and Publishing Company, 1863), 6.

governmental bodies still grapple with today: the possibility that individual fishers will catch too many fish. A net, the primary tool of the fisher, becomes a weapon against a suddenly endangered ecology. To be “caught in a net” is a metaphor we use to mean haplessly trapped, to become entangled in a situation one entered without a larger, systematic understanding of what is going on, to be stuck in such a way that becoming unstuck is increasingly improbable the longer one is stuck.

Freedom, for the shrimpers I spoke to, functions both as a core value and as one (of several) justifications for working in the fisheries. When shrimper Kim Guy told me that he loved “to come do this,” I asked him what he loved about commercial fishing. He told me,

I mean [you’re] your own boss. You don’t have nobody fussing you in the back and say “Aw, you gotta go do this. Aw, you gotta go do that.” You go when you want, and you come back when you want. You know what you have to do to make your bills and what you have to do to survive. You want it, you gotta go get it.

Kim loves working the nets and traps in the estuary and gulf because it is a way of living free of surveillance, of nagging, of proscribed rules of labor. Kim’s tone is matter-of-fact, but it also contains a whiff of disdain for people who need the comfort of management. Freedom, for Kim, means relying on your own competence to ensure that you and your family survive. It means not being subject to external discipline, not being enclosed in a physical space. It means choosing to do something instead of consenting to follow the orders of a superior. The mere freedom of democratic society—wherein one can vote for leaders and, theoretically, participate in governance as an equal to others—is insufficient for Kim. His idea of freedom is deeper than legal guarantee. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer critique the notion of freedom in free democratic societies: “Formal freedom is guaranteed

for everyone. No one has to answer officially for what he or she thinks. However, all find themselves enclosed from early on within a system of churches, clubs, professional associations, and other relationships which amount to the most sensitive instrument of social control.”²⁴² Instead of a formal freedom, Kim and other shrimpers desire a formless one, a state of being left alone. Specifically, Kim resents what Michel Foucault would call disciplinary power: a technology of control that produces individual subjects of the state by shuffling bodies from one enclosed space to another—the school, the factory, the prison—where people conform to schedules of activity and hierarchies through a process of normalization.²⁴³

Though Kim, at least as an adult, embraces the enclosed system of the church, he trawls to escape from spaces of normalization. The specter of formal schooling surfaces in conversation with him as simultaneously irrelevant and perhaps a little ludicrous: it is an artificial system that threatens to supplant the improvisatory learning of experience and the sacred exchange of techniques passed through kinship. Like other shrimpers, Kim said that he could not wait

²⁴² Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 120.

²⁴³ Foucault makes the case for three modes of power that have arisen at different moments in history but which all persist heterogeneously to the present moment: sovereign power (based on the right of the state to kill), disciplinary power (based on the production and normalization of individuals), and biopower (based on the regulation of people as populations rather than as individuals). For a schematic description of how these types of power manifest and overlap in society, see Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003); Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

to get out of school and go on a boat to shrimp, which he did with his family during school breaks. When he speaks of his son, T-Kim and his embrace of schooling, he becomes simultaneously self-deprecating and defensive. T-Kim was studying computer science, a topic Kim claims to “not know what that is or whatever,” although he clearly knows what it is. Kim elaborates, “We wasn’t raised with that! So we don’t really got no use for it, for us!” Kim also recounts a story familiar not only to the other shrimpers I spoke with (and who, themselves, repeated a version of this narrative), but to anyone who has studied the historically francophone populations in southern Louisiana: his parents, raised in French, had to learn English once entering the school system. While Kim did not explicitly describe the process by which they learned English, I know from both my family’s stories and from the scholarly record that French was basically beaten, physically and emotionally, out of francophone children in early twentieth century Louisiana.²⁴⁴ Schooling, figured as a site of humiliation, takes the unruly tongue and kneads it into something normal, takes the body and breaks its rough edges against a clock, locks the child made docile into a place away from his family, figured as a receding yet primary form of natural support and knowledge. While mandatory schooling in the early twentieth may have produced modern American subjects of most children who are processed in its machines—prepared to function in other enclosed and disciplined spaces like offices and factories—for men like Kim, disciplinary institutions

²⁴⁴ Teachers would rap knuckles with rulers, hit them with rubber hoses, and force them to write lines or wear nooses, among other things. See Bernard, *The Cajuns*, 18–19, 33–34; Hosea Phillips, “The Spoken French of Louisiana,” in *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture*, ed. Glenn Conrad, 173–184 (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 1978), 173; Brasseaux, *Cajun Breakdown*, 99; Sexton, “Cajun-French Language Maintenance and Shift,” 37.

such as education or wage-labor are intolerable. For Kim, these places may as well be their logical extension: the prison.²⁴⁵

When I arranged meetings with Kim, I never talked to him directly. Even being accessible by phone was too limiting. His wife brokered the interview. My brother, my production assistant throughout my fieldwork, and I arrived right after dawn at Kim's house. Two little boys hid behind pilings and each other, watching us. They had slept over the night before at Pawpaw Kim's house but decided not to make a run when they heard there would be some strangers aboard. These were the ones I mentioned in the blood chapter, the ones who, Kim believes, have commercial fishing in their blood. When I interviewed Kim in 2015, it was just before the opening of the inshore shrimp season, and so we went crabbing with him. Though crabbing does not take Kim into the open waters of the Gulf, he enjoys the flexible mobility the fishing life affords him. He is not bound by geography. Whereas fishers might sell closer to their home, Kim sells to a dock in the neighboring village Dulac, a straight shot across Lake Boudreaux by boat. Instead of a proscribed procedure for his trade, he decides who gets his business. I asked him if Dulac's market was especially good. Kim did not respond to that: he just said that he had been selling to them for almost twenty years. Even the invisible hand of the market seems to be unable to pin him down.

²⁴⁵ For a more in-depth discussion of discipline and the homology between schools, barracks, factories, and prisons, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 135–305.

One time, Kim secured a regular job, but could not last more than a month. I learned about this when I asked him about the differences between his life onshore and on the water. He said, “Life on the boat is so much easier. I stayed on a tugboat for about a month, just staying—you don’t enjoy yourself.” This reply seems bewildering until you realize that life as a paid tugboat captain is no different than any other type of land-based job to Kim. The aesthetic of life on the water is defined by freedom and flexibility. The aesthetic of the land is enclosure and obstacle and discipline. Kim says, “If you on a job, you gotta stay on the job, wherever they tell you, you gotta be at.” Working on a tugboat, you just as soon work at a factory or sit in a classroom. Regardless of the scenery, you still do not have the freedom to move.

Almost all the shrimpers I spoke to had a similar story. Steve Billiot, who moonlights as an Elvis impersonator, makes the same gestures against both schooling and wage labor. He tells me outright that he did not like school, and that from an early age, he wanted to shrimp for a living. But then he met his wife, who being from the West Bank of New Orleans, at first refused to move with Steve “down the bayou.” He tried to make a life for himself onshore: first, he worked in a shipyard for six months, then tugboats on the Mississippi River, then truck driving. You can see the progression from enclosure to mobility. The shipyard kept him stationary, working factory-style labor, punching a time clock. To escape, he thought to captain a tugboat, which affords more mobility and autonomy. When that proved too constricting, he piloted a big rig, traversing a greater geography. But with the full network of the United States interstate highway system his domain, he still could not escape the directives of a boss and the responsibilities to a company not his own. Eventually, he



Figure 24: Steve Billiot, commercial shrimper, Cajun Elvis. Photographs by Christopher Lirette.

convinced his wife to move with him to Montegut, where Steve could shrimp the inshore waters in a sixteen-foot skiff. He travelled greater physical distances on the tugboat and

eighteen-wheeler, and he almost certainly made more money in any of those jobs than he did when I talked to him in the lean spring shrimp season of 2015. What he did not have, however, was a sense of absolute freedom, of self-direction, of being able to check out and be obliged to no one but himself and his wife and their children. His wife does not work. During the off-season, Steve refurbishes busted and abandoned skiffs to sell to other fisherman.

Talking to Steve, however, you might never guess the amount of scrambling it must require for him to make enough money to support himself and his wife (their children are now adults). When I first met Steve, it was after he joined a band at Chauvin Fest²⁴⁶ in his “Cajun Elvis” persona. Within five minutes, he was showing off a picture of himself lying on a big haul of shrimp in his little boat. He is an active member of his tribe, the United Houma Nation. He plays family reunions and clubs and other events that would require an ethnically specific Elvis. He and his wife restore antiques. They also collect and curate the faux-Nudie suits and sunglasses and wigs and sequined shrimp boots that comprise his Elvis costume. While Steve does not exactly enjoy a life of leisure, his easy, garrulous, and friendly attitude makes it seem like he does. And he, indeed, sees it that way. He describes rebuffing telemarketers selling cruises by telling them that he already goes on cruises six months out of the year. This is not to say that Steve is naïve about the shrimp fishery’s decline or the

²⁴⁶ I cofounded this festival and the nonprofit, T-Possibility, that hosts it, and Steve was trying to get booked as an act for a future festival.

political and infrastructural challenges to his way of life. He told me, “the shrimping industry here where I work in the back of the Terrebonne area is—it’s coming to an end.”

