

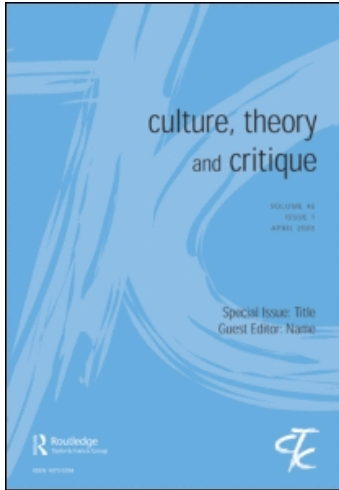
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The Sea and the Land: Biopower and Visuality from Slavery to Katrina

Nicholas Mirzoeff



Antony Gormley, MINDSCAPE, 2008, © the artist.

Abstract *This essay proposes that biopower needs to be understood as a relation between discourses of 'life' and the 'natural', engendered in the Atlantic world by slavery and its assemblages of life. Absolutism legislated the sea as a zone of both monarchical power and free circulation, a regime placed into crisis by the abolition of slavery. I interpret this crisis in terms of a secularised form of the Kongo cosmogram that defines the spaces of the living and the dead as being linked and divided by the sea. Immersion, and its crises of seeing and subjectivity, is the suspension of circulation that leaves the subject in the sea between regimes of power. In this essay, I examine two such immersive crises, first by means of the intersection between John Ruskin's criticism and Joseph Turner's marine painting; then and its present moment of 'intensification' via Spike Lee's film-document of Hurricane Katrina, When the Levees Broke (2006). Finally, I examine how the current crisis of neoliberal circulation has become interactive with the climate crisis in a set of exchanges between 'real' and 'metaphorical' floods, whether of water or debt.*

A society's 'threshold of modernity' has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. (Foucault 1978: 143)

Modernity is, in fact, a European phenomenon but one constituted in a dialectical relation with a non-European alterity that is its ultimate content. (Enrique Dussell 1995, quoted by Mignolo 2007: 453)

Between these two parts, the lands of the dead and the living, the water is both a passage and a great barrier. The world, in Kongo

thought, is like two mountains opposed at their bases and separated by the ocean. (André Fu-kiau, quoted in MacGaffey 1974: 417)

The best definition of a living thing is a straightforward dialectical statement: a living thing is something that can die. (Mitchell 2005: 52)

Three years after Hurricane Katrina flooded New Orleans in 2005, and the subsequent floods worldwide from England to Thailand, what have we learned? How can climate change be imagined and understood in terms of current cultural theory? What is the place of the sea in the human sciences? How can we interpret it as a material force and presence; as a place where power is marked and contested; and as a mythical or spiritual form of life that threatens humans and yet is also their vital support? In each of these dimensions, the events known as 'Katrina' marked the coming into visibility of a new crisis of what Foucault (1978) called biopower. It marked the 'intensification' (Nealon 2008) of a modality of biopower generated by the intersection of its central concerns with 'race' and sovereignty (Foucault 2003) and with the biopolitical articulation of the sea and the 'natural'.

For Foucault, the extension of power over biological life marked the emergence of modernity. Biopower thus 'brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life' (1978: 143). A new biopolitics would create institutions, disciplines and regulatory controls to embody and enable the production and management of life itself. Foucault noted that 'outside the Western world', it had not yet been possible to cross this 'threshold of modernity'. Implied here is a requirement for a supercession of the 'natural', discussed in terms of famine and disease, in order to pass over into the realm of biopower. Developing Foucault's argument that death is the point where life escapes and exceeds biopower, forcing it paradoxically to produce death to safeguard life, I will argue that any deployment of 'life' also exists in a relation to the 'natural'. Contrary to Foucault's suggestion that biopower was a modern innovation, I argue that the very need to produce and accumulate life was itself engendered in the Atlantic world by the assemblages of chattel slavery. Slavery's modernity formed a cosmography in which the space of the living was divided from that of the dead by the sea, a place of simultaneous life and birth. In the period of abolition and the Industrial Revolution, the sacred circulation of the cosmogram became the secular figuration of key aspects of modernism in a dialectic that interfaced with the understanding of life itself.

