**When Nature Curates:**

**Hurricane Katrina, Cultural Survival, and the Limits of a Metaphor**

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**Abstract**

We live in a world where human and non-human agency are deeply interconnected. While our unique viewpoints are shaped through interactions with others, the forces that most profoundly transform our lives are, whether we are ready or not, is nature. In Monika Stobeika's article, *"Nature as Curator: Cultural Heritage in the Anthropocene,"* she introduces the metaphor "Nature as Curator" as a way to frame nature as an active agent that has the power to select, preserve, and erase. This metaphor seeks to challenge human exceptionalism while taking on the risk of anthropomorphizing nature. Although this metaphor helps deepen our understanding of ecological events, it can also obscure the economic and structural systems that influence how we remember such events.

This paper incorporates Jason Moore's concept of Capitalocene which reframes ecological crises not as the result of humanity, in general, but the outcome of capitalism's organization of nature, labor, and value. Drawing from key theoretical foundations from scholars like Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour, and Donna Haraway, this paper explores how agency is distributed across human and non-human networks. Case studies such as Robert Smithson's *"Partially Buried Woodshed"* demonstrates entropy and nature curatorial agency, while Hurricane Katrina and Six Flags New Orleans exposes the added elements of racialized neglect and contested narratives. By contrasting indigenous and western epistemologies with black ecological, a new perspective is revealed to show how ecological disasters are both environmental and cultural events that have been co-curated by nature and the systems that have been defined and redefined by the human experience.

*Keywords: Nature, Curator, Hurricane, Katrina, Anthropocene, Intercultural Communication, Environmental Humanities, Capitalocene, Actor-Network Theory*

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One of my favorite movies growing up was The Lion King. It was a story that was packed full of important life lessons disguised as a children's movie. The lessons that I learned then are still very much applicable today. One of those messages was about the “Circle of Life.” Everything has its place in time where it lives and, then, inevitably dies. The circle of life is a wonderful example of nature being the curator of this thing we call life. Most conventionally, the circle of life is associated with animals and natural selection. The apex predator dominates and eliminates the weakest prey. And just like that, nature has selected.

I grew up on the West Bank of New Orleans during a time when life was seemingly easy and slow. Many people knew each other, and family was of utmost importance. Everyone looked out for each other. The city, however, was busy, bustling with music in the air and street performers on almost every street corner in the downtown area. There was always something going on. Then, in 2005, everything came to an abrupt stop. We didn’t know it yet, but at the end of that year, everything would change; the makeup and atmosphere of New Orleans would never be the same. But, with a city so eclectic and notable for its food, music, and culture, how could one event change everything? Well, this one event was a multifaceted catastrophe named Hurricane Katrina.

In Southern Louisiana, we are no strangers to hurricanes. In fact, it is a part of our lives. Southern Louisiana, according to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) in an article titled, *Sea-Level Rise and Subsidence: Implication of Flooding in New Orleans, Louisiana*,” estimates that the area of New Orleans and other areas in the vicinity are presently 1.5 to 3.0 meters below mean sea level. Unfortunately, the sea levels are rising, and they posit that the city is at risk of

being even more below sea level, up to 2.5 to 4.0 meters by the year 2100. And, according to a 2016 study published by the ASCE Journal of Hydrologic Engineering," most of New Orleans proper– about 65% of the city – is at or below mean sea-level now." To make matters worse, the areas surrounding the city, such as Jefferson Parish, St. Bernard Parish, and the like, sit at or above sea level, according to a 2007 study by Richard Campanella called "*Above-Sea-Level New Orleans: The Residential Capacity of Orleans Parish's Higher Ground.*" This creates a bowl-effect with the center of the city being right in the middle making it an optimal place for flooding.

The people outside of Louisiana who remember the time and events surrounding Hurricane Katrina often remember the news broadcasting stories of harsh winds, horrific floods, significant infrastructure damage, looters, violence, and refugees, but to the people of Louisiana, and specifically New Orleans, the story is bigger than that. The events of Hurricane Katrina are more than a story of nature as a curator, but an inside look into intercultural dynamics, race relations, and how narratives shape a people and a city impacted by natural devastation.

