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Black Ecologies, subaquatic life, and the Jim Crow enclosure of the tidewater

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an effort to recover histories of Black critiques of the twinned forces of displacement and extractionism in relation to the Jim Crow enclosure of the Tidewater region represented by the consolidation of commercial fisheries after 1880. Braiding Black cultural history, labor history, and environmental history, under the formulation of "Black Ecologies," I show the ways rural Black communities' relationships with the water and the subaquatic species like fish, crabs, oysters, and clams, in practice and in expressive culture, evolved through the period of the industrialization, deindustrialization, and recent reindustrialization of the Tidewater's waterways after Reconstruction. Using county level records, local Black expressive culture, governmental studies, historical newspaper articles, and recorded oral histories, I chart the transformation of Black rural relationships with the area's waterscape–, a conceptualization combining the geological features and processes of the waterland ecotone as well as the overlapping spaces of labor and leisure that created competing demands and a dialectic shaping rural life.

As the leading image illustrates (See Fig. 1), Black line-fishing and other modes of engagement with the water in the rural communities of Tidal Virginia and Maryland, while unfolding as part of the quiet expression of Black communal self-creation in intimacy with the aquatic and the sub aquatic, are set against the backdrop of extractavism—the exploitation of lands, waterways, and resources for short-term profitability through industrial processes of removal rather than a long term strategy of communal wellbeing. This is symbolized pointedly in the grain repository for poultry at the center of Tappahannock, a rural community between the Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck in the Tidewater region of Virginia, which is within the composition of this image as well as in the land ownership data available for Essex County and similar rural counties in the Tidewater where multi-national corporations are purchasing large parcels for their global land portfolios exacerbating local patterns of large scale agricultural and logging company ownership.[1] Against a long history of communal and reciprocal relations with regional waterscapes, cultivated by Black communities, meaningful access has continued to winnow in the face of the ecological unmaking of this unique hydrological system. Pollutants and contaminants associated with industrial agriculture, the deterioration of soils from logging, as well as the refashioning of exurban communities into suburbs further north at Fredericksburg as part of Northern Virginia's sprawl choke these waterways with various kinds of runoff. These processes threaten the system with large oxygen-depleted zones that impact survivability in these waters and justify future settler intervention as the solution to the social and ecological crises of rural landscapes shaped by gendered racial capitalist financialization.[2] While technically a commons, legal access to waterways is regulated by expensive licensures for fishing and boating as well as private landownership. Access to the waterways is further diminished by commercial development, the growth of exclusive waterfront enclaves, and the reterritorialization of the subaquatic through the denaturing of land and

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[1] For more on these relationships, I draw on the remarks of Hilda Lloréns remarks regarding extractionism and mobile Black ecologies in Southeast Puerto Rico and New England during (2020) POLLEN20 Contested Natures: Power, Possibility, Prefiguration Black Ecologies Keynote Third Biennial Conference of the Political Ecology Network (POLLEN) 22–25 September 2020 Brighton, UKAs well, her co-authored work with Carlos Garcia Quijano which is instructive. Hilda Lloréns and Carlos Garcia-Quijano, "From Extractive Agriculture to Industrial Waste Periphery: Life in a Black-Puerto Rican Ecology," *Black Perspectives*, June 22, 2020, https://www.aaihs.org/from-extractive-agriculture-to-industrial-waste-periphery-life-in-a-black-puerto-rican-ecology/. Also see Lloréns compelling monograph, *Making Livable Worlds: Afro-Puerto Rican Women Building Environmental Justice*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021). I'm grateful for Hannah Grabowski for helping me to research property and tax information at the county level.

[2] Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) maintains a daily apoxia forecast. <https://www.vims.edu/research/topics/dead_zones/forecasts/cbay/index.php>.

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its disarticulation from the water as an integrative biosphere.

This essay examines the shifting historical relationships between Black life, the Tidewater ecotone, and subaquatic life for what this constellation might tell us about the past and a possible future for the political ecology of rural Black life and placemaking. I recover alternative formulations of rural water and landscapes beyond their historical and ongoing articulation emerging from plantation landownership and the racist, genocidal, and enslaving settler state of the region's seventeenth century colonization (Morgan 1975). Premised on the genocide or removal of Indigenous peoples, and enduring in the logics of racial exploitation, plantation extractivism took shape in this region with the cultivation of tobacco in the 1640s and 50s. From its outset, short term profitability was tied with the debilitation, exploitation, and ultimately the disposability of displaced Africans and their descendants brought to the region under conditions of enslavement. Despite the siloing of the social from the ecological, the recurring and intergenerational conditions unmaking Black communities spatial and social integrity as well as meaningful Indigenous sovereignty are the same processes that have diminished the ecological system's capacity to reproduce itself in terms of the varied species life and subaquatic processes, endangering the fates of the species of the land, the subaquatic, and those of the air in this intricate estuary biome.[3]

I historicize Black ecologies through rural Black communities' unstable relationships to the processes of the waterways as well as the subaquatic species life such as crabs, clams, oysters, and various fish in the context of cyclical riparian and landed enclosure. With a particular focus on the Jim Crow era, this essay returns to the period of Jim Crow's transformation of the waterscape through industrialization beginning in the 1880s, and traces this political, economic and environmental history through to the 1990s, with the closure of many fisheries and local seafood processing plants in the lower-Chesapeake in rural areas between Virginia Beach, Virginia and Baltimore, Maryland. While the unmarked rural in US discourse often signifies white settler communities, this region encompasses significant historical rural Black communities as well as enduring Indigenous nations. I chart Black subaquatic cultivation in a dialectic with ecological devastation and cyclical enclosure—the repeated geographic displacement of Indigenous and Black relations with the waterscapes and the concomitant taming of myriad uses of the tidal bodies including, creeks, rivers, and the Chesapeake Bay. Despite the state's systematic undermining of Indigenous sovereignty and the Black commons through the consolidation of a Jim Crow waterscape, these formulations have continued in the propagation of Black and Indigenous fishing cultures articulated across public and private lands and the ponds, streams, creeks, and rivers that define the place as much as the land.

The Tidewater's emergence and historical transformation is the product of a series of overlapping financial and ecological dislocations; its political-ecological contours part of the complex interplay between new rounds of capitalization, shifting regimes of labor exploitation, and the state management of human and non-human life. In particular, during the era of Jim Crow's ascendency, the state governments of Virginia, Maryland and federal officials sought to create unprecedented bureaucratic management of subaquatic life through the rubric of a "fishery" as an exploitable resource. The codification of fisheries began in the 1670s, with the discursive demarcation of commercial fishing enterprises flying under British flags, and took shape over the proceeding decades, coinciding with the rise of the Virginian colonial enterprise, a growing maritime trade anchored in plantation ecologies, and the lucrative taxation of tobacco, sugar, and other products of West Indian plantations (Morgan 1975). The English Common law precedents that set the course for the 1825 emergence of the "riparian doctrine" in American law, maintained tidal rivers were common property associated with the need for free navigation and defense. As part of this, fish inhabiting tidal waters constituted a commonly held entity available to any who could access the water (Lauer 1963). In practice, however, access to the water was determined by property ownership and, as such, was a right based on the displacement of Indigenous people from these landscapes. As parcels of privately held land along the water filled, there was technically less access by anyone through privately held adjoining land. Despite the complexity of this formulation, however, as Kevin Dawson (2018) and Kathryn Benjamin Golden (2020) and Christy Hyman (2021) show, Black people in the region, along with Indigenous people, continued to create unremarked and sometimes fugitive relationships with the waterscapes, using swamps, rivers, and the Bay to plot escape and create alternative systems and infrastructures based in values of reciprocity, care, and collectivity associated with the Black commons.[4]

This essay engages Black subaquatic politics from the 1880s to the 1990s, a largely ignored period of rural Tidewater history.[5] Braiding Black cultural history, labor history, and environmental history, under the formulation of "Black Ecologies," I show the ways rural Black communities' relationships with the water and the subaquatic species like fish, crabs, oysters, and clams, in practice and in expressive culture, evolved through the period of the industrialization, deindustrialization, and recent reindustrialization of the Tidewater's waterways after Reconstruction. Using county level records held by the state of Virginia, local Black expressive culture, governmental studies, historical newspaper articles, and recorded oral histories, I chart the transformation of Black rural relationships with the area's waterscapes—here and throughout, a conceptualization combining the geological features and processes of the water-land ecotone as well as the overlapping spaces of labor and leisure that created competing demands and a dialectic shaping rural waterways.

