Research Master's programme *Cultural Anthropology: Sociocultural Transformation* (CASTOR)
Utrecht University, the Netherlands

MSc Thesis Hanan de Sain (6033989)
Title: "Tied to the Land": Slow Violence, Necrocapitalism, and Descendant-Activism in "Cancer Alley"
28 April 2024

Supervisor: Dr. Marlene Schäfers
Second grader: Dr. David Henig

Preferred journal of publication: Social Anthropology
Word count: 12,928

Abstract

"Cancer Alley" is a region in Louisiana, formerly the site of slave plantations, plagued by toxic pollution from some 200 petrochemical plants. In spite of devastating health effects, especially unprecedently high cancer rates, the affected communities often remain invisible. This thesis examines how the slow violence of toxic pollution is normalized through the politics of resignation, which generates feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness, and inattention. It analyses how contemporary activists draw upon the region's history of slavery and their descendant identities to confront this normalization. Based on ethnographic research among local activists in Cancer Alley, this study found that slow violence in Cancer Alley is characterized not by its invisibility but by its seeming inevitability.

While earlier studies proposed that activism should engage in the politics of spectacle to create urgency around slow-developing violence, I demonstrate that this is unable to generate social change, as it still allows for the production of counter-facts. I have shown how contemporary activists in Cancer Alley have shifted to an emphasis on the reality of structural violence, shifting the political debate from the register of facts to the register of values: what matters to whom? This is achieved through the strategic mobilization of local heritage and descendant identity.

Keywords: *Necrocapitalism, Slow Violence, Temporality, Environmental Racism, Activism, Descendants.*

Table of Contents

Introduction

On the River Road along the Mississippi River lies "Cancer Alley" – a 137 km stretch of land between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, officially named the River Parishes, where some 200 petrochemical plants pollute the region's air, water, and soil with unlawful emissions of toxic chemicals such as benzene, chloroprene, and formaldehyde. Over time, the toxic pollution has caused an unprecedently high number of cancer cases (50 times the national average), bronchitis, and asthma among the region's residents (Terrell and St Julien, 2022). Based on centuries of structural violence tracing back to the history of settler colonialism, the area is designated a "sacrifice zone," a segregated space in which the physical and mental health of disadvantaged populations is compromised under the guise of economic development, but ultimately serve to benefit capitalist interest (De Souza 2020, 220).

In spite of these statistics, the victims of this structural violence remain largely invisible and ignored in an example of what Rob Nixon (2011) has called "slow violence." In the context of my study, however, I agree with Thom Davies (2021) that in Cancer Alley, slow violence is not an invisible threat but a tangible brutality. Numerous small towns in the region are enclosed by enormous chemical plants that plague their residents with excessive dirt, noise pollution, bad smells, and many family deaths.

What, then, allows those in power to ignore these deaths? This thesis aims to answer that question by analyzing how the local government mobilizes a politics of resignation, which normalizes capitalist harm as an inevitable consequence of economic development. Additionally, it examines how local activists engage in a form of "mattering practices" that mobilize the region's history of slavery in order to challenge the petrochemical industry's continuing development.

In doing so, this thesis contributes to a body of literature that examines the relationship between polluting industries, affected communities, and local activists. Scholarship on toxic pollution increasingly argues that the "slow violence" of toxic pollution needs more arresting stories about affected communities to invoke urgency around the violence of delayed effects. Integrating scholarship on toxic pollution with Black studies, this thesis aims to demonstrate how descendants of the enslaved move beyond a focus on the bodily effects of chemical toxins toward the structural violence that has been a daily reality since the arrival of their ancestors.

The data presented in this thesis are derived from ethnographic research conducted from September 2023 to February 2024 in five parishes of Cancer Alley: St. Charles, St. John the Baptist, St. James, Ascension, and East Baton Rouge. Combining participant observation with semi-structured interviews and sensory ethnography, I learned what it means to face the everyday manifestations of toxic pollution.

This thesis is structured as follows. The first chapter, "From 'Plantation Country' to 'Cancer Alley,'" shows how the structures of the region's former slave plantations have paved the way for the development of what is now known as "Cancer Alley." The second chapter, "The Everyday Reality of 'Cancer Alley,'" illustrates what "slow violence" means for the everyday lives of the residents of "Cancer Alley." The third chapter, "Necrocapitalism in the River Parishes," unpacks how the politics of resignation has led residents to accept toxic pollution as normal. The fourth and final chapter, "Making Descendant Communities Matter," shows how local activists engage in mattering practices that challenge the disposability of descendant communities.

Finally, a note on terminology. "Cancer Alley" is a political nickname that has been used in local, national, and international discourses about the area since the 1990s. Recent online discourse has renamed the area "Death Alley," to signify that cancer is not the only type

of death the industry causes. However, I follow my interlocutors, who still refer to the area as “Cancer Alley.”

Theoretical Perspective

Politics of Death

Political theory on death often departs from Achille Mbembe's (2019, 92) work on "necropolitics," in which he defines necropower as the "subjugation of life to the power of death." He argues that necropolitics has created "death-worlds," new forms of social existence in which vast populations are exposed to deadly living conditions. Building on Mbembe's work, Lauren Berlant (2007) and Rob Nixon (2011) explore necropolitical dynamics in the context of ordinary life. Their works help to understand why entire populations accept their precarious situation as normal. In the context of her study on obesity, Berlant (2007, 76) coined the concept of "slow death" to refer to the physical wearing out of populations through the reproduction of everyday life. By simply "living on," bodies are slowly destructed through their long-term exposure to toxic environments, habits, and consumption under capitalism. For Berlant (2007, 2), slow death is neither an exception nor mere banality but an unsettling scene of living that is normalized due to the ordinariness in which it takes place. Nixon (2011, 2) developed the concept of "slow violence" to address violence "that occurs gradually and out of sight," referring to slow-developing disasters in the environments of people deemed disposable ("the poor"). According to Nixon (2011, 2), the common understanding of violence as something immediate, spectacular, and eventful neglects "violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space."

Berlant and Nixon both demonstrate that it is the uneventfulness of everyday life that renders slow forms of death and violence invisible. However, in the context of his study on Cancer Alley, Thom Davies (2022, 411) argues that everyday exposure to slow violence is not necessarily invisible to affected communities "but can be a very real and often tangible brutality." Responding to Nixon's notion of slow violence as violence "out of sight," Davies asks, "Out of sight to whom?"

Capitalism

Scholarship on capitalism can deepen our understanding of how necropolitical landscapes continue to exist even when their violence is noticed by affected communities and the politicians that represent them. Bobby Banerjee (2008) developed the concept of "necrocapitalism" to address contemporary capitalist practices that involve dispossession and exposure to death. Following Mbembe's argument that the colony represented a permanent state of exception, Banerjee (2008, 1546) asserts that in the postcolony, global markets collude with governments to create economic states of exception in which capital can rule independently of democratic rights, enabling the covert continuation of violence. The concept of necrocapitalism is useful as it explains how the infiltration of market logic into politics justifies the deaths needed to make profits.

Furthermore, to comprehend why affected communities accept their precarity, I engage with Benson and Kirsch's (2010) "politics of resignation," which refers to the way corporate power produces a prevailing cynicism toward political life: the idea that capitalist harm is an inevitable consequence of economic progress (2010, 461). This politics is powerful as it normalizes harm, leaving corporate power unchallenged. Cynical about the ability to bring about change, affected communities "have become resigned to their fate" (2010, 473). Bhattacharyya (2018, ix) points out, however, that people partake in unfavorable arrangements not only out of coercion but also out of a desire for the economic prosperity promised by capitalism. She says that people "rush to be included" in capitalist ways of life (2018, ix).

