

***Losing Miami:* Imagining Post-Extractivist Futures in the “Magic City”**

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Abstract

Against the principled ecological wisdom of economic degrowth in the face of planetary catastrophe, echoed throughout a capacious archive of work on the imperative to restrict the ceaseless extraction of the biosphere, the sunshine state has doubled down on relentless growth in its primary economic sectors. Investment in agrocultural, for example—most notably sugar and phosphate—moves forward relentlessly, despite the clear ecological consequences of continued investment in such extractive economies; so too, their deleterious impacts on the state’s largely Afro-Caribbean and Latinx working class, many of whom work in either the state’s agricultural corridor or in the rock quarries that flank Miami. As an example of uneven development, and what critics have lately termed uneven disaster, the city of Miami incisively illustrates the settler logics that have long drawn speculators to Florida’s central and southeastern bioregions; and it is to Miami that I shall draw my attention when considering the disastrous impacts of agroculturalism (and unchecked industrial development more broadly) in an era increasingly defined by cataclysmic shifts to global and local climate. Specifically, in this essay I examine Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué’s book-length poem *Losing Miami* in order to explore the impacts of Florida’s feckless development schemes on Miami’s coastal precariat. Although, as I shall also argue, *Losing Miami* is not merely a critique; it is a provocation. What I term Ojeda-Sagué’s “limestone lyricism” offers both a productive vehicle for thinking through the violent histories of Jim Crow, and the role of private property in the production of citizenship; and it likewise presents the possibility that Miami’s sinking endoskeleton may be ripe for coalition-building in the face of imminent disaster.

Keywords: Climate, power, lyric, uneven disaster, development.

Resumen

Frente al conocimiento ecológico ejemplar del decrecimiento económico ante la catástrofe planetaria, que resuena a través de un gran número de obras sobre la imperativa de restringir la incesante extracción de la biosfera, Florida ha apostado a favor del implacable crecimiento de sus principales sectores económicos. La inversión en agrocultural, por ejemplo—notablemente azúcar y fosfato—, avanza incesantemente, a pesar de las claras consecuencias ecológicas de la continua inversión en tales economías extractivas; así como los impactos perjudiciales para las comunidades Afrocaribeñas y Latinx de clase trabajadora, muchas de las cuales trabajan en el corredor agrícola del estado o en las canteras que flanquean Miami. Como ejemplo del desarrollo desequilibrado, y a lo que los críticos se han referido como desastre desequilibrado, la ciudad de Miami ilustra de forma incisiva las lógicas de colonización que durante mucho tiempo han atraído a especuladores a las biorregiones del centro y sureste del estado. Y es en Miami en la que me centro al considerar los impactos desastrosos del agroculturalismo (y, más ampliamente, del desarrollo industrial desenfrenado) en una era cada vez más definida por cambios cataclísmicos en el clima global y local. En concreto, en este ensayo examino el libro/poema *Losing Miami*, de Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué, para explorar los impactos de los ineficaces esquemas de desarrollo en el precariado de la costa de Miami. Aunque, como también argumentaré, *Losing Miami* no es simplemente una crítica, es una provocación. Lo que denomino el “lirismo de calcita” de Ojeda-Sagué ofrece un vehículo productivo para reflexionar sobre las violentas

historias de Jim Crow y sobre el papel de la propiedad privada en la producción e la ciudadanía; y, asimismo, presenta la posibilidad de que el hundimiento del endoesqueleto de Miami pueda estar preparado para el desarrollo de coaliciones frente al desastre inminente.

Palabras clave: Clima, fuerza, lírica, desastre desigual, desarrollo.

I want to wonder the following publicly. The ocean is a manifestation of the unknown and the changing, the imperceptibly far and deep, and it is also monstrous in both reality and text. Miami gains its unique cultural/language construction from a traversal of the surface of the ocean. What happens, then, when that which produces Miami, the ocean, covers it? Swallows it? Fills it?

Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué, *Losing Miami* (2019)

Our imaginations failed us. Our models failed us
Karen Russell, “The Gondoliers” (2019)

Against the principled ecological wisdom of economic degrowth in the face of planetary catastrophe, which has been echoed throughout a capacious archive of work on the imperative to restrict the ceaseless extraction of the biosphere, the sunshine state has doubled down on relentless growth in its primary economic sectors.¹ Investment in agrocultural, for example—most notably sugar and phosphate—moves forward relentlessly, despite the clear ecological consequences of continued investment in such extractive economies. Mirroring “green revolutions” across the Global South, over-investment in energy-intensive industrial agriculture has in fact proven disastrous for local ecosystems, not to mention an already beleaguered and dispossessed working-class majority now further suffering from the interlocking forces of environmental toxicity and cataclysmic shifts to local and global climate.²

¹ Anathema to the impulse of endless accumulation that is the central drive of capital, ecological economists since the 1970s have prioritized consideration of the biophysical limits of markets and have thus called for various forms of economic “degrowth.” Regarding Florida specifically, the glaring consensus is that “one way or another, the very near future will force South Florida to contend with the biogeophysical reality of humanity’s carbon dioxide problem” whether or not local legislators concede to privilege planetary health over profit for agroculturalist elites (Ariza 251).