Enabled and sustained by Atlantic world slavery, sovereign marine power turned the oceans into divisions known as territorial waters, the high seas, rights of passage and the right to trade that shaped imperial experience and cost many lives in the process. Beginning with the reckoning of longitude in 1759, newly accurate charts, maps, navigation tables and depth soundings of the seascape were the rendition of imperial boundaries, expansions and claims that, as Marx and Engels highlighted in *The Communist Manifesto*, engendered a global 'Free Trade'. Marine biopower emerged in the nineteenth century as a limit and resource for settler colonies and the circulation

of industrial capital. It was the product of human interaction with the marine environment, the attempts to govern and profit from that exchange, and the resulting subjectivities. As an instrument of global modernity, marine biopower at once sustains circulation in the networks of power and indicates its periodic episodes of crisis. The present crisis of neoliberal circulation has now become interactive with the climate crisis to produce dizzying exchanges between 'real' and 'metaphorical' floods and sea levels.

This regime has created and sustained its own order of 'seeing', which I will call 'immersion'. Immersed subjectivity has no 'outside' but is constituted by the cosmographic circulation between nature and culture, the West and its Empire, and the land and the sea. This secular cosmogram also contains maps the crisis of circulation 'below the line', or 'under water' (a phrase used today to refer to a property whose mortgage exceeds its market value). My concern here is to sketch (in necessarily preliminary and abbreviated terms) a genealogy of this marine biopower, using tools derived from W. J. T. Mitchell's understanding of the imperial landscape, empire and objecthood, and picture theory. I pay special attention to its immersive crises of circulation, first via the intersection of John Ruskin's criticism with Joseph Turner's marine painting; then at its present moment of intensification by means of Spike Lee's four-hour film-document of Katrina *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem for New Orleans* (2006).

One effect of this biopolitical production has been to render the sea invisibly 'natural'. As one recent Turner exhibition catalog has claimed: 'In contrast to landscape, which centuries of human activity changes irrevocably, the sea remains the same whatever may happen upon it' (Hamilton 2003: 2). So much, then, for land reclamation, sea walls, canals, piers, wrecks, fishing, dredging, pollution, carbon-dioxide generated acidification of the water, and the possible changes to thermohaline circulation induced by climate change. Given the obviousness of such refutations, it becomes clear that there is a remarkable investment (in all senses, whether economic, psychoanalytic, or emotional) in the imagining of the marine as elemental, primordial and unchanging, a dialectical corollary to the biopolitical struggles over land.

Res nullius

In the early modern moment of European marine-based slavery and colonialism, which Foucault calls the 'classic' period, the sea was *res nullius*, a nothing thing, subject to conflicting and contradictory sovereign claims. The modern period produced a radical shift in this epistemology in which the marine became both the limit to imperial representation and something that was alive. Mitchell has highlighted the place of landscape as an imperial construction (1994b). So James Harrington defined empire in his 1656 treatise *Oceana* as dominion in lands 'and such ... as is the proportion or balance of dominion or property in land, such is the nature of the empire' (Harrington 1963 [1771]: 37).

The invisible support of this empire of lands was the legal, economic, geographic and military formation of the sea as both a space for imperialism (*mare liberum*, the free sea) and national sovereignty (*mare clausum*, the closed

sea) (Vieira 2003). These apparently contradictory designations of the sea were made contemporaneously in the early seventeenth century by Hugo Grotius and John Selden respectively. Both authors used the same evidence and even the same citations from Roman law to buttress their national politics. The classical order of representation, Foucault reminds us, was amply able to sustain such tensions under the containing force of the 'sovereign gaze' (Foucault 1970: 13).

In this ordering of the sea, it was transformed from a commons into the property of the Western state, personified in the (Roman) Emperor to whom later European monarchs liked to trace their legal and personal genealogies. Grotius, the Dutch theorist of open seas and free trade, inaugurated the concept of the sea as the road to empire in his 1609 treatise designed to demonstrate that the sea was open to all, especially the Dutch. In his view, sovereignty was defined by possession and the sea cannot be possessed. Further, water is one of those things that must be 'common to all mankind' (Grotius 1916 [1609]: 61–62). Being limitless and unable to be occupied, the sea was *res nullius*, a 'nothing thing'. A nothing cannot be alive, owned or divided. This concept was analogous to the legal precept that 'discovered' lands in the Americas and Australia were *terra nullius*, nothing land, available for occupation by armed Westerners. However, if the *res nullius* was potentially available to all as the common, it was not communal, let alone communist. That is to say, Grotius was not basing his argument on the traditional rights of the commons, which tended to be customary rather than codified, but on the limited notion of *res communis* found in Roman law. Thus, although fish were available to all to be caught, once one was so caught it belonged to the person who had entrapped it.