Mattering

Scholarship on environmental justice questions how to create political urgency around slow forms of violence. Chloe Ahmann (2018, 144) asserts that slow violence is difficult to represent because it never reaches eventfulness. She explains that events are useful as they expose the order of things by disrupting the experience of routine. Inspired by her fieldwork among toxic pollution activists in Baltimore, Ahmann (2018, 146) suggests that strategies of temporal manipulation (e.g., rearranging history) can help to "create events out of nothing." In a similar vein, Nixon (2011, 3) states that the temporal dispersion of slow violence complicates representation as the media gives unequal attention to "spectacular" versus "unspectacular time." To counter this, Nixon (2011, 6) asserts that we need to devise arresting stories that invoke urgency around the violence of delayed effects.

However, Davies (2022, 421) demonstrates that there are plentiful arresting testimonies about pollution. He argues that slow violence persists only because these stories do not *count*. The problem is that capitalism has the power to discredit or reappropriate evidence aimed at its destruction (Benson and Kirsch 2010; Latour 2004). Therefore, Bruno Latour (2004, 232) proposes that we need to devise a "powerful descriptive tool" that transforms "matters of fact" into "matters of concern." For Latour (2004, 232), matters of fact are political subtractions of reality. Represented as empirical evidence, they evoke countercriticism. Matters of concern, in contrast, represent issues that are complex, value-laden, and meaningful. They are things that are cared for and, hence, protected rather than debunked.

Exposing slow violence, then, is not just about orchestrating eventful stories but also about making those stories *matter*. But when do stories matter? And perhaps more importantly, whose stories matter? This thesis will answer these questions by analyzing how contemporary activists in the River Parishes mobilize their identity as descendants of the enslaved as a means of making their stories matter.

Methodology

This research was conducted during six months of ethnographic fieldwork in the River Parishes. The bulk of the data was collected through participant observation and at council hearings, lawsuits, protest marches, "toxic tours,"[1] dinners, parties, and community meetings, where I encountered local activists, residents, pastors, non-profit employees, environmental lawyers, filmmakers, urban planners, parish council members, and representatives of petrochemical companies. Enriched by semi-structured interviews with fourteen local activists, participant observation was essential for understanding the sociocultural and political reality that is Cancer Alley. The activist organizations I primarily worked with are: Concerned Citizens of St. John (2016); Rise St. James (2018); The Descendants Project (2020); Inclusive Louisiana (2021); Rural Roots Louisiana (2023); Refined Community Empowerment (2023); Boundless Community Action (2023)

In addition, I used sensory ethnography as a research method. Ethnographers often pay attention only to their visual observations and to what is talked about. Sensory ethnographers, however, also analyze what roles other senses play in sociocultural environments (Martin, n.d.). Through "participant sensing," I learned that my interlocutors use their smell to monitor unlawful chemical emissions (Pink 2015, 118). I became increasingly aware of the fact that my interlocutors understand their precarity not only through pain or grief but also through everyday experiences. Furthermore, I used "sensory introspection" to analyze how my exposure to petrochemicals gradually changed my understanding of Cancer Alley (Martin, n.d.). This

[1] Toxic tours take visitors along Louisiana's Chemical Corridor, focusing on the local environmental justice movement and its roots in the local history of African American resistance.

helped me understand, above all, that petroviolence is not as invisible as is often proposed in scholarship on slow violence.

This research took place in an area embedded in layered histories of dispossession. As a non-Black woman from Europe, I continuously reflected on the ways in which I could become complicit in the extractive dynamics entrenched in the area (and lurking in ethnographic research). To counter this, I discussed my observations and considerations with my interlocutors throughout the data-gathering process to stay as close to their perspectives as possible. Nevertheless, I was and still am aware of the fact that my efforts could never overcome the inequality between me and my interlocutors. Early on in my fieldwork, for instance, I followed the advice of New Orleanian interlocutors to take primary residence in New Orleans as there is no safe level of exposure to some of the chemicals emitted in the River Parishes. The fact that I can make such a choice exemplifies the unequal health distribution this thesis hopes to challenge.

Ethnographic Analysis

1. From "Plantation Country" to "Cancer Alley"

Louisiana's history of slavery began in 1721 with the arrival of two ships that brought enslaved people from Guinea, Africa (Hall 1992, 64). Many more ships would follow. By 1788, nearly every inch of the Mississippi River-adjacent land was part of a slave plantation, where a total of forty thousand enslaved were forced to work and live (Hall 1992, 277). After the abolishment of slavery in 1864, newly freed enslaved received small land grants on or near the plantations, where they built homes and established businesses (Lerner 2005, 11; Allen 2006, 113). Out of former slave villages arose thriving "Free Towns," many of which are still inhabited by the descendant communities who inherited their ancestors' property (Human Rights Watch 2024, 26). The larger plantation sites, however, remained in the ownership of White planter families. When petrochemical companies began arriving in the 1950s, they gradually bought out these planter families. The petrochemical companies preferred to buy large plots of land under single ownership, which helps to explain why petrochemical facilities exist in such proximity to historic Free Towns and their African-descendant communities (Allen 2006, 113).

During the 1960s, the State of Louisiana stimulated a steep increase of facilities by reducing taxes on natural gas and minimizing pollution regulation (Allen 2006, 115). It led to the development of some two hundred fossil fuel and petrochemical plants located in the River Parishes today (Human Rights Watch 2024, 4). Lori[2], 72, local activist and resident of St. James, witnessed the arrival of the petrochemical industry:

> In 1953, a man discovered natural gas in St. James, and that started the industry to come. Then, of course, the federal government came in to confiscate everything. By 1967, they had marketed all over the world. So, when you go back and look at all of this, you realize that it all really started with men deciding in a boardroom that this was gonna be their industrial hub.

In the context of her research on Cancer Alley, Barbara Allen (2006, 119) explains that the collusion between the state government, wealthy planters, and corporations encouraged neoliberal policies that were harmful to the River Parishes' residents. Lori, like many other residents I spoke to, believes that the state government was fully aware of the harm these policies would cause them:

> Of course, they knew. How can you build a plant and not know what the chemicals do? Scientists built these plants, so scientists told them all it was dangerous. They just didn't tell us. And when we found out, it was basically too late. You know, our immune system is already compromised.

Likewise, John, 83, local activist and resident of St. John, said:

> They knew about it, alright. Dupont invented Chlorophene in the late 30s and perfected it in the mid-40s. They had all the information and facts by then. At that time, only the industry knew it. However, by the time [Dupont] came to us, [the government] knew. They knew a whole lot. They were warned.

[2] All names have been changed to secure the privacy of my research participants.

Allen (2003, 11) explains that the commercial development of Louisiana's chemical corridor "was ushered in by a wealthy few that held power," establishing alliances with big oil that are often still in place today. One such alliance became apparent during my fieldwork when the Descendants Project found out that Jaclyn Hotard, the president of St. John the Baptist Parish, personally profited from the land her council sold to Greenfield (to build a facility).

This history demonstrates that the petrochemical industry is built on existing colonial structures, which enabled the continuation of the violent exploitation of Black communities (Fiskio 2021, 52-54; Kang 2021, 107-109; Bullard 2000, 97). It is a structural form of violence that is commonly understood as "environmental racism." Robert Bullard (1993, 23) defined environmental racism as "any policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups or communities based on race," referring to the way people of color continue to disproportionately bear the burden of air, water, and waste hazards. The reality of environmental racism is reflected in Cancer Alley's demographics. The petrochemical facilities have been built in towns where 65 to 95 percent of the population is Black (Human Rights Watch 2024; Davies 2022). The River Parishes' white communities are much further removed from the facilities, are not exposed to the sights, sounds, and smells of living in a polluted area, and suffer significantly less from health complications (Terrell and Julien 2023; Castellón 2021).

It is worth pointing out local suspicion around the so-called "White flight," the large-scale migration of White US residents from ethnically diverse areas to White neighborhoods following the end of segregation in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Many of my interlocutors told me that "their White Flight" really was a strategic buyout of petrochemical corporations prior to the construction of their plants. Ann, 83, local activist and resident of St. John, said:

> White people lived where the plant now is. In the 1960s, the people started moving out of this area. We didn't know what was coming, but they knew. They just didn't tell us Black people. They don't tell us anything. They left us with a death sentence.

