Copyright

by

Delia Sarah Byrnes

2015

The Report Committee for Delia Sarah Byrnes
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:

"It's All One Ghetto": Narrating the Petrochemical Plantation in HBO's *True Detective*

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor: ______________________________
Coleman Hutchison

____
Edward Allen MacDuffie

"It's All One Ghetto": Narrating the Petrochemical Plantation in HBO's *True Detective*

by

Delia Sarah Byrnes, B.A.

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2015

Acknowledgements

Warmest thanks to Coleman Hutchison for his generous insight, encouragement, mentorship, and humor. I would also like to thank Allen MacDuffie for his valuable feedback as a second reader, and Ashlyn Davis, fellow graduate student and petrochemical comrade, whose feedback on early drafts helped me clarify my ideas and recast the scope of my project. Finally, I want to express my appreciation for the wonderful friends I've met in Austin, and for my much-loved friends and family back home in Canada.

Abstract

"It's All One Ghetto": Narrating the Petrochemical Plantation in HBO's *True Detective*

Delia Sarah Byrnes, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Coleman Hutchison

The first season of HBO's 2014 anthology series *True Detective* has garnered much critical and popular praise for its generic innovation and intertextuality. Informed by recent work in the burgeoning field of petroculture studies, this essay argues that *True Detective*'s representation of Louisiana's oil industry is an understudied yet integral feature of the show's narrative of corruption, exploitation, and the erasure of personhood. While the detective plot fails to uncover and hold accountable the perpetrators of the occult murders that terrorize Louisiana's bayous, the series' ubiquitous petrochemical landscapes register the cumulative violence of industrial pollution as it segregates African American communities and slowly erodes the coastline. Drawing comparisons to the literary mode of plantation fiction and its themes of paternalist authority and pastoral nostalgia, this essay argues that *True Detective* replaces the trope of the plantation with the trope of the petrochemical. Through the "petrochemical plantation," the HBO series links Louisiana's antebellum histories of slavery with its "oily" futures, making legible the region's *longue durée* of exploitation.

Table of Contents

List of Figures vii

Introduction 1

Oily Bodies: *True Detective*'s Opening Title Sequence 7

True Detective's Plantation Legacy 16

The Petromantic Landscape 21

Paternalism and Petrochemicals 25

Race and Sprawl 33

Subsidence and Erasure 38

Occult Knowledges 42

The God's-Eye-View 45

Conclusion 50

Works Cited 53

List of Figures

Fig. 1: Still from opening title sequence of HBO's *True Detective*, 2014. Petroleum infrastructure obscures Detective Hart's face. 9

Fig. 2: Still from opening title sequence of HBO's *True Detective*, 2014. A neon cross, superimposed over a woman's hair, hovers above a glowing industrial skyline. 11

Fig. 3: Still from opening title sequence of HBO's *True Detective*, 2014. Detectives Hart and Cohle stand in silhouette against a hazy petrochemical skyline. 13

Fig. 4: Still from "The Locked Room," from HBO's *True Detective*, 2014. Detectives Hart and Cohle gaze across the bayou toward a refinery. 21

Fig. 5: Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog,* 1818. 23

Introduction

Since Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast in 2005, efforts to represent the traumatized communities and ecosystems of coastal Louisiana continue to proliferate. Recent portrayals of the embattled Gulf Coast, such as HBO's series *Treme* (2010-2013) and Benh Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), reflect a burgeoning interest in the ways in which ecologies of power inscribe themselves in the landscapes of the Bayou State. In January of 2014, HBO released a new series that thrusts the dissolving landscapes of southern Louisiana into the popular consciousness through the spectral presence of the petrochemical industry that perpetually looms on the horizon. Set throughout the state's remote bayous, *True Detective* follows two investigators, played by Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson, as they attempt to solve the ritual murder of Dora Lange, a young woman whose body is discovered in a burning sugarcane field in the early 1990s. We are introduced to Detectives Rustin Cohle, played by McConaughey, and Martin Hart, played by Harrelson, in the year 2012 (the diegetic present), as a recent crime prompts them to rehearse their investigation from nearly twenty years earlier. In the first episode, as Hart and Cohle drive away from the initial crime scene, Cohle observes, "I get a bad taste in my mouth out here… Aluminum, ash, like you can smell the psychosphere" ("The Long Bright Dark"). Gazing out the car window at petrochemical skylines, water-logged bayous, and precarious mobile homes, Cohle implicitly suggests that the materials and residue of petro-industry materialize the corruption lurking in the community. Even more importantly, the aluminum and ash wafting from the ubiquitous refinery flare stacks register on a bodily level the *spiritus mundi*, or "psychosphere," of American oil culture. The sensate experience of evil made manifest by these industrial substances recurs in the final episode, as the two men

approach the home of serial killer Errol Childress. Cohle remarks: "That taste. Aluminum, ash. I've tasted it before" ("Form and Void"). In this way, *True Detective* bookends its first season by registering Louisiana's signal petroleum industry through its permeation of the body.

The series, created and written by novelist Nic Pizzolatto, offers a postmodern interpretation of the hardboiled detective genre, and further draws on thematic and formal features of film-*noir* as it charts the unruly terrain of morality, postsecularism, and Nietzschean philosophy.[1] While several critics have celebrated *True Detective*'s generic experimentation, the series finale triggered a wave of disappointment, spanning professional critics, scholars, and popular audiences alike.[2] Cultural studies scholar Christopher Lirette, in his analysis of the "Louisiana apocalyptic noir" series, dismisses the final episode's emphasis on the southern imaginary, suggesting that *True Detective* "panders to the worst stereotypes of 'southerners' in cinematic history" (n. pag.).[3] Indeed, the finale hits all the markers of the "backwards South" in the American imaginary: the serial killer, driven by occult religious fanaticism, is a backwoods, overweight, uneducated white male living in a former plantation house and engaging in a sexual relationship with his developmentally-challenged half-sister. Yet despite the widespread recognition that the series draws on these exhausted caricatures of the US South, there

---

[1] For discussions of the series' generic innovations, see Nicola Masciandaro, "I Am Not Supposed to Be Here: Birth and Mystical Detection," *True Detection*, eds. Edia Connole, Paul J. Ennis, and Nicola Masciandaro (N.p.: Schism Press, 2014) 65-75. Additionally, see Pedro Cortes, "'True Detective' vs. Film Noir," *Salon* 25 Feb. 2014. Web. 5 May 2015.

[2] E.g. Spencer Kornhaber, Christopher Orr, and Amy Sullivan, "The *True Detective* Finale: That's It?" *The Atlantic*, 10 Mar. 2014. Web. 5 May 2015. Emily Nussbaum, "The Disappointing Finale of 'True Detective,'" *The New Yorker*, 10 Mar. 2014. Web. 5 May 2015.

[3] See also Maureen Ryan's review of the finale and its portrayal of Childress, which "played like a parody of Southern gothic tropes… as if the show didn't trust us to grasp the themes at work, it hit us over the head with them." "'True Detective' Finale Highs and Lows," *Huffington Post*, 10 Mar. 2014, Web. 5 May 2015.

has been little discussion of *True Detective*'s critical mobilization of these stereotypes. Consequently, we lose sight of the ways in which representations of a stereotypically "retrograde South" invoke the past to implicate the present. As historian Edward Ayers suggests, "Stories about the South tend to be stories about what it means to be modern" (47).

Despite the "backwards South" that informs much of *True Detective*, the series unfolds in the peculiarly futuristic—even post-apocalyptic—landscapes of southern Louisiana, lined with petrochemical plants, oil refineries, and the ever-present haze of industrial pollution. Indeed, virtually every review of the series notes the looming presence of its industrial backdrop.[4] Nevertheless, there remains no sustained critical discussion of the recurrent petrochemical aesthetic that structures *True Detective*. Lirette's short-form essay notes that the series exposes "petroleum conspiracy and ecocide" as the central threats in the narrative, and he saliently observes that the serial killer is enabled by the "machinations of power that lay pipe through the bayous" and drill for oil in coastal estuaries (n. pag.). Suggesting that *True Detective* charts an "uncanny geography" of a backwater Louisiana, Lirette offers a provocative introduction to the series' thematic imbrication of people and place.

Yet Lirette's discussion raises a pressing question: How can we responsibly narrate these geographies of "petroleum conspiracy" that prey on poor and predominantly

---

[4] For example, Maureen Ryan begins her short-form analysis with the questions: "What about the refineries? What do they mean?" She interprets the "metal monstrosities looming over swamps" through the trope of the corrupted Eden, ultimately suggesting that *True Detective* emerges as a "bayou *Blade Runner*" that depicts modern soullessness; in "'True Detective,' Flat Circles, and the Eternal Search for Meaning," *Huffington Post*, 24 Feb. 2014, Web. 18 April 2015. Elizabeth Donnelly notes that the industrial aesthetic of *True Detective* is "one of the most distinctive things about the show" in "'Petrochemical America': The Richard Misrach Photos that Inspired *True Detective*,'" *Flavorwire*, 7 Mar. 2014, Web. 4 May 2015. Additionally, Alexis C. Madrigal cites the series' "petrochemical landscape[s]" as an integral part of *True Detective*'s narrative, in "The Sacrificial Landscape of *True Detective*," *The Atlantic*, 7 Mar. 2014. Web. 2 February 2015.

African American communities in Louisiana—home to the largest concentration of refineries and petrochemical plants in the Western hemisphere? [5] If, as Bertolt Brecht famously remarked, "petroleum resists the five-act form," is it even possible to narrate oil's social, economic, and environmental impact (29)? Rob Nixon reminds us that the "slow violence" of environmental pollution, which overwhelmingly victimizes African Americans in the Gulf Coast, is neither "spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive," its insidiousness marked by an invisibility that poses a profound representational challenge (2-3). He asks, "How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making…? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention…?" (3).

While *True Detective* serves up a compelling and dramatic plot, it is ultimately a narrative of failed detection: the criminal cabal responsible for the occult murders that terrorize the coast systematically evades discovery. Indeed, a news report in the final minutes of the series announces that a police inquiry has formally discounted claims of political conspiracy. The plot itself suggests the futility of intervention. Yet this essay argues that the shifting, oil-soaked, landscapes of southern Louisiana mobilize *True Detective*'s politics of activism, rendering visible the "accretive" violence of the petrochemical industry in the Bayou State. If, as Timothy Mitchell suggests, "fossil fuels helped create both the possibility of modern democracy and its limits," a study of Louisiana's legacies of injustice demands that we attend to the petroleum ecologies of this most oily state (1).[6] Specifically, this essay suggests that in order to narrate the slow

---

[5] "Louisiana Industry," *Louisiana Division of Administration, State of Louisiana*, n.d. Web. 5 March 2015.

