

Higher Water: Virginia Hanusik's Application of Radical Ecology

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On Sunday, August 29<sup>th</sup> 2021, Hurricane Ida landed near Port Fourchon, Louisiana as a Category 4 storm with sustained winds of 150 mph, only seven miles per hour from a Category 5.<sup>1</sup> Ida partially reversed the flow of the Mississippi River due to the strength of the storm, an incredibly uncommon feat, and remained a Category 4 hurricane for six hours after landfall.<sup>2</sup> All of New Orleans was without power by the end of the night, and 95% of the Gulf of Mexico's oil production was shut down.<sup>3</sup> Ida also struck the last inhabitable barrier island along the Louisiana coast, Grand Isle, leaving 100% of all buildings damaged, and one in four structures leveled.<sup>4</sup>

Virginia Hanusik (b. 1992) has been photographing what would become the site of Ida's landfall since 2014, documenting the "pervasive" hold that the fossil fuel industry had on her adopted home.<sup>5</sup> She writes, "On average, the Gulf of Mexico swallows a football field worth of Louisiana's coastline every 100 minutes, by the time Ida's storm surge reached the Leeville boat launch on (August) 29, the state had already lost nearly...an area approximately the size of the state of Delaware."<sup>6</sup> Hanusik does not speak about the Gulf Coast with the attitude of an outsider looking in as she passes by, nor does she photograph like it. Neither does she partake in disaster imagery, making pictures of the what's-left—land, structures, and people—after a climate disaster like Ida or Katrina. Rather, Hanusik embodies a new generation of artists and climate activists. She portrays Louisiana as the multidimensional land that is; a land strangled by capitalism and the fossil fuel industry, the end of one of the most important and polluted rivers in

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Hayes, Kathryn Snowdon, and Jack Guy. "August 29, 2021 Hurricane Ida Landfall News," *CNN*, August 30, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/us/live-news/hurricane-ida-updates-08-29-21/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Hayes, "Hurricane Ida."

<sup>3</sup> Hayes, "Hurricane Ida."

<sup>4</sup> Faimon A. Roberts, "After Hurricane Ida destroyed 1 in 4 Grand Isle buildings, demolition is on 'path to recovery,'" *Nola.com*, December 1, 2021, [https://www.nola.com/news/environment/article\\_921438d2-52cc-11ec-9fa7-1ff714e37988.html](https://www.nola.com/news/environment/article_921438d2-52cc-11ec-9fa7-1ff714e37988.html).

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Hanusik, "Ida Showed the Fossil Fuel Industry Has Left Louisiana Defenseless," Virginia Hanusik, September 10, 2021, <http://www.virginiahanusik.com/new-page>. Hanusik hails from New York City.

<sup>6</sup> Hanusik, "Ida."

the United States, a site of diverse culture and history, a place of beauty, and most importantly, a home worth staying in and preserving. This approach to climate activism and photography represents a resurgence of movements begun in the 1970s surrounding environmental activism. Hanusik exemplifies scholar Carolyn Merchant's radical ecology movement in her photographs of the ethereal coastline of Louisiana by showing the effect of capitalism's systemic abuses of the land. Hanusik uses her photography, as well as her ecofeminist gaze as a photographer, to call for a complete dismantling of the systemic use of fossil fuels, whose industry preys upon historically marginalized communities along the coastline of the American South.

Hanusik is one of many young creators making art with themes of life in the Anthropocene. The topic of the official beginning of the Anthropocene is a highly debated one, with the earliest beginning with the first clear-cutting of land for farming, or the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s. According to Timothy Clark, the most widely accepted beginning date, however, is substantially closer, at the time of the "Great Acceleration" in 1945, "in which human impacts on the entire biosphere have achieved an unprecedented and arguably dangerous intensity."<sup>7</sup> Many scholars are in agreement that the Anthropocene was largely fueled by capitalism, as Clark writes, "with its increasingly destructive side effects of pollution, deforestation...reaches a threshold of self-destruction, but also of self-deception, as the accelerating conversion of all natural entities into forms of human capital becomes more and more patently in denial of ecological realities and limits."<sup>8</sup>

This stance on capitalism was a widely accepted belief of the environmentalist movement in the 1970s, specifically in the subsection movement dubbed "radical ecology." Carolyn

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy Clark, "The Anthropocene—Questions of Definition," in *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), 1-2, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/scad-ebook/detail.action?docID+2056898>.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, "Definition," 2.

