

## CHAPTER 7

# *Memory and Land Loss in South Louisiana*

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This chapter examines ways in which gender, the environment, memory, and artistic practices intersect through the experiences of women confronting environmental displacement in southern Louisiana. Several of the central debates about gender and memory that are highlighted in this chapter concern listening to and documenting women's voices as well as examining how gendered narrations of the past act as counternarratives to mainstream understandings of historical events. Furthermore, the chapter outlines how mainstream understandings of space—physical as well as social, historical, and imaginary spaces which tend to marginalize the perspectives and experiences of women—can be reconfigured through the artistic and documentary practices of women.

Within feminist theories of memory, counternarratives (alternative accounts of events from the perspective of marginalized groups, for example, women or communities of color) of space and the past come to the foreground. Women's counternarratives amplify their personal stories, relating how their gendered identities influence their experiences of the past. Counternarratives can also employ alternative forms of telling the past, such as through documentary film, photography, or other creative forms, capturing the past in ways that narrative or traditional historical forms (e.g., books) cannot. Contemporary feminist perspectives on memory emphasize the ways in which memory operates in tandem with gendered experiences of past events and spaces. In the context of examining experiences of environmental displacement, a feminist perspective on memory asks us to focus on the distinct challenges women confront in the face of environmental change and to ask questions such as these: How do experiences of environmental displacement impact women in their social roles? And how might these experiences differ from the experiences of men? These questions respond to popular depictions of environmental displacement that marginalize or overlook gender-specific relationships to the environment. The questions also reflect concerns that many feminist geographers have raised about the implicit and explicit erasure of women's presence in analyses of space and the need to explicitly examine the experiences and perspectives of women (Deutsche 1991). These feminist interventions extend to examinations of environmental change wherein a feminist focus on memory and gender can provide insight into women's experiences that are overlooked or erased by mainstream histories of environmental change.

*My Louisiana Love* (2012), a documentary film about post-Katrina Louisiana written by Sharon Linezo Hong and Native American Monique Verdin, serves in this chapter as

a case study through which to examine how memory, artistic practices, and gendered politics inform the way women and their communities understand and cope with environmental change and displacement. Other sections in the chapter situate the impact of Hurricane Katrina (which hit the Gulf Coast of the United States in 2005) in the broader context of historic displacement of communities of color in the United States, and then draw examples from *My Louisiana Love* to describe scholarly discussions of gender, the environment, and memory from several disciplinary fields in the humanities and social sciences. The chapter ends by examining how artistic practices create new possibilities of recovery and healing in the wake of environmental crisis.

## ROOT SHOCK: DISPLACEMENT AND THE LOSS OF PLACE IN US HISTORY

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While it's true that the environmental consequences of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and coastal land loss in Louisiana today are not targeted to specific racial, ethnic, or gendered communities, many such communities are more likely to experience the exacerbated hardship and displacement caused by hurricanes and climate change because these groups have been historically discriminated against and forced to live in environmentally vulnerable areas. Within the broader context of US history, the spatial displacement of minority communities is pervasive. In *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can Do About It* (2004), American scholar Mindy Fullilove (1950–), a psychiatrist who examines the relationship between mental health and social inequality, points out the palpable emotional and psychological impacts of urban displacement in the United States. She coined the term *root shock* in her research to describe the lingering negative psychological effects upon black communities that are displaced because of urban redevelopment initiatives in the twenty-first century. The displacement of people of color in the name of development and expansion has roots in America's colonial history, particularly the history of slavery and the displacement of Native American, or indigenous, groups.

As documented in *River of Dark Dreams* (2013), American historian Walter Johnson's study of slavery and the plantation economy in the southern United States, enslaved Africans taken from their homes and sent to America to work as laborers on large plantations are collectively one of the most glaring examples of displacement and detachment of people from place in US history. These forced migrants lived on and worked huge tracts of land in the southern and southeastern United States, yet were inherently denied land ownership owing to their own status as transferable property. In the era of emancipation and subsequent urbanization in the twentieth century, access to land and ownership continued to be limited and temporary for former slaves and generations of their descendants. Even early in the twenty-first century, as African American author Ta-Nehisi Coates (1975–) describes in his article "The Case for Reparations" (2014), lack of ownership of land and property often contributes to the struggle for many African American communities to keep the homes and spaces that hold cultural or personal significance for them.