[6] A number of contemporary scholars working in the burgeoning field of petroculture studies echo Mitchell's claims. See Imre Szeman, "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster,"

violence of Louisiana's petrochemical industry, we must turn back our gaze to the antebellum southern plantation.

Charting *True Detective*'s representation of the "retrograde South," I argue that the series implicates itself in the literary tradition of the plantation novel. Crucially, however, *True Detective* trades the trope of the plantation for the trope of the petrochemical complex. In doing so, the series links Louisiana's plantation histories with its petrochemical futures as it makes legible the region's *longue durée* of exploitation. *True Detective*'s "petrochemical plantation" thus builds on recent histories of American capitalism that expose the foundational role of slave labor in the global economic dominance of the United States.[7] Mapped onto the Bayou State's antebellum legacies of violence, *True Detective*'s petrochemical aesthetic renders visible the specter of America's most barbaric energy regime—plantation slavery—as it haunts our "oily" modernity.

In order to illuminate *True Detective*'s negotiation of the contemporary petro-industrial complex and the ecologies of violence it perpetuates, I will begin by exploring the series' opening title sequence as an epigraph to the narrative. From this paratextual moment in the show, *True Detective* asserts the dominion of oil over bodies. Next, a discussion of the literary plantation mode contextualizes *True Detective*'s plantation ideologies, including pastoralism and paternalism. In the subsequent sections, I argue that *True Detective* thematizes the plantation's segregation and erasure of African Americans

---

South Atlantic Quarterly 106.4 (2007): 805-23. Also, Frederick Buell, "A Short History of Oil Cultures: Or, the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance." *Journal of American Studies* 46.2 (2012): 273-293.

[7] E.g. Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (New York: Verso, 2011), Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2013), Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), and Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

through the trope of urban sprawl and freeway infrastructure—perhaps the most iconic images of petro-modernity. Focusing in on Louisiana's Gulf Coast and the rapid subsidence of the wetlands, I then explore *True Detective*'s representation of the oily, dissolving terrain of the bayou. Spurred by the corrosive technologies of pipelines and offshore drilling, flood damage repeatedly erases archives and creates a landscape of occult knowledges that ultimately allows crime to flourish. The penultimate section explores *True Detective*'s recurrent use of aerial cinematography, arguing that the "God's-eye-view" both registers and subverts the imperialist ideologies that subtend the southern plantation. In the conclusion, I turn toward the petrochemical future, reflecting on the ways in which *True Detective*'s "petrochemical plantation" allows us to think anew our contemporary petroleum dependency.

Oily Bodies: *True Detective*'s Opening Title Sequence

At the threshold of *True Detective*'s narrative, the title sequence plunges the viewer into a water-logged Louisiana in which violence, corruption and petroleum tangle together. Though not part of the narrative proper, title sequences are an increasingly important way in which to read a serialized text, functioning as an epigraph that frames our introduction to the fictional world we enter. Taking up a minute-and-a-half of each episode, *True Detective*'s title sequence offers a collage of images that insist on interpreting the petrolized landscape of Louisiana through its impact on human bodies.[8] An analysis of the sequence further reveals metonyms of "the South" superimposed on images of petro-industry. This formal and thematic double-exposure suggests a link between the power wrought and enabled by Louisiana's oil industries and the ways in which we understand the southern imaginary and its plantation legacies. The critical trend in analyses of *True Detective* privileges fundamental character distinctions between the two protagonists, casting Cohle as a cosmic nihilist and Hart as a good ol' boy, or as he describes himself in the first episode, a "regular type dude, with a big ass dick."[9] Yet the opening sequence and its emphasis on dissolving bodies suggests that within the broader ecologies of Louisiana's petroleum complex, character loses its definitions and environment takes dominion.

Drawing heavily on landscape photographer Richard Misrach's series *Petrochemical America*, *True Detective*'s titles sequence invokes the haunted landscapes

---

[8] Here I borrow Kate Orff's concept of the "petrolization" of the Louisiana landscape (Misrach and Orff 127).

[9] E.g. Lirette, n. pag. Also, see psychiatrist Dale Archer's analysis of each character, in "True Detective: The Psychology of Hart and Cohle," *Psychology Today*, 26 Jan. 2014. Web. 5 May 2015.

of contemporary Louisiana's "Cancer Alley" to frame the narrative.[10] In doing so, it illustrates the striking juxtaposition of domestic and industrial spaces that defines the landscapes of the Bayou State. Furthermore, the title sequence insists on the thematic relationship between the Industrial Corridor of the Mississippi River in eastern Louisiana, and the coastal terrain that forms the backdrop of the HBO series. A hazy grey photograph begins the sequence: in the center of the wide-angle frame, we make out the shape of an industrial plant, partially obscured by a murky cloud. A crop field takes up the bottom half of the image, and we are positioned in front of a well-worn path, at eye-level with the building; the photograph is titled *Sugar Cane and Refinery, Mississippi River Corridor, 1998*. Even without the explicitness of its title, the image forges an uneasy connection between the ominous refinery, which appears in the image as a "busted up Emerald City," and the racial legacies of the plantation South, of which sugarcane harvesting was the most notoriously brutal and back-breaking staple crop regime (Lirette n. pag.). From this perspective, the viewer's entrance into the Louisiana of *True Detective* is informed by a fusion of the twin industries of exploitation that have historically laid claim to the Bayou State—plantation slavery and oil. A moment later, the silhouette of Matthew McConaughey's character emerges, superimposed over the refinery before dissolving into the subsequent shot. As the fleeting profile of the detective's face emerges, the landscape becomes more saturated and pronounced, as if asserting its domain: bodies are ephemeral, while the petro-industrial complex is immutable. A subsequent image features another of Misrach's photographs, titled *Home and Grain Elevator, Destrehan, Louisiana, 1998*. Depicting a modest single-storey house dwarfed by a behemoth industrial building, the image visualizes the unusual proximity of

[10] "Cancer Alley" designates the 150-mile stretch of the lower Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans and is home to over 125 petrochemical companies.

industrial and domestic spaces that characterizes much of Louisiana and its fenceline communities.[11]

Whether through superimposition or visual bisection, *True Detective*'s title sequence insists on the imbrication of people and oil. A subsequent frontal shot of McConaughey is split in half, with the left side of his body replaced by the hazy scaffolding of refining machinery. Drawing on the European pattern of visual perception wherein our eyes scan an image from left to right, the white vacuum that composes the left side of his body (the right side of the picture for viewers) intimates the dissolution of his identity into a petrochemical fog. Similarly, a frontal close-up of Harrelson's

Fig. 1: Still from opening title sequence of HBO's *True Detective*, 2014. Petroleum infrastructure obscures Detective Hart's face.

[11] Environmental historian Barbara Allen notes that while Louisiana is certainly not the only petroleum-intensive state in the US, nor even along the Gulf Coast, it has a distinctive history of property-ownership that resulted in the unprecedented proximity of petro-industry to neighboring communities. The French *arpent* system of land distribution in the Bayou State, which comprised long, thin strips of land, meant that when petrochemical corporations began operations on former plantations along the Mississippi's River Road, their facilities did not provide the requisite "safe zone" between industry and residences mandated by environmental policy agencies (*Uneasy Alchemy* 7-8).

character is partially obscured by a black-and-white silhouette of a refinery that fills the top half of his face and obliterates his head from the eyes upward (fig. 1). As the image begins to dissolve into the next, a map of the Mississippi River traces the outline of Hart's head, charting the extent to which place defines identity. This multi-layered image insinuates the petrochemical complex's erosion of personhood; Louisiana's ever-expanding petroleum industry consumes those who co-exist on its terrain. Furthermore, the double-exposure suggests that the bodies inhabiting Louisiana's petro-landscapes are always already oily with the feedstock and byproducts of crude that drain into the Mississippi.

Subsequent images, such as Misrach's *Trailer Home and Natural Gas Tanks, Good Hope Street, Norco, Louisiana, 1998*, further intimate the connection between poverty and petroleum production in Louisiana.[12] In a particularly evocative shot, the image of a flare stack covers Cohle's head; only as the flames leap upward are we able to make out the contours of the former detective's face. Moments later, a double-exposure shot presents an aerial image of a labyrinthine freeway system superimposed over Detective Hart's face. This image marks a shift from the rural communities that live in the shadows of Louisiana's petroleum industry to the infrastructure of petro-modernity: the freeway. Through the juxtaposition of bodies and industry, the sequence suggests that the cumulative violence of American oil culture is rendered visible only through its impact on geographies of the body.

Toward the end of *True Detective*'s title sequence, an image of a desolate house that appears to have been abandoned mid-construction evokes the empty promise of community rebuilding in embattled southeastern Louisiana. Misrach's *New Housing*

[12] Norco, Louisiana in St. Charles Parish derives its name from the New Orleans Refining Company. It is the site of one of Shell's largest petroleum refineries.

Construction, Paulina, Louisiana, 2010 appears on the screen, showing an unfinished white house with darkened windows against a foggy background. Behind it is another house under development, but nothing is visible beyond these two vacant structures, only dense fog; there are no signs of life, habitation, or activity. The image emerges from within a shot of Detective Hart's wary face; moments later, both are engulfed in sparks and flames. Through this layering of images, the sequence speaks of the false starts and vacant promises of federal community-rebuilding efforts in the wake of Hurricane Katrina's destruction of the Gulf Coast.

Interspersed throughout the opening sequence, stereotypes of the South emerge and forge a thematic link between the excesses of southern culture and the excesses of the

Fig. 2: Still from opening title sequence of HBO's *True Detective*, 2014. A neon cross, superimposed over a woman's hair, hovers above a glowing industrial skyline.

petroleum industry. In one shot, a developmentally-challenged man raises his arms in a gesture of fanatical religiosity as a landscape overwhelmed by swirling clouds emerges

behind him. A subsequent image echoes this shot as a seemingly evangelical family stands in prayer, the son's arms stretched upward in a gesture of surrender. Ostensibly standing in a church, the modest-looking family is enclosed within the image of an upside-down natural-gas tank against a velvety night sky. In another image, a stripper in a bodysuit emblazoned with the American flag dances under a looming black mass of industrial infrastructure that slowly pushes her out of the frame. A subsequent image presents a multi-layered shot of a woman's naked upper-body and face, rendered against a white background (fig. 2). A neon cross hovers in her black hair and the orange glow of a nighttime petrochemical skyline lingers below it. The woman is illumined by on-camera flash, a lighting technique that evokes the seaminess of an illicit Polaroid. The neon cross emerges as an emblem of "trashy" southern excess, at once pious and garish. Beneath it, the petrochemical skyline with its twin glowing towers eerily recalls a densely urban city at night, yet the infrastructure of the petroleum complex is a city devoid of humans—indeed, a "city" that displaces humans. As the massive-scale neon cross hovers over this industrial skyline, the image implicates corrupted religiosity in the sprawl of Louisiana's petroleum infrastructure. Visible only through the body of the woman, this shot further suggests that the nexus of oil and southern religiosity in *True Detective* is only legible through the spectacle of exploited bodies.