Building on the conceptual work of Black geographies, I work with the notion of Black ecologies to consider the historical and enduring proximity of rural Black people in the Tidewater to the ecocidal effects of extractionism as well as to the relations of mutuality and resistance giving expression to possibilities beyond the delimitation of blackness as living in vulnerability and death. Taking seriously the cultural mediums

[3] For a trenchant critique drawing together colonial governance and environmental destruction see Malcom Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking From the Caribbean World*, trans. Anthony Paul Smith, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2022).

[4] See also Winston, Celeste. "Maroon Geographies." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111, no. 7 (2021): 2185–2199; Rachel Zellars. "Dreams of a Black Commons on Turtle Island." *Studies in social justice* 14, no. 2 (2021).

[5] As Kevin Dawson (2018) illustrates of the aquatic histories of Black life in the Americas, enslaved Black watermen including swimmers, surfers, divers, fishermen, and oystermen provided significant assets to enslavers in the riparian, estuarian, and sea environments of the Chesapeake as well as the diverse water ecotones throughout the Diaspora created by the Transatlantic slave trade. While some masters capitalized on these capacities, enslaved Africans also drew on their historical and cultural lineages for canoe building and their skills fishing, crabbing, and oystering to carve out spaces of independence, authority, autonomy, and fugitivity articulating the insurgent possibilities of Black ecologies. As Kathryn Benjamin Golden (2020) illustrates, swamps and in particular the Great Dismal Swamp underwrote an insurgent Black ecological world, an intimacy with the indeterminacy of land and water, providing the possibility for a protracted freedom struggle.

of Black expression, I examine Black insurgent and practical knowledge in the face of environmental degradation, geographic dislocation, and territorial violence.[6] During the Civil War, key sites of Black commons' in Virginia and the South were partially destroyed along with the wider infrastructure of plantations, roads, and bridges (Du Bois, 1973). The Potomac and the other waterways in the Tidewater were fortified and weaponized, foreclosing Black historical relationships with these sites and reterritorializing the interstices of plantations as sites of more intensive danger and violence, if also opening possibilities for forms of fugitive freedom. Near the zones of open conflict, former slaves faced down war as "murder, force, [and] anarchy" to free themselves (Du Bois, 1973). As a result of the war, water and the fish populations of Virginia and Maryland went from being largely untapped to a boom in both demand and production, especially of oysters. Concomitant with what Sarah Haley (2016) terms "Jim Crow modernity", local, state level, and federal bureaucracies sought to codify fisheries as exploitable resources in order to enhance their profitability. First, Federal and State officials in the 1880s and 1890s surveyed and mapped aquatic resources, including the then most lucrative Bay system product: oysters (See Fig. 2). Then, through a system of licensures, taxes, and riparian rental management, they sought to regulate and stabilize the profitability of oysters and other fisheries by transposing the landed relations of the settler regime onto riparian land. The state designated "planters" to define who was at the apex of this racialized waterscape and social-labor hierarchy. Tongsmen, especially shuckers and other largely Black workers were proletarianized—alienated from the waterscape except as the bodied instruments of settler extractivism, reinstating the logic and functional operations that had defined slavery.

The Jim Crow industrialization of the Bay and its tidal rivers and creeks illuminates the relationships between rural Black human communities and the subaquatic. While the subaquatic is not delimited to one site or species, the Bay's critical oyster populations and Black relations to the oyster as a shoal suggests a critical conceptual and metaphorical space to think Tidewater Black ecologies. Foremost, the oyster bed, reef, or shoal provides an important corollary to the generative work of Tiffany Lethabo King (2019) on the shoal as a register and metaphor of "liminal space between the sea and land," which she uses to theorize the "convergence, gathering, reassembling, and coming together (or apart)" of Black and Indigenous histories and Studies. In the context of the Chesapeake's tidal estuaries, the oyster shoal resonates with slightly different significance: the indeterminacy between land and water generated by the specific meeting of saline and fresh water and the oyster's biological responses to these ebbs and flows. Oysters in these estuaries grow their shells in intimacy with the muck generated by the meeting of fresh and sea water at the opening of the Chesapeake and their cultivation draws together Black and Indigenous waterscapes as a continuum of intimate relations with the fluid and cyclical nature of local water bodies. Regeneration through life and death is also seen in the living substrate of these reefs, which form from the shells of preceding generations of oysters. The composite mucky shoals of shell, salt and fresh water create inhabitable spaces for other life, such as the region's blue crabs and fish populations, and in this life-sustaining indeterminacy, bring forth complex layers of social and political history, ecology, intimate relationships between the dead, the living, and possible futures: Black, Indigenous, non-human.

Oyster reefs were cultivated by the Rappahannock nation prior to the onslaught of European settlers into the region from the 1640s. Like other nations joined under the Powhatan Confederacy, the Rappahannock extended their use of oyster beds to a range of about twenty-five feet deep, and collected primarily mid-sized oysters by hand. The Rappahannock, Mattaponi, Pamunkey and other groups in the area ate from oyster reefs cyclically to avoid over harvesting in one site. The hand selection for mid-sized oysters preceded without a radical disturbance to the oysters' habitat, maximizing reproduction and growth of these populations over time and binding these communities in reciprocal relationships with subaquatic life (Rountree, 2021).

While Black and Indigenous histories are distinctive and have different timelines, I describe the ethos of the Black commons in the context of the Tidewater as an indigenized relationality, a reciprocal and intimate relationship with the water cultivated at the edges of settler corporate interests and its codification of life in the waterways as a profitable industry (Roane 2018). Oysters and other subaquatic life in the region that rely on the unique meeting of fresh and salt water and land in the brackish Tidewater bring into focus the indeterminacy of Indigenous and Black histories of the region working against further erasure of specificity and difference to show the shared practices and ethics around stewardship and the murkiness of lineages separating these communities.

Confronting a world resulting from cyclical discommoning, expropriation, extractionism, exploitation, and the resulting ecological disruption, that have been as regular as the Chesapeake's tides, rural Black communities created cultural, intellectual resources, and local organizing traditions that supported the cultivation of intimate relations with the subaquatic, defying the separation of the social from the ecological and quietly forwarding an ethos of collectivity and reciprocity despite the atomization, thingification, and disposability imposed by the state on Black life and the subaquatic. The regional waterscapes are defined in part by the animating force against Black life serving as sites of drudgery and the predominant means of intergenerational dislocation, and at the same time, sites underwriting the ongoing force of the Black commons— "a fugitive furtive social architecture rivaling, threatening, and challenging the infrastructures of abstraction, commodification, and social control developed by white elites before and after the formal abolition of slavery" (Roane 2018). This paper is an effort to recover histories of Black critiques of the twinned forces of displacement and extractionism in relation to the lower Chesapeake's

