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## ‘MI I PL ET RIUM’

### Navigating a Post-Apocalyptic World in Karen Russell’s “The Gondoliers”

#### Abstract

*Far from being speculative fiction à la Atwood or just another cli-fi piece, Karen Russell’s short story “The Gondoliers” is a genre b(l)ending text, a ‘Southern Gothic 2.0.’ Rife with intertextual references, it entwines cli-fi with the “freakishly imaginative” (Roy 2019) which is Russell’s signature hallmark—the mythological, supernatural and magical realist, maybe even the surreal. As the following sets out to show, the story employs the post-apocalyptic scenery of climate-change-induced “New Florida” to hint at current social iniquities and draws on timeless ruminations about individualism and identity also to comment on contemporary discourses about epistemological uncertainty.*

**Keywords:** *apocalypse, climate change, intersectionality, Russell, short story*

*The strange craft, an entirely unaltered survival from the times of balladry, with that peculiar blackness which is found elsewhere only in coffins—it suggests silent, criminal adventures in the rippling night, it suggests even more strongly death itself, the bier and the mournful funeral, and the last silent journey. And has it been observed that the seat of such a baroque, this arm-chair of coffin-black veneer and dull black upholstery, is the softest, most luxuriant, most lulling seat in the world?*  
(Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice*)

**K**aren Russell, recipient of both a Guggenheim Fellowship (2011) and a McArthur “Genius Grant” (2013) and author of the Pulitzer Prize finalist *Swamplandia!* (2011), returns to some of that novel’s themes in “The Gondoliers” (2019).<sup>1</sup> The setting of this intricate short story

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<sup>1</sup> Collected in *Orange World and Other Stories* (2019), it was first published in 2019 in the final issue of *Tin House*, the Portland/NYC literary magazine which for more than twenty years

is again Florida—Russell’s native state—this time, though, not the swamplands of the Everglades also of, say, Zora Neal Hurston fame,<sup>2</sup> but the flooded Magic City, Miami. Whereas the Everglades can be conceptualized as a liminal space, a “terra viscous,” as Graham-Bertolini argued for *Swamplandia!*,<sup>3</sup> the post-apocalyptic Miami of “The Gondoliers” is characterized by just water and vast expanses where smoother salt water meets high Atlantic waves.<sup>4</sup> In both cases, though, the spatial settings are also a metaphor for the boundary between the worlds of life and death (Graham-Bertolini 2020, 8). The narrator, Janelle Picarro, is the youngest of four sisters whose mother drowned when Janelle was only three years old. Just as in *Swamplandia!*, the trauma of the mother’s early demise underlies the narrative and here, too, a female protagonist is in search of her own identity. The four Picarro sisters operate the waters of what is now called Bahía del Oro and Bahía Rosa with gondolas. They are famous for their rare ability to echolocate,<sup>5</sup> earning them the sobriquet “bat girls;” they themselves use the brand company name “The Gondoliers”—“[f]our singing sisters, poling the canals of New Florida” (2019, 199). Many years ago, the seawall, “erected by the army corps as a last-ditch attempt to protect the city from getting swallowed” (Russell 2019, 195), had broken, flooding the city, and killing thousands of people. This “New Florida” is a ‘realistic’ setting. “The Big One—the hurricane that overwhelms the water management system, wipes out Miami Beach and all the development along the Miami River, and destroys the local economy, kicking the tortuous process of abandoning South Florida into overdrive—could hit this year, or maybe next” (Ariza 2020, 31). And Miami is just one prominent example of a much larger and global threat. “Water—its level, its quality, its temperature—will determine the future of Miami. [...] it is [...] a front line, a possible future Atlantis, and a metonymic stand-in for how the rest of the developed world might fail—or succeed—in the climate-changed future” (Ariza 2020, 9).

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published many recent and classic literary icons (e.g. David Foster Wallace, Donna Tart, James Salter, Miranda July, Jonathan Lethem, but also Edward Said and Pablo Neruda). Four other stories from the collection first appeared in *The New Yorker*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

<sup>3</sup> Graham-Bertolini follows here the definition of “terra viscous” provided by Ursula Emery McCure and Michael McCure: “super-saturated soil, one that is never completely solid or liquid, one that is never in stasis but in a continuous state of being made, and being removed” (Graham-Bertolini 2020, 20).

