



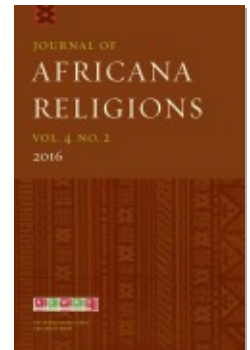
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Conjuring Pasts and Ethnographic Presents in Zora Neale Hurston's Modernity

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Abstract

Although history suggests that conjure is a practice hidden from plain view, Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographies unearthed the pervasive and varied ways Black people throughout the diaspora—and Black women especially—used conjure to create a new reality or to disrupt the existing one. In this essay, we revisit Hurston's ethnographic and folkloric study *Mules and Men* to consider the question: What does it mean for Black women in America to conjure in modernity? We use ethnographic examinations of two contemporary locales—one of Florida's fantasy corridors and the South Carolina lowcountry—to unearth how contemporary Black women draw from the conjure tradition Hurston documented eighty years ago. When viewed through Hurston's ethnographic history, contemporary Black women's richly layered conjure practices disrupt the widely destructive effects of modernity.

Keywords: conjure, modernity, ethnography, Black women's spirituality

The first chapter of *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston's 1935 ethnography of the American South, begins with a folktale about John, who drowned when waters from a long torrential downpour flooded his home in Johnstown, Florida.¹ When John reached heaven, he cornered everyone he saw behind the pearly gates, including Saint Peter, to tell them about what he had witnessed on earth, asking, "Y'all want to hear 'bout de big flood Ah was in down on earth?" Most of those he encountered listened to his tale except one man who responded tersely to his question, "Shucks! You ain't seen no water!" After John told Peter about this rude man, Peter informed him that it was Noah, and "You can't tell [Noah] nothin' 'bout no flood!"²

The folktale hilariously positions John's suffering as not as severe as Noah's, but also revisits consistent themes in Hurston's ethnographic studies of the African diaspora. Hurston traveled throughout the global South—including Haiti, Jamaica, and the southern United States—where she collected thousands of stories about the myriad experiences framing Black life. The folktales she gathered were more than just mere lore. Rather, they captured the framing devices, the survival strategies, and the oral traditions Blacks deployed to make sense of life's joys, sorrows, pains, pleasures, hopes, dreams, beliefs, and skepticisms.³ John's story in *Mules* was part of a larger history of Black diasporic wordplay.

John's tale was also part of a particular narrative about floods in the southern United States, such as the 1927 Mississippi River Flood and the 1928 Florida Okeechobee Hurricane, which is widely thought to have inspired the end of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston's acclaimed 1937 novel.⁴ Hurston's accounts in *Mules* and *Their Eyes* unveil the racially stratified consequences of environmental inequality, as water metaphorically washes Black residents away while preparing ground for something new. Finally, John's story offers another metaphysical frame for interpreting the Bible. Unlike eighteenth-century stories about Blacks as the cursed descendants of Noah's son, Ham, John is aligned with Noah as witness to the extraordinary power of God's hand in nature.⁵

Mules's archive of African-derived interpretive practices reveals environmental inequities, metaphysically reframes biblical scripture, and demonstrates the ability of folk customs to alter textual meaning. As literary critic Marjorie Pryse argues in her introduction to *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, *Mules* functions as conjure in the long tradition of Black women's writings.⁶ In its initial stages, Black women's literature assumed the authority of Christianity, even as this authority privileged the "patriarchal genealogy by which the Bible transmits authority (Father to Son to Puritan minister to male head of the household)."⁷ Hurston's oeuvre, which began from her ethnographies of the global South, launched a "second beginning" of Black women's fiction by shifting the authorial source from Christianity to the tradition of conjuring. By recording the stories of her community as presented in *Mules*, Hurston dissolved "the mystique of connection between literary authority and patriarchal power."⁸ Through the tradition of conjure Hurston recovers, *Their Eyes* becomes a mythology—an origin story that explains the emergence of an autonomous self and its creation of a world.⁹ Similarly, *Mules* becomes another way for envisioning Black spiritual and religious life anew.