The closing image of the title sequence, on which the camera lingers for several seconds, positions the two detectives against the industrial skyline of coastal Louisiana (fig. 3). We see a long shot in which the two men, standing on either side of a parked car, occupy the bottom third of the screen and stand in relief against a clouded background. What at first appear to be the tops of buildings peek out from behind them. As the camera pans upward, we recognize the hazy structures as oil refineries, which take up the entire horizon of the frame. The shot employs an unusual juxtaposition of deep space that

emphasizes both the distance and interconnection of the two planes in the frame. Hyper-

Fig. 3: Still from opening title sequence of HBO's *True Detective*, 2014. Detectives Hart and Cohle stand in silhouette against a hazy petrochemical skyline.

stylized high-key lighting imbues the refinery complex with a dream-like feel, with the two central characters appearing as darkened silhouettes against it. While Detective Hart turns away from the industrial skyline and toward the viewer, he appears to scan the landscape in front of him for clues. His hunched posture gestures toward the ultimately failed venture of his detection. In contrast, Cohle angles himself toward the sprawling oily skyline with his detective ledger in front of him. Crucial in his staging is his partial turn toward the petroleum complex: Cohle does not confront the machinations of Louisiana's oil industry head on. Rather, his placement in the frame suggests a subtle recognition that the sprawling petrochemical industry of Louisiana, opaque in this final image, must be reckoned with obliquely through its effects on both the landscapes and human bodies of the bayou.

In addition to the evocative staging of the detectives' bodies, the visual weight of the car positioned between the men signals its crucial significance throughout the narrative. Not surprisingly for a detective series, the car is a primary site of reflection and discussion for Hart and Cohle; a large amount of their screen time is spent in the gas-guzzling vehicle as they endlessly traverse the rural communities of southern Louisiana and venture into eastern Texas. Yet, while it is standard fare for a mystery series to film detectives from within their car, *True Detective* only films Hart and Cohle from outside the vehicle, filtered through the passenger- and driver-side windows. Consequently, the two men are only ever visible through the reflections of the landscapes they chart: barren cypress trees, telephone poles that eerily resemble crosses, and petroleum skylines zig-zag across their faces, rendering them illegible outside the context of their surroundings.

Furthermore, the car in *True Detective* forecasts the protagonist's ultimately failed detective work. Throughout the series, we see the detectives' investigation interrupted—even thwarted—by the unnavigable landscapes around them, such as the burned-down church in the second episode that almost eludes them due to its location off the grid. While automobiles often emblematize the limitless expansion and freedom conferred by oil modernity (such as the classic "road movies" of the 1970s), the failure of the detectives' car to mine the shifting, swampy landscapes of southern Louisiana constrains rather than liberates Hart and Cohle. The detectives cruise around the Bayou State's coastline in seemingly endless circles of failed leads and dead ends—and undoubtedly burn through numerous tanks of gasoline in the process. Warily traversing the state in the emblem of oil culture—the car—Hart and Cohle's investigative skills are predicated on the organizing logic of roads. The men are constantly confronted with the inadequacy of this infrastructure to expose the guilty, whose occult knowledges of the ever-shifting bayou terrain eludes the detectives' cartographies.

The uncertainty and wariness of the detectives' efforts recalls Timothy Morton's "dark ecology" and its recuperation of hesitation and irony in ecological thought. Indeed, Morton suggests that the ideal form of dark ecology is the *noir* film, in which the narrator begins an investigation from an assumed position of neutrality only to realize his or her complicity (16-17). Ultimately, neither Hart nor Cohle are directly involved in the occult murders that terrorize the coast. Nevertheless, their constant association with the automobile and its inability to penetrate the landscapes of the Bayou State reveal their broader complicity in the oily ecologies of the region that slowly erode the coast.

True Detective's Plantation Legacy

Given the centrality of landscapes in *True Detective*, Louisiana's real-world topographies uncover the stakes of the series' representational politics. The Bayou State, among other states of the Lower South, has a particularly troubling history of repurposing its former plantations for both commercial and state-subsidized uses.[13] Descriptions of the contemporary Louisiana landscape often invoke the language of opposites, such as "chaotic mixture" and "juxtaposition," to describe the peculiar melding of petro-industry, sugarcane fields, and antebellum plantation houses. Yet the confluence of these features is anything but chaotic: it speaks to a shared genealogy of exploitation and the colonial roots of global capitalism. Indeed, some of the plantations that still stand along Louisiana's River Road, such as the famed San Francisco Plantation, are themselves "oily" with subsidizations from petroleum corporations such as Marathon Oil. Furthermore, a vast quantity of petrochemical plants along Louisiana's notorious "Cancer Alley" are built on former plantations, such as the behemoth Dow Chemical complex, the largest petrochemical company in the state, which lays claim to an industrial sprawl of over fifteen-hundred acres across the parishes of Iberville and West Baton Rouge. Reflecting on the state's unusual landscape, literary scholar Jessica Adams observes: "the oil tanks and acres of cane serve as reminders that neither the disturbing past nor the unsavory present of this land will submit to total erasure" ("Local Color" 175). Lying at the nexus of Louisiana's "disturbing past" and "unsavory present," the spectral plantation looms on the landscape, offering a site through which to narrate Louisiana's two most lucrative and exploitative energy regimes: plantation slavery and oil.

---

[13] For example, the Louisiana State Penitentiary, informally known as Angola, stands on the grounds of the former Angola Plantation, with its slave cabins turned into present-day dormitories. For an in-depth discussion of the contemporary cultural landscape of Angola prison, see Jessica Adams, *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory and Property on the Postslavery Plantation* (135-158).

While the title sequence of *True Detective* explores oil's permeation of bodies and homes in Louisiana's watery landscapes, the ecologies of power that emerge through the narrative evoke the plantation novel. Although the energy regimes of the slave plantation and the modern petrochemical industry are separated by over a century, literary scholar Michael Bibler reminds us of the ubiquitous presence of the plantation myth in American culture. He argues that plantation narratives assert themselves in a range of cultural sites that may otherwise "have nothing to do with the plantation, or slavery, or the South, or even the issue of race" (234). Plantation fiction, a subgenre of the literary pastoral, traces its roots to the dawn of British colonialism in the New World, though the genre is particularly associated with the nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth centuries. A central assumption of plantation fiction, notes John Grammer, is the belief that plantation hierarchies are "ordained by nature" (74). In 1936, two of the most memorable examples of plantation fiction crystallized the genre, representing in vastly different ways the supposed inscription of social hierarchies in the pre-Civil War landscapes of the Lower South. Margaret Mitchell's Civil War epic, *Gone with the Wind*, evokes the nostalgic pastoralism of the antebellum South. With its iconic columned houses and its belles and cavaliers, the novel and subsequent film adaptation portray a noble aristocracy struggling to preserve an embattled way of life. In contrast, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* implicates white southern nostalgia for the plantation past as it ruptures the belief that the plantation's racial hierarchies are "ordained by nature." Both novels—emblems of the genre—compellingly illustrate the centrality of the landscape in plantation ideologies.

Plantation fiction's emphasis on landscape offers a valuable framework through which to explore Louisiana's contemporary petrochemical industry in *True Detective*. The series invokes the plantation imaginary through two integral and interconnected themes: pastoralism and paternalism. When we recall twentieth-century plantation

fiction, the most salient theme is nostalgia for a controllable landscape from which social hierarchies seemed to organically grow. Scholars of rural life, such as Raymond Williams, define the pastoral tradition by its juxtaposition of the pleasures of agrarian living alongside a constant "threat of loss and eviction" (17). Similarly, Lucinda MacKethan reminds us that plantation fiction, tracing its roots to the pastoral of Virgil's *Eclogues*, relies on a "past" in which the natural world is perceived as inherently good, manageable, and populated by a sense of community (n. pag.). Crucially, plantation logic is wholly inseparable from the landscapes that enable it (Grammer 59). From this perspective, the centrality of pastoralism to the plantation mode insists on the constitutive role of landscapes in *True Detective*'s narrative. Where the plantation imaginary offers gentle agrarian landscapes, glistening crop fields, and columned mansions as a "refuge from modernity" (Grammer 62), *True Detective* displaces the plantation house and its acres of sugarcane with the omnipresence of petrochemical plants, refineries, and the ubiquitous pipelines that are "carving up this coast like a jigsaw," as Detective Cohle observes ("The Locked Room").

True Detective establishes its ironic relationship to the pastoral tradition from the first moments of the narrative proper. Following the title sequence, the initial image that appears onscreen shows a shadowy, amorphous figure stalking through a field against a black sky; moments later, we see a lone tree and a line of fire reaching out into the darkness. Several scenes later, when we are taken back to this location in the context of the ritual murder staged here, an aerial shot draws us over a meticulously ordered expanse of fields, green and lush. The only interruption of this pastoral landscape is a white line of exhaust from the detectives' car as they hasten toward the crime scene. This second image of the car, following the closing shot of the title sequence, again forecasts the corruptive power of oil modernity as it disrupts the landscapes of rural Louisiana.

Registering the murder that has taken place here, the Eden of the pastures, we discover in retrospect, has been engulfed in flames, recalling the trope of "the garden" as a lost paradise. Through its use of the visual vocabulary of pastoral painting, including warm greens and burnished golds, modest agriculture, a cradling perspective, and the implicit dominion of humans over nature, *True Detective* insists from its opening scenes that we interpret through its landscapes a profound anxiety over a vanishing Arcadia.