² For further discussion of the failures of agroculturalism in the context of green revolution campaigns (as well as the long-term deleterious impacts of agrocultural globally) see also Ashley Dawson’s *Environmentalism from Below: How Global People’s Movements Are Leading The Fight For Our Planet* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2024). Among the impacts of overdevelopment and industrial agriculture for local communities are soaring asthma rates in cities like Belle Glade, a largely African-American community adjacent to the sugar fields of south-central Florida. “Big Sugar” is the third largest economic sector in the state, and its practice of burning cane has created an epidemic of asthma in the region. See Michael Adno’s essay “A Fire in the River: Big Sugar and ‘Black Snow’ in the Everglades”: <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/sugar-crop-pollutants-florida-1234924707/>

The evident consequences of overdevelopment on the state’s increasingly coastal precariat, however—whether daily deluges or soaring asthma rates—still don’t seem to deter investment. While calls for social and environmental justice resound across the state, and energy justice workers carve out space to consider not merely economic degrowth—a strategy framed by the mandates of capital—but the cultivation of a just future for all of Florida’s stakeholders, development continues apace.³ Meanwhile, Florida also boasts the highest rate of population increase in the nation. Some are likely drawn by the promises of employment in the abovementioned industries; many more have cited the libertarian virtues enshrined in recent policy endeavors designed to insure the sorts of rogue freedoms long associated with a much-mythologized American frontier. The last gubernatorial election offers evidence of the latter.

Ever the inverse of more ‘majestic’ sites like Yosemite National Park or Henry David Thoreau’s beloved Mount Katahdin, Florida had long suffered from an imaginative perception of its landscape as inhospitable to development, let alone worthy of conservation.⁴ But this would change following nineteenth-century drainage campaigns that would allow for permanent settlement; the following century, Henry Flagler’s railroad—running from Jacksonville to Key West—would then insure the edification of settler infrastructures and the further marginalization of the state’s largely Indigenous and pan-Caribbean underclass. Indeed, only a decade or so after Frank Norris’s notable literary indictment of corporate rail’s enclosure of California’s farmland, Flagler’s railroad would be celebrated as an engineering marvel and one that would guarantee Florida’s belated entry into a national imaginary that would hinge on “the promise of [such] infrastructure” (Anand).⁵

Within this quintessential site of American dreaming, the “magic” city of Miami would stand apart as a true marvel and one directly tethered to the industrial virtuosity of Mr. Flagler. But as “the promises of modernity [...] crumb[e]” in the face of overdevelopment and climate change, the city also offers a unique illustration of precarity in its cruel amplification of what critics term uneven disaster (Anand 30). Ashley Dawson, commenting on the fallout from Hurricane Sandy in 2012, appropriated Trotsky’s familiar formulation of “combined and uneven development” to consider the sorts of “combined and uneven disaster” on display after such extreme weather events (2013). “Uneven disaster” shall figure centrally in the following pages in which I examine a literary critique of Miami’s fragile infrastructure by Miami-born poet Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué. Their book-length poem *Losing Miami*, which they describe as an “experiment in grieving,” is a bilingual indictment of the sorts of infrastructural

³ Moratoria on development have been lifted; so too, any investment in climate-mitigating green technologies. Additionally, new bills have been passed to protect real estate interests against, most recently, ‘squatters’ in a landscape of unchecked increases to housing costs; thus, developers are further incentivized to invest their capital.

⁴ William Cronon’s foundational 1997 essay “The Trouble with Wilderness” recounts the coterminous aesthetic and economic ideologies that produced both the wilderness tradition in American literary production and its material analogue in the form of the National Park System.

⁵ See Frank Norris’s 1901 novel *The Octopus: The Story of California*.

“apartheid” that I outline throughout (Copy Cover, Connelly). Moving between images of urban ruin and reflections on the conditions of exile amongst Miami’s Cuban community, the poet interweaves potent lyrical indictments of the imperial logic of private property with extensive commentary centering the unique forms of uneven development and dispossession that mark the drowning city. Among them are new means of gentrification, driven largely by sea-level rise, which plague historically Black and Latinx neighborhoods.

Such forms of “climate gentrification” have become commonplace. As an example, communities like the largely Black and Latinx Liberty City are being razed in the interest of new residential development; similarly, neighborhoods such as “Little Haiti” are threatened by initiatives like the mixed-use “Magic City Innovation District,” which promises substantial returns on what amounts to the eviction of local residents (Chéry & Morales). Of course, there is also a less visible form of infrastructural apartheid, and one emboldened by soaring investment by the fossil-fuel industries: the porous limestone that constitutes the state’s bedrock is being extracted ever more feverishly in the interest of cement – based highway construction. This causes increased flooding conditions and occasionally sinkholes in lower-rent districts.

