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# Epistemologies of the Coast

## From Columbus to Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black*

### Abstract

*In this essay, I put two distinct periods in conversation, namely the modernizing era (1500-1850) and the recent present, to offer a very brief history of an Atlantic coastal imaginary over the long durée. I first look at how the European iconography of Atlantic coastal encounters developed in the early modern period, redefining the geography and the epistemology of divine-human relations and participating in the invention of racial difference. I then look at how a contemporary Black historical novelist, Esi Edugyan, working in the genres of the neoslave narrative and the scientific adventure tale in her 2018 novel Washington Black, uses circumatlantic coastal locations to imagine the making of a Black naturalist—a naturalist who, importantly, shifts the definitions of knowledge, race, and the sacred he has inherited from imperial British science. The essay thus offers two glances at coastal transformations, the first at European promises of Atlantic expansion offering divine redemption, and the second at a contemporary story, written during a time of rising coastal peril, of how historical Black risk-informed knowledge might help us reimagine our relation to the nonhuman world now.*

**Keywords:** *Imperial Atlantic science, scientific iconography, Black ecology, neoslave narrative, Esi Edugyan*

After Columbus's voyages inaugurated European imperial expansion to the Western Hemisphere, Atlantic coastlines came to supply a necessary pictorial element that signified to European audiences the arrival of a new version of the sacred. Before 1492, Christian imagery of contact between the divine and the human occurred at the line where the sky met the earth, as celestial bodies descended to make known God's will. Once material from the Americas (as well as from Asia and Africa) gradually provoked the turn toward European empiricism—what we might think of as a shift in attention from authoritative ancient Word to visible New Worlds—Christian iconography was enlisted to incorporate and bless this reorientation in knowledge-making, and in divine-human interaction.<sup>1</sup> In near-term Iberian thinking, God had

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<sup>1</sup> I am making a slightly different point than Anthony Pagden, who has argued that “With the discovery of America, the historical process itself, concerned not with the operations of God's

revealed an entire hemisphere to aid Catholic nations in a global religious conquest; in a more slowly developing pan-European orientation, God was offering a new material world to prod, and sanction, a European conversion to scientific inquiry. As a visual language emerged to herald this turn, coastlines became the new seam joining emissaries of divinity with earthly beings in need of redemption through scientific encounter.

By contrast, in early modern Indigenous American and West African accounts, the Atlantic shoreline brought apparitions of strange-looking beings carried by fantastical water-borne machines, and, of course, new languages, technologies, goods, gods—and in the case of America, domesticated animals and devastating diseases.<sup>2</sup> Recall how Olaudah Equiano wrote, in his 1789 *Interesting Narrative*, after weeks of being traded as a child from one captor to the next, moving from his inland home in Benin toward the Atlantic ocean, that “The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave-ship, which was riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo.” He continued to remember, “These [objects] filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at a loss to describe” (1996, 202-203).

Today, at the far side of processes initiated in the late 15th century—that is, colonization, dispossession, the triangular trade, the scientific Enlightenment, capitalism, and eventually, industrialization—coasts have become once again sites of socio-environmental vulnerability. The contemporary hazards produced over time by an uneven global “Risk Society,”<sup>3</sup> whether that be warming and rising seas (combined with a more turbulent atmosphere), offshore oil infrastructure and spillage, or disaster refugees attempting water crossings, are being acted out on coasts in the form of storm surges, hurricane winds, wetland erosion, plagued fisheries and aquatic ecosystems, and migrant loss of life. Historical markers like the recent four-hundredth anniversary of Africans’ captive arrival at Point Comfort, Virginia in 1619 as well as the

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purpose in time [...] but with the record of purely human acts, now became a mode of authority” (1993, 93); I would point out that these “human acts” needed to be made legitimate through adjusting the iconography of Christianity.

<sup>2</sup> For coastal North America, see, for example, the Hitchiti account of meeting Europeans in what would later become coastal Georgia, in Swanton (1998 [1922], 173). For the European arrival to the West Coast of Africa in the 15th and 16th centuries, and how various kingdoms responded by participating in trade and diplomacy, see Northrup 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Beck describes a shift from a “Science Society” begun in the European Enlightenment, entailing commitment to technological improvements despite risks “accumulat[ing] [...] at the bottom,” to a “Risk Society” after the introduction of nuclear warfare, in which risk became an unavoidable, species-wide result of scientific invention (1992, 35; 155). Contrary to this model built around nuclear threats, climate change risks (resulting from carbon energy dependence and the removal of carbon sinks) are not equally manifested across the globe.

identification, in 2000, of the beginning of the Anthropocene era circa 1800 (Crutzen and Stormer 2000, 17-18), have prompted scholars to connect these modernizing processes, as with the coinage of the term “The Plantationocene.”<sup>4</sup>