The conjure of folktales in Hurston's writings not only displaces Christianity's hold on literary authority in Black women's writings, as Pryse argues, but Christianity's entire metaphysic, or what we call a silent, structuring narrative of reality derived from Anglo Protestantism's colonization of the Atlantic world. Hurston's writings reveal that, like John in the folktale from *Mules* and Janie, the protagonist in *Their Eyes*, Black people in America are forced to deploy conjuring as a metaphysical alternative to the destructive realities of European modernity—realities that attempt to wash away Black life.

The idea of conjure as suggested by Hurston—and echoed in the writings of Theophus Smith, Tracey Hucks, and Yvonne Chireau—confirms that Black women's religious creativities are always disrupting ideas of Christian normativity.¹⁰ A concealed mobilization of forces that alter relationships to material being, conjure sits within, rides alongside, and selectively inserts itself into Christian rituals and traditions, as Hurston writes, “with all the intensity of a suppressed religion.”¹¹ In this sense, conjure resists modernity—a spirit that, as Max Weber demonstrated, derives from forgotten practices of Christianity, imbues material reality with ultimate significance, and signifies being through the language of economic rationality. Modernity's dark side is its impulse for sacrificing Black people, whether by way of the colonization of Black occupied lands or the exploitation of Black bodies. Hurston's fiction and ethnographic writing illustrate how conjure resists those forces by reimagining twentieth-century American modernity as a project of Christian metaphysics that sacrifices Blacks for capital's resurrection of a new earth and deploys consumption to blunt ethical postures against the force and scope of Black suffering.

Hurston's ethnographies unearthed the numerous and varied ways Blacks in America—and Black women especially—used conjure as a means of creating a new reality or disrupting the existing one. Her writings, in fact, reflect how the transmission of ancient power is increasingly challenged by capitalist culture, as Pryse argues. Conjure practices are evident throughout the African diaspora, but in this essay we explore how our ethnographic work on Black religion in the American South has been influenced by the following question: What does it mean for Black women to conjure in modernity? Through our ethnographies of two contemporary locales—one of Florida's fantasy corridors and the South Carolina lowcountry—we unearth how Black women continue to access and deploy the very ancient powers that Hurston documented eighty years ago.¹² We contend that, within these geographical spaces, Black women's conjuring pasts meet conjuring presents, as conjure is drawn upon to transcend the limits of modernity.

Florida's Fantasy Corridor

Beyond their influence on Black women's literary history, Hurston's writings, which were resurrected during the 1970s by Alice Walker's recovery of her authorial significance, also conjured the preservation of Eatonville, Hurston's homestead located a mere six miles from "the magical world of Disney."¹³ In the late 1980s, the Orange County Commission, the legislative body that governs Eatonville, authorized the widening of the two-lane highway that runs through the small community. At the time, infrastructural change was not new to Eatonville. During the 1950s, the construction of Interstate 4, the huge highway that facilitates automobile travel to and from Disney World, led to the elimination of Black-owned properties in Eatonville. N. Y. Nathiri claims that I-4 "took 7.5 acres of the ten acres [her family] owned."¹⁴ I-4 would widen highways within Eatonville, as the Orange County Commission proposed, would create a permanent boundary beyond which the community could not expand, and would deal a tremendous blow to Eatonville by crippling its rich institutions of faith and education, such as St. Lawrence African Methodist Episcopal Church, Macedonia Baptist Church, and the Hungerford School.¹⁵ The new, expanded highway not only would have infringed on the properties of these storied institutions but also would have increased traffic flow through the small town, subjecting residents to increased carbon emissions and a greater possibility of automobile injury.

