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“Vanishing Points”: Climate Witnessing at the End of the Earth

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Abstract

Focusing on heritage and tourism practices on Louisiana's Gulf Coast, this article explores the ethical challenges of witnessing vanishing landscapes and cultures in the era of climate change. Land in South Louisiana is disappearing at the rate of one football field every 38 minutes; the erosion is so intense that cartographers have begun to remove place names from maps. This process is a direct result of evolving modalities of racial capitalism that have targeted indigenous and minoritized communities since the origins of settler-colonialism. Today, this violent past is echoed in the development of major on- and off-shore oil infrastructure, which has both visible and invisible effects on socioecological life: displacing Native, Cajun, and Black communities, toxifying waterways and airways, and destroying the region's unique wetlands. However, this reality is absent from the mainstream tourist narrative, which continues to celebrate the 'authenticity' of the natural and cultural landscapes that are in decline.

1. Introduction

Louisiana's wetlands are an uncanny environment. Riven by canals and waterways, this strangely green and barren land appears to float upon the sea. This is a terrain of “amorphous boundaries, where land is forever turning into water, water devours land, and a thousand degrees of marshy, muddy, oozing-in-between exists” (Solnit and Snedeker 2013, 1). The topography is defined by contradictions: it is “one of the oldest places in the United States in terms of culture and memory, but geologically it is part of the youngest, a region of soft alluvial soil that ... erodes into the surrounding waters” (2). The region is scarred, socially and environmentally, by violent histories of settler-colonialism and slavery, today “deteriorating from more [petrochemical] poison than it can absorb” (2). Yet the wetlands also teem with ecological and cultural diversity: home to Cajun and indigenous fishing communities, and abundant with bird, mammal, and sea life.

Ancient and newborn, toxic and thriving, this land is both exposed and invisible. As Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker expand:

More than an acre of land is lost every hour, about 25 to 35 square miles a year. [...] Normally a chunk that size doesn't disappear without fanfare, but this region of

wetlands and backwoods and people who are as at home on water as on land remains out of sight to the rest of the world. (3)

The depletion of the wetlands is the result of centuries of racial capitalist violence that have disfigured the environment, from the plantation past to the petrochemical present; today's coastal erosion is the combined result of climate change, petrochemical production, and decades of flawed levee planning.

As we will see, this bleak reality is absent from Louisiana's official tourist and heritage narratives. State authorities encourage visitors to experience the 'authenticity' of the wetlands, eliding the fact that the communities concerned, their culture, their heritage, and the ecologies that sustain them, are being displaced and eroded. Drawing on tourist materials, maps and photographs from fieldwork undertaken in 2022, this article explores divergent approaches to witnessing (and denying) the violent reality of environmental and cultural decline. Our work is informed by the experience of driving state-sanctioned heritage trails, visiting museums, sites of historic significance, and contemporary leisure attractions across the wetlands, and engaging with local tourist guides.¹ We contrast the recalcitrant non-witnessing of official tourist narratives which continue to capitalise upon the material presence of disappearing landscapes and heritage with a community endeavour – an app named *Vanishing Points* – which attempts to make the lived reality of climate change and coastal erosion visible. The sources we analyse are those we encountered as tourists and researchers, which shaped our own itineraries within the wetlands. As Phaedra Pezzullo (2007, 143) has suggested, such "media guide us in our decisions of where to go (and not to go), how to get there, what to value once we are there, and which places, people or ideas we should remember once we have left". Crucially, in this context, they also shape the possibilities of climate witnessing, and the histories, sufferings, and losses that remain unseen or unremembered by visitors.

In comparing divergent approaches to framing this landscape, we question how secondary witnesses, such as tourists, might engage ethically with narratives of ecological and cultural erosion. The tourist "gaze" has been critiqued by anti-imperialists and postcolonialists who regard tourism as a neocolonial practice (Nair-Venugopal, 2012), productive of inherently unequal power relations that are compounded by the various forms of othering (cultural, racial, environmental, etc) that are often, implicitly or explicitly, encouraged by industry promoters and curators. However, Pezzullo (2007, 9-10) argues that, in tours of 'toxic locations', being "present" in a landscape can challenge the remoteness of the traditional tourist encounter and encourage a mode of advocacy that is beneficial to minoritized communities.