Merchant introduces radical ecology as “emerg(ing) from a sense of crisis in the industrialized world. It acts on a new perception that the domination of nature entails the domination of human beings along lines of race, class, and gender. Radical ecology confronts the illusion that people are free to exploit nature and move in society at the expense of others with a new consciousness...it empowers people to make changes in the world consistent with new social vision and a new ethic” running completely antithetical to capitalist-centric Western culture.<sup>9</sup> Merchant writes, “an egocentric ethic (grounded in the self) for example, is historically associated with the rise of *laissez faire* capitalism...and is the ethic of mainstream industrial capitalism today.”<sup>10</sup>

Radical ecology, according to Merchant, is not simply a single, monolithic movement.<sup>11</sup> It exists across different branches of activism, with a spectrum of proposed solutions. Radical ecology is often associated with the movement of deep ecology, both a movement and a philosophy. This paper focuses on Hanusik’s expression of both radical ecology and ecofeminism, named as two subsections of deep ecology. Coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, deep ecology is a substantially more spiritual approach to environmentalism, the belief that humanity’s survival depends on the radical altering of the conscious mind, specifically, the deepening of compassion, and the removal of the “self” from the focus of attention to best work for the salvation of the planet, and humanity.<sup>12</sup> Merchant writes:

(Radical Ecology) pushes social and ecological systems toward new patterns of production, reproduction, and consciousness that will improve the quality of human life and the natural environment. It challenges those aspects of the political and economic order that prevent the fulfillment of basic human needs. It offers theories that explain the

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<sup>9</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World (Revolutionary Thought and Radical Movements)* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1, Kindle.

<sup>10</sup> Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, 63.

<sup>11</sup> Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and Why it Matters*. (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000,) 67. Kindle.



social causes of environmental problems and alternative ways to resolve them. It supports social movements for removing the causes of environmental deterioration and raising the quality of life for people of every race, class, and sex.<sup>13</sup>

Both Merchant and ecofeminist scholar Karen Warren argues that a step in radical ecology—what can be considered an *application* of the consciousness-raising deep ecology—is bioregionalism. Warren defines bioregionalism as emphasizing “the importance of place in environmental ethics. Here, ‘place’ refers to both geographic spaces and cultural contexts in which humans and nonhumans live.”<sup>14</sup> Bioregionalism embraces holding the Self as a part of the natural ecosystem of the land and living as part of the ecosystem. Bioregionalism advocates for removing the hierarchy holding Man—specifically, humans born with penises and white skin—above womxn, above animals, and above Earth. This hierarchy has been enforced for at least as long as the interpretation of the writing of Genesis, giving man “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”<sup>15,16</sup> The “God-given” right of Man/men ruling over the cosmos was later reinforced by seventeenth-century philosophers, who advocated for the abandonment of ancient views of the earth as a Mother, or a connective entity with a circulatory, nervous, and elimination system just as an animal.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the earth became a dead thing, or a blank canvas “insensitive to human action.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 67.

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 1:26-29.

<sup>16</sup> This is a Western and Christian perspective on the source of the hierarchy of Man and Nature that I discuss often in my writing. I acknowledge that Christianity does not solely exist to dominate the earth in a capitalism-driven way that is one of the apparent causes of the Anthropocene, but I will argue that not only do many powerful followers of Christianity use misconstrued words in the Bible to support the oppression of women, and that the pyramid of Man versus “The Other” certainly places the natural world at the bottom of the hierarchy.

<sup>17</sup> Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, 50-53, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, 45.

An example of the application of bioregionalism can be the construction of vernacular architecture: defined as a regional construction created outside academic or global fashion. Vernacular architecture is created using materials and for uses specific to a regions' location and are often considered affirmations of cultural identity.<sup>19</sup> Rather than photographing disaster imagery as a form of education on the people most at risk for climate change, leading to empathy burnout, Hanusik believes that the best way to view the everyday prescence of land loss due to the climate crisis is through photographing architecture.<sup>20</sup> Much of her photographs are of homes built in the bayou's vernacular. These homes are often nestled around cypress trees, and often floating peacefully above the river. In a long-term series, entitled *Louisiana: 2014-2019*, Hanusik focused on the vernacular architecture of the wetlands, primarily vernacular homes floating quietly on the marsh. Hanusik began this series with the intention of showing "the ways that built environment symbolizes what we value, how we inhabit space, and the unequal exposure to risk brought on by rising sea levels."<sup>21</sup>

Some homes included in the *Louisiana* series appear reasonably well taken care of, in an unnamed image (fig. 1) Hanusik depicts a single story, modest house with pale grey siding, a flat metal roof, and a screened in porch. Other than the porch, a small, solitary window is cut into the house, likely the kitchen. The house itself rests on no solid ground, rather a platform over the water, perhaps held in place by long poles into the unstable ground below. The still waters perfectly reflect the house and the lush, green cypress trees behind it. These magical homes burrowed into the wetlands, harmoniously living among the trees often appear in this series. A

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<sup>19</sup> Camilla Chisleni, "What is Vernacular Architecture?" translated by Tarsila Duduch, ArchDaily, November 25, 2020, <https://www.archdaily.com/951667/what-is-vernacular-architecture>.