The common ownership of the sea and of water was thus more common for some than others. Indeed, Roman authorities argued that precisely because the sea was 'public', it was thus the domain of the state, that is to say, the Emperor (Vieira 2003: 374). So without contradiction, seventeenth-century sovereign power inaugurated a property claim to rights over water adjacent to its land boundaries, despite its assertion that the sea was nothing and common to all. The supplementary concept of territorial waters has led to a proliferation of complex legal disputes in our own time, ranging from disputes between states and the Federal government in the United States over the three-mile state-controlled zone of territorial waters and the now 200-mile zone of Federal domain, to the Maori claim to all Aotearoa New Zealand sea rights under the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi, and international disputes over whaling or fishing. These complications have arisen because the *mare liberum* of trade and voyaging was held to co-exist with what seventeenth-century British political theorist John Selden called *mare clausum* in his defense of fishing rights.

The question of sea access thus became one of rights, which became figured as property by sovereignty theorists. So quickly did such an extension of the reach of power become naturalised that Sir John Burroughs declared in 1651 'that Princes may have an exclusive property in the Soveraigntie [sic] of the severall parts of the sea, and in the passage, fishing and shores thereof, is so evidently true by way of fact, as no man that is not desperately impudent can deny it' (Allott 1992: 764). As Foucault put it, the emergence of this mari-

time law 'was an attempt to think of the world, or at least the sea, as a space of free competition, of free maritime circulation, and consequently as one of the necessary conditions for the organisation of a world market' (2008: 56). Despite the immense material challenges of ocean navigation, fishing and mapping in the period, the sea was rendered into representation as property, an essential stage in the imaging of the planet as an open domain for the circulation of capital.

'The multitudinous seas' (*Macbeth* II ii: 59)

Yet as Foucault noted in his example of piracy, this maritime jurisprudence of property was far from uncontested. Indeed, its central contradiction was the use of 'free' oceanic trade to transport people as unfree property, or slaves. This contradiction ultimately gave modern form to the sense of the sea as alive and capable of action. Just as Foucault made use of secularised forms of Catholic ritual to explain modern power, such as his depiction of therapy and psychoanalysis as transposed versions of confession, so I want to figure the exchange of life and death over the sea in terms of what Robert Farris Thompson has termed the Kongo 'cosmogram', a cosmos composed of the human and spirit worlds. This place of exchange is depicted as a circle transected by a cross, whose horizontal line represents the sea. Humans live and interact at the top of the cosmogram, while the spirit world is below, capable of interacting with the human world. All pass from one world to the next in a circular and recurrent movement from ascent to maturity via death to the other world and rebirth. The boundary between the two domains is marked by water, a place of both life and death. The cosmogram syncretically absorbed the Christian cross and can be found across the Atlantic world from Kongo to Haiti and the slave plantations of the Americas. Enslaved Africans were known to drown themselves in what Europeans believed to be a foolish attempt to return to Africa. Within the frame of the cosmogram it made sense: by passing under the water, one returned to the spirit world and then, in due course, would return to the life-world in Africa. For those taken into slavery, the sea was both alive and constituted by its depths as the burial ground of so many thousands gone.

The sea's life is manifested as anger in floods, typhoons, tsunamis and other events often fatal to human life. As Mitchell would be the first to point out, the flood is perhaps the oldest metaphor that humans have preserved in first Mesopotamian and then Jewish legend. Indeed, the ancient god Yahweh was a storm god, capable like the mysterious flood of manifesting anywhere and any time. To begin again after the first beginning is the time of the flood, a narrative that takes central place in Eurasian religions. The flood was intimately connected with the formation of 'race' in modern times. The difference between peoples, institutionalised as racism, was justified from the seventeenth century onwards by the legend of Ham. According to this outgrowth of the Bible story, Ham was punished for seeing his father Noah naked while the latter was drunk. This punishment drove him into Africa, where he and his descendants suffered the 'mark of Ham', or being 'black'. Whereas late sixteenth-century theories of 'blackness' held it to be the result of infection, by the period of the British and French slave codes (1660 and 1685 respectively), the myth of Ham was widely disseminated (Braude 1997).

The abolition of slavery in the British Empire created an immersive crisis in the sovereign form of marine biopower, a crisis by which modern biopower was able to establish a norm (Foucault 1978: 144). It can be measured in two reckonings with the oscillating forms of 'race', 'nature' and the sea made in 1840, and again in 1865, by two very different figures: the painter Joseph Turner and the Swiss geologist and formulator of the concept of the Ice Age, Louis Agassiz. In the influential view of the critic John Ruskin, Turner's depiction of the sea opened it up to representation for the first time. In his *Modern Painters*, Ruskin dismissed all artistic images of the sea prior to Turner as 'so execrable, so beyond all expression and explanation bad' (1903 [1843]: 498). Turner represented a new modern figuration of the sea that encapsulated the tension between the sea as property and the fury of the multitude against that ownership, visualised as and in the sea itself, newly vested with depth. According to Ruskin, in Turner's seascapes: 'there are indicated a fitfulness and fury in the tossing of the individual lines, which give to the whole sea a wild, unwearied, reckless incoherency, like that of an enraged multitude, whose masses act together in phrensy, while not one individual feels as another' (Ruskin 1903 [1843]: 564). These are complex lines, bringing together, in the midst of the Chartist agitation of the 1840s, allusions to what Edmund Burke had famously called the 'swinish multitude' with the nineteenth-century nosology of madness.

