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# There’s Something in the Water

by [Tia-Simone Gardner](#) January 22, 2020

Image courtesy of the author.

*This essay is a collage of images and writing from an ongoing project “Reading the River: Yemayá and Oshun.” I am approaching it as an experimental documentary that looks at the relationship between Blackness and the Mississippi River as a collision of ideas, cultural practices, political geographies, and intimacies. This manner of working emerges out of a Black feminist practice of unsettling how we think and know place.*

—Tia-Simone Gardner

M - I - <sup>S</sup>CROOKED LETTER <sup>S</sup>CROOKED LETTER - I

<sup>S</sup>CROOKED LETTER <sup>S</sup>CROOKED LETTER - I

<sup>P</sup>HUMPBACK - <sup>P</sup>HUMPBACK - I

Mississippi, or THE Mississippi, is a body memory. The **Black Body** and **Mississippi** stick to one another, in pleasure and in violence, through metastasis and re-membering.

“The natural levee along the Mississippi River is a mass grave, filled with the city’s earliest workers and slaves.” [1]

when I was a child, we had a chant.

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we learned to spell

M I S S I S S I P P I

by singing the letters aloud, clapping our hands in time, and hunching our shoulders up to our ears. It is a useful chant; it helped us to also keep time as a song to jump rope.

M - I - CROOKED LETTER CROOKED LETTER - I  
CROOKED LETTER CROOKED LETTER - I  
HUMPBACK - HUMPBACK - I

...I'm still not sure if we were singing about the land or the water.

---

...they are not always so distinct, the land and the water.

Image courtesy of NASA.

...perhaps it was both.

---

Neither are the land, water, and body completely distinct.

Like land and water, the **Black body** was remapped. Rearticulated through a range of regimes: racial capitalism, colonization, labor exploitation, into a site of extraction. The **Black body** was, is, undifferentiated from the land and water that are habitually used to make life, for some, more livable.

“...we must now consider the roads, rivers, and showrooms where broad trends and abstract totalities thickened into human shape.” [2]

Moved, overworked, defiled abstracted as an object of trade, the Black body is an important feature, like the pot ash tree or the bald cypress of the Southern landscape. And the river is a

part of this strange abstraction.

“In the seven decades between the Constitution and the Civil War, approximately one million enslaved people were relocated from the upper South according to the dictates of the slaveholders’ economy, two thirds of these through a pattern of commerce that soon became institutionalized as the domestic slave trade...

As those people passed through the trade, representing something close to half a billion dollars in property, they spread wealth wherever they went.” [3]

“I was soon inside, cowering with fear in the darkness, magnifying every noise and every passing wind, until my imagination had almost converted the little cottage into a boat, and I was steaming down South, away from my mother, as fast as I could go.” [4]

“What the New Orleans slave pens sold to these slaveholders was not just field hands and household help but their own stake in the commercial and social aspirations of the expanding Southwest, aspirations that were embodied in the thousands of black men, women, and children every season: the slaves out of whom the antebellum South was built.” [5]

---

...it is both an old and a new acquaintance. When I lived in the South, I knew it by one name, but it was too far away to enter into my sense of place. Living now in a place where I am never more than few miles from its banks, its presence cannot help but be a part of my everyday life.

Now, I also know that it has many names:

*Báhat Sássin* – (*Hasí:nay* [Caddo]), “Mother of rivers”

*Beesniicie* – (*Hinóno’eitít* [Arapaho])

*Hahcicobá* – (*Kowassá:ti* [Koasati])

*Ĥaĥáwakpa* – (*Lakĥótiyapi* [Lakota]), “River of the falls”

*Kickaátit* – (*Paári* [Pawnee])

*Mäse’sibowi* – (*Meshkwahkihaki* [Fox-Sauk])

*Ma’xeé’ome’tää’e* – (*Tséhésenéstsetse* [Cheyenne]), “Big, greasy river”

*Mihcisiipiwi* – (*Myaamia* [Miami-Illinois])

*Misi-Ziibi* – (*Anishinaabemowin* [Ojibwe]), “Great river”

*Misha Sipokni* – (*Chahta’* [Choctaw]), “Beyond age”

*ᎠᎯᎩᎠᎵᎠᎵᎠ* – (*GWV* [Cherokee]) “Mississippi [transliteration] river”

*Mníšoŕethąka* – (*Dakĥótiyapi* [Dakota])

*Ny-tonks* – (*Okáxpá íe* [Quapaw]), “Great river”

*Ohnawiið:ke* – (*Kanien’kéha’* [Mohawk])

*Uhtawiyú?kye* – (*Ska:rù:rę’* [Tuscarora])

*Yandawezue* – (*Wa’dat* [Wyandot])

*Yununu’a* – (*yUdjEha* [Yuchi]), “Great river”

*Xósáu* – (*Cáuijògà* [Kiowa]), “Standing Rocks” [6]

“bayuk loosa” = “bayou black”

“bayuk ouski” = “bayou cane”

from the Houma language [7]

---

“water of mars” = war water [8]

“What they gone do with all this property? What the oil company gone do?” [9]

---

Fort Cities. Port Cities.  
Colonization, Spanish, French, British,  
American, still marks the landscape  
and our bodies.