<sup>20</sup> Virginia Hanusik, interview by the author, March 8, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Virginia Hanusik, "About," Louisiana, 2014-2019, Accessed March 7, 2022, <http://www.virginiahanusik.com/about-louisiana>.

wider shot of two marsh homes (fig. 2) provides further context for the spaces that they inhabit. This photograph shows low tide, and it is easier to see the soft sediment present in the foreground of the image—sediment deposited from the 2,340 miles that the Mississippi River flows—on which the homes stand. The homes are closer to the background, and blend into the thin line of cypresses at the edge of a dense wetland. The house on the rightmost side of the image sits slightly higher from the water than the small, white structure nearby, and viewers can clearly make out the stands on which the home is raised from the water. Many structures in Hanusik's series, however, do not fare as well. Another floating house (fig. 3) rests near the edge of the water. Its walls are stripped to their core particle board, the screen door has been removed from the entrance, and rests precariously, sideways, against the stark white door to the house. Whatever windows may have been at the front of the building have been covered over by this same brown particleboard, leaving only ghost marks of where they were. The wide, angular roof looks awkwardly larger than the composition of the house itself, and loom over the structure. The platform the house rests on over the water is fashioned out of wood, which is grey from age and seems balanced against submerged, circular methods of floatation. It seems this house will collapse with a gentle breeze.

These photographs carry an air of quiet poetry similar to William Christenberry's (1936-2016) images of his home in Hale County, Alabama, such as *Palmist Building* (fig. 4) which Christenberry often returned to, documenting the abandoned business until it crumbled into the dirt beneath it. In an interview, Hanusik said "Honestly, the most challenging conversations that I've had are with self-identified liberals and progressives whose prejudices of the South or rural communities come out with their comments. 'How could people be so ignorant?' 'Why don't

they leave?’(...)These are actual questions that I’ve heard posed in a serious way.”<sup>22</sup> Like Christenberry, Hanusik has developed a bioregionalist methodology, making her photographs not to simply record the way that Louisianians live, but to show the love of the land and water that they have, an often-forgotten part of photographing climate change or climate disasters.

Like radical ecology and deep ecology, ecofeminism cannot truly exist without intersectionality. Ecofeminism serves as a connective branch between the family trees of environmentalism, radical ecology, race, class, and feminism. Warren elaborates, “Ecological feminists claim that there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of color, children, and the poor and unjustified domination of nature.”<sup>23</sup> Ecofeminism was first founded by French writer Françoise d’Eubonne, who founded the *Ecologie-Féminisme* (Ecology-Feminism) Center in Paris in 1972, where she “called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet...D’Eubonne saw pollution, destruction of the environment, and run-away population growth as problems create by a male culture.”<sup>24,25</sup>

Warren writes, “All ecofeminists agree that there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women and nature, but they disagree about both the nature of those connections and whether some of the connections are potentially liberating or grounds for reinforcing harmful stereotypes about women.”<sup>26</sup> Critics of the ecofeminist movement, many times feminists themselves, often consider ecofeminism as essentialist, stripping of people born with uterus to their sole reproductive purposes by comparing them with the fertile earth, often

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<sup>22</sup> Amy Brady, “An Interview with Photographer Virginia Hanusik.” Artists & Climate Change, March 2, 2019, <https://artistsandclimatechange.com/2019/03/07/an-interview-with-photographer-virginia-hanusik/>.

<sup>23</sup> Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 162.

<sup>24</sup> Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, 194.

<sup>25</sup> Warren elaborates of the bases of this claim beginning on Location 451 in *Ecofeminist Philosophy*.

<sup>26</sup> Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, Location 443.

assigned she/her pronouns in English. Merchant herself problematically enforces this by introducing ecofeminism's drive as the protection of women's bodies and fertility from toxins, "Ecofeminist actions address the contradiction between production and reproduction," which is not the entirety of ecofeminist thought.<sup>27</sup> It is important while discussing ecofeminism in 2022 to disapprove this essentialist idea. While there is rapidly growing evidence of the relationship between pollution and fertility in both men and women, this is a single issue in the ecofeminist belief system.<sup>28</sup> Modern ecofeminism must also acknowledge queer theory and the dismantling of the gender binary in favor of the gender spectrum if it is to evolve.