Indeed, the watercolour that inspired them, 'Laugharne Castle' c.1831 (Columbus Museum of Art, OH), depicted a contest between the traditional rights of the commons and assertive modern state power. Ruskin's commentary makes it clear that the scene was not simply picturesque. It shows people wrecking on the Pembrokeshire coast (modern Carmarthenshire), that is to say, gathering goods and objects washed up from a shipwreck. This long-standing practice was criminalised in the early eighteenth century and made subject to the death penalty (Hay 1975), so the painting certainly shows the frenzy of the multitude insofar as it records a series of capital offences. From the popular point of view, by contrast, wrecking was a form of communal activity and, like the poaching celebrated by Michel de Certeau (1984), widely sanctioned as entirely legitimate. The wreckers gather what they can in the shadow of a castle, representing the traditional authority under which wrecking had been permitted, itself now bypassed by the centralising forces of state power. This medieval castle had been captured and laid to waste by the Parliamentary armies during the English Revolution, so by Turner's time it had long been a picturesque ruin.

Turner made the sea into a fulminating mass that could be taken to mourn the decline of traditional England, to celebrate popular resistance or to present them as in tension. His work depicts the ruin of aristocracy and the wreck of commercial capitalism with the multitude literally the last people standing. The sea appears organic, alive, and dramatically divided above some underwater obstruction – perhaps part of the ship – that I always took to be poetic licence until I saw exactly such effects in the floodwaters of New Orleans after Katrina. The spectator is caught, suspended in the sea, perhaps on a breaking wave, or held above it on a piece of wreckage, a tremulous viewpoint on the frenzy in front of us. This 'modern painter' has taken the Atlantic world sense of the sea as a place between life and death, the locus of circulation, and visualised it.

In modern scholarship, we have been offered a choice between art and objecthood that presents a dichotomy between absorption (good) and theatricality (bad), a choice ‘forged in the colonial encounter’ (Mitchell 2005: 147). While Turner’s figures act as if unobserved, the entire work is presented from the marine viewpoint that necessarily implies a spectator. That spectator is not quite the ‘disinterested’ viewer imagined in theories of the sublime that so often took the shipwreck as an example, who was presumed to be able to appreciate the terrible beauty of the scene because there is no danger to him or her. Turner’s intent, by contrast, was to immerse the spectator. That immersion is at once a literal place of viewing from amongst the waves, a feeling of being captivated by the power of the scene and a metaphorical deployment of a space of transition between regimes of power. In short, being immersed was to be in crisis.

The immersive viewpoint was perhaps most dramatically represented in Turner’s *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On* (1840), a painting that makes explicit his coming to terms with the legacy of slavery (Gilroy 1993: 13–14; Baucom 2005: 265–96). It depicted the notorious voyage of the slave ship *Zong* in 1781, whose captain ordered 132 Africans to be thrown overboard during a storm, thereby at once lightening the ship and enabling its owners to file an insurance claim for lost ‘cargo’ (Figure 1). Turner shows a moment just after the weighted-down prisoners have been



Figure 1. Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), *Slave Ship: (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)* 1840. Oil on canvas. 90.8 × 122.6 cm. Courtesy: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Henry Lillie Pierce Fund. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

thrown into the sea and just before they finally sank. Chains, hands, arms and one leg are visible in wake of the ship, leading to the bottom right corner. In his commentary, Ian Baucom cites Ruskin to support his contention that there was no point of identification with these bodies: 'we are not allowed to tumble into it, and gasp for breath as we go down' (Ruskin 1903 [1843]: 539; Baucom 2005: 292).

This border policing argues that there is no spectatorial position within the painting, rendering it properly absorptive and hence modernist, but it misrepresents Ruskin to do so. Baucom's powerful quotation from Ruskin actually referred to Turner's depiction of calm water and the necessity of depicting a surface composed of reflections. In stormy water, according to Ruskin, Turner never showed the sea as if from the shore but as if twenty or thirty yards out. Here 'the sensation of power is also trebled ... the whole action is different; it is not a passive wave ... but a sweeping exertion of tremendous and living strength' (Ruskin 1903 [1843]: 562–64). The storm itself is alive, it has power. By visualising this biopower from the place of immersion, Turner at once lays imperial claim to it and cannot but indicate its moment of crisis.