Nathiri, Alice Walker, and members of the Eatonville community were able to preserve the town by publicizing Hurston's historic significance. Although Eatonville does not have widened highways, it has become another Orlando-area tourist attraction just beyond the world of Disney. In a way that is similar to Hurston's forays into the Caribbean to draw connections between the Black folk cultures in the region, her hometown has become connected to what John Lowe calls a burgeoning "heritage" tourist industry in the global South.¹⁶

Other small Black communities similar to Eatonville—like Tallevast, Florida, which is located less than two hundred miles from Hurston's hometown—have not produced a famous author to justify their preservation. Over the past thirty years, Tallevast has been threatened by the encroachment of the burgeoning tourist industry. The Manatee County Board of Commissioners recently approved the erection of a depot where public buses will be fueled and maintained. The site for the depot was strategically selected because of its location in the commercial geography of Manatee and Sarasota Counties. The Sarasota-Bradenton Airport is located just west of the depot, and last year a mammoth luxury shopping center was built near Interstate 75, less than ten miles from Tallevast.

The erection of a bus depot is only the most recent environmental threat to Tallevast. During the 1980s, Mrs. Laura Ward and Mrs. Wanda Washington founded the faith-based group FOCUS—an acronym for “Family-Oriented Community United Strong”—to protect their community. About a decade ago, Mrs. Ward approached a man drilling on her property at the edge of Tallevast Road. Through her own investigations, she learned that the nearby American Beryllium facility, which produced beryllium components for the defense industry and space program, had contaminated the community’s groundwater. Lockheed Martin, the defense contractor, had discovered the contamination but was not required by law to inform residents of Tallevast.¹⁷ In 2008, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry found that residents who drank the polluted groundwater consistently since the late 1960s were likely to develop kidney cancer, liver cancer, lymphoma, and leukemia.¹⁸

In the wake of the contamination and its destructive health effects, Florida legislators passed a bill—called the Tallevast Bill, in fact—deeming it illegal for a company or the state to withhold information about contamination from those immediately affected by it.¹⁹ Legal remedies have followed in Tallevast too, including an “undisclosed” monetary settlement for damages incurred from the contamination and a cleanup plan slated to take at least forty years to complete.²⁰ Mrs. Ward and Mrs. Washington continue to conjure power against the conditions that entomb them in postindustrial progress—from commerce parks to entertainment to air transportation.

Since the monetary settlement was dispersed and the cleanup plan began, some residents of the community often say among themselves, “FOCUS does not communicate with us. . . . We do not know what they are up to,” suggesting that Mrs. Ward and Mrs. Washington work under a secrecy reminiscent of conjure. But a closer look reveals that they have carefully conjured aid to protect their community, constantly consulting with a number of entities, including law firms, land developers, politicians—and scholars—to gather information for resisting the coming elimination of Tallevast. Once on the underside of the industrial production necessary for America’s war economy, Tallevast is now being cleared for new space in Florida’s fantasy corridor, as the proposed cleanup plan will prepare Tallevast for absorption into the thriving tourist and commercial industry. As the cleansing of the contaminated groundwater prepares Tallevast for new commercial space, and the bus depot becomes a land dock for launching easily accessible vehicles throughout an emerging passageway of consumption, it invokes the flood chronicled by Hurston in *Mules*. However, this contemporary manifestation of the flood does not elicit the cynical humor of the community, like John’s story, but unyielding, strategic activism. Through their conjuring, Mrs. Ward and Mrs. Washington render

sacred Black homes, Black churches, and Black bodies in the face of constant external assaults that threaten to sacrifice them for progress.