[6] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Rashad Shabazz, "*Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 2015); McInnis, Jarvis (2019) Black Women's Geographies and the Afterlives of the Sugar Plantation. *American Literary History*, Volume 31, Issue 4, Winter 2019, Pages 741–774; Justin Hosbey. "Refusing Unliveable Destinies: Toward a Future for Black Life in New Orleans." *Fire!!!* 5, no. 1 (2018): 35–47; K. Ian Grandison, "The Other Side of the 'Free' way," *Race and Real Estate*, ed. Adrienne Brown and Valerie Smith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Ashanté Reese (2019), *Black Food Geographies: Race, Self-Reliance, and Food Access in Washington, D.C.* Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press. See Nathan Hare, "Black Ecology." Hosbey, Justin and J.T. Roane. and (2019), Mapping Black Ecologies. Current Research in Digital History. Volume 2(2019), https://doi.org/10.31835/crdh.2019.05 American Intellectual History Society's Black Ecologies series eds. Justin Hosbey, Leah Kaplan, and Roane. Reese, Frazier, Chelsea (2016), "Troubling Ecology: Wangechi Mutu, Octavia Butler, and Black Feminist Interventions in Environmentalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2(1): 40–72; White, Monica (2018) *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. Purifoy, Danielle and Louise Seamster (2020)"What is environmental racism for? Place-based harm and relational development," *Environmental Sociology* DOI: 10.1080/23251042.2020.1790331; Carlyn Ferrari, "Anne Spencer's 'Natural' Poetics," *CLA Journal*, v61 n4 (2018): 185–200. American Intellectual History Society's Black Ecologies series eds. Justin Hosbey, Leah Kaplan, and Roane. Reese, Frazier, Chelsea (2016), "Troubling Ecology: Wangechi Mutu, Octavia Butler, and Black Feminist Interventions in Environmentalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2(1): 40–72; White (2018) *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. Purifoy, Danielle and Louise Seamster (2020) "What is environmental racism for? Place-based harm and relational development," *Environmental Sociology* DOI: 10.1080/23251042.2020.1790331; Carlyn Ferrari, "Anne Spencer's 'Natural' Poetics," *CLA Journal*, v61 n4 (2018): 185–200; Yusoff, Kathryn. "The Inhumanities." *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 111, no. 3 (2020): 663–676; Latoya Eaves, "Black Geographic Possibilities: On a Queer Black South." *Southeastern Geographer* 57, no. 1 (2017): 80–95. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26367644.

Fig. 1. Black people fishing on a creek tributary of the Rappahannock River in Tappahannock, VA, with large granary in the background. The image is a still from film work shot in Summer (2021) for Black Ecologies Film work by author. (COLOR PHOTOGRAPH). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

Tidewater region.

1. Turn of the twentieth century industrialization and the ethos of Black Ecologies

As Ernest Ingersoll noted in his account of the national oystering industry for the Bureau of Fisheries, "The four years of war, during which the oysters had almost complete rest in many parts of the state, gave them a chance for development, and when they trade revived, the beds were well stocked with large finely-flavored oysters."[7] In this earliest era, people enduring slavery's violence elaborated a collective vision of place and temporality that facilitated their fugitive social existence in dialectic with a spatial imaginary centering the plot and with it use value.

Just after the Civil War, as Ingersoll noted, "Men from nearly all occupations, representing all classes of society, eagerly entered the business and soon there were hundreds of oystermen where formerly there had been but a dozen or so."[8] Following the initial mass appeal of oystering in the era of the 1870s, the business began to appear ostensibly into the familiar patterns of the antebellum period with "certain parts of the state … almost monopolized by negroes" and generally "in the hands of a rougher class" of poor whites working primarily in the older methods of tonging the oysters using a long-handled rake from small canoes and other vessels over natural reefs. As one observer writing for the New York Times and quoted by Ingersoll noted about the oyster planting grounds along the James River, the labor of oyster tonging impressed one outsider unfamiliar with the maneuvering of oystermen:

> "To see the oystermen balancing themselves in one of their canoes and working with so much energy at the same time, was quite a novelty. Many of these canoes are so narrow that should a novice step into one it would most probably be overturned; yet the oystermen work in them all day long in smooth weather and sometimes in pretty stormy weather, and apparently keep them properly balanced without any effort. To propel them through the water they use a long paddle, and, balancing it over the stern (the canoes of course, are sharp at both ends), having no row-locks and no indentation to aid them in keeping the paddle in place, they move them swiftly."[9]

Despite the skills attributed to the oystermen, many of them Black, Ingersoll could only read the actions of Black fishermen as ineffective and inefficient. While, as he observed, "tonging in Virginia is probably equally as profitable as in Maryland", there was a discrepancy in the productivity of oystermen with Maryland-based tongsmen extracting and profiting more from the business. According to him, this discrepancy was of a racial character, "explained by the fact that the proportion of negroes is larger in Virginia than in Maryland, and these people are more generally inclined to be indolent than the whites."[10] According to Ingersoll, Black oystermen in Virginia were defined by the uncertain "habits and thrift of the men is plainly marked, in particular in dislike of steady industry." As he noted, "Few of them ever pretend to work on Saturday, Sunday, or Monday, those days being consumed in going to market and returning, though there is nothing to prevent their going home on Saturday night, or at least on Sunday morning. Many of them have a small piece of land and a house, but their efforts at accumulation do not seem to go beyond living from 'hand to mouth.'"

As Michael Ekers writes in another context, the "juxtaposition between what was considered progressive and what was considered atavistic" invites further investigation (Ekers, 2014). What Ingersoll overwrote as indolence and a penchant for leisure over labor and excess

[7] Ernest Ingersoll, The Oyster Industry, Bureau of Fisheries, US Census Office 1881: 181.

[8] Ernest Ingersoll, The Oyster Industry, Bureau of Fisheries, US Census Office 1881: 181.

[9] Ernest Ingersoll, The Oyster Industry, Bureau of Fisheries, US Census Office 1881: 181.

[10] Ernest Ingersoll, The Oyster Industry, Bureau of Fisheries, US Census Office 1881: 182.

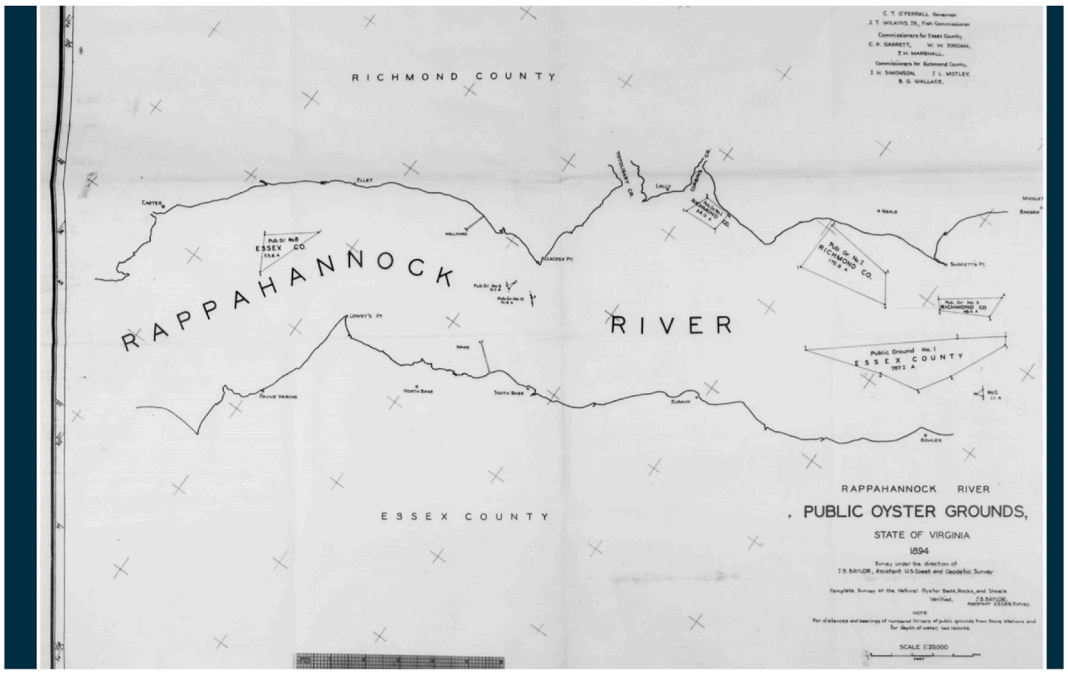

Fig. 2. Public Oyster Grounds mapping efforts in the 1890s were central to state's efforts to codify a fishery extending the cartographic tradition of the planter state (Baylor, 1894).

profitability, suggests the ways that Black oystermen in Virginia used their demographic concentration in the emergent fishery to exert control over their labor, combining their own self-preservation from grueling labor, and perhaps consciously or inadvertently exerting less detrimental pressure for extraction on the oysters. This rendered these workers less financially competitive with the white watermen of Maryland, but also within a trend toward what would be considered a more tenable long-term strategy of raking and selling the bivalves in a mode of self-sufficiency rather than radical exploitation.