Most of these White residents (who are descendants of planter families) moved to Airline Highway in Laplace. According to John, a policy restricting industrial construction around the Airline Highway is still in place. Although the reality of such a buyout cannot be confirmed, we do know that petrochemical corporations feared the White populations would pose a threat to uncontrolled chemical production because of their protests against the siting of facilities in their communities (Castellón 2021, 17). Black communities, on the other hand, had no choice but to accept the arrival of plants. They welcomed the jobs the industry promised to bring, and above all, they did not know what they were about to face. As Ann explains:

> We didn't know cancer was coming out in this area. We have been living here for all our lives and never knew that we had been exposed to it. They didn't tell us.

"We didn't know;" I heard these words over and over again. The residents of the River Parishes were never told of the health consequences of living next to the chemical plants. As it takes time for cancer to develop, awareness about the consequences has been delayed by decades. Several of my interlocutors pointed out that a long-prevailing stigma around cancer among Black communities even further delayed awareness. John said:

> When my wife got cancer, she told everybody. And then, it came to light that so many of her girlfriends had cancer. They would show up at our house, and as soon as they walked in and closed the door, they pulled their wigs off and

> said: 'Me too, girl.' That is how I found out how prevalent cancer in our community is. Before my wife got it, I didn't see it.

John first became aware of the industry's toxicity as late as 2016. That year, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) organized a meeting to warn the community of St. John the Baptist Parish that Dupont/Denka was exposing the community to levels of chloroprene, a cancer-causing chemical, four hundred to seven hundred times the level the EPA had deemed acceptable. John explained:

> We didn't know that stuff. I certainly didn't know about it, the stuff that the EPA made evident to us. When I got proof from the EPA about that, I didn't know what else to do [but to organize]. I was so upset that we had been suffering for so long. Not knowing.

In his definition, Bullard highlighted that environmental racism can be both intentional and unintentional. Often, it is the product of the way society is designed to protect the privileged. Indeed, Louisiana's petrochemical plants have been "placed in the path of least resistance, near communities with the smallest reserves of political, economic, and social capital" (Davies 2022, 416). This way, the industry has exploited and reproduced the racial structures of the slave plantations with the goal of making unrestricted profits. As Mbembe (2017, 2) points out, race and Blackness were produced to legitimize the exploitation of African bodies, transforming the enslaved into "life that can be wasted and spent without limit" (2017, 34-35). Grace, 44, a local activist and resident of St. John, compellingly captured this:

> It all comes down to capitalism. And that's why it's so important to make connections between the plantations and the plants. We've built this country on the enslavement of African people and African-descended people. We've built it on the idea that somebody has to accept sacrifice for progress. The federal government doesn't care; companies do not care. They've already resolved that somebody's gonna die because of this. They've already written this off. Like, y'all are gone now, y'all are suffering, y'all are dead, and the overall benefit of the good is gonna wash all of that out. Well, I'm here to tell them what that sacrifice looks like. That sacrifice means that people are getting chemotherapy, that children are dying, and that people are losing their loved ones.

Grace's words strongly remind me of Judith Butler's (2016, xix) notion of ungrievable lives: "those [lives] that cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed (…)." Thus, ever since Black people arrived in the River Parishes, their lives are seen as disposable and ungrievable.

Cancer Alley developed against this historical backdrop. In the next section of this chapter, I portray how the industry has transformed the historic Black Free Towns and their communities.

Displacement in Place

Media articles and scholarly literature on Cancer Alley often focus on the health implications and environmental injustices of petrochemical pollution. Less attention is paid to the way the industry is wiping out the economy, landscape, community, and history of the River Parishes. But that part of the story is important. My interlocutors raised serious concerns about the way the petrochemical industry has gradually deprived them of their livelihood. Their stories all come down to one thing: although they had always been a poor community, they had good lives

before the plants came in, with plenty of jobs to do and activities to enjoy. Ellen, local activist and resident of St. James in her early seventies, described it poignantly:

> We had a thriving community. We had several post offices, we had a major store, we had a restaurant, we had a senior center, and we had the first all-Black high school. Most of that is gone now.

My interlocutors explained the myriad ways in which the industry has been responsible for their displacement. Most importantly, corporations bought out many Black businesses, farmers, and families to make space for their continuous expansion. This has led to a strong decrease in facilities, local economies, and younger populations (who could afford to move). During a council meeting, a resident in her forties said: "I left because there is nothing in Wallace. We ain't even got a store." In addition, people and businesses leave due to the environment the industry has created. Heavy industrial traffic and excessive odor and noise pollution make it unattractive to do business in the historic towns situated next to the plants. Moreover, to make room for industrial traffic, public transport was pushed out, making it difficult, if not impossible, to travel from and to the River Parishes without a car.

During a guest lecture at Loyola University, Grace illuminated the grave cultural and historical implications of this displacement. She explained how freed enslaved people bought land after the Civil War as a means of emancipation. After seeing how much prosperity land ownership had brought to the colonizers, Grace said, the freedmen understood that owning land gave them a voice. They continued cultivating the sugarcane fields while also establishing the structures of the historic district of the River Road: churches, schools, railroads, ferries, stores, restaurants, and so on. "They built all that we have now," Grace concluded. Indeed, land ownership and farming proved to be important to the freedmen as the 19th-century real estate holdings of "Louisiana's free people of color were slightly better than white adult males in the Northeast and the Northwest" (Schweninger 1997, 4). Farming, Steve Lerner (2005, 22) says, was the black communities' livelihood.

Brian, local activist and resident of St. John, and former councilman in his early fifties, showed the remnants of the historic structures. What once were schools, businesses, and houses are now empty plots of land. Brian told me the story of the families and farmers who used to live in the area generation after generation but are now torn apart. Each time a plant comes in, businesses and houses disappear. "As you can see, nobody wants to be near a plant." He continued:

> They are taking away the landscape. They are taking away… You know, people traveling to the River Road to see what the River Road is like. We should put some things in place that help with the preservation of its integrity.

Lori is also concerned with the loss of her community's history:

> If we don't preserve our Black history, it will be lost. So, right now, we're trying to get markers to identify those historical sites that we know will be lost if we don't take care of them right now. And we want tourists to come and see what we have. Maybe we don't have some things no more, but we want them to see what we used to have. And we want them to know that we are not beggarly people, but loving, caring people who can take care of themselves, weren't it for the many obstacles that keep getting put in front of us every time we turn around.

Ellen adds: “I was thinking about bringing my class’s yearbook to the museum in Donaldsonville so that we can show that we actually did have a school.” She is referring to the first all-Black high school in St. James, which was closed to make room for incoming plants.

I find it useful to relate this to Nixon’s (2011, 19) notion of displacement without moving, which refers to the loss of land and resources “that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable. He speaks of “goners with nowhere to go,” which reflects some of the remarks made by my interlocutors. Ann said, for instance:

> So many people ask me, ‘Why don’t you all move?’ Where are we gonna go? We can’t go. I’ve been in my house for 57 years. My house is paid for. Who’s gonna sell me a house without a job or social security? Nobody.

Nixon (2011, 17) explains that often, in the context of resource extraction, “an official landscape is forcibly imposed on a vernacular one.” “Vernacular” refers to the way a landscape is shaped by affective and historically textured maps devised by communities over generations. Official maps imposed by governments and corporations are oblivious to such earlier maps. Indeed, this is precisely what has happened in the River Parishes. Governmental zoning practices and corporate buyouts have fractured historic communities and overwritten the social functions of their landscape. In Wallace, for instance, the government built a bridge across the Mississippi River to facilitate the increase in traffic that incoming chemical plants would bring. The construction forced hundreds of people to move, shattering the community. The bridge was built next to Wallace’s cemetery. What used to be a place of mourning and solitude is now next to a highway. In Reserve, the Marathon petroleum refinery had fenced in the Zion Travelers Cemetery, forcing people visiting their deceased loved ones to register at the refinery’s reception. My interlocutors emphasize that the destruction of their homeland is particularly painful because their ancestors worked so hard on the land, first as enslaved and later as freedmen. For them, historic Black Freetowns are a direct reminder of their ancestors’ resilience and, as such, a source of pride and freedom.