A number of Anglophone artists have been working across diverse genres and media in the last few decades to think about this Atlantic history, including its social or environmental qualities and consequences, as they set novels or shoot documentary films at coastal locations: Toni Morrison’s 2008 *A Mercy*, a work of neoslave fiction, chronicled the forced and beleaguered movements of various disempowered people around the coastal spaces of the 17th century English and Dutch Atlantic; Spike Lee’s 2006 *When the Levees Broke* was one of many Katrina representations to root New Orleans’ irreplaceable mixture of African, Caribbean, and European cultural inheritances, as well as its ongoing practice of Black and poor white disposability, in the antebellum period; and Aaron Thier’s work of climate fiction, the 2016 *Mr. Eternity*, set the contemporary environmental crises of Key West, Florida at the mid-point of its protagonist Daniel Defoe’s epic thousand-year, Atlantic life. Out of this 21st century cultural work which places contemporary racial and environmental crises in a deep Atlantic—and especially coastal—history (following the establishment of Atlantic history as a discipline in the 1990s), one recent novel in particular stands out: Esi Edugyan’s 2018 *Washington Black*. Through its attention to the interconnections between the history of Euro-western science, plantation environments, and processes of racialization, through its circum-Atlantic motion, and through its exploration of a young Black marine naturalist’s subjective experience, it draws together the various concerns fueling the 21st century, creative, history-diving Atlantic imaginary. As such, it offers a thoroughgoing response to the early modern European iconography of redemptive coastal contact.

My goal, in taking the modernizing period (ca. 1500-1850) and putting it in conversation with the present—taking a European rhetoric of imperial empiricism and looking into its legacies with a contemporary Black investigator—is to offer a very brief history of an Atlantic coastal imaginary over the long durée. This is not an exhaustive survey of developments in which I

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<sup>4</sup> Scholars who argue for renaming the era “The Plantationocene” point to the tremendous—previous and ongoing—socio-environmental consequences of the plantation: the substitution of alien monocrops for previously biodiverse native ecosystems; massive deforestation and thus loss of a critical carbon sink; the ratification of a capitalist system and worldview based on practices destructive to non-European, typically tropical, places and peoples; and, in the case of cotton especially, the linkage with coal-powered manufacturing (Moore et al. 2019). This group conducted a John E. Sawyer seminar on “The Plantationocene” at the University of Wisconsin from February 2019 to May 2020.

track direct causation. Rather, it offers two glances, the first at European promises of Atlantic expansion offering divine redemption, and the second at a contemporary assessment of how coastal spaces and Black risk-informed knowledge have been co-created.<sup>5</sup> I do so to place the concerns of this special issue within a deep historical accounting. More particularly, I do so to recognize the scope of Edugyan’s encounters with Atlantic legacies and the reasons for her articulation of a neo-Romantic sacred.

## 1. Divining coasts in the early modern Atlantic

To appreciate how the European iconography of Atlantic coasts developed, let us begin with an image of coastal encounter resulting from Columbus’s first voyage, seen in this woodcut from the 1494 Basel edition of the Latin translation of Columbus’s 1493 letter, addressed to Gabriel Sanchez (fig. 1). The perspectival distortion, in which distant space is tipped upward to appear close at hand, the placement of European architecture in the “Indies,” and the names associated with Spanish monarchs and their savior, promise assimilability, that is, both cognitive, spiritual, and territorial possession. Another woodcut, printed in Florence in 1493 and illustrating Giuliano Dati’s *La lettera dell’isole che ha trovato nuovamente Il Re di Spagna* quickly develops the iconography of coastal contact (fig. 2). In its fantastical foreshortening of



**Fig. 1:** The six islands of the Indies, woodcut from the 1494 Basel edition of the Latin translation of Columbus’s 1493 letter, addressed to Gabriel Sanchez