In *Slavers*, the spectator is far out to sea, at one of several potential viewpoints, a trebled sensation of biopower. One can look from the point of view of those about to drown, not yet dead, who can still see through the water. Second, there is the viewpoint of the sea creatures, both the fish and the curious creature on the far right, whose look is marked by Turner as part of his visualised drama. Critics have speculated as to whether this animal is the Typhon of the title, the fearsome deity who took on Zeus himself and was father to the storm winds, Cerberus, the Sphinx and other such anxiety-provoking figures. Next, there is the place marked by the pillar of light, the place of Benjamin's angel of history. This light cannot be the sun unless it represents the passing of divine time, which would be in dialectical contradiction with the instant of human time that is seen in the water.

History, the commodification of people, the actuarial rendering of that property, and doubled visualities resonate across this painting. The enslaved body was the 'primitive' form of biopower in the sense of Marx's concept of the primitive accumulation that preceded the formation of capital. In the understanding of that history formed from the storms of the middle passage, those bodies are always on the point of drowning, not yet gone, not yet forgotten. To be enslaved was to be in 'social death', a place outside the social and the protections of the law. Immersed in the sea, adrift in the seas of the multitude, these people are no longer slaves and not yet the object of an insurance claim. Turner's suspension of time extends the restoration of personhood, as claimed by those enslaved who drowned themselves, and makes it dialectical in Benjamin's sense: this transitional moment jumps out of the history in which slavery has already been abolished into a present in which the body is sustained between states of life by the sea.

In a counterpoint to Turner's vision of immersion, the Swiss geologist Louis Agassiz came to fame in 1843 by challenging the then still current thesis of the Flood in deriving evidence for what he called the Ice Age from the glaciers of the Alps. His thesis was based on observation of so-called 'erratic boulders', pieces of rock bearing evidence of glacial 'polishing' and striation

that had been left behind when the ice retreated. Whereas Neptunism held these boulders to have been swept down by the currents of the Flood and other inundations, Agassiz showed that water could not have shaped the boulders as he saw them nor distributed them. The rocks were mere objects but the principle of creativity – divine and human – was defended by means of the inspired observation.

At the same time, his thesis depended on approaching 'nature from a physiological viewpoint', leading him to assert the rise and fall of modes of life that were not descended from each other (Agassiz 1967: lxvii–lxviii). Agassiz denied that creatures now living were directly descended from very similar or even identical species preserved in the fossil record, preferring to argue instead for a series of cataclysmic reformations of life, which he illustrated with a curious line drawing. In order to preserve life as the domain of the divine, Agassiz theorised its repeated extinction and recreation in identical form, a theoretical exemplar of the biopolitical need to kill to save life. The implementation of this disjunctive mode of biopolitics in geology entailed his subsequent belief in the radical separation of humans into distinct species.

Installed at Harvard, he commissioned a now notorious series of photographs of enslaved Africans on Carolina plantations that were intended to visualise this essential racial difference (Wallis 1995). When that effort failed, he set off for the Amazonian rain forest in 1865 to photograph the indigenous peoples for evidence of innate difference. In a scene worthy of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1981), Agassiz's assistant Walter Hunnewell took photographs of local 'Indians and Negroes' in a rickety colonial pile in the legendary Amazon city of Manaus, under the cool gaze of William James, the philosopher-to-be, while Agassiz lectured that, despite the necessity of emancipation, the United States should 'respect the laws of nature, and let all our dealings with the black man tend to preserve, as far as possible, the distinctness of his national characteristics, and the integrity of our own' (Agassiz and Agassiz 1889: 293 n).

Agassiz was nonetheless able to make an important development in the understanding of the North American ice sheet by using his Alpine methods of observation. Agassiz's implementation of a biopolitical approach to geology was in equal measure as successful as his racialising efforts were failures because they were what he would have understood as uniformitarian responses of differing forms of life to the same conditions: namely, both climate and humans would periodically 'die' and then reincarnate in similar or identical form. Immersion, mingling, crossing, commonality, equality, call it what you will: death was preferable.