Nixon (17) remarks that displacement in place is not just about the economy and wealth. By treating the landscape as if it was uninhabited by the living and the deceased, an official landscape discounts its spiritualized layers and severs “webs of accumulated cultural meaning.” Treating the land as “empty” and available for appropriation is also what lies at the heart of settler colonialism. In the context of the US, literature has mainly elaborated on this with regard to indigenous communities and lands (Kang 2021, 105; Morris 2003). However, my study points towards broader trajectories of settler colonialism.

In this chapter, I described how residents saw their thriving communities and vibrant towns develop into “Cancer Alley.” In the following chapter, I will portray the everyday reality of living in Cancer Alley.

2. The Everyday Reality of “Cancer Alley”

> You have to be here to see. You have to live the life that I have lived to know. People are dying, and they don’t care. It’s not right. This land is for everybody. We all deserve clean air, clean water, clean soil, and a place to live. We don’t own this land. The Lord gave us this land. It’s not fair.
>
> Ann

“Cancer Alley” beyond cancer

The first time I drove through the River Parishes, I was astonished in many ways. After having read so much about the dystopia that is Cancer Alley, I was surprised by the beauty of its swamps. Trees surrounded the road I drove on. I felt a little silly. Had I really thought that Louisiana’s River Parishes were only Cancer Alley? As I drove on a bridge that led into the residential area, I saw Cancer Alley for the first time. Laid out in front of me was a landscape of enormous chemical plants. Massive fumes of smoke were being pumped into the air. What immediately struck me was just how close people’s houses were to the plants. The facilities were right across the street.

As I drove through this landscape, I opened the windows of my car to get some cool air. Of course, my car was quickly filled with a horrible smell. Up until that moment, I had only considered the long-term health consequences, but my first visit immediately taught me there was much more at play.

That night, I experienced even worse odors while I was trying to sleep. Later, I learned that I had smelled the emission of excessive flaring. A flare is a torch-like flame on top of a facility that burns chemicals. The amount of flaring is restricted due to the amount of chemicals flares release into the air. Many residents told me that companies flare at times when no one is paying attention, at night, or during extreme weather conditions. This is a major problem for frontline communities as flares lead to dangerously high levels of chemical emissions that can cause immediate emergencies such as skin rashes, nose bleeds, or an inability to breathe. Heather, 54, local activist and resident of St. Charles, described the impact flaring has had on her life:

> There was this one night in particular. I was getting the fumes, and they were just too great. Usually, you wait a while, cover your nose with a pillow, and just try to sleep. But that didn't happen. So, I texted my son, and we decided to go to the next town, where we waited in a 24-hour restaurant until the fumes had lifted.

Stories like Heather’s demonstrate that slow violence is not necessarily invisible to the communities of the River Parishes but a very tangible reality.

In October 2023, I started my residence at the Movement House of the Descendant’s Project in Wallace, a historic Free Town situated in St. John the Baptist Parish. Across the river from the house are two petrochemical facilities. During my stay, I was offered a small glimpse of everyday life in a highly polluted environment. Almost every night, the loud horns of industrial trains and bad odors kept me awake. In the daytime, sirens would sound from the plants. Nobody ever knew why they went off, as the plants never gave a notice. My hosts seemed used to it. They told me that if the siren meant danger (explosions or fires), they would eventually find out anyway. Soon, I also started experiencing severe headaches. At first, I disregarded it as a placebo, but after three days, I felt it had to be the plants across the water. Now, I realize that the initial dismissal of a connection between my headaches and petrochemicals exemplifies the ambiguity of slow violence experienced in the body. It is very present but can also be written off to something else.

Throughout my fieldwork, I learned about many more of the problems residents face every day as a result of the industry: lacking infrastructure, a shrinking, and aging population, industry profits not flowing back into the community, and the absence of public transport (which is challenging for patients without a car). Furthermore, many residents I spoke to suffer from chronic respiratory diseases such as asthma and bronchitis. Unfortunately, too many of them deal with such health problems on top of being a cancer patient.

“Every Household Got Someone with Cancer”

During my first week of fieldwork, I canvassed for Grace, a participant in the local elections. One of the people who answered his door was a man in his fifties. He smiled kindly as he welcomed me into his trailer. He was one of the many people still living in a trailer after Hurricane Ida had ravaged the area in 2021. When I stepped inside, I was welcomed by the sound of loud Gospel songs. It was very dark inside. All the curtains were closed, blocking whatever was happening outside on this sunny afternoon. The walls of the man’s living room were completely covered with family pictures. After I was seated, I talked about Grace’s canvas and asked if he had any concerns about the parish he wanted to share. Suddenly, he looked deeply troubled. “I got cancer,” he said, “I am dying...” He started crying intensely. “I am all alone, you see. All of my family already died.” My heart ached. Not knowing how to respond, I asked him if a doctor was helping him. He said there was, but then, his cries intensified. “I will not live to see March. I will not live to see March.” I didn’t know how to comfort him. I knew my question had evoked his distress, but at the same time, I knew I was not certified to offer actual help. After uttering some words of comfort, I had to leave him behind.

The meeting with this man was my first of many encounters with death in the River Parishes. During that canvas alone, four other people shared stories about their illnesses or recent losses. Of course, I had anticipated encountering a lot of death as I had read about the “high cancer rates” while preparing my research. Yet, the reality was beyond anything I could have imagined. I hope that by sharing some of the many stories my interlocutors told me, I am able to represent the violent reality of Cancer Alley.

As we walked through Zion Travelers Cemetery, John showed me how many relatives he had already buried there. “My mother, two aunts and uncles, their children, my dad, my grandfather, my brother, and two sisters are all here. All these people died as a result of the industry. Cancer took them.” Yet, he referred to himself as “fortunate” due to the fact that his wife had survived breast cancer. Likewise, Ann called herself lucky: “I only have a little raspatory problem and a kidney problem.” Almost all of Ann’s family members died from cancer. “My father had cancer. My brother next door and his wife died of cancer. My other brother next door died of cancer. The brother next to him has cancer. I just buried my mother.” Ann also talked about all the neighbors she had lost and concluded: “All over this area, somebody died from cancer.” Similarly, Ellen told me how many friends and loved ones she had lost. “House after house, people died of cancer. You go across the street, cancer. You go down the street, cancer. My sister was 57 years old when she died from lung cancer. My uncle is suffering from prostate cancer right now.”

Moreover, my interlocutors pointed out how much they are mentally affected by the things they are going through. Charlot, local activist and resident of St. John said: ”I just had surgery because I had five tumors. And now I am constantly anxious about new tumors. What else might be going on inside of me? It's hard not to think about that. When I look at my children, I wonder what might be going on with them. Do they have problems I don’t know about? It messes with you.” Likewise, Helen pointed out that her son decided to continue smoking cigars because he works at a chemical plant. “Basically, he was telling me: ‘I'm gonna die off cancer anyway, so I might as well enjoy the cigar.’ Think about that... They have to go to work with that knowledge every day.”

After hearing such grievous testimonies, the question arises: Why is it that my interlocutors “didn’t know” that something was off in their living environment prior to the EPA’s warning in 2016? In what follows, I engage with that question through the conceptual lens of necrocapitalism, demonstrating how the dynamics of necrocapitalism work to render this extraordinary landscape into something perceived as normal.

3. Necrocapitalism in the River Parishes

Living On

In the theoretical framework, I followed Davies's (2022, 411) observation that slow violence is not something invisible but often a tangible reality for affected communities. As I have demonstrated, my interlocutors receive daily reminders of the toxic environment they inhabit in the form of bad smells, loud noises, skin rashes, coughs, and headaches. Nevertheless, it wasn't until 2016 that my interlocutors became aware of the dangers of the petrochemical industry and started organizing. Grace explained: "We didn't know better than that a lot of people die. We thought it was like this everywhere." Likewise, Gloria, 71, local activist and resident St. James, said:

> I started noticing that we had too many funerals. I knew it wasn't normal. Why would so many people die? But I didn't know what it was. I also noticed the smell in the air. But I thought it was just… I thought it was *smelling* like this everywhere.