This paper argues that approaching Hurricane Katrina through Monika Stobeika's metaphor of "nature as curator" deepens our understanding of how disasters shape—and are shaped by—intercultural dynamics, environmental rhetoric, and cultural resilience. By critically examining how nature's curatorial agency intersects with race, cultural identity, and systemic neglect, I seek to bridge theories of environmental rhetoric and intercultural communication. This dual focus demonstrates how narratives of vulnerability, resilience, and neglect are materially and rhetorically constructed, especially for disenfranchised communities in America.

Drawing from scholars like Jane Bennett, Bruno Latour, and Donna Haraway, the paper will examine how agency is distributed across human and non-human networks through examples such as Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* in relation to the aftermath of

Hurricane Katrina and the neglect of Six Flags New Orleans situated in New Orleans East. By evaluating these discussions within the economic and ideological context of capitalism and corporatism, the argument can be made that curatorial agency is never neutral especially when there are long-term cumulative effects of environmental neglect and systemic inequity at play. In fact, it is materially and rhetorically entangled within systems of systemic and cultural neglect, slow violence, racialized capitalism, and corporate narrative control. Together, these frames position Hurricane Katrina as not only a natural curation event but as an outcome of long histories of exploitation and uneven vulnerability commonly found amongst the disenfranchised.

**Nature as Curator**

Nature as Curator, specifically, is a rhetorical framing that attributes curatorial agency to nature, suggesting that nature processes select, preserve, or erase elements of the world much like a museum curator choosing what to display or forget. While this metaphor highlights non-human agency, it also risks importing human-centered logics of order, value, and display into ecological discourse. However, it is important to recognize that likening nature to a human curator can oversimplify complex ecological processes. Nature does not select with intentionality, preference, or narrative coherence the way a curator does; its 'decisions' are shaped by impersonal, sometimes chaotic forces. This can create misunderstandings about the impartiality or logic behind environmental events, and may obscure the roles of human systems and history that influence outcomes beyond 'nature's choice.'

We can see this curatorial function of nature in very literal ways. Take, for example, erosion. Erosion removes certain features from the landscape while it preserves others, or like storms, which destroy some structures but leave artifacts that later shape how entire communities are remembered and even remember the disaster. This act is a sort of fossilization process that selectively preserves fragments of life across millennia while actively erasing countless other

forms. These processes demonstrate how nature is not passive but an active force that "selects", "keeps," and "forgets" in ways that parallel curatorial decisions in a museum.

I was first introduced to the metaphor, "nature as curator," in Monika Stobeicka's article, *"Nature as Curator: Cultural Heritage in the Anthropocene."* Her article discusses the evolving understanding of cultural heritage in the context of the Anthropocene, where human activity profoundly impacts the natural processes. The understanding of the Anthropocene alone denotes an epoch where human actions have significantly altered the planet, and hence everything we know to be true about the world in which we live has been affected by mankind and the narratives that are chosen to be told. It brings to mind the proverb, "History is written by the victors." This proverb underscores the idea that humans curate history by choosing which stories are preserved and which are forgotten. Her framing of the Anthropocene using this metaphor extends the concept by showing that nature, too, participates in a parallel curatorial process through storms, erosion, decay, and other natural forces that "select" what will remain and what disappears. Under the Anthropocene, these human and non-human curations intertwine, shaping cultural heritage through both intentional narratives and the material traces nature leaves behind.

For starters, we must understand that cultural heritage is not static. Yes, things like oral traditions and observances are passed down, but those oral traditions and observances (like holidays or holy days) are typically an outcome of something happening either through supernatural encounters, natural disasters, institutions, power, or social memory practices. Because of this, cultural heritage is in a constant state of transformation, mainly influenced by non-human factors.

Jane Bennett, in her book titled *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), recognizes the power of things, which she calls "thing-power". This concept envelops the capacity of non-human matter to act, influence, and shape events– giving things agency. She

posits that things are not passive or lifeless; they possess vitality that can affect not only human lives, but also non-human lives. In Western and Western-colonized thought, the world is often split into two spaces: active/living subjects, which include primarily humans, and passive/nonliving subjects like rocks, storms, and floods. This dualistic framework makes it difficult to recognize the capacity of non-human matter to act, infer, or shape events.

When we think of agency, we must grapple with the understanding that agency is and should be given to anything that has the capacity to act, influence, or bring about change. In this, we can place agency in a rhetorical and ecological context as not only being limited to humans but can extend to non-human forces like storms, rivers, plants, and animals that shape outcomes and meanings in material and symbolic ways.