By 1865, some former proponents of immersion had come to similar conclusions. John Ruskin sat with Thomas Carlyle on a committee successfully campaigning on behalf of Governor Eyre of Jamaica, whose repression of the Morant Bay rebellion had cost thousands of lives. Eyre explained that 'the Negroes are most excitable and impulsive, and any seditious or rebellious action was sure to be taken up and extended'. His belief that colonial authority could not 'deal' with Jamaicans in the way that one might treat 'the peasantry of a European country' was reinforced by the scientist Joseph Hooker, for whom it was self-evident that 'we do not hold an Englishman and a Jamaican negro to be convertible terms' (Holt 1992: 305–06). Abolitionism

had posed an enslaved man asking: 'Am I not a man and a brother?' By 1865, the answer was 'no'. It was as if the immersive viewpoint had been abandoned for the quarterdeck of the *Zong*, the final possible viewpoint in Turner's *Slavers*. It was from such a place that Conrad's Lord Jim drew his course for the ill-fated *Patna* to Aden as a straight line across the chart that nonetheless led directly to the ship's mysterious collision.

Katrina time

A storm, death by drowning, looting, violence, political debate, government commissions and the ultimate setting aside of radical proposals for change: Hurricane Katrina again produced a violent clash of past, present and possible futures, a symptom of a new crisis in marine biopower (Figure 2). In Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke*, slavery is recalled over and again by African American participants such as city resident Gina Montana who described the experience of being forcibly bused out of town to an unknown destination as awakening 'an ancient memory' of being enslaved. Fred Johnson, an organiser for The Black Men of Labor, recalled a discussion with one of his friends in which they agreed that Katrina was the result of the dissatisfaction of the spirits of those Africans who died in the Middle Passage with the conditions experienced by their descendants in New Orleans.

Why the *simbi* water spirits destroyed the African American neighborhoods and not those of the descendants of slave owners is unknowable but the point is that slavery and its legacies remain a storm within Atlantic world nations and critical studies alike. Indeed, in the last act of Lee's film, Hurricane Katrina was given a second-line jazz funeral to put the spirit of the storm to ground. The appalling spectacle of its aftermath nonetheless made it clear that some human lives are more highly prized than others and that the operative distinction remains racialised. Once again, the context is that of a radical transformation of capital. If Turner's immersive vision came at a time when industrial capitalism was gathering strength, intensifying the sea's instrumentality into a means of global circulation, Katrina struck when capital had become so hegemonic that it was claiming to be nature. That is to say, capital-



Figure 2. From Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem For New Orleans in Four Acts* (2006, HBO Films).

ism exercised such a powerful hegemony that it created the illusion that it was natural to the extent that humans could only seek to mitigate its effects, as they had with the storms and tempests of the past.

Even the current financial crash is often represented as a mystical outpouring of what is termed a 'sea' of debt. As one bemused investor put it: 'We are so dislodged from fundamentals, what we're left to is just the vagaries of the oceans' (*New York Times* 2008, B4). In East Asia, the crisis is known as the 'economic tsunami,' while, economist Joseph Stiglitz saw a parallel with Katrina: 'A flood of liquidity combined with the failed levees of regulation proved disastrous' (2009). The sea here is a force of capital, flowing wildly as debt, requiring regulation from properly built levees to avoid disastrous inundation by the very force that gives the network life.

Just so in New Orleans; outsourced emergency relief was supposed to manage the immediate crisis that would then be resolved by the 'natural' action of the market. The ruins of African-American New Orleans expose this failure of the substitution of globalised capital for nature. The 'life' of the market, guided by Smith's famous invisible hand, does not sustain other life but seeks only, as Mitchell might put it, to clone itself into ever expanding surplus value. When Condoleezza Rice went shopping for shoes during the Katrina crisis she was enacting the police theory of capital as articulated by Jacques Rancière: 'The police say, there is nothing to see, nothing happening, nothing to be done, but to keep moving, circulating; they say that the space of circulation is nothing but the space of circulation' (2004 : 176–77).

Introducing *Landscape and Power*, Mitchell pointed out that the then new landscape studies had cinema as its 'subtext', in its understanding of landscape as a 'dynamic medium' (1994a: 2). So he will not have been surprised that the most striking visual response to Katrina has come from Spike Lee. *When the Levees Broke* was notable for winning three Emmys and also being included in the 2008 Whitney Biennial for the best contemporary art. It immersed the viewer in Katrina, as the critic David Denby recognised: 'anyone hoping to reclaim Katrina emotionally – to experience what the city went through in all its phases of loss, anger, and contempt – needs to see Lee's movie' (2006). This immersion was part of its visual style as well as its content. The original film was divided into four acts, with a fifth added to the DVD release in 2007. The film begins with a long visual sequence of the effects of Katrina, unaccompanied by voice commentary or interviews, four minutes in time that take far longer in the mind.