Hanusik begins one of her series, entitled *All the Good Earth*, with an example of this unjustified domination of the earth, and the attitude towards the Gulf Coast and Mississippi River that she as a photographer and environmental activist seeks to dismantle. This example takes the form of an excerpt from a letter (fig. 5) penned in support of what would become the Swamp Act of 1850, an act that enabled states such as Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi to drain swamplands to use the drying lands for commerce. This letter's excerpt opens with the description of the seasonal flooding and tidal changes of lands across the Mississippi River and its tributaries, "thus effectively prevents the cultivation of those lands, at the only season of the year that they could be planted." Describing this natural occurrence of a healthy river and deltas as an "evil", the letter pushes for the construction of levees across the Mississippi Delta, especially Louisiana, naming Louisiana's swamps as sites for severe diseases and claiming the wetlands has never held value. This would be solely monetary value, of course.

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<sup>27</sup> Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, Location 193.

<sup>28</sup> Nicole Westman, "Air Pollution Might Make It Harder to get Pregnant" *Popular Science*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.popsci.com/air-pollution-fertility-pregnancy/>.

When the letter's excerpt concludes, it is with a sinister, capitalist, arguably misogynistic tone.

The anonymous writer calls to action:

Louisiana occupying, for all the purposes of commerce, one of the most favorable positions of the earth, having a soil of unbounded fertility, and an enterprising and industrious population, a climate suited to the culture of all the products of the temperate and torrid zones, needs but this donation to place her in the front rank of the States of this Union. It will enable her to open up her bayous...to drain and reclaim her marshes, and thus add to her territory thousands of acres of rich and fertile lands, the products of which would support thousands, and relieve her of those fruitful source of miasma, disease, and death, that now too frequently transform this beautiful country into a charnel house.

Merchant, in her book *Death of Nature*, discusses the ingrained imagery around the feminizing of any part of the earth as the giving, nurturing mother. However, there is another trope of nature as feminine that Merchant points out, “another opposing image of nature as female was also prevalent: wild and uncontrollable nature that could render violence, storms, droughts, and general chaos. Both were identified with the female sex and were projections of human perceptions onto the natural world.”<sup>29</sup> This letter excerpt is an example of the use of she/her pronouns in the description of the Earth.<sup>30</sup> However, rather than the use of these pronouns to acknowledge the earth as a living, conscious Mother, these feminine pronouns coincide with the call to tame the wild, “evil,” feminine land, remaking her into the domesticated, docile, farmable land for the greater good of Man—though the beneficiaries are truly a select few. Upon the passing of the Swamp Act, Louisiana began draining the wetlands, and adding control structures to prevent the shifts in the river, beginning the end of inland protections.

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<sup>29</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 2020), Kindle, 2.

<sup>30</sup> I'd like to take a minute here to point out the use of these she/her pronouns as deliberate is strictly in the English language, as gendered pronouns are reserved in English for sentient animals/humans with designated female genitalia. This does not apply in French or Cajun French which names Louisiana *La Louisiane*, a feminine name with female pronouns.

Hanusik's photograph, *Old River Control Structure, Concordia Parish, Louisiana* (fig. 6) from her series *On the Origins of High Water* is weighted heavily on the bottom third of the frame, an often-used technique in her color landscapes. Beneath blue sky predominately covered in large, fluffy cumulus clouds, a small group of large cows graze on a yellow green patch of grass. The animals graze in front of a large grey barrier behind them, the seven triangulated shapes looming large behind the animals. These barriers, built in 1964, regulate the water of the Mississippi River in to the Atchafalaya River in Louisiana, thereby preventing the Mississippi River from naturally changing its course.<sup>31</sup> This straightjacketing of the Mississippi River prevents the natural development of wetland landscapes, such as marshes which are sustained by mineral deposits as the river moves. This control of the river, as well as building and leveeing on the wetland, leads to shrinking of the Mississippi, which endangers wildlife, plants, and destroys the natural protective barrier from flooding caused by extreme weather.<sup>32</sup>

On her work, Hanusik says, "As a photographer, I control the light and the frame, but not much beyond that. In terms of subject matter, the architecture, and landscapes that I photograph really speak for themselves. The evidence (of climate change) is there." *Refinery in Norco, Louisiana, 2020* (fig. 7) is an example of the evidence of the cause of the climate disaster in the Mississippi Delta. The camera, the viewers' eyes, is turned upward, following the clean lines of the cylindrical modern smokestack as it opens towards the sky. The photograph is in black and white, leaning towards a higher key with stark contrast, with the softness of clouds in the background highlighting the manmade-ness of the refinery. The oil refinery itself, located on the Mississippi Delta in Louisiana in what is nicknamed "Cancer Alley", is all sharp angular lines

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<sup>31</sup> Virginia Hanusik, "On the Origins of High Water." Virginia Hanusik, accessed February 13, 2022, <http://www.virginiahanusik.com/about-1>.