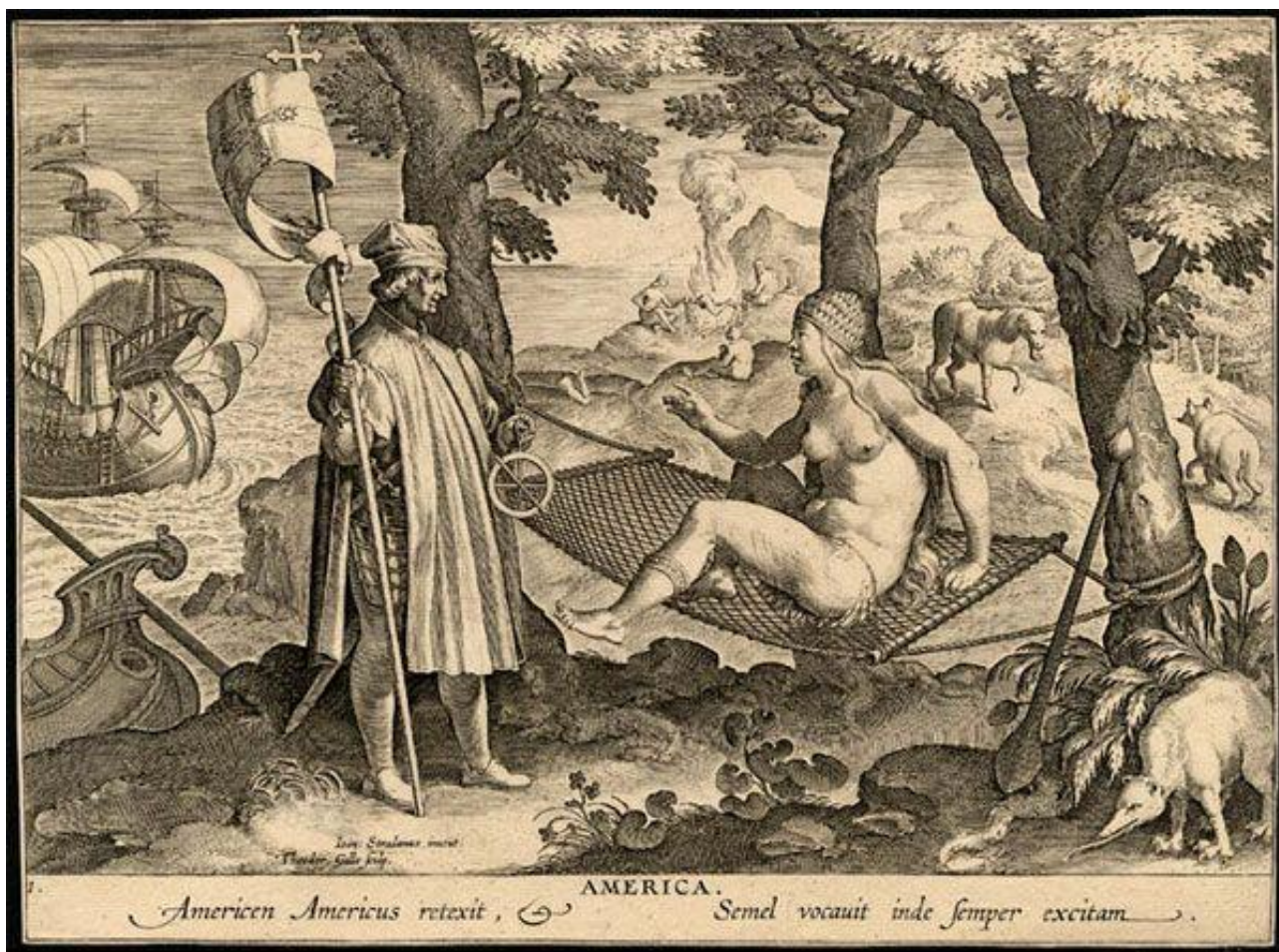


**Fig. 2:** Woodcut on the title page of the Italian verse edition of Columbus’s “Letter to Gabriel Sanchez,” by Giuliano Dati, titled *La lettera dell’isole che ha trovato nuovamente Il Re di Spagna*, published in Florence, Oct. 1493 (2nd ed.)

<sup>5</sup> An entirely different essay could be written about contemporary Indigenous American responses to coastal effects of dispossession, climate change, and petro-industrialization.

Atlantic space, this woodcut imagines that the Spanish monarch could, from his position on the Atlantic's eastern coast, see and command the actions of a mass of bodies on its western edge, using ships as proxy actors.<sup>6</sup>

In the now-iconic image, “America,” Jan Van der Straet, a Flemish artist working on a series extolling new inventions in late 16th century Florence, brought together what was in his time a growing set of pictorial motifs of coastal contact: marvelous animals and barbarous practices in the western hemisphere, and the European explorer as regal—even divine—proxy, all of this with a new Renaissance perspectival depth and corporeal dimensionality (fig. 3).<sup>7</sup> With the ships



**Fig. 3:** Jan Van der Straet (also known as Johannes Stradanus and Giovanni Stradano), *America* in the *Nova Reperta* series, late 1580s. Engraving

<sup>6</sup> On early European visual representations of the western hemisphere, see Bleichmar 2012, Brien 2006, and Honour 1975.

<sup>7</sup> This is one image of the *Nova Reperta* [New Inventions] series, printed by the Galle publishing house in the late 1580s and 1590s; ones linked to America marked the centenary of 1492. For the late 16th-century Florentine context of its production, see Markey 2012. Markey writes that the engraving's focus on Amerigo Vespucci could patriotically “declare the novel idea that the New World was a Florentine invention” (2012, 392); for images Van der Straet might have drawn from, see Markey 2012, 426-427.

and the compass (on the left side of the image) signifying the possibility of oceanic commerce and technological innovation, and the standard offering proof of eternal life through Christianity, Amerigo Vespucci offers “America” salvation from ungodly practices (note the cannibal scene in the middle distance) as well as development for her natural resources (note the flora and fauna behind her).