Lee took montage, one of the oldest tools in the modernist film vocabulary, and gave it a striking new lease of life by refusing to direct that montage to supply answers. He allows the combination of images, words and music to form their own visuality, one that places the watcher in the midst of the conflicted interpretation of events. The film comprises a series of amateur and professional video and photographic images of the events of August and early September 2005, linked by retrospective interviews with those who experienced the storm. In the absence of a narrative voice and with the interviews being conducted in a direct style to camera, the viewer is expected to do a great deal of visual and critical work. That is to say, as we watch, we are immersed in Katrina, not in a single image but over an extended span of real and represented time. For that reason, together with the indelible impact of so

much of what is seen and said, the four-hour long piece seems to unfold at once with great speed and with great deliberation.

It is certainly, as Mitchell saw in relation to *Do The Right Thing*, public art of the highest order. It alerts us to the intensification of biopower, our intensified immersion in both the metaphorical ocean of debt that has flooded all solvency and the literally transformed warming and rising seas. In this intensified immersive environment, simple circulation (whether of images, capital or people) ceases to be a possibility and we are again confronted with the 'profound invisibility of what one sees' at a moment of epistemic transformation (Foucault 1970: 16).

One dramatic segment in Lee's film discusses one of the most controversial questions that circulated after Katrina: were the levees blown? In rapid sequence, Lee shows six African American residents indicating that they heard what they described as an explosion. Two people say there was no explosion. Then older people recall the events surrounding Hurricane Betsy in 1965 and testify to the widespread belief that the levees were blown up then to protect white residential neighborhoods. The proverbial expert explains how a levee breaking under pressure will necessarily sound like an explosion. Before one has time to absorb this, archive film of the levees actually being blown up during the 1927 flood is shown (Figure 3), with a white engineer supervising a black labor force.

John Barry, a white historian, declares that this detonation was more about class than race because it affected St Bernard Parish, where the inhabitants were mostly white. But the archive footage of the refugees shown immediately afterwards depicts far more visibly African American people than anyone else (Figure 4). In these dense sequences, it became possible to see how and why popular discourse about Katrina emerged in New Orleans. People believed that the levees were blown up deliberately because they knew that they had been in the past and that the geography of New Orleans



Figure 3. Blowing the Poydras levee in 1927. From Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke*.



Figure 4. Displaced persons from the 1927 levee breach. From Spike Lee, *When the Levees Broke*.

inescapably indicated class and race in terms of relative height to sea level. While expert opinion shows that the levees were not deliberately destroyed in 2005, the entire film makes it clear that to all intents and purposes they might as well have been.

Indeed, the city has now become a smaller, majority white town that played its part in returning a Republican governor of Louisiana in the 2006 elections, replacing the Democrat Kathleen Blanco. The ruin of New Orleans has further been downgraded from being a place that handled 20% of all exports and imports to the United States (Brinkley 2006: 125) to a much smaller operation, dominated by coffee imports. The major crude oil and petrochemical business formerly handled in New Orleans has been transferred to the Port of South Louisiana, further up the Mississippi River, which serves global multinational companies like Archer Daniels Midland (agribusiness and GMO giant), Dupont (chemicals) and Marathon Petroleum (one of the world's largest oil refiners).

The advantage of the Port of South Louisiana, as its website announces, is that 'Louisiana is a right-to-work state, with minimal union activity within the River Region' (Port 2006). By contrast, New Orleans has been served for decades by the International Longshoremen's Union Local ILA 3000, whose main business now is managing redundancies for its members (ILA). A Democratic, unionised African-American industrial city has been transformed into a white, Republican service industry, tourist destination. Katrina's destructive biopower enacted the neo-liberal transformation that politics had not been able to perform, even as it disrupted circulation.

The full intensity of this immersion can be seen in the documentary *Trouble the Water* (2008), centered on the amateur camcorder footage taken by Kimberly Rivers Roberts of her family as they remained in the Lower Ninth Ward during the storm, and thereafter in their odyssey to Memphis, and final return to the city. Rivers was shooting video for the first time and her blurry,

somewhat washed-out images contrast strongly with the saturated colour of the television images that counterpoint her work in the early stages of the film, directed by Tia Lessin and Carl Deal and nominated for a 2009 Academy Award for Best Documentary. It is noticeable that in the footage from before the storm the television was on throughout and everyone in the neighborhood was aware of the threat but lacked the means (or what Rivers calls the 'luxury') to evacuate.