This is further evidenced in extant records from the period's consolidation of the oyster fishery. (See Fig. 2). Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Black agriculturalists and oystermen were indistinguishable from one another.[11] In one small tidewater community in Essex County, Virginia Black families combined agricultural and aquacultural production to sustain their small holdings. Black farmers and aquaculturalists operated primarily along the Rappahannock at a scale commensurate with subsistence and perhaps as a strategy consistent with visions for self-sufficiency that emerged as a central theme in post-Emancipation life. These families sought stability and basic social and familial soundness and not necessarily massive wealth derived from an ever-expanding holding.

The Fauntleroy family was exemplary of this vision. Lawrence was born in 1837 in Virginia and likely in Essex County as a slave. Nearly thirty at the outset of the Civil War, by age forty-three in 1880 he owned a small acreage of land near the post-office at Center Cross. Lawrence and his family tilled eight acres, dedicated a half acre to an orchard or meadow, and left seven acres as unimproved timberland.[12] In addition to his farm land Lawerence began in 1892 to rent one-half acre of river bottom for oyster planting likely as part of the diversification of his small holding and in collaboration with Richard, his oysterman son.[13] (See Fig. 3) Oystering allowed the Fauntleroy family to improve their stability: harvesting from artificially seeded oyster beds they leased for a dollar a year, in addition to natural beds, to sustain their income between seasons.

Census takers noted Henry and Hettie Tunstall, a couple in their young twenties who had been married for just two years 1880, as a "mulatto" couple. Together they worked their small farm near Center Cross, Virginia in Essex along with their nephew twelve-year-old William. Henry and Hettie who owned approximately thirteen acres of land, six of which they farmed and seven of which remained in timber, lived on the adjoining parcel with Henry's brothers Walter and Julius as well as a young sister, Mary Tunstall.[14] Walter and Julius listed their occupations in 1880 as oystermen. In October 1892 the brothers, Henry, Walter, and Julius began like the Fauntleroys to rent a small parcel of river bottom from the state. Together they leased a four and a quarter acres of riparian land for seeding and harvesting oysters.[15] The Tunstall family mobilized a similar strategy to the Fauntleroys, combining farming and oystering across the seasons to maximize stability as a small family operation. Although the Tunstalls rented a significantly larger parcel of the river bottom, the scale suggests the combined labor strategy rather than the desire for maximizing profitability in the flesh of the delicate bivalves.

These practices sit in contrast with later extractive operations on the Bay's natural reefs which was encouraged by the state under the paradigm of a horizon of profitability and taxability, all but destroying the regenerative capacity of the natural oyster population to reproduce itself

[11] I am indebted to the important opening provided by Cherisse Jones-Branch in recovering Black rural women's histories of agricultural practice during the Jim Crow Era. See Jones-Branch, Cherisse, and Adrienne Petty. "Special Issue: African American Women in Agriculture During the Jim Crow Era." *Agricultural History* 93, no. 3 (2019): 388–92. https://doi.org/10.3098/ah.2019.093.3.388

[12] In this schedule Fauntleroy's name is marked as "Larence; " however the other details match information from the census for Lawrence Fauntleroy. Agriculture Schedule, Selected Federal Census Non-Population Schedules, 1850–1880, OS Page 13, Line 2. Enumeration Date June 1, 1880.

[13] Oyster Plat Records Microfilm, Library of Virginia.

[14] *Virginia, Marriages, 1785–1940*. Salt Lake City, Utah: FamilySearch, 2013 (found on Ancestry.com); Year: *1880*; Census Place: *Essex, Virginia*; Roll: *1364*; Page: *221C*; Enumeration District: *022*; Census Year: *1880*; Census Place: *Center Cross Precinct, Essex, Virginia*; Archive Collection Number: *T1132*; Roll: *22*; Page: *13*; Line: *8*; Schedule Type: *Agriculture*.

[15] Oyster Plat Records for Essex County 1892–1902, Library of Virginia.

and reducing Black laborers to fungible laborers in large-scale shucking operations. The small-scale efforts of the Fauntleroy and Tunstall families also diverge sharply with the production strategies of white contemporaries working the waterscape. While some Black families amassed control of small plots of riparian land for the planting of oysters, Black fishermen did not over time amass larger holdings. Born in the 1880s, John McCarty was a white oysterman who, according to the 1920 census, resided on the other side of the Rappahannock River near the town of Whitestone in Lancaster County, Virginia.[16] Because he was primarily a fisherman, McCarty amassed hundreds of acres for planting and harvesting oysters. It is unlikely given the scale of his operation with various sites of rented riparian land, that he would be able to perform this labor alone. McCarty, unlike the Tunstalls and Fauntleroys likely controlled a larger vessel capable of navigating his dispersed holding and employed others beyond his family to work the harvest at a sizable profit. According to the Essex County oyster plat records, McCarty leased from the state as well as sub-let hundreds of acres of river bottom for oystering within Essex's jurisdiction between the 1890s and early 1900s.[17]

While some Black families and autonomous Black communities worked the riparian land as part of their visions of self-sufficiency, the codification of the oyster plats was a means of establishing a system of riparian rights through which the state sought to tame the complex and "messy reality of local common property rights" into a manageable system of extraction, taxation, and governance to encourage "planters" like McCarty, in contrast to what were viewed as inefficient and ineffective Black operations. The state's codification efforts in the long-term were at odds with the vision put forward by Black practitioners and in all likelihood excluded other Black oyster tongers unable to afford an emergent regime of licensures and fees for boats and the river bottom. A series of legislation from 1880s to 1892 provided for the systematic measure and survey of water rights attempting to quantify the labor of tongsmen. Herein, the state of Virginia sought to codify oysters as a fishery: a quantifiable, taxable, and profitable unit as opposed to a complex population materializing in biological form the complex systems of interdependence between the land as well as salt and fresh waters.

Central to the construction of the fishery was the racialized hierarchy reinforced by the state's system differentiating tongsmen and shuckers versus planters that helped extend the metaphors of the bygone plantation to the riverscapes of the Tidewater. Although the Tunstalls and the Fauntleroys planted small acreage of river flat and communities like Litwalton, Virginia built autonomous towns, many of the Black people engaged in aspects of the Chesapeake oyster boom after the economic depression of the late 1870s were relegated to physical extraction with their proletarianization consolidated by the organization of the fishery with the emergence by 1900 of industrial shucking and processing facilities. "Planter" in this context was associated with the elaboration of the riparian management assumed to exact more taxable income by delimiting the river bottom as leasable property for the production of oysters as well as other state revenue generating catches like clams, crabs, and shad. In part this extended from landed interests of the planters who continued to control the primary agricultural lands along the region's waterways and who used their historical domination to claim riparian rights along with their control of commodity crops. The designation of the planter transposed and extended the landed interests of the antebellum period and also evidenced the unprecedented reterritorialization of Virginia's political and economic structure in a context of the rapid privatization and enclosure of the state by railroads, steamboats, and other interests seeking to resolve the national tensions by transforming the South into a colony of hybrid regional, national, and British capital (Woodward, 2009).