When I asked shrimpers about the problems facing the shrimp fishery, they responded with the claustrophobic sense of a person hopelessly entangled in a net. A net is a liquid cage: adapting and flowing around the borders of a body. It was not the eroding land transforming their fishing grounds that gave the shrimpers the most acute frustration, nor the toxins and oils spilled into the water by careless corporations, nor even really the foreign shrimp farmers whose chloramphenicol-marinated shrimp cut deep the price of shrimp. According to Glynn Trahan, former shrimper, “The biggest problem is the government taking over and telling you what you can and cannot do.” Over the course of several meetings, Glynn grew most angry telling me the myriad ways the government mismanaged the fishery: they enforced turtled-excluder devices (TEDs) for trawlers,²⁴⁷ they stipulate the opening and closing of seasons, and they enforce catch size limits. As Steve told me, “There’s a lot to be said about the government: they control our livelihood. They say when we can go shrimping and when we got to stop.” One of the great appeals of the shrimping life, the freedom to “be one’s own boss,” was thwarted by regulation. These regulations appear as a perpetual course correction. The shrimpers outfit their boats and gear a certain way, form habits of movement, and then

²⁴⁷ I make the distinction here of a trawler as a shrimper who employs an “otter trawl” fishing gear, which consists of great nets attached to an outrigger boom that stay entirely submerged during the drag, as opposed to shrimpers who use a skimmer or butterfly net gear, neither of which currently require TEDs. For greater detail on the otter trawl, see the introductory chapter, *Unmooring for Beginners*.

they need to conform to a new protocol incrementally different than the previous one. Once shrimpers adapt to the second protocol, governing bodies, who have been monitoring the effects of the change in terms of safety, environmental impact, and economics, refigure the protocol and disseminate the new correct way to shrimp. The shrimpers are free in a sense: they can still shrimp, but within parameters that are constantly assessed and adjusted.

One clear example of this kind of control mechanism involves the requirement that commercial fishing vessels install automatic identification systems. Beginning February 26, 2016, boats must have devices that provide information including name of boat, type of vessel, position, course, speed, and other types of information.²⁴⁸ Also, captains of vessels that trawl in federal waters may be selected to participate in the National Marine Fisheries Service's electronic logbook program, which transmits location data to be used to determine fishing effort, estimate landings and incidental sea turtle and red snapper mortality due to bycatch, and generally monitor where boats are at a given point.²⁴⁹ Despite the alarm I felt hearing about this rule (*surveillance state! panopticon!* I whisper-shouted to myself), shrimpers were nonplussed when I asked them about it. They did not feel this geocoordinate system of surveillance infringed on their freedom in the way that TED regulations did. This kind of control masquerades as technology and safety and is, ultimately, an invisible part of a paradigmatic shift in how social controls manifest. Global positioning—specifically its use in

²⁴⁸ AIS Requirements, *Code of Federal Regulations*, Title 33 (2015): 164, § 164.146 ¶ (b) *ibid.*: 164.146 ¶ (j) .

²⁴⁹ Recordkeeping and Reporting, *Code of Federal Regulations*, Title 50 (2015): 622, § 622.651.

tracking—is precisely the technology Gilles Deleuze writes about in his short essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control.” Citing Félix Guattari, he describes a city where one’s access is controlled by an electronic card. He writes, “[W]hat counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person’s position—licit or illicit—and effects a universal modulation.”²⁵⁰ This technology is not being used to limit a boat’s mobility—yet. Deleuze’s point is that not only could this tracking technology be used to control the movement of individuals, but technology of control itself changes the possible ways people might be manipulated, often invisibly, by corporate entities. Such techniques of control, Deleuze argues *divide* the individual into different datapoints (such as location, productive potential, buying habits, participation in politics) that can be continually adjusted. Automated and distributed surveillance replaces the institutional gaze that controls human activity in discrete space and time. A society of control is a network comprised of intersecting nets, capturing and culling, cast by coalitions formed by the merging of government and corporation and family and religion—institutions broken apart by changing paradigms in technology, economics, and politics.

Deleuze expands on Foucault’s conception of the shifting character of power from sovereign power to disciplinary and biopolitical power with his brief description of a society of control. In a sovereign society, the state in the figure of the monarch exercises power to end life. In a disciplinary society, the state in the figure of institutions makes individuals adapt to

²⁵⁰ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 7.

constraints in a series of enclosed spaces (the school, the factory, the hospital). In a society of control, institutions are in crisis, and people are divided into sub-individual qualities that become data. In this type of society, control is diffuse (not necessarily coming from the state, but also corporations and complex industrial-governmental networks) but targeted (able to pinpoint granular, subindividual qualities to transform or keep static). Deleuze writes, “Enclosures are *molds*, distinct castings, but controls are a *modulation*, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point.”²⁵¹ Controls are technologies that shape our free movement, that conform to our unique bodies, that subdivide us into modular keywords that can be manipulated piecemeal. Controls are like a sieve that behaves like a net, a matrix that culls certain data into a dataset and releases the irrelevant rest. Kim and Steve and the rest of the shrimpers who romanticize their free lives feel the tug of this net from time to time without feeling disciplined by a society that would normalize them into the productive citizens of an industrialized state.

Although the shrimpers I spoke to mostly identified governmental intrusion as the foil to their freedom, industry regulations are not “controls” in the Deleuzian sense. They are still exercises of power characteristic of disciplinary societies: they define the limits of the normal with sanctions. Shrimpers bristle at the rules set forth by Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries or the United States Department of the Interior, rules which, in the most generous reading,

²⁵¹ Ibid.: 4.

intend to promote life—the lives of shrimpers and the lives of the animal populations that sustain them. These efforts to shape lives are visible, enforced with citations and policing. The real danger is in the control you cannot see: ghost nets. A ghost net is a net that has been severed from its fishing vessel, floating unclaimed in the open waters. You feel a ghost net when you are cruising along in a Lafitte Skiff, throttle open wide, and your motor lurches and whines, tossing you against the steering wheel, as you drift to a stop. Your propeller catches the invisible net underwater, but you do not need to see it to resign yourself to a ruined motor, stranded somewhere off the coast, with a hold full of fast-decomposing sea life. We might think of the controls that mold the actions of shrimpers as a ghost net: free-floating, distributed technologies that form as other institutional forms of power break apart create an illusion of self-directed freedom while snaring us just underneath our vision. Ghost net one: limited access to knowledge and the claim to have knowledge. Deleuze writes, “The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it.”²⁵² Shrimpers feel rejected and confused by the way the state chooses scientific knowledge over the experiential knowledge of the workers in the fishery.

On Good Friday 2015, I sat with Glynn Trahan under his carport and talked about this very subject. We started the morning in a pond about an eighth of a mile behind his house, where he pulled from the shallow brown water traps clicking with crawfish. His son had a sack and carried the shelly life away to boil for a midafternoon meal. In Chauvin, and I suspect

²⁵² Ibid.: 5.

elsewhere in Catholic Louisiana, Good Friday is observed by eating enough crawfish boiled in spice and salt, dipped in a mix of mayonnaise and ketchup, and drinking enough Miller Hi-Life beers to put you in a food coma until the Easter Vigil Mass. The Catholic Church says that Good Friday is an obligatory day of fasting and abstinence, meaning a day with only one meal and no meat.²⁵³ Crawfish does not count as meat. Glynn has a foot in several non-meat recreational fisheries—crawfish, shrimp, crab, finfish—but now derives his income from alligator hunting and hosting alligator hunting events for sportsmen vacationers. Since alligator season is only the month of October, he seems to be semi-retired, spending his days how he sees fit, which generally consists of pursuing wild animal protein.

Under the carport, surrounded by manicured lilies and saw palmetto, Glynn rocked on his swing, telling me of the olden days of ducks so thick on the ground you could meet your limit with only a tennis racket. He was 54 at the time of the interview, but his flat Cajun accent was about as thick as the accent of my francophone grandparents. Unlike ChaCha, a bait shrimper who trawls daily to supply recreational fishers with shrimp, a man who had a sinewy and mournful muscularity, Glynn was gregarious. He was not a hungry man. His life was one of recreation and projects. He had four children, only one of whom works in the fisheries. His rambling conversation style was accommodating, aided no doubt by the fact that he went to high school with my uncle and knew my family well. He was so disarming in person that I did not realize until going back through my recordings that his distrust of

²⁵³ Days of Penance, *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1251, in *The Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition* (Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1983).

institutional knowledge was so great that he insisted on fantastic counter-narratives that seem to be made up with only a tenuous mooring in reality. He was the only shrimper I spoke to who repeated the frankly ludicrous story that the federal government was planting sea turtles for shrimpers to catch in order to jam through Turtle Excluder Device legislation in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁵⁴ He also told me that one of the reasons he refrains from foreign shrimp is that he believes “the foreigners”—here he invokes by name the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—are trying to kill us, and imported shrimp would be a suitable vector to poison us.

Although on the periphery of the commercial fisheries, Glynn was by far the most suspicious of the government and its various technologies of disciplining the populace. In between dreamy descriptions of the disappearing wetlands, he complained about a set of laws and regulations at the state and federal level known as Compensatory Mitigation.²⁵⁵ These rules intend to offset potential coastal loss with a series of consequences—including fines, infrastructural development, or injunctions—for land-damaging projects. As a man with an interest in turning his land into a Louisiana paradise replete with crawfish ponds, deer pens,

²⁵⁴ I cannot understand what possible motivation a federal organization like National Marine Fisheries would have to plant turtles or what possible benefit anyone could receive by sabotaging a relatively small industry in a relatively negligible way. Jill Ann Harrison documents this same conspiracy theory in (*Buoyancy on the Bayou*, 51–53).