Such realities, however, only recently appear in popular discourse concerning the “magic” city; and this includes the growing corpus of speculative fiction centered on a city that earned the moniker of “magical,” because of the breakneck pace with which it moved from putative wilderness to coastal playground—a process that pivoted on the violent removal of the region’s Indigenous communities and the indenture of tens of thousands of Caribbean laborers. Popular Florida fiction writer Karen Russell valiantly enfolds questions around class and social injustice into stories like those in the recent anthology *Orange World and Other Stories* (2019); and Lily Brooks-Dalton centers questions of dispossession and uneven disaster in the disturbingly proleptic 2022 *The Light Pirate*—a novel that chronicles the sorts of era-defining storms that permanently alter otherwise pristine coastlines (and which is set in a sinking city explicitly sacrificed to keep Miami afloat).⁶ Neither, however, attend to the century-old horrors of the state’s racialized development patterns. Russell’s alligator wrestlers in the 2011 *Swamplandia* don’t quite drive the point home like the images contained in N.D.B. Connolly’s *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* in which we see luxurious hotel swimming pools featuring dispossessed Seminole performers wrestling gators in full regalia as white patrons enjoy the services of a largely Caribbean waitstaff. The latter were also forced to perform a caricature of their Caribbean identities—one real estate developer boasting about “wonderful Bahama Negro[s]” who would be “stripped to the waist and wear big brass rings. And possibly necklaces of live crabs or crawfish” (Connolly 23).

⁶ *The Light Pirate* was published one year after Hurricane Ian nearly destroyed historic areas of Fort Myers and Naples on the state’s Gulf Coast.

Such histories of the city remind readers of the interlaced waves of dispossession that suture the diasporic histories of Indigenous communities like the Seminole with those of Caribbean communities such as Miami’s Bahamian workforce, and the Cuban exiles long tokenized as ideal immigrants despite the material realities of exurbs like Hialeah, or Riviera Beach in the northern county of Palm Beach. In the following pages, I follow regional historians in centering the racialized development history of the magic city; as an energy humanist interested in infrastructural relations and their mediating discourses, however, I ultimately turn to a literary work that endeavors to render precarity of the sort experienced by such diasporic communities in the face of unprecedented changes, both politically and climatically. If earlier campaigns of dispossession thrived on the imaginative triumphs of Romantic lyric, I shall argue that Ojeda-Sagué’s work serves a similar end: against the morally impoverished imagination of settlers who see the region as ripe for speculation, Ojeda-Sagué renders a community whose past may be etched “in the surface of the ocean,” but whose future will not recede with the ebbing tide (55). In what follows, I read *Losing Miami* as a critique of the violent legacies of Jim Crow and the correlative role of private property in the dispossession of local communities; but I also interpret the poem as a provocation to consider the possibility of revolution in Ojeda-Sagué’s sinking city. Critically, revolution shall also be understood as a rejection of the sorts of infrastructural apartheid that Connolly observes, which is to say a “present-day [form of] apartheid [or] a variation on colonialism” (6).

Infrastructure, a term bandied about to refer merely to the brick-and-mortar foundations of the city (and a replacement for such naggingly socialist-seeming descriptors as “public works” or “public goods”) has historically operated to conceal the matrix of white supremacy and private property that was (and continues to be) central to the city’s formation. Miami was incorporated in 1896 when Flagler, who had amassed his fortune through Standard Oil, would lay railroad ties far south of what was once swampland, and the same year of the Plessy v Ferguson decision that would declare racial segregation constitutional. For some historians, the coincidence is quite notable. Miami’s “magical” progress from wilderness was enabled by the material dispossession not only of its Indigenous communities, but a stillborn Black middle-class consistently terrorized by the white settler state. Riffing on Norris’s abovementioned novel of rail expansion and its discontents—*The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901)—local journalist Mario Alejandro Ariza describes Flagler’s project (and those of a band of similarly rapacious rubber barons) in terms of a “gilded age kraken...a mythical concentration of wealth, power [...] noxious greed” and racism (202).⁷ But a reckoning with conventional forms of power of the sort long framed by such “noxious greed” is in fact under way as I shall demonstrate below. In these pages,

⁷ A rather different “kraken”—a common octopus, which was found swimming through a submerged Miami parking lot in 2017—has become a sort of bellwether in popular discussions around climate change, and the belated consensus regarding Miami’s inevitable collapse. Rob Verchick’s *The Octopus in the Parking Garage: A Call for Climate Resilience* (Columbia UP, 2023) centers the famous octopus as a harbinger of what’s to come.

I begin with a consideration of the city’s history—as developmentalist marvel and tribute to racial apartheid—before delving into the poem as both radical critique and revolutionary provocation.