Bruno Latour has the same idea. In his article, *Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene* (2014), he further invites the idea that nature is not just a backdrop to our lives, but rather it has agency. He argues for a reconceptualization of agency that doesn't just rest on human exceptionalism, which is rooted in Western thought, but sees human and non-humans sharing in action or effect. He has several critiques of human exceptionalism. The first, like Bennett, is that there is a dualism problem where a distinction is made between subjects or active and objects or passive (Bennett, 2010; Latour, 2014). The second is the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which implies that agency is distributed across networks of humans, non-humans, technologies, and environments such as levees, viruses, and even hurricanes. They can all act in ways that profoundly shape human lives. Lastly, there is an anthropocene shift that we must consider. In light of this shift, he posits that human exceptionalism will collapse. When we think of climate change, pandemics, and technological entanglements, we quickly see that humans are not masters of the world; rather, we are mere participants in a web of human and non-human actants.

Latour's critiques of human exceptionalism is important to note because when we think of nature as curator and the Hurricane Katrina event in 2005, it is clear that Hurricane Katrina wasn't simply a human tragedy, but also where the non-human actant, nature, displayed agency through the floodwaters that poured into and stayed in the city of New Orleans for weeks, the mold that grew due to the stagnated water. After the floodwaters receded, the mold itself became an active force. It spread aggressively, consumed wood and drywall, made homes uninhabitable, and caused respiratory illnesses, which prevented tens of thousands of residents from returning home. In this example, mold itself acts as an agent that "curates" what decayed and what survived. From the human actant standpoint, there were some levees that have been confirmed as being broken by public officials or at least the acknowledgement that the levees would break due to faulty construction or the under construction of the levees, FEMA trailers, and the slow release of aid to the people of New Orleans who were stuck in the city because they were unable to leave due to financial and transportation constraints. All of which paints a picture of non-human and humans' reliance on each other in the way things were shaped and curated.

While Actor-Network Theory (ANT) typically avoids economic analysis, world-ecology allows us to integrate structural forces. In fact, ANT emphasizes the distributed agency of human and non-human actors within networks, and its framework should be extended to consider economic systems. These systems include capitalism, corporatism, and state economies. These are actants that shape material and ecological outcomes. Economic systems are not abstract background forces. They are operative actors that mobilize resources, technologies, and bodies in a way that materially configures the world. Utilizing Jason Moore's notion of world-ecology, we can infer that infrastructures, disasters, and ecological degradation can be seen as outcomes of interactions among human actors such as engineers (like the engineers that developed the levee systems), policymakers (like the policymakers in New Orleans), corporations (like Six Flags),

and non-human actors such as water (like the Mississippi River), soil (like the Louisiana Wetlands), and storms (like Hurricane Katrina), and systemic actors such as markets, debt regimes, and global capital flows. These considerations allow ANT to better account for how material and environmental conditions are shaped by the economic logics that govern the movement of capital and value through both human and non-human networks.

Just like cultural heritage, not being static, nature isn't static either. Jasmine Trächtler (2014 highlights nature as a "witty agent" in her article "*The World as Witty Agent– Donna Haraway on the Object of Knowledge"* (2014). In her article, she examines Donna Haraway's thoughts from her article "Situated Knowledges" (1991) in which she suggests that nature has history and it is shaped by human and non-human actors. She posits that nature is not just the "raw material" but is involved in its own production (and reproduction) in scientific practice. Trächtler argues that Haraway seeks to go beyond two extremes: scientific realism, where nature is seen as real and independent; and not passive and radical social constructivism, where nature is all discourse, all human construction. In doing this, her hope is for us to begin seeing the world as being co-constructed as we all are active participants. If nature participates in knowledge-making and world-making, then what survives, persists, or is erased in the material world is also produced in an ongoing form of curation shaped by both human and non-human actors.

If we take on this stance, nature as a witty agent, then its "curation" of what survives and what is erased is not merely a metaphor but is something that is real and affects our world. So, when we consider disenfranchised or indigenous people who live through storms and floods like Hurricane Katrina, we can posit that they will narrate those experiences and perceive the event differently from a different place of reference. Yet, these experiences are not only lived, they are curated. Nature's actions materially shape which homes, neighborhoods, and cultural sites

survive or vanish, while political and institutional systems determine which suffering is acknowledged and whose stories are recorded and not. For marginalized and indigenous communities, disasters like Katrina reveal a double curation where the physical curation is enacted through land loss, contamination, and displacement, and the symbolic curation is produced through the media and its narratives, state reports, and public memory that often overlook or minimize perspectives. Some may see just the storm, while others will see an act of, yes, a storm, but also a place of systemic and social racism.