Indigenous communities in the United States—groups who resided on North American lands prior to European colonization—also have a distinct history of displacement from their lands by settler colonialism, which forced many indigenous tribes to migrate and make their homes in new places. Settler colonialism is a particular form of colonialism wherein colonial powers not only take control of a certain geographic area but also decide to inhabit that region

as an extension of their home country. Unlike other forms of colonialism, which usually end after a period of time, settler colonialism is often indefinite, replacing previous inhabitants and their social systems permanently. Forced by colonizers to move to less desirable lands, many indigenous groups lost their ancestral homes, adapting without choice to the dispersal of their tribal communities and the new lands allocated to them by colonial powers.

Indigenous communities in southern Louisiana were similarly displaced from their ancestral lands by European colonization and the discovery of offshore oil and gas beginning in the early 1900s. Several indigenous communities were regularly misled by exploration companies into signing contracts they could not read, contracts that gave away their property, particularly the lucrative mineral rights of coastal lands, to oil-and-gas companies (Austin 2006). Coastal lands offer cultural value as well as hunting and fishing value to indigenous communities, who rely on the health of the coastal marshes to provide food for their families. Once energy companies acquired and began digging up coastal land for oil, much of this marshland was destroyed, leaving fewer places to fish and hunt and increasing the area's vulnerability to damage from tropical storms and hurricanes. The deterioration of the natural wetlands buffer that protects coastal communities from hurricanes and storm surges, combined with a rising sea-level, has compelled many indigenous communities still living in coastal areas to seriously consider the prospects of relocating to higher ground (Maldonado et al. 2013).



***Ghost Forest, by Monique Verdin, 2005.*** Dead cypress trees inundated by saltwater from hurricanes and land loss create what coastal residents often call “ghost forests.” **MONIQUE VERDIN.**



*After the Storm*, by Monique Verdin, 2005. Young boy in a wooden canoe making his way home through floodwaters days after Hurricane Katrina. MONIQUE VERDIN.

Slavery and settler colonialism have had distinct impacts on African, African American, and indigenous communities historically. Yet these histories are deeply connected to contemporary forms of social and economic inequality and increased exposure to environmental risks. These risks include toxic pollution and environmental disasters, as documented by sociologist Robert Bullard (1946–) in his influential 1990 study *Dumping in Dixie*, which was one of the first books about black communities being disproportionately exposed to chronic pollution. Both slavery and settler colonialism established racialized ways of organizing social and political hierarchies among people in the United States. But, as noted, slavery and settler colonialism were also spatial practices that predisposed many of these groups to be disproportionately exposed to environmental risks in urban and rural areas.

Scholarly responses to Hurricane Katrina frequently cite this broader history of unequal environmental risk and displacement. Much of the work on the effects and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina highlights the disproportionate social and economic impacts on black and poorer communities in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast. For instance, Scottish geographer Neil Smith (1954–2012), in his essay “There’s No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster” (2006), rightfully highlights the relationship between social and environmental vulnerability, arguing that the hurricane was not a “natural” disaster but rather a human-made disaster that was the cumulative effect of years of economic and social discrimination and economic disinvestment in communities of color in New Orleans. Anthropological

research, such as Vincanne Adams’s *Markets of Sorrow, Labors of Faith: New Orleans in the Wake of Katrina* (2013) and Katherine Browne’s *Standing in Need: Culture, Comfort, and Coming Home after Katrina* (2015), build on Smith’s argument, using long-term research among poorer and racially marginalized communities to show the unique struggles they faced rebuilding homes and families in the years following Hurricane Katrina. Within many of these works, the experiences of women and their efforts to rebuild their families and lives are often central to recovery.