Furthermore, the abandoned and unpeopled townscapes that flash past the car windows recall the pastoral narrative of declension and its anxieties about a disappearing "way of life." In one scene, as Cohle and Hart return to their car, we follow them across a desolate parking lot surrounded by boarded up or uninhabited storefronts; their car is the only vehicle in the lot. "This place looks like someone's memory of a town," Rust remarks. "And the memory's fading. Looks like there was never anything here but jungle" ("The Long Bright Dark"). This remark presents a crucial reworking of the plantation novel's characteristic nostalgia. Rather than focusing on traditionally pastoral images (sun-dappled landscapes, humans in harmony with nature, convivial family relations), the nostalgia is distinctly ironic. Cohle's observation eulogizes the lost landscapes of commerce and motor culture, even as it invokes the anxiety that nature will quickly reclaim itself and return to "jungle" without human intervention.

An evangelical tent revival in the third episode further connects the landscapes of the bayou and a nostalgia for a disappearing way of life. "The Locked Room" begins with a sweeping panoramic shot of the Louisiana bayou at sunset, where dusky oranges and reds reflect in the water. Following a subsequent survey of a burned-down church, we are transported to a tent revival where a drawling minister preaches to a rapt audience of locals. Hart, describing the sermon as an example of "old-time religion," bristles at Cohle's condescension toward the all-white, visibly poor crowd, who cheer along with

the sermon. This is one of a series of conversations between the two men that set up their initial characterizations: Hart is a relatively straight-laced family man, born and raised in southern Louisiana; he is an ostensible Christian with a penchant for adultery and bouts of binge-drinking. In contrast, Cohle embodies the skeptical, secular perspective: he is widely-read in philosophy, anthropology, and science, the embodiment of postmodern man. Following Cohle's indictment of the parishioners, Hart retorts that "some folks enjoy community, the common good." Here the sequence of shots from a pastoral rendering of the idyllic landscape to the "old-time religion" of the tent revival forges a link between the landscape and the nostalgia for the "common good" that defines the plantation as a "refuge from modernity" in the southern imaginary. Following a dialogue in which Cohle scorns the rural Louisianans' "propensity for obesity, poverty" and their "yen for fairy tales," the detectives meet with a handful of parishioners to inquire after Dora Lange and a mysterious man who often accompanied her to the tent revivals. A particularly compelling scene shows Hart, flanked by two young women in modest, old-fashioned dress; they are framed in a long shot that emphasizes the verdure of the landscape behind them, creating another visual linkage of the landscape with embattled conservative, down-home religious values.

The Petromantic Landscape

Reflecting on the narrative of social declension that subtends plantation fiction, Grammer observes, “one can almost always detect, on the horizon, if not directly overhead, a cloud of historical doom” (59). An analysis *of True Detective*’s aesthetics of oil exposes the “cloud of historical doom” hovering over this contemporary plantation zone as a cumulus mass of petrochemicals. As the detectives leave the revival tent, the show plucks us from the agrarian Arcadia on which the tent revival stands and thrusts us

Fig. 4: Still from “The Locked Room,” from HBO’s *True Detective*, 2014. Detectives Hart and Cohle gaze across the bayou toward a refinery.

into a post-apocalyptic landscape of industry and smog. In a lingering long shot, Detectives Hart and Cohle stand on either side of their parked car, facing away from us (fig. 4). An echo of the title sequence’s closing image, the men are roughly centered in

the frame as if presiding over the landscape they gaze at. Gold-tinged greenery in the foreground contrasts sharply with the washed-out greys of the refineries in the background. Employing deep space, the shot insists on a formal link between the viewers, the men who stand as our surrogates in the landscape, and the petroleum industry hovering on the horizon.

Through *True Detective*'s romantic aesthetics, the Bayou State's petroleum complex mirrors the antebellum plantation imaginary. Rendered in a nostalgic sepia cast, this shot again conjures the pastoral fantasy of authority over the landscape and recalls the iconic representation of Tara Plantation in Victor Fleming's adaptation of *Gone with the Wind*. The petroleum complex in this image does not oppress its observers, but rather, emerges as a seemingly natural part of the landscape that comfortingly attests to humankind's dominion; it is not threatening or unruly, but merely a testament to human progress. One of the crucial features of the plantation genre is its ability to "confer the prestige of nature" on social arrangements, so that the orderly cultivation of crops becomes the *de facto* vindication of the plantation's racial hierarchies (Grammer 59). *True Detective* both formally and thematically evokes this nostalgic longing for dominion. In the previous image of the detectives, the petrochemical buildings, much like the southern plantation, appear to simply manifest humankind's natural and orderly authority over nature.

Furthermore, the image of the detectives is a striking visual echo of German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich's iconic 1818 work *Wanderer above the Sea of*

Fog (fig. 5), which presents its human subject in an almost identical position within the

Fig. 5: Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog,* 1818.

frame as that of Detective Cohle. Friedrich's painting embodies a tension between the pastoral and the sublime that crucially illuminates the detectives' encounter with the petrochemical landscape in *True Detective*. Depicting a man dressed in black, turned away from us and perched authoritatively on a dark cluster of rocks, Friedrich's Wanderer gazes at a hazy scene of untamed wilderness. The opacity of the vista in front

of him signals its sublimity, as the faint craggy rocks jutting out of the mist elude his grasp. Nevertheless, the positionality of the Wanderer's body bespeaks a sense of authority over the scene in front of him. Standing in the very center of the frame, the mountains rise up symmetrically on either side of the man, while the rocks on which he stands reach their apex directly beneath him: the human subject of the painting is thus the organizing center of the image. Detective Cohle, much like Friedrich's Wanderer, gazes at the elusive landscape of petro-industry before him in a stance that suggests both contemplation and authority.

Despite the oppressive weight of the petro-industrial complex as it commands the landscapes of Louisiana, the shot of the detectives presiding over the polluted skyline insists on rendering the oil industry through a romantic cast. Consequently, the industrial buildings emerge as if organic to the landscape; the asymmetrical power structures that determine Louisiana's industry thus become aesthetically naturalized. Yet unlike the representation of Friedrich's Wanderer, *True Detective* invokes the visual trope of the Romantic hero only to subvert it: the myriad flare stacks of the processing plants are the highest points of the image and occupy the far right of the frame, commanding the viewer's gaze. Furthermore, the magnet at the center of the image is neither the detective nor the petrolized skyline, but rather their car. Once again, the centrality of the car signals the detectives' inevitable complicity in the oily culture at which they gaze.

Paternalism and Petrochemicals

While pastoralism uncovers the plantation aesthetics in *True Detective*, paternalism exposes the themes of corruption that structure the narrative. Plantation paternalism may at first glance seem a symptom of a bygone era in American history, yet literary critics and historians alike have uncovered its foundational role in contemporary systems of economic power. Jeremy Wells argues that the antebellum institution is a crucible of American imperialism: the plantation, he argues, "made men fit for empire" (180-181).[14] Rather than trying to thematize the distant corporate corruption that constitutes so many critiques of globalization, *True Detective* represents the absolute power in Louisiana as paternalistic. In doing so, it renders visible the genealogy of plantation patriarchy that resonates in the state's petroleum industry. America's love affair with oil may well lie at the nexus of the nation's global relations. Yet the refinement and chemical processing of black gold in Louisiana exploits and displaces the state's poor and predominantly African American communities in ways that eerily recall the southern plantation.

True Detective's narrative stretches from the Mississippi across southern Louisiana and into eastern Texas, yet many of the shooting locations for the series are along the Mississippi River in oil-soaked towns. Indeed, the legacies of the river's petrochemical industry reverberate throughout the state and echo in the petrolized ecologies of the Louisiana Gulf Coast—and the nation at large: landscape architect Kate Orff suggests that "America's consumption patterns can be traced to the landscape of Cancer Alley" (Misrach and Orff 129). As she links America's consumption patterns

[14] Similarly, Paul Gilroy argues in his study of the black Atlantic that the plantation laid the groundwork for global capitalism. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993) 54-55. Print.

with the micro-region of the lower Mississippi River, Orff participates in the broader body of scholarship that insists on implicating the nation in the exploitative energy regimes that have fuelled Louisiana's economies since the 1700s. From this perspective, the knotty plantation and petrochemical histories of the river help to illuminate the series' representation of Louisiana landscapes.

Louisiana's social and economic history further implicates the petroleum industry in the genealogy of the Plantation South. The history of energy production in what is currently Louisiana dates back to the introduction of chattel slavery by French colonists in the early 1700s, when plantation owners began to exploit slave labor to bolster the sugarcane economy of the lower state. Sugar was Louisiana's primary export prior to the Civil War, and remains a staple of its current agricultural economy. In the wake of the American Civil War and Reconstruction, many African Americans were granted land along the Mississippi River. In places like Ascension Parish, large extended families of freed slaves were deeded sizeable land grants for the purposes of subsistence farming. The former plantations were, in turn, parceled off and sugarcane was re-planted in the fields. The abolition of slavery in the 1860s catalyzed a nation-wide search for alternative forms of cheap energy in order to sustain the wealth begot by forced labor. From the energy of slaves to the energy of fossil fuel, 1901 marked the discovery of rich crude oil deposits in Louisiana, which bubbled to the surface the same year that a gusher in Spindletop, Texas inaugurated the so-called American Century.[15]

Today, the towns in this parish are among "the most polluted places in the United States" (Allen, "Narrating" 188). Alongside the booming petrochemical industry that took off in the 1950s, sugarcane remained a staple of the landscape even as refineries and

---

[15] Andrew Nikiforuk discusses the history of American slavery within the context of energy regimes, suggesting that coal and oil were the often-overlooked allies of the abolition movement. *The Energy of Slaves: Oil and the New Servitude* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2012).

chemical plants bought out former plantations. To this day, petroleum industries frequently plant and harvest sugarcane in order to accrue tax write-offs for the industry-owned property not immediately used by the chemical plants (Allen, "Narrating" 191). The town of Vacherie in St. James Parish, which provided the shooting location for the cane fields in which Dora Lange's body is discovered, is home to the famed Oak Alley Plantation, one of the most popular and tourist-saturated antebellum estates throughout the southern US. In addition to drawing in thousands of plantation tourists each year, Vacherie also boasts a massive petrochemical industry and a forthcoming $1.85 billion dollar methanol complex. By choosing to film in this location, *True Detective* implicitly invokes the multi-layered histories of plantation- and petrochemical violence. Indelibly inscribed in the landscapes of the Bayou State, these legacies haunt the aesthetics of the show.