²⁵⁵ For United States federal regulations, see Compensatory Mitigation for Losses of Aquatic Resources, *Code of Federal Regulations*, 33 (2015): 325, 332; Compensatory Mitigation for Losses of Aquatic Resources, *Code of Federal Regulations*, 40 (2015): 230 §§ 230.91–230.98. For Louisiana State law, see Mitigation of Coastal Wetlands Losses, *Louisiana Revised Statutes*, 49 (2011): § 49:214.41.

and boat launches, Glynn runs afoul of mitigation laws regularly. He recognizes the dangers of erosion, a process he keenly and personally feels—a nagging emptiness that colonizes his memories of a good life on the bayou with his family. But he does not think the government is the best steward of a life and landscape he can feel sifting through his fingers. He told me,

The government has got involved so much in this, you know, trying to regulate, trying to do what they think is best. And sometime it's hard to see that they're doing the right thing. If you get older people here, get the older people who've been doing this and seen everything from year to year, that's the people who ought to be making decisions on the fisheries and whatever, because I think that's the smartest people, you know: they've seen over the years what's going on, how it can be fixed or whatever needs to be not done so we don't continue having the problem we're having.

The “problem we’re having” here refers to both the specific hardship of the 2015 shrimp season, but also the general decline of the fisheries and the loss of coastal land. He rejects the expertise of government scientists. He knows how to manage his land. His grandfather knew how to manage his land. They know because they live a life intimately, ecologically enmeshed with that land. Chacha, who has a larger stake in the shrimp fishery than the semi-retired Glynn, echoes this sentiment after telling me his solutions for ensuring a thriving fishery:

You know this is just my opinion. I'm not a biologist. I'm not one to make the decision on what needs to be done, but with my years of doing only commercial fishing, for forty years, as a kid growing up, you'd think that someone who has that experience you should take their opinion seriously.

Shrimpers know what is in the water because they have dipped their nets in it and pulled out what was there to see. They know what happens when too many shrimpers lower their nets in a small area. They know the salinity encroaching landward is killing the plants that hold the earth together, letting clumps of mud release into the sea. They cannot abide people who

have spent their lives indoors, except when it comes to gathering data, nor can they expect them to truly understand the magic of being connected to a place or the threats that menace that magic.

Anthropologist Tim Ingold, in an homage to Martin Heidegger, might say that Glynn operates from a “dwelling perspective.” He defines this perspective as one in which “the forms people build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings.”²⁵⁶ In other words, one can only properly build something, manage space, if she is embedded in the complex network of people, landforms, animals, plants, and things in a given locality. The intrusion of regulatory apparatuses from outside, engineered by scientists who may be abstracting conclusions from faraway experiments, is an act of condescension and colonization. In his lecture “Dwelling Building Thinking,” Heidegger weaves a network of etymological claims that links *Bauen* (German: building) to *buan* (Old English: to dwell) and *bin* and *bist* (German first and second person single forms of *sein*: to be). In doing so, he argues that to dwell is to abide, to cultivate (to build), and to *be*. He says,

What then does *ich bin* mean? The old word *bauen*, to which the *bin* belongs, answers: *ich bin, du bist* mean: I dwell, you dwell. The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. The old word *bauen*, which says that man *is* insofar as he *dwells*, this word *bauen* however *also*

²⁵⁶ Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, 186.

means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine.²⁵⁷

Dwelling, for Glynn, is distinctly Heideggerian: to be in place is to live, to live is to cultivate his life through an encounter with the land, to dwell is to be. A deep nostalgia and yearning for an authentic life wounds Glynn, propels him to build camps, transform land into crawfish pounds, equip a Lafitte skiff for recreational trawling long after he left the shrimp fishery.

One of the most interesting metaphors Heidegger uses in his discussion of dwelling is that of the bridge. A person can only build a bridge if they have a deep, intimate relationship of dwelling to a place. The bridge organizes wild nature into places. Heidegger says,

[The bridge] does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream... With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream.²⁵⁸

The bridge, rather than being a logical connection between two places, *creates* the places it connects. We could say that the bridge is a type of net: a way of harvesting meaning from an undifferentiated nature. For Glynn, this makes it all the more odious when the Army Corps of Engineers dictates infrastructural projects in a landscape already made meaningful by structures built by people who dwell there. The disconnection between knowledge informed

²⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, 143–159 (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 145.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.: 150.

by dwelling and the abstract knowledge of government and university scientists creates the possibility that new structures—such as canals, flood walls, levees, land augmentation—not only bulldoze local input, but threaten the legibility of the land. In this story, you don't leave home, home leaves you. And you watch, small and angry, as the land upon which you staked the authenticity of your life erodes underneath your feet.

Heidegger, not writing in English, neglected to trace the strange origin of dwelling in English. The word dwell comes to us from Old English, in which it means “To lead into error, mislead, delude; to stun, stupefy.” It began to mean “To tarry, delay; to desist from action,” upon borrowing the meaning of the Old Norse word *dvelja*, which means “to retard, delay.” From here, we arrive at the modern meaning of living in a home.²⁵⁹ To dwell in the old sense was to err. In 1933 Heidegger erred in joining the Nazi party and subsequently implementing Nazi policies as Rector of the University of Freiburg. He spent his summers dwelling in a chalet in the Black Forest, becoming ahistorical and rooted. The romance of origin, homeland, and the “simple” life of self-sufficiency in a secluded patch of earth lends Heidegger's phenomenology of dwelling a fascistic stink. It is not hard to see a similar autochthony in Glynn's testimony. When he describes the intrusion of government regulation, the arm of state bureaucracy is an invading army. He is suspicious of foreign shrimp not only because the aquacultural practices in southeast Asia might involve dangerous antibiotics and human rights abuses, but because he believes that imported shrimp might be

²⁵⁹ “dwell, v.,” Oxford English Dictionary. December 2016. Oxford University Press.

a vector for the violence of foreign-born terrorism. I asked him how Chauvin has changed over the years, and in addition to the narratives of changing industries and receding land, he cites the main problem being one of drug addiction. Without prompting, he tells me, “You know, the people doing all the drugs, the crack and the heroin—that’s people not from around here.” This dwelling perspective, the valorization of local knowledge over institutional knowledge, this longing for a life free from governance and public responsibility—these qualities can easily tumble into a nativism that is stubborn, reactionary, and incommunicative. This dwelling, if we are to take Heidegger’s conflation of dwelling with building and being at face value, can also invite delusion, error. It can stun us, freezing us in an imagined home that has always been out of our grasp. It can stupefy us.

The mistrust of institutions and their disciplinary power fuels the dwelling perspective characteristic of fishers in Chauvin. Driving down the winding two-lane highway along Bayou Petit Caillou, you cannot help but feel the sepia bleeding from old photographs into the atmosphere. If you look closely, you can read the old signs over closed shops even after the letters were swept away in some hurricane, the outlines etched into the paint by generations of sunlight. Everyone seems old. At the end of my first meeting with Glynn, he brought me inside of his house to see old photographs of his grandparents that he wanted digitized and enlarged and framed for the wall in a recreation room. My dad collects all the old photos of people in Chauvin, and so I acted as his proxy once the anthropology part of the meeting was over. But his urge to collect the traces of the olden days was infectious. You can go into Glynn’s yard and find decorative bits of old farm machinery. The cement slab under my dad’s raised house is an archive, *en plein air*, of juke boxes, antique boats (some

pulled from the bottom of the bayou), the metal Christmas trees that used to top decommissioned oil wells, nineteenth century singer sewing machines, MG convertibles, and the cypress he pulled from the houses where his parents friends lived when they were alive. A rust and rot museum of old Chauvin. In Chauvin, you feel that you are just beyond the reach of an institution like a government. You feel the weight of dwelling and creating your own systems of knowing.

Perhaps the sequestering of administrative knowledge in environmental reports and census statistics invites the fishers of Chauvin to more fiercely entrench in a dwelling perspective. Though the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and the United States Army Corps of Engineers both conduct outreach, often through programs like Sea Grant, gates to information still lock out shrimpers. These gates often manifest as lacks: a lack in educational attainment, a lack of scientific or political literacy, a lack of receptiveness to governmental and media communications, a lack of capital, a lack of time. To be in the know, as far as it matters for the regulatory functions of state knowledge, one must not spend one's days on a boat, trawling in a nostalgic haze or in the sharp muscularity of hauling in a net full of shrimp. The dwelling perspective becomes too minute, and the myopia of shrimpers makes them easier to manage. Although they are building structures, both real and imagined, from their engagement with the local environment, they cannot see beyond its horizon to the forces that steer them. They are still resisting in the older way: against enclosure, attempting to escape to a plane of nautical mobility, to rebel against sanctions when they are imposed, to skipping out of schools and quitting waged jobs.

For instance, when the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) issued a regulation requiring TEDs in 1987,²⁶⁰ shrimpers—who at the time had considerably more political power in Louisiana—mobilized immediate pushback. US Congressman Billy Tauzin, at the time a Democrat representing Louisiana’s 3rd congressional district and a member of the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee, and his likeminded colleagues delayed for two years the reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act, the passage of which was required to make the regulation enforceable. The Louisiana legislature, in an amazing muster, passed a law that made enforcing TED regulations illegal in state waters.²⁶¹ A month after the TED rule went into effect, shrimpers formed an armada of their skiffs, mooring them starboard to port, blocking all naval traffic into Galveston and Port Aransas in Texas. When the coast guard fired water cannons into their riggings, angry fishers clung wet and resolute to their nets and shackled boat to boat so that even the tide could not break the blockade. The blockade at Galveston blocked the Houston Ship Channel, which was the entry to Port Houston, the third largest United States port by tonnage handled in 1988.²⁶² The shrimpers achieved what they wanted: national attention. They imagined themselves civil rights activists, the oppressed standing up for their livelihoods against a cruel and distant

²⁶⁰ Sea Turtle Conservation; Shrimp Trawl Requirments, *Federal Register*, 52 (Washington, D.C.: 1987): 217, 22, 227, § 24244.

