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Black Earth Rising

Colonialism and Climate Change in Contemporary Art

Black Earth Rising, May 2025

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III

Reclaiming

Nature as a source of renewal and liberation

Midway through *Twelve Years a Slave*, his harrowing account of being kidnapped into bondage on a Louisiana plantation (first published in 1853), Solomon Northup pauses to gaze at the landscape around him. 'There are few sights more pleasant to the eye, than a wide cotton field when it is in the bloom', he writes. 'It presents an appearance of purity, like an immaculate expanse of light, new-fallen snow.'[1] A few lines later Northup is back to describing how an enslaved person who did not pick enough cotton from those same fields would face the 'severest chastisement' from the overseer.

But amid the unrelenting grimness of Northup's tale, this brief arcadian interlude stands out. The scholar Kimberly N. Ruffin argues that the way Black people experience the natural world is characterized by an 'ecological burden-and-beauty paradox'.[2] The history of Africans in America is one of both intimate connection to, and alienation from, the land, says Ruffin. Brought to the New World as labour, they were denied the opportunity to find pleasure, or engage in leisure, in the fields where they were made to toil so assiduously.

Today Black people, along with Indigenous people and other communities of colour, still remain distanced from nature, their neighbourhoods disproportionately targeted for the siting of toxic facilities like waste dumps, slaughterhouses and chemical factories.

Ruffin's 'ecological burden-and-beauty paradox' suggests that the only way for Black people to embrace nature is with a bitter awareness of historical trauma and present-day injustice – a consciousness guaranteed to drain the pleasure from any sun-dappled walk in the woods. That's what makes Northup's description, with its echoes of pride and proprietorship, so unusual. He seems to temporarily forget his subjection and find a genuine if fleeting joy in the fields around him.

This chapter, 'Reclaiming', is concerned with artworks that balance the pain of the past with the sense of renewal that can come with the embrace of beauty. It brings together works that assert the natural world as a site of personal and political liberation, in the process highlighting what the scholar bell hooks called 'the humanizing connection with nature' as a fundamental aspect of Black, Brown and Native aliveness.[3] And it does so too in the knowledge that the hazards of a rapidly warming planet, from rising sea levels to population displacements, disproportionately impact the populations of the Global South.

Is it possible to reestablish a relationship with nature under these circumstances? And if it is, what does that look like? How does it feel? Perhaps, in response, we could consider Sky Hopinka's *Breathings* (2020; see fig. 1), a series of images created by the artist as he travelled

Fig. 1: Sky Hopinka, *Ah ha hey as my dad used to say, he learned it from my great grandfather I imagine. Blue Sky with a good voice, across this water on the other side of the encircling lake. We're not far from there and the direction that they lead us, ahahé*, 2020

through the United States in the spring and winter of 2020. Some of the photographs are vignettes of urban life, like the interior of an open-plan apartment suffused with the light coming through floor-to-ceiling windows, or the yellow arm of a dockside crane protruding over a stretch of water. For the most part, though, Hopinka devotes himself to an enraptured contemplation of the natural world: a sky flecked with distant birds; a rocky bay verdant with lichen; the bare branches of a tree reaching upward against pale clouds.

Each photograph is bordered by a lyrical handwritten text that frames the image within a context that is as political as it is poetic. Hopinka is a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin, and his pictures and words speak of both a treasuring of nature and a rage and mourning at the history of violence and dispossession that took their ancestral homelands from Native peoples. A text around a picture of a paradisal blue sky reads: 'The clouds are too dull this time of year. It's late June and I'm full of anger and hate. They think we're trash, they think we're as useless as our garbage buried in their fields turned up under plow, exposed in heavy rain. It makes me angry to think about that. To feel like that. Under plow and over plowed and plowed over by machines dredging and weeding through the hills and the fields and my family and my home.'