In light of these tensions, this article asks what it means for tourists to visit sites of environmental violence, especially when travel to such places is reliant upon the products of the petrochemical industries that exacerbate the ecological and cultural erosion of these spaces.

¹ As per our discussion of the deleterious environmental consequences of tourism below, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which our own research has been dependent on the petrochemical economy, and thus the fact that we ourselves are implicated in the processes of consumption and destruction we critique throughout this article.

How can the realities of climate change be made visible to outsider audiences without encouraging problematic forms of vicarious witnessing or voyeuristic engagement? Finally, how can heritage sites and institutions encourage visitors to understand their own implicatedness in different forms of environmental and cultural violence and the inequitable structures of racial capitalism and environmental racism that underscore them?

2. Racial Capitalism and Environmental Racism in Louisiana

In volume three of *Capital*, Karl Marx (1867) ties the origins of capitalism to colonisation and enslavement – violent, extractive processes that forcibly inserted people and environments into an inhuman capital-relation. The more recent critical discourse on racial capitalism has extended this work to underscore the symbiosis of racism and environmental destruction. From the beginnings of settler colonialism, the exploitation and destruction of peoples and land have been inextricable from one another (Yusoff 2018). The violence of colonialism and slavery can be linked directly to contemporary environmental racism (Wright 2005; Saldhana 2019) – defined as “any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color.” (Bullard 1993, 23).

One of the most significant barriers to acknowledging the endurance of environmental racism in the Deep South today is the cultural and economic reach of petrochemical corporations. Petrochemical dollars saturate every aspect of Southern life, pervading politics, education, media, and the law. Corporations have heavily invested in cultural institutions, sponsoring heritage and tourist sites across the Gulf States, and shamelessly “using their power to ensure their interests are fully represented in the state legislature” (Wright 2012, 90). In Louisiana, the social and environmental cost of oil production is overwhelmingly paid by African American, Cajun, and indigenous communities, whose living environments are rendered toxic by poisonous gas, water pollution, and oil spills. As the second largest producer of petrochemicals in the nation, Louisiana is one of the most polluted states. Its substantial offshore oil wells are connected to the mainland by 20,000 miles of pipelines and service canals. To lay these pipelines, engineers dug thousands of channels across the wetlands; dredging drained them of sediment, starving the marshes and causing massive erosion.

A vast network of pipelines stretches to the Louisiana Offshore Oil Port (LOOP), twenty miles out to sea. The LOOP is responsible for 80% of the US’s offshore oil production and 13% of its crude oil. This aging infrastructure poses further dangers to the wetlands. As Christopher Hallowell asserts, “The pipe coming ashore from the LOOP carries one thousand barrels of crude oil per minute. If it were to break as it crosses the coast or the marsh, the resulting spill would amount to 2.2 million gallons per hour” (2005 12, fn2). The nexus of pipelines that runs from the offshore LOOP to the sprawling inland infrastructure of refineries, plants, and factories traces a topography of environmental racism that stretches far beyond the wetlands. As we have documented elsewhere (Rapson 2018; Bond and Rapson 2023), the epicentre of Louisiana’s petrochemical industry is the 150-mile stretch of the River Road that runs between

New Orleans and Baton Rouge. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the River Road was the centre of a plantation economy, which transformed the area socially and ecologically. European colonists coerced enslaved labourers to raze the native environment, preparing the land for the cultivation of non-native cash crops. These formed the major source of the region's wealth until the early twentieth century when the discovery of oil reserves throughout the Deep South saw agrarian industry superseded by petrochemical production. Today, the River Road is colloquially known as "Cancer Alley". The communities living in this region are majority African American, many living on the land their ancestors acquired at Emancipation. They tend to be low income and high in unemployment, with most residents not possessing a college education. In this area, "more than one hundred firms manufacture sulfuric acid, ethylene, fertilizers, petrochemicals, and vinyl chloride" (Markowitz and Rosner 2013, 264), causing elevated rates of cancer among local residents, who are often deprived of the political and economic capital to contest their circumstances (Wright 2005).