“[B]lack Miami looked up at a concrete sky”; or, Building the Magic City

Miami’s bioregion, inclusive of drained swamp ecologies and denuded mangrove systems, has been decimated by phosphate mines, industrial sugar plantations, a massive network of limestone quarries, and successive legislative measures designed to insure the security of area oligarchs (and their cronies in the halls of state) at the expense of ecological stability, labor equity and the survival of its largely Caribbean working-class. Much-mythologized for area beaches, and lately memorialized in scores of media campaigns around climate crisis and sea-level rise, this century-old tribute to one of the U.S.’s most visible “drain the swamp” campaigns has indeed inspired a fairly extensive corpus of speculative climate fiction in the last decade, if one that often excludes consideration of racial apartheid and settler-colonial terror.⁸

Miami, it should be noted, is adjacent to (or situated in, depending on one’s grasp of the state’s settler history) the Everglades—a massive swamp ecology, whose area has receded exponentially in recent decades as the city grows to the north and west.⁹ The area was finally “cultivated” after a century of being described as a literal “hellscape” by prospectors who were increasingly discouraged by the subtropical terrain—behold “nature at its most uncultivated: an icon infested with frightening reptiles, botanical excess, swarms of mosquitoes, and unforgiving heat” (Ogden 1). Also speaking to the long settler history of the region, Devin Garofalo describes the “Everglades” in terms of its ability to “conjure visions of a vast, impenetrable, sublime expanse”—a perception responsible for everything from Napoleon Bonaparte Broward’s initial calls to “drain the swamp and thus master it as Egyptians had the Nile” to the garden-variety Orientalist racism evinced in popular films like the 1956 B-horror film *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (2017).¹⁰ What Groff would describe in the 2018 story “Boca Raton” as the “black blank at the bottom of the state,” Garofalo understands in terms of “the anthropocentric fantasy of a planet whose resources are infinite, endlessly ripe for the claiming, the taking, the exploiting” (2017). But the unceded lands of the Seminole, Apalachee, Miccosukee, Calusa and Tequesta tribes—the latter living alongside Lake Mayaimi, now Okeechobee—would

⁸ Colson Whitehead and Tananarive Due are examples of writers who do in fact attend to the long history of Jim Crow Florida; Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys* and Due’s *The Reformatory* specifically take to task the notorious Dozier School for Boys. Due also reminds us that agricultural work in the state’s phosphate mines was undertaken by young men of color long before migrant laborers from Central and South America would be brutalized by multinational corporations like The Mosaic Company (<https://mosaicco.com/>).

⁹ The Everglades was so-named by settlers to refer to what appeared as a vast grassland; Indigenous communities referred to the area as a site of “grassy waters.”

¹⁰ The film, it ought to be noted, was shot in a northern region of the state similarly subject to European settlement—the Wakulla River littoral—but claims a nameless Amazonian setting as its backdrop.

be “cultivated,” and violently so, not only by prospectors, but the United States Army Corps of Engineers and the National Park System. In 1947, the region that was still viable swampland (and home to the amphibious infrastructures of the Miccosukee) would become a national park upon the near-exhaustion of the state’s cypress forests—prized wood for building putatively permanent settlements, if ones that wouldn’t endure hurricanes of the category that decimated the region in the late 1920s. The city’s planners would only belatedly come to learn the virtue of cement.

Importantly, a century before the Cuban working class would be employed to mine the city’s bedrock (about which more below), in the 1920s Miami’s labor force was largely Bahamian; these were workers who hailed from another place where coral limestone would prove invaluable for construction in the face of cyclonic activity. The latter also demonstrates Chris Campbell’s argument regarding “economies of quarry and extraction [which] form an important substrate of [the] imaginaries” of Caribbean writers, and which continue to inspire works that center the sorts of infrastructures that figure in Ojeda-Sagué’s poem, and those of renowned Barbadian poet Kamau Braithewaite (66). So too, literary critic Anne Stewart’s argument for an “angry planet” reading methodology that attends to such historical ironies as the situating of those same Bahamian laborers on a coastal ridge several feet above sea level. Consequently, while some global speculators continue to park their capital on the coasts and bank on a sufficient return before submersion, others are seeking higher ground in the area historically understood by the racist epithet “Colored Town.”

Critical to this discussion of infrastructural apartheid, it also ought to be noted that when the city sought to expand Interstate-95 in 1968, as Flagler’s unfinished railroad continued to crumble into the lower keys, the town (long termed “Overtown” by its residents) would now be shrouded by the I-95 Midtown Overpass, which was installed in 1968 to much fanfare for the well-heeled who could now easily navigate to local airports and beaches. Meanwhile, Black children “looked up to a concrete sky” in what might more aptly be termed “undertown” (Connolly 2). What a striking tribute to what energy humanist Jeffrey Insko has termed “infrastructural intimacy” to name the condition of infrastructural violence that finds socioeconomically precarious communities subject to such demeaning and toxic environments (2023). “Overtown” remains framed by a crumbling yellow six-foot cement partition that once insured against “‘inharmonious racial groups’ [considered] more of a hazard than flooding or hurricanes” (Ariza 202); but it was also built on that prized ridge whose worth would come to be known well after NASA scientist James E. Hansen would popularize the concept of “global warming,” and its relationship to sea-level rise, in 1988.