While there is certainly a hetero-erotic charge to this scene, I’d like to draw out a slightly different subtext (or sub-image) here, namely that of the *Annunciation*, exemplified in this painting Fra Angelico made in 1430s Florence (fig. 4).<sup>8</sup> Notice how this first *Annunciation*



**Fig. 4:** Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*, c. 1432-1434, tempera on panel, Cortona, Museo Diocesano

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to an undergraduate student whom I taught in 1999 for noticing this pictorial echo of an annunciation scene; I only wish I could still remember her name.



defense of the empirical method which would come to form the basis of England's "New Science" as institutionalized by the Royal Society of London in 1660, shows galleons moving through the "Pillars of Hercules" into the Atlantic Ocean. As they leave Mediterranean waters, they likewise leave the influence and limitations of Classical, Mediterranean-bound, knowledge. Bacon's citation of the Book of Daniel (12.4) in the motto placed beneath the ships—"Multi pertransibunt & augebitur Scientia" (or, "Many shall run to and fro and knowledge shall be increased")—allows him (like Van der Straet) to absorb the biblical prophecy of salvation into the energies of the New Science.<sup>9</sup>

For a final example of the ways in which early modern European renderings of coastal scenes appropriated Christian iconography so as to insist upon the divine sanction given imperial science, consult this frontispiece to a Dutch natural history of the mid-18th-century, Albertus Seba's *Locupletissimi rerum naturalium thesauri accurata descriptio* (Amsterdam, 1734-1765) (fig. 6). Modelling itself on the iconography of the Gift of the Magi, we see Mary this time transformed into an allegorized figure of science accepting the specimen gifts of the four continents (on our left). Death (on the right, with a now down-turned scythe) will be forestalled and life made eternal by the institution of global empiricism. As with the other examples, the birth of modern knowledge is visualized as a coastal scene: just as Mary's secluded bower became a coastal edge in Van der Straet's engraving, here the once-ensconced manger finds itself now open to—and made possible by—oceanic travel. The coast guarantees a holiness which has been redefined as unceasing material novelty.

Present in many of these scenes, in which the once-mysterious globe is gradually reimagined as a series of materially and cognitively accessible coasts, is, of course, a working out of the early modern European invention of human difference. In this image, for example, we see that Europa stands closest to and looks most like the allegorical figure of science, while Asia, Africa and America huddle at the edge of the frame, requiring this go-between to introduce them. The image seems to beg the question: are these figures knowledge-makers or simply bearers of material? When readers turned the page and met the likeness of the author of this Dutch Natural History, Albertus Seba, it must have seemed inevitable that his was the geopolitical identity ultimately given credit by the preceding allegory. The placement of figures on Seba's frontispiece illustrates whom institutional European science centered and sidelined. The natural sciences, of course, were not only invested in collecting flora and fauna, but also

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<sup>9</sup> The English do not deserve credit for solely inventing modern empiricism; see Cañizares-Esguerra 2004 on the 1606 Spanish book which preceded Bacon's: Andrés García de Céspedes's *Regimiento de Navegación*.



information for European naturalists' evolving science of human difference. This difference was first understood to be climatically contingent and changeable in a person's lifetime; as it became 'race,' human difference assumed corporeal depth and inheritability.<sup>10</sup>

What I have been quickly moving through here is a gradually accruing visual rhetoric of empire, and especially of imperial science. Scholars like Jorge Canizares-Esguerra, Joyce Chaplin, Londa Schiebinger, Daniela Bleichmar, myself and many others have, since roughly 2000, made the case that the rhetoric I have been describing of coastal arrival as epistemic possession and racial subjugation *never* represented the *full story* of colonial natural history.<sup>11</sup> For one, the specimen-centered quality of empiricism made local expertise and local access in non-European places crucial to the Enlightenment's laborious reckoning of world-wide matter. Examples exist in 18th-century British America of naturalists hiring enslaved boys and men to collect insects and dive for aquatic specimens, of enslaved men earning their freedom by divulging cures to local organic poisons, of enslaved men and women whose curative practices were favored over that of European doctors, and even of a freed African man in Suriname whose discovery of a new root was rewarded with a Linnaean taxonomical name in his honor (Parrish 2006, 1-7; 259-306; Schiebinger 2017). Because Europe came in many ways to depend on the matter the Americas provided not only to drive their economies forward but simultaneously to expand their knowledge of the complexity and variety of nature, European elites needed, despite their propaganda about superior European intelligence, to accept and to credit the hybrid, Atlantic ways of knowing that emerged from the Americas. Moreover, scholars are drawing attention to the ways in which non-white intellectuals publicly questioned and opposed race science as it developed in the 19th-century US.<sup>12</sup> Running alongside this recent scholarly recovery of the profound role non-Europeans played in the creation of modern natural history and in the opposition to an evolving race science, artists like Esi Edugyan are recasting this historiography and theory into compelling narrative form.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Carl Linnaeus, for example, early divided humankind into four geographically-modulated varieties (listed in this order), *Europaeus albus*, *Americanus rubescens*, *Asiaticus fuscus*, *Africanus niger* in the early editions of his *Systema Naturae* (from 1735), but then came to confer emotional, social and cognitive traits to these varieties by his 1758 edition.