The violent impact of petrochemical production can be seen explicitly in the disappearing landscape of the wetlands and the toxic effluents of the Cancer Alley. However, it is also visible in the regular damage that the region sustains from hurricanes. While the land is sinking, "the Gulf is rising as the effects of global warming set in" (Hallowell 2005, 16). Seventy per cent of Louisiana's population live along its Southern coastline, and ninety per cent of them dwell less than three feet above sea level, leaving a large portion of the state's residents exposed to storm surges which are exacerbated by wetland erosion (13). As was evident in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, uneven investment in levee maintenance by the Army Corps of Engineers has left Black and low-income communities especially vulnerable to rising sea levels, storm surges, and hurricanes. As Henry A. Giroux (2006) argues, Katrina made visible a "biopolitics of disposability" in which African Americans were "relegated to human waste", "reduced to rotting along with houses destroyed by the flood" (10).

The combined impact of rising tides, poor levee planning, petrochemical construction, and hurricane damage has left South Louisiana environmentally and economically mutilated.² Yet, until very recently, attempts to mitigate the erosion of the wetlands and to hold corporate and governmental bodies accountable for disastrous social and ecological effects of petrochemical production have been met with legal and political obfuscation (Markowitz and Rosner 2003; Wright 2015).³ This refusal to witness to the socioecological effects of climate change and environmental violence is reflected in the region's official tourist and heritage narratives, which obfuscate the fact that both the wetlands through which visitors are encouraged to travel and the communities they encounter are threatened with obsolescence.

² As well as being a centre of oil and gas production and a site of extraordinary ecological significance, the wetlands generate 25-35% of the nation's seafood catch. The future of the state's shrimp production and its oyster beds are under threat. These industries are predominantly run by Houma and Cajun communities whose livelihoods and homes are placed in imminent danger by the disappearing coastline

³ In an historic lawsuit in April 2025, a civil jury ruled that Chevron, owner of the oil brand Texaco, should pay \$744m in damages for its role destroying parts of south-east Louisiana's coastal wetlands over the years. It is thought that the verdict, which the oil company intends to appeal, could prompt other companies to settle similar lawsuits (Yang 2025).

3. Non-witnessing in Tourist and Heritage Practices: the Wetlands Cultural Byway

The following analysis focuses on the geographic region known as the Cajun Bayou, administratively Lafourche Parish, which covers 1068 square miles of Louisiana and is home to 95,342 residents (census 2020 and 2024). Lafourche Parish's motto, "Feeding and Fuelling America", speaks to two key regional economic and cultural drivers: food and petrochemicals. If the former is central to the way the area is advertised to tourists, the infrastructure that supports the latter forms the ever-present backdrop to their visits. Since 2000, the area has been subject to around 30 tropical or subtropical cyclones – most devastatingly, Hurricane Katrina (2005), Hurricane Laura (2020), and Hurricane Ida (2021). These hurricanes resulted in significant loss of life and land, causing billions of dollars of damage to property and infrastructure. As the landscape features of the Cajun Bayou are steadily eroded, tangible and intangible heritages are disappearing. Cajun and Native American communities have been displaced as the receding shoreline has led to the decimation of traditional fishing industries.

Against the backdrop of social and environmental decline, tourism is becoming an increasingly important economic interest for the region, generating over \$90 million a year (Annual Reports 2022 and 2024). In 2021-22, 5,000 people downloaded Lafourche Parish's official visitor guide (an 18% increase from the previous year), and 9,689 engaged with the Cajun Bayou Food Trail and accompanying 'passport', which encourages visitors to stop off at restaurants as they traverse the Bayou (Lafourche Parish 2022). However, in contrast to nearby New Orleans, a cosmopolitan city with an established tourist economy, there is little in the way of infrastructure to support this industry in the Cajun Bayou. Hotels are few and far between and AirBnbs are almost non-existent. The Cajun Bayou/Lafourche Parish website lists 5 hotels, two of which opened after the period in which our fieldwork was carried out (Annual Report 2024), and 3 bed and breakfasts.