Meanwhile, the majority of the residents still seem to accept these instances of slow violence. My interlocutors explained that their neighbors don't want to be bothered with stories about pollution as life is already as hard as it is. Ellen said: "It is not that people are not aware; they are just too busy with their lives." Likewise, Heather, who only recently started organizing, told me: "I guess I was just going about my own life—doing whatever I do, running a business, teaching. I didn't make the connection."

Heather's remark on missing the connection is important. It is not that residents are not noticing manifestations of slow death and violence. Rather, they aren't aware of the cause and the exceptionality of their situation. Ahmann (2018, 150) points out that the signs of pollution are often ambiguous, which makes the connection between health problems and the environment vague. This ambiguity can cause people to feel powerless over their fate. As a coping mechanism, Ahmann (150) argues, they often cultivate "modes of inattention," referring to the brushing off of these ambiguous signs of pollution. It is under such conditions that people "live on," as Berlant puts it.

Politics of Resignation

In contexts such as Cancer Alley, however, we cannot talk about "modes of inattention" or "living on" without talking about the politics of resignation necrocapitalism engages in. All my interlocutors agreed that the system that created Cancer Alley operates by purposefully keeping the community "ignorant" and burned out to prevent them from connecting the chemical industry to the many deaths and, by extension, to the local history of slavery. "They want to keep us a hopeless and uneducated lot," John said. Indeed, as laid out in the historical context, Cancer Alley was able to develop because corporations and politicians withheld all information about the dangers of petrochemicals. The community did not know they were exposed to deadly chemicals. However, I believe that there is more to it than sheer ignorance.

Even after scientific studies on dangerous emissions started to emerge in the early 1980s, the industry was able to avoid responsibility (Friese 2023, 7). As I described in the theoretical perspective of this thesis, capitalism can deny or reappropriate critique against its harmful activities by engaging in the "politics of resignation." Benson and Kirsch (2011, 465) explain that corporations move through three phases of responding to critique that allow for the perpetuation of harm: 1) denial, 2) acknowledgment, and 3) crisis management. Benson and Kirsch explain that corporate responses often combine denial and acknowledgment when criticism is increasingly backed by scholarship.

Indeed, in the context of my study, I encountered responses that denied full blame while acknowledging some truth. Because petrochemical harm stretches out over time, "toxic layering," the accumulation of different toxins in bodies and environments, complicates clear settling on causality (Goldstein and Hall 2015, 643). It enables politicians and company officials to redirect blame to other causes. Permitting policies, for instance, only consider the emissions of each plant, thereby neglecting the cumulative effects of all the plants combined (Allen 2003, 31; Human Rights Watch 2024, 70). This enables individual corporations to argue that as they do not emit more than accepted, they are not to blame for high cancer rates — an argument I encountered often in the field. In addition, politicians and industry professionals redirect the blame toward residents' "lifestyle choices" such as smoking or eating fast food (Singer 2011, 150). Toxic layering, thus, also applies to toxins that reach people's bodies through consumption. During a council meeting in St. James Parish, for instance, a council member said: "We can't deny the cancer cases, but we can't just blame it on one aspect." This argument acknowledges that there is a causality between cancer and petrochemicals while simultaneously denying full blame.

The industry's politics of resignation has successfully led many residents to echo this rhetoric. Patricia, a Black resident from La Place in her forties, told me that it is not just the industry causing illnesses but unhealthy food consumption. Connecting cancer to food consumption allows for a sense of control over her fate: "I don't eat all that chicken. I eat like white people!" Later, I learned that Patricia and her five children have asthma. When I asked her about it, she said: "It just runs in the family." Patricia's response can be understood as a "mode of inattention." Accepting the reality of Cancer Alley might be too difficult, as there is nothing an individual can do about it. It explains why someone like Patricia can have an unusually high number of asthma cases in the family while still accepting the industry. Even Laura, co-founder of the Descendants Project, told me she was relieved upon reading somewhere that the cancer cases in the region were no more than usual. Although the article was attacking her movement, she wanted it to be true as both her parents have worked in a plant all their lives. Her relationship with the term "Cancer Alley" is similar:

> I still don't think about [the River Parishes] as "Cancer Alley"; for me, it is just home. We did not grow up using this term, and we still don't use it in the community. It is a strategic term, and that's where it's important. But the term is traumatic and upsetting.

The combination of ambiguity of slow violence and doubts spread by the government and the industry has led the people of the River Parishes to become "resigned to their fate," as Benson and Kirsch (2010, 473) put it. As I have pointed out, my interlocutors describe this resignation as ignorance. However, resigning to one's fate and not knowing are two different things. As I have demonstrated, residents of the River Parishes are aware that *something* is amiss, but they resign because of their powerlessness to do something about it. Anna Lora-Wainwright (2021, 28) says that resignation is often a means through which people comfort themselves about the limits of their agency. There are already 170 petrochemical plants polluting the area. So, what is this extra plant going to do? Exactly, at least bring more jobs. Or, as Ann said: *"*We're gonna die anyway."

Desire and Fear

Another important function of the politics of resignation is producing the widespread notion that risk and harm are inevitable and even necessary consequences of modernity and economic prosperity. Indeed, I have seen politicians continuously emphasizing that the parishes need the jobs the industry brings in. A council member of St. James, for instance, said: "I understand the [activists'] passion and all that they're going through, but we gotta have a balance. We need

the jobs." Warren Montag (2005, 6) explains such reasoning with his notion of "necro-economics." He argues that the market not only allows death but demands that some "allow themselves to die" or be compelled by the state for the sake of economic development. Bhattacharyya (2018, ix) helps us understand that this acceptance is rooted in a desire to be part of the capitalist way of life. According to my interlocutors, the petrochemical industry produces and nurtures such desire. Laura told me:

> They'll tell us, 'You've got nothing over there.' But we have everything. We've got space, we've got land, we've got beautiful houses, we've got our culture. But they are convincing people that they need more.

Gradually, I learned that the petrochemical industry creates this desire by offering families scholarships and grants. In addition, they fund school boards, priests, sheriffs, and landowners to expand their influence (left unnoticed is the high amount of tax exemptions given by the government). Grace said about this: "We all live in the middle of [toxic pollution], but [politicians] tell you: 'We're an industrial community, we've got all of these benefits, they donate to your church, we've got all these jobs.'"

The area's economic dependence on the petrochemical industry, thus, is an important factor in the production of desire. As I have described in the historical context, since the 1960s, the industry has gradually pushed out other economic sectors in the River Parishes. The jobs they create are thus perceived as crucial to the region's economy, thereby outweighing the "side effects of pollution," as one council member stated. But perhaps even more important is the fact that the industry has been a source of social security for generations of residents and public bodies. Because of this, there is much loyalty toward the industry. Most families have several members who work in the plants, and politicians hold long-standing deals with industry professionals.

According to Lora-Wainwright (2021, 25), a lack of action from residents is not simply a consequence of economic-self-interest. She explains that as the relationships between residents and polluters are often more complex than simple economics, affected communities may prefer to deny the existence or gravity of pollution (2021, 50). The industry's social embeddedness in the River Parishes is perhaps the biggest challenge for my interlocutors. It divides communities between those who oppose the industry and those who prefer peace and quiet. Benson and Kirsch (2010, 465) explain that fragmenting social movements is one of the powers of the politics of resignation. Grace explains:

> You have to persuade people to want to be educated. The industry has given them good stuff. They have a relationship with the community. New organizations like ours don't have that. They look at us as outsiders. They trust [the industry] more than they trust us, and building that trust and being persuasive, that's our battle.

Moreover, my interlocutors assert that their neighbors' loyalty to the industry is grounded in the fear that speaking out may cost them or their family members their jobs or their favor with local politicians (when applying for permits, for instance). Even though the industry is harmful, keeping the peace may seem safer for residents' livelihoods. As Heather points out:

> After decades, people still benefit from this industry. So, it is difficult to be an organizer in my community. People smell the chemicals coming into their homes, waking them up and making them sick, but they are afraid to speak up and say anything. They're not speaking out because they feel like repercussions will come if they do.