## GENDER AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

Scholarship on gender and environmental change, including short-term effects of natural disasters and longer-term issues such as sea-level rise and climate change, notes that the documentation of women’s experiences of unprecedented environmental change is largely absent. In response, feminist scholars attempt to foreground the ways in which gender



relations—familiar, romantic, political—and gendered social roles as caretakers—wives, mothers, daughters—shape the ways women experience and respond to environmental disasters. Emphasis on women’s experiences highlight that environmental change is not experienced in the same ways by everybody. Feminist scholars, however, are also careful to note the importance of avoiding stereotypes of women’s social roles and relationship to the environment. Such stereotypes include pigeonholing women as naturally more “at risk” than men or naturally more attuned to nature. Such work risks reinforcing gender binaries rather than attempting to undo and correct gender inequalities. This risk has created, as sociologist Sherilyn MacGregor (1969–) writes, an “almost total avoidance of climate change by feminist social scientists” (2009, 126). In response, feminist scholars like MacGregor suggest that scholars need to sustain critical analysis that asks how gender and power inequalities existing before and after environmental disruptions shape the ways women respond to environmental shifts.

As MacGregor’s work highlights, when analyzing the relationship between gender and environmental change and displacement, critical attention must be paid to existing inequalities of power in terms of gender. Specifically, this includes accounting for the roles women play and their status prior to an environmental change as well as after. As MacGregor states, in many parts of the world the “economic and social breakdown caused by displacement” is assumed to “bring about a worsening of women’s already low status and vulnerability” (2009, 130). The implication of such an assumption is that women confront the logistical burdens of climate change through their roles as caretakers and the seemingly trivial work they perform in everyday life to sustain networks of family and kin through stereotypical roles assigned to them because of their gender. While this kind of work may accurately describe the experience of some women, it should not reduce all women’s experiences of environmental change to normative gender roles that are tied to being mothers, daughters, and wives (Arora-Jonsson 2011). Rather, critical work should point out that women also participate in more technical and political responses to climate change outside of what appear to be normative gender roles.

Overall, the primary goal of this research is not to stereotype the role of women in response to environmental change but rather to underscore ways that gender inequalities shape their unique experiences with environmental disruptions. This approach to thinking about gender and environmental change suggests that we need to grasp women’s social and political roles in particular cultural contexts in order to understand the full scope of women’s experiences of environmental change.

## A NATIVE DAUGHTER OF A DISAPPEARING LAND

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Covering the span of almost five years, from 2005 to 2010, the film *My Louisiana Love* explores how Monique Verdin, a young member of the United Houma Nation from southeastern Louisiana, encounters and attempts to understand and cope with the disappearance of Louisiana’s wetlands and its impact on her people’s way of life and the environment. The United Houma Nation is a collection of several indigenous groups that live in the US Gulf South near the Mississippi and Red Rivers in present-day Louisiana, whose cultural heritage is intimately tied to the coastal wetlands where their ancestors have hunted, fished, and built their homes for several generations. Verdin’s first documentary project, the film follows her and her family in the years after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 as they attempt to



*Horse Line Pipeline, by Monique Verdin, 2005. Horses seeking the highest ground on a levee protecting oil and gas infrastructure amidst floodwaters. MONIQUE VERDIN.*

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rebuild their homes and cope with the personal losses that accompany the storm. While the hurricane plays a central role, the film also highlights the significance of coastal land loss that is particularly devastating for indigenous communities. As mentioned earlier, the destructive activities of the oil-and-gas industry in southern Louisiana, in addition to the impacts of Hurricane Katrina, have contributed to the deterioration of the coastal wetlands.

In the opening scene we are introduced to Verdin, who was “born during a typical springtime Louisiana flood” in the early 1980s. Matine, Verdin’s grandmother, born in 1915, embodies the magnetism of the wetlands for Monique. Verdin’s impulse to pick up a camera and film her grandmother describing small tasks associated with living off the wetlands—cooking shrimp, plucking duck feathers, catching rainwater in a cistern—emerges in tandem with the realization that as the land begins to sink into the open waters of the Gulf, the “old ways” of living off the wetlands encompassed by her grandmother and the Houma people are quickly becoming extinct.