While Stobiecka, Bennett, Latour, and Haraway each help us understand how agency extends past humans as they reveal that nature is both a participant and curator in shaping our lives and history, the frameworks they posit are still largely the center of symbolic and ontological understandings of agency. Nevertheless, the agency also operates through economic and structural systems that determine what part of our world is preserved, who is erased, and what and who is left to decay. This is where the notion of the generalized Anthropocene of human impact must collide with the forces of capitalism, corporate power, and systemic neglect that actively shape how natural disasters unfold and how recovery occurs, or if it doesn't.

Now, when we analyze the Anthropocene and the effects of humans on the planet, we see that humans, in general, are not the problem. For example, the response during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina paints a picture of capitalism's organization of life and labor, which can be summarized in the theoretical framework, Capitalocene. Jason Moore, in his 2017 article titled "The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis," argues for the acknowledgement of the systems of power, profit, and reproduction of life. In this sense, capitalism itself operates as a curatorial force determining which environments are protected and which are left to decay. It also determines which communities receive resources and infrastructural investments and which are neglected. Capitalist institutions also shape the

symbolic curation of disasters by deciding which events are memorialized, funded, or publicly narrated through things like media agenda setting. In this sense, curation is not only a natural process but an economic and structural one, actively shaping what survives, what erodes, and who is remembered or erased.

He doesn't deny humanity's role in the changes we see in our world today; rather, he argues that the idea of the Anthropocene cleanses the differences away from humanity. In this cleansing, all people are lumped into being the cause of and holding equal responsibility for the effect of the destruction of nature. All humans are not equal in power, contribution, and impact, and thus many of the world's issues, including the influx of natural disasters, can be accredited as a result of capitalist relations of power and production that treat nature and disenfranchised people as cheap, exploitable resources.

Capitalocene, according to Moore, describes the current geological and historical epoch not as the age of "humanity" (in general), but as the age shaped by capitalism as a world-ecology– a system that organizes nature, labor, and power for endless accumulation determined by the interwoven nature of economic systems, social hierarchies, and ecological relations.

**Historical and Contemporary Examples of the Interconnectedness of Nature vs. Human Curation**

To further demonstrate how curation operates across natural, material, and human systems, it is useful to turn to concrete historical and contemporary examples. The following examples, in this section, reveal how objects, structures, and entire landscapes are shaped through the intertwined forces of natural process, entropy, capitalist neglect, and cultural meaning-making. By tracing how matter is preserved, transformed, or erased in both artistic and

environmental contexts, we can see more clearly how nature and human systems co-curate what survives and what is forgotten.

For starters, let's examine Robert Smithson's 1970s piece titled, *Partially Buried Woodshed,* in which he studied how matter behaves and transforms when left to its own devices (Stobieka, 2018). In this artistic experiment, Smithson demonstrates that every object experiences a life of its own and is ultimately destined to annihilation. Smithson's project makes the connection between human intention and non-human agency, revealing how nature co-produces meaning through decay, transformation, and material erasure.

*Robert Smithson, 1970, Kent State University, Kent Ohio, USA*

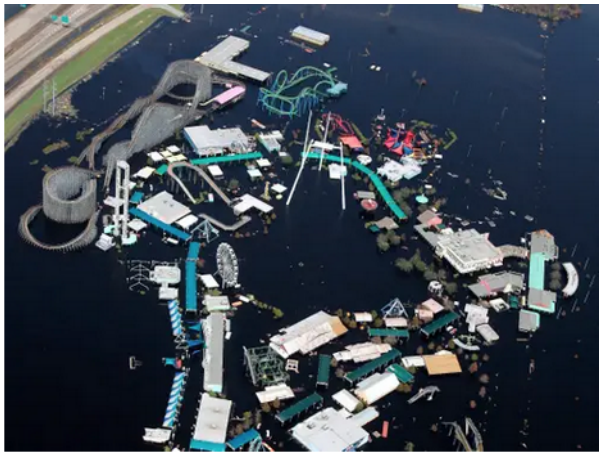
Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* not only spoke volumes about destruction but also about entropy, which is a concept that measures disorder, randomness, and energy dispersal in systems over time; moving from order to disorder. Time selects what endures and what fades.