²⁶¹ Turtle Excluder Devices; Findings; Enforcement of Federal Requirements; Rules and Regulations, *Louisiana Revised Statutes*, 56 (2011): § 56:57.2.

²⁶² United States Department of Transportation, Maritime Administration, *A Report to the Congress on the Status of the Public Ports of the United States 1988–1989*, Washington D.C.: Office of Port and Intermodal Development, 1990, 6.

government. The public, however, did not see the analogy, and after thirty-six hours or so, the blockade ended, and trawl boats left to harvest the last of the spring season shrimp.²⁶³ Nothing much changed until 2013, when Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program designated Louisiana caught shrimp as seafood to avoid based on the lack of TED rule enforcement. Seafood Watch partners with a wide range of businesses, including high-end grocery chain, Whole Foods. These businesses then will either attach Seafood Watch's designation to their products or avoid red-listed products altogether. Even though the law barring enforcement of TED rules was finally repealed in 2015 (after a repeal was vetoed by Governor Bobby Jindal in 2010),²⁶⁴ in March 2017, Louisiana shrimp, except for shrimp caught with otter trawls, is still classified as "to avoid," since only otter trawl gears require TEDs, not skimmers or butterfly nets.²⁶⁵

Not only has any resistance to TED regulations failed to change the ultimate force of rules, but commercial shrimp fishers led the charge to overturn the 1987 law that *prohibited* TED enforcement. The Louisiana Shrimp Task Force, an advisory body to the Louisiana

²⁶³ Anthony V. Margavio and Craig J. Forsyth, *Caught in the Net: The Conflict between Shrimpers and Conservationists* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1996), 31–42.

²⁶⁴ *Provides Relative to Fisheries Management by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries* 2010 Regular Session, HB 1334; *Repeals the Prohibition on Enforcement of the Federal Teds in Shrimp Nets Requirement*, 2015 Regular Session, HB 668.

²⁶⁵ Maggie Ostdahl, *Warmwater Shrimp: Brown Shrimp, Pink Shrimp, Rock Shrimp, Royal Red Shrimp, Seabob Shrimp, White Shrimp* (Monterey: Seafood Watch, 2015), 2–3. A new rule extending TED requirements to skimmer and other fishing gears was proposed in December, 2016 (Sea Turtle Conservation; Shrimp Trawl Requirments, *Federal Register*, 81 (Washington, D.C.: 2016): 217, 22, 227). After a period of public comments and re-evaluation, perhaps TED requirements will extend to all shrimp nets.

Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, consists mostly of shrimpers and shrimp processors, with non-voting representation from a biologist, an enforcement agent, an economist, and three political designees. In 2015, the year the price of shrimp bottomed out, this task force voted to support repeal legislation. Shrimpers declared in press that they had been using TEDs all along, and that the law misled the public about the Louisiana shrimp fishery.²⁶⁶ Kim, ChaCha, Steve, and Chad—all active commercial shrimpers—spoke ambivalently about TEDs. They all used them and had for a long time. They never even indicated that there was a conflict between Louisiana state law and the federal regulations. Over the course of 30 years, active resistance to governance gave way to an active compliance with federal law. The shrimpers interviewed in the press around the Seafood Watch designation and the effort to repeal the anti-TED law blamed the government for this dilemma, even though the fishery and sympathetic legislators fought for and gained institutional roadblocks to regulation. The chairman of the Shrimp Task Force and operator of the Gulf Island Shrimp & Seafood processing plant in Dulac, Mark Abraham, said, “having on the books that our own agents can’t enforce TEDs sends the wrong message that Louisiana doesn’t care about its own marine life.”²⁶⁷ This message was previously the rallying cry of the anti-TED movement. Governor Edwin Edwards was purported to have said at an anti-TED rally in Thibodaux in 1987, “Perhaps some species were just meant to disappear. If it comes to a

²⁶⁶ Benjamin Alexander-Bloch, “Louisiana Shrimp Task Force Votes to Repeal Turtle-Excluder Device Enforcement Prohibition,” *NOLA.com*, April 1, 2015, http://www.nola.com/environment/index.ssf/2015/04/louisiana_shrimp_taskforce_vot.html.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

question of whether it's shrimpers or the turtles—bye-bye turtles.”²⁶⁸ The irony of this callous sloganeering is that shrimpers are the species on the brink of disappearance.

In describing the delicate process of keeping alive bait shrimp, ChaCha describes a scenario that as aptly describes his own situation as a commercial shrimper:

Shrimp is something that can't take no kind of stress. Anything you do to them, they'll die. Anything you do to stress them out, they'll die. And then you wonder how they can live, going through all kinds of bad weather, hurricanes—but that's in their natural environment. When you take something from its natural environment, and you put it into captivity, you're changing the whole scenario. Whether it's with shrimp, with animals. You know there are some animals you try to capture them—after so many hours or days, they're gonna die. They're not gonna live. They can't take the stress.

What ChaCha says here clearly paints an image of precarious shrimp-life, teetering on the edge of annihilation, rocked by water and wind and the relentless violence of the trawl net. This is what ChaCha does: he takes the shrimp from its natural environment, dunks them in a tank of circulating water, sells them to be skewered on hooks by recreational fishermen and their children. The shrimp are going to die. They are not going to live. They cannot take the stress of grubby hands pulling them from an ice chest where they are nestled between lunch meat sandwiches and cans of sweet tea. They cannot take the stress of the jaws of a redfish swallowing them hook and all. But a shrimper, like ChaCha, endures considerable stress too: all kinds of bad weather, hurricanes, but also oil slicks and imported aquacultured shrimp, a home environment that is quickly surpassing the traditional, quiet life of the boat with its

²⁶⁸ Jack Rudloe and Anne Rudloe, “Shrimpers and Lawmakers Collide over a Move to Save the Sea Turtles,” *Smithsonian*, December 1989, 50.

networked pleasures. In the last twenty years, we have changed the whole scenario: the impossible calculus of increasing fuel prices and decreasing shrimp prices, the increasing ease at which a person from Chauvin with limited means can discover a world divorced from the estuaries of their fathers, the shifting political arena that now privileges a parochial and ethnocentric vision of the world while nevertheless refraining from articulating a vision of how a middle-aged man carrying a torch for an industry in rapid deindustrialization might fit in. There is no path by which we might resurrect shrimping whole, the way it lives in memory.

Ghost net two: indebtedness. Deleuze writes that in a society of control, “Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt.”²⁶⁹ Not only is man in debt, but he also cannot escape the market. This is the ultimate reason that shrimpers accepted the TED regulations as necessary: their anachronistic fight against it resulted in their industry marked as bad, their products to be avoided. The Louisiana shrimper, portrayed as greedy and reckless, became the bully of the Gulf of Mexico, a cohabitant of public resource that did not want to play nice with the ecosystem. Unlike the oil industry, the shrimpers could not wage a multi-pronged and extended public relations campaign that reconfigures the industry’s image as a job-creator and steward of the lands from which it sucks its hydrocarbons. After the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, BP bought Google search terms to keep their efforts in the cleanup at the top of any search for information about the spill, funneling public curiosity

²⁶⁹ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” 6.

into their careful and apologetic explanation of how they were fixing the problem.²⁷⁰ They spent millions of dollars on a television advertisement campaign. And they paid people with boats upwards of \$1,200 per day to captain their vessels to aid in cleanup.²⁷¹ Kim Guy told me,

The money we made, you wouldn't have made it shrimping. People were like, "Aw BP this and BP that." If it wouldn't have been for BP, they had a bunch of people on our bayou that would have lost a bunch of their stuff. Because they were at the end, you know like I was saying? It was hard to make it at the price of the fuel. And then BP came around and—it went to booming again for the whole year. Some people that had one shrimp boat, now had five shrimp boats.

Although BP claimed responsibility for the spill, Kim feels indebted to BP, because without their aid, that year might have collapsed the shrimp fishery due to the high price of oil.

Without the necessary cleanup of an oil spill that threatened to permanently transform the ecosystem and taint Louisiana seafood with a whiff of toxicity and corporate malfeasance, shrimpers might have gone out of business. Even though the shrimp seasons were effectively closed in areas impacted by the spill, the shrimp fishery experienced a boom cycle: people made fortunes, expanded operations, bought new trucks and nets, went on vacation. All of this, BP was willing to give to you, a shrimper, if you would merely kneel before it. If you would play nice, BP was happy to be your patron for a year.

²⁷⁰ Emily Friedman, "BP Buys 'Oil' Search Terms to Redirect Users to Official Company Website," *ABC News*, June 5, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/bp-buys-search-engine-phrases-redirecting-users/story?id=10835618>.

²⁷¹ Rick Outzen, "Gulf Oil Spill: BP Pleasure Boat Scandal," *Daily Beast*, June 2, 2010, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/06/03/gulf-oil-spill-bp-pleasure-boat-scandal>.

Indebtedness is different than enclosure in one key way: although both situations are technologies that limit activity in some way, only indebtedness requires that you enter a continuous relationship with another person. In a prison or factory, an overseer does not necessarily need to be there. You can be thrown into a solitary cell. You can arrive at the factory and do your job and then leave. With enclosures, there is an arbitrary limit to the confinement: either a sentence or a shift. When the limit is reached, you are free to go. Perhaps you are eager to get out of the classroom and join your daddy on his boat. Fair enough: endure until the end of the day, and a bell will ring you home. With debt, there is no endpoint. Instead, you must repay what has been given you. You exchange a promise and obligation to perform a certain way. You are free to decide how you might fulfill your debt, but you must fulfill it. If you do not do it by an arbitrary time, you are further indebted or your possessions are forfeit. You may be left without anything, tossed around by forces you may not be able to defend against: the caprice of economics, the sudden and drowning force of disaster. You do not need to be confined because you know that your debtor can come in and seize your life from you if you do not bear down and finish the job of repayment.