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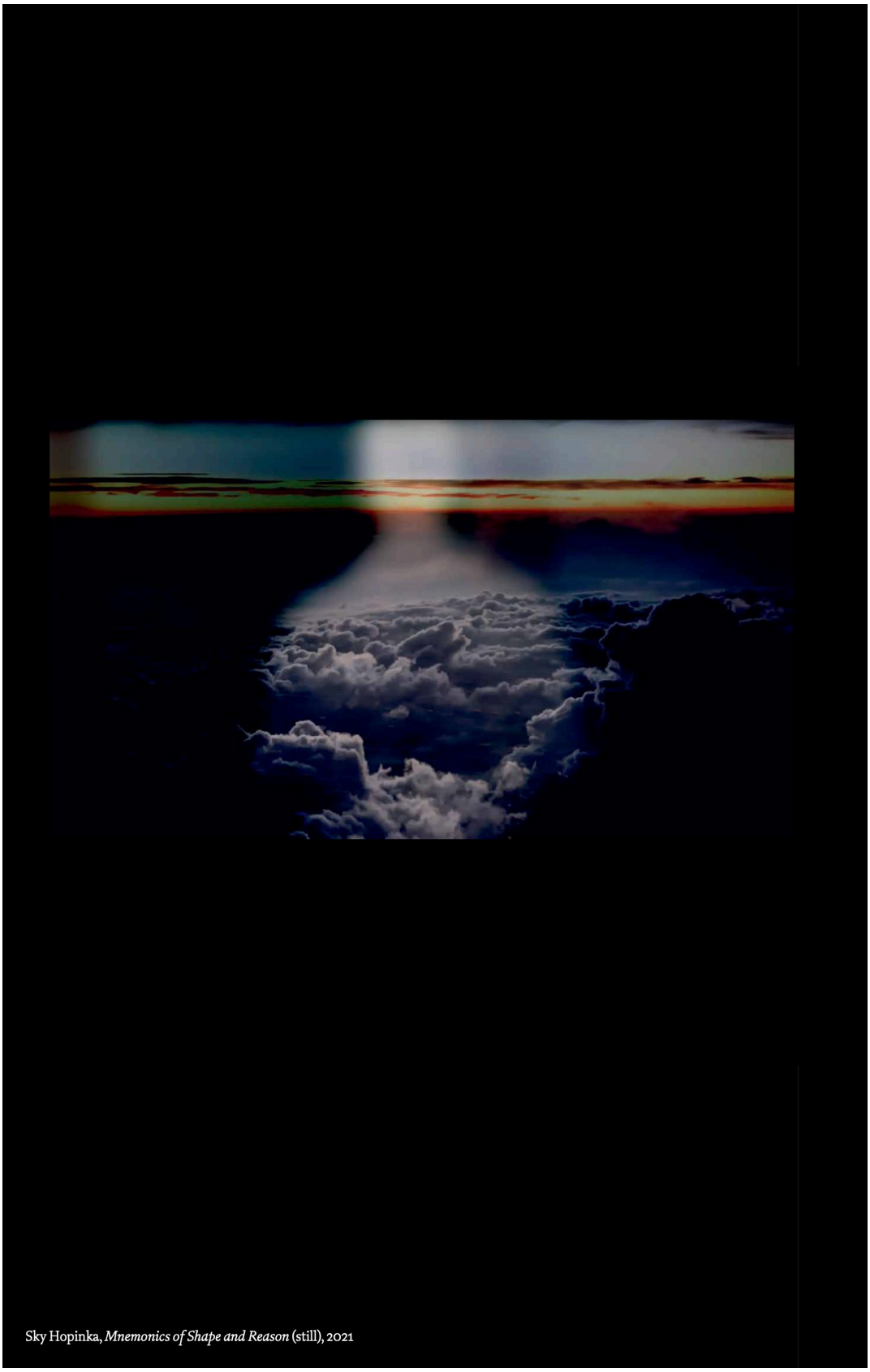

Sky Hopinka, *Mnemonics of Shape and Reason* (still), 2021

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Sky Hopinka, *Earthmaker considers the mountain*, 2023

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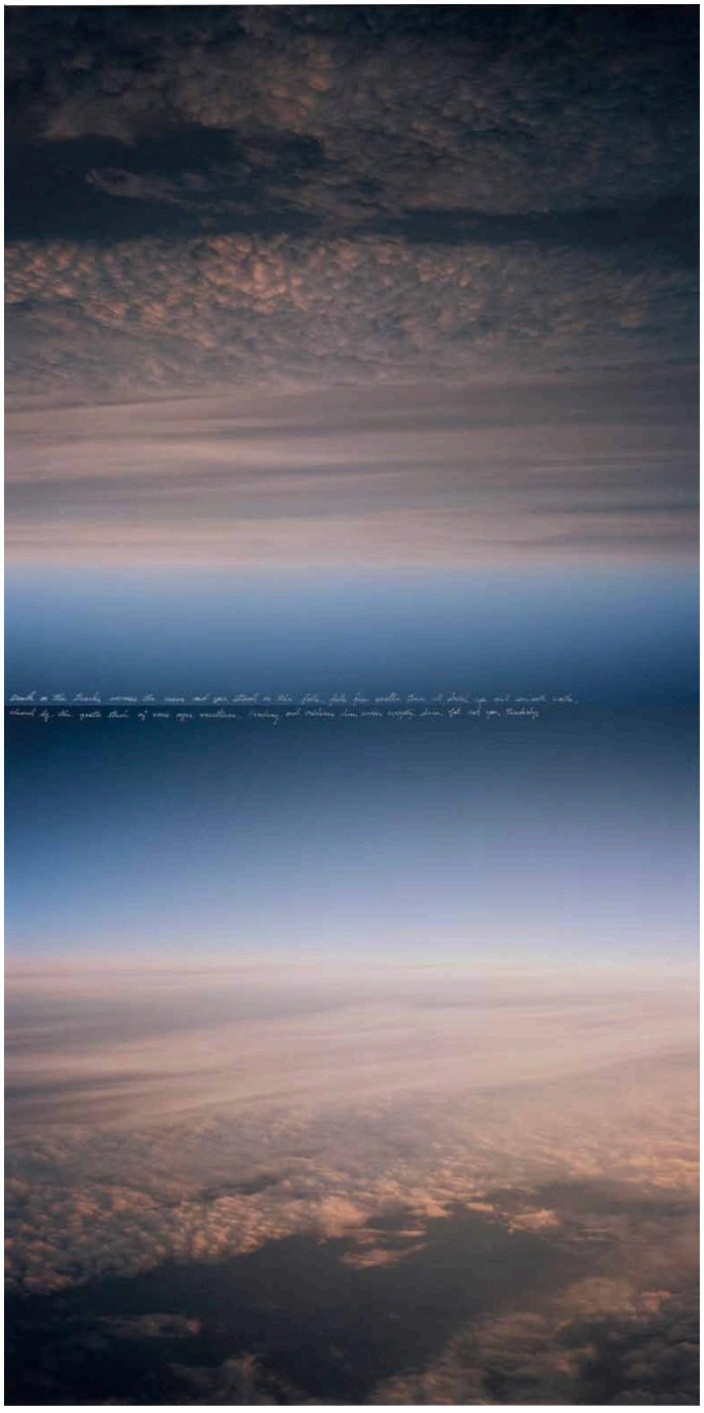

(Above left) Sky Hopinka, *Death on the tracks across the river and you stood in the falls, falls from another time all dried up and smooth walls cleaned by the gentle stroke of eons and ages and ancestors. Verdancy and violence hum under everything here. Yet not you, tenderly*, 2021

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