As Verdin describes her grandmother, footage of Matine moves into the visual frame, showing her gracefully walking through her garden and backyard forest, inspecting plants, cooking up a large meal, and speaking softly in French and English. Stylistically, the film uses these experiences as a way to describe the symbolic meaning of land to the Houma people, particularly as it is tied to tradition and the inheritance of cultural practices that, as



**Grandmother**, by Monique Verdin, 2005. Matine, Monique's grandmother, sitting on the front porch of her home a few weeks after the floodwaters from Hurricane Katrina subsided. MONIQUE VERDIN.

anthropologist Julie Maldonado outlines in her research on indigenous tribes in coastal Louisiana (2014), are centrally tied to the wetlands landscape. The film also focuses on the physical dimensions of land and the destruction that accompanied Hurricane Katrina, incorporating footage of flooded towns, rotting homes, and Verdin's efforts to dig through the debris of her grandmother's flattened home, trying to rebuild her family's lives as well as her own.

In the context of *My Louisiana Love*, Verdin's drive to confront historical and contemporary questions about displacement and loss in her Houma community are largely framed through her relationship to Matine and her self-ascribed status as a "native daughter" of Louisiana. In the field of scholarship concerned with gender and the environment, the tendency to associate femininity with nature is often criticized on the ground that there is no such thing as an innate relationship between women and the earth or nature (Gaard 2011). For Verdin, however, the notion of being "of" the land stems from her relationship to Matine and to the larger cultural traditions and collective memory of the Houma people that Matine and the land itself contain and represent. In other words, Verdin does not feel an inherent connection to the land just because she is a woman, and a Native American woman. Rather, her relationship to the environment reflects the ways that particular gendered identities and intergenerational ties take shape in relation to the landscape itself.

For example, Matine's identity as a grandmother and elder in the Houma community is in part defined by the knowledge she has of the wetlands and the ease with which she can

sustain herself and her family through that knowledge. This is a crucial aspect of how Verdin engages with her grandmother and remembers her. Verdin's relationship to the land, however, is distinct from her grandmother's. While there is a shared knowledge and set of memories exchanged between the women, from grandmother to granddaughter, part of what encourages Verdin to become an artist and activist is the fact that the coastal wetlands she will inherit is markedly different from the one her grandmother knew as a child. Unlike her grandmother, Verdin is inheriting "a dying Delta."

The film captures the centrality of women's relationships to the environment, reflecting critical feminist research (discussed in an earlier section of this chapter) that examines how gender difference and inequalities can impact the ways in which climate change, sea-level rise, or land loss are experienced (MacGregor 2009; Arora-Jonsson 2011). These studies argue that women have distinct experiences in relation to the shocks that environmental disasters place upon communities around the world (Denton 2002). In particular, women often bear many of the social burdens that accompany displacement, including the work of maintaining family ties when members are dispersed and displaced, as was the case in the months and years after Hurricane Katrina in Louisiana. In other words, women are often left to pick up the pieces, especially those related to the emotional and psychological stresses placed upon families in these situations.

In a book that traces the experiences of one black family from the same town as Verdin for almost ten years after Hurricane Katrina, anthropologist Katherine Browne reminds us that women in bayou communities are often the "social organizers, the storytellers, and the keepers of children and secret family recipes" (Browne 2015, 196). These distinct social roles inform how the family copes with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and are also reflected in Verdin's experiences. A critical approach that foregrounds the relationship between gender and environmental change suggests that we need to grasp the role of women in particular social and cultural contexts in order to understand the full scope of how environmental displacement is lived in different, oftentimes uneven ways across gender (in addition to other factors, such as race and class). While Verdin understands the impacts of Hurricane Katrina in wider social inequalities, her film tends to focus more strongly on the fact that land loss and Hurricane Katrina are primarily of significance to Verdin because she envisions the cultural traditions of her grandmother, cousins, and father disappearing along with the land. Thus for Verdin, land loss and environmental crisis compel her to consider what she stands to inherit as a woman who hopes to carry the traditions of her Houma people into the future.

The loss of cultural tradition is also political, and Verdin's way of politicizing and confronting what she sees to be the greatest sacrifice of environmental change is to collect the memories of her grandmother and cousins and incorporate her own recollections of childhood on the bayou into her film. Verdin's political statement is made by using film and her own life to process, as she puts it, the "bizarre state of familiar places" that Hurricane Katrina and the gradual erasure of her homeland has created.