The Atlantic Coastal Ridge is actually twelve feet above sea level; Miami Beach is a mere four feet. Yes, in “Overtown” ancient coral interpolates the red lines of Jim Crow—a concise example of what Stewart describes as an “angry planet alliance” (2022). Such “angry planet” readings offer new frameworks for looking at a host of popular representations of the city, amongst them Barry Jenkins’s exquisite 2016 film

Moonlight. The film was shot on that same ridge, in “Liberty Square,” which was built not only far from the affluence of Miami Beach, but far enough from the sandy horizon to evoke a sort of real marvelous for young “Chiron,” Jenkins’s protagonist. Viewers of the film may recall “Little,” or Chiron, sitting on the beach in tears and imagining himself “turning to drops [...] [rolling] out into the water” (*Moonlight*). Viewers may also recall an exquisite moment of intimacy between Chiron and his friend Kevin, and one that makes palpable the communities who are often dismissed not only by predatory real estate speculators, but also by community activists guided by a market ideology that euphemizes racial violence with language intended to minimize “poverty density” through conventional means of “economic improvement”; the latter is illustrated in the recent documentary *Razing Liberty Square* (2024).

Of course, Miami’s Afro-Caribbean communities have not only suffered the settler logics of development whereby their disposability is sanctioned by economic justifications for “improvement” in the imperial sense—a rubric that also erases long-standing relationships to and with the land that were systematically denied over the course of four centuries of American history.¹¹ The communities at stake in *Losing Miami* have also endured a political myopia that simultaneously pathologizes Miami’s Haitian and Jamaican communities while holding up the city’s Cuban residents as a quintessential model minority and one who seemingly occupies a homogenous political bloc. The approximately 400,000 Cuban exiles, amongst whom Kevin and Chiron’s mentor Juan may be counted as descendants, and who cultivated a critical presence in the sinking city during the 1950s, continue to figure in the Republican imagination as an example of the potential for capitalist states to successfully *improve* the uncultivated communist masses in need of democratic reform. Sixty years hence, the grandchildren of the Castro generation tell a rather different story.

Ojeda-Sagué’s speaker is one of them; and he offers biting and relentless lyrical prose that is unapologetic in its angry indictment of the state’s Republican establishment and the continued investment in private real estate at the expense of local communities who are literally drowning. The speaker invokes Chiron’s beach repeatedly, describing it as the “oxidized” inverse of area postcards (40). In lyrics that hauntingly conjure the slow deterioration of this coastal landscape, the speaker demands consideration of the relationship between lithified coral limestone and its sandy brethren into which the city crumbles daily; so too, of course, of the city’s vast “undercommons,” who find common ground on that second beach (Moten and Harney). It is for this reason that I am interested to trace the intersecting histories of settler violence and infrastructural breakdown, while also attending to radical worldbuilding in Miami where “transition” is absolutely being leveraged by the agents of corporate greed, but where communities are also building coalitions in the interest of redistributive justice.

It is also worth mentioning, in this critique of developmentalism as it operated (and continues to operate) in the region, that in the introduction to Min Hyung

¹¹ For a discussion of Black commoning economies and anti-capitalist relationships with landscape, see also Jennifer James’s “Dyspossession: Notes on the Black Commons.” *Post45* 19 Sept 2023.

Song’s recent book *Climate Lyricism*, Song critiques the term ‘undercommons’ worrying that it might reinforce, imaginatively speaking, a perceived lack of agency amongst the working poor; but Song also acknowledges that the undercommons are figured as such because Fred Moten and Stefano Harney explicitly reject aspirations to agency as are framed by the ideologies of the settler state—what they describe as the “auto-interpellative torque that biopower’s subjection requires and rewards” (Song 9).¹² This rejection resonates with Stewart’s argument (in the context of an ‘angry planet’ methodology) that we ought to work toward an ontological withdrawal from the infrastructural imaginary of the settler state—that which is framed by the accumulation of capital in the form of property. Ojeda-Sagué’s particular brand of “climate lyricism” models such a withdrawal in its critique of property and the associated ills of imperial liberalism; the poem accomplishes this, in part, through its emphasis on property as a vehicle for biopolitical belonging. *Losing Miami* offers a deft figuration of solastalgia whereby the loss of home for the diasporic subject is intimately linked to the loss of the city itself; the speaker’s subjectivity is shot through with a “shrinking future and an expanded memory” (Ariza 245). The drowning city (as figured in the poem) “symbolize[s] the ruins of an anticipated future, and the debris of an anticipated or experienced liberal modernity” (Anand et al 27). The titular loss thus functions both symbolically and literally. Ultimately, the poem rejects the logic of land as property and its accumulation as a social good.