The enclosure entailed in the consolidation of legal ordinances and a tax structure around the waterways underwrote the New South/Jim Crow South's social and political consolidation: alienating the Black commons and further eroding Indigenous sovereignty. In 1880, Virginia was the richest ex-confederate state yet fell well behind the poorest union states in per capita wealth generation (Woodward, 2009). Following the Depression of 1879, when there was a veritable bonanza of northern and British capital turning to the South as an outlet for the excess of capital brought on by the crisis, "the river boat became the handmaiden of industrialism" on the Rappahannock as well as the other navigable waterways that form the lower branches of the Chesapeake (Woodward, 2009). The steamboats created the primary architecture of the fisheries' extraction with many of the steamboat operators taking ownership of seafood processing facilities by World War I.

As Carter G. Woodson (1930) documents in the *Rural Negro*, the rural South's local and regional waterscapes endured seismic transformations in the cultural lives of Black people living after Emancipation. While ongoing large baptisms in creeks, rivers, ponds, lakes and at the seashore signified ongoing spiritual and social connections to various kinds of waterscapes across the region, commercialization and enclosure threatened more quotidian uses of and attachments to the various waterscapes. According to Woodson, Black people were increasingly "turned away from the bathing beach which was once a free-for-all swimming place … not admitted to the private game reserve which occupied the old fishing and hunting grounds" and prohibited from having "any parties on the placid lake where they once rowed their canoes without fear of disturbance" (Woodson 1930; Roane 2021) As Woodson documents it, the discommoning of waterways and the erection of racially exclusive commercialized leisure undermined Black people's abilities to access water and gave powerful significance to Jim Crow's early twentieth century spatial consolidation. In the US context, despite the slaves' overthrow of the antebellum regime during the civil war and the flickering possibilities of something otherwise given expression during Radical Reconstruction, the terroristic, racial violence of systematic rape and lynching defined the Jim Crow era, enforced a labor regime of excess profitability and political hegemony, and underwrote the territorial reorganization of the Black commons–the enclosure of southern places, setting off the dislocations of the Great Migration and the concomitant reterritorialization of Black ecological practices and knowledges.

Despite the reduction of Black expressive forms as nonhistorical or folk, Black communities used music and other forms of collective production, especially the rich repositories of the spirituals and the Blues, to note these transformations in their watery worlds. In a 1928 recording for Paramount Records "Old Country Rock," Virginia rag guitarist William Moore opens the recording by calling to "Bear": "Let's take them for an old country rock." Grounding the sound of old country rock and its attendant movement in the watery contours of Tidewater, Virginia, Moore suggests "Let's go back down on the Rappahannock, Tappahannock way" and calls for "everybody to rock." Recorded in Chicago, the song's prideful invocation of displaced home in a watery Virginia town announces a new kind of mobile, migrant southern subject in the age of the peripatetic Blues and rag. Critically, Moore's sound and the subsequent dance he invokes operate through a longing for home and its affiliations – "them boys cross the river"- and its attendant movements—"that old country rock." Moore's innovative style and the cultural transformation in which he took part is an intimate invocation of a rural southern place identified by its river.

Critically, Moore's longing for his watery home is a structure of longing and a relation to place that was, as we have seen, itself in transit, unstable, and fleeting. While Black communities in Tidewater Virginia utilized the area's streams, ponds, marshes, creeks, rivers, and the Chesapeake Bay for self and collective creation and plotting beginning with slavery, the commercialization after 1880 threatened these delicate ecosystems and endangered the soil, forests, marshes, and rivers, and

[16] Year: *1920*; Census Place: *White Stone, Lancaster, Virginia*; Roll: *T625_1895*; Page: *20A*; Enumeration District: *69*.

[17] Oyster Plat Records for Essex County 1892–1902, Library of Virginia.

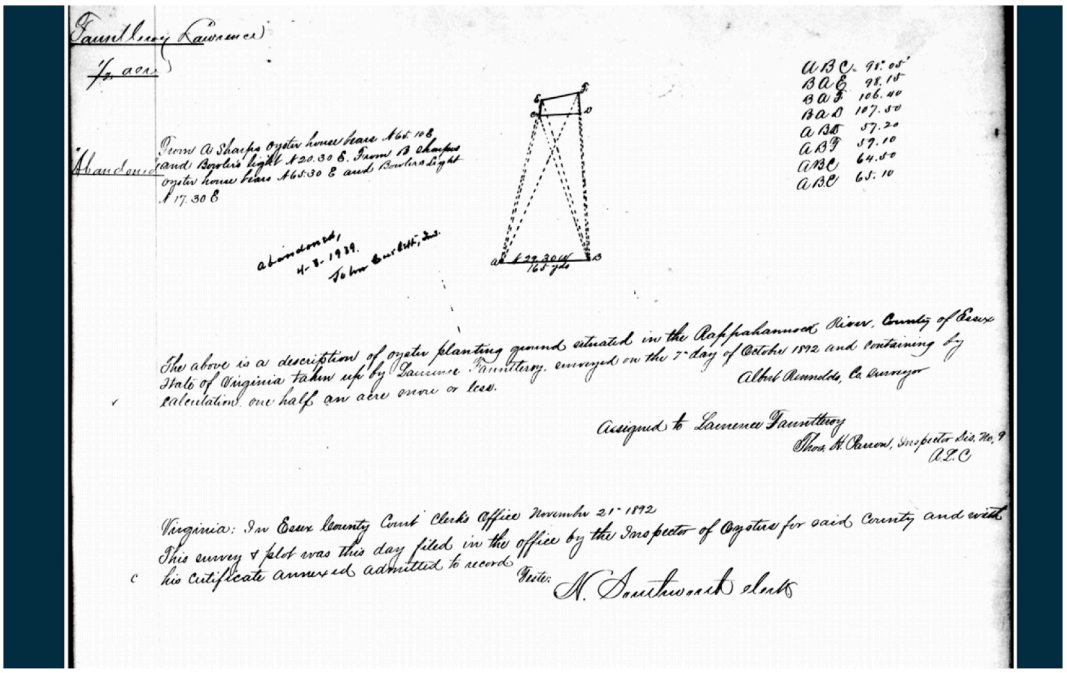

Fig. 3. Fauntleroy family half-acre riparian river rental, Library of Virginia (Essex County 1978).

actively relegated Black experiences with the water and fishing to tedium and drudgery. By the time of Moore's recording, the water's centrality to Black cultural life, including in work and leisure, was in rapid decline.

Although Black families used the area's oyster reefs as well as its other fisheries to create stability and an ethos of partially indigenized cultivation, by the turn of the twentieth century the transformation of the Chesapeake's oysters through commercialization relegated the majority of Black people from small commercial interests seeking to eek a living from the bounty of the commons to proletarianized laborers working for large fishing operations or as oyster shuckers and crab pickers. Moore's invocation to the "boys cross the river", his nostalgia for the old country rock animating his innovative guitar work and an associated movement riffing on a particular water and landscape with which he is familiar and which he understands as marking a "home" documented the fleeting possibilities of the affiliations around waterscapes for Tidewater's Black communities in the face of ongoing processes of conquest, racial capitalist geographic transformation, and the transition of people's interface with the contours of the Tidewater from an orientation along wharves and boats, to one increasingly dominated by oil-based extraction and mobility. Here I want to think with Ashanté Reese (2019) drawing on what Lorena Munoz terms "productive nostalgia," to describe "a process in which nostalgia is not just memories or imaginations but instead calls for the embodiment and enactment of practice." Rag and the blues represented a form galvanizing various sentiments like the water to draw and pull Black geographic subjects through their own paths of desire, connection, disbandment, mobility, and affiliation despite the forces rending their communities displaceable, condemnable, and subject to the gratuitous violence under white supremacist governance of Black life and the subaquatic.[18]