<sup>11</sup> See Cañizares-Esguerra 2001, Chaplin 2001, Schiebinger 2004, Parrish 2006 and Bleichmar 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Moreover, scholars are drawing attention to the ways in which non-white intellectuals publicly questioned and opposed race science as it developed in the 19th-century US; see Rusert 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Many contemporary visual artists have also been considering the imperial Enlightenment's long wake; see, for example, this current exhibit at the University of Michigan Museum of Art (Ann Arbor), "Unsettling Histories: Legacies of Slavery and Colonialism," mixes the exhibition

## 2. Revisiting Atlantic coasts with *Washington Black*

*Washington Black* is an historical fiction told from the perspective of George Washington Black (“Wash”), an eleven-year-old boy born into slavery in Barbados in 1818, who travels the Atlantic rim, escaping slavery and eventually gaining legal freedom when Great Britain abolished slavery in its colonies in 1833. When the novel opens, he is the property of the Wilde family, whose patriarch researches the Canadian Arctic region, funded by the proceeds of the family’s Barbadian sugar plantation. One family member, Christopher (“Titch”), a secret abolitionist who plans to privately record plantation cruelties for a forthcoming exposé, arrives in Barbados where he begins to mentor Wash in scientific illustration and balloon experimentation. Though Wash has a noticeable talent in drawing, he is also just the right ballast weight for Titch’s balloon, a fact which provokes questions about the motivation for Titch’s cross-racial project in scientific education. When Wash is falsely implicated in an Englishman’s death, the pair escape Barbados in the balloon, making their fugitive way to Norfolk, Virginia, then to the west coast of Hudson’s Bay, where Titch disappears into a blizzard. Wash continues solo to Halifax Harbor, where he meets and grows close to another scientific pair, the aquatic naturalist G.M. Goff and his mixed-race daughter, Tanna. Here, diving for specimens as Goff’s assistant, Wash has a cosmos- and mind-altering encounter with an octopus. Along with the Goffs, and the living marine creature, Wash travels to London, determined to revolutionize marine scientific exhibition practice; no longer will animals be ‘preserved’ for science through taxidermy, but will be allowed to live in aquaria, miniature versions of their native environments. Finally, his longing for his lost father figure Titch still unresolved, Wash travels to Amsterdam, and finally to Morocco, where the two are equivocally reunited.

The novel is at once a bildungsroman, a neo-fugitive slave narrative, and a propulsive scientific adventure story. Written by Ghanaian Canadian author Esi Edugyan, it was short-listed for the Booker Prize and won Canada’s highest literary recognition, the Giller Prize. While reviewers were struck by its engagement with 19th-century European science, scholars are just beginning to investigate the very careful attention which Edugyan pays to the overlapping histories of science and slavery. My scholarly background in the archives of imperial Anglo-Atlantic science allows me to appreciate the historically conscious way in which Edugyan grounds her story of

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of items bearing traces of this history that are typically ignored when displayed merely as collectible finery (like a mahogany piano with ivory keys), but which are made visible when placed in their rightful geo-political context next to the critical consideration of this history undertaken by contemporary artists like Titus Kaphar, Kara Walker, and Tyree Guyton <https://umma.umich.edu/exhibitions/2021/unsettling-histories-legacies-of-slavery-and-colonialism>.

Black/environmental mutualism—that is, of a Black person’s survival through an understanding of nonhuman nature, and that nature’s survival in Black hands.<sup>14</sup> The novel is especially relevant for my inquiry into epistemologies of coastal encounters because of the way it intertwines Atlantic motion and the maturation of a Black naturalist. Edugyan creates a character who begins as the property of British Romantic-era science and ends as someone who redefines its schema of biotic life. Created to minister to the deity of science, he redefines the sacred as ecological relation. Edugyan materializes a young black Atlantic naturalist from the archives while doing so at a moment when Enlightenment legacies—from racial classification to an instrumentalist orientation to the natural world—are all increasingly under scrutiny. Wash’s observations and judgements are a means for Edugyan to return to a formative period in the history of modernity and alter its legacies by producing an immanent critic.