St. Paul

Cairo

St. Louis

Memphis

Natchez

Vicksburg

New Orleans—

The militarized and commodified rivers—  
cape flows from Minnesota to the Gulf and  
our bodies flow with it.

Image courtesy of the author.

---

New Orleans was the largest and perhaps the most feared of the slave port cities along the Mississippi, no one wanted to be sold down river to New Orleans.

Ports and forts tell stories about mobility, Black death and Black life. The commodified Black body. Commodified landscapes and bodies of water. They do not perhaps look like the castles and forts of Elmina or Gorée, but the ports and the forts are there.

Aerial view of the Mississippi River near Fort Jackson circa 1935. Image courtesy of United States Department of Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places.

Aerial view of the Mississippi River near Fort Jackson circa 1974. Image courtesy of United States Army Corps of Engineers.

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Near the confluence of the Missouri and the Mississippi sits Fort Belle Fontaine, the first established American military fort, which predates the Louisiana Purchase. It was once a fur trading post. Now deaccessioned, it lives down the road from a juvenile detention center.

So I ask: what do histories and cartographies that trace and locate Black mobility along a river that moves between the Gulf of Mexico and Minnesota reveal about the lives and struggles of Black populations contemporarily in and between these spaces?

---

“Harper’s Weekly”, March 15, 1884, 169.

Image courtesy of the author.

he says...the levee took the place of the  
Sugar House. They had to move the houses to  
place the levee. [\[10\]](#)

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Image courtesy of the author.

Ochún...?

Image courtesy of the author.

“Yemayá

I come to you, Yemayá,  
Ocean mother, sister of the fishes.  
I stop at the edge of your lip  
Where you exhale your breath on the  
beach  
Into a million tiny geysers.  
With your white froth I anoint my brow  
and cheeks,  
Wait for your white-veined breasts to  
wash through me... [\[11\]](#)

I stare at the sea, surging silver-plated  
between me and the lopped-off corrugated  
arm, the wind whipping my hair. I look  
down, my head and shoulders, a shadow on  
the sea. Yemayá pours strings  
of light over my dull jade, flickering  
body, bubbles pop out of my ears. I  
feel the tension easing and, for the first  
time in months, the litany of work  
yet to do, of deadlines, that sings  
incessantly in my head, blows away with  
the wind.

Oh, Yemayá, I shall speak the words  
you lap against the pier.

But as I turn away I see in the distance,  
a ship's fin fast approaching. I see  
fish heads lying listless in the sun,  
smell the stench of pollution in the waters." [12]

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"Because of its qualities as a tangible, visible scene/seen, it follows that not only can we interrogate the historical and geographical dimensions of the landscape as an object in and of itself (as a material thing, or set of things), we also can read and interpret cultural landscapes for what they might tell us more broadly about social worlds of the past." [13]

"...rather than seeing surveillance as something inaugurated by new technologies, such as automated facial recognition or unmanned autonomous vehicles (or drones), to see it as ongoing is to insist that we factor in how racism and antiblackness undergird and sustain intersecting surveillance of our present order." [14]

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Image courtesy of the author.

...the Police-like people I encountered on the levee were ICE agents, Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

They might have taken my camera and what I thought were harmless images of the ships in the channel.

I wonder what, or who, is aboard the ships? Would it, they, have to be quarantined? How did ICE determine the border in the river?

...do borders float? Not all people do.

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Image courtesy of the author.

## Footnotes

[1] Rich, Nathaniel. 2013. "Bodies." In *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas*. Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker, eds. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

[2] Johnson, Walter. 1999. *Soul by Soul : Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 8.

[3] Johnson, Walter. 1999. *Soul by Soul : Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 6.

[4] Delaney, Lucy A. 189-?. "From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or Struggles for Freedom." In *From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or Struggles for Freedom*. St. Louis, MO, Publishing House of J. T. Smith II.

[5] Johnson, Walter. 1999. *Soul by Soul : Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 7.

[6] "Native Names for the Mississippi River" in *The Decolonial Atlas*. January 5, 2015.

[7] Verdin, Monique. 2013. "Southward into Vanishing Lands." In *Unfathomable City: A New Orleans Atlas*. Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker, eds. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

[8] Hurston, Zora Neale, and Miguel Covarrubias. 1935. *Mules and Men*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co.



[9] Dent, Thomas. Thomas Dent Papers. Amistad Research Center at Tulane University.

[10] White, Frank. "River Road Interviews." Thomas Dent Papers. Amistad Research Collection at Tulane University.

[11] Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2009. The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader. Latin America Otherwise. AnaLouise Keating, ed. Durham: Duke University Press. 242.

[12] Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2009. The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader. Latin America Otherwise. AnaLouise Keating, ed. Durham: Duke University Press. 114.

[13] Schein, Richard H. 2006. Landscape and Race in the United States. New York: Routledge, 5.

[14] Browne, Simone. 2015. Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness. Durham: Duke University Press. 8.

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*Editor's note: This essay was originally published in [Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place, and Community](#).*

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