By collecting pieces of her own and her family's past, Verdin confronts her audience with an unexpected portrait of environmental change that demonstrates the close connections between the environment and her role as a woman and member of the Houma tribe and as an emerging environmental activist and documentary filmmaker. As Verdin exposes the impacts of Hurricane Katrina on her personal relationships to her grandmother, father, and boyfriend throughout the film, we further see how ways of understanding land loss are shaped not only by more popular and scientific understandings of climate change but also by personal experiences that do not, at face value, seem to say much about the environment at all. Verdin's



narrative compels the audience to see climate change and environmental disaster as more than scientific fact, as a broader personal and cultural phenomenon that is interpreted through individual, shared, and, in the case of *My Louisiana Love*, gendered experiences.

## GENDER AND THE POLITICAL WORK OF MEMORY

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Verdin's decision to highlight the spaces of family and romantic relationships in the film reflects the importance of gender in shaping the film as well as the role of women's memory and remembering as a driving framework for documenting the cultural impacts of environmental displacement. Within the framework of feminist theories of memory, *My Louisiana Love* can be interpreted as a counternarrative to mainstream depictions of the impacts of Hurricane Katrina that do not give voice to the experiences of an indigenous woman from outside New Orleans. Accounting for such counternarratives and remembering practices of women encompasses the bulk of how feminist scholars have theorized the practice and role of memory in society.

Most contemporary research on memory focuses on analyzing the collective recollections of certain social groups as well as entire nations. The idea of collective memory is taken from work by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), whose book *The Collective Memory*, posthumously published in 1950, theorizes memory as a social formation, something learned and inherited by individuals from within their social contexts, such as the family, and from society at large. According to Halbwachs, "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" ([1950] 1980, 38). *My Louisiana Love* reflects this approach to memory as a collective social formation through its work as a documentary that bears witness to the slow destruction of place and cultural practices—entities that ascertain their meaning, and our impulse to document them, through a shared value they have for a family or larger community. Indeed, Verdin and her grandmother Matine exemplify the centrality of the family as a framework for sharing memory and passing down knowledge from generation to generation. Verdin recalls and inherits Matine's memories of living off the land and escaping hurricanes in small boats—experiences that, in turn, shape how Verdin understands the Houma people's past. Several scenes in the film focus on interviews between Matine and Verdin, wherein she shares these stories. They are used as a narrative frame for the film, capturing the moments when Verdin tries to determine the cultural traditions and values she wants to sustain as she rebuilds her life and home.

In contrast to work in psychology that foregrounds an individual's memories and recollections, scholarship interested in collective memory looks at the specific historical and cultural situations within which a society remembers or memorializes particular events. Research interested in these questions often analyzes public memorials or artworks, as American cultural theorist Marita Sturken (1957–) has done in her research on memorializing the Vietnam War in the United States (Sturken 1997), posing questions about how the past is curated for particular audiences or publics. In particular, many scholars tend to emphasize the conflicts that arise about how best to represent the past or traumatic events as they are memorialized in the present, drawing attention to complicated relationships between what French historian Pierre Nora (1931–) has described as the distinctions between history (what "happened" in the past) and how it is remembered through various cultural practices (Nora 1989).

Most contemporary scholarship analyzes collective memory through the scope of the nation or public memory, often doing little to account for the individual in relation to the formation and transformation of collective memories. Furthermore, the dominance of collective memory in the field has meant that questions of identity, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, are often absent from work in memory studies (Radstone 2008). Issues involving difference and identity animate central concerns of critical feminist theory, a theoretical framework that emphasizes what are often termed *reflexive* approaches to the study of gender, culture, and society, asking the scholar to critically examine her role within society as she analyzes that of her subjects. This approach is a means of trying to address and understand how various “truths” about society and people are produced and can be potentially thought of differently. Within feminist work this takes the form of asking how gender or sexuality mean different things in different places, at different times, and for different bodies.