The mass and industrialization of the oyster fishery in Virginia promoted by the state's "favorable laws" underscoring the power of the planter and the other commercial interests associated with nascent seafood processing facilities, instituted a regime of massive extraction, that within fifty years significantly curtailed the overall capacity of the oyster reeves, and which in a short order fashion displaced and proletarianized rural Black laborers, relegating them to tedious shucking labor. The oyster interests at Whealton, Virginia brought their enterprise from Maryland where earlier rapid industrialization had already begun to deplete oyster populations in the 1890s. While in 1896, there was one shucking operation in an area called Whealton near the oyster harvesting town of Morratico, by 1901 there were five establishments. These facilities, concentrated along one of the Rappahannock's organic reefs near the limits of the oyster's capacity to survive the salinity of the estuarian ecotone, employed approximately five hundred migrant-Black shuckers who they transported on large fishing vessels seasonally across the Chesapeake Bay from Somerset County on Maryland's Eastern Shore. These shuckers lived in cramped housing developed by the oyster house operators where they remained susceptible to the caprice of these owners who could use the implicit threat of a family's homelessness to discipline them into the demands of rapid shucking and packing. The shucking houses also incentivized the employment of young children in the houses. While some parents were adamant that their children attend the local school or leave the harvest season early to return to their educations in Maryland, others worked alongside their parents sometimes without regular school attendance to generate more money as the operators paid by the volume of oysters shucked rather than hourly wages.

In sharp contrast to the conditions shuckers faced at Whealton and Morattico were the nearby Black oyster workers and their families at Litwalton, a small unincorporated town composed primarily of Black oyster tongers. Litwalton's residents, unlike the migrant shuckers, remained attached directly to the water affording them a significant independence and autonomy through their labor. As William Taylor Thom noted in his juxtaposition of Lilwalton's tongers to Whealton shuckers, "The oyster tonger is his own master. He comes and goes when he pleases." The semi-autonomous lifestyle of the Litwalton community created a different ethos of community centering the possibilities for sustaining life and emphasizing favorable work and restorative leisure over extreme exertion. The tongers at Litwalton like those about which Ingersoll had made his derogatory commentary, chose to work during good weather days in the fall and often generate sufficient funds to carry their families largely throughout the winter and indeed the year giving them "more liberty and more fun than the shucker." During the harsh winter weather days, rather than going out on the water, the tongers of

[18] Here I also draw on discussions with artist Huewayne Watson regarding the nature of Black lines of mobility.

Litwalton stood "around the stove in the store with his fellows, or otherwise disport [ed] himself" translating their intensive skilled labor not into yet more harvesting and profit but rather investing their energies in the intimate social worlds they created in the community store and other institutions of their own making. The Black tongers of Litwalton used their power and collective bond enacted through a relation to the subaquatic to establish a small independent community consisting of "some 10 houses, including 4 stores, a post-office, and the office and residence of the physician of the neighborhood" as well as a blacksmith shop, boat-building operation, a mortuary service, a gristmill, and a "large unfinished Negro Baptist church."[19]

Despite the significant counterpoint of independent and autonomous communities like Litwalton, ongoing proletarianization and urbanization coincided with the growing alienation of Black communities from the means of fishing the waters of the region but it did not halt the organizing of Black communities. In Norfolk in 1917, Black shuckers and packers affiliated with the Transportation Workers Association of Virginia (TWAV) went on strike, demanding increased wages. Following the successful model of longshoremen organized by the same union in a strike-less pay increase, the group sought a similar adjustment. When their request was ignored by their employer, the Old Dominion Steamship Company, the workers left "every oyster house in the city … without labor".[20] As Claudrena Harold (2007; 2016) documents, the organization of shuckers, tobacco stemmers, and other Black laborers at Norfolk was part of a larger strategy of southern New Negro politics that included radical labor organizing, self-help organizing, and active work as part of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association.

The processes of industrialization and ecological erosion were amplified in the 1930s in Tidewater with the 1933 Great Hurricane which permanently transformed the area, destroying the steamboat infrastructure, the wharves, and the boats and paving the way for automobility and the subsequent rapid decline of Chesapeake ecologies and fisheries. By 1939, many of the planting grounds that had been codified as part of the emergent fishery for oystering on the Rappahannock, including the plots held earlier by the Tunstalls and Fauntleroys, were marked by unnamed county officials as abandoned—the changing capacity of the natural habitat to sustain even planted oysters, the destruction of the primary shipping routes, and the turn away from the water as a primary source of livelihood for Black communities coinciding with the implosion of Black landownership in the region preceding and during the Great Depression. The hurricane served to further concentrate seafood production among a select number of houses in Maryland and Virginia, delimiting Black people primarily to shucking and picking labor.

Despite conditions of increasing delimitation to tedious shucking and picking labor, Black seafood workers built on a series of customary rights and labor structures, emphasizing part-time leisure, the legacy of a previous generation. In Maryland, during World War II, these customary rights were violently ended by the state under the expediencies of war time food production. Although this is a story emerging from the repression (Guha 1998), it demonstrates the ongoing ethos of self-sufficiency and a privileging of leisure associated with making one's own time for work that Black seafood workers transposed from earlier relationships to the water related industries, and the enduring ethos of the Black commons and its antipathy for overwork and overuse.

According to Black journalists, in 1941 Maryland authorities "rounded-up" "more than one hundred colored men and women", collecting "customary unemployment compensation checks" during the off season from shucking, forcing them to perform crop harvesting labor.[21] The group stood before a magistrate and was forced to "explain why they continued to draw unemployment checks while 'refusing' work in the fields", following the end, in mid-April, of the oyster shucking season. Although the collective was entitled to unemployment benefits according to the law, three white truck farm operators William Langford, Fred Dorman, and Ivory Henry argued otherwise. The local constable for the county, Linwood Moore, working on behalf of Smith, began rounding up the Black shuckers, accusing them of "loafing" and taking them into state custody. Eventually, after being jailed, the group was taken before a magistrate, Meldin Robinson, who demanded of them proof that they were "entitled to unemployment compensation when jobs were available." The collective was pressured under the force of state authority, and its management of extractionist labor in the fields and along the waterscape, to work in the fields picking strawberries. Removed from the small village they inhabited as shuckers, they were transported by the reporting white truck farmers to other locations in the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Delaware.[22] Here the ethos of self-sufficiency, modulated labor, and extended leisure, associated with customary benefits by Black seafood workers, was undermined, illustrating the regional prerogative in rendering Black seafood workers interchangeable with farm hands as a body of deskilled labor, but also evidencing the ongoing ethos of less work and enhanced leisure. This case exemplified the anti-human and more broadly life-phobic logics of capitalist accumulation and the ways in which the racialization of Black "indolence" served as the ideological pretext for accumulation by dispossession in the region and beyond.[23]

The ecological deterioration of the ecosystem, the consolidation of racialized labor hierarchy organized to benefit white landed and riverine planters, the criminalization of what Black communities claimed as customary rights, as well as the demarcation of Black shuckers themselves as "loafers", helped to constitute the Jim Crow enclosure of the region's waterscape (Federici 2004).

2. The Post-Jim Crow transformation of the subaquatic

"Sleep On" is a work song recorded in 1980 at a crab meat processing plant in Bluff Point, Virginia, sung by three crab pickers, Lena Thompson, Lucy Scott and Lucy Smith. The central theme of the spiritual's lyrics is death. "Sleep on, Mother, lay down and get your rest," Thompson calls out, followed with vocal accompaniment from Smith and Scott. As they go through repeated rounds imploring their mother, father, and others to ease into eternal rest, the sounds of their labor, the sloshing associated with the removal of crab meat from the shells and persistent dripping form the ambient backdrop of their call and response.