The South Carolina Lowcountry

Tourism has transformed Florida in extraordinary ways, and, as Eatonville and Tallevast exemplify, one need not turn geographically far from Hurston's homestead to see tourism's impact and other ways tourism elicits conjure. The Gullah/Geechee communities of the coastal lowlands of South Carolina and Georgia have also been affected by heritage tourism, marked by "Gullah Tours," the display of sweetgrass baskets, and an entire tourist economy that celebrates histories of the "Old South." In South Carolina in particular, the lines between cultural celebration and cultural commodification are blurred. The Black women who sell their sweetgrass baskets on the streets surrounding the City Market—a tourist haven—wrestle with expectations from tourists who demand they create something special and immediate from a craft that is unmistakably painstaking and notoriously slow. These women further grapple with diminishing supply, as the sweetgrass is being destroyed by the (im)plantation of five-star resorts. A terrifyingly ritualistic supply-and-demand formula emerges: increasing numbers of tourists arrive; tourists demand more baskets; prices for said baskets go up as a result of diminishing supply *caused* by tourist arrival; tourists scoff at the seemingly exorbitant prices for baskets; Black women suffer diminished product sales. Even as this commoditization of a historical art form threatens its end, the Black women collaborate and pool their resources to ensure the continuity of their craft, which many interpret as a sacred ancestral practice.

The existence and persistence of sacred ancestral practices is integral to the spirit of conjuring. In *Mules*, Hurston unearthed the pervasive intimacies of conjure practices, which she called "hoodoo," in New Orleans and its surrounding lowlands and swamps: "The way we tell it, hoodoo started way back there before everything."²¹ This beginning, or starting way back before everything, remains essential for considering the implications of conjure for Black women in modernity. Black women in the South Carolina lowcountry effectively call upon conjure to face the very real effects of modernity and, more importantly, to configure strategies on which they draw to help move *beyond* the effects of modernity. Conjure becomes the mystical, metaphysical course that Black women summon to survive with their bodies, minds, and souls intact.

In the lowcountry, conjure has been a widespread, though understated, practice that has always been perceived as supernatural. In *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory among Gullah/Geechee Women*, LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant suggests that conjure was a way for allowing Black women to “maintain cultural memories of their African pasts while incorporating realities of their present existence.”²² This is certainly the case for Beatrice Dixon, a seventy-year-old local sweetgrass basket maker who conjures (or invokes) the spirit of her grandmother to guide her hands as she practices her craft. In so doing, Beatrice taps into an ancestral power of instruction. Even as Beatrice increasingly struggles to make ends meet from her craft, she maintains an assurance of her economic survival because of the strength, resilience, and *skill* she inherited from her maternal ancestor.

This is also true for Lucinda Pinckney, a ninety-three-year-old former seamstress and root-worker. Lucinda is well-known in her role as a conjurer, and locals from near and far seek Lucinda for her remedies.²³ Lucinda’s perceived power simultaneously generates reverence and fear among members of her community. Her ability to provide alternative forms of aid to Black women, men, and children at prices that are more affordable than those of practitioners of Western medicine endears her to community members, while her inexplicable gift for providing homeopathic remedies that are actually efficacious terrifies them. At the heart of their healthy fear of Lucinda is that she knowingly has access to a metaphysical power that, though hidden, surpasses modern medicine. Lucinda, a devout Christian woman, is clear that she inherited her ability to heal others from her mother. Her role as healer/conjurer is in no way antithetical to her identity as a Christian woman. In fact, her ability to recall and draw from a system of practices passed on from generations of Black women affirms a deep spiritual tie to Christianity. In Lucinda’s story we are reminded of the ways that conjure has never fully been suppressed and that Christianity has always served as a conduit for inherited practices that may not necessarily be “Christian.” For Lucinda, conjuring is a set of skills used for healing as well as the literal calling up of strength, memory, and energy from ancestral spaces. Lucinda’s belief in her own power connects her to a long history of Black women practitioners who ushered conjure into their communities and used that space to cultivate alternative realities.