Feminist perspectives on memory are mostly implicit in works that focus on the experiences of women through topics such as slavery, sexual abuse, migration, and autobiography (Hirsch and Smith 2002). This body of scholarship reflects the broader concern of feminist studies to give voice to erased and suppressed gender histories and experiences that are largely left out of official histories or memorials of the past. Unfortunately, questions about gender as an aspect of how or what we remember as a society are largely absent within the realm of scholarship looking at collective memory and remembering or, at best, focused solely on documenting women’s spaces and experiences. These distinctions represent the various foci of gender studies on both women as a historical group and more critical questions about the politics of gendered identity and its impacts on people’s lives. As Romanian-born humanities scholar Marianne Hirsch (1949–) and American scholar of African American culture Valerie Smith (1956–) suggest, the field of memory studies could greatly benefit from inquiring more into the gendered dynamics of remembering and forgetting experiences and events that expand beyond women’s history or events that involved only women (Hirsch and Smith, 2002). In this regard, a feminist approach to memory is about not only recovering women’s stories that have been lost within popular history but also asking how gender and gendered experiences shape practices of remembering, or of how something is remembered, as well as what is remembered.

This approach is exemplified by the fact that gendered identity and memory are key frameworks that shape Verdin’s documentary practice—how she decides to narrate and edit the film, and what stories she chooses to focus on. As is clear from the beginning of the film, it is the relationship between women and the passing down of memory from grandmother to granddaughter that shape how Verdin sees herself as a Houma woman and compel her to begin documenting the spaces, people, and practices around her. But Verdin’s relationships to men also take center stage in the film. As the film suggests, it is by meeting Kras (actor, artist, and activist Mark Krasnoff), one of the other primary individuals in the film, that the documentary project transforms from being bits of footage Verdin shot of her grandmother to becoming a full-on documentary film about Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana’s environmental crisis, and their impacts on indigenous communities. As Verdin says, after meeting Kras, a documentary filmmaker, she “started seeing a bigger story in the photos I was taking of my family.” Furthermore, “as Kras and I went deeper into exploring our Louisiana, we were also falling in love with each other.” Verdin and Kras’s relationship push the documenting of Matine’s past and Verdin’s desire to sustain a Houma way of life in the face of environmental crisis into simultaneously becoming a documenting of her romantic

relationship as it cuts across environmental change and documentary practice. That is, in lieu of editing out the complexities of her emerging interest in documentary film, her romantic relationship, and her family, Verdin weaves them together. By weaving together these stories, the film highlights multiple kinds of gendered roles that Verdin moves through in the wake of Katrina as well as the interpersonal experiences that motivate her toward making the film in the first place (i.e., her relationship to her grandmother and to Kras).

As such, the film asks us to view it as a documentation of the post-Katrina landscape *and* as a portrait of Verdin and Kras's romantic relationship, as experienced through Verdin's voice and vision, as it is forged within the context of attempts to capture the disappearing culture of Verdin's Houma family. Such work exemplifies the fact that gendered experiences impact the ways we remember and memorialize the past that reach beyond filling in gaps where women's histories are overlooked or erased. It also underscores the ways in which environmental displacement is experienced in the midst of everyday life. Likewise, this approach reminds us that memories are subject to interpretation, audience, and the contexts of the present through which the past is constantly "re-worked" as Hirsch and Smith point out (2002, 5). This draws our attention to the ways in which gendered identities shape how the past is remembered, how the present is experienced and, most importantly, how the meanings of social identities are transferred and rearticulated over time and between generations.

## FILM AS A FEMINIST SPATIAL PRACTICE

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By weaving together Verdin's romantic relationship, her role as a native daughter of the land, and her documentary practice, Verdin's film highlights the complex relations between past and present, individual and collective, public and private that feminism brings to memory studies. Viewing *My Louisiana Love* through a feminist lens also highlights that the film itself is a feminist space precisely because it insists that experiences of displacement are not separate from gendered experiences but interwoven with them.