Consider the costs associated with a large boat that seeks to trawl the Gulf of Mexico for a month or so. For an eighty-two-foot shrimp boat with a 10,000-gallon fuel capacity, a captain would have spent around \$28,000 in diesel in May of 2015.²⁷² One shrimper told

²⁷² According to the US Energy Information Administration, diesel was \$2.888 per gallon in May of 2015: *U.S. No 2 Diesel Ultra Low Sulfur (0–15 Ppm) Retail Prices*, US Energy Information Administration (2017) https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/PET_PRI_GND_A_EPD2DXL0_PTE_DPGAL_M.htm.

me for a boat with a crew of three or four that intends to spend a month at sea, the total upfront cost (covering fuel, ice/refrigeration, and food) would be between thirty and forty thousand dollars. With the price of 40–50 shrimp at seventy cents that May, the boat would have to return with about twenty-eight tons of shrimp to break even. Anything caught beyond the break-even tonnage will be split between the captain and the crew, assuming there are no other expenses such as maintenance, repairs, insurance, licensing, or equipment replacement.²⁷³ Considering that the average boat in the offshore fleet landed about forty-seven tons per year between 2000 and 2013, a single hitch when the shrimp price was at seventy cents would almost certainly mean crippling debt for the boat captain.²⁷⁴ And so, many offshore boats remained moored, waiting for the price to rebound, while they depleted their savings from the 2014 boom year. The price of a used steel boat between sixty and eighty feet long runs upwards of \$250,000. The price of a brine freezing unit costs between \$21,000 and \$55,000.²⁷⁵ When a young man, eager to escape the confinement of the classroom, embarks on a maritime life of freedom and prosperity, he must first go into debt and buy a boat. If he is lucky, his father is a well-established shrimper and has a boat to give him. If not, he must work as a deckhand until he accumulates enough capital for a down

²⁷³ Exact figures on necessary expenses for an average trawler is difficult to determine. Insurance, for instance, may be as high as \$15,000 per month for the largest vessels or \$1,200 for mid-sized vessels to \$83 for the smallest, inshore boats in Louisiana. The following article has a good breakdown of shrimper expenses in the year 2005: Elizabeth LaFleur, Diane Yeates, and Angelina Aysen, Article, “Estimating the Economic Impact of the Wild Shrimp, *Penaeus* Sp., Fishery: A Study of Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana,” *Marine Fisheries Review* 67, no. 1 (2005).

²⁷⁴ Mine et al., Louisiana Shrimp Value Chain, 20.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*: 19.

payment on a twenty- to thirty-year-old boat. He must pay off his debt in good years and bad, for richer or poorer. There is no easy way to divorce debt.

Perhaps this primacy of debt in commercial shrimp fishing contributes to the frequency with which shrimpers talk about greed as a primary motivator for work. Elder fisherman and shrimp-drying mogul Houston Foret told me, “Let me tell you one thing about shrimping: if you’re not greedy, you’re never gonna make it. You have to be greedy to go out there and hustle for it. The more you hustle, the more you’re gonna make it. Nobody’s gonna give you nothing. You have to go and earn it.” Shrimping as an activity promotes a vision of the individual as a competitor, as an entrepreneur, as a person whose primary goal in straining the sea with his nets is to extract the absolute maximum limit of possible profit. The shrimper envisions himself as a gold miner: every minute not spent in the vein, panning the river, is a minute wasted. Indeed, some trawl boats run twenty-four hours a day in season: several shrimpers I interviewed described days punctuated by two hour naps every twelve hours, hauling and culling with frenetic crews of hungry men. If you could not manage this schedule, the captain of the boat would radio for a boat to bring you in. On such a productive vessel, there is no use for dead weight, another mouth to feed, another mouth gnawing away at profits. Unless your boat fishes the federal waters beyond three miles from the coast, you must make all your yearly income in two seasons. What choice do you have? You’re gonna have to make it.

The twin ghost nets of access to knowledge and indebtedness wisp in and out of the lives of the shrimpers of the Louisiana Gulf Coast. Unlike the classical trawl net, which piles and crushes together the life of the sea, the ghost net ensnares just a part of *you*: it divides you

into your limbs, your propeller, the moorings you cast to not drift at night if you are the kind of shrimper who sleeps. The ghost net does not collect you. It is not a productive tool. It shimmers in its surprise attacks, and you do not fully see it until you are already underwater. In this analogy, shrimpers imagine they are the shrimp and the government is the net, limiting their movement in the predictable ways that a government governs: setting rules, issuing licenses. This, of course, is still true: the United States government has not given up its disciplinary exercise of power. It imagines shrimpers as individuals to be fined into submission. It grants freedoms aligned, if we are to be generous, with the promotion of life—life that institutions design and mold through education, spatial design, and the study of human life as possible lives. But there is a spooky power that is, perhaps, more potent and invisible and distributed. In this analogy, the shrimpers motor along as themselves, individuals capable of being reduced to a foot with the perfect shape to catch old pieces of net, dipped in anti-rot fluid and still capable of doing what a net does. Who knows who originally cast that net? In this analogy, it could be anyone or any institution.

But the point of this analogy is not to make a facile case for the drowning menace of debt as a type of spectral net. The point is that shrimpers, who have spent their lives cultivating an identity of freedom from the ways that people onshore are disciplined into obedient citizens, have been fighting the wrong battle. The fierce individualism of the yeoman shrimper is anachronistic in two ways: first, it imagines itself as a pre-capitalistic identity concerned with self-sustenance and individual liberty not beholden to the bourgeois class of business owners; and second, it rebels against a disciplinary apparatus swiftly being replaced by one that is not even trying to regulate individuals, but sub-individual qualities that can be measured and

regulated *en masse*. We might call it, as I have been doing, a society of control after Deleuze. But the issue remains that while shrimpers have gained and seek to preserve a certain variety of freedom—wherein they do not have to show up to work on time or report to a boss—at the expense of identifying other methods by which corporate bodies subjugate them to a new logic of the databank, of password-locked gates to information, of continual, intimate relationships with money and markets and debtors, of distributed, multivalent communications that dizzy them with sheer volume. What results is a group of people who, while rebelling in small ways against a controlling government, entrench themselves in nativist thinking. A group of people who are having an increasingly hard time culling good information from fantasy. A group of people who carry on working to repay debt, a people who are good natured about it, justifying what they are doing with love, with a desire to carry on traditional occupations into a mysterious future that will almost certainly be presided over by algorithms and automatons. A group of people who long for a time (perhaps one that has always been dislodged from history) where a small family might live on a boat, catching shrimp, and going to sleep to the cries of seagulls and the buzzing of mosquitos just beyond the net draped over a bunk. In this analogy, we are the shrimpers. In this analogy, our fight to avoid large nets makes us miss the ghost nets pulling at our toes.

Miraculous Draught of Fish

Picture this: the sagging net of the trawl, a fruit ripe and heavy, verging on splitting under its own weight. Within the net are hundreds of brown shrimp. They crash into each other, sometimes loosening heads shackled to the rest of their armored bodies. The net conforms to space: pulled from the water, it is the teardrop shape of harvested life; beneath the water, it flows away from its rigging. A contortionist cage. When you see the net and its contents hanging above the deck before untying the drawstrings holding closed the package of shrimp in what is called the cod end of the net, you also see the poggy fish caught in the mesh, all tails and lethargic, gasping mouths. You see crabs foaming at the mouth. You see slicks of mud and clumps of salty vegetation.

This is the point of nets: to catch that which is big enough to be caught.

Sometimes, there is nothing big enough to catch. Sometimes, like the Bible story,²⁷⁶ you work all night long at the nets, your body stiffening with the repetition of raising and lowering nets full of nothing—at least nothing you can use. Then, in the morning, some Christ tells you to get back out on the water. It's your job. And you return with so much

²⁷⁶ Luke 5:1–11 (King James Bible).

consumable life that your nets groan to the point of breaking, and you spill out the catch from the cod end onto your culling table and make your living.

As ChaCha told me, “It’s just about making a living no matter what you do. It’s all about work, really, at the bottom line. It’s all about work.”



Figure 25: Dawn through skimmer nets, Lake Boudreaux, May, 2015. Photograph by Christopher Lirette.

What does it mean to make a living? This is the question I have been whispering to myself in writing this meditation on shrimping and nets and debt and the slow decline of a livelihood that some people, doggedly, will not give up despite the bust years, despite conspiracy theories about a sinister government out to destroy a small population of old-timey Louisiana shrimpers. This is about work. Work is about making a living, the work of fashioning a way to be. Work is about making, fabricating, artificing a situation wherein living takes place, wherein something might be alive, wherein someone might make a life worth living and recognizable as alive, worth catching in a net, valuable enough not be thrown overboard. One must make a living regardless of what one does. The living made by

the shrimpers I spoke to is made by the seasonal labor of drifting in a body of water, scraping it clean of its marketable shrimp with big nets hauled on deck by wenchies powered by diesel engines. This is a living that they hope to make, at least, as long as it does not bankrupt them first.

Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's work focuses on these processes of making a living, or the pursuit of living through a life, and how we become attuned to an atmospheric miasma of senses, trajectories, repetitions, and possible futures. She writes, "The labored viscosity of being *in* whatever's happening renders choices and surfaces already weighty with the atmosphere one is literally attuning to. It produces hard-won attachments that can be hard to get out of once you're in."²⁷⁷ In other words, the atmosphere is a net. These are the things that catch us: the rhythm of life, the work of the body repeating its work routines, the expectation of the smell of the brackish marsh and bushels of shrimp, the whine of the wench pulling up a net, the stillness of the thick, humid air just this side of chilly, blanketing you as you walk from house to dock, from dock to boat, and the spark of your lighter and cigarette against the predawn gloaming. This atmosphere is a dwelling in the Heideggerian sense: a way to carve oneself into a way of being, a way to build a life from the chthonic experience of already living it, a way to preserve something earthy and old into the future by looking directly ahead and persevering. To survive in this way, according to ChaCha and

²⁷⁷ Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," 451.

Kim and Glynn and Chad and Steve, means to love your work, to throw your weight into the job, to wake up every morning and recommit to a life you believe worth living.

Throughout this chapter I have been building a case against the understanding that the shrimping lifestyle affords the type of freedom that shrimpers told me they enjoy. They like shrimping because they are their own bosses. They like the distance of the open water. They hate the enclosed spaces of onshore life—the school, the factory, the machine shop, the office. They hate feeling the touch of government regulation. They want, at last, to be unmoored from the ways that people on land are moored. I argued that while performing a type of rebellion, these shrimpers are ensnared by a diffuse, nearly invisible but potent style of power that is adaptable, modular, and continuous. This control is not unique to shrimpers. Scholars have been identifying the rise of data collection, market logic, and global communication as a unique threat for much of the late twentieth century.²⁷⁸ The ways in

²⁷⁸ Deleuze is not the only critic to identify issues associated with distributed control through networked society. In a prescient passage entitled “Fish in water” from *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno writes,

Since the all-embracing distributive machinery of highly-concentrated industry has superseded the sphere of circulation, the latter has begun a strange post-existence. As the professions of the middle-man lose their economic basis, the private lives of countless people are becoming those of agents and go-betweens; indeed the entire private domain is being engulfed by a mysterious activity that bears all the features of commercial life without there being actually any business to transact. (Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: New Left Books, 1974), 23)

On the same page, he also writes, “there is no relationship that is not seen as a ‘connection.’” This observation comes in 1951, well before the 1970s economic crises (the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, the 1973–4 US recession, the deindustrialization of steel and other manufacturing industries, the shifting of industrial production to foreign countries through foreign direct investment), which marks a shift in the US and Europe from industrial economies to service economies, global financial markets, and

which shrimpers are not free are the ways in which we are all not free. We live in a world governed at all levels by these intersecting nets. We produce that world by living in it. We are attached to it, in ways that make it difficult to get out of it. But now, I want to make the case for how shrimpers, in an imperfect way, also offer a model of thinking this living differently. I do not mean to recuperate some nostalgic vision or return to an archetypal and rural disconnection from society. Instead, I would like to argue that it is not in the fight

immaterial labor. Here, Adorno asserts that the impulse of capitalism has become so pervasive as to breach the wall between an individual's work and home life. All relationships become business opportunities in a chain of connections that reduces people to their productive capacity. A wealth of scholarship across theoretical traditions contends with the changes wrought by the transformation of capitalism and social control in the late-twentieth century, with the rise of the computer as the central and emblematic machine of first economic and later social activity. Foucault's concept of biopolitics mirrors much of what Deleuze (and Adorno) describes in societies of control: constant surveillance, statistical control of populations by divorcing subindividual qualities from individuals (who are disciplined into becoming individual), the logic of neoliberalism. See Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Here is a brief selection of works that address issues of late capitalism, globalism, and primacy of the information networks in twentieth and twenty-first century societies: Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991); David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (London: Verso, 2006); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Doreen B. Massey, *World City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007); Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2003).

against the powers-that-be that shrimpers offer a novel way of making a living, but in the small way of making their living, of casting a smaller net, of caring for themselves, and of conceiving of an alternative ethics and aesthetics of work.

What does it mean to make a living? In the Bible story I paraphrased earlier, the tired and fish-less fishermen make a final cast at the behest of Jesus. They come back with a miraculous draught of fish. Jesus tells the fishermen, “Fear not; from henceforth thou shalt catch men.”²⁷⁹ It is unsurprising, then, when I hear Chad Portier, the most devout of the shrimpers I spoke to, tell me,

I was gonna quit the other day. You know, like you said: sometimes you get anxiety or something. One day I was wanting to quit. I was like I’m just gonna sell all this, and I could live happily ever after and just go fishing. And God says, I feel in my heart, it’s like “It’s not about you, Chad.” You know, it’s not about you dude. It’s about the families that you got right here that you’re trying to direct and that you’re trying to feed: you’re giving them a job. It’s about my son’s future, where it’s gonna go. If I give up and go fishing, I ain’t building no boat for him, I ain’t got nothing else going on. I’m just sitting there fishing. Yeah I made it, but what about him?

Chad clearly believes that he has seen a miraculous draught of fish in his lifetime. He inherited a boat-building talent from his father. His wife, Angela, and he run a small fleet of shrimp boats, and he still captains one himself. He knows that he is blessed with a successful business, with a healthy family, with a legacy to maintain and the energy and money to do so. But even he is not immune to a bust cycle. This admission of wanting to quit was the only time Chad admitted to any negative feelings toward his own position in the industry. I

²⁷⁹ Luke 5:10. (King James Bible).

asked about the falling price of shrimp, and he replied, “You gotta take the good with the bad.” I asked about other bad years, and he treated the idea that a season could bankrupt him with a blasé faith in his own ability to pull worth from work. He said, “God will provide.”²⁸⁰ Chad’s faith that God will provide apparently does not extend to the extended network of people that rely on Chad for a job: God’s providence also does not exist without Chad’s active labor. Chad is a fisher of men in this sense: through his work, he collects people into his realm of responsibility.

The first day I went to interview Chad, he was just this side of hostile to me. He perched on the skeleton of a sixty-foot steel boat in his yard, torch in hand and no more protection for his face than a pair of Oakley wraparound shades and a camouflage hat with an embroidered yellow cross. A small boombox blared the latest in Christian rock music broadcast over FM radio. I wanted to film him working while I interviewed him, but that meant climbing a ladder twelve feet off the ground, then straddling the two-by-fours he laid across the void where the middle of the boat would eventually be installed. There were rectangles of industrial grating flopped across these slats, and these were what was to pass for solid ground if I wanted to talk to Chad. He grunted an acknowledgment when I introduced myself to him. The only sentences he muttered at me were patronizing: “It’s a long drop down, brah.” “You sure you want to bring that camera up here?” “You want me to talk about being a shrimper? It’s work.” I did not stick around for long. Chad was standoffish. My camera and

²⁸⁰ The theme of God providing, of course, appears throughout Christian and Jewish scripture, and Chad was not the only shrimper to tell me that God will provide for them.

audio equipment were imperiled by my own teetering on the grating and my nervousness about breaking them, either in a fall or by catching a spark raining from Chad's welding torch. I didn't particularly want to go back, either, but Angela returned a call later that day, and I met her and Chad on their dock a week later. After my first meeting, I thought it ironic that the shrimper who most strongly identified as a Christian might be the one guy to be a bit of a jerk to me. Perhaps the presence of his wife tempered his distemper. Perhaps it was the golden hour lighting and the breeze off the bayou.



Figure 26: Chad Portier welding together the steel frame of a shrimp boat. Photograph by Christopher Lirette.

Since he was so gruff with me before, I thought he might give me some good material about some shrimping gossip that was making the rounds that spring. The regular openings—questions about the low price of shrimp, the changes in Chauvin life over his lifetime—did not yield much. He began the conversation by say that he would not have much to say, that his wife was the one who would not be able to shut up. So I made a joke about the shrimpers

who trawl Robinson Canal, the mile-long waterway that connects Bayou Petit Caillou and Lake Boudreaux. The canal is a bottleneck between Lake Boudreaux and Terrebonne Bay, which opens into the Gulf of Mexico. Shrimp grow to maturity in the brackish waters of Lake Boudreaux and then migrate back into the Gulf. In other words, this canal is prime waters for catching shrimp, a fact that draws small thirty- to forty foot skiffs into the canal, equipped with skimmer nets, to line up and make a quarter-mile circuit to the east of the bridge that crosses it. The owner of Robinson Canal, the banks on either side of it, and a convenience store, Terry Lapeyrouse, was the traditional gatekeeper of who could shrimp in the canal. He had recently been denied a writ of mandamus to compel the police to arrest trespassers—in this case, anyone he did not want trawling his canal. The judge dismissed it, and many shrimpers in Chauvin interpreted this as an open invitation to bypass Terry and skim his canal. I speculated to Chad that it would be shoulder to shoulder in the canal this year, with shrimpers firing shotgun shells across each other's bows. There was a long tradition of menacing rival shrimpers in the Canal for offenses as minor as trawling too slowly. Chad laughed, but immediately defended the essential goodness of the people of Chauvin. From this point, Angela could not get a word in edgewise: Chad could not shut up. What caused him to open up was his impassioned defense of a small-scale ethics of work epitomized in shrimping. Over the course of an hour and a half, Chad revealed a much different persona than the gruff asshole on a steel perch wielding a torch. He was engaging in his utter faith in work and commitment to care for his people.

