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WHEN I BEGAN WORKING on *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective*, I knew that water was one of the central tropes in the African American literary and historical tradition, but I could not conceive of how timely this project would become. Soon after I embarked on this study, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the surrounding areas. As I watched image after image of bodies floating in the Gulf Coast waters, it was not lost on me that this tragedy was decidedly raced. Indeed, the materiality of the drowned, displaced, and disregarded recalls an African diasporic history that continues to wash on the shores of America.

Water—fluid, shifting, and indeterminate—is the material center of this book, and is employed as a framework for theorizing survival and trauma, diasporic and regional connections, and physical and psychological dislocations. Beginning with the transatlantic trade voyage, in which Africans were taken from their homelands and placed in the holds of slaving vessels—and where, estimates suggest, one-third of the captives died en route to the Americas and the Caribbean—this project reveals the confluence of water, loss, and migration in African American culture. Not only did the waters of the Atlantic Ocean bring captives to the shores of America, the current of the Mississippi River carried the enslaved “down-river” to new and often harsher plantations and worksites, and, before the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, crossing the Ohio River signaled a deliverance from slavery.

For centuries, people have conceived of waterways as a symbolic link to human anatomy: “Were they not figured as *bodies* of water because, since antiquity, their flow was likened to the blood circulating through the body?” (Schama 247). While making use of this Platonic notion of watercourses conforming to the “universal law of circulation that governed

all forms of vitality” (Schama 247), and thus reading bodies of water as arteries pulsing, stretching, and providing life, this study considers the specificities of African American history, in which bodies were jeopardized and threatened in waterways. The African American expressive tradition construes bodies of water as haunted by the bodies of those who lost their lives in their currents. Water, then, the course of travel, marks severed paths to home, family, landscape, and even life, a demarcation that, according to Theodor Schwenk in his pioneering work in water and flow research, is inherent in the character of water: “Water’s flow constantly links life and death. It is the mediator between the two, and its surface provides a common frontier in nature where they meet” (23). It is the psychological (yet physically imperceptible) break in the waters that inaugurated a transatlantic culture. While not an empirical study of water, this book takes into account the politics and the poetry of water in the African American expressive tradition.

Bodies of water articulate a double registry of meaning, referring to oceans, rivers, lakes, and swamps and simultaneously to the human body, which is comprised primarily of water.

Every organ in the human organism is originally born of water: the forms of the joints, of the limbs with their convoluted bones, of heart and blood vessels, of ears, brain and sense-organs—the forms, in short, of all the functional systems . . . we can see in water a reflection, so to speak, of the human being. (Schwenk 153)

Indeed, as the central element of the body, comprising 70 percent of its mass, water is our life force:

One could say that each of us—every man, woman and child—is a small river; ebbing . . . flowing . . . seeking replenishment. A 1-percent deficiency of water in our body makes us thirsty, 5 percent causes a slight fever; at 10 percent we become immobile. A 12-percent loss of water and we die. There is no option, no alternative, no substitute. From the elderly to the young, the rivers within each of us need a continuous supply of clean, fresh water. (Swanson 9)

That our bodies are dependent on water suggests an interconnectedness that extends beyond the metaphorical. It is this materiality that forms the central core of this examination, as both living entities hold memory in

liquid form. Though there is no dispute that the human brain stores memory, the texts here posit other kinds of memory—blood and water memory—which transcend individual lived experiences.¹ August Wilson, for example, cites blood memory as the genesis for his creative expression, which he defines as a kind of racial memory that is corporeally inscribed. Wilson holds that the blood carries a collective memory, which allows a communion with something greater than himself, a connection with a shared African past.² That the body's essential life liquid is also the element of memory recalls Toni Morrison's reading of the Mississippi River, in which she argues that the earth's primary element is a seat of cultural memory:

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory—what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. And a rush of imagination is our "flooding." ("Site" 119)³

Drifting from place to people, Morrison affirms a shared consciousness among life forms in which geography is imprinted with memory. The simile that Morrison draws between writers and rivers advances the notion that humans, like bodies of water, are capable of flooding and that rivers, like humans, are creatures of memory. Recent scientific studies further the association between water and corporeal memory:

Many life forms occupying our planet at any given moment carry within their blood a chemical imprint of the place where they were born as well as the environment in which they have intercourse. As an example, marine scientists now have the ability to identify genetic markers and other features on fish to provide information heretofore unavailable. . . . the stream where any salmon is born can now be ascertained by examining its scales for the water's unique characteristics. (Marks 26)

Inasmuch as blood remembers the waters of import—home, coupling, and family—it is reasonable that Morrison would have us believe that the waters remember the body, too.