The broadest conceptualizations of religion in the American South reveal that Hurston’s anthropological and intimate musings about the pervasiveness, efficacy, and suppressed nature of conjure were—and continue to be—spot on. As demonstrated in the lives of Beatrice and Lucinda and from the

stories about them conjured up through an ethnographic approach similar to Hurston's, the very acts of sweetgrass basketry and "root-work" (or hoo-doo) are a beseeching of ancestral, metaphysical power, the same power that Hurston described nearly a century ago. The South Carolina lowcountry is also a part of this story that "started way back there before everything" and is connected to Hurston for the ways that women have historically used—and continue to use—conjure as a means to call on the past, live in the present, and imagine their futures. Yet conjuring-as-calling does not occur in the linear continuum emphasized in Western concepts of time. Rather, time is fluid and malleable, where the past and present meet and carve out new imaginings where the past becomes the present and the present the past. Whether conceived of as "no time, potential time, and actual time," as described by John S. Mbiti, "diaspora temporality" as articulated by Sheila McKoy, or "way back time" as espoused by Hurston, conjuring practices provide Black women with a means of invoking an internal, ancestral power to move beyond (and between) their realities.²⁴

Conclusion: Conjure, Capitalism, and the (Re)creation of Modernity

In the new millennium, neoliberal capitalism has changed the terms but sustained the fluidity of racial capital that washes away Black life in new ways to create spaces for titillating forms of entertainment and pleasure. In the postindustrial age, capital recovers material worlds polluted by the prior industrial era. Sacred crafts and healing practices are consumed under tourist-driven demands and corporatized medicalization. Corporations align with state governments to improve infrastructures and mobilize labor to create enjoyment. Culture industries—visual and sonic—produce stereotypes derived from colonial and racial discourses of previous eras to enable a longing for "otherness," a fetish available for consumption. These industries mobilize a "gaze," or what Rob Nixon calls "racial ecologies of looking," where this looking, through its machine of translation, rewrites space to bring it into compliance with the tourist fantasy.²⁵ "Looking" involves experiencing places without physically being there, but it also acts as a form of surveillance, controlling—physically and symbolically—what the space can be.

Our ethnographies and examinations of the role and function of conjure in and by *Mules* reveals that conjure is never only about spiritual formation,

religious sustenance, or communal retribution. Rather, conjure is a mechanism of survival that Black women literally and metaphorically deploy to *transcend* the limits of their contexts. More specifically, conjure among contemporary Black women throughout the South has come to have varied forms including, but not limited to, the following:

- To call Black women into community and community-oriented practices
- To call others into a sacred, ancestral exchange
- To provide alternative forms of aid to members of their communities
- To navigate multivalent systems of belief
- To awaken individuals to self-consciousness
- To empower Black women to protest and contest their current contexts

In the midst of the violence, surveillance, and displacement facilitated by racial commodification, Black women mediate power through these various expressions of conjure to actively disrupt the supposed progress of American modernity. In Tallevast, Florida, Mrs. Ward and Mrs. Washington conjure to ensure communal preservation and environmental sustainability. In the South Carolina lowcountry, Lucinda Pinckney and Beatrice Dixon conjure long-standing ancestral wisdom to ensure the continuity of ancestral practices. Through their actions, these women behave—much as Zora Neale Hurston did—as mediums of a sacred ancestral form. Their calling upon conjure permits a fluid incorporation of past and present that also gestures to a future of possibility and promise in a context that threatens to wash their very existence away.

Notes

1. Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990).
2. *Ibid.*, 12–13.
3. See also Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990); Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1997); and Hurston, *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-Tales from the Gulf States* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001).
4. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006).
5. For greater discussion of the “curse of Ham” and its implications for African American religion, see Paul Harvey, “‘A Servant of Servants Shall He Be’: The Construction of