<sup>4</sup> Many cli-fi texts deal with lack of water (e.g. *The Water Knife* by Paolo Bacigalupi [2015]), but some also highlight the flooding of low lying coastal areas, such as Melbourne (George Turner, *The Drowning Towers* [1987]), Helsinki (Antti Tuomainen, *The Healer* [2013]), or New York city/Manhattan (Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* [2017]).

<sup>5</sup> Also known as “bio sonar,” which means emitting calls to the environment and listening to the echoes to locate objects (Langley 2021).

The following sets out to show that far from being speculative fiction *à la* Atwood or just another cli-fi piece, “The Gondoliers” is a genre b(l)ending text, maybe a ‘Southern Gothic 2.0.’ Discursively framed by the *Überbau* of Avery Gordon’s 1997 sociological/intersectional study *Ghostly Matters*, the story employs the post-apocalyptic scenery of climate-change-induced “New Florida” first, in order to hint at current American social iniquities, especially systemic inequality, faintly echoing the Southern legacy of slavery. Second, “The Gondoliers” draws on timeless ruminations about individualism and identity also to comment on contemporary discourses about ontological and epistemological uncertainty. Rife with intertextual references ranging from the Bible via Italian folklore to Thomas Mann, the text fuses cli-fi with the “freakishly imaginative” (Roy 2019), which is Russell’s signature hallmark—the mythological, supernatural, and magical realist, maybe even the surreal. It presents a Southern Gothic where the past, a “dark legacy,” “the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present” (Lloyd-Smith 2005, 118; 1), returns in a post-apocalyptic world. Yet despite the continuing pressures of the past upon the present, Russell allows her narrative to close with a hopeful look towards a better future (Punter and Byron in Marshall 2013, 3).<sup>6</sup>

### 1. “Life is complicated”

One of the two epigraphs to Russell’s *Orange World and Other Stories*, in which “The Gondoliers” is collected, is: “We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there”—a quote from Avery Gordon’s 1997 *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Gordon’s study represents an early attempt to move sociology away from the empirical and narrow path of ‘factual’ analysis towards a form of interdisciplinarity that some years later intersectionality and Reproductive as well as Environmental Justice would finally spell out. Gordon’s is an approach that acknowledges and finds tools to analyze her fundamental axiom: “life is complicated”—maybe “the most important theoretical statement of our time” (1997, 3). For Gordon, it has at least two dimensions: power (race, class, gender) and complex personhood (identity as complex, multiple, unstable, adaptable etc.): “In writing the book I took on two major problems with which I have, in good company, long grappled. The first was how to understand modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, repression, and their concrete impacts on the people most affected by them and on our shared conditions of living” (1997, xv). She means here “racial capitalism and the determining role of monopolistic and militaristic state violence” (1997, xv). Gordon is on the

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<sup>6</sup> In the attempt to break open the text’s remarkable density, this analysis offers extensive citation from the text itself to illustrate the deep interconnectedness of the story’s themes.

heels of Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality: "That life is complicated is a theoretical statement that guides efforts to treat race, class, and gender dynamics and consciousness as more dense and delicate than those categorical terms often imply" (Gordon 1997, 5). Crenshaw highlighted that black women's experiences are multidimensional, and that therefore the single-axis framework of either race or gender which was employed in antidiscrimination law, antiracist politics, as well as in feminist theory, erased and marginalized them (1989, 139).<sup>7</sup> In order to get a better grasp of these very complexities, the sociologist Gordon turned to cultural texts, such as Toni Morrison's southern gothic novel *Beloved* (1987), understood them as sociological texts and employed the concept of haunting and of ghosts to highlight diachronic and synchronic trajectories of systemic inequality. Haunting, for her, "is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known." It describes "those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future" (1997, xvi). Ghosts of history claim their place in the contemporary and vie for recognition and affirmation and "ghostly matters," therefore, are intimations, hints, suggestions, echoes and murmurs of what has been lost but is still present.<sup>8</sup> As the subsequent analysis shows, this understanding of ghosts and haunting in and through literary texts constitutes a significant aspect of the conceptual idea underlying Karen Russell's story where the drama unfolds above the "psychic topography" (Luckhurst 2002, 528) of the ruins of Miami.

## 2. (New) Florida: toxic wastelands and "MI I PL ET RIUM"

Miami and Florida play a distinctive part in the American national narrative. The first area of today's USA to be settled by Europeans, Florida became a US state in 1845 and has attracted

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<sup>7</sup> "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw 1989, 140).