<sup>32</sup> "Land Loss." Restore the Mississippi River Delta, 2017-2022, accessed February 5, 2022, <https://mississippiriverdelta.org/our-coastal-crisis/land-loss/>.

and perfect circles, directly opposed to the cumulus clouds. “Cancer Alley” is located between the stretch of land between New Orleans and Baton Rouge along the Mississippi Delta. Originally called “Plantation Country,” descendants of enslaved African people forced to work on large-scale plantations now make up the majority of residents.<sup>33</sup> In the background of their neighborhoods, right on the water, stand 150 oil refineries, plastics plants, and chemical facilities.<sup>34</sup> These toxic fumes from plants such as *Refinery in Norco* contribute to a higher level of cancer deaths, about 105 cases per million, “while those threats in predominately white districts range from 60 to 75 per million.”<sup>35</sup>

Merchant writes, “the contribution of ecosystem services to the world economy, argue ecological economists, can be valued at around \$36 trillion a year.”<sup>36</sup> This is particularly evident along the Gulf Coast, and Hanusik has shown this abuse as a part of life. Hanusik does not photograph *Refinery in Norco* pumping out toxic gas, showing the thing that has been slowly killing Cancer Alley’s inhabitants, but rather the refinery is sculptural in her frame, an existence like the background in *Old River Control Structure*. Arguably, this “fact of life” statement of the abusers of Louisiana makes Hanusik’s photography all the more profound; this oil refinery, a place of breaking down crude oil to create anything from concrete to fuel to Vaseline, has faded into the landscape of the Gulf Coast, despite the knowledge that it is poisoning people.

Hanusik embodiment of ecofeminism within radical ecology surrounds not only her finished photographs, but her methodology in creating them. Hanusik, a young woman within a male-dominated field of journalism photography, directly challenges the historically male gaze

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<sup>33</sup> “Environmental racism in Louisiana’s ‘Cancer Alley’, must end, say UN Human Rights Experts,” United Nations, UN News, March 2, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086172>.

<sup>34</sup> “Environmental racism.”

<sup>35</sup> “Environmental racism.”

<sup>36</sup> Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, 35.



upon the landscape with her own gender. She exists in a long history of women—specifically women of color—who have dedicated their lives and often placed their bodies on the line to preserve the environment they live in, a direct nod to ecofeminism and bioregionalism. Hanusik writes, “As a woman, I know it’s important to bring a perspective on landscape that’s been historically marginalized...at this moment in environmental history, it’s critical to recognize that the male gaze on the land has helped shape our relationship with nature.”<sup>37</sup>

Contemporary scholars have opened discussions on the effect of the male gaze on landscape and the natural world. Most often in recent scholarship, it is the photography of Carleton Watkins (1829-1916) that has been described by Elizabeth Hutchinson as a “propagandist for the exploitation of California’s natural resources, creating aesthetic images that legitimized the region’s commercial development” that have become examples of the male gaze upon a “wild” or “untamed” feminine landscape.<sup>38</sup> Watkins, as well as other photographers of the mid 1800s were commissioned by the United States government to create geological surveys of California and the American West in the 1870s. Watkins, often praised for his capturing of the sublime beauty of the West—his photographs are credited with helping create Yosemite National Park—still retained his trademark eye for capturing the wild beauty of the West.<sup>39</sup> His image, *Pine Tree from Josephine, Looking Northwest* (fig. 8) takes a semi-documentary approach, despite its very rigid name. Watkin’s aptly named mammoth plate camera pans down the side of a mountain at a newly built mine built into the rock. Dirt roads zig-zag through the mountains in

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<sup>37</sup> Virginia Hanusik, “A New Narrative for Landscape Photography in the Anthropocene.” *Artists & Climate Change*, accessed February 5, 2022, <https://artistsandclimatechange.com/2019/01/21/a-new-narrative-for-landscape-photography-in-the-anthropocene/>.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Hutchinson, “They Might Be Giants: Galen Clark, Carleton Watkins, and the Big Tree,” in *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*, ed., Alan Braddock and Christoph Irmscher (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press. 2009), 112.

<sup>39</sup> “Piwyac, or the Vernal Fall and Mt. Broderick, 300 feet,” Carleton Watkins Image Gallery, Accessed February 21, 2022, [http://www.carletonwatkins.org/Gallery/igallery\\_pages.php?page\\_id=1](http://www.carletonwatkins.org/Gallery/igallery_pages.php?page_id=1).