This spiritual/work-song is a complex testimonial that brings to the fore the complexity of agency. The form originated as Amiri Baraka describes, in the prohibition against and the decontextualization of Africans "native chants … native songs, at work." As Jones/Baraka notes, these forbidden songs "after a time changed into other forms that weren't forbidden in contexts that were contemporary" (Baraka, 1963, 20). As hybridized cultural constructions, work songs embody a form of sublimated cultural defiance and alternative communications among those condemned to slavery and their descendants. At the same time, despite the subversive origins of these materials, they have historically

[19] See the fascinating account of Whealton and Litwalton provided by William Taylor Thom, "The Negroes of Litwalton, Virginia: A Social Study of the 'Oyster Negro'," (1900) *Bulletin of the U.S. Department of Labor*, 351, no. 37-01.

[20] "Norfolk Oyster Shuckers Strike: Four Hundred Employees of Oyster Plants Ask for Higher Wages; Women's Case Unsettled, Failure to Recognize Union Causes Continued Hold-Out of Tobacco Stemmer." October 6, 1917 *New Journal and Guide*.

[21] "Forced to work on 'Shore': Women and Men Sent to Farms," *New Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, VA): May 16, 1941: C1.

[22] "Forced to work on 'Shore': Women and Men Sent to Farms," *New Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, VA): May 16, 1941: C1.

[23] Here I'm grateful to reviewer number one for the insight about drawing out the deep antagonism of gendered racial capitalist accumulation for human and nonhuman life.

also represented a mode of forced merriment connected to enhanced work and productivity, masking in the required performance, the demands of work discipline, speed, and enhanced exploitation under a façade of happiness (Hartman 1997).

The three women's rendition of "Sleep On" illustrates this ambiguity. It is not articulated as part of a discrete labor struggle. It does not stake an explicit critique of the environmental degradation affecting blue crab populations and the shifting conditions of their labor. The song is not a loud claim raised about the ongoing struggle over the maldistribution of the region's resources and its harms affecting the collapse of places once tied to crabbing, fishing, and oyster harvesting. Indeed, it may well have enhanced the labor output of these women, extending profits for the crab house owners.

As a feature of its complexity, the spiritual passes along a simple but adaptable description linking death and tedium through the time of the song itself. Repetition instantiates the enduring power and possibility of "the Blues epistemology" described by Clyde Woods (1998) to underscore the use of Black expressive culture to maintain a body of critical epistemic interventions propagating traditions of critical performance, description, thought, and practice around the matters of Black place and ecologies. In this instance, the Blues tradition draws explicitly on the form preceding it. As Smith noted to recorders: "That's one of the old, way-back songs-a spiritual with a long history in the crab houses."[24] The work song serves as an embodied archive of intersubjective memory, rehearsed and replayed in vernacular performance. The singing recalls the toil associated with removing the flesh from hundreds of crabs a day at a rapid *pace and* the rich interior cultural world associated with "Black aliveness" (Quashie 2021), not fully containable from the purview of the bosses' desires for faster work. It riffs on popular recordings and remakes of the song from earlier in the twentieth century and is still actively remade between local churches and the workplace as part of an undeniable collective self-expression.

Despite the demands and impositions of exterior exploitation, the singing of these lyrics announced an insulating collectivity (Quashie, 2012), protective in the face of exploitative wage restructuring, in which wages were determined by the amount of meat compiled from discarded shells. Wages were further limited by the daily number of pounds brought into the plant, shrinking with the seasonal availability of crabs, oysters, and clams within the shifting ecological conditions of the Chesapeake Bay. The seasonality of their harvests and fluctuating crab populations vulnerable to the Bay's ecological decline combined to further compress the wage-earning potential of individuals and incentivizing competition between co-workers. Against this backdrop and in contrast to the unevenness of the water's dripping, these workers *keep pace with one another* through a primary technology of collectivity of rural Black cultural expression in the region, the antiphonal. The act of singing together allows these women to embody intimacy and a shared daily struggle in the face of company sponsored atomization and competition.

Oral history interviews taken in the 1990s in rural southern Maryland, confirm, expand, and make direct the analyses of pickers indexed in the recorded work song. William Bourne, working into his late seventies between the land as a tobacco farmer and as a shucker in an oyster house in southern Maryland, had begun both occupations around the age of fifteen to care for his ailing parents. When Bourne was interviewed in 1997 as part of the "Behind the Apron" oral history project with Black oyster and clam workers, Bourne had worked in the oyster house seasonally for more than sixty years.[25] In his assessment of the changes that had accrued in his decades in the Chesapeake oyster business he noted that the labor composition of the oyster enterprises in southern Maryland had changed dramatically. While in his early years there had been seventy-five or more Black shuckers employed seasonally in the local houses, by 1997 there remained only elder Black shuckers, the workforce increasingly replaced by migrant workers from Latin America.

In addition to the changing social dynamics of shucking, Bourne noted that the oysters themselves were beginning to succumb to the destructive transformation of the Chesapeake's environment. When asked about what he viewed as the likely future of oystering and shucking in Maryland, he replied without hesitation that he didn't think there would be a future for the industry since, as he understood it, "they dying out." As he noted oysters were not nearly as plentiful as when he had begun that work and grew smaller and less healthy over time. When asked by Parker what he believed to be the culprit behind the diminished oyster population he answered by connecting it directly to changes in land uses: "I think it's got some to do with the fertilizers and stuff people use on their farms. It runs into the water and I think that's got something to do with it."[26] As both a tobacco farmer and an oyster shucker into the latter part of his seventh decade, Bourne was well situated to make sense of the changing dynamics between changing uses of the landscape and transformations in the capacity of delicate species like oysters to reproduce and survive.

Interviewed by Parker as part of the same project, Mary Dawkins corroborated Bourne's accounting of the changing dynamics and demographics of labor, going further however to detail the ways that migrant laborers from Latin America had become the preferred laborers within the industry by the mid-1990s. According to Dawkins, although when she began shucking in the 1940s, the shuckers were primarily local Black people, young and old, "all our young people … left the county now" and by 1997 it was "mostly Mexicans" working to open the oysters brought in by truck from the Eastern Shore to the last of the shucking houses on Maryland's mainland. According to Dawkins, the owners of the shucking houses generated additional profits from the Latinx migrant laborers by charging them for accommodation in five or so cramped trailers that he and his friends owned near the shucking houses. She noted that he charged these laborers to transport them between the rundown mobile homes and the oyster houses. While here she is largely descriptive, there is a sense from her change in tone on the recording that Dawkins understood the implications of this exploitation on the growing body of largely Mexican women taking up the work in Southern Maryland shucking towns.

Like Bourne, Dawkins lamented the shifting nature of the oysters themselves. She noted the changing fishery and the pressures of ecological transformation on the size and volume of the oysters and clams she helped process and prepare for market. Although she had found it to be decent work since she started fifty years before her interview with Parker, helping to pay for children's college educations alongside her husband's union income, she also noted the severely delimited hours for Black workers and the reorganization of pay around smaller units of measure rather than the historical gallon measure. Significantly, neither she nor Bourne attributed this transformation in

[24] See Liner Notes for the Smithsonian Folkways Virginia Work Songs album collection.

[25] Interview Shelia Montague Parker interview with William Bourne, Behind the Apron: The History, Life, and Hidden Achievements of Southern Maryland's Black Oyster and Clam Workers, Anacostia Community Museum Archives Digital Collection, https://sova.si.edu/details/ACMA.09-007.28?s=0&n=10&t=C&q=&i=0#ref8.