Over decades, certain materials eroded while others fossilized; the building crumbled while plants began to overgrow and over take it. In this way, time, itself, becomes curator by performing the act of editing, preserving, and erasing in conjunction with nature. In Smithson's design, human withdrawal becomes part of the curatorial act. Once the woodshed was left alone, its meaning and material's future were shaped almost entirely by non-human processes. His

artistic intent sought to show how human structures inevitably collapse, shift, and decay over time when confronted with natural processes. From a cultural standpoint, the shed was left to deteriorate as nature completed his artistic piece through rot, vegetation, and weathering. Further, entropy makes apparent the layered agency of nature and temporality in shaping memory, history, and matter as it contrasts humans efforts to preserve or control outcomes. While Smithson's woodshed offers a controlled artistic demonstration of how matter succumbs to entropy and natural agency, events such as Hurricane Katrina shows how these same processes operate on a bigger scale where environmental forces intersect with capitalism, racialized neglect, and political decision-making. As we move past the micro-level of an art installation to the macro-level of an urban disaster, the curatorial metaphor becomes materially and socially visible. And if Smithson's woodshed demonstrates how not only nature curates but co-produces what survives alongside entropy, then Hurricane Katrina and SixFlags New Orleans can further reveal the same but also introduce the element of capitalism and how it can contribute to the curation of catastrophe.

When we think of the effects of Hurricane Katrina on, let's say, the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans or even New Orleans East, we can see how entropy has and is playing out today. These parts of the city are forever changed. There are portions of these spaces in New Orleans that have been utterly annihilated and remain unbuilt, while glimpses of spaces around have been transformed and gentrified. In this gentrification process, the culture and essence of those places are annihilated and will never be the same. These transformations function as forms of both natural and human curation: nature edits the landscape through decay and regrowth, while economic and political actors curate the city through selective investment, redevelopment, and neglect.

The places that have not been rebuilt gradually degrade as nature is, first and foremost, the reason they no longer have life or their function, but secondly, because no one has invested the time and energy to restore those areas, they have now been enveloped by nature's process of annihilation. For a while, places like The Six Flags Amusement Park remained abandoned and overgrown like the temple in the movie *Jungle Book*. Six Flags is a perfect example of the interconnectedness of nature and human curation.



**Picture of Six Flags under four to seven feet of water during Hurricane Katrina,** David J. Phillips/ Associated Press (2005)

**Before demolition of Six Flags almost two decades later (Carousel),** KEG-KEG/Shutterstock (2024)

**Before demolition of Six Flags almost two decades later (Swings),** Kristina Rodgers/ Shutterstock (2024)

**Before demolition of Six Flags almost two decades later (Roller Coaster),** KEG-KEG/Shutterstock (2024)

It's hard to gauge from the pictures posted above, but before Hurricane Katrina, Six Flags was a space for the people of New Orleans and tourists alike to have fun and be a part of the spectacle. It became a site that embodied the Capitaliocene as it became a visible afterlife of industrial modernity. Its ruins became a museum curated by nature and neglect– capitalism debris. This "capitalist debris" reflects how capitalism curates by abandoning sites that no longer generate profit leaving them to decay. In this, disaster zones become a form of an "open-air" museum of structural neglect, displaying the material consequences of economic decision-making and the values embedded in what corporations choose to preserve or discard.

Six Flags New Orleans was adjacent to the Bayou in New Orleans, and its theme encapsulated the best things New Orleans had to offer, from its architecture to its food. After Katrina, the park officially closed, and despite having a 75-year lease with the City of New Orleans, Six Flags, the corporation, abandoned it.

During the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the park was under four to seven feet of water for weeks and was subsequently deemed uninhabitable and a complete loss. Before the process began to demolish the park in September of 2024, Six Flags, similarly to the partially buried woodshed, was continuing to be curated by nature through the rusting of the rides, the rotting of buildings, alligators taking over the lagoons, and vegetation overtaking structures. The things that remained reflected nature's choices of what decays, survives, and thrives.