Beginning with this rejection of the logic of property, in the remaining pages I will organize my argument along three axes, each anchored in a close reading of *Losing Miami*. First, I consider property and, correlatively, infrastructure, both in terms of cement as well as the sociomaterial infrastructural formations that buttress a place like Miami Beach; second, poetic form, or what I am terming Ojeda-Sagué’s “limestone lyricism” to name the relationship between the shared ecologies of Caribbean writers rooted in landscapes of limestone, whose lyrics draw attention to the intimate relationship between colonial dispossession, sublime imaginings of paradise, and industrial modernity; and finally, the possibility that every crack in the pavement poses an invitation for revolutionary infrastructural worldbuilding—a potential revolution for the “thousands” like the speaker who figure alongside limestone and salt water: “i do not wake up alone here, alone in thinking i am losing everything” (32). That this catastrophic loss is also communicated in a poem that is unapologetically bilingual—rendering the texture of this distinctly diasporic community in lines that move rapidly between Spanish and English—is also a critical

¹² In Jack Halberstam’s introduction to Moten and Harney’s *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, he remarks: “if you want to know what the undercommons wants, what Moten and Harney want, what black people, Indigenous peoples, queers and poor people want, what we (the ‘we’ who cohabit in the space of the undercommons) want, it is this – we cannot be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgement generated by the very system that denies a) that anything was ever broken and b) that we deserved to be the broken part; so we refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls” (6).

means of establishing what the author describes as the “language ecosystem” of their childhood community (9).

On “Concrete Mangroves,” Limestone Lyricism and *Losing Miami*

Cristian Simonetti, in his contribution to the collection *Solarities: Elemental Encounters and Refractions*, addresses the porosity of limestone and attends to concrete in a way that resonates with the poem’s intersectional critique of settler infrastructure—as a concealment of fragility and one enabled by the sacrifice of others:

Cement results from the burning of limestone, a sedimentary rock made of petrified shells, the appearance of which relates closely to the emergence of bones in evolution [...] In burning the remaining exoskeletons of sea creatures that formerly constituted ancient, submerged reefs, urban dwellers have somewhat created their own reefs on land to protect their fragile bodies (120).

Interestingly, Simonetti’s metaphorical reefs become palpable in the speculative worlds of Florida fiction writers like the aforementioned Russell, whose wonderful tale of echolocating gondoliers is set in a submerged, now amphibious, Miami. “The Gondoliers” offers a rather hopeful glimpse of what others might imagine as a watery tomb; the disintegrating limestone here creates little alcoves teeming with life. One of my undergraduate students (in coastal Florida), in their final project—a short story about post-submersion Miami—referred to the faded coastline in similar terms: “The monolithic condo complexes on the horizon stuck out of the water like concrete mangroves” (Lewis 1).

Simonetti also remarks that “concrete is arguably the material that has most significantly contributed to spread modernity’s narrative of progress, [...] advancing forward on the road of civilization” (119). Aptly euphemizing the geological impacts of colonial-capitalist modernity as the “concretocene,” riffing on the more popular (and rightfully embattled) term Anthropocene, Simonetti adds to the ongoing debates regarding how to narrate the impacts of uneven development; as well, the degree to which the putatively impermeable foundation of industrial modernity is but another means of concealment—its smooth lines paving over the geo-epistemological violence of settler infrastructures. It is also useful to recall Campbell’s argument here regarding quarry economies and the Caribbean poetic imagination; not to mention, the sedimentation of liberal subjectivity within the appropriative logic of capital—that is, the development of the citizen-subject through the accumulation of property. I refer to those unceded lands whose rightful inhabitants lack the political agency to protest more legibly—whether the Miccosukee community, or the residents of Little Haiti whose homes are being threatened owing to a series of creative legal ordinances designed to abet the construction of sites like the “Magic City Innovation District.”

The poem deploys a bit of levity in playing with such histories of colonial dispossession: “if I/find a mattress/in the middle/of the gulf/does that make/me Columbus?” (53) But then the tone shifts. After excoriating the new round of land

grabs at the hands of speculators looking for higher ground, the speaker mockingly remarks: “For the sake of going on, I build property. I make money as I build and so I build more” (31). Ojeda-Sagué cleverly interweaves the material and the symbolic in this damning tribute to the drowning city. The poet effectively documents the interlocking traumas of racialized violence, cultural loss, and (quite palpably) environmental disaster in a city “bursting... [with] the leaks in drains below. White noise of septic tanks bursting. Of limestone cut into” (30). Describing the slow decay of the city and its environs, the author coins the term “Permacrumble” (30) in reference to the persistent, if seemingly gradual, erosion of the city’s central infrastructures. “Wading through limestone,” the speaker offers up “vertebrae tercets” to describe this disintegrating infrastructure; in this sense, the poem becomes a lyrical expression of the city’s backbone where, it should also be noted, only “*after* electricity, there is food” (20, 36). This, of course, is also a reference to the tenuous nature of power in lower Miami—both the regulated power of the city’s crumbling grid and the unregulated power of communities agitating for justice. There is no clear break between the material erosion of the city and that of their community; there are also haunting figurations of the speaker’s drowning body being literally, materially, interpolated with saltwater: the “blinking holes [...] stinging from salt coming in, going out” (32).