One of the central ways in which the series invokes the plantation past is through the theme of paternalism and the trope of the patriarchal family. Particularly from the 1930s onward, the family functioned as the central symbol that "shaped the entire plantation world" in the southern imaginary (Bibler 32). These "pseudofamilial relations," to borrow Bibler's term, underwrite the power relations that structure *True Detective*. In the first episode of the series, we encounter Reverend Tuttle, Louisiana's powerful evangelical ministry magnate, as he makes an appearance at the local precinct to discuss the inauguration of a special task force aimed at crimes with an "anti-Christian connotation" ("The Long Bright Dark"). Moments after he departs from the police station, we learn that he is first cousin to state governor Edwin Tuttle.[16] As *True Detective* unfolds, it exposes a tangled web of corruption and complicity, in which the

[16] The fictional governor's name recalls the actual elected official, Edwin Edwards, who governed Louisiana across four terms spanning two decades between the 1970s and 1990s, and was himself no stranger to charges of political corruption.

unacknowledged descendants of the patriarch Sam Tuttle dominate both sides of the criminal justice system. For instance, Ted Childress, an unacknowledged son of Sam Tuttle, was a former parish sheriff who systematically erased and forged police records. Likewise, Childress's son (and Sam Tuttle's grandson) is Errol Childress, the serial killer who emerges in the final episode of the show through a Faulknerian revelation of familial secrets.

True Detective's portrayal of familial relations invokes the specter of the southern plantation and its constitutive paternalist logic, with Reverend Tuttle emerging as the contemporary face of Louisiana's plantation past. Following a session in the police department in which Detectives Hart and Cohle brief their colleagues on the murder of Dora Lange, the captain of the unit introduces the two detectives to Tuttle, who, he explains, "runs our statewide charity drive" ("The Long Bright Dark"). From the viewer's first introduction to Tuttle, the paternalistic minister is linked via money to the state law enforcement agency. An imposing physical presence, Tuttle stands before the detectives in a finely-tailored suit complete with silk tie and pocket square, gold-rimmed glasses, and carefully coiffed hair. Evoking a younger Billy Graham, Tuttle earnestly presses his fingertips together in front of him and performs his brand of southern gentility. He explains to the detectives that the recent crime has "Eddie," the governor, very concerned. He subsequently laments that the spectacle of the body in the cane fields has "people taking care, doors locking where they used to not." Crucially, Tuttle's concern is not for the murdered woman, nor even the safety of the town; his lament is for a dying way of life, a nostalgia for a sense of rural community now ruptured by fear and paranoia. Recalling the "deep structure" of social declension that underwrites the southern pastoral, Reverend Tuttle here emerges as a virtual pastoral patriarch (Grammer 59). His coastal Arcadia, it seems, is now tragically vulnerable to intrusion, and he bemoans the vanishing

values of communal trust that once cradled the region. In doing so, Tuttle embodies the central trope of "burdened white manhood" that informs plantation fiction (Wells 143).

Reverend Tuttle's first and single visit to the precinct to share Governor Tuttle's "concern" over the ritual murder is staged as an exercise in power: from his crisp dark suit to his gently authoritative demeanor, his magisterial presence echoes a plantation master's directions to an overseer, where the pretext of paternalistic concern masks the fear of waning authority. Cohle voices his frustration as Tuttle walks out of earshot. A colleague glances at the detective and quips, "That's the sound of the Big Machine gearing up to pound your ass" ("The Long Bright Dark"). While the officer's comment is clearly spoken in jest, the reference to Billy Lee and Edwin Tuttle as the "Big Machine" will resonate throughout the series: the authoritarian power they embody permeates the landscapes and emerges as a nexus of corruption, where religion, law enforcement, industry and government collide.

In addition to the Tuttle-Childress family tree, however, the series implicates the social structures of Louisiana in a web of systemic corruption involving all levels of state government. As the detectives drive into the hinterlands of the coastal community to inquire after the victim in a trailer park brothel, Detective Hart can barely hide his disgust as he stares at the clusters of young woman in scant clothing. During an encounter with the nonchalant madam of the "bunny ranch," Marty remarks on the business's illegality. The unnamed woman warns him to speak to the police before making accusations: "The sheriff's got a stake in this place, too," she explains ("Seeing Things"). These tangled connections are clearly signified as family relations, in which the sprawling roots of the Tuttle's family tree stretch and twist beneath the coastal landscapes of Louisiana and organize its legal and extralegal structures. In reality, Louisiana has historically held claim to a number of the strongest and most influential governors in the United States,

who possess a remarkable amount of power to influence legislation (Allen, *Uneasy Alchemy* 164n17). Furthermore, the state is well-known for its "professional" state legislature, which sees elected officials remain in office for multiple terms; Allen notes that the often lifetime terms of Louisiana's elected officials resemble "a king and his court" (*Uneasy Alchemy* 164n18).

Invoking the authoritarian power of a monarch, an episode tellingly titled "Haunted Houses" portrays the Tuttle Ministries' headquarters through the conventions of the plantation "big house." As mounting incongruities in the murder case and whisperings of missing children stir Cohle's suspicion toward Reverend Tuttle, he disregards his captain's orders and goes to visit Tuttle at his ministry. Grand double doors open into a large, immaculate room where Tuttle sits behind an oversized desk, the lush countryside seen through the window framing him with an aura of verdure. A cut to a profile shot of Tuttle reveals a neon blue cross on the wall adjacent to his desk, as if to signify the perversion of his Christian faith through the most garish of modern inventions. Crucially, this neon cross is a visual echo of the opening title sequence, in which an identical neon blue cross hangs over a glowing petrochemical skyline. While Detective Cohle is ultimately unable to implicate Tuttle in time to prevent a slew of subsequent murders, the neon cross provides an urgent clue for the audience, reminding us of the entanglements of religiosity, petro-industry, and the exploitation of bodies that punctuate the series' visual epigraph.

The "burden" of white manhood that Tuttle earnestly exudes reaches beyond the patriarchal evangelist and into the domestic lives of *True Detective*'s characters. In the first episode, Detective Hart meditates on the overwhelming responsibility of being a law enforcement agent. The "burden of authority, of vigilance" that underlies the role of a detective is, as Hart suggests, "like a father's burden" ("The Long Bright Dark"). The

narration here is layered over an image of a naked woman's mutilated body in a sugarcane field. The mention of a "father's burden" uneasily recalls the paternalism so often invoked as an apology for the plantation system: the honorable and genteel responsibility to guide those assumed incapable of taking care of themselves—namely women and blacks. Yet even as the series invokes paternalist rhetoric to describe the burdens of law enforcement, Hart's narration, again echoing above a woman's lifeless body, belies the protective power invested in a "father's burden."

In a more disturbing sequence of events, *True Detective* implicates the corrosive patriarchal corruption that defines the social structures of Louisiana in the indoctrination of Hart's daughters. Following Hart's return from the Lange crime scene, we see him walk down the hallway of his house, drink in hand, as he summons his young daughters for dinner ("The Long Bright Dark"). They jump up from their playing on the bedroom floor and run past him, and we see Hart's eyes linger on the scene they were staging with their dolls: a naked Barbie doll lies spread-eagled on the ground; a male doll kneels between her legs, staged as though he is unbuttoning his pants. Two other male dolls stand and watch while a third kneels behind the woman's head, his arms raised in some semblance of ritual and authority. Hart furrows his brow as the import of the scene sinks in, yet this seems to be the extent of his concern; the incident is never mentioned again. In the third episode, the theme of sexualization recurs as we learn that Hart's eldest daughter Audrey has provoked the concern of her teachers due to her drawings of a man and woman having sex. As Hart flips through the sketches, the third drawing shows a tall bearded man reaching out to touch a woman's breast. Hart's wife Maggie is deeply concerned, yet he dismisses the drawings as his daughter's attempt to "get attention" ("The Locked Room"). Although neither of his daughters fall prey to a child molester, the scenes they stage—from the Barbie doll gang rape to the crude drawings of sexual

intercourse—signal their absorption of violently asymmetrical sexual norms. This scene suggests that the specter of patriarchal corruption seizes even the minds of the innocents that the plantation "family" obsessively protects. As Bibler argues, plantation novels typically center on reproduction and the persistence of the white family line, yet *True Detective*'s portrayal of Hart's children suggests that the corruption of power implicit in plantation patriarchy is in fact responsible for the young girls' projected fall from grace and innocence (Bibler 2).

Through the figure of Hart's father-in-law, *True Detective* illuminates the link between the "burden" of white masculinity and the nostalgic narratives of social declension that underlie the southern pastoral. Yet even as the series invokes the figure of the nostalgic white father, it registers the inequality and injustice that are always already present in its mourned "way of life." In doing so, the show both invokes and subverts the "refuge from modernity" characteristic of plantation fiction. At one point, Hart takes his family on a day trip to the home of his parents-in-law, an idyllic property complete with sprawling willow trees, a small lake, Spanish moss, and an American flag waving in front of the house. Maggie's father, a nostalgic patriarch, presides over the property that clearly signifies "American values." As Hart walks along the lush lawn with his father-in-law, the older man laments a time in American culture when there was more "dignity" and people were not "out in the streets yelling about their rights" ("Seeing Things"). While the show clearly lampoons this attitude (Hart subsequently retorts that every old man throughout history has probably said the same thing, "and old men die, and the world keeps spinning"), it nevertheless foregrounds the knotty tangle of paternalist nostalgia and racial ideology.

Race and Sprawl

One of the core symptoms of the plantation myth, which *True Detective* implicitly manifests, is the displacement of African American labor and suffering by white victimhood. Touring contemporary plantation homes in Louisiana—a major player in the state's tourism industry—Adams charts the systematic erasure of blacks from the sites of the contemporary plantation. Through guided tours of erstwhile luxuries, lush gardens, and bygone architectural decadence, commercial plantations perform an affective sleight of hand: "what is mourned is not the inhumanity of slavery, but the quality of life held by antebellum whites" ("Local Color" 171). Rather than illuminating the histories of slavery, plantation tours privilege whites' "suffering" through the "burdens" of slave ownership, industrialization, and the inevitable encroachments of modernity, a process rendered most memorably in the classic, *Gone with the Wind*. The whitewashing of the southern plantation suggests that efforts to rewrite plantation history as a "white history" cannot be separated from "white fears and superstitions about the consequences of slavery" in a society in which whites and blacks continue to coexist (Adams, *Wounds* 71-72). Indeed, *True Detective* registers this anxiety toward racial coexistence as it embodies the characteristic "whitewashing" of the plantation narrative: all victims of the sprawling criminal cabal are white.