Along these lines, the film draws the viewers' attention to the multiple dimensions and meanings of space and the possibility of inhabiting a dying land in a way that highlights the immediacy of its erasure, but it also attempts to heal and maintain the cultural traditions and memories in new ways. This aspect of the film reflects critical work in the fields of geography and cultural studies that consider space and place to be simultaneously physical, representational, and lived (Lefebvre [1974] 1991). As geographer Gillian Rose (1947–1995) describes in her overview of the field, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (1993), feminist geography has built upon this approach to thinking about space by asking how particular spaces produce social identities and, in turn, how those identities are created and changed in relationship to space. This body of work broadly argues that space is not a mere stage or invisible background but is central to crafting personal and shared subjectivities and cultural identities, particularly gendered ones.

*My Louisiana Love* operates within this approach to space on multiple levels by focusing on the physical destruction of wetlands as well as the social destruction that is incurred by land loss. Weaving together the symbolic and intimate meanings of Louisiana with the historical and environmental facts, the audience discovers that Verdin's "Louisiana love" is composed of individual people and the coastal landscape and, furthermore, that each gives depth and meaning to the other. The narrative arc of the film, grounded in a mutual love of

land, family, and romantic love, situates Verdin's story at the nexus of her gender, sexuality, and indigenous heritage. It is through making a documentary about land loss that we come to see how gendered and indigenous identities and interpersonal relationships are shaped in relation to, although not necessarily determined by, physical spaces both in their presence and, in the case of coastal Louisiana, their increasing absence.

As an artistic work, *My Louisiana Love* is also an example of how artistic practice can be a means of confronting traumatic experiences as well as a way of giving new meaning to and healing broken or "wounded" spaces. In her research on arts practices in wounded urban spaces in Latin America, feminist geographer Karen Till argues that the manipulation of space is central for using art to facilitate individual and group healing for people who have been exposed to damaged or degraded landscapes (2012). Art as a spatial practice, in this regard, reflects how space can be transformed through labor and creative work to open up the possibility of reimagining a broken space through inhabiting it differently. For Till, arts practices can initiate what she calls a "place-based ethics of care" (Till 2012, 10) that uses site-specific art to help repair and heal damaged physical spaces and the social relationships that have been impacted by the destruction of those particular spaces. Such artistic practices can be sites for the development of counternarratives of the past in both their format (i.e., nonnarrative based) and their content, particularly when they are told through the voices and creative work of women and other marginalized groups. This is significant in regard to Verdin's film, which highlights the impacts of Katrina on indigenous communities while also recasting the devastated post-Katrina landscape as a space where the intergenerational ties between women provide a foundation to rebuild.

Within the context of thinking about art as a means of exercising a place-based ethics of care, *My Louisiana Love* shows how filmmaker and protagonist Verdin is at once struggling to overcome the limitations of the dying landscape and way of life she is inheriting as a Houma woman while also transforming that space by using film, photography, and autobiography to experiment with possibly changing her future. At the end of the film, after Kras and her father have both passed away and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill has become the largest oil spill in marine waters, the audience sees Verdin thrust forward into the future: finishing her lingering bachelor's degree, leading tours in the wetlands for students and researchers, and becoming a political activist. As she reflects, "I never wanted to become a political activist, but now I find myself bringing jars of oil-saturated water from our bayous to the US Senate." Through documentary practice, she becomes an activist.

*My Louisiana Love* asks its audience to recognize how space is not a mere stage or invisible background but is central to crafting interpersonal and shared subjectivities and cultural traditions. By the end of the film we see Verdin blazing a trail between the personal and political and coming into a new position as a representative of the Houma people and an environmental activist in her own right. Likewise, the film also suggests that Verdin is not a victim of Hurricane Katrina and land loss but rather that she recognizes the deep connection between herself, her community and space, and her capacity to shape the nature of those connections by becoming a documentarian.

To a large extent, the film implicitly suggests that art can be a way of processing and healing as well as an example of how creative and artistic work can politicize environmental crises in ways that draw attention to their global reach and personal impacts. As such, the act of making the film transitions from being a documenting of land loss and the cultural loss that accompanies it to becoming a means of personal healing in the face of environmental destruction. The film also tries to bring wider attention to land loss as an issue of



environmental and social justice. Put another way, the film can perform the work of being political in two ways: first, by exposing the long history of environmental degradation and injustice toward indigenous communities in coastal Louisiana (politics as a form of critique) and, second, by facilitating personal and collective healing that enables affected individuals and communities to help cope with and transform their futures (politics as forward looking and reparative). This way of theorizing political work reflects how a place-based ethics of care is not only reactive to past injustices but also proactive in building new political possibilities at the personal and community level for Verdin and the Houma people.