Through Brian, I learned that even council members must be careful not to be portrayed as opposing the industry. He was a council member when the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) notified them of the EPA's 2016 report. "As I was legislated to protect the people, I stood up and told them: 'If they cannot do it right, we have to shut it down.'" Brian continues: "My colleagues did not like it too good, but I had taken an oath to protect the people, so I had to make that choice." Brian's experience as a council member resonates with Tania Murray Li's (2006, 68) "politics of letting die," which refers to scenarios in which governing authorities elect "not to intervene when they could" to maintain the status quo (2006, 66).

My interlocutors' most significant challenge is grappling with this industrial powerplay that keeps the community resigned and divided. In the following and final chapter of this thesis, I examine how my interlocutors try to counter this by engaging in temporal politics that create awareness about the structural violence that communities of the River Parishes face.

4. Making Descendant Communities Matter

Throughout my fieldwork, I attended many council hearings about permits for incoming plants. Although residents shared emotional stories about the devastating effects of pre-existing plants, the meetings always concluded that the economic benefits of industrial expansion outweighed the so-called "side effects of pollution." During one such meeting about the expansion of Koch Methanol in St. James, a lifelong resident said: "Every time someone is diagnosed with cancer, my heart aches. You all know… You know what these chemicals are doing. My heart goes out to y'all who make these decisions." Another resident stepped in and said: "How many more people need to die? We have enough death. The parish council must protect us!" When I asked my interlocutors why politicians are not helping them, they all voiced the same three words: "They don't care." As Lori insightfully said: "They don't care that they kill us while they're getting what they want and need."

Since the 1990s, concerned citizens have been working with expert activists (such as scientists, urban planners, and attorneys) to counter such governmental decisions (Allen 2003). These "citizen-expert alliances," as Allen calls them, merge local knowledge with scientific data to produce evidence on the causality between cancer and petrochemicals and the unequal and racialized distribution of petrochemical pollution (Castellón 2021; Singer 2011; Lerner 2005; Allen 2003). This fight is primarily played out in the legal realm and concerns planning, zoning, and permitting processes.

Although this type of science-based activism has achieved success (Lerner 2005; Allen 2003), legal setbacks are common (Davies 2018; Singer 2011). As Latour explains, empirical evidence ("matters of fact") can be debunked by counter-facts, which is precisely what happens in the River Parishes. When faced with legal or public claims made by citizen-experts alliances, petrochemical corporations hire scientists to produce counter-science (Singer 2011; Lerner 2005; Allen 2003). Indeed, during a lawsuit between the oil company Formosa and Rise St. James, I saw Formosa's attorneys present complex datasets on "lifestyle trends" to deny the existence of Cancer Alley.

According to Nixon (2011, 3), slow violence is out of sync with the "politics of spectacle" that governments and media engage in, which is shaped around perceived immediate needs and prominent individuals. Therefore, scholarship on toxic pollution increasingly focuses on the question of how to create arresting stories around the slow-moving violence that frontline communities face — stories that matter to the public (Davies 2018; Nixon 2011; Latour 2004; Allen 2003). Davies (2022, 421) argues that in Cancer Alley, however, slow violence does not persist due to a lack of arresting stories but because those stories do not count.

He is referring to the "countless" intimate stories of people from the River Parishes who lost their family members to cancer. Stories such as the ones I have described throughout this thesis.

Indeed, until recently, activism in the River Parishes focused primarily on science-based evidence that provides linkages between cancer and the petrochemical industry, strengthened by public testimonies of individual community members (Davies 2022; Singer 2011; Lerner 2005; Allen 2003). As mentioned above, this activism has led to some success stories. The most well-known is the relocation of the historic Black community of Diamond by Royal Dutch Shell in 2002. After a 13-year-long campaign led by community activist Margie Richard, Shell agreed on the relocation when they were permitted to decouple it from health concerns (Lerner 2005, 281). In the end, this success story did not lead to social change. After all, none of my interlocutors were aware of Cancer Alley until fourteen years after Diamond's victory. Meanwhile, Shell has been able to continue their operation without resistance. As Gloria expressed it:

> Some of the activists tell me they've been doing this for 30 to 40 years. What were they doing? Who were they talking to? I don't see it. I had never heard of anybody doing this. We come way after them and look at the progress we have made.

The progress Gloria refers to is the global attention the Cancer Alley movement has generated since 2019 when a new wave of activism began to emerge in the River Parishes. While this activism still opposes permitting, zoning, and planning processes, it has shifted its focus toward the structural violence the Black people of the River Parishes have faced for over 300 years.

We can understand this activism as a form of temporal politics. As discussed in the theoretical perspective, Ahmann (2018, 149) identified several strategies among environmental activists in Baltimore that manipulated time to challenge the supposed invisibility of violence unfolding over generations. According to Ahmann (2018, 165-166), her work is a modest start "for thinking time as a contested terrain." With contested, she refers to the fact that polluting industries also engage in temporal politics. They use time – such as the slow development of cancer in bodies – to redirect blame. One of the strategies Ahmann identified was teaching neighbors the relevance of past to present exposure. In what follows, I want to propose that my interlocutors employ temporal strategies that help their communities and the public understand the relevance of slavery to petrochemical pollution, specifically through practicing descendancy and heritagization

We Are Descendants

Critical to the temporal politics my interlocutors engage in is practicing their identity as descendants of the enslaved and freed ancestors. All of my interlocutors said that they are organizing to protect all that their ancestors have built. As Olivia, 46, local activist and resident of Ascension, put it:

> I know that my great-great-grandfather, Oli, originated from Africa and was brought to the United States. So, I know the importance of staying on this land. We came, and we built our families here. We're tied to the land now. I would like to preserve that to be able to stay here.

My interlocutors told me that even if they would be able to relocate, they would not because they owe it to their ancestors to protect their legacy of breaking free from slavery. Ellen said:

> I am a fifth-generation granddaughter of a lady who came out of slavery, and she purchased 34 acres of land; that land is still in our family. This year marks

> 150 years that the land has been in the family. We want to keep it in the family. My ancestors had to struggle hard for this.

Because the petrochemical industry is built on the structures of the plantation society, my interlocutors feel that they are continuing the fight their ancestors started three hundred years ago. They believe that this fight has never really stopped. When I asked Olivia how she deals with the pushback she faces as a grassroots organizer, she said: "If my foreparents were able to stand up to slavery and get their heads onto spikes, then I should speak out, too." Likewise, Lori said: "We know that the fight is about our Black legacy. Our ancestors had to fight as enslaved people, and we find ourselves fighting as well."

To my interlocutors, their ancestor's legacy does not just entail material heritage. They view themselves, the living descendants, as vital to this legacy. During a meeting with the Army Corps of Engineers, which assessed whether a new facility would adversely affect the River Road Historic District, Grace said: "If our community leaves the area, the historical value will be gone, too. Our community is emotionally and spiritually connected to the region. Our ancestors built it." Sustaining that lineage is an important source of power for Olivia (who had breast cancer):

> When I grew up, we grew everything we ate. I can remember picking vegetables and sharing them with a few neighbors. That is the way of life I have known. It was a way of life that allowed my grandparents to live for many years. They ate healthily. I want to live long for my grandkids, too. But staying healthy is not so easy these days.

Olivia fights for a healthy environment not because she wants to live longer for herself but for those who come after her.

An important element in descendancy as a temporal strategy is getting the community engaged. The sense of descendant identity is missing in the community because the history of slavery is silenced. Many of my interlocutors told me that there is a lack of education, historical markers, and conversations about slavery. Saidiya Hartman (2008, 14) explains that in many families, slavery is not spoken about and forgotten out of the hope that this could provide the possibility for new life. She asserts that this has turned the history of slavery into a mystery. Although it is part of people, it never is concrete (2008, 10). This perspective resonates with Laura and Grace's experience. When they started the Descendants Project (to offer the community a sense of identity), they really had to step into their descendant identity. Grace said that this was hard at first because they were never taught to embody this identity: "The trauma was never processed. Enslaved people ran away, fought for their independence, and then worked hard to build the lifestyle, the American dream. When did they have time to grieve?"