Indeed, the "burden" the series represents is not that of African American poverty, disenfranchisement, and continued exploitation. Rather, *True Detective* portrays the "burden" of white manhood. This is a "burden" that spurs Hart and Cohle to invade an African American housing project, to dupe an impoverished, elderly black woman into giving them information by leading her to believe she will inherit mineral rights, and to dismiss the laments of an African American preacher who complains about

disemboweled cats being nailed to his church doors: "We aren't those type of police, sir," Hart remarks ("The Long Bright Dark"). Indeed, as the preacher rehearses the police department's failure to respond ("I called and told the police, but we're predominantly an African American congregation"), Cohle literally turns his back on the man, withholding even a verbal response, and walks toward the back of the church where a cross on the wall catches his eye. Here even Cohle, the skeptical and enlightened outsider, brushes off the preacher's concerns and brings the conversation back around to his own interest: the region's missing white women. Through exchanges such as these between the detectives and Louisiana's African American communities, *True Detective* performs the privileging of white victimhood over black suffering.

Through the trope of urban sprawl and its environmental segregation, the series further links this patriarchal plantation past with the petroleum present. In the penultimate episode, we join the two former detectives in 2012 as Cohle recruits Hart to help him definitively solve the Lange murder from the early 1990s. Showing Hart his research on the array of missing persons along the Gulf Coast, Cohle expresses his conviction that the Tuttle family was involved in a number of the murders. "Now I don't know the sprawl of this thing, all right?" He begins. "The people I'm after, they're all fucking over. They're in a lot of different things, pieces, family trees" ("After You've Gone"). Hart remains skeptical. "Look," Cohle levels. "Eddie Tuttle is the goddamn senator of this state. The late Reverend Billy Lee Tuttle is his cousin. I'm telling you, it's a fucking family thing. That's what I mean when I talk about the sprawl, Marty. Eddie Tuttle is the reason the Lake Charles [murder] never made the wire." While the word "sprawl" invokes the image of a tree with ever-reaching roots—indeed, an apt metaphor for the Tuttles—the noun form recalls the image of the freeway that punctuates *True Detective*. In the American imaginary, the freeway signals endless freedom for those economically mobile enough to

traverse it. Yet when Cohle forges a thematic link between the Tuttles and "sprawl," he suggests that the trope of the ever-expanding infrastructure cannot be divorced from the authoritarian control of the Tuttle family.

True Detective primarily visualizes the freeway in sequences linking white towns and the African American communities that appear trapped in the interstices of freeway modernity. While the relationship between American freeway systems and racial segregation is well documented,[17] *True Detective* implicates the paternalistic past of the plantation system in the freeway's logic of oil modernity through the Tuttle family, whose occult reach Cohle conceptualizes as a "sprawl." In the fourth episode, frenetic shots of orange-lit freeways and dizzying car lights lead us to the African American projects in Houston that Detective Cohle and his "army of white men" storm (Lirette n. pag.).

While negotiating the raid on what Cohle's biker accomplice refers to as a "stash house in coon country," Cohle registers his anxiety: "From what I remember, the place is blocked in. One way in, one way out. The place could be Mogadishu, man" ("Who Goes There"). Cohle of course recalls one of the most violent military interventions in recent diegetic memory (this sequences takes place in 1994), which resulted in hundreds of Somalian casualties. Furthermore, his observation that there is "only one way in, one way out" signals the marginalization of African Americans on at least two levels: with regard to life in the ghetto, birth is the only entry, death the only exit. Crucially, Cohle's remark also underscores the stark contrast between the endlessly open infrastructure of the freeway system that sprawls across the landscape, encoding oil's frontier fantasies of

[17] E.g. Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

boundlessness,[18] and the segregated, bidirectional spaces inhabited by economically disadvantaged African Americans. The black experience of petro-modernity, the series suggests, is circumscribed rather than extended by oil's promise of freedom. By visualizing the "sprawl" through which Cohle subsequently maps the Tuttle clan, *True Detective* forges a link between the authoritarian power of plantation patriarchy and the ubiquitous freeway that ruthlessly disciplines the landscape with its proliferating roadways.

In another sequence set in 2012, the now-retired detectives enter an African American housing project in eastern Louisiana to extract information from a former servant of patriarch Sam Tuttle. Notably, Hart finds the woman through a search of Section-8 housing records in Alexandria, Louisiana, a historically bustling port city on the Red River that is now home to a robust petroleum off-loading facility. As we watch through a dirty window their car cruising off a freeway exit and alongside railroad tracks, the panes of the window we look through recall prison bars. "Fuck, I don't like this place," Cohle states as he peers out the passenger-side window. "Nothing grows in the right direction" ("After You've Gone"). We arrive at the Alexandria projects and the camera quite literally descends on the housing complex, entering through steel mesh gates as hip-hop music swells. Through the mesh fences that gird the community and the prison-like windowpanes through which we view the detectives' entry, the series frames the Alexandria community on the margins of freeway modernity.

In many ways, the representation of Alexandria's African American community reflects Louisiana's petrolized Cancer Alley landscapes. Residents of the lower

---

[18] Several contemporary scholars of oil culture in the U.S. explore the ideologies of limitless expansion that attended the widespread use of petroleum energy in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See Brian C. Black, "Oil for Living: Petroleum and American Conspicuous Consumption," *Journal of American History* 99.1 (2012): 40-50. Additionally, see LeMenager, 3-19.

Mississippi describe high fences that divide the chemical plants from the community and act as material reminders of the power wielded by the petroleum industry as thousands of pipelines zig-zag through the ground, carrying feedstock and waste products underfoot (Allen, "Narrating" 192). Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of residents directly affected by toxic waste and petrochemical byproducts in Louisiana are African American. Sociologist Robert Bullard ominously deems this phenomenon "environmental apartheid," a concept that reverberates in Nixon's insistence that we consider racially-based environmental segregation as slow violence against economically underprivileged communities (Bullard 102). *True Detective*'s representation of African American segregation in Alexandria, behind mesh fences and beyond the pleasures of oil culture, echoes the "environmental apartheid" spurred by Louisiana's petrochemical industry.

Subsidence and Erasure

The oily sprawl of the freeways between Louisiana and eastern Texas registers the environmental racism against African American communities, while the disappearing landscapes of the Gulf Coast threaten to erase them altogether. In an interview with *Buzzfeed* preceding the release of the season finale, Pizzolatto suggests that *True Detective* portrays "a world in which the weak (physically or economically) are lost [and] ground under… these lost souls dwell on an exhausted frontier, a fractured coastline beleaguered by industrial pollution and detritus, slowly sinking into the Gulf of Mexico. There's a sense here that the apocalypse already happened" (n. pag.). Pizzolatto's reflections not only emphasize the constitutive role of landscape in the narrative; he also exposes the entanglements of these industrial landscapes and the "lost souls" who inhabit them.

In the third episode, the detectives depart from the evangelical revival tent. Cohle, gazing out the car window at the washed-out bayou and barren cypress trees, remarks: "This pipeline is carving up this coast like a jigsaw. Place is gonna be under water in thirty years" ("The Locked Room"). This comment marks the only explicit mention of oil throughout the eight-episode series, yet it perfectly captures the ways in which *True Detective* narrates the ubiquitous presence of petroleum industry in Louisiana. It is worth drawing attention here to the fact that the detective's full name, Rustin Cohle, itself conjures the specters of industry and dirty energy. Cohle's statement about the omnipresent oil pipelines that zig-zag through the coastline, segregating communities and eroding land mass, in fact echoes a growing body of current environmental scholarship

on the subsidence of the Gulf Coast wetlands, which has increased significantly as a result of off-shore drilling and mineral extraction in the Gulf of Mexico.[19]

Yet within the universe of *True Detective*, subsidence is not just topographical as it slowly erodes the wetlands. Subsidence is also epistemic, erasing the archives of the coastal communities. When Cohle pays his visit to Reverend Tuttle at the corporate headquarters of the sprawling Tuttle Ministries, he inquires about files from the rural schools that were subsidized by the organization. The Reverend informs him that the files cannot be retrieved because they were destroyed by flooding. Given Cohle's suspicion of Tuttle, and the latter's ultimate complicity in the occult murders, it is entirely possible that his reference to flood damage is simply a pretext for withholding files. Yet Cohle accepts the explanation, looking no further for the records. In coastal Louisiana, *True Detective* repeatedly suggests, "flood damage" is part of the collective consciousness—an accepted consequence of the landscape. In another instance, as Cohle and Hart narrow in on their prime suspect and begin tracing the Tuttle family tree, Cohle asks Hart if the Tuttles could have wiped out birth records. "I don't see why not," Hart replies. "I mean, half those hospitals along the coast are gone now" ("Form and Void"). Here Hart's response implicitly invokes flood damage as an invisible accomplice to the Tuttles' recurrent acts of violence and corruption. Though the Tuttles are obviously not responsible for acts of nature such as superstorms or flooding, these events contribute to the fluid and dissolving landscapes of the Gulf Coast, carrying off on their currents the records that could implicate the patriarchal cabal. Furthermore, as Cohle's comment about oil pipelines "carving up the coast" suggests, *True Detective* insists on another

[19] LeMenager, 102. Additionally, see Robert Morton, Julie Bernier, and John Barras, "Evidence of regional subsidence and associated interior wetland loss induced by hydrocarbon production, Gulf Coast region, USA," in *Environmental Geology* 50 (2006): 261-274. For a discussion of the over-determination of coastal subsidence, see Brendan Yuill, Dawn Lavoie, and Denise Reed, "Understanding Subsidence Processes in Coastal Louisiana," *Journal of Coastal Research* 54 (2009): 23-26.

contributor to coastal erosion: oil. As the ubiquitous pipelines carve through the bayou and spur its erosion ("place is gonna be underwater in thirty years"), they take with them the archives that document crime: both the Tuttle Ministries' files and hospital records of their genealogy disappear into the Gulf of Mexico. In this way, *True Detective* implicates Louisiana's oil industry in the erasure of archives and the consequent proliferation of corruption in the bayou.

In the series finale, we are offered a far more sinister and explicit suggestion of the ways in which Louisiana's vulnerable and compromised bayous conceal the violence on the coast. Detective Cohle leads Hart to his storage locker, an archive of unsolved cases of missing women and children that have haunted the Louisiana coastline for decades. Reflecting on their as-yet-unknown killer, Cohle states: "Think our man had a real good time after the hurricane—chaos, people missing, people gone. Cops gone. I think he had a real good year" ("Form and Void"). Indeed, in one such case from an earlier episode, we learn of a young woman in neighboring Abbeville who was reported drowned, despite bearing the characteristic marks on her back of the religious cult responsible for the initial murder in the series. Here Louisiana's ubiquitous flooding provided an easy explanation for the authorities. Again, we might recall Detective Cohle's earlier suggestion that the oil pipelines snaking through the bayou are responsible for the slow erosion of the coastline. To be sure, Hurricane Katrina, which he refers to here, was not actually a consequence of mineral extraction. Yet many scholars suggest that its catastrophic effects were worsened by the weakened bayous that had formerly protected the coast. In this way, the series essays a link between Louisiana's petroleum industry, which pioneered offshore drilling in the Gulf Coast, and the disappearing landscapes that erase public archives and allow corruption and exploitation to flourish. From this perspective, the recurrent motifs of flooding and subsidence that structure the

narrative expose the unruliness, violence, and conspiracy that proliferate in and around Louisiana’s petrochemical complex.