<sup>8</sup> Hauntology is a trendy, flourishing yet heterogeneous critical field, with fluctuating definitions and usages of the term hauntology itself; for the given context I reference Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, from which the term is originally derived, since its political context allows for a smooth connection to the idea of intersectionality—an important and unique feature of Russell's short story. Derrida writes: "it is necessary to speak *of the ghost*, indeed *to the ghost* and *with it*;" "no justice—let us say no law [...] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist" (1994, xvii).

hopefuls and hedonists for more than a century. The official branding of “The Sunshine State” includes sun, art, and leisure. Snowbird sanctuary since the 1920s, vacation spot for writers like Hemingway (on Key West) during the 1930s and, in 2018, 23 million other people (Ariza 2020, 9), it is also home to the Disney World Resort in Orlando (since 1971) and to many affluent people—in 2019, Southern Florida alone had 35 billionaires (Ariza 2020, 10).

In “The Gondoliers,” already the Spanish names for geographical spaces—“Bahía del Oro” and “Bahía Rosa”—together with “New Florida” and the family name “Picarro”<sup>9</sup> set the scene and allude to contemporary Miami’s ethnic diversity<sup>10</sup> as well as to its plethora of problems. Its “dark legacy” is part of today’s systemic inequality: a pronounced wealth gap, a significant poverty rate (15% of Miami-Dade households live in poverty [US Census Bureau 2021]), clearly geographically demarcated socio-demographic stratification and strained race relations.

Featuring the longest coastline of all contiguous US-American states (1.350 miles), Florida’s attractive sandy beaches and cities have been endangered by rising sea levels for decades, thus providing Russell’s scenario with high probability. “Of all the world cities threatened by climate change, Miami is faced with particularly daunting challenges. A report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development listed it as the second most flood-imperiled city in the world, after the port city of Guangzhou in China” (Dawson 2017, 17). The reasons are primarily flat topography (3 feet of sea level rise will make a third of southern Florida disappear under water) and porous karst limestone, the ‘rock foundation’ of Florida. Saltwater pushes in and up, together with sewer, leading to high levels of fecal bacteria around Miami Beach and waste-generated elevated levels of phosphorus, nitrogen and other pollutants which trigger e.g. algae blooms toxic to marine life (Miami-Dade County 2018; Harris 2019; Benna 2021).

Echoing this contemporary background, Russell unfolds her narrative. One evening in New Florida, Janelle Picarro takes on a last customer; a stranger requests to go to the seawall in Bahía Rosa. It is soon getting dark, and the journey is dangerous, but Janelle agrees, because he offers so much money. While Janelle navigates through this terrain, the reader is introduced to her post-apocalyptic world. The trip in the gondola is strikingly different from the stereotypical, romantically enshrined lovers’ cruise along the canals of Venice before sunset, or

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<sup>9</sup> The family name Picarro ironically references both: a US-American company providing solutions to measure greenhouse gas concentrations (<https://www.picarro.com/about-picarro>) as well as the *picaro*—Spanish for rogue or rascal—and the picaresque novel.

<sup>10</sup> “La Florida,” the name given to Florida by Ponce de León in 1513, is a state, which in recent history has been safe haven for many (Cuban and South American) refugees. Half the population of the Miami-Dade County is foreign born (US Census Bureau 2021); Florida as a swing state is an important factor in presidential elections (e.g. in 2000), determined not only by white Republican voters, but also by African-American and Hispanic (swing) votes.

up and down an artificial waterway in Orlando's mimicry Disneyland, for that matter. The area has been declared a "wasteland" (2019, 204), an illegal place to settle (2019, 198), a toxic swampland where squatter sovereignty of forgotten people reigns supreme (2019, 215). And while the Venetian *gondolieri* of olden times and cultural lore sang *canzoni* for and about the everyday and its people, often popular adaptations of opera pieces (Romeo 2019), here, the song is of a very different kind. Janelle and her sisters move within this new world using their special skill of echolocation<sup>11</sup> for safe transport of local people and goods between precarious points of instability and temporariness. Floating markets exist, people have fishing nets in the salty water, and children go to school in deserted ocean cruise liners (2019, 195). (Social) space is here deterritorialized, fluid, and life is liminal, literally *unheimlich*.