The family lived a few blocks from the Industrial Canal and they were soon at risk of flooding when Katrina hit. We see the water reaching the second-storey window as they climb up into the attic with some friends. With its simple wood frame construction, constricted space and poor light, that attic filled with African American people could not help but recall the middle passage to the film's viewers. Remarkably, there was no panic at the scene. Scott Roberts capably engineered the removal of all those in the attic to a nearby two-storey house, using some barrels as floats. Civil society may have abandoned these people but they were still capable of organising their own social structure. If the attic was a re-memory of slavery, and the immersive descent into the water recalled the desperate leaps of those determined not to be enslaved and the victims of the *Zong* alike, this was a repetition with a difference. While bare life was at stake, it was social life that sustained these people and was prior to it.

A reconstruction then shows how local survivors moved as a group to a nearby four-storey US Naval Reserve building for shelter, only to be greeted by an estimated twenty armed troops, who drove them away. Far from being an urban myth, as the then Lieutenant-Governor of Louisiana Mitch Landrieu termed such accounts in *When the Levees Broke*, President Bush later awarded commendations for bravery to the guards for their actions. The Rivers Roberts family was able to evacuate using a truck that presumably was commandeered by them for the purpose. For all the furore about property rights that we have heard, the film clarifies that such social organisation, enabled by prayer and empowerment strategies, must have kept the death toll from the hurricane much lower than it might have been.

Looking again at Lee's film, I noticed that CNN covered Katrina under the rubric 'State of Emergency'. It is the definition of such a moment that 'necessity has no law'. If that dictum of Roman law applies to establishing martial law, it also applies to people taking trucks to survive or chain saws to rescue those in need. At the same time, those left behind in New Orleans did not feel that the moral or criminal law had been suspended, as manifested by the care shown for the elderly, the disabled and even the dead. If neither Lee nor Rivers made significant formal innovations in their films, they restored to visibility the 'subjugated knowledges' (Foucault 2003: 8) of Katrina, making a genealogy of its intensified immersion possible.

As a metonym for the entire crisis, one could look at the water itself. In *Trouble the Water*, it is noticeable during the storm scenes that the water is clear and clean. But in *When the Levees Broke*, the rescue sequences show a brown-black water that was frequently described as toxic. Mixed with the assumption that some sewage had leaked into the water was the ancient prejudice against the poor and the ethnically different that they are dirty, which,

in some unexpressed and inchoate way, was seen to be responsible for the water's condition.

In fact, the major cause of dirt and toxicity alike was crude oil. The government Minerals Management Service report found more than 100 accidents leading to a total of 743,400 gallons of oil spilled throughout the Gulf region during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. To put that in perspective, 100,000 gallons is classified as a 'major spill' and this quantity amounts to half that of the Exxon Valdez disaster. Crude oil is toxic and burns the skin. The spills resulted from the failure of the oil companies to withdraw their tankers efficiently despite the long-range forecasting of the storm. Nonetheless, it was the impoverished mostly African-American urban population who were castigated for failing to evacuate, not the all but invisible refining companies.

The conjunction of economic and climate disaster generates new questions. Is the era of circulation at an end? Can the 'flows' of globalisation be resumed? Throughout the era of marine biopower, capital has sought to 'create the world after its own image' as Marx and Engels famously put it. That image is now in contradiction with itself. Debt, debt everywhere, nor any liquidity to drink, one might say. The restoration of capital's circulation seems to depend on a resumption of the very industrial production and consumption that will continue to accelerate climate change. Spike Lee's film is in its final act a call for a form of green capitalism, seeking to revive New Orleans by a combination of wetlands restoration and the construction of '100 year' levees, meaning levees capable of withstanding a once-in-a-hundred-years event such as a Category 5 hurricane.

Even in 2006, Lee's film expressed doubt as to whether American capitalism, so devoted to the accumulation of profit by finance capital, was any longer capable of such modernist works, doubts that must be much stronger now, whether in engineering or finance. Nonetheless, this solution is effectively that called for by President Obama's February 2009 stimulus. Against that, *Trouble The Water* presents a small-business model in which Kimberley Rivers Roberts is trying to make a career as a musician, helped by her title song for the film making the long list for Oscar nomination in 2009, while her husband learns the contracting and building trade. Perhaps the web-based Born Hustler Records can offer more success than the credit-starved construction industry. Yet the immersive digital world is only as long-lived as the energy that powers its networks and as effective as its circulation allows. All these strategies seem inadequate to the needs of the moment. The task of the historical materialist is, then, to imagine a circulation (of images, goods, energy, ideas) that engenders sustainability not permanent expansion. Put more simply, look at the flood, see its depths and listen to what it has to say.

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