Practicing the descendant identity can emancipate residents from their feelings of powerlessness and resignation by offering a sense of purpose in the face of loss and precarity. No longer is the fight about proving the damage done to a collection of individual bodies but about a collective effort the complete the work of a lineage. As Hartman (2008, 170) explains it: "The demands of the slave on the present have everything to do with making good the promise of abolition, and this entails much more than the end of property in slaves. It requires the reconstruction of society, which is the only way to honor our debt to the dead. This is the intimacy of our age with theirs – an unfinished struggle."

Heritagization

I gradually discovered that my interlocutors also utilize their ancestors' legacy as a political strategy to transform the River Parishes into a nationally recognized heritage site, which offers

legal protection against the petrochemical industry. Through heritage-making practices, my interlocutors protect and revive plantation sites, creole cottages, and historic cemeteries. In doing so, they hope to educate their neighbors on the industry's roots in slavery and alter the area's disposable status by utilizing what Van der Port and Meyer (2018) call a "heritage buzz," the global interest in heritage that generates the political power to make public value claims. My interlocutors strategically implement national heritage discourses to win lawsuits against petrochemical companies, blocking zoning and permitting processes.

In particular, they engage in Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, which determines that all federal agencies must assess the effects of their undertakings on Historic Properties that are listed on or are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (US General Services Administration, n.d.). Section 106 reviews whether the industry will impact the feeling, setting, and authenticity of a heritage structure. It may be hard to legally prove slow death by petrochemical pollution, but the significant loss of heritage cannot be denied. Although the fact that my interlocutors are required to resort to the strategic mobilization of material heritage to protect their communities against death and loss of livelihood is perceived as painful by many of them, the strategy has proven effective in doing so. In April 2024, for instance, the Corps of Engineers recognized the community of Wallace as an eligible National Register Historic District that would be adversely affected by the construction of Greenfield's proposed facility.

In essence, the shift toward heritagization is about what kind of evidence the activists provide to prove slow and structural violence. While corporations can debunk the claim that their emissions lead to cancer, the conversation about slavery's afterlife is not about facts. Although my interlocutors still face obstacles and setbacks, the dialogue between residents, industry, corporations, and governments has changed. It is no longer about who delivers the most convincing evidence but about who and what matters to whom. For instance, during the meeting with the Army Corps of Engineers, Laura questioned the assessment of historical structures along the lines of their design: "These people were enslaved, and what they built, even if it is just a fence for you, might have caused a lot of more time, energy, and resources than your criteria would assess." As we can see, this conversation is important as it exposes which histories matter and which do not.

Coda: Radical Hope

I argue that the new wave in activism is fostering social change primarily because of their connection to their ancestors. As Lora-Wainwright (2021, 93) argues, ultimately, it is not scientific evidence that leads to success but the persistence of the community in complaining and threatening social stability. Fiskio (2021, 9) argues that without radical hope, activists might give up and resign to the inevitability of environmental pollution. Indeed, the belief that my interlocutors carry on their ancestors' legacy enables them to continue fighting the industry, even after difficult setbacks. About their ongoing fight against Greenfield, Grace said that as she knows that the ancestors are powering her work, she is certain they will win. Mary Bethune, who has been an inspiration for generations of activists in the River Parishes, phrases it as follows: "If we have the courage and tenacity of our forebears, who stood firmly like a rock against the lash of slavery, we shall find a way to do for our day what they did for theirs."

Hartman (2008, 169) argues that we can see the enslaved as the contemporaries of descendants as they share their aspirations for a different future as well as their defeats. By this, she means that the ancestors accompany descendants in their "every effort to fight against domination." In a similar vein, Benjamin Ruha (2018, 47-50) developed the notion of "Black Afterlives Matter" to argue that black communities living close to death invoke their "materially dead/spiritually alive ancestors" to animate collective movements. Fiskio (2021,6) argues that by forging kinship bonds with the ancestors, who share their precarious condition,

descendants of slavery are able to imagine speculative futures of liberation. Michelle Murphy, finally, speaks of the "Alterlife," referring to the fact that life plagued by slavery and pollution is already altered but, therefore, also open to future alternations. This openness allows communities to imagine decolonial futures. Radical hope, then, is based on the idea that something good will emerge out of the uncertain future. My interlocutors hold on to the radical hope that their ancestors are guiding them toward that uncertain future. It is this belief that enables them to hold on to the fight against the billion-dollar petrochemical industry, even when criticized by their neighbors and (former) friends.

Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to show how it is possible that despite the staggering health implications of Cancer Alley's petrochemical industry, the victims of this form of structural violence remain largely invisible and ignored. Departing from Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence," I have analyzed these health implications as a "slow-moving disaster." In contrast to Nixon's "slow violence," however, I contest the invisibility of pollution, illness, and death in Cancer Alley, arguing that for those affected, they are part and parcel of their everyday life.

In the first chapter, I have traced the petrochemical industry's lineage to the establishment of slave plantations in 1721, showing how large plantation sites were gradually bought out by petrochemical corporations with the abolishment of slavery, continuing the violent exploitation of Black communities and their environments.

The second chapter portrayed the reality of living in Cancer Alley through the testimonies of local activists and residents. Apart from showing the severe health issues they face after having lived with toxicity for decades, it has shown the invasiveness of living daily petrochemical violence. Despite the fact that the manifestations of toxic pollution are visible and tangible, residents have long struggled to recognize what their bodies and environments were going through.

The third chapter examined why residents initially accept toxic pollution as normal despite the daily reminders of its dangers. It analyzed how governments and corporations engage in the politics of resignation to deny the existence of toxic pollution while producing a desire for the prosperity their industry promises to bring. Moreover, it demonstrated that most residents do notice that something is amiss but choose to ignore the ambiguous signs because of their powerlessness to bring about change.

The final chapter highlighted how a new wave of activism in Cancer Alley can counter feelings of resignation and powerlessness among community members by engaging in mattering practices that mobilize temporality. This activism moves away from earlier science-based activism, which produced facts about toxic pollution that evoked counter-science from corporations. In contrast, it exposes how the petrochemical industry is built on the structures of colonialism. It engages with the community's descendant identity to transform the fight into a collective effort to complete the work of their ancestors. In addition, they translate this strategy into the national heritage discourse to establish protection through the National Historic Preservation Act.

Taken together, these findings suggest that what sets slow violence apart is not so much its invisibility as its seeming inevitability. As necrocapitalism requires people to allow themselves to die, it engages in the politics of resignation to maintain feelings of hopelessness and uncertainty among those affected. While earlier studies proposed that activism should engage in the politics of spectacle to create urgency around slow-developing violence, I have demonstrated that opposition to slow violence through spectacular evidence of its effects on bodies is unable to generate social change, as it still allows for the production of counter-facts. I have shown how contemporary activists in Cancer Alley have shifted to an emphasis on the reality of structural violence. Where activism through spectacle evokes a counter-scientific response on the part of the petrochemical industry, in which the responsibility for adverse health effects is shifted to the victims, contemporary activism shifts the political debate from the register of facts to the register of values: what matters to whom? This is achieved through the strategic mobilization of local heritage and descendant identity.

Although this thesis has contributed to understanding environmental racism, slow violence, and activism in Cancer Alley, it has its limitations. Chief among these is the fact that

most of the ethnographic data that forms the basis of this thesis is based on interviews and participant observation among local activists. My interactions with community residents were limited to my encounters with them at council hearings, community hearings, and political canvassing. Future research could benefit from engaging with a broader range of community members in order to better understand how residents relate to both activism as well as the petrochemical industry. Additionally, while I heard many politicians and representatives of the petrochemical industry defend their position at local council meetings, I had little opportunity to speak to them personally.