Perhaps even more haunting are the references to Key Largo, the northernmost key and home to numerous employees from the region’s major mining companies. There’s a moratorium on building there now, as in most of the Keys, but not yet on the mainland. In scenes also worthy of a climate fiction blockbuster, each massive bucket of limestone, which is wrenched from the Earth to accommodate a rapidly expanding population, is littered with shark teeth, various marine exoskeletons, and, occasionally, the desecrated bones of dispossessed Indigenous communities. Such scenes invite visitors to wonder how we will ourselves be ambered when our state finally becomes the first “aquatic museum to petroculture” (Boyer 2023). Perhaps Ojeda-Sagué’s cynicism is appropriate—referencing, for example, the Pinecrest Bakery on Key Largo where locals “order pastries in a whisper”—“a cafecito [spiked] with a shot of sadness” (Ojeda-Sagué 9, Ariza 227). The speaker quips: “If the reference to Pinecrest Bakery is lost on you, no problem. It will be lost on everybody soon enough! I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be flippant, but I also do” (9).

The poem takes Miami’s submersion as a foregone conclusion, and it ought to: the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) predicts its total submersion by 2100. Residents of neighboring counties often muse that they will survive, although in a rather more amphibious landscape; notably, *The Light Pirate* is set in a town that will be recognized by its coordinates as southern Palm Beach County. It is a town lacking any vital seaport and thus discarded long before Miami would suffer such a legislative fate. Such sentiments are commonplace, which is perhaps why the poet creates tercets that mimic the experience of uneven disaster; so too, of the disjointed, uneven grid that powers the crumbling city. The poem roars

like the winds of a category-4 hurricane, sweeping across the ephemeral plain of an “oxidized beach” where diminutive sanderlings no longer play and where sun-tanned bodies are replaced with the shrapnel of infrastructural collapse (20).

The poem, critically, moves between the more ephemeral sandscape and its sedimented cousin in the coral limestone edifices that are crumbling into the sea, and where the city of Miami becomes a “dangling modifier” without a stable referent (21). Incisively dramatizing Sonya Posmentier’s argument for disruptive lyrical forms that reflect the precarity of their speakers—what the critic describes in terms of catastrophic breaks, or ruptures—Ojeda-Sagué offers a poem that roars like a hurricane and is as ephemeral as sand. Echoing Campbell, *Losing Miami* is a poem that is as much stone as wind, born of the “historical and social relations grounded in landscapes of coral limestone” (73). In this vein the “porousness of limestone becomes as significant as the revolutionary potential of the hurricane for better comprehending and articulating the complexities of Caribbean culture and history” (74)—what the poet also describes as the “murmurs of the exile” which stand in for the ineffable experience of return (20). A child and grandchild of Cuban exiles, the speaker wonders: “what it would be like to be exiles from Miami, to have the city be an effect only of memory and simulation as Havana is for the Cuban exile generation, to have any description of the city be a dangling modifier, to have to put my antennae at the bottom of the ocean” (21). It is hard not to recall the famous formulation by Stuart Hall regarding that “presence” which is just barely tangible to the exile (1990).¹³

Hall’s figuration of diasporic identity, like Braithwaite’s, assumes a particular shape—one whose contours are always shifting like the winds of Ojeda-Sagué’s lyrical space. If, per Posmentier, “Braithwaite’s call for poetry worthy of hurricanes is a future-oriented call for a circulatory poetics that acknowledges the geographic range and the violence of the hurricane’s motion” (14), Ojeda-Sagué’s response is to offer lyric that is similarly contoured. In the penultimate section entitled “Better Organized,” which is actually a satirical tribute to preparedness in the face of unprecedented disaster, the poet begins by scoffing at a category-1 hurricane: “not enough to lift the ocean/ and pour it into my pants/ at least not here, but it/ can evacuate a coast, and set it/ aside, or it can destroy New/ York, but even I can destroy/ New York” (97). But the speaker is no match for a category-4. When they refer to Hurricane Matthew, which “organized [...] into a category-4,” the tempo picks up, gains wind and speed (101). Now the speaker is “going crazy with the news, gusts/ imagining my husband is the eye, where rooms [...] riding rain into my attic, my basement is/ a puzzle box of limestone and water...” (104). The category-4 organizes itself with the “remnants” of the lesser Antilles and the “heads of the keys”; and the

¹³ In his foundational essay, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall speaks of the ineffable experience of return for the diasporic subject. He crafts a geopolitical matrix of “presences”—African, European and American—that frame the experience of forced movement and assimilation for enslaved persons across multiple continents.

poet’s family organizes along with it. Undeniably, here we see a play on organizing; here too, an indication of alliances.