Local tourism and heritage narratives rely on selling the 'authentic' attractions of nature on the one hand and culture on the other. LaFourche Parish markets the Cajun Bayou as a place to experience the "flavour" of local culture through the celebrated gastronomy of the region (gumbo, fish, shrimps and crawfish). They contend, "In Louisiana's Cajun Bayou, just 45 minutes south of New Orleans, there's an authenticity to the culinary experience that allows anyone to truly understand how a place's food and culture are deliciously entwined forever". Visitors are urged to use the aforementioned passport to "venture a ways off the main road and follow the Bayou as it flows through wetlands and authentic Cajun communities."

The Wetlands Cultural Byway, produced as part of the state's Louisiana Byways scheme, is a 282-mile driving trail. As publicity materials assert:

The Wetlands Cultural Byway offers visitors an abundance of both natural beauty and cultural experiences, providing a unique look into the rich history of the coastline, where shrimping, trapping, and farming have been a way of life for hundreds of years, and close-knit families have preserved their cultural heritage. Regional American

Indian and Cajun traditions are demonstrated in food, music, customs, language, and traditional architectural styles. The landscape is mainly prairie and wetland. With natural bayous and tree-lined swamps, fresh, brackish, and saltwater marshes surrounding much of the environment, water dictates the byway's twists and turns.

This celebration of natural and cultural heritage belies the fact that these "attractions" are under threat by rising tides and extreme weather conditions. The route is littered with ruins: abandoned industrial architecture, foreclosed restaurants and stores, damaged and empty homes.

The promise of hospitality feels at odds with this decaying landscape. When we visited in July 2022, the majority of the attractions marketed on the Byway were closed due to storm damage sustained during Hurricane Ida the previous summer. However, the tourist economy continued to trade in denial of the devastation around it. On Grand Isle, the extreme southeast tip of the trail where Ida made landfall, visitors were promised "unblemished views". On our visit, tourists in golf buggies bedecked with stars and stripes wove their way among numerous empty plots, swerving around debris. One of the few businesses to weather the storm was the Hurricane Hotel, surrounded by ruins, but defiantly in operation. Sunbathers and swimmers seemed undeterred by the fact that the beach was littered with dead birds, and the famous state park was closed to visitors.

Across Grand Isle, petro- and disaster capitalism contrast strangely with the tourist economy. Realtors and construction firms profit from the sale of damaged lots – their signs a ubiquitous presence in the postapocalyptic landscape. Cox's Operating refinery and a Shell plant are located next to "Island Strong", a luxury gated community. From the beach, the view to the horizon is interrupted by towering off-shore petrochemical infrastructure. The channels made by oil and gas pipelines are clearly visible from the Grand Isle Bridge. The Gulf Expressway is flanked by advertisements for legal firms offering litigation services for hurricane damage. However, official tourist practices across the Cajun Bayou manifest a determined non-witnessing of the realities of environmental destruction. The infrastructure of disaster capitalism is not hiding – it is in plain sight – and yet, state tourist narratives negate the connection between these industries and the loss of the natural and cultural heritages on whose preservation they trade.

The repeated re-constitution of the land in the wake of coastal erosion and extreme weather events has also overwritten much of its longer history. As summarised by Lauren Miller (2019), tourism to Grand Isle first began in the mid-nineteenth century when plantation owners visited in the summer. Cotton and sugarcane plantations operated here until soil salinization coincided with the end of slavery, heralding an increase in hotels (some of which were located in renovated plantation houses), and, by the 1930s, the arrival of major oil companies. The landscape of the wetlands has thus harboured and generated overlapping violences from the plantation past to the petrochemical present, yet the connections between these histories are erased within the contemporary tourist experience. The celebratory maps and charts produced for schemes such as the Wetlands Cultural Byway evade the brokenness of the environment

they depict. As Kari Marie Norgaard (2011) argues, such modes of denial have long characterised popular responses to the climate crisis, but here the blinkeredness feels heightened to the point of collective delusion. When driving the Wetlands Cultural Byway, it is impossible not to notice the violence foisted upon this landscape – the evidence is all around in the foreclosed businesses, empty lots, dead wildlife, and abandoned boats. However, not to *witness* it marks a decision – conscious or otherwise – to deny this reality. The responsibility for this negation must lie with both the local and state tourist boards that market an obsolete vision of an untouched and authentic landscape and culture, and the visitors who consume and perpetuate this fantasy.