Additionally, while many of the community residents were devoutly religious, and a responsibility to protect God's creation played an important role in motiving them to organize, a thorough analysis of the role of God in the movement is beyond the scope of this research. A possible future direction for research lies in the respective roles of residents' ancestors and God in their mobilization.

Acknowledgments

I am gratefully indebted to my interlocutors, who welcomed me into their homes and trusted me with their incredible life stories. Your strength and resilience will always be an inspiration to me, and I am thankful that I had the opportunity to learn from you. I also want to thank Demi, Julie, and Sauvaa, who offered me friendship and comfort during my stay in New Orleans. I want to thank my thesis supervisor, Marlene, for all the incredible insights that helped me further my research and thesis throughout the process. In addition, I want to thank my fellow Castorians for sharing this journey. To Niek, I can never thank you enough for the support you offered during the fieldwork, the return home, and the writing of this thesis. Lastly, I want to thank my parents for encouraging me to start a Master's program and supporting me throughout.

Bibliography

Ahmann, Chloe. 2018. "It's exhausting to create an event out of nothing": Slow Violence and the Manipulation of Time." *Cultural Anthropology* 33(1): 142-171. DOI: 10.14506/ca33.1.06.

Allen, Barbara. 2006. "Cradle of a Revolution? The Industrial Transformation of Louisiana's Lower Mississippi River." *Technology and Culture* 47(1): 112-119. *DOI: 10.1353/tech.2006.0051*

_____. 2003. *Uneasy Alchemy: Citizens and Experts in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor Disputes.* Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.

Banerjee, Subhabrata Bobby. 2008. "Necrocapitalism." *Organization Studies* 29(12): 1541-1563. DOI: 10.1177/0170840607096386.

Benjamin, Ruha. 2018. "Black Afterlives Matter: Cultivating Kinfulness as Reproductive Justice." In *Making Kin Not Populations,* edited by Adele E. Clarke and Donna Haraway, 41-65. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

Benson, Peter, and Stuart Kirsch. 2010. "Capitalism and the Politics of Resignation." *Cultural Anthropology* 51(4): 459-486. DOI: 10.1086/653091.

Berlant, Lauren. 2007. "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)." *Critical Inquiry* 33(4): 754-780. DOI: 10.1086/521568.

Bhattacharyya, Gargi. 2018. *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival.* London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Bullard, Robert D. 2000. *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality.* London and New York: Routledge.

_____. 1993. "The Threat of Environmental Racism." *Natural Resources & Environment* 7(3): 23-26, 55-56. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40923229.

Butler, Judith. 2016. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*. London and New York: Verso.

Castellón, Idna. 2021. "Cancer Alley and the Fight Against Environmental Racism." *Villanova Environmental Law Journal* 32(1): 15-43. https://digitalcommons.law.villanova.edu/elj/vol32/iss1/2.

Davies, Thom. 2022. "Slow violence and toxic geographies: 'Out of sight' to whom?" *Politics and Space* 40(2): 409-427. DOI: 10.1177/2399654419841063.

_____. 2018. "Toxic Space and Time: Slow Violence, Necropolitics, and Petrochemical Pollution." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 108(6): 1537-1553. DOI: 10.1080/24694452.2018.1470924.

De Souza, Marcelo Lopes. 2020. "'Sacrifice Zone': The environment – territory – place of disposable lives." *Community Development Journal* 56(2): 220-243.

Fiskio, Janet. 2021. *Climate Change, Literature, and Environmental Justice: Poetics of Dissent and Repair.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Friese, Zoe. 2023. "Fight or Flight: A Story of Survival and Justice in Cancer Alley." *Women Leading Change* 7(2): 3-18.

Goldstein, Donna Meryl, and Kira Hall. 2015. "Mass Hysteria in Le Roy New York: How brain experts materialized truth and outscienced environmental inquiry." *American Ethnologist* 42(4): 640-657. DOI: 10.1111/amet.12161

Hall, Gwendolyn Midlo. 1992. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Human Rights Watch. 2024. *"We're Dying Here": The Fight for Life in a Louisiana Fossil Fuel Sacrifice Zone."* New York: Human Rights Watch.

Kang, Simi. 2021. "They're Killing Us, and They Don't Care": Environmental Sacrifice and Resilience in Louisiana's Cancer Alley." *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 8(3): 98-125. DOI: 10.1353/res.2021.0001.

Latour, Bruno. 2004. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225-248. DIO: 0093–1896/04/3002–0020$10.00.

Lerner, Steve. 2005. *Diamond: A Struggle for Environmental Justice in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor.* Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.

Li, Tania Murray. 2010. "To Make Live or Let Die? Rural Dispossession and the Protection of Surplus Populations." *Antipode* 41(1): 66-93. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00717.x.

Lora-Wainwright, Anna. 2021. *Resigned Activism: Living with Pollution in Rural China*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.

Martin, Tom. n.d. "Sensory Ethnography." In *Ethnography Made Easy*, edited by Alia R. Tyner-Mullings, Mary Gata, and Ryan Couglan, Last Modified January 28, 2021, New York: CUNY Manifold. https://cuny.manifoldapp.org/read/untitled-fefc096b-ef1c-4e20-9b1f-cce4e33d7bae/section/1134227d-aac0-4175-bc18-6e966b15397e.

Mbembe, Achille. 2019. *Necropolitics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

_____. 2017. *Critique of Black Reason.* Durban and London: Duke University Press.

Montag, Warren. 2005. “Necro-economics: Adam Smith and death in the life of the universal.” *Radical Philosophy* 134(November/December 2005): 7-17.

Morris, Barry. 2003. “Anthropology and the State: The Ties That Bind.” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 47(1): 137-144. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23170079.

Murphy, Michelle. 2017. “Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations.” *Cultural Anthropology* 32(4): 494-503.

Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor.* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Pink, Sarah. 2015. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. London: Sage Publication.

Port, Mattijs van de, and Birgit Meyer. 2018. “Introduction: Heritage Dynamics Politics of Authentication, Aesthetics of Persuasion and the Cultural Production of the Real.” In *Sense and Essence: Heritage and the Cultural Production of the Real*, edited by Birgit Meyer and Mattijs van de Port. New York: Berghahn Books, 1-39.

Schweninger, Loren. 1997. *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915 (Blacks in the New World).* Urbana: Illinois Press.

Singer, Merrill. 2011. “Down Cancer Alley: The Lived Experience of Health and Environmental Suffering in Louisiana’s Chemical Corridor.” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 25(2): 141-163. DOI: 10.1111/j.1548-1387.2011.01154.x.

Spratt, Tanisha Jemma Rose. 2022. “Reconceptualizing Judith Butler’s theory of ‘grievability’ in relation to the UK’s ‘war on obesity’: Personal responsibility, biopolitics, and disposability.” *The Sociological Review* 70(3): 474-488. DOI: 10.1177/00380261221078063.

Terrell, Kimberly A. and Gianna St. Julien. 2023. “Discriminatory outcomes of industrial air permitting in Louisiana, United States.” *Environmental Challenges* 10(2023): 1-13. DOI: 10.1016/j.envc.2022.100672.

US General Services Administration, n.d. “Section 106: National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.” Modified June 6, 2023. https://www.gsa.gov/real-estate/historic-preservation/historic-preservation-policy-tools/legislation-policy-and-reports/section-106-of-the-national-historic-preservation-act.

Popular Summary

“Cancer Alley” is an area in Louisiana with over 200 chemical plants. These chemical plants spew out a large number of toxic fumes, causing cancer and other diseases in people who live near them. Yet, cries for help from the local community are often ignored. During my research, I spent six months with the people who live here, trying to find out how this is possible, especially since the health effects are so obvious. What I've found is that local government and the oil companies consider these hazards to be the cost of doing business, leaving many of the people living there feeling helpless in their situation. A group of local activists are fighting against this problem. Recently, these activists have started to win court cases against the oil companies based on the fact that the region is protected under the Civil Rights Act since the land where these oil refineries stand was once the site of slave plantations.