Occult Knowledges

Coastal subsidence contributes to the conditions in which corruption abounds in *True Detective*, yet it also renders the landscape illegible and largely impenetrable to the detectives. When we reflect on the shifting land and slowly moving waters that denote swamps and bayous, we can recognize their inherent evasion of measurement. As literary scholar Monique Allewaert notes in her study of Gulf Coast colonization, one of the distinct features of the coastal plantation zone is the fundamental illegibility (to colonial whites) of the landscape due to its evasion of static systems of measurement (341). From this perspective, the oily ecological fluidity of coastal Louisiana emerges in *True Detective* as a sanctuary for corruption. For example, a rural brothel or "bunny ranch" that appears in the first episode evades discovery as the woody landscape seems to claim the cluster of trailers that make up the facility. Later, the marshy terrain south of New Orleans conceals the drug den and torture chamber of Tuttle accomplice Reggie Ledoux—located in an area that notably requires the detectives to pass through a flood wall to reach it (Lirette n. pag.). Furthermore, attempts to locate Ledoux are thwarted, we learn, by the disappearance of his family into the recesses of the bayou: "No line on any of his people," Cohle explains. "Swamp folk. Dug in off the grid" ("Who Goes There"). Here the swamp emerges as an extralegal space that eludes modern technologies and rhetorics of measurement.

We might also recall Cohle's earlier observation about the rapidly encroaching kudzu vines that snake through the town and reclaim buildings, cars, and trees: "Looks like there was never anything here but jungle," he says, intimating the landscape's ability to reclaim sites of civilization ("The Long Bright Dark"). The jungle motif recurs in the finale, when the detectives finally locate Errol Childress's home and follow him into the

labyrinthine "Carcosa," filmed in a former Confederate fort overgrown with dense subtropical foliage. The location of the Childress compound is notably beyond the perimeters of cellular range, further jeopardizing the detectives and echoing Cohle's earlier observation about swamp people "dug in off the grid." In these ways, the fluid landscapes of coastal Louisiana resist submitting to standard systems of organization and measurement, whether cellular ranges, grid systems, or maps. While there are certainly maps of the Louisiana bayou, recent phenomena such as Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill remind us of the ease with which these landscapes (and the communities they sustain) erode and resettle. Indeed, the exodus of coastal Louisianans in the wake of Katrina, many forced to permanently leave their homes, attests to the fluidity of the state's southern topographies. The land itself bears the signs of mobility, too: nearly 19,000 square miles of coastline have disappeared into the Gulf of Mexico since the 1930s.[20] *True Detective* thematizes this topographic fluidity through the occult knowledge of the landscape it creates; throughout the series, the sprawling criminal cabal are the sole possessors of this knowledge, and the detectives' efforts to penetrate it are consistently thwarted.

While Katrina remains a touchstone of community destruction, we can further uncover Louisiana's contemporary legacy of black erasure in the Bayou State's petrochemical industry. When Hurricane Katrina made landfall in 2005, it triggered the unprecedented destruction and evacuation of countless African Americans in southeastern Louisiana, a tragedy exacerbated by the federal government's shoddy relief efforts. Nearly ten years after the storm, the homes of many former New Orleans residents have still not been rebuilt; numerous African American communities have been

[20] Tim Folger, "Louisiana's Bayou is Sinking: Can $50 Billion Save It?" *National Geographic*, 17 May 2013. Web. 12 Feb. 2015.

virtually expunged from the landscape. A decade earlier, one of the state's rural African American communities faced a smaller-scale erasure along the Mississippi River's Chemical Corridor. In a striking example of the ways in which petro-industry systematically effaces black culture from the Lower Mississippi landscape, a Japanese petroleum company named Shintech advanced a plan in 1996 to build a $700-million dollar polyvinyl chloride plant in Convent, Louisiana—the very heart of Cancer Alley and a predominantly poor African American community. Convent also happens to be a historic town founded by ex-slaves in the late 1800s. Known by the name "Freetown" among its residents, Convent did not appear on any maps of the region in the 1990s, and was consequently not considered in any of Shintech's permit applications regarding the dumping of toxic byproducts (Allen, "Narrating" 194). Luckily, in the midst of heated protests and environmental justice rallies, Shintech finally withdrew its permit. Yet the Shintech incident uncovers the disturbing ease with which Louisiana's industry-regulating bodies can deny African American personhood and community in the name of industrial growth: if it isn't on the map, it doesn't exist. Furthermore, the siting of petrochemical plants on towns such as Convent threatens to efface the historical richness of these early freedmen communities and destroy the homes of hundreds of African American citizens. In this way, much like contemporary tours of the antebellum plantation such as Vacherie's Oak Alley, the petrochemical plantation threatens to completely erase the presence of African Americans and the archives of suffering inscribed in the Louisiana landscape.

The God's-Eye-View

While the theme of political corruption as a patriarchal affair is certainly not specific to plantation oligarchy, *True Detective*'s consistent visual emphasis on landscape, both thematically and formally, implicates the specific geographies of rural Louisiana in the patriarchal corruption the series portrays. *True Detective*'s recurrent use of aerial photography, spanning the freeways of southern Louisiana and eastern Texas and the remote water-logged landscapes of the Bayou State, emerges as an almost obsessive attempt to map a fluid and mobile landscape. Even as many of the series' shots offer an eye-level view of the industry-dominated skylines, the consistent deployment of aerial cinematography gestures toward the imperialist aesthetics of the sublime—an effort to render comprehensible an ever-elusive landscape of disappearing coastline and proliferating pipelines.

From the first episode, *True Detective* implicates the aerial perspective in the objectification of the landscape and its communities. Departing from the crime scene that inaugurates the show, Cohle opens up to Hart for the first time in their three-month partnership, offering his outsider's perspective on the poverty-stricken environment. The bird's-eye-view carries us over sinking bayous, shacks, and decrepit mobile homes. "People out here don't even know the outside world exists," Cohle laments. "Might as well be living on the fucking moon" ("The Long Bright Dark"). Here, Cohle's tendency to glibly generalize and to forget that people are "still living in the places we analyze" reflects the logic of abstraction inherent in the aerial photograph (Lirette n. pag.). Furthermore, Cohle, who is continually figured as an outsider (although from neighboring Texas, this is apparently worlds apart), frames the rural bayou culture as willfully ignorant and insular—its residents cannot be bothered to explore the "outside

world." When Hart pushes back against Cohle's assumptions, saying that there are "all kinds of ghettos in the world," he suggests that the pervasive poverty of southern Louisiana is simply one example of abjection among many. Cohle replies, "It's all one ghetto, man," as an aerial shot attempts to register the landscape. With this response, he changes the terms of the discussion, suggesting that the entire world reflects the poverty-stricken coast—"a giant gutter in outer space." In this light, the problem for Cohle isn't the abjection in which coastal Louisianans live. Rather, Cohle's frustration is with the residents' stubborn refusal to recognize their miniscule place in the world. Here the aerial perspective is the technology of Cohle's objectifying perspective: it visualizes his condescension toward the poverty-stricken inhabitants of the remote community. Indeed, scholars of photography note that the birds-eye-view allows perspective on systems rather than discrete phenomena. Roland Barthes, for example, suggests that inherent in the aerial perspective is a tension between the novel feeling of omniscience and the struggle to make sense of fragmented signs. Celebrating the aerial photograph as a means through which to not only perceive but to "read" the world around us, he suggests that the bird's-eye-view confers a systemic perspective (242).

Yet the fantasy of comprehensive perspective becomes a nightmare of objectification when aimed at a region historically disavowed in the national imaginary. Indeed, cultural studies scholar Benjamin Fraser uncovers the more sinister implications of the God's-eye-view, suggesting that the view-from-above reifies the "bourgeois power of the viewer to possess an exotic landscape and reality" (70). This impulse to condescend to a landscape finds a rhetorical echo in the discourse surrounding Hurricane Katrina. Following the storm, President Obama repeatedly referred to Gulf Coast residents' threatened "way of life," a phrase echoed throughout the post-Katrina

mediascape.[21] This rhetorical emphasis on an embattled "way of life" spurs literary scholar Stephanie LeMenager to reflect on the national invisibility of the Gulf Coast: "Thinking about Gulf Coast subsidence as a narrative that has not become national despite its dissemination through national media raises the question of when, exactly, the Gulf Coast fell out of the U.S. territorial imaginary" (109).[22] Indeed, Cohle's remarks about the insularity of rural Louisiana locate the residents outside the purview of modernity, where lifestyles are not so intimately tied to place (LeMenager 106-07). Cohle's frustration with the seemingly tradition-bound South stems from this ideology of modernity. While the "outside world" Cohle describes is modern, fast-paced, diverse, and secular, the insular world of the bayou is a pre-modern "other."

The characterization of rural southern communities as backward others within a nation of progressive moderns recalls contemporary scholarship on the role of "the South" in nationalist fantasies.[23] Indeed, the American master narrative of progress depends on treating the South as a container for the regressiveness that lurks within the nation's borders. "The South" becomes a metaphor for racial violence, rural poverty, and religious fundamentalism and thus absolves the nation of these transnational phenomena (Lassiter and Crespino 9). One of the consequences of this perspective is the disavowal of regions perceived in the national imaginary as "backwards." The imperialist narrative of

---

[21] Quoted in LeMenager, 106-107.

[22] Michael Bibler discusses the connection between narratives of southern premodernity and the discourse of Hurricane Katrina, provocatively implicating popular stereotypes of the South's backwardness in the neglect of coastal Louisiana both prior to and in the wake of the storm, in "Always the Tragic Jezebel: New Orleans, Katrina, and the Layered Discourses of a Doomed Southern City," *Southern Cultures* 14.2 (2008) 6-27.