4. Witnessing Vanishing Points

By contrast, one recent endeavour that attempts to make the reality of ecological and cultural decline in the wetlands visible is the Vanishing Points app created by the South Louisiana Wetlands Discovery Center (SLWDC). Funded by a combination of grants, donations, sponsorships and paid programmes, the SLWDC is a non-profit organisation which “serves as a hub to increase awareness of the plight of Louisiana’s wetlands and the people that live there... revolutionizing how we think, teach and learn about Louisiana’s disappearing coast.” (SLWDC n.d.) The Center runs programmes for young people, focused on building climate adaptation skills, to enable the survival of regional culture. According to the website, Vanishing Points “Identif[ies] points of cultural significance that are threatened due to land subsidence, sea level rise and coastal erosion. [...] Not only does it identify these locations, the application also tells their stories through the voices of the community members themselves.” (SLWDC n.d.). Indeed, the app, first proposed by SLWDC Executive Director Jonathan Foret, was developed via in-depth Participatory Action Research with these communities in 2012-13, determining the locations and narratives presented (Maina 2014). SLWDC (n.d.) argue that it provides an alternative to cartographic modes of climate witnessing, commenting, “Land loss in this region is often depicted solely in maps; however, they are unable to capture the harmful social effects of the disappearing land”.

Since the beginnings of European settler-colonialism, mapping has functioned as a powerful hegemonic tool in the Deep South, stratifying land and segregating society. Cartographic practices enshrined violent and inequitable hierarchies along spatial and racial lines, naturalizing processes of enslavement and exploitation, while invisibilising their attendant violence. Maps submit material and social environments to violent abstraction – reducing diverse ecosystems and communities to a series of lines, spaces, and symbols. In the Louisiana wetlands, as Solnit and Snedeker argue:

conventional maps make the land more stable and solid than it often is [and...] the waters of the Gulf [...] more like pristine open waters than they actually are. Specialized maps show the same region as a checkerboard of oil and gas leases: this aquatic space has all been carved up as extractive-industry real estate. These [...] lines destroy this place. (2013, 3)

By this reading, conventional maps appear as a wholly unsuitable media for climate witnessing. The use of trail maps, such as those produced by the Louisiana Byways scheme, to celebrate the alleged preservation of the wetlands and their Native cultures can thus be read as a double negation: first, of the region's social and ecological decline; second, of the historic and contemporary role that cartographic practices have played in authorising and naturalising this destruction.

SLWDC's multimedia Vanishing Points app aims to overcome the reifying effects of orthodox cartography by illustrating the devastation of the wetlands through photographs, interviews and video testimonies from local residents. The precise co-ordinates, maps and driving instructions offered by the app encourage viewers to engage in a proactive witnessing of disappearance. To date, the app features 12 locations, which are a mix of cultural and 'natural' spaces. Two sites are provided to mark so-called "ghost forests", where skeletal remains of once lush live oaks and cypresses punctuate the horizon. These forests have been killed by salt-water intrusion and subsidence deriving from the dredging of the wetlands. Narrated by a local fisherman, the story of the Terrebone Parish Marina describes the effect of worsening erosion and hurricanes upon shrimp populations and fish stocks.

The listing for the Cecil Lapeyrouse Grocery Store exemplifies a social space at risk of erasure. A video of the current owners traces the shop's history from a time when the majority of customers were local to today, when 70-80% are outsiders – mostly tourists on their way to Grand Isle. However, perhaps the most melancholic site included in Vanishing Points is the Isle de Jean Charles. Once home to the Biloxi-Chitimacha-Choctaw Tribe, coastal erosion has led much of the population to relocate further north. Within the app, the Isle de Jean Charles is represented by a short textual description outlining that this island is home to "many members of the Biloxi-Chitimacha tribe as well as a community of the Houma people. The Indian population on Isle de Jean Charles today is approximately 25 families." This description is accompanied by nine photographic images. Two show residents: a blurred sepia toned image of a man working the land, and a lone figure dressed in a football shirt and jeans against a forested backdrop, in a vivid colour palate more familiar to photographs from the later twentieth century. These images reference the historic connection between residents and the landscape of the island. They are juxtaposed by seven contemporary photographs showing depopulated spaces scattered with derelict structures. The result is to position human beings as part of the Isle's past, in contrast to a present marked by their absence. Accompanying these photographs is recorded interview with the Island Deputy Chief, describing the cultural and ecological decimation of the community, and championing ongoing efforts to raise sufficient funds to collectively relocate the remaining residents. The extent of the devastation is reinforced by further media content: a video timelapse shows the Isle's progressive land loss, with statistics highlighting the crisis faced by the islanders, whose homes currently reside at just 2.4ft above sea level, against an advisory flood elevation level of 14ft. As the text notes, "Height Vanishing Point Must Be Raised To Pass FEMA Standards: 11.6ft".

By combining evidence of the ongoing depletion of the landscape and the community with commentary on plans for the future relocation of the few that remain here, SLWDC suggest that the Isle is caught in an inevitable teleology of anticipated displacement. The impossibility of its continued presence is emphasised by the stark inadequacy of the Isle's 2.4ft elevation. The Isle de Jean Charles's entry on the app is paradigmatic: these Vanishing Points are not just 'being lost' in the present; their complete future annihilation is also marked as inevitable. Today, the island is scattered with abandoned buildings and broken civic amenities, familiar from the images described above. It is clear from the many signs mounted outside houses – one notably reading “fuck climate change” – that islanders expect outsiders to come and see their homes, and that some of them understand themselves to be exemplary victims, and witnesses of, environmental catastrophe as it unfolds.

SLWDC describe the purpose of the app thus:

Vanishing Points™ is a website that enables community members in Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes to identify points of cultural significance that are threatened due to land subsidence, rising sea levels, and coastal erosion. In efforts to document our threatened culture, students and community members log memories, interviews and photos of places that have defined their community for generations, but are now disappearing. By bringing community and national attention to the societal impacts of this loss, the website encourages advocacy for the protection of the land and, most importantly, our culture.

Vanishing Points speaks to two distinct audiences: it aims to safeguard cultural heritage for the local community (which is increasingly diasporic and displaced) and to share stories of a people threatened by land loss with the rest of the world. Through the testimony of first-hand climate witnesses, the app attempts to inform secondary witnesses about the material and cultural destruction of the wetlands and the ways of life they have sustained and nurtured for generations.

These dynamics replicate the testimonial circuit of storytelling proposed by memory scholars as a way of bearing witness to trauma. As academic and psychoanalyst, Dori Laub (1992), suggests of his work with Holocaust survivors, through the witnessing of testimony, the “emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard [becomes] the process and place wherein the cognizance, the ‘knowing’ of the event is given birth to.” (57) In trying to give cognizance to the lived realities of land loss and climate change, the Vanishing Points app offers an important counter to the denial and evasion seen in mainstream tourist and heritage practices. However, the different levels of witnessing facilitated by the app create tensions for visitors seeking to access the natural and cultural heritage of the area. Without wanting to undermine the importance of SLWDC's work, these are worthy of brief exploration as they have the potential to shed light on some of the broader challenges ethical of climate witnessing.

5. The Ethics of Climate Witnessing in Disappearing Memory Environments

In his account of testimony, Laub (1992) suggests that, through the process of hearing the witness's story, "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event" (57). As Colin Davis (2020) contends, while Laub's description of the testimonial encounter may be "psychologically accurate, [...] ethically it raises huge questions: what does it mean for me to participate in and co-own a trauma which is not mine, what right do I have to claim a share of the pain others?" (41). Gary Weissman alleges that such practices encourage "fantasies of witnessing", that enable "nonwitnesses" to seek a "privileged position in relation to the event" (21).

Is there, then, a danger that initiatives like Vanishing Points encourage visitors to engage with vicarious forms of (over-)identification? On their website, SLWDC note: "Whether you live along Bayou Terrebonne, work along Bayou Lafourche, or celebrate in the city of New Orleans, we're all in this. Everyone across the globe faces challenges in the place they choose to live." Whilst this expression of solidarity is doubtless well-intentioned, the universality of the sentiment risks eliding the complex modalities of victimhood and perpetration that critics foreground in relation to the climate crisis. While environmental precarity is a planetary phenomenon, it is important not to elide the uneven impact of and responsibility for land loss, water salination, extreme weather events, and cultural erasure in regions like the wetlands. Most outsider users of Vanishing Points are arguably unlikely to have experienced the effects of land loss and rising tides to the extreme extent of the residents whose stories are told in the app. Ethical climate witnessing would thus demand that tourists are able to acknowledge their own positionality and/or privilege in relation to these disparities.

It is not necessary to visit the wetlands to engage with the Vanishing Points website. However, the detailed directions and coordinates provided for the sites mapped by the app are intended to facilitate physical encounters between first and secondary witnesses and the disappearing landscape. In this sense, Vanishing Points might be understood as a virtually-led toxic tour. As Pezzullo (2007) argues, such tours are "a request for outsiders to travel in order *to be present* and, perhaps more importantly, *to feel present* ... being present as a mode of advocacy suggests that the materiality of a place promises the opportunity to shape perceptions, bodies and lives with respect to the people and places hosting the experience." (9) However, in the context of the wetlands, the socio-environmental consequences of "being present" produces new quandaries for the toxic tourist. Shopping in the Cecil Lapeyrouse grocery centre fuels the rising percentage of non-local customers, contributing to the ongoing dilution of community spaces. Driving through the Isle de Jean Charles encourages a voyeuristic, touristic gaze, incompatible with respectful cross-cultural engagement. The experience of witnessing the damage wrought by the Hurricane Ida is reminiscent of touring the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Viewed through glass of a car window, residents all-too-easily become objectified exhibits in a climate change disaster diorama.⁴

⁴ It is important to contrast the aims of Vanishing Points with the more explicit forms of disaster tourism marketed in nearby New Orleans where multiple 'Hurricane Tours' trade upon giving visitors authentic access to sites of devastation and renewal from Hurricane Katrina. Across the Cajun Bayou, hurricanes and extreme weather events remain a (largely unacknowledged) threat to the tourist economy, rather than an economic driver.

Pezzullo contends that toxic tours ask “the tourist to *witness* what is going on in a way that invites him or her to feel implicated ... providing opportunities to witness is to suggest alternative modes of viewing and acting in the world” (145). Yet, for visitors to the wetlands, the act of witnessing is more directly imbricated with material forms of environmental harm. There is no way to traverse the Wetlands Cultural Byway without travelling by car; doing so necessitates purchasing fuel from one of the many gas stations *en route*, which are interconnected with the nexus of petrochemical facilities that extends from the refineries of the River Road, through the pipelines that criss-cross the wetlands, out into the off-shore drilling rigs of the Bay of Mexico. The production of this fuel poisons African American communities along Cancer Alley, contributes to the erosion of the wetlands, exposes the Gulf Coast to greater hurricane damage, causes massive off-shore oil leaks such as Deepwater Horizon, and exacerbates anthropogenic climate change. As a medium of globalized and digitized memory, meanwhile, *Vanishing Points* – like all platforms of media production and consumption – is reliant on technology produced by material extraction (of, e.g. rare earth minerals) and tied to ongoing processes of environmental racism in indigenous and minoritized (Reading and Notley 2015).

As Michael Rothberg has argued, the climate crisis complicates the conventional binary between victimhood and perpetration. Like other forms of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011),⁵ it recasts much of the global population as “implicated subjects”. Such actors “cannot be termed perpetrators or held legally accountable in a criminal justice system” (Rothberg 2024, 266), but “contribute to, inhabit, inherit or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes. [...] Although indirect or belated, their actions and inactions help produce and reproduce the positions of victims and perpetrators” (Rothberg 2019, 1).

The examples we have traced above exemplify how tourists function as implicated subjects in processes of environmental destruction. How, then, might visitors to endangered landscapes be encouraged to recognise their own complicity in “the powerful structures of inequality and deep histories of violence that define our contemporaneity” (Rothberg 2024, 267)? As Rothberg notes, the dynamic of implication “involves the entanglement of individual and collective subjects with large scale structures and histories” (268). However, as critics have recurrently argued (Clark 2019; Morton 2013; Craps et al. 2018), one of the most significant “representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence” (Nixon 2011, 3) is overcoming the “derangement of scale” (Clark 2012) that exists between macro-level planetary phenomena and micro-level personal experience. The same is true of attempts to denaturalise the politics of petrochemical production. As Matthew Huber (2013) asserts, “the story of oil is almost always told from the perspective of ‘big’ forces—geopolitical strategy, oil kingdoms, titans of oil finances, and global oil capital”. The “problem with these big stories of oil is they ignore the fact that oil is also incredibly *ordinary* because

⁵ Rob Nixon famously defines the symptoms of the climate crisis as being paradigmatic of “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (3).

it is embedded in everyday patterns of life” (xi). By way of conclusion, then, we would like to explore how alternative tourist and heritage practices might enable visitors to connect their own emotional and embodied experiences of disappearing memory environments to the longer histories of social and ecological violence in which they are implicated by developing a praxis of *critical climate witnessing*.

6. Conclusion: Critical Climate Witnessing as Environmental Memory Work

This article has argued that tourism in Louisiana’s wetlands operates within a contested terrain of erasure and forgetting. As both ecological matter and cultural memory disappear, visitors are invited to consume curated narratives of authenticity that obscure the imbricated histories of racial capitalism and environmental degradation. The tourist encounter with Louisiana’s vanishing wetlands demands more than passive observation or sentimental obfuscation. As we have shown, to travel through this landscape is to be entangled—materially, historically, and ethically—with the very forces of its destruction. The challenge, then, is to reimagine tourism as a situated practice of critical climate witnessing: one that foregrounds the complicity and accountability of the visitor.

This framing complicates the moral economy of witnessing by asking what it means to remember—or fail to remember—places that are not only disappearing but have long been produced through multilayered violences. Critical climate witnessing is a form of environmental memory work attuned to the structural forces that render both people and places precarious. It requires mnemonic practices that disrupt dominant temporalities and spatial imaginaries. It demands narrative forms and representational strategies that render slow violence visible, historicise environmental loss, and resist the aesthetics of spectacle or nostalgia. In the case of the Gulf Coast, this means engaging with the wetlands not only as vanishing landscapes to be mourned, but as memoryscapes of dispossession whose degradation is ongoing and structurally (re)produced. It also means challenging the temporal myopia of heritage projects that fail to connect present-day ecological collapse with deeper histories of plantation agriculture, extractive capitalism, and settler-colonial land regimes.

Critical climate witnessing, as we conceive it, requires tourists to actively engage with the socioecological histories that shape the places they visit. This means recognising the wetlands not (only) as a backdrop for cultural authenticity or natural beauty, but as a living archive of racial capitalism, environmental racism, and settler-colonial violence. It means moving beyond affective identification or mere presence to a mode of witnessing that is historically literate, politically aware, and ethically responsive.

Rather than reproducing extractive and objectifying dynamics, we suggest that heritage and tourism practices should ask visitors to confront how their mobility, consumption, and curiosity are enabled by—and contribute to—the structures of inequality and environmental degradation they encounter. This could involve reconfiguring heritage trails, interpretive materials, and digital platforms to explicitly trace the links between the plantation economy, the rise of the petrochemical industry, and contemporary climate collapse. It could also involve fostering

spaces for dialogue, discomfort, and critical reflection that disrupt the smooth narratives of resilience or nostalgia routinely marketed to tourists.

As this article has argued, tourism all-too-often becomes a medium through which memory is mobilised, distorted, or silenced. To reframe it as a practice of critical witnessing is to insist on its ethical and political stakes. This entails designing heritage experiences that implicate rather than absolve, that reveal rather than conceal, and that prompt self-reflexivity rather than passive empathy. Such an approach does not offer moral clarity or closure but instead invites sustained engagement with what Rothberg has called the “difficult knowledge” of structural injustice.

Ultimately, we call for memory studies to take seriously the environmental dimensions of tourism and heritage practice—not only in terms of content, but in how memory work itself is materially and infrastructurally shaped by the very forces it seeks to critique. In this sense, critical climate witnessing is not just about remembering differently, but about remembering *from within* the uneven geographies of climate crisis. It asks us to situate memory in motion: on highways cut through wetlands, in digital maps that trace disappearing ground, and in the cultural and ecological vanishing points that testify to centuries of racial and environmental violence.

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