Given my interest in the coastal zone, I want to focus on two moments in the narrative in particular: one in Barbados on a high precipice, anticipating the balloon launch, and another in Halifax harbor, down under the water, where Wash descends to search for specimens. The first scene is answered—and in part redeemed—by the second. At the Wildes’ “Faith” plantation, Wash is assisting with a demonstration of hydrogen, the lighter-than-air gas that will be used to elevate Titch’s balloon. Just as the demonstration begins, Titch’s cousin asks Wash to run get something to satisfy his appetite, materializing in a sense Wash’s fundamental role as a slave on a sugar plantation: to satisfy white appetite while incurring bodily risk. As Wash runs out of a position of shelter, he is situated right in the scope of the hydrogen as it explodes, burning and disfiguring his body. When he returns to consciousness but not yet to sight, he is at first afraid that he has been “left suspended” in a purgatory “between worlds” (*WB*, 70).<sup>15</sup> At last looking at himself in a mirror, he thinks: “What a grotesque creature peered back at me. I raised a hand, and shuddered at the touch of my cheek. It felt like meat [...]. I could see into the flesh of my cheek, a strange white patch marbled with pink” (*WB*, 72). Of his assistant’s new face, Titch remarks: “Science has left its mark on you now, Wash. It has claimed you” (*WB*, 71). This idea

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<sup>14</sup> There is already compelling scholarship on the novel. Engaging with some of the same concerns as this essay—for example, slavery and science’s co-implication—see Slapkauskaitė 2020 (including a reading of the octopus scene on 490; 492); see also Davies 2021, who writes about the novel’s “generative engagement with world literature, which it develops through an extended metaphoric reflection on the comparative weight of methodologies and human bodies” (2021, 2) and who praises Edugyan for “reinserting the embodied and affective experience of the ‘human’ into the otherwise abstracted processes of capital accumulation and biopolitical control” (2021, 11).

<sup>15</sup> All quotations from *Washington Black* in this essay are taken from the Knopf edition and will be abbreviated within the essay as *WB*.

of science's proprietary burn mark, meant by Titch to be the slightest bit compensatory for the facial disfiguration, cannot but recall the two other brands on Wash's skin—the two **F**s for the Wildes' Faith plantation. Given how often, moreover, maimings, explosions and burns occurred in the boiling houses, cane presses and disciplinary rituals of sugar plantations, Wash's bodily violation by aeronautical science is remarkably continuous with the worst incidents of plantation labor and terror. Titch certainly did not intend for this damage to occur, and assiduously nurses Wash after the explosion. Edugyan nevertheless makes clear that in such an environment of high risk, its dangerous consequences fall disproportionately on those in a subordinate social position. Edugyan evidently wants us to see Titch's experimental science not as a reprieve from his family's plantation regime but rather as an alternate version of the Wildes' extreme subordination of matter and people in the making of ostentatious prestige.

After Wash becomes a casualty of science, they escape—as I mentioned—all the way to the Canadian Arctic where Wash is abandoned by Titch, initiating a process of Oedipal longing and searching that will last for years. With this plot feature, Edugyan makes a nod to a Romantic novel about another 'creature' of science who comes to judge, and pursue, the maker who had turned him into a disfigured 'monster' and then abandoned him: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Edugyan's novel adds to Shelley's by including the facts of race slavery into the original story about scientific hubris. She associates the Oedipal energies of the hunt so central to *Frankenstein* with the hunts of slavery's fugitives. Edugyan asks us to see both Enlightenment science *and* racial slavery as conjoined efforts central to modernity—or, as Paul Gilroy would put it, to appreciate how "racial slavery was integral to western civilization" and its restless innovations (Gilroy 1993, x).

For the rest of my essay, I want to drop us into and linger on the pivotal underwater scene coming at the middle of the novel. At this point, Wash is technically free but still pursued by a bounty hunter; he has left his mother behind on Barbados and lost his symbolic father, Titch. He has come into the orbit of the British naturalist, G.M. Goff, who is collecting aquatic specimens in Halifax harbor to be placed, dead, on exhibit in London. Wash is hired to do the physical work of diving for aquatic animals. Little exists at this point in the narrative to offer his life security or meaning. As he puts it: "I became a boy without identity, a walking shadow [...]. For there could be no belonging for a creature such as myself, anywhere: a disfigured black boy with a scientific turn of mind and a talent on canvas, running, always running, from the dimmest of shadows" (*WB*, 184). And yet it is here, in a deep protected bay, that Wash undergoes a kind of cross-species conversion experience.

At first, as Wash dons the “apparatus” of a diving suit with its heavy weighted shoes, brass helmet and leather air hose, and prepares for Goff to “throw [him] overboard” (*WB*, 216), we are put in mind of previous risks Wash has assumed for the sake of white scientific celebrity, and of the common form of death for Middle Passage captives. But, in he goes: “With a cold punch the air left my lungs, and the freezing black waters sucked at my body [...]. I was dropped lower and lower, feeling with each descent a tug in my stomach. [...] I turned my head; a rivet dug painfully into my collarbone” (*WB*, 218). Time begins to slow, luminosity darkens to dusk.