In this regard, *My Louisiana Love* operates as more than a documenting of what has been lost or will soon be lost in collective memory and cultural practice. Instead, the film acts as a performance that examines the personal and shared implications of environmental change through the intimacy of one woman's life and her family. By doing so, the film suggests that ruin and healing can exist side by side in creative work despite their contradictory implications. Thus, making a film about loss becomes a way of processing loss and a means of overcoming its devastation.

By intertwining personal experiences of place with the physicality of its decay and the dense social memories and cultural histories it encompasses, *My Louisiana Love* captures the complex meanings of space and the ways memory and gendered identities are woven into places such as the landscapes of southern Louisiana as well as how gendered experiences create their own space, like the film itself. As such, the film is an example of the ways in which personal and collective experiences become intimately tied to particular landscapes, even in the face of their imminent erasure, and the way individuals and entire communities understand and cope with environmental displacement and the cultural and familial ties connected to these spaces.

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## Summary

By outlining connections between scholarship on gender and the environment, collective memory and feminism, and artistic practice, this chapter suggests that film and visual art can be mobilized to bear witness to both environmental change and the unique experiences of women. Using key frameworks from geographers, feminist theorists, and social scientists, this chapter uses the site of post-Katrina Louisiana and the film *My Louisiana Love* (2012) as a case through which to examine how memory, artistic practices, and gendered experiences inform the ways in which individuals and entire communities understand and cope with environmental displacement and the loss of cultural and familial ties connected to these spaces.

The chapter notes how the histories of slavery and settler colonialism in the United States set the stage for African American and indigenous communities to disproportionately experience urban and environmental displacement, with Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath cited as a primary example. Within the context of broadening understandings of environmental change, this chapter introduces feminist theories of the relationship between gender and the environment, highlighting gender inequalities in experiences of environmental change that resist framing women's experiences as universally linked to stereotyped gender roles and innate social vulnerabilities. These feminist frameworks provide an approach to theorizing memory that can amplify critical perspectives on gender and the environment by insisting that gender also shapes how we remember certain past events,

giving voice to women's counternarratives. Finally, the chapter ends by exploring how feminist art practices, such as documentary film, create a space for these counternarratives to engage the wider public while also acting as a means to cope with the personal challenges of environmental change and loss.

Together, these theoretical frameworks illuminate the ways in which critical feminist scholarship on the environment, space, and memory can provide a means for grasping the complex experiences of women in the face of environmental displacement. Verdin's film actualizes this goal, using documentary practices to interrogate the meaning of environmental displacement and recovery through her experiences as an indigenous woman living in southern Louisiana.

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#### FILMS

*Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Dir. Ben Zeitlin. 2013. A fictional account of a bayou community in southern

Louisiana confronting a monumental flood, told from the perspective of a young black girl.

*Can't Stop the Water*. Dir. Rebecca Marshall and Jason Ferris. 2013. Documentary about the impacts of land loss and sea-level rise on the small indigenous community of Isle de Jean Charles in southern Louisiana.

*My Louisiana Love*. Dir. Sharon Linezo Hong. 2012. Documentary about the experiences of a woman from the United Houma Nation (indigenous community) in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

#### WEBSITES

Cry You One. <http://www.cryyouone.com>. An outdoor performance and online storytelling platform from the heart of Louisiana's disappearing wetlands.

Losing Ground. The Lens and ProPublica. <http://projects.propublica.org/louisiana/>. Detailed graphic and historical account of Louisiana's disappearing wetlands.

Monique Verdin. <http://moniquemverdin.com>.

Native Heritage Project. <http://nativeheritageproject.com/2012/10/27/houmas-indians-of-terrebonne-parish-louisiana/>. An online platform for sharing histories of indigenous communities in the United States.