The aforementioned passage is from Morrison's "The Site of Memory," an essay that recalls Pierre Nora's concept of history and memory, *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory. Nora postulates that *lieux de memories* exist "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself as a particular historical moment" (284). What I want to suggest is that in African American cultural history, bodies of water are *lieux de mémoire*, embodied sites where memory and history converge. Because a *lieu de mémoire* is conveyed "verbally, kinetically, and visually" (O'Meally and Fabre 8), it is an apt paradigm for conceptualizing water—an element visually omnipresent, moving, living, and textually punctuated in the African American expressive tradition. Throughout the book, water, at once sensuous and abstract, geographically bounded and boundless, is an evocation of memory and history. Others have posited an inherent connection between memory and water: "The deep—chaos, the unconscious, pure potential—is also the place of memory. . . . 'Its briny surf and shifting sand correspond to a memory as deep as any we possess'" (Mittlefehldt 141). In African American literature, recovery of the past is frequently coterminous with a literal or symbolic return to the originary waters of the Atlantic Ocean. As a *lieu de mémoire* par excellence, the Middle Passage, the second leg of the triangular trade route, is always already present in bodies of water. The somatic description of the Middle Passage as the "second leg" is particularly evocative as water, either directly or obliquely, calls us to remember the millions who endured the enforced physical crossing over the moving waters of the Atlantic.

Tears, Mourning, and the Atlantic Ocean

The Middle Passage highlights the elision of geographic and human water bodies, as the transatlantic slave trade, beginning in West African interiors, took human bodies across smaller bodies of water—rivers and lakes—before crossing the Atlantic. It is tenable to employ the Middle Passage as the archetypal water crossing in African American letters, for "the geographical dimensions of a Middle Passage sensibility in the Americas" construct a map of African American culture (Diedrich, Gates, and

Pedersen 8). The sheer multitude of those who made the journey and those who died en route highlights water crossing as integral to black life:

In the four centuries of that triangular trade, ten to eleven million people—fifty or sixty thousand a year in the peak decades between 1700 and 1850—were packed beneath slave ship decks and sent to the New World. Indeed, up to the year 1820, five times as many Africans traveled across the Atlantic as did Europeans. And those numbers do not include the dead—the five percent of the human cargo who died in crossings that took three weeks, the quarter who died in crossings that took three months. (W. Johnson 4)

That death, as a result of disease, dehydration, and suicide, was common aboard these slaving vessels provides a nexus of water, mourning, and death. The underwater bones, marking the journey from Africa to America, are a material carrier of memory, one in which both the body and the ocean waters are transformed:

Nothing is safe from being changed by water. Whenever water comes into contact with other molecules, it begins to assimilate them. Be it rock, wood, plastic, glass, or whatever—the molecules in water push apart the atoms, surround them, and then put them into solution. It is for this reason that seawater contains all the elements known to humankind. Scientists have also discovered that seawater contains only eleven elements in concentrations exceeding 1/100th of a percent and, not surprisingly, these same elements are the top eleven that make up the human body. (Marks 25)

From a scientific standpoint, there is a molecular interconnectedness between humans and the sea; read through an African American historical prism, humans, who lost their lives in the currents, have, by their very materiality, changed the composition of the waters. Altering the bones that have lain on the ocean floor for centuries, the Atlantic is part of the ancestral past and thus inherent in the collective memory.⁴

Not only are bodies of water regarded as spatialized sites of memory in this study, but the drowned bodies are objective correlatives of submerged histories which continue to haunt the natural world. Kathleen Brogan, in her analysis of cultural haunting in American literature, provides a paradigm for mapped memory: