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Imagetext and Post-Katrina Disaster Recovery in Sarah M. Broom's *The Yellow House* (2019)

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ABSTRACT

This essay attends to the ways in which vernacular photographs modulate into post-Katrina literature. In 2005, when the deluge receded, saltwater-stained snapshots were found to be enmeshed in the debris – a haunting reminder of the mnemonic violence of the storm and its widespread destruction of familial photographic archives. Various volunteer groups and non-profit organisations were therefore setup with the sole objective of restoring flood-damaged photographs and returning them to their original owners. Turning to Sarah M. Broom's memoir, *The Yellow House*, this essay engages with the role of the literature in this process and within the ongoing, unresolved context of post-Katrina disaster recovery. In doing so, it reads *The Yellow House* in relation to W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of the imagetext, illuminating the visual-verbal entanglements that constellate throughout the memoir, with a particular focus on how language supplement images that were vulnerable to water-mediated erasure. By demonstrating how *The Yellow House* resists ecologically mediated, racialised violence and its ongoing assault on the Black archive, this article argues that Broom repurposes imagetext as a method for cultivating hope in times of crisis.

KEYWORDS

Hurricane Katrina; cultural memory; imagetext; hope; race; disaster recovery; anthropocene; vernacular; photography

After Katrina, waterlogged polaroids bedecked the streets of New Orleans – each altered image a reminder of the mnemonic violence of the storm and its widespread destruction of familial photographic archives.[1] Re-photographed images of watermarked snapshots – displaced, swollen, and warped – can be found in the work of photographers like Stan Strembicki, Charles Ommanney, and Will Steacy, who visited New Orleans shortly after the deluge receded. Alongside the emergence of artistic responses to flood-damaged photographs, photographic restoration also formed part of the grassroots disaster recovery efforts that followed the crisis, with various non-profit organizations, including Operation Photo Rescue and The Picture Project, established precisely for the purpose of salvaging personal photographs that were damaged and displaced during the hurricane. Turning to Sarah M. Broom's post-Katrina memoir, *The Yellow House* (2019), this essay engages with literature's capacity for supplementing lost images in the wake of anthropogenic disaster. Examining the imbrications between the visual and verbal throughout *The Yellow House*, I suggest that the memoir can be understood in relation to W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of the imagetext, used to name

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expressive works that merge visual and verbal components (1994a). Scholarship on imagetext emphasises how the form facilitates an awareness of the interdependence between visual perception and linguistic comprehension, highlighting the ways in which graphic novels, comics, and children's picture books, for example, destabilise the notion that text and image are discrete forms (2017). Similarly, while it is not always possible for Broom to optically reproduce the photos she refers to, the entanglements between literature and photography in *The Yellow House* invite us to consider how vernacular photographs that were taken before Hurricane Katrina continue to modulate into different forms of multimodal storytelling.

Situating *The Yellow House* within the broader context of post-Katrina disaster recovery, this paper will argue that Broom repurposes imagetext as a method for nurturing the conditions for hope and wild possibility in times of ecological crisis. More than a natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath cannot be disentangled from various memory crises. Anna Hartnell poignantly describes the storm in terms of 'a violently forgetful liquid capitalism' (2017b, 933). Here, Hartnell is referring to a 'cultural amnesia' (933) surrounding the lessons gleaned from historical catastrophes which repeatedly illuminated 'the need to concede to water – via the creation of outlets and spillways' (934), but Hartnell's notions of water-related amnesia are also helpful in terms of apprehending how the storm – itself the product of a refusal to remember – brought on further erasures, particularly in relation to those who were discarded by a capitalist, neoliberal economy. Entire family archives were lost during Katrina – photographs, letters, and documents that were passed on through generations were destroyed in the watery wreckage. '*Papers tell so many stories*', Broom recalls her mother telling her (2019, 297; emphasis in original). Inevitably, the loss of personal documents would have been most severe in the low-lying, central city areas where flooding was most extreme. It is also worth pointing out that, as Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires summarise, after centuries of residential zoning and racial segregation, Black people were 'concentrated in the central city', shielding wealthier, white residents who were 'concentrated in the outlying (and in New Orleans, literally higher) suburban communities' (C. Hartman and Squires 2006, 5). In this way, many of the saltwater-stained photographs that rose to the surface after the storm, materially evidenced longstanding processes of ecologically mediated, racialized violence and their ongoing assault on the Black archive.[2] And yet, wayward snapshots – both mental images and material photographs – continue to constellate into post-Katrina writings, and in doing so, direct our attention to what Christina Sharpe describes as an 'attentiveness wherever possible to a kind of aesthetic that escaped violence whenever possible' (2023, 79).

In what follows, I posit that the re-emergence of personal snapshots via imagetext symbolises the (re)creation of hopeful possibilities because, as Rebecca Solnit puts it, 'though hope is about the future, grounds for hope lie in the records and recollections of the past' (2017, 34). Conceptualising a methodology of hope centred around traces and residues, Jose Esteban Munoz also postulates that hopeful possibilities are forged in relation to memory. As Munoz puts it, turning 'to the past for the purpose of the present, is propelled by a desire for futurity' (2009, 43). In engaging with the ways in which Broom utilises imagetext as a method for cultivating hope (by retrieving snapshots of the past), the first section of this essay will explain how *The Yellow House* functions as an imagetext, highlighting how the memoir combines 'different codes, discursive connections, channels, sensory and cognitive modes' (Mitchell 1994a, 24–25) in ways that demonstrate how photographic traces are diffused into different expressive forms. Next, I explore how the memoir encourages us to think relationally between text, image, and disaster recovery, with a particular focus on the ways in which Broom utilises imagetext as a method for repairing archival absences and negotiating racialized, ecological traumas. Finally, I suggest that in protecting vernacular images that were vulnerable to hurricane-induced erasure, Broom registers what Rinaldo Walcott terms '*glimpses of Black freedom*' (Walcott 2021, 2; emphasis in original) which help us to envision alternative futures.

Vernacular expressive cultures – as in, forms of expression and creativity imbricated in the everyday and born out of specific times and places – do not subscribe to the conventions of elitist cultural forms and traditions. In the words of Tina Campt, vernacular photography refers to 'a genre of everyday image-making most often created by amateur photographers and intended as documents of personal history' (7). As Brian Wallis notes, vernacular photography has long been a contentious subject for visual art theorists because they challenge 'the art historical formalist precepts of the history of photography not only because of their sheer omnipresence and variety but also, and worse, because of what is often perceived as their dull or repetitive qualities' (18). As Campt et al. write in the introduction to *Imagining Everyday Life: Engagements with Vernacular Photography* (Campt et al. 2020), vernacular photographs 'are often fragile and neglected artifacts portraying underrepresented, oppositional, marginalized, misunderstood, or effaced communities. In this respect, these fugitive images may offer precisely the material and methodological terms for future historical reconsiderations' (13). Such photographs are 'inherently political objects that communicate, tell stories, evoke memories, predict futures' but 'require attentive engagement, active listening, and ongoing critical interrogation' (21). As we will see through the following close-reading of *The Yellow House*, vernacular photography has the potential to participate in the creation of hopeful futures in times of ecological crisis, and that potential surpasses the material photograph.

I should note that this reading is not designed to echo reductive assertions about the resilience of New Orleans which inadvertently excuse the state for failing to uphold its responsibility to support and safeguard its citizens. As scholarship on Hurricane Katrina emphasizes, the impacts of the storm were intensified by the neoliberal withdrawal of crucial public services and social infrastructures (Johnson 2011). Pro-market reforms of the welfare system meant that, by the time Katrina struck, responsibility was individualised and state-funded protections were rendered obsolete. It is therefore important to stress that I am not proposing that the imagetext is so profound that it substitutes the federal government's duty to invest in public infrastructure. After all, as Hartnell reminds us, Solnit suggests that 'one reason that disasters are threatening to elites is that power devolves to the people on the ground in many ways', but in so doing she misses the fact that the 'do-it-yourself' society is precisely what the neoliberal roll-back of public services is all about (Hartnell 2017a, 14). I am not suggesting that art offers 'a better alternative' (14) to physical aid, public services, and economic solutions. Crucially, *The Yellow House* does not the belie the socioeconomic complexities of life after the storm, but it does ask that we also pay attention to the insurgent process of 'making a small blot of pretty in a world of ugly' (Broom 2019, 361). In other words, the memoir contains the wild possibility that even under the conditions of racialized capitalism and anthropogenic catastrophe, the vernacular functions as a site of contestation and hope. That is not to say that the vernacular is immune to external forces. In Walcott's words, 'the vernacular is, contradictorily and simultaneously, a sovereign site of Black expressivity and creativity and one of the most [. . .] interdicted sites of Black life' (2017, 6). This was materially evidenced by Katrina and the ways in which vernacular photographs, for example, were porous to interconnected flows of climate change and racial neoliberalism. Hope, as it appears in the memoir, is thus an emergent, unresolved praxis, with the visual and textual recovery of vernacular images through imagetext prompting us to engage with what Katherine McKittrick describes as 'the premise that liberation is an already existing and unfinished and unmet possibility, laced with creative labor' (2020, 13).

The Yellow House As Imagetext

Taking New Orleans East as its focal point, *The Yellow House* tells the story of 4121 Wilson Avenue, the shotgun house Broom's mother bought in 1961 and went on to raise 12 children in. The house was 'split in two' by Katrina, and then, a year later, the City of New Orleans demolished the remaining architecture without notifying the Broom family (Broom 2019, 224). Broom describes *The Yellow House* as being about 'architecture and belonging and space' (8), but it is also a project of hope and recuperation, and all of these things are, in the memoir, linked to vernacular image making. Observing the relationship between photography and the architecture of the house, bell hooks describes the 'walls of images in Southern black homes' as 'sites of resistance' (1998, 59). 'These walls were a space where, in the midst of segregation, the hardship of apartheid, dehumanization could be countered', asserts hooks (59). What happens, then, when as Sarah M. Broom writes in *The Yellow House*, the 'story of [the] house [is] the only thing left'? (372) As *The Yellow House* unfolds, it becomes clear that for Broom, like hooks, vernacular photographs are intimately connected to the structure of the house. In Broom's words, 'A book is like a house; it needs a support structure, beams, entrances and exits, all these layers of construction and form'(*The Guardian*, 8 August 2020). Broom explains that, in this way, writing the memoir became a way of memorialising the home she lost during Katrina. Like the homes described by hooks, *The Yellow House* is furnished with photographs: it cannot be reimagined without photography. Scanned polaroids and verbal recollections of family photographs adorn the memoir. In many ways, the pages of the book, like the 'walls of images in Southern black homes' (hooks, 59), represent sites of photographic resistance.

Thinking about the ways in which photographs constellate into post-Katrina literature resonates with Tina Campt's notions regarding the afterlives of images. Writing about vernacular photography in the Black diaspora, Campt asserts that the forms of filiation and affiliation, linkage and belonging that family evokes constitute a crucial sensibility that registers in these images at multiple sensory and affective levels. It is a sensibility that begins with vision and sight, with what we see, but it certainly does not end there (Campt 2012, 13). In engaging with the ways in which these sensory and affective registers are visually and textually regenerated throughout *The Yellow House*, I turn to Mitchell's concept of the imagetext, used to define works containing visual-verbal components. In Mitchell's words, the '"visual-verbal", [. . .] produces a productive confusion of signs and senses, ways of producing meaning and ways of inhabiting perceptual experience' (Mitchell 2015, 40). Mitchell argues that 'all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no "purely" visual or verbal arts' (Mitchell 1994b, 5). We can think of visual–verbal relations alongside the work of Anne-Marie Garat who conceives of the family photo-album as a kind of novel. Garat asserts that the 'family album, in its naïve and defective way, certainly satisfies the immense need for a story [le dit] which for lack of written documents [l'ecrit] haunts each family' (as quoted in Langford 2021, 5). While we might initially interpret *The Yellow House* as an inversion of this model insofar as the written document is haunted by an incomplete visual archive of the family, the memoir not only reveals how language figuratively recovers lost images, but also demonstrates how crucial vernacular image-making has become to storytelling practices.

No other critic has considered the ways in which *The Yellow House* functions as an image text but it clearly meets the criteria on the basis of two key features. First, the incorporation of photographic elements is literally at the forefront of the memoir; the front cover consists of scanned polaroids organized into a fractured geometric sequence, calling to mind the family photo-album. These are the first of many of Broom's personal polaroids that we encounter throughout the text. Second, but equally as important, are the photographs that are verbally transmitted through Broom's detailed descriptions of their content ('In a picture taken outside the house, I am returning from elsewhere, barefoot and diapered, holding a decrepit baseball mitt. I am captured midstride, examining my found object, oblivious to the camera'. [116]). As is typical of the imagetext, there are photographs in *The Yellow House* that we only come to know through language. Hirsch reminds us that Barthes' seminal work Camera Lucida incorporates this mode of photographic narration. 'In his book, his mother's picture exists only in the words he uses to describe it [...] the image has been transformed and translated into a "prose picture"', she writes (Hirsch 2012, 3). Hirsch leans further into Barthes' work to suggest that 'Writing the image accomplishes even more in this scene of mourning: it undoes the objectification of the still photograph and thereby takes it out of the realm of stasis, immobility, mortification – what Barthes calls "flat death" – into fluidity, movement, and thus, finally, life'. (3–4) Merging the work of Mitchell and Barthes, Hirsch helps us to conceive of the ways in which text and image are 'intricately entangled in a narrative web' (4). In what follows, I engage with how, in the long wake of Katrina, Broom deploys the narrative entanglements between text and image to resist hurricane-induced amnesia and participate in the construction of historical knowledge.

Image, Text, and Disaster Recovery

Thinking of the imagetext in relation to disaster recovery in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans, requires acknowledging the extent to which, for many residents, the loss of familial photographic archives was bound up in the traumatic experience of returning to a house in ruins. Broom's first memory of returning to New Orleans East after the floodwaters receded is of her friend and neighbour, Herman, leaping out of the car in search of family photographs. Herman rummaged through soaking-wet dresser drawers for photographs of his dead brother and my childhood friend Alvin. Searched for intact images of his mother, Big Karen, and his grandmother, Ms. Octavia, who had died of old age 2 years before. Came up short., Broom recalls (2019, 224). The memory of Herman's search, verbally relayed by Broom, is resonant with those haunting scenes captured by

Spike Lee in *When the Levees Broke* (C. Hartman and Squires 2006), in which residents return to find family albums destroyed among the debris. In other cases, snapshots were completely 'separated from their owners by wind and flood' (Zuromskis 2008, 425). Volunteer groups, like The Picture Project, therefore emerged in an effort to restore water-damaged photographs and return them to their original owners. As Catherine Zuromskis puts it, 'The Picture Project [. . .] takes to heart the oft-repeated assertion that the first things one saves from one's house in the event of a disaster, and conversely the most tragic things to be lost, are the family snapshots'. (425) Nothing, says Zuromskis, 'seems to rival the album or shoebox full of family photographs as a souvenir of the past, a record of family history, and an existential and indexical trace of the self'. (425)

It is worth stressing that the storm's destruction of memory-inducing photographs ought to be addressed in relation to the racialised contours of the catastrophe. According to a 2021 *Climate Signals* study, when Katrina made landfall, the impacts to life and property were disproportionately borne by the Black community. The hardest hit areas in the New Orleans and Biloxi-Gulfport coastal regions were 46% Black and 21% poor compared to undamaged areas which were 26% Black and 15% poor. In many ways, Katrina's water-mediated annihilation of Black vernacular archives is evocative of the archival absences that emerged out of the watery origins of the plantation. Broom prompts us to make these connections during her 2020 interview with *The Guardian*, during which she presents a copy of Saidiya Hartman's 'Venus in Two Acts', and begins to read from its pages (*The Guardian*, 8 August 2020):

> We stumble in the archives upon her exorbitant circumstances that yield no picture of the everyday life, no pathway to her thoughts, no glimpse of the vulnerability of her face or of what looking at such a face might demand. We only know what can be extrapolated from the analysis of the ledger, or borrow from the road of her captors and masters and apply to her. (S. Hartman 2008, 2)

Here, Hartman is referring to the 'silence in the archive' resulting from the 'scarcity of African narratives of captivity' on board the slave ship (3). Broom's recuperative project seeks to resist further mnemonic absences by retrieving and documenting recent histories. Once again, in the 'wake of disappearance' (Hartman, 14), Broom, like Hartman, grapples with questions around how best to 'yield [a] picture of [. . .] everyday life' (Hartman, 14) and memorialize it. Critical discussions of visual cultures in the Black diaspora emphasise the role that vernacular photography plays in this process (Campt 2012; Hooks 1998), and Broom affirms this notion in *The Yellow House*, describing how, during her childhood she understood her mother to be 'the art director of family memory, organizing photographs and presenting the story of us in books with labels handwritten in her curlicue' (127). It is through the familial photographic archive that Broom locates the presence of her father, who died when she was 6 months old: 'my father is six pictures', she says (349). 'We take photos', Broom writes, 'because we do not want to remember wrong' (136). How, then, to respond to the destruction of family albums during Hurricane Katrina? In what ways can communities counteract this amnesiac violence so as to inhibit further 'silence[s] in the archive'? (Hartman, 2) *The Yellow House* responds to these questions by centring the ways in which language stands in for lost images, positioning the imagetext as an alternative form of photographic recuperation. ‘Mom always thought words had enormous power, was always saying, You have what you say’, writes Broom (142).

Thinking of the imagetext as a form of disaster recovery, however, requires a more nuanced approach than simply highlighting the verbal reproduction of damaged or lost photographs; it also demands that we attend to the complex relationship between the imagetext and trauma. Disaster recovery is a prominent theme in the memoir, with Broom chronicling various organizations that professed their commitment to rebuilding the city, such as the Road Home programme which was ‘generally agreed to be a massive failure’ (2019, 227). Broom also recalls the fallacy of recovery in relation to the federal government, reflecting on her own role in this process given that in 2008 she returned to New Orleans to take up writing speeches for Ray Nagin. ‘More and more I began to feel that I was on the wrong side of the fence, selling a recovery that wasn’t exactly happening for real people’, she recalls (Broom 283). Failure to rebuild the physical infrastructure of the city was accompanied by an absence of psychological support for hurricane-related trauma, which, by the time Katrina struck, had been an ongoing issue in New Orleans East for generations. After Hurricane Betsy, ‘Residents in Pines Village, one of the earliest eastern neighborhoods [. . .] were threatening lawsuits against the city’s Sewerage and Water Board for “mental anguish and anxiety suffered during floods and all heavy rainstorms”’. (Broom, 7–8) In what ways, then, might the imagetext serve as an instrument for working through – or, at least, confronting – water-related trauma?

Alan Gibbs argues that ‘conventional methods of representing trauma’ tend to be so preoccupied with evoking emotional affect – sensationalising traumatic events to convey the severity of them – that they fail to instigate political action (2014, 36). Gibs draws on the work of Laura Brown to assert that ‘envisioning trauma as extraordinary [. . .] safely brackets it, giving the illusion that it is not part of normal life’ (22). Broom’s use of the imagetext, however, does precisely the opposite by centring vernacular photography and everyday memories into an account of the impact and legacies of Katrina. Poignantly, when analysing the PostSecret art project, wherein anonymous individuals submitted confessions in the form of 4-by-6-inch postcards, Tanya K. Rodrigue asserts that ‘Imagetext functions as a productive means to recognise an event as traumatic, represent traumatic experiences, and engage in dialogue for the purposes of understanding trauma’ (Rodrigue 2012, 40). The photographs that are visually and verbally reproduced in *The Yellow House* do not depict shocking spectacles of traumatic events but viewing them from a post-Katrina perspective requires that we attend to the traumatic experiences of death, displacement, and estrangement that frame them in the present. In trauma studies, it is generally upheld that traumatic events are accompanied by an inability to remember them entirely because their sudden and catastrophic nature escapes language and recollection. Imagetext, on the other hand, ‘offers an avenue for a traumatized person to feel, see, sense, and live the trauma – without actually experiencing it again. Via imagetext, a person who has experienced trauma can bear witness and thus ultimately come to know his/her trauma or something about it’. (Rodrigue, 59) ‘By bringing you here, to the Yellow House, I have gone against my learnings. You know this house not all that comfortable for other people, my mother was always saying’, Broom writes (2019, 9). Despite this conditioning, Broom visually and verbally draws the reader into the house in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and in doing so communicates a sense of how familial and environmental traumas work in tandem. Further, Rodrigue argues that image texts open up a ‘process for testifying [. . .] that in itself directly confronts and resists oppressive dominant discourses. The process eradicates the demands, which dominant discourses have created, to “prove” or provide “forensic evidence” in court or elsewhere of a traumatic experience’. (2012, 42) The notion of witnessing reappears throughout the length of *The Yellow House*. Broom is interested in the ways in which the landscape bears witness (‘Ghost cypress tree trunks stood up everywhere in the water-like witnesses, evidence of vanquished cypress forests’. [71]), but also in how photographs bear witness. In this way, the memoir resonates with Susan Schuppli’s assertion that ‘technical objects can account for and express their historical conditions; that artifacts can induce the affective register of testimony; and that materials can, in short, bear witness’ (Schuppli 2020, 13–14). So, in the wake of mass photographic loss and damage, with entire familial archives destroyed in the storm, the imagetext emerges as a vehicle for writing into and against traumatic voids. The recuperation of testimony fosters the conditions for hope by removing us from the confines of trauma – which is the realm of stasis and amnesia – and placing us in relation to both the past and an emergent future. As Solnit reminds us, without memory there are no ‘grounds for hope’. (2017, 34)

In the memoir, Broom recalls the first time she accompanied her brother, Carl, to the Yellow House after the hurricane. The family were dispersed when the storm struck, and Carl was the only one who was at the Yellow House when it did. Remembering the moment in which she watched her brother return to the house in search of weed eater, Broom recalls, ‘We were here, it was apparent, as witnesses to what Carl had come through. To retrieve, in some way, not the weed eater but the memory’ (Broom 2019, 227). Broom responds to this perceived need to bear witness by utilising her camera. ‘I photographed his every movement as if to save him from disappearance’, Broom writes (226). ‘Believing, even against my will, that to be photographed is to be present, alive, confirmed’, she later on explains (326). Broom describes the photographs she takes of Carl in detail:

> Picture a man set against a wide blue sky, wearing a bright-red Detroit Pistons hat, blue jean shorts that fall far below the knee, and clean blue sneakers. In the first frame, he is bent down, holding himself up by his hands, entering the escape hole, a rugged map carved through the roof, feet first. By the second frame he is shrunken to half a man. In the last frame, we see only his head. (226)

While she chooses not to visually incorporate the photographs, she vividly reproduces them verbally. Through imagetext, Broom retrieves traumatic memories of Carl’s, without reproducing them; Carl returns to the scene of trauma, Broom and her camera bear witness (using photography and then language to further emplace him at the scene), together they interrupt the traditional trajectory of trauma by ‘making things real, findable, fighting disappearance’. (Broom, 262) As Rodrigue asserts, ‘imagetext paves an avenue for the reclamation of memory’ (Rodrigue 2012, 40). Crucially, the reclamation of memory is necessarily the reclamation of hope, which struggles to survive in forgetful conditions. In other words, the ability to remember brings with it the potential to hope because, as Walter Brueggeman puts it, ‘Memory produces hope in the same way that amnesia produces despair’ (as quoted in Solnit 2017, 34).

I want to remain with this notion of reconstruction for a moment to think of it more specifically in relation to imagetext, architecture, and witnessing. 'How to resurrect a house with words?' (Broom 2019, 292): this is the question that reverberates throughout the memoir. I have suggested that through visual-verbal conjunctures Broom conjures the Yellow House; that houses, as hooks reminds us, are intimately connected to the vernacular photographic archives of the family and that this is thematically and aesthetically represented throughout the memoir. The ways in which Broom uses imagetext to reconstruct the Yellow House and write into traumatic voids is resonant with some of the methods deployed by the multidisciplinary research group Forensic Architecture. Combining a range of architectural strategies and technologies, Forensic Architecture are known for conducting investigations into state violence and other human rights violations. In *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (Weizman 2017), Eyal Weizman, director of the group, details a particular investigation through which the survivor of a drone attack that took place in Northern Pakistan reconstructed her obliterated home using digital softwares.[3] Weizman explains how 'some of the details of the strike were obscured from memory' (44) and so they assisted her in building a digital model of the house in the hopes that it would provide 'another route to memory' (45). Through this process, the witness 'started narrating fragments of life in this house and some aspects of the incident itself' (Weizman 2017, 46). Although the drone attack occurred in North Waziristan and the historical and geographical contexts are, therefore, vastly different to those associated with Hurricane Katrina, what is significant here are the ways in which Weizman and Broom both experiment with mnemonic models – digital technologies and imagetext – to address gaps in memory that occur as a result of traumatic incidents. This shared methodology is also united by an engagement with the ways in which architecture, in particular, facilitates remembrance. As Weizman writes in relation to the investigation in North Waziristan, 'Architecture [...] functioned as a mnemonic technique, a conduit to testimony. The model became a stage on which some of her memories were accessed and performed'. (46) Similarly, Broom's visual-verbal reconstruction of the Yellow House, built with language and photographs, is a mnemonic technique, with the imagetext emerging as an entity through which testimony unfolds.

Early on in the memoir, Broom explains how, 'From time to time, Simon set up a projector in the backyard [...] the side of the house becoming, for a night, the greatest movie screen' (2019, 68). Here, we are reminded of hooks' notions regarding the power of image and the architecture of the house, but the scene is also symbolic of the ways in which we might conceive of the Yellow House *as* media. In *Forensic Architecture*, Weizman writes:

> Architecture and the built environment [...] could be said to function as media, not because photographs of buildings might circulate in the public domain, but because they are both storage and inscription devices that perform variations on the three basic operations that define media: they sense or prehend their environment, they hold this information in their formal mutations, and they can later diffuse and externalize effects latent in their form. (2017, 53)

Thus, even though the house was ostensibly erased by the time Broom was writing its story, its presence is diffused and externalised into the former occupants of the house and their photographic archives – and later, of course, into the imagetext itself. *And then you* *see the lives of the children and they become the living people of the house, the house lives in them. They become the house instead of the house becoming them. When I look at you all, I don't really see the house, but I see what happened from the house. And so in that way, the house can't die*, Broom's mother tells her (192; emphasis in original). She had also 'grown to believe that the objects contained within a house spoke the loudest about the person to whom the things belonged. More than that, she believed that the individual belonged to the things inside the house, to the house itself' (Broom, 98). Throughout the memoir, we see that vernacular photographs are objects that form part of the narrative web of the house and are identified as a source of self-knowledge. Thinking of the house as media ('all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous' [Mitchell 1994b, 5]) and engaging with the ways in which it shapes the narrative assemblage of architecture, photography and language that constitutes *The Yellow House*, brings us closer to understanding how the imagetext forms a practice of emplacement in the traumatic wake of dislocation, an exercise in remembering what was destroyed, and thus, a poetic form of disaster recovery.

A Glimmer of Hope

As part of her meditation on the ways in which memory serves as the antidote to despair and the basis for hope, Solnit writes: 'We can tell of a past that was nothing but defeats and cruelties and injustices, or of a past that was some lovely golden age now irretrievably lost, or we can tell a more complicated and accurate story' (2017, 34). The kind of hope that is forged through *The Yellow House* is not built on a nostalgic view of the past (or, indeed, the house itself). Instead, in excavating 'historically situated struggles' (Munoz 2009, 3) – tracing government failures from Hurricane Betsy to Katrina and ongoing patterns of dispossession – *The Yellow House* belongs to 'the realm of educated hope' (3). For Munoz, educated hope involves attending to the past in order to assess what lessons and designs it contains that might help to shape alternative 'future social relations' (1). It is not optimism without action, but rather, a historically situated 'mode of critique' (3) undertaken in the pursual of radical transformation. Given that it is both historically attuned and future oriented, educated hope encompasses the dialectical tension between acknowledging what has been and anticipating alternative possibilities that are yet to come. Munoz conceptualises educated hope in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) as part of his broader theorisation of queer utopianism which explores the ways in which queer activists resist neoliberal myopia to imagine possibilities beyond the 'here and now' (1). Educated hope, which Munoz describes predominantly in relation to queer resistance, also resonates with pursuits for environmental justice which necessarily entail tracing the socioecological asymmetries of the so-called Anthropocene to reject the here and now, not as a means for denying reality, but as a way of asserting that other versions are possible.

In deploying a visual-verbal narrative web as method for recuperating vernacular snapshots, *The Yellow House* prompts us to engage with the imagetext as a process of documentation and thus an instrument for cultivating educated hope. This, in part, is because of the ways in which the vernacular snapshots that emerge throughout the memoir resist what Sharpe describes as the 'dysgraphia of disaster' – as in, 'the rapid, deliberate, repetitive, and wide circulation on television and social media of Black social, material, and psychic death' (Sharpe 2016, 21). Instead, the photographic constellations that appear throughout *The Yellow House* emit flickers of hope that do not concede to erasure. In these snapshots, we find Ivory Mae who bought the yellow house with $3,200 and built a world for her children in it. 'From the start the house was sinking in the back' (Broom 2019, 58), and yet still she planted 'a magnolia-filled garden that ran from the front of the house along the side', 'planted mimosas – rain trees, they called them, for how they grew pretty pink flowers that fell in such scattered bulk you could sweep them all day and not be done. She planted gladiolas, the way she had seen her mother, Lolo, do. And pink geraniums'.(58) We find the French provincial-style pieces that Ivory Mae collected from Barnett's, each piece an affirmation that this was a home worthy of beauty and decadence, like an ornate gold mirror which was stationed in the entryway of the house – 'you walked in and saw you reflected back' (59) says Broom, gesturing towards the ways in which the beauty of the house was designed to render its occupants present and alive. We find the faces of smiling children – Broom says, 'We were on sinking ground and knew it as children and still we played'. (364) We find Carl – who, Broom explains, continues to cut the grass on the plot of land on which the house once stood, 'protecting it from name-calling and from dismemory'. (366) 'From high up, fifteen thousand feet above, where the aerial photographs are taken, 4121 Wilson Avenue, the address I know best, is a minuscule point, a scab of green', says Broom, 'From these great heights, my brother Carl would not be seen'. (3) Zooming in on quotidian snapshots, Broom asks us to consider what it means to make 'a small blot of pretty in a world of ugly'. (361) Broom writes, 'From high up above where the survey pictures are taken, this would not show. But standing on the ground, *we* knew' (361); and, in encountering the yellow house through imagetext, we know too.

It is through these snapshots that Broom registers what Rinaldo Walcott describes as '*glimpses of Black freedom*' (2021, 2; emphasis in original). Gesturing to legislative and juridical processes through which the logic of the plantation is sustained, Walcott argues that 'we are still in the time of emancipation and that freedom [...] is yet to come' (1). Through imagetext, *The Yellow House* recuperates glimpses of Black freedom and invites us to 'dwell in its fleeting moments'. (Walcott, 4) These ephemeral glimpses are evidence of wild possibilities. As Munoz writes in 'Ephemera as Evidence', 'writing practices that index different experiences and memories of self' (Munoz 1996, 11), help us to apprehend 'the ephemeral as proof'. (7) Ephemera, Munoz explains, 'is linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself'. (10) Glimmers of hope appear throughout *The Yellow House* in the form of both photographic and verbal vestiges that linger in the wake of fleeting moments of freedom and joy. Locating the ephemeral as proof of hopeful possibilities thus requires 'following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things' (Munoz, 10).

Broom's 'writerly relation to ephemera' (Munoz, 11) – established in relation to the material photograph – is a modality for resisting collective amnesia. The curation of visual and verbal residues throughout *The Yellow House* is also, it ought to be noted, an exercise in futurity. After all, the snapshots of Black vernacular life that modulate into the memoir can be understood in relation to what

Campt describes as ‘a quotidian practice of refusing to stay put or to stay in their designated place, and a refusal to accept the rejection of and limitations on black futurity’ (Campt 2017, 43). In inviting the reader to dwell with vernacular snapshots that were vulnerable to erasure, Broom repurposes imagetext in order to practice ‘a backward glance that enacts a future vision’ (Munoz 2009, 4); and this, as Munoz reminds us, this is the foundation of hopeful methodologies. The anticipatory resonances of the imagetext lie in the fact that memory allows us to (re)imagine the future and live in relation to it. As Solnit puts it, ‘A memory commensurate to the complexity of the past and the whole cast of participants, a memory that includes our power, produces that forward-directed energy called hope’ (Solnit 2017, 34). As we have seen, memories of 4121 Wilson avenue (and the glimmers of hope it once contained) cannot be retrieved without also recalling entangled processes of government neglect, environmental degradation, and racialized segregation. ‘Remembering’, as Broom says, ‘is a chair that is hard to sit still in’ (2019, 223), but sometimes the future depends on it.

Notes

1. Mnemonic devices and processes are memory aids – as in, they assist in the retrieval and remembrance of information. As such, when referring to the ‘mnemonic violence’ of Hurricane Katrina throughout this essay, I am alluding to the ways in which the storm destroyed a range of memory-inducing materials and places.
2. When referencing ecologically mediated, racialized violence I am signalling to the structural causes for environmental catastrophes – such as divestments from environmental protections and inadequately regulated toxic exposures – and the ways in which they disproportionately impact racialized people. Put otherwise, socioeconomic forces often shape environmental crises – like extreme weather events and toxic burdens – and frequently (re)produce racial inequalities. In this way, ecological violence is anthropogenic but mediated via the so-called natural environment.

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