Even for Janelle, navigation is risky in "Old Town" and beyond, because the terrain is difficult. Debris shifts and drifts and relocates constantly, in murky waters full of algae and weeds and toxins, in kaleidoscopic fashion (2019, 197), making them entirely unpredictable and uncontrollable. Whereas in the past, people in boats on large waters had always used the stars to navigate, the planetarium is literally defunct: "MI I PL ET RIUM" is all that remains of the "[f]ormer home of the phony night sky, where hundreds of translucent fish now sway" (2019, 197). The satellites have been down for half a century, too (2019, 198), hinting at a much larger catastrophe that has transformed the civilized world. Sextants are dysfunctional and the look towards the sky is no longer helpful. Down under, beneath the water's surface, lurks danger, because the waters are not smooth, and echolocation is the only viable way left to hope for secure travel on the surface; the Picarro sisters live—tellingly—in a deserted seaplane hangar.

### 3. Towards the seawall: post-apocalyptic *Death in Venice*

*En route*, the young woman and the older man talk. He says that he was once a marine engineer, and that this toxic wasteland is his fault: "People my age are criminals. We ruined the world [...] We built the wall to withstand winds of one hundred fifty miles per hour. Does that sound naïve to you? [...] Our imaginations failed us. Our models failed us" (2019, 216 and ff.). "I'm part of a dying breed, bat girl. An *Old Floridian*. [...] We fled. I was in the first wave of evacuations"

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<sup>11</sup> The term was coined by American zoologist Donald Griffin in 1938; during the 18th century, Lazzaro Spallanzani had been the first to write about the idea that bats (Latin: *pipistrellus*) have some other sense beside vision which they use when they fly at night (Kaproth-Joslin et al. 2015, 960). Echolocation is a communication system ingeniously adapted to Russell's new post-apocalyptic world, a life on water. The sisters apparently developed this skill in a quasi-evolutionary process, as a highly improved version of what their mother had been able to do (2019, 200).

(2019, 215, italics in the original). Just as in classic Gothic literature ever since Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1784), the sins of the fathers haunt the present, human hubris and immorality ooze to the surface and frame the catastrophe here as a biblical flood—*sans* Noah. The man, victim of his own ingenuity, lost his family in the disaster, and now that he is sick, he has returned to the wall to die (2019, 224). The setting thus becomes a river Styx replay and Janelle embodies Charon, the ferryman, who chauffeurs the dead for an *obolus* across Acheron/Lethestyx to Hades. The man “folds himself into the gondola as if it's a casket” (2019, 199), and we might be reminded of Thomas Mann's 1912 novella *Death in Venice*. Here, Charon is an anonymous and mysterious gondolier who brings Gustav von Aschenbach across the Laguna to the Lido where the latter will hopelessly fall in love with a young boy and the tragedy unravels from there. Including cholera. Whereas Thomas Mann's novella has five chapters, reminiscent of five acts of classical Greek tragedy, “The Gondoliers” consists of four chapters, the first and last aptly titled “Chorus.”<sup>12</sup> Janelle accompanies the man through a dangerous territory above haunting residues of the past, on and in toxic waters, towards the seawall, emblem of his and humankind's failure(s), towards his own death by suicide, and towards her own future.

#### 4. Into toxic waters: Turkey Point, dead spots and rebirth

Janelle describes to the man a special area, the deadspot, and confesses that she enjoys swimming there, occasionally, in secret. The deadspot, Russell's version of the Gothic element of the secret room, is generally a secret locality with no activity, a region of poor or no radio reception, and also a dead part on a guitar's fingerboard. Here it is a space in the water, outside the safe perimeters of the Bahías where echolocation no longer works. For Janelle, it is dangerous, but it is liberating: “When I am silent, when I am alone, I feel free. I don't have to sing along with anybody. Even my thoughts stop. [...] Only then, when I am nothing to anyone, do I feel the great peace” (2019, 219).