The foremost group of people on Chad's mind is his family. He does not want to disappoint his son, a thirteen-year-old with a commercial fishing license, by giving in to anxiety (or

something). He relates stories about his daughter telling him she wants to be a nurse and his desire for her to do work that makes her happy. He recalls, as I mentioned in a previous chapter, that he and Angela spent their honeymoon trawling, a time he considers the best time of his life. One of the few times he and Angela share the narrative, they describe the idyllic paradise of a couple floating on the wild earth, plucking the first-fruits from the ocean, in love. Picture this: Angela, eight months pregnant, standing sway-backed on the deck of a steel trawler painted blue. The sun a flame behind the rushes of marsh grass, the water milky and muddy. There are birds and there are bugs, and a sheen of sweat and brackish spray has dampened everything. Chad, pulling up the try-net they use to test for shrimp density. A large female crab, bursting with roe, scuttles across the floor, stopped by Angela's heel. She's near the cabin, where she lights a butane burner and puts on a pot of water and seasonings. If she were inside the cabin, the spices sublimating into the air would make her choke, but out here, it's no big deal. She stands there, live crab underfoot, until the water boils. Then, she dunks the crab into the pot, boils her red. Chad looks up and says, "You serious you want to boil that one crab?" Angela replies, "I want that crab. I boiled it and I'm gonna eat it." They are wistful as they tell me this story. They tell me that with some crackers and good dip, you can never starve on the boat. Chad and Angela built their life on this boat and cultivated their family on the water. But while the pleasure of their memories of the seafaring life form the kernel of their family unit, good stewardship sustains Chad's practice of trawling and building boats. He cannot quit the shrimp fishery even if he wanted to—which, at times, he does. Sometimes, he just wants to go fishing, rather than act, pastorally, as a fisher of men.

He elaborates that his network of care extends beyond his family:

You got fifteen families depending off of you, you know. I felt in my spirit, “No, you’re not giving up.” When the job’s finished, that’s the day I’m gonna die. When the job’s finished, that’s when I’m gonna give up. I’m gonna [pantomimes washing his hands] because I believe my eternal reward is in heaven. So I can live this reward: I’m set up. I can sell everything. I can live this reward, but that’s not where it’s at, brah. It’s my good friends’ families. I consider these guys like my brothers, brah. I consider these guys, my captains and crews, they’re family, and I tell them that. I say, “I love you, brah.” You know? I want to see y’all succeed. I don’t want to see y’all not succeed. I’m doing all this for y’all could prosper. I’m prospering along the way with y’all, but I want you to have all that too. So I’m not gonna give up I don’t want to give up for that reason, and not just for that, but because my son’s coming right behind em.

Chad believes in certain mottos: God will provide. A rising tide raises all ships. He sees himself as a coach or mentor rather than a boss to the people who work for him. He sees himself as their father. He further sees the strengthening of this network as vital to the future success of his own son, who will need the community of shrimpers to continue if he hopes to make it. And though he and his wife do, in fact, run a profitable wholesale and retail shrimp outfit, Faith Family Shrimp Company, they were among the first in Chauvin to advertise retail shrimp for sale online. The boat Chad was building when I met him was commissioned for close to a million dollars.²⁸¹ Chad was not boasting when he told me that he could probably retire and fish until he gave up his ghost. He was merely stating that his prosperity should not be his alone. Chad believes that he is responsible for those under his

²⁸¹ This boat, even for its size, was considered expensive by others in Chauvin, but there was a significant amount of customization and luxury styling that went into it, in addition to the size and function of it. Many shrimpers were skeptical, when I talked to them in 2016 and the boat still incomplete, that the eventual owner would be able to recoup that cost.

employ. Beyond that, they are his family. He tells his workers, mostly gruff men that smell of diesel and shrimp, “I love you.” While there might be a whiff of emotional martyrdom to this refrain of “I’m doing this for you,” it does not come off that way when he gives me this justification on his dock as the sun sets one evening in May 2015. There is a sweetness in how Chad imagines his role, but also an ethics that obliges him to his work in an uncertain industry, during the worst shrimp season in years.

The care of shrimpers extends to the nonhuman network of landscapes, organisms, tools, plants, and animals as well. Here is ChaCha’s proposal for securing the fisheries:

You know one thing I can say is that in order to guarantee the fishing industry as a whole for the future—for future generations—is having a little more management. Or having areas that shouldn’t be harvested. That would be a definite—an almost definite guarantee that it would always be there for the future. That they should have areas be, I guess, wildlife management areas. Off limits. And they could. We do have enough in this state that they could close a few areas. And it wouldn’t hurt. Everybody could still make their living.

ChaCha cannot make a living without having the fisheries continue into the future. ChaCha, out of all of the shrimpers I spoke to, was the least nostalgic—even as he was the most melancholy. Having lost so much business during the BP oil spill while his brothers, all of whom left the industry years before and were unaffected by it, put into relief the economic reality of trawling for a living. By yearning for the olden days, you let the present-day obstacles to thriving blindside you. You dwell, errantly. To oppose this, ChaCha advocates for a future-oriented, pragmatic mode of governance. Although he complains about the lack of respect institutional bodies have for local knowledge, he nevertheless recognizes the necessity for some kind of institutional management of the fishery. This management manifests in the same mold as Chad’s sense of responsibility for his fleet. To successfully

continue making a living, one must care for the environment. To hope to continue fishing, to hope that future fishers might fish, one must take care to not overfish. If this means sequestering space as off-limits, so be it. Nature, to men like ChaCha and Chad, is bountiful. God will provide.

We might envision Chad's paternalism and ChaCha's stewardship as a harkening back to what Foucault describes as the dominant principle of Greek antiquity: to take care of oneself (*ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ*). Foucault identified in Greek thought a turning inward, refocusing of practices toward an elaboration of the self, and a subjugation of knowledge to the cultivation of the self as an ethical actor. This conception of selfhood, for Foucault, is not mere individualism, at least not the way we normally imagine individualism. We might say that there is, in the United States, a certain cult of individuality, one that values libertarian and competitive values, one that envisions people as economic agents in a grand, ever-expanding market, one that defines the individual by a bill of rights and that dares some person or institution to attempt to infringe on those enumerated rights. In much of my interviews with shrimpers, I heard variations on these themes: shrimpers must be greedy to be successful, the government needs to stay out of our business (except to enforce tariffs on foreign shrimp), we must defend our rights—with violence if necessary—those who would violate our right to property, land, ability to shrimp the way we learned how. I asked every person I interviewed why shrimpers did not just unionize and take collective action with processors or protest things besides TED regulations. One retired processor told me this story

I don't believe they're ever gonna build a union, because everybody's individual. If you got a shrimp boat, and you do your thing with that shrimp boat, where you sell your shrimp is yours: you have the right to sell on the roads or anywheres else. This is

never gonna get—we tried years and years ago to try to put all the fishermen together and try to build a union. You know build one big plant and have all the fishermen bring it to that plant, and when that plant processes and sells it, well, the profit that they make on it, they still pay the fishermen everyday when they come in, but the profit that they make on it would be split amongst everybody. And you couldn't get them to get together, you know? Half of them agreed to do it, but they didn't show up when it came time to put the package together [...] It's never gonna come to play because every shrimper that has his own boat is gonna control himself. He don't wanna be told when to go out, where to go, and how much to catch and nothing like that. [...] People like Kim Guy, you ain't gonna go over there and tell him that that net he's got is not doing him any good, that he needs a bigger mesh net. He's gonna say, "No! Get away from me! They're a certain kind of people and that's what they are.

This explanation makes sense from a perspective of American individualism: each person—in the capacity as economic agent—in conflict against one another, where people just want to be left alone by government, whether that governance comes in the form of governmental regulation or fellow shrimpers trying to build a defined, institutional fishery. The idea that shrimpers might come together and create a self-governing market is as utopian as them becoming liberated from either regulation or controls. But what this explanation for the lack of union viability also demonstrates is a qualitatively different attitude of individualism: at the end of the day, the shrimper has his own boat, his domain, his household, and he will *control* himself. In describing how the care of the self for the Greeks should not be confused with modern notions of individualism, Foucault differentiates three “realities” we conflate: the amount of independence bestowed upon a person by governing institutions, the valorization of one's private life of the home and interpersonal relationships, and “the intensity of the relations to self, that is, of the forms in which one is called upon to take oneself as an object of knowledge and a field of action, so as to transform, correct, and purify

oneself, and find salvation.”²⁸² It is this third individualism that Foucault identifies as the care of the self: the project of transforming the self such that one might *live* well. We might call this making a living.

The Greek care of the self, not to be confused with our contemporary notions of self-care (which combines a promotion of healthy lifestyle choices with a simultaneous license to make unhealthy short-term decisions and act hedonistically), involves a rigorous habit of knowing what the self is capable of and identifying spheres of control. The care of the self is also not being self-involved. Foucault clarifies the usage of the noun ἐπιμέλεια (*epimeleia*), care:

The term *epimeleia* designates not just a preoccupation but a whole set of occupations; it is *epimeleia* that is employed in speaking of the activities of the master of a household, the tasks of the ruler who looks after his subjects, the care that must be given to a sick or wounded patient, or the honors that must be paid to the gods or to the dead. With regard to oneself as well, *epimeleia* implies a *labor*.²⁸³

To care is a job. To care is a job directed outward from the process of turning inward. We see this type of care with Chad, who knows what he is capable of, who knows how to manage his job. Through a process of looking inward, to knowing himself and his own struggle with his occasional desire to quit, he can recognize how his labor, his care, fits into a household, an economy, and a network of persons under his care. We return here to the word οἶκος, the Greek word for house, family, and family property. This tripartite realm is

²⁸² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 3: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 42.