Watkins's photograph, pale against the hazy rocky cliffs in the background, and meandering in the same salt-gold glow of the print medium until it reaches the new buildings. The sun radiates a heavenly light upon this new triumph of Man, as if proof of Man's God-given right to dominate, rather than steward, the land they mine. The downward gaze present in *Pine Tree* creates a substantially different effect than the gaze in Hanusik's *Refinery in Norco*, where she elects to turn the gaze upward. In these decisive directions by both photographers, the role of The Ruler has been declared in both photographs based on the positioning of the camera. But while Watkins assigns the viewer, Man, as the domineer of the buildings and the mountains, Hanusik clearly assigns the looming oil refinery as the domineering force over her, and Louisiana.

These photographic surveys of the West were intended to show the expanse of an imposed label of *terra incognita*. Photographers like Watkins were commissioned specifically to sell land that they saw as empty to prospectors to take as their own, tame, and build cities upon it. This use of the male gaze upon the landscape that ecofeminist scholars like Merchant and Warren would speak against, reinforces the Man/men over womxn and nature hierarchy that would be the foundation of the Anthropocene. There was no thought of risking the climate for capital, as the story of Earth as the wild, dangerous feminine, or even the "dead thing," was at the forefront of photography. Now, Hanusik and other female photographers have begun to train their cameras at times away from the wild, untouched sublime, in favor of a post-sublime; land formerly billed as "wilderness," with its undefined beauty made rigid and constrained, a space sickened by climate change and capitalistic greed.<sup>40</sup> Hanusik's photograph from her series, *All*

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<sup>40</sup> I am interested in pursuing the idea of the "post sublime" further in future research. I am interested in especially the gradual shift from the romanticization of the "wilderness"—I put wilderness in quotes here because there is very little true wilderness left, even colonizers, upon arrival to America, saw little wilderness, as the forests and designated hunting meadows had been changed and maintained by Indigenous Americans long before they arrived—to the romanticization of the city, and now the display of land that has been changed dramatically by human infrastructure. I began my interest in what would become the post sublime when I wrote a short paper on the

*the Good Earth*, entitled *Power Line over Lake Pontchartrain in Kenner, Louisiana* (fig. 9) conveys a still, solitary emotion. A powerline rests over a platform of thick concrete submerged in the still waters of Louisiana's Lake Pontchartrain. It, the water, and the sky behind it, are illuminated with the golden peach of the setting sun. The thin bars of illuminated metal thread together in collections of triangles as if embroidered into the river's landscape, suggesting a delicacy of the power line, antithetical to its purpose of sending the most powerful of earth's forces across the water. Three stacked powerlines bisect the image, supported by the line, and continue their journey across Lake Pontchartrain. Power lines are rightfully regarded as a blight against the natural beauty of the environment, but in an example of this post-sublime view, Hanusik has created an anti-hero subject in *Power Line*, a blight, an uncomfortable reminder of the unsustainable nature of the energy we rely on, but still with a graceful, indescribable beauty.

While Hanusik records the causes of the weakening defense of the Louisiana wetlands, she also turns her attention to the long-term results of the loss of natural protection due to the loss of wetlands. Her photograph, *Hurricane Katrina Memorial on the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, Shell Beach, Louisiana* (fig. 10) shows a golden-colored cross atop a cement stand, floating in the center of the frame near the end, or beginning, of the day. The sky is tinged with a subtle peach from the changing light, and the cross glows a rosy gold. There are other smaller poles emerging from the choppy water, perhaps a damaged pier, or an old barrier. The cross itself is punctured with decorative pointed star shapes. A metal overlay of Jesus wearing the crown of thorns, looking up towards the sky is overlaid across the center of the cross, with "I.N.R.I" spelled across the top of the cross. The face of Christ is mournful, pleading, the result

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evolution of the landscape on Ossabaw Island, Georgia. I would like to make this term an often cited one, especially because I believe it encapsulates the damage we have inflicted on the planet.

of the catastrophic damage and loss of life across Louisiana when Hurricane Katrina decimated the already crippled marshland in 2005.

When Hurricane Ida slammed into Louisiana's coast in 2021, it was ironically the sixteenth anniversary of Katrina's landing in New Orleans. After Ida's wrath, the cities of New Orleans and Baton Rouge were without power for about two weeks, with most of the city's lights on by September 29<sup>th</sup> but this was not extended to many of the coastal communities, and those hardest hit by the storm.<sup>41</sup> This lapse in power led to an increase in the death toll, and by September 23<sup>rd</sup>, thirty people had died, many of the deaths due to the excessive heat from the lack of climate control, or carbon monoxide poisoning.<sup>42</sup> As of February 9, 2022, the state of Louisiana received an authorization of further FEMA Public Assistance Funding for people without homes, lost income, further financial protection.<sup>43</sup>