However, it must strike us that since she has taken to bathing in the deadspot waters, an “odd rash has spread silently” over her belly (2019, 218), providing Janelle and her body with an element of the grotesque. And we wonder, together with the stranger, why it is that she feels that “this water is gestating me, my secret life” (2019, 219), that she seeks the silence, the peace it brings (2019, 221). “You choose to swim there,” he says. “In the world's most toxic waters.” “It

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<sup>12</sup> The chapter titles are: “I. Chorus,” “II. The Bridge,” “III. The Deadspot,” and “IV. The Chorus.” Act 5, conceived in classical drama as either the catastrophe or *dénouement*, is missing. We do not know whether all are damned and dead, in the end, or whether salvation or catharsis await.

hasn't affected us.' 'Hasn't it, little bat? It's affecting all of us.' He drums his knuckles on his temple, his smile softening like something boiling at the bottom of a pot. [...] 'The gondoliers. The birds of Chernobyl'" (2019, 218).

Here again, Russell's "freakishly imaginative" universe (Roy 2019) alludes to acute ecological issues, since Florida has its own highly dangerous Chernobyl: Turkey Point, built in the early 1970s and consisting of two nuclear reactors, is one of fourteen nuclear power plants in the US, and America's sixth largest. It is only some 40 miles south of South Beach, Miami, and is expected to drown at least in part by 2030. Already, due to the porous underground, radioactive water has been pumped into Biscayne Bay. The fact that in 2015, the crocodile population decreased significantly in the area seems to be just the tip of an iceberg; and in addition, Turkey Point sits flat in Hurricane Alley (Dawson 2017, 22). In 2019, Turkey Point was re-licensed for another twenty years by the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC)—it may thus soon be one of the world's oldest nuclear power plants still in use (World Nuclear News 2022; Natter and Bloomberg 2020). In "The Gondoliers," the toxic, sickening deadspot, the space of absolute nothingness, is the site of the protagonist's search for her own independent identity. Russell uses a very intriguing phrasing here: Janelle "sank out of earshot of [her ...] thoughts" (2019, 209). Thought or reason and sound are coupled, and this sound is always connected to the sisters. Throughout her life, her song makes sense because it reverberates, because there are echoes coming back to her body, because when she sings, she hears her sisters and they hear her. Their identities thus are co-dependent and co-defined—they exist and survive because of their echoes, their ability to echolocate; she is, because they are. Singing and echolocating are a special gift the sisters developed; but having a voice which is put to life-saving and life-sustaining use is obviously not entirely positive for the narrator. To sink underwater mutes all sound, Janelle becomes "nothing to anyone" (2019, 219) and when she surfaces, she is (re)born, without a past: "I surfaced to a grogginess that exceeded anything I'd ever felt in my waking life. [...] I didn't know who I was, what I was. The face floating on the water was not mine, not yet. It wrinkled and smoothed with a foreign serenity. Nothing remembered me" (2019, 209). Coming to consciousness brings physical pain, as if she were being birthed and the entire experience a desire to return to the maternal womb of the deceased mother. Sinking into the deadspot is a search for a meaningful existence and an identity, a singular voice, coupled with a death wish—she deliberately takes the risk of death by drowning. She explains to the man how she feels about the deadspot and he replies: "Who doesn't dream of it? The silence that blots up thought. The silence that frees one from the burden of being oneself" (2019, 220). He describes a wish to die, the annihilation of self, yet for her, it is the opposite: a desire to become an



independent self: “I am an adult now, with secrets of my own” (2019, 206). Whereas for the man, New Florida is toxic, doomed and the predestined site of his death, for Janelle, it is a place of renewal, regeneration, and rebirth: “It always surprises me when visitors treat New Florida as if it’s a graveyard. Our home is no afterlife, [...] our world is newborn” (2019, 216).

### **5. Into the past, ‘after the wound’: silhouettes, sedimented memories and semantic fields**

Janelle’s nickname, given by her sisters, is “Blister” (2019, 194; 229). A blister, “a bubble of fluid under the skin,” caused by irritation, allergic reactions, infections, or skin infections, develops as a reaction to injured skin (Harvard Medical School 2019). For her sisters, Janelle, the youngest one, orphaned at the age of three and given in their care, is a visible and physical reminder of a past wound—the loss of the mother. She is literally ‘after the wound’ also in the sense that she was born after the catastrophe, which had wounded and killed so many and destroyed life as the Floridians knew it.