[26] Interview Shelia Montague Parker interview with William Bourne, Behind the Apron: The History, Life, and Hidden Achievements of Southern Maryland's Black Oyster and Clam Workers, Anacostia Community Museum Archives Digital Collection, https://sova.si.edu/details/ACMA.09-007.28?s=0&n=10&t=C&q=&i=0#ref8.

terms of culpability to the new workforce of largely Latinx women; rather noting that it was primarily about the shifting ecological terrain created by decades of exploitation. She noted with frustration the shrinking size of the oysters and clams transported for shucking. "Seafood is not as plentiful as it used to be," she noted. According to her there weren't as many oysters because they were dying out and the clams had gotten smaller because "we are not giving them time to grow."[27]

What had kept Bourne and Dawkins was the nature of the shucking house. Although their work was tedious and began well before sun rise each day during the oyster harvesting season, they noted intergenerational camaraderie, as well as freedom of time, as the reasons for their decisions to continue with this work. As Dawkins noted, "there's no clock to punch" in the shucking house, meaning that her individual speed and skill determined her compensation. Although this does not necessarily suggest a livable wage, especially beyond the era of unionized shucker strikes in the earlier twentieth century, it formed a supplementary income to her husband's wage that allowed Dawkins to send their children to college. For Bourne, it was a space in which he could work and provide himself an income in tandem with tobacco farming in a similar strategy to the Fauntleroys and Tunstalls before him. More optimistic than Bourne, when asked about her prognosis for the future of shucking and the industry, Dawkins suggested that it would not disappear but rather that after her and the few remaining elderly Black shuckers had left these work spaces, no one Black would do that kind of labor anymore and the shucking work would be fulfilled by migrant Latinx workers: "I see the oyster houses in a few years being Mexican."

Neither of them anticipated the conditions of the Chesapeake's post-2005 "renaissance" centering the oyster fishery but also discursively connected by the boosters of the return to oyster harvesting, as a "win-win" for all species including crabs and fish. The current industry is constituted by the integrated techno-scientific management of labor, extraction, and distribution, including the networking of the growth and processing of oysters from their larval stages through marketability with the minimalization of labor, including rendering the labor of shuckers themselves as redundant. While tongers and dredgers have been displaced by the use of oyster baskets and the daily scientific management of the oyster's life cycle, shuckers have been replaced by a costly high-pressure mechanism that removes the flesh of the oyster from its shell without the need for skilled shuckers.

The Rappahannock Oyster Company (ROC) based in rural Topping, Virginia, is a leading force in the contemporary "Renaissance" in the Chesapeake's shellfish industry. Founded using the two hundred acres of state managed river bottom land that had been the basis of their grandfather's oyster operation from the 1899 through 1961, cousins Ryan and Travis Croxton have built a veritable oyster empire. Along with their "tasting room" in Topping, ROC boasts restaurants in Richmond, Washington, DC, Charleston, SC, and Los Angeles. They also have an online store through which they ship shucked and living oysters and clams to patrons' doorsteps across the US.[28]

Like many historical periods demarked as renaissances, the current boom in oyster production galvanized by the ROC and similar operations was preceded by an era of decline and death, and, in the case of the Bay's oyster populations, near extinction. ROC self-consciously situates itself outside the paradigm of historical "overfishing" that characterized previous efforts, including their family's. Overfishing, as the Croxtons understand it, involved the overuse of natural beds through the dredging and disruption of the oysters' habitat. Because oyster aqua-culturalists like the Croxton's grandfather relied on the capturing of larval oysters before they began to settle on the oyster rock substrate they require for natural reproduction, overfishing endangered populations on the natural beds along with those on "planted" beds. The company's interpretation of its vision of oyster production as embracing sustainability and as they suggest, moving beyond sustainability, is critical for the discourse of the reindustrialization of the region's waterscapes—here, the profitable commercialization of oysters' life cycle and their ongoing legal and economic codification as a fishery.

Entangled with their interpretation of the company's sustainability is the ROC's emphasis on using the "native" species of Virginia and their continued employment of "hand shucking": extending the settler-conquistador logics (King 2019) of aqua nullius that subsume indigenous peoples' knowledge and cultivation of these ecotones and justify their continued exploitation, while simultaneously naturalizing tedious and poorly-compensated shucking labor—historically supplied by Black laborers— as part of the legacy and established future of the Bay's ecology. The company's embrace of the "native" species, *Crassostrea virginica*, within the predominant settler classificatory regime, discursively ties their desire for continued extraction to a naturalized ordering of the water and land as the management of property and rights by the settler state.

The embrace of "saving" the "native" species elides Indigenous cultivation of these waterscapes preceding colonization and continuing alongside its unfolding rearrangement of waterscapes for continued extraction and exploitation. Similarly, the fetish for "hand-shucked" oysters —directly set against novel technologies of pressurized shucking that remove the animal's body from the shell without disrupting the flesh—trades in the settler romanticization of grueling work Black laborers faced when employed by white owners in the shucking houses or as tongers on operations like their grandfather's historical harvesting business. The label disembodies the hands that have done and continue to do the shucking. For a century between the 1890s and the 1990s the regional industry relied primarily on poorly compensated Black labor to prepare oysters and other subaquatic species for market. Furthermore, the reduction of tedium to the euphemism "hand-shucked" also hides a history of Black aquaculture wherein Black families cultivated knowledges, practices, and relationships with the tidal waterways and subaquatic species life at the edges of and out of the purview of settler domination and capitalist labor extraction. Black communities cultivated alternative relations to the region's waterscapes intimately intertwining Black sociality and the geological and biological processes of the subaquatic. Black people's relationships to these waterscapes and nonhuman life didn't begin or end with employment in the shucking and picking plants processing clams, oysters, and crabs for market.

While this form of oystering is posited as a sustainable alternative to the overharvesting that characterized previous generations of lower-Chesapeake fisheries, this entails a lucrative horizon of future extraction and harvesting rather than transformation in the relations threatening oyster populations and the underlying conditions of the hydrological system's health. These growing interests ignore the zone of hypoxia making the Bay uninhabitable for fish and other species, as a severe lack of oxygen extends each summer due to contamination by industrial agriculture, exurban development, as well as warming water attributed to the processes of racial capitalist generated climate catastrophe. Instead, they have invested large sums in various species they manage through extra-natural processes and integrate into global distribution chains interdependent with the systems disintegrating the Bay's inherent capacity to reproduce itself.

Despite their predictions of dwindling and the transformation of labor, when taken together across the chorus of oral histories and the

[27] Interview Shelia Montague Parker interview with Mary Dawkins, Behind the Apron: The History, Life, and Hidden Achievements of Southern Maryland's Black Oyster and Clam Workers, Anacostia Community Museum Archives Digital Collection, https://sova.si.edu/details/ACMA.09-007.28?s=0&n=10&t=C&q=&i=0#ref4.

[28] I'm indebted to Hannah Burnett's critical insight about the use of Katrina Debris in the Gulf's oyster industry during the US Locations workshop where I served as her respondent at the *University of Chicago* in Spring 2021) for thinking about the shape of the contemporary oyster industry. Also see Burnett, Hannah Eisler, and Talia R Gordon. "Reimagining the Commons: Survival Ethics and Collective Endurance." *Journal for the anthropology of North America* 24, no. 1 (2021): 42–45.

spiritual, Black seafood workers at the end of the twentieth century demonstrate a critical regional outlook about the shifting nature of labor and the environment under late-twentieth century globalization. Together they plod connections (if not causal ones) between the shrinking Black population of shuckers in the county where the shucking house remained. The Black communities' collective regional analysis of the relationship between the water-land ecotone of the Tidewater, intergenerational labor exploitation, tedium, ecocide, and death, put forward in coded spirituals and through explicit critique about the fisheries, has not been adequately recognized, reflecting the dynamics of race, gender, class, and region that disqualify Black rural working-class women and men from meaningful knowledge. The spiritual places the crab pickers and shuckers within a genealogy of everyday aesthetic and social practice, the conceptual wellspring of critical working-class Black labor and ecological analysis.

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