- Race in American Religious Mythologies," in *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction*, ed. Craig R. Prentiss (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 13–27; George Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); Thomas Virgil Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1971); and H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image But . . . Racism in Southern Religion, 1780–1910* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1972).
6. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).
 7. *Ibid.*, 9.
 8. *Ibid.*, 12.
 9. *Ibid.*, 14.
 10. Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Tracey Hucks, "Burning with a Flame in America': African American Women in African-Derived Traditions," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 89–106; Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
 11. Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 183.
 12. Each of us is involved in ongoing ethnographic research projects in the South, including Tallevast, Florida, and the South Carolina lowcountry. James Manigault-Bryant partners with residents of Tallevast and is currently writing a yet-to-be-titled project that features interviews with members of the Florida community. LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant collaborates with women in the South Carolina lowcountry, and her work has been published in *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory among Gullah/Geechee Women* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).
 13. See Alice Walker's introduction "Looking for Zora" from *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (Boston, Mass.: Mariner Books, 2003).
 14. N. Y. Nathiri, ed., *Zora! Zora Neale Hurston, a Woman and Her Community* (Orlando, Fla.: Sentinel Communications, 1991), 4.
 15. Edgar Canter Brown and Larry Eugene Rivers, *For a Great and Grand Purpose: The Beginnings of the AMEZ Church in Florida, 1864–1905* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).
 16. See John Lowe's poignant essay, "'Calypso Magnolia': The Caribbean Side of the South," *South Central Review* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 54–80. As he writes: "Paule Marshall, Terri McMillan, Lee Smith and others have written about the intersection of the South and the Caribbean through narratives based in the touring industry. This too unites all the countries of my reconfigured region; Louisiana's most booming industry is tourism, and much of it is fueled by visitors from the wider

Caribbean. This works both ways, in that many cruise ships now go out from New Orleans and Miami. The vexed history of tourism—which is viewed negatively by many Afro-Caribbeans as it tends to replicate the old white master/black subject servant dichotomy—is a very rich subject that is key to the future and is interbraided with the literature of the wider Caribbean” (74).

17. The relationship between members of the Tallevast community and Lockheed Martin has been strained, due in great part to the company’s limited initial disclosure to residents, its responses to the contamination, its remuneration practices, and its remediation processes. For additional, and at times competing, information regarding the varied responses between community members and Lockheed Martin, review “Tallevast, Florida: Project Information,” Lockheed Martin, <http://www.lockheedmartin.com/us/tallevast.html>; and Steve Lerner, “Tallevast, Florida: Rural Residents Live atop Groundwater Contaminated by High-Tech Weapons Company,” The Collaborative on Health and the Environment, <http://www.healthandenvironment.org/articles/homepage/3829>.
18. Kathleen Navarro, Sarah Janssen, Terry Nordbrock, and Gina Solomon, *Health Alert: Disease Clusters Spotlight the Need to Protect People from Toxic Chemicals*, issue paper from the National Resources Defense Council, March 28, 2011, 10–11, http://www.nrdc.org/health/diseaseclusters/files/diseaseclusters_issue-paper.pdf.
19. Florida House Bill 937, or the “Tallevast Bill,” ensured consistency in contamination notification requirements. The act became effective September 1, 2005. Ch. 2005–50, 2005 Fla. Laws 937 (codified at FLA. STAT. § 376.30702 [2005]).
20. In 2012, a trial by jury ruled that Lockheed Martin had to pay FOCUS and its members \$3 million, including \$1.725 million for past economic loss and \$1.275 million for future economic loss. The individual aspects of the settlement are publicly undisclosed. See Juan Carlos Rodriguez, “Jury Orders Lockheed Pay \$3M To Fla. Community Group,” Law360.com, December 3, 2012, <http://www.law360.com/articles/398431/jury-orders-lockheed-pay-3m-to-fla-community-group>; and Family Oriented Community United Strong, Inc. v. Lockheed Martin Corporation, 8:11-cv-00217 (Florida Middle 2011).
21. Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 183.
22. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead*, 75.
23. See especially chapter 2 of *Talking to the Dead*, entitled “Folk Religion,” 66–103.
24. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969); and Sheila Smith McKoy, “The Limbo Contest: Diaspora Temporality and Its Reflection in *Praisesong for the Widow* and *Daughters of the Dust*,” *Callaloo* 22, no. 1 (1999): 208–22.
25. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 176.