As with all generational transitions, the younger generation always lacks a part of the collective historical memory, but here the memorials and artefacts are gone too, and with them, an entire linguistic and cognitive framework has been swamped and swallowed. Those who were born before the flood remember; they remember the apocalypse, the old stories, and the old words. Janelle does not. For her, there exists no before, no ‘other’ of difference. She carries dreams of the day of the apocalypse, but they are not her memories. As her sisters keep telling her: “You have no idea what it was like then. [...] Quit stealing our stories” (2019, 206). The old man says: “This used to be paradise. I’m sorry, little bat. We ate up the whole horizon. We left you a ghost town. Not even a town. A toxic slough” (2019, 217). And although Janelle claims: “This is our home [...] And we are not ghosts” (2019, 217), Janelle and Janelle-as-narrator are mere contours without (visible) content or essence.

Disappearing can make you feel like your own biographer. You hear the absence of your voice, and the notes you are failing to hit make their own shadowy melody. You unlid the spaces ordinarily hidden by your body: a new song comes fluting through them. Whenever I hear my sisters singing without me, I get a flash of my own silhouette. (2019, 211-212)

A silhouette describes a presence in absence, a form without essence. Here, it only becomes visible once the connection to the sisters is broken. Disappearance enables Janelle to hear the absence of her voice, she can become aware of her own contours, and “a new song” can emerge. Janelle is a creature of the unmoored present, and embodies residual traces of the past. She has never seen a horse or a lawn, but she learned sayings such as “the grass is always greener on

the other side.” The man laughs when she says this: “Where did you hear *that* one? I’m surprised that it survived the floods. You know all our corny sayings. You’re like a jukebox, miss” (2019, 214, italics in the original). She is a mindless jukebox, in search of her own voice and identity, a young woman without a past, rootless in a world and life lived not on land, with sedimented memories, but on ever shifting water. “You youngsters only know the stories,” (2019, 213) the man—who, tellingly, has been camping for three weeks on the roof of the old university library (2019, 216)—realizes. There is only flotsam of stories told by others, and Janelle belongs to those cut loose from solid earth-bound socio-cultural genealogy. Thus, she is also denied a process of grieving: “leave the grieving to the grown-ups,” says her sister (2019, 206). In this new world, letters get lost; language crumbles like the porous limestone. Words are eroded, hollowed out, flooded, washed away. The Miami Planetarium has crumbled both as a physical structure as well as a symbol for a semantic order: “MI I PL ET RIUM” marks its ruins (2019, 197). Many people have gone missing; solid earth, houses on soil with basements, grass and lawns, streets, are all gone, and with them entire semantic fields. The signified has lost the signifier and *vice versa*.

## **6. Ghostly matters, intersectionally: “...poling out of the past or the future?”**

In “The Gondoliers,” the presences that haunt the living are not just the dead mother, but also a cityscape, a geographical built space that has vanished, and with it a home, an entire social cosmos, including a language, a rhythm, an order, a body politic, a belief system, an identity grid. Swallowed by the flood, they still make life precarious on the water’s surface. “Invisible things are not necessarily not-there” (Morrison in Gordon 1997, 17), and what is not visible in the water, too, is not necessarily not-there. It can be life threatening. What appears to be absent has a seething presence and it is a challenge to navigate one’s life in the midst of all the flotsam. For Russell’s stranger, New Florida is a ghost town of his own making. He is haunted by his past as an engineer, by the guilt of having failed and left, and by the ghosts of his dead family. Now he confronts the echoes and the murmurs, the hints and intimations, the “over-and-done-with” (Gordon 1997, xvi) of what was and what has become. Janelle and her sisters are haunted by the catastrophe, by their memories, and by the ghost of their dead mother. Her absence is a strong presence. What took her life is what they live on and off now—the water. And all of them are haunted by the conceptual triad “race—class—gender,” which also features, albeit only mildly, in this ‘Southern Gothic 2.0,’ and enforces the link to Gordon’s attempt at intersectional readings of cultural texts. Southern Gothic in general is strongly informed by the history of slavery and racism (Marshall 2013, 5; 11; Gilbreath Ford 2020). Russell’s two main characters

might be perceived as embodying the white privileged male (of the past) and the young PoC (person of color), now ‘in command,’ not or no longer on the plantation, but on water. The older man is described repeatedly as white (“white-faced” [2019, 194; 220]) and pale (2019, 201) and was so privileged as a marine engineer designing the great seawall (2019, 216), that he was first to flee the scene of disaster, the house with a foundation, clearly situated, then, on higher ground (2019, 215). No information about Janelle’s physical appearance or ethnic identification is provided, yet Janelle’s first name might reference the famous Janelle Monáe, an African-American R’n’B/soul-funk singer, often dressed dandyishly in a tux.<sup>13</sup> Janelle is one of four orphans whose single parent mother had not fled Miami—or, we may conjecture, had not been able to. The reader might be reminded of the racially divided rescue and evacuation—also survival—stories of people, many of them PoC, in New Orleans post hurricane Katrina. Whereas the white male engineer had lived on higher ground and then fled, Janelle’s family had been left behind to face the waters—a hint at systemic inequality and today’s climate gentrification crisis.