For the locals, Six Flags is not just seen as a ruin, but a reminder of how vulnerable the city of New Orleans is to environmental effects and racialized neglect, as New Orleans East, where Six Flags was located, is a prominently black community that has long faced infrastructural abandonment. In fact, driving through New Orleans East now, twenty years after Hurricane Katrina, still feels like a semblance of a ghost town. This notion of racialized neglect in the rebuilding of New Orleans is not just a theory; it has been studied. In the 2013 article *Housing,*

*Race, and Recovery from Hurricane Katrina* by Rodeny Green, et. al., examined how housing destruction post Katrina was disproportionately high in majority Black neighborhoods, and how fewer Black families were able to return due to historic settlement patterns. Likewise, another study reported via PubMed in an article titled *Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Return Migration to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina* shows how housing damage and delays in recovery disproportionately impacted Black residents of low socioeconomic status. To the locals of New Orleans, Six Flags' abandonment was just another racialized neglect, even though in reality, Six Flags counted it as a total loss due to the location being adjacent to the bayou and its vulnerability to natural disasters. For the company, the investment was too great a loss, and several development deals under consideration for the site were later unsuccessful, according to

the City of New Orleans in May of 2024. This disparity is not only infrastructural but also symbolic: the stories, landmarks, and cultural identities of Black New Orleanians are curated into obscurity, erased through unequal redevelopment, policy decisions, and the selective ways public memory foregrounds certain narratives while ignoring others. This example of Six Flags New Orleans can also be viewed through the lens of Latour's Actor-Network Theory. This framework reveals how economic systems, in this case insurance markets, privatization policies, and corporate disinvestment, act alongside natural forces to curate the city's material and cultural landscapes. Nature's agency in reclaiming the site is inseparable from the capitalist networks that rendered it disposable.

While Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* lives in art history as an exploration of materials and decay, teaching us a stark lesson in nature as curator, Six Flags New Orleans ruins live in cultural memory as evidence of racialized neglect and the disproportionate recovery of New Orleans East. In this, both cases expose the limit of human control. In the Six Flags

scenario, another element is introduced that the wooshed piece did not, and that's the political layer, which is human exceptionalism at its finest.

Here lies the rhetorical contestation between government and media versus the belief and narrative that is perpetuated through the generations of black residents and artists who lived through Hurricane Katrina. In short, we must acknowledge that there is a struggle over meaning-making when different groups of cultures frame the same event, metaphor, or concept in competing ways. These competing narratives reveal that curation is not limited to physical landscapes but extends to public memory itself, where governments, media, and marginalized communities vie to define what the disaster means. Contestation highlights how discourse is never neutral, but is always tied to power, identity, and cultural perspective.

Rob Nixon, in his book ***Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor***, introduces the concept of "slow violence," which is a crucial term in addressing the long-term environmental impacts that disproportionately affect impoverished communities. Slow violence, according to Nixon, refers to gradual, often unnoticed destruction of the environment and the slow-motion suffering it inflicts on communities, particularly those in the global South. It is not immediate or even visible because it unfolds over time. It functions as a long-term curatorial force, gradually selecting which communities remain habitable, which ecosystems endure, and which are sacrificed to industrial interests.

Southern Louisiana, not just New Orleans, has suffered from the gradual erosion of the coastline and wetlands, which are known to be the state's defenses, and as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Louisiana is significantly below sea level. This has been an argument that the people of Louisiana have been having for decades, but little to nothing has been done to help aid in preservation until recently. Even the New Orleans levee system, which has been built to protect economic centers like New Orleans, prevents natural sediment deposition that would

be the state's natural defense to rebuild the wetland. So, long before Hurricane Katrina winds tore through the Gulf Coast, the Louisiana wetlands had already been subjected a quieter and slower form of destruction that through oil extraction, levee engineering, and canal dredging created by corporations to mechanically support and protect their interests, stripped away the wetlands natural resilience, making the coastline more vulnerable to the very disasters they were trying to protect themselves and their interest from.

Hurricane Katrina cannot be understood solely as an act of nature, but it was also a culmination of capitalism and slow violence for parishes like St. Bernard, Plaquemines, and the Lower Ninth Ward, which had long lived on the frontline of environmental decline and systemic neglect were predisposed to the harsh effects of slow violence. They, unfortunately, bore the brunt of environmental degradation and the effects of Hurricane Katrina.