Of course, it is in the texture of what Ojeda-Sagué terms their “experiment in grieving” that we find a more succinct homage to such a “circulatory poetics” (Cover Copy, Posmentier 14). In another entry, entitled “Fire Ants,” we read of “the daily hurricane in the refrigerator/ not yet condensed/ the Ziploc of fire ants”; still further: “I made the tropics into a thin circular theorem” (35). This “theorem” is amply proven not only in explicit allusions to, for example, Hurricane Matthew; the poem’s very structure is recursive, circulatory, and we move along with the winds of the storm, all the while experiencing not the spectacle of disaster but the enduring horrors of the mundane in a world of protracted disaster. “I wish a hurricane were more dramatic,” the speaker sarcastically retorts (99).

Conclusion: Revolutionary Infrastructures

Disaster is cruel in its amplification of landscapes of precarity. Miami’s ramparts are bursting at the seams; and those in low-lying communities will surely suffer first and most horrifically. But because this poetic experiment teems with rhetorical possibility—indulging the necessary impulse to grieve while resisting the sort of callous apocalypticism that often marks popular climate fictions—I’ll close by addressing the title as an open signifier and one useful for imagining a just future for the unnamed “thousands” who inhabit Ojeda-Sagué’s Miami. The titular “losing” operates on multiple registers, amongst them surely the loss of home for the diasporic subject, and of course the material loss of property. But perhaps “losing” can also function more transformatively; perhaps it can also function as a potential disarticulation of the colonial-capitalist transaction, the central terms of which rely on the building and accumulation of property. The speaker is explicitly unmoored; their home is but a signifier whose signified lies either in the “murmurs of the exile”—not the “aftertaste, but third taste-of Cuba”—or “at the bottom of the ocean” (21). Understood in this way, the poem resonates with discussions of “permacrumble” not merely in terms of infrastructural disruption, but as a moment potentially ripe for coalition building amongst historically dispossessed subjects.¹⁴ Disaster, as we know, also engenders solidarity. Certainly, such readings risk erasure—the erasure of uneven histories and thus, potentially, the uneven impacts of disaster on communities long terrorized by the settler state. But what are we to make of the crumbling, sinking endoskeleton of fossil capitalism—those “ribcages of corporations” sinking into the sea (Ojeda-Sagué 32)—if not an opportunity for radical infrastructural transformation, or the “revolutionary infrastructures” that Boyer also describes in his

¹⁴ In the introduction to *The Promise of Infrastructure*, editors Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel remark: “As the promises of modernity are crumbling under neoliberal austerity and climate change, the ruins of liberalism are manifest in the sociomaterial remnants of oil wells and superhighways, water pipes and shipping channels, fiber-optic cable and an ever-growing pile of rubble” (30). They also, however, argue that the “ruins of Cartesian dualism” present opportunities for developing “new epistemological infrastructures” of the sort described by Boyer (29).

recent *No More Fossils* (2024)? I thus read the poem not only as an indictment of uneven development, cultural dispossession, and infrastructural violence, but as a provocation.

In the final section of the poem, a single line lingers alone. Occupying a full page, we read: “puts a nest on a higher branch” (114). Perhaps we might consider that “nest” in terms of the communities who are refusing to leave the higher grounds of the Atlantic Coastal Ridge. In *Razing Liberty Square* (2024) viewers are given a glimpse of such robust refusals in the face of liberal development campaigns whose promises are consistently empty—demonstrating, as they have for centuries, a kind of “cruel optimism” (Berlant).¹⁵ Local community members are protesting the razing of their homes, just as that same community protested over half a century ago in the face of the abovementioned highway extension. Or perhaps that nest symbolizes those who are fortifying their low-lying homes because they have been left with little choice but to stay. Far from a lament, this one line seems to gesture toward radical forms of resistance and refusal—that is, refusal of the extractivist logics that understand Miami’s undercommons as in fact disposable.

There is much mobilization in the ruins amongst communities who are refusing the forfeiture of their lives in the interest of capital, and thus refusing the libertarian virtues and settler-colonial logics that continue to draw scores of settlers to this sinking, crumbling state. Perhaps a provocation like *Losing Miami*, in its lyrical figuration of not only disaster but of such forms of refusal, is precisely the sort of ‘climate fiction’ that we need at a moment of incapacitating doom-scrolling; so too, as state and area legislators continue to erase histories of oppression from the public record, just as Brooks-Dalton illustrates the imminent erasure of Miami’s suburbs from the state’s power grid—a grotesque metaphor for the erasure of communities living in what is becoming a literal ‘undercommons’ with each passing tide.¹⁶

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¹⁵ Lauren Berlant’s oft-cited 2011 *Cruel Optimism* resonates in this discussion when we think of the degree to which the accumulation of property as an index of political enfranchisement and social flourishing is actually a direct contributor to the imminent demise of Florida’s southeastern coast.

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