And it was then that some deep tolling went through me, an enormous throb, as though someone had struck a large bell beside me. And all at once I felt my body dropping away, all of the clenching and the anger and the terror [...] so that I hung with my arms suspended at my sides, the soft current tugging at me. The cold sucked at me and the light weakened, and I was finally, mercifully, nothing. (*WB*, 218-219)

Wash then propels himself toward a shipwreck which he hopes harbors aquatic life and begins to search. He is staring at a “brown-and-red outcropping,”

when a shape flashed bright orange, before transforming again into brown rust [...]. [I]n a series of hallucinations, the rock became a slick blue smudge, then a bumpy red crag of meat, then a mottled brown rag, then a vile red slash.

Again I went very slowly towards it, extending my arms in their thick hide. The creature shot up from its rock, its orange arms boiling around it, the suckers very white. Its gaze seemed to churn up out of its soft mantle and burn through me, seeing, I suppose, the sad rigidity of a boy, the uselessness of his hard, inflexible bones. I stared at the bulb of its pendulous head, the crags that made it look ancient, and a hot, glorious feeling rushed through me, a bright, radiating hope. (*WB*, 219)

Wash quickly sickens at the idea of this “breathing miracle” being killed to be “crate[d] up as a specimen” (*WB*, 219) for Goff’s London exhibit. Might there be a way to bring her there alive, he wonders?

The octopus arranged itself in a smatter of algae, its body hanging blackly before me. When I came forward to touch it, it sent out a surge of dark ink. We paused, watching each other, the grey rag of ink hanging between us. Then it shot off through the water, stopping short to radiate like a cloth set afire, its arms unfurling and vibrating. There was something playful in the pause, as if it expected me to ink it back. (*WB*, 220)

Finally, the creature swims into Wash’s outstretched hands. Back up on deck, he shows the octopus to Goff as she “braid[s]” herself over his arms. Edugyan ends the scene with Wash saying, “I felt very calm, very far from the rough, scoured-out life I had made for myself. And I began to laugh” (*WB*, 221).

Interleaved in this scene are the sensory and interior life of the human boy and the exterior appearances and performances of an aquatic animal. We are asked to feel with Wash the tugs and sucks and digs at his body—to feel his suspended condition and then his sense of merciful obliteration. His being “nothing,” of course, prepares him, and us, to witness the revelation of another kind of creature’s being. With a gaze that registers the shape’s rapid-fire transformations, Wash sees it shift instantly from a smudge, to a crag, a rag, and last a slash. As the boy beholds this fluxional creature and receives her gaze, he first becomes aware of his own ill-adapted, rigid embodiment only to have this rigidity melted as a “bright” “hope” radiates through him. Just after this brief, intersubjective encounter, Wash is primed to arrive at a scientific breakthrough: instead of displaying dead specimens in London, Wash invents the idea of a living aquarium. In this aquarium, the saltwater chambers will house not only marine animals but also the vegetable life on which they depend—a preserved ecological world in miniature. Finally, Wash’s “radiating hope” passes back over to the octopus, who “*radiates* like a cloth set afire.” And the “grey rag of ink” which the octopus jets out will be returned later on—as a kind of deferred form of play—when Wash illustrates the creature in ink on rag paper.

Recognizable in this scene are many Romantic habits. The intense looking that follows upon Wash’s “suspended” state may recall the Wordsworth of “Tintern Abbey” whose blood and breath being “Almost suspended,” becomes a “living soul” who can “see into the life of things” (1968, 97, lines 45-49). Perhaps the “soft current tugging” recalls that canonical scene from Emerson’s 1836 essay “Nature,” in which he declares: “I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me” (2006, 18-19). This passage displays many of the tendencies described by recent scholars of Romantic nature writing in which the human, “yearning for [...] transcendence of his individual being,” finds in the nonhuman natural world “a moment of interfusion, a leveling of subjectivity” causing him or her to “embrace [...] an ecological way of thinking” (Ottum and Reno 2016, 2).

The octopus-loving Wash seems then a figure who signals to us the Anglo-American Romantic impulse to transform Enlightenment reification into ecological relation. I want to argue though, that Wash is a neo-Romantic figure of a more complex type. Recall Edugyan’s earlier use of the concept of suspension when, after the hydrogen explosion, Wash was “left suspended [...] between worlds” (*WB*, 70), cast out of the realm of the human and falling into his existence as a “grotesque creature” (*WB*, 72). If that first scientific experiment on the coast of Barbados left Wash with what he felt was a monstrous body, his embodiment underwater in Halifax harbor seems still more Frankensteinian: with rivets in his neck, he lumbers in his thick rigid hide, hands outstretched. And yet, these echoes in language and motifs from the earlier to the later

scene clue us into how this second suspension of human selfhood and turn toward the creaturely will overwrite the first. Like for Shelley's creature in the woods, interacting with nonhumans brings forth in Wash a happy kind of play and empirical awareness. Here we have then a Black Frankenstein version of a transspecies Romance.