There were several narratives told to the public by the media, including the "natural disaster narrative", "Blame Deflection", Security Rhetoric, and "Humanitarian Crisis Narratives". The "Natural Disaster Narrative" was framed by the federal, state, and local officials in who they deemed Katrina as an unavoidable "natural disaster". Conveniently, they focused on the scale of the storm and labeled it as unprecedented. The "Blame Deflection" narrative was given that deflected blame from the Bush administration, FEMA, and local officials. In these cases, the federal government blamed the local government and vice versa. Then, there was the narrative of "security," where the mainstream media emphasized lawlessness and looting, causing a military response to the city instead of relief aid.

During Hurricane Katrina, the narrative of the people in the city and what was taking place during that time was starkly different. The local government criticized both the state and federal governments for their slow relief. In a radio interview on WWL-AM on September 2, 2005, the Mayor, Mayor Ray Nagin, sharply criticized the relief efforts, saying, "I told Bush we

had an incredible crisis here… I am very frustrated because we are not able to marshal resources…" He is later quoted in 2006, Nagin claimed that race and class affected the speech and quality of recovery efforts. He said, "If Katrina had hit a more affluent or white area, the response would've been different. The local government's arguments framed the disaster not just as a meteorological event of unprecedented proportions, but also as one that was heavily impacted by social and political inequities.

There was even a different narrative given by the residents who stayed behind. The displaced residents were majority African Americans who were of low socio-economic status. The resources the city had prepared for those who stayed behind were drastically in proportion to the number of people who needed them after flooding began. People began to loot as a way to survive. Although there were some who looted frivolous things like televisions, others were looting drug stores for medication, grocery stores for food, and clothing stores for shoes for their feet. The narrative of the people became one of survival of the fittest, or at least doing what must be done to survive. By recognizing capitalism as an actor within the network of ecological relations, we will begin to acknowledge that environmental events, like Hurricane Katrina and storms like it, are not only natural or human causes, but co-produced through capitalism.

The rhetorical contestation reveals an intercultural communication divide between the lived experience of mostly African-American residents and the politically distant bureaucratic framing that perpetuated harmful stereotypes. These narratives reveal how rhetoric shapes not only public memory but also material consequences for marginalized communities.

**Intercultural Frames of Curation**

While the idea and metaphor "nature as curator" illuminates non-human agency, we cannot overlook human agency's role in the process as well. In this, we must acknowledge that its interpretation is deeply shaped by cultural frameworks that help to shape and define what

counts as valuable, a part of heritage, and ultimately survival. When we consider the intercultural conversation as it relates to curation, there are two thoughts: indigenous and Western. These epistemologies operate as curatorial systems, shaping what is remembered, protected, and how human-nature relationships are interpreted.

Indigenous epistemologies around curation are often rooted in reciprocal relationships. They understand that human-nature relations are reciprocal and interdependent. According to Kyle Whyte, in his article, *Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene*, there is this concept of relational responsibilities in which human and non-human relations emphasize obligation, care, and reciprocity. Instead of ranking beings, unlike in Western epistemologies, it emphasizes ongoing exchange, mutual responsibility, and kinship across human and non-human life. For example, when we think about indigenous people of America, their relationship with the land, water, and other non-human entities, such as totem poles, mountains, and the like. They treat those things as co-actors in their cultural survival. They become one with nature and do not treat nature as a passive backdrop to their lives, but as partners in life. In doing this, they curate through relationships, memory, and survival practices.

Further, Whyte argues that indigenous epistemologies frame environmental events, like Katrina, not as isolated crises, but as part of ongoing colonial and systemic patterns (Whyte, 2017, p. 159). Indigenous epistemology curates disasters by embedding them in long histories of colonial ecological violence.

Western epistemologies, on the other hand, are rooted in hierarchy selection (human exceptionalism). Its logic assumes some species, spaces, or narratives are more valuable than others and thus prioritized for preservation. This model ranks and manages nature according to

human-defined hierarchies of importance. This epistemology focuses on the "curator" being a figure of authority and control, separating the valuable from the worthless.

In James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art,* he examined how ethnography, art, and literature in the 20th century grapple with cultural differences from a Western standpoint. He argues that the idea of museum curation often strips objects that have been extracted from other living cultures, and are reframed and labeled as art according to Western categories. In his argument, he discusses how museum curation isn't neutral