[23] E.g. Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), and Leigh Anne Duck, *The Nation's Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

backward-South/progressive-North finds a perfect visual analog in the aerial perspective. David Harvey, for example, begins *The Urban Experience* by suggesting that the birds-eye-view allows us to "possess the city in imagination instead of being possessed by it" (1). Indeed, the aerial view confers a sweeping perspective, yet the interpretation of this perspective is inevitably determined by the viewer's own subjectivities. Detective Cohle brings a worldly outsider's perspective to rural Louisiana, yet his own fantasies of distance and difference signal his objectification of the residents, leading him to disparage their religious beliefs and ultimately, their decision to live in the bayou. In this way, the aerial shots that obsessively sweep the landscape provide a visual analog to Cohle's abstractions.

The God's-eye-view, perhaps more than any other perspective, captures the impulse toward abstraction and the tendency to render "fluid" and "mobile" reality in conceptual terms (Fraser 70). Given the shifting landscapes in which *True Detective* takes place and the immediate localities warily traversed by the central characters, attempting to abstractly render the fluid bayous is both futile and dangerous: it prevents Cohle from recognizing the occult knowledges of the region and the ways in which they encode corruption. Crucially, however, the aerial view makes this vexed process of abstraction visible (Fraser 70). Indeed, *True Detective*'s liberal deployment of the God's-eye-view registers the imperial impulse to obsessively narrate the landscape. By mapping Cohle's cool condescension onto aerial shots of coastal Louisiana, the series renders visible the dangers of fantasizing regional otherness. In the end, the God's-eye-view makes its latent ideologies visible: the ability to see everything in its structure confers the power of omniscience on the viewer, yet it simultaneously elides crucial local and regional complexities.

With its impulse to map and implicitly control landscapes, the aerial perspective embodies an aesthetics of imperialism. More specifically, it embodies an aesthetics of plantation ideology, wherein early French and British colonialists and their antebellum descendants sought to command the notoriously resistant landscapes of the Gulf Coast. Indeed, "swamps compromised the order and productivity of imperial venture," as their shifting grounds "stymied" colonizers and their efforts to conceptualize the coastal topography (Allewaert 342). By consistently deploying the God's-eye-view, *True Detective* both invokes and subverts these impulses of imperial control. Exploring a plantation aesthetics, the series ultimately illuminates the subjection of the Gulf Coast, and particularly its disenfranchised African American communities, to America's contemporary empire of oil.

Conclusion

In the first episode of *True Detective*, we learn that several years earlier Detective Cohle lost his young daughter in a car accident. Looking out the passenger-side window as he and Hart cruise through a desolate, overgrown neighborhood, Cohle fixes his gaze on a young girl standing in front of an abandoned gas station as she peers into his eyes and waves softly to him. He turns to Hart and asks, "Do you believe in ghosts?" ("The Long Bright Dark"). It is crucial to note here that the specter of his daughter appears at a gas station. In a landscape comprised of rust-flecked buildings and sites of abandon, the little girl stands on a site of refueling. As both a locus of ghostly presence and of material fuel, the gas station thus mediates between the living and the dead. This connection between oil and ghostliness bookends the series, as the spectral presence of Cohle's daughter recurs only in the final episode. Following Hart and Cohle's fatal confrontation with Errol Childress, Cohle's injuries plunge him into a coma from which he awakens only minutes before the final credits roll. Sitting outside the hospital under an inky black sky, he laments his return from unconsciousness, rehearsing for Hart a mystical encounter with his deceased daughter. Recalling the experience in sensory terms, he describes a feeling of immersion in a "deeper darkness" that was thick and "warm, like a substance," in which he could feel his "definitions fading" as he became "a part of everything [he'd] ever loved" ("Form and Void"). While Cohle is clearly describing a metaphysical journey here, his sensate descriptions of death—a warm, dark substance that envelopes him and binds him to his loved ones—strangely conjures the specter of crude oil. Indeed, this connection between death and oil is not merely arbitrary: fossil fuel is itself a register of death and compressed time, a liquid archive of extinction and geological strata. In this light, Cohle's near-death experience provides a stark contrast to the God's-eye-view from

which he formerly narrated the oily topographies of Louisiana. He once fantasized his critical distance from the landscape, glibly remarking that Louisiana's ubiquitous pipelines would sink the coast within thirty years. Yet, *True Detective*'s thematic and visual emphasis on petroleum culture invites us to read his spiritual submersion in an oily darkness as an acknowledgement of his complicity in American petro-modernity and the ecologies of power it sustains. Indeed, symbolic union with his deceased daughter is only possible through Cohle's submersion in the "heart of darkness" of petrochemical Louisiana (Ryan n. pag.).

True Detective's politics of oil is rarely verbalized by the narrative's characters, yet its formal and thematic representation of petroleum ecologies uncovers the knotty web of complicity, power, and pleasure that emerges from Louisiana's petro-industry—an economy in which all Americans are ultimately implicated. Indeed, as the anthology series prepares to launch its second season in Summer 2015, this time set in Los Angeles, the national implications of petroleum dependence emerge once more. In a recent interview with online magazine *Hitflix*, Pizzolatto offers only one clue as to the subject of the forthcoming season: it centers on the "occult history of the United States transportation system" (n. pag.). With this comment, the series creator provides a link between the two seemingly disparate seasons of *True Detective*: the ideologies of oil culture and the ecologies of corruption they engender.

In her study of America's twentieth-century love affair with oil, LeMenager advances the concept of "petromelancholia": the immense pleasures we get from our oily lifestyles preclude our ability to truly mourn fossil fuel's unsustainability (16). In our ambivalence, we are thus unable to seek out sustainable alternatives, and we remain trapped in our melancholic refusal to mourn. In this essay, I have argued that *True Detective* maps its representation of Louisiana's petrochemical industry onto the state's

plantation past, invoking tropes of the plantation genre in order to narrate the contemporary petrolized landscapes of the Bayou State. Building on recent scholarship that recasts American economic history as a *longue durée* linking plantation slavery and modern capitalism, I suggest that the violent legacies of chattel slavery continue to echo in the nation's most densely industrial petroleum state. Invoking the specter of the antebellum plantation and its ecologies of violence and exploitation, this essay advances the "petrochemical plantation" as a concept through which to narrate—and in so doing, mourn—both our oil dependency and the slow violence it perpetuates.

Works Cited

Adams, Jessica. "Local Color: The Southern Plantation in Popular Culture." *Cultural Critique* 42 (1999): 163-187. Print.

———. *Wounds of Returning: Race, Memory, and Property on the Postslavery Plantation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. Print.

"After You've Gone." *True Detective [Season 1].* Writ. Nic Pizzolatto. Dir. Cary Fukunaga. HBO, 2014. DVD.

Allen, Barbara. "Narrating the Toxic Landscape in 'Cancer Alley,' Louisiana." *Technologies of Landscape: From Reaping to Recycling*. Ed. David Nye. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000. 187-206. Print.

———. *Uneasy Alchemy: Citizens and Experts in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor Disputes*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003. Print.

Allewaert, Monique. "Swamp Sublime: Ecologies of Resistance in the American Plantation Zone." *PMLA* 123.2 (2008): 340-357. Print.

Ayers, Ed. *What Caused the Civil War?: Reflections on the South and Southern History*. New York: Norton, 2005. Print.

Barthes, Roland. *A Barthes Reader*. Ed. Susan Sontag. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983. Print.

Bibler, Michael. *Cotton's Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936-1968*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. Print.

Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre*. Ed. and trans. John Willett. New York: Hill and

Wang, 1977. Print.

Bullard, Robert D. *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990. Print.

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Vintage, 1990 [1936]. Print.

“Form and Void.” *True Detective [Season 1].* Writ. Nic Pizzolatto. Dir. Cary Fukunaga. HBO, 2014. DVD.

Fraser, Benjamin. “The Ills of Aerial Photography: Latin American from Above,” *Chasqui: Revista de Literatura Latinoamericana* 39.2 (2010): 70-84. Print.

Friedrich, Caspar David. *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. 1818. Kunsthalle Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany.

Gone with the Wind. Dir. Victor Fleming. Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, 1939. Film.

Grammer, John. “Plantation Fiction.” *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Eds. Richard Gray and Owen Robinson. Hoboken: Wiley, 2008. 58-75. Print.

Harvey, David. *The Urban Experience*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. Print.

“Haunted Houses.” *True Detective [Season 1].* Writ. Nic Pizzolatto. Dir. Cary Fukunaga. HBO, 2014. DVD.

Lassiter, Matthew, and Joseph Crespino, eds. Introduction. *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.

LeMenager, Stephanie. *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Print.

Lirette, Christopher. “Something True about Louisiana: *True Detective* and the *Petrochemical America* Aesthetic.” *Southern Spaces*, 13 Aug. 2014. Web.

“The Locked Room.” *True Detective [Season 1].* Writ. Nic Pizzolatto. Dir. Cary Fukunaga. HBO, 2014. DVD.

“The Long Bright Dark.” *True Detective [Season 1].* Writ. Nic Pizzolatto. Dir. Cary Fukunaga. HBO, 2014. DVD.

MacKethan, Lucinda. “Genres of Southern Literature.” *Southern Spaces*, 16 Feb. 2004. Web.

Misrach, Richard, and Kate Orff. *Petrochemical America*. New York: Aperture, 2014. Print.

Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone with the Wind*. New York: Scribner, 2011 [1936]. Print.

Mitchell, Timothy. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. New York: Verso, 2011. Print.

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. Print.

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

Pizzolatto, Nic. *True Detective [Season 1]*. Writ. Pizzolatto. Dir. Cary Fukunaga. HBO, 2014. DVD.

———. “The ‘True Detective’ Creator Debunks Your Craziest Theories.” *Buzzfeed*. Interview by Kate Aurthur. 6 March 2014. Web.

———. “’True Detective’ Creator Nic Pizzolatto Looks Back on Season 1.” *Hitflix*.

Interview by Alan Sepinwall. 10 Mar. 2014. Web. 5 May 2015.

Ryan, Maureen. "'True Detective,' Flat Circles, and the Eternal Search for Meaning," *Huffington Post*, 24 Feb. 2014, Web. 18 April 2015.

"Seeing Things." *True Detective [Season 1].* Writ. Nic Pizzolatto. Dir. Cary Fukunaga. HBO, 2014. DVD.

Wells, Jeremy. *Romances of the White Man's Burden: Race, Empire, and the Plantation in American Literature, 1880-1936*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011. Print.

"Who Goes There." *True Detective [Season 1].* Writ. Nic Pizzolatto. Dir. Cary Fukunaga. HBO, 2014. DVD.

Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press, 73. Print.