Despite this, Louisiana's response to Hurricane Ida was considered a success. New Orleans governor, John Bel Edwards, "touted the success of the levee system as a 'silver lining' of Ida's wrath."<sup>44</sup> This silver lining, however, was only applicable in the city of New Orleans and other wealthier, white neighborhoods.<sup>45</sup> Daniel Milroy Maher discusses Hanusik's photographs of inequity in Louisiana's climate protection, "A floodwall, for instance, acts as a barrier to disaster for some, and as a reminder of the potentially unavoidable danger for others... Though

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<sup>41</sup> Carlie Kollath Wells, "Hurricane Ida Hit Louisiana a Month Ago. Here's Where We Stand with Recovery," Nola.com, September 29, 2021, [https://www.nola.com/news/hurricane/article\\_bb0c2268-2144-11ec-8dce-672b7a624bed.html](https://www.nola.com/news/hurricane/article_bb0c2268-2144-11ec-8dce-672b7a624bed.html).

<sup>42</sup> Wells, "Hurricane Ida."

<sup>43</sup> "Hurricane Ida Updates," NOLA Ready, February 14, 2022, <https://ready.nola.gov/incident/hurricane-ida/>.

<sup>44</sup> Marlene Lenthang, "How New Orleans Handled Hurricane Ida After Post-Katrina Changes," September 2, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/orleans-handled-hurricane-ida-post-katrina/story?id=79743061>.

<sup>45</sup> A highly influential article for this paper was Rivlin's essay in TalkPoverty, "White New Orleans has Recovered from Katrina, Black New Orleans has Not." 1 in 3 Black Louisianians had abandoned destroyed homes after Katrina and had never returned due to lack of funds to rebuild. It was also brought to my attention that the media almost exclusively documented the tourist-driven, white, wealthy sections of New Orleans, such as the French Quarter, when the city government claimed the city had made a full recovery, while lower income, majority Black neighborhoods like the Seventh Ward still had areas where all the homes had been demolished.

we have no control over where a hurricane hits, we can influence which sections of land become ‘sacrifice zones’ as sea levels rise. The areas we designate to be swallowed up say a lot about what—and more importantly *who* we value.”<sup>46</sup> With every levee preventing water from a site, are neighborhoods, specifically those belonging to majority lower income, non-white people, that are treated as “buffer zones” or “sacrifice zones” that do not get the funding to be saved.<sup>47</sup>

Neighborhoods now absorb the shock of the water as it inundates the coast, what protected wetlands would have done had they been properly preserved. This climate racism, as realized by Hanusik, will only lead to more memorials floating along the Mississippi Delta if preservation, increase in funding to save historically marginalized communities, and the decrease in the power of the fossil fuel industry, begins.

Virginia Hanusik’s art of the systemic abuse of Louisiana’s waterways, people, and climate represents a new generation of activists and artists embodying Merchant’s theory of radical ecology. In documenting the systemic abuses of the land by the fossil fuel industry, the rerouting of the Mississippi River, as well as uncovering the long-standing push by capitalists to do so, Hanusik reveals the multifaceted cause of the Anthropocene. Hanusik also applies a radical ecofeminist methodology in creating her art, citing her photographic ancestors, overwhelmingly men, and the damage of the male gaze on a feminized, “untouched” earth marketed as made for the taking.

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<sup>46</sup> Daniel Milroy Maher, “Virginia Hanusik on Changing the Visual Narrative of Climate Change,” *British Journal of Photography*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.1854.photography/2021/10/virginia-hanusik-on-changing-the-visual-narrative-of-climate-change/>.

<sup>47</sup> Hanusik, “Ida.”

Figures



**Figure 1:** Virginia Hanusik, from *Louisiana: 2014-2019*, digital capture, <http://www.virginiahanusik.com/louisiana-2014-2019>.



**Figure 2:** Virginia Hanusik, from *Louisiana: 2014-2019*, digital capture, <http://www.virginiahanusik.com/louisiana-2014-2019>.





**Figure 3:** Virginia Hanusik, from *Louisiana: 2014-2019*, digital capture, <http://www.virginiahanusik.com/louisiana-2014-2019>.



**Figure 4:** William Christenberry, *Palmist Building (Winter)*, Havana Junction, Alabama, 1981 (negative) 1982 (print), chromogenic print, image: 7 11/16 x 9 3/4 inches, sheet: 11 x 14 inches, purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund, 1982, 1982-87-65, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/135570>.

“...it appears that large bodies of land in that State are annually subject to overflow, between the months of May and August, by the periodical rise of the Mississippi and its tributaries, which thus effectually prevents the cultivation of those lands, at the only season of the year that they could be planted.