So what does this other creature teach him? Recall that it begins as a "rock," then turns into a "slick blue smudge, then a bumpy red crag of meat, then a mottled brown rag, then a vile red slash." In texture, color, affect, and substance, it appears to reconstitute itself continually. In one painterly or sculptural gesture after another, the creature makes and remakes itself. Her gesture is her condition and her condition is her gesture. Octopi, in real life, behave this way. As one contemporary science writer puts it: "they can disguise themselves on the fly, now looking like coral, now like a clump of algae, now like a patch of sand. It's as if they use their skin to make three-dimensional images of objects in their surroundings." Octopi keep pigments in thousands of little sacs on the top layer of their skin; "depending on which sets of sacs an octopus opens or closes, it can instantly produce patterns" (Judson 2018). They have a muscular bag of melanin in their hind gut, which, in a process called 'inking,' they can squirt through their anus as they flee from a predator; when this melanin is mixed with mucus, it can form a cloud—or pseudomorph—in the very shape of the fleeing octopus. They have intense neuron activity, not concentrated in their brains but spread throughout their bodies, evolved from being vulnerable, soft-bodied prey living in complex environments.

Though Wash, who is a talented artist, can use ink to make "three-dimensional images of objects in [his] surroundings," he cannot operate on and through his own body to "disguise it on the fly." In other words, his skin has not been his own medium; it has been seen as "burnt" and then actually burned—it has been doubly over-determined—by his former owners and experimenters. And yet to watch as a creature makes survival art out of her own skin in relation to her environs—to understand the "ancient" lineage of these ecological "arrangements"—opens Wash's eyes to other forms of life and gives him "hope." Finally, the trauma which her form initially reintroduces—as her gaze "burn[s] through" him and her appearance as a "red crag of meat" recalls Wash's unhealed facial burns—makes that earlier catastrophe available for recoding. By being associated with an evolutionary art form that is an expression of ecological belonging—the beauty of the niche, if you will—those old traumas of the skin assume new definition. Unlike the terrifying ascent in a balloon apparatus which has branded him, here we see a *descent* in an apparatus—the diving suit—which allows him to move from reckless science to interspecies ecology. His dive into the wreck of the Atlantic—its triangular trade and high-

risk circuits of science—allows Wash (and here I am quoting Adrienne Rich) to “see the damage that was done / and the treasures that prevail” (Rich 1973, 23, lines 55-56).

By introducing an animal body into Wash’s process of auto-graphical recoding, Edugyan offers an alternative to recent theories of Black resistance under slavery. In her book *Black Frankenstein*, Elizabeth Young argues that this tradition developed to “turn an existing discourse of black monstrosity against itself,” offering an “anti-racist critique” by humanizing the enslaved, justifying their violence, condemning the slave owner, and exposing the “instability of white power” (Young 2008, 5). Edugyan, I would argue, explores all these possibilities to the full in her iteration of the Black Frankenstein figure. She exposes the instability of white power specifically by connecting up Romantic science with plantation slavery and toxic patriarchy, showing all to be volatile and explosive. But instead of strictly *humanizing* Wash as a response to the discourse of Black monstrosity, she has him dwell at length in this *creaturely zone*, playing, taking in aesthetic behavior and adaptive strategies, and mitigating the terms of his own making. She has the Octopus not only reenact Wash’s own pain but also, through a performance of virtuosic skin tricks and through a display of evolutionary belonging, counterinvest in his own creaturely body as a site of possibility.

To conclude: we have seen how the Atlantic coast of the Americas came in the early modern European imagination to be an annunciation scene of a new kind of holiness, one characterized by an unceasing material novelty. I have traced how that early modern sacred scenario is currently under revision by artists and scholars and have explored the example of one Black novelist in North America. I suggest that Edugyan’s novel may help remedy, in the present, the leftover presumptions of epistemological, social, and racial rescue long ago heralded in Van der Straet’s engraving. While this imagined encounter was at the ideological core of the imperial Enlightenment, it did not represent the full experience of colonial science. Edugyan, mindful of this distinction, at first recapitulates the annunciation narrative by having an English mentor on a Caribbean Island shedding the light of science on an enslaved boy, rescuing him from his degradation, and awakening his immanent resources. But once that mentor disfigures and abandons his creation, leaving in Wash’s psyche a distraught Oedipal longing, our protagonist opens himself to a new kind of coastal encounter. Under the water, Wash does not announce anything to the other creature he meets; ink hangs between them, a shared medium for new morphologies of being.

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*this broad question: how have the making of races and environments in the Americas occurred in overlapping ways since the era of colonization began—and how have various media been enjoined to produce and question this process? She has written two prize-winning monographs, The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History (Princeton University Press, 2017) and American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World (UNCP, 2006). She has recently edited the Norton Critical Edition of William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! (Fall 2022) as well as co-edited, with Sarah Ensor, The Cambridge Companion to American Literature and the Environment (2022). Along with this article, recent essays address imaginings of historical and contemporary Black ecologies by artists Dawoud Bey, Jordan Peele and Jesmyn Ward. She is currently the Chair of the Michigan Society of Fellows.*

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