²⁸³ Ibid.: 50. My emphasis on labor.

the ancillary target of the care of the self. Foucault explains the care of the self as an ethical exercise of freedom, that elusive and tantalizing goal of shrimpers everywhere. In an interview with Helmut Becker, Raul Fornet-Betancourt, and Alfredo Gomez-Müller, Foucault responds to a question about how the care of the self might become an easy path to tyranny by saying,

[I]f you take proper care of yourself, that is, if you know ontologically what you are, if you know what you are capable of, if you know what it means for you to be a citizen of a city, to be the master of a household in an *oikos*, if you know what things you should and should not fear, if you know what you can reasonably hope for and, on the other hand, what things should not matter to you, if you know, finally, that you should not be afraid of death—if you know all this, you cannot abuse your power over others.²⁸⁴

Foucault is still talking about Greeks in antiquity here, but the ethical imperative of a shrimper like Chad or ChaCha is likewise predicated on the ability to understand how one fits into a sphere of influence, how one's own life is contingent on working at making that life a life worth living. The shrimpers I spoke to each described to me an *ethos* of living, an aesthetic mode by which they understood what they do. They imagine the character of their life to be familial, moored to both their ancestors and to their contemporary blood relations. They imagine their activity to be fundamentally productive: generating wealth, culture, and possible ways of working in the future. They imagine themselves to be free-floating, individualistic agents withstanding and surviving an assault of institutionalism that threatens

²⁸⁴ Michel Foucault et al., "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Robert Hurley and Paul Rabinow, 281–301 (New York: New Press, 1997), 288.

to codify them into nonexistence. They imagine their household to extend from their immediate family to their community, to their cultural identity, to the landscape in which they cast nets and yank out shrimp. They imagine themselves to be attuned to an environment of water and rain, of crustacean migration patterns, of fast eroding land and fast salinizing water. Most of all, they imagine themselves.

This self-imagining is perhaps the key means by which shrimpers attempt to survive a global world they believe has left them in the wastelands of history. I earlier alluded to Kathleen Stewart's concept of the atmosphere, an embodied network of material and immaterial intensities. Like Tim Ingold, Stewart uses Heidegger's language to elaborate what she calls atmospheric attunements: "atmospheric attunements are a process of what Heidegger [...] called worlding—an intimate, compositional process of dwelling in spaces that bears, gestures, gestates, worlds."²⁸⁵ What shrimpers are doing in their mode of caring for themselves is a practice of not only making a living, but making a world. They are worlding. For Stewart, what is important about dwelling is not so much that a person might construct a system of knowledge that errs, but that the act of dwelling is the technology that fills space with rich worlds always on the edge of transforming. To form these worlds, one must be receptive to the environment, to recognizing one's own practices, and to account for one's movement in that world. The strength of the world relies on the strength of attunement (which is not always a conscious activity). The lives of shrimpers are marked by the labor of

²⁸⁵ Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," 445.

captaining boats, hauling nets, culling the catch, repairing their equipment, but also by the experience of working outdoors, the sensitivity to the changes in humidity, wind, and air pressure that might signal a storm or school of fat shrimp. Shrimpers, even as their own bosses, generate a rhythm of work, of cycling through hitches of trawling and selling and working on their boats. They create a world where all it takes to be successful is loving the work of fishing and not giving up, even when the price of shrimp bottoms out and you have to go into debt just to get paid. These worlds come into being through practice and belief. We call the creation of worlds a miracle. Making a world, making a living—these are miracles, especially when there are controls out there gerrymandering the field of possible lives, of possible worlds.

These possible worlds, tenuous and whispery, form through the process that Foucault and Deleuze call subjectivation (*assujettissement*): the formation of the self as a subject. This process is not utopian: subjectivation both allows individuals to become identifiable selves and to become objects of study. Subjectivation, therefore, has the sharp bevel of danger. It is a net: one that gathers a world, a self, into being but also catches the self, to be crushed in a net dragged through a water thick with other selves. But this process is where we find hope: it is the locus of the care of the self that Foucault identifies as the ethical imperative of Greek antiquity, the interplay with an atmosphere that brings worlds into being. What is most important in attending to the subjectivation of shrimpers in their work, their persistence, and their justifications and self-mythologizing that keeps them on boats is that these shrimpers—although caught in a net of late capital flows, institutional administration, and corporate control—make do, creating lives worth living. Their faith in themselves, which takes no

small amount of creativity and confabulation, is perhaps their greatest, albeit unconscious, act of resistance to the colonization of their world by market forces and governmental mismanagement. Rather than being an activity focused on individuation and personal gratification, the shrimpers I spoke to fabricated their lives that sought to form little networks of survival: the family, the fleet, the bayou village. In an interview with Antonio Negri, Deleuze argues that these nonce worlds, created as individuals and groups constitute themselves as selves, offer glimmers of possible rebellions, of possible new modes of ethical practice. He says,

What we most lack is a belief in the world, we've quite lost the world, it's been taken from us. If you believe in the world you precipitate events, however inconspicuous, that elude control, you engender new space-times, however small their surface or volume. It's what you call *pietas*. Our ability to resist control, or our submission to it, has to be assessed at the level of our every move. We need both creativity *and* a people.²⁸⁶

Deleuze makes a case for an engaged politics of worlding (even though he would be unlikely to use this term). He describes the ability to maneuver around controls and the self-elaboration of individuals and groups through experimentation at the frontiers of societal knowledge. Like Stewart, what Deleuze is trying to name are the brief moments when a set of material and imaginative practices click together to bring a precarious world into being. In the question Deleuze responds to, Negri counterposes Spinoza's concept of *pietas*, which Spinoza defines as "[t]he desire to do good generated in us by our living according to the

²⁸⁶ Gilles Deleuze, "Control and Becoming," in *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 176.

guidance of reason,” and a “radical construct.”²⁸⁷ This piety—this morality, this desire to do good, to live ethically—is at the center of how the shrimpers I spoke imagine themselves.

Every shrimp I spoke to insisted on the cooperation that happens on the water. Even as they defined their fellow fishers as competitive, greedy, granular, and individualistic, they talked about how anyone with a radio and a boat would help you if you ran into trouble. These worlds erected on trawlboats are not closed worlds, but ones that constantly reconfigure through interactions with others. This is not to reiterate the argument that Chad makes, that shrimpers are essentially good. They are not. Nearly every shrimp I talked to espoused nativist beliefs, xenophobia, and a politics dismissive of social justice. They are comfortable with autocratic leaders, from the late Governor Huey P. Long to current President Donald Trump. One shrimp, when I told him the name of another shrimp I interviewed, told me that he wished he could just shoot the other shrimp right in the face. Shrimpers dwell in contradictions: parochial but invested in mobility, libertarian but moored to a mythic past, ethically oriented towards the others in their network but economically invested in the worst forms of American capitalism’s will to competition.

In their self-fashioning through storytelling, through engaging with an environment, through holding in suspension memory and futurity, filiation and cultural identity, the

²⁸⁷ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin M. Curley, in *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, 85–265 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 218. Curley translates pietas as *morality*. In the Latin: “Cupiditatem autem bene faciendi, quae ex eo ingeneratur, quod ex rationis ductu vivimus, pietatem voco” (Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*, in *Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, vol. 1, 149–416 (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1843), 356).

corporeal intensity of laboring beneath the nets and the doom of that labor's potential to continue generating income, in these strategies for coping in a world run amok with controls that seek to subdivide them into markets segments, these shrimpers form little worlds of possibility. The possibility of surviving. The possibility of imagining survival. The possibility of gathering a family, an estuary, a set of bodily movements into a net. This net, woven by fingers that rehearse the movements of fingers from a different era, is a net that allows shrimpers to unmoor themselves from the death march into industrial oblivion. And it is that net that moors shrimpers to an uncanny memory that, as Michel de Certeau defines it, is crucial to the practice of interventional storytelling. Memory, for de Certeau, as a spectral technology, is already unmoored. He writes, "Far from being the reliquary or trash can of the past, [memory] sustains itself by *believing* in the existence of possibilities and by vigilantly awaiting them, constantly on the watch for their appearance."²⁸⁸ Shrimpers teach that to survive our current era, to survive work, to make a living, we need to be vigilant for opportunities of collective world-building that are invested in building networks in the places we dwell, of unmooring ourselves to the stultifying destiny of economic determinism and the logic of corporations and global capital. New worlds built through faith in the possibility of making a life worth living may not always yield a better model, a more compassionate model, than the systems of social controls and biopower and disciplinary control and global capital that now, especially now, seem inescapable and inexhaustible in their capacity to crush out forms of life. But in the aesthetics of work fashioned by shrimpers, we might be able to yet

²⁸⁸ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 87.

imagine an other-directed, ecological ethics of labor. This labor is less concerned with utopian revolution than getting through the week, of imagining the work as a practice of weaving a net.

Successful shrimpers must be constantly attentive to the environment, to the weather, to the flows of sea-life, and to their equipment. In the offseason, some shrimpers spend weeks weaving and reweaving nets. Sometimes the mesh is too small. Sometimes, it is too loose. Sometimes the material of the net rakes across some sharp trap in the water, and the net gives up its ghost. The job of the shrimper is to be attentive to these nets, to weave together new nets when the old can no longer compel the catch to stay caught. Likewise, in coping with the end of their industry (and the continuing, accelerating change in global labor practices), shrimpers in coastal villages in southern Louisiana have modeled strategies of persistence. Their self-elaboration—through bodily and imaginative practice, individual and collective worldbuilding—relies on a type of unmooring that orients them toward a different logic of living. Shrimpers are not free. By persisting in a doomed industry, by championing an anachronistic model of work rooted in locality, small networks of care and belonging, and narratives of continuity and freedom, shrimpers offer an alternative possibility of freedom. They have released all anchors, but one: an anchor that allows them to re-orient themselves towards a future they can imagine inhabiting, where they can do some good for the people in their sphere of influence. What shrimpers are doing is casting a net that gathers together components of a world in which they might experience freedom, a world that might treat them better than the world where their work is no longer wanted. What they are doing is weaving a world they can survive.

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