To check this evil, as far as practicable, levees have been constructed, almost the entire length of the State, on the west side of the Mississippi, following its sinuosities, and from Baton Rouge nearly to the Gulf of Mexico. The bayous, also, which, to some extent, receive and drain, off the surplus water, which, otherwise, would deluge the whole country, have to be leveed in many places.

I would ask, as an act of simple justice, the donation of all the swamp or overflowed land now unfit for cultivation, and which will ever remain so unless reclaimed by heavy expenditures in leveeing and draining.

From the earliest history of Louisiana to the present, these swamps and overflowed lands have been noted as the principal cause of the severe diseases which afflict the citizens, and more especially strangers in the State, during the summer months.

They were of no value before they were reclaimed; they were worse; for they rendered the country unhealthy and impassable, and prevented, to some extent, the sale of those lands which were fit for cultivation.

Louisiana occupying, for all the purposes of commerce, one of the most favorable positions of the earth, having a soil of unbounded fertility, and an enterprising and industrious population, a climate suited to the culture of all the products of the temperate and torrid zones, needs but this donation to place her in the front rank of the States of this Union. It will enable her to open up her bayous, and establish the finest chain of canal and steamboat navigation in the world, and to drain and reclaim her marshes, and thus add to her territory thousands of acres of rich and fertile lands, the products of which would support thousands, and relieve her of those fruitful sources of miasma, disease, and death, that now too frequently transform this beautiful country into a charnel house.”

*Letter in support of what would become the Swamp Act of 1850 which ceded federally owned swamps to states in order to encourage wetland reclamation, economic exploitation, and the development of flood plains.*

**Figure 5:** Virginia Hanusik, from *All the Good Earth*, digital capture, <http://www.virginiahanusik.com/all-the-good-earth/v67h0bt0tglzym6piaq4t2kan6ci77>.





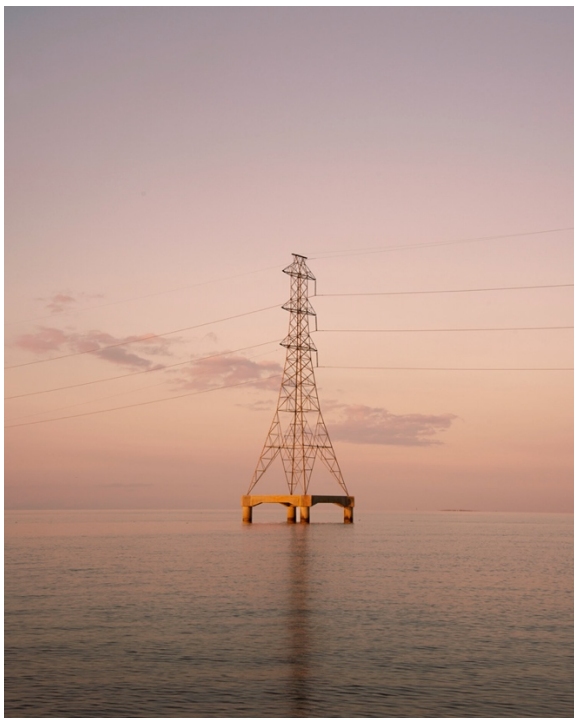
**Figure 6:** Virginia Hanusik, *Old River Control Structure, Concordia Parish, Louisiana*, 2020, from *On the Origins of High Water*, digital capture, <http://www.virginiahanusik.com/images/5e7r5lre67snsnqblfcvwm5k5ptfzd>.



**Figure 7:** Virginia Hanusik, *Refinery in Norco, Louisiana*, 2020, from *On the Origins of High Water*, digital capture, <http://www.virginiahanusik.com/images/5e7r5lre67snsnqblfcvwm5k5ptfzd>.



**Figure 8:** Carleton Watkins, *Pine Tree from Josephine, Looking Northwest*, 1859-1860, Mariposa County, California, mammoth plate, salt print on verso mount, image size 12 3/8 x 15 9/16 in., mount size 17 7/16 x 23 9/16 in., The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California, <http://www.carletonwatkins.org/getviewbyid.php?id=1005560>.



**Figure 9:** Virginia Hanusik, *Power Line over Lake Pontchartrain in Kenner, Louisiana*, from *All the Good Earth*, digital capture, <http://www.virginiahanusik.com/all-the-good-earth/v67h0bt0tglzym6piaq4t2kan6ci77>.



**Figure 10:** Virginia Hanusik, *Hurricane Katrina Memorial on the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, Shell Beach, Louisiana*, from *All the Good Earth*, digital capture, <http://www.virginiahanusik.com/all-the-good-earth/v67h0bt0tglzym6piaq4t2kan6ci77>.

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