The term denotes the displacing of poorer neighborhoods, e.g. redlined areas such as Miami’s Liberty Square or Little Haiti, which, situated inland, on higher ground from sea level, are less flood-prone (Keenan 2018). Today, these areas have become very desirable for developers, pricing out the residents by raising rents on apartments and stores. A broad-scale relocation process is at work where the rich(er) are moving from the beaches and exclusive islands to the areas of higher elevation. The former’s—now endangered—neighborhoods lose in property value, the latter’s—safer—blocks become expensive and exclusive, pushing out the poor(er) residents to the cheaper sites, down by the water.<sup>14</sup> “This is a city cut from the swamp, segregated by wealth and privation, and kept alive by international flight capital” (Ariza 2020, 13).

In addition to references to issues of race and class, it is also noteworthy that in this short story, it is four sisters who can echolocate and operate the gondolas. Janelle ‘sings’ in a traditionally highly gendered, male dominated profession, as a *gondoliera*. And the history of Italian gondoliers illustrates a strong emphasis on male prerogative. *La prima gondoliera di Venezia* was actually Alexandra Hai, a German. In 2007, her attempts to become an officially licensed

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<sup>13</sup> See her Instagram profile (<https://www.instagram.com/janellemonae/?hl=de>). She also published a collection of Afrofuturistic short stories: *The Memory Librarian and Other Stories of Dirty Computer* (2022).

<sup>14</sup> The patchwork of communities, which has always characterized Miami, is now unsettled, and the risk of eviction is especially high for renters, which are in the clear majority in many neighborhoods (Ariza 2020, 189).

*gondoliera* caused tremendous uproar in Venice, especially among the four hundred male *gondolieri*. She became an icon for some feminists who saw here the breaking down of another male bastion, one victory in the larger battle for gender equality.<sup>15</sup> Whereas in *Swamplandia!*, the two young women are confronted with male (mythical) characters who lure, tempt, deceive, and also abuse and overpower them, here Janelle and the stranger have a tense, yet ultimately rather balanced power relation. When Janelle meets the man at the jetty, and he asks her to take him on as a passenger, she feels powerful:<sup>16</sup>

Power gathers in my cracked heels and pulses upward. Will I take him to his destination? [...] His fear reaches out to stroke my cheek. It makes me feel tenderly towards the white-faced old man; also, powerful. [...] He is nervous. I am making him nervous. Power whips through me again, and I almost laugh, it feels so good to be alive on the poling platform. (2019, 193-194)

This flash of elation and power shifts in the course of the journey towards a moment of mutual understanding, until rain sets in and echolocation becomes difficult, then nearly impossible. Janelle tells her customer that she cannot continue the journey. He demands they go on, because this night is the anniversary of the storm surge. “I travelled a thousand miles to die here. I chose this spot, this date. I wanted to walk across my wall on my last night on Earth. This was my wish. To die at home, on the anniversary of my children’s deaths” (2019, 224). In traditional gothic fashion, violence erupts: the man wrestles with Janelle, she loses her navigator, the pole; he falls into the toxic water and swims away, in the darkness, towards the wall. He goes missing and she drifts in the dangerous no-go zone, the deadspot, far from home, without a means to navigate the gondola—no pole to steer, her song without echo in this bad weather. Then, all of a sudden, a *doppelgänger*—her sister Viola—appears, depicted, again, with an intriguing phrasing: “My double, poling out of the past or the future?” (2019, 228). They tie their gondolas together and wait in the rain and above the deadspot for what will (be)come. “The end of his life is not the end of all life. Something wants to be born” (2019, 222). The readers might feel a

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<sup>15</sup> She failed to pass the exam to become an official *gondoliera* four times and could only work for a private company, a hotel (Brink 2016). In 2017, Alex(andra) came out as transgender (Sopelsa 2017; Anderson 2018). Now, the first and only and officially licensed *gondoliera* is a young Venetian mother of two, Giorgia Boscolo, who began training in 2009 (Giuffrida 2017).

<sup>16</sup> It is a power maybe reminiscent of Naomi Alderman’s 2016 novel *The Power*, where the women of the world (re)discover their ‘power’—electrical power that they can generate and release via their hands, to hurt, harm, and kill others, especially violent and suppressive men. Russell’s Janelle wonders: “Perhaps there are many others like us around the bays of New Florida and elsewhere. Women who know enough to be silent about what is developing inside their bodies” (2019, 200).

gentle breeze of Derrida, but also the rolling waves of Luckhurst, since the generative locus of the haunting is here, indeed, central: a deadspot is the new present, where past and future merge, and, with the man gone, surrounded by the “dark legacy,” the women await the future. For the women in the gondola, various categories collapse into each other or intersect, a phenomenon which Gordon had identified as in need of comprehension and articulation (1997, xvii): present and past, present and future, above and below, inside and outside, self and other, subject and object, presence and absence, knowing and not-knowing, first and foremost: life and death. The gondola, in the deadspot, occupies a space reminiscent of Ed Soja’s third space,<sup>17</sup> on the intersection of two two-directional lines: first vertically, down, into the water, and up in the sky; second, horizontally towards the past, where the haunting originates, and towards the future—“we move to accommodate the future of the river” (2019, 201), after all. Instead of merely invoking nostalgia and luring the protagonists as well as the reader back towards the past, the story ends with new voices, “a deep, marine roar,” a new song, echoes, emanating from something that is not human, saying “*This is not the end of the world. This is not the end of the world [...]* I am afraid of the voices lifting out of the dark. I am afraid to join them. But perhaps we will have to, if we want to survive” (2019, 233; italics in original). Just as in, say, Richard Powers’ 2018 “tree novel” *The Overstory*, where the anthropomorphized trees speak about eternity and the ultimate insignificance of man *vis à vis* nature, here we have a new marine voice that tells the sisters that there will be a future as long as they can muster the strength and resilience to weather the storm and then pole on. “Survive” is the story’s final word.

## 7. Towards a future: “This is not the end of the world”

“Writing that survives the bodies that produced it is always haunted, I guess” (2019, 202) says Janelle. And we might add, it is haunting, too. It is our cultural narrative of memory and identity; it interprets the past and envisions the future, narrates, with Gordon, where we are and where we are going, who we were, are, and will be. Karen Russell’s story draws on the register of the Southern Gothic, yet without nostalgic backward glances. It engages primarily with three broad themes of our contemporary world, projected into a post-apocalyptic future: climate change, systemic inequality, and, metafictionally, discourses about identity in times of ontological and epistemological crisis.<sup>18</sup> Brimming with intertextual references—of the Bible,

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<sup>17</sup> According to Soja, third space is “real-and-imagined” space where “the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, [...] structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history” merge (1996, 56-57).

<sup>18</sup> See Idiart and Schulz on the political aspect of Southern Gothic (1999, 138).

classical mythology, Italian cultural lore, Thomas Mann, even classic film<sup>19</sup>—“The Gondoliers” tells a story about what it means, fundamentally, to be human when the Miami Planetarium is gone, when order, natural rhythms of moon, water and seasons have been swallowed up, and life has turned into a precarious state in which woman is adrift, on a slim spar.

In this “deftly chimeric collection” (Smernoff 2019) full of literary surrealism, “The Gondoliers” is a story of a young woman, traumatized, unmoored, who is seeking her own voice, her sense of self, in a toxic world, floating on uncertainties and epistemological deterioration.

In a world full of surrealism beyond literature, this story encourages us to “navigate these margins with breath and bones” just as Janelle does (2019, 198), but not to try and “dissolve on our own terms” (2019, 233). We should not be afraid of the voices lifting out of the dark. We should join the chorus. Because “perhaps we will have to, if we want to survive” (2019, 233).

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<sup>19</sup> See e.g. the classic 1973 UK-Italian horror movie *Don’t Look Back*, by Nicolas Roeg (UK), based on a short story by Daphne Du Maurier with the same title (German title: *Wenn die Gondeln Trauer Tragen*; Italian: *A Venezia...un dicembre rosso shocking*; Spanish: *Venecia rojo shocking*; French: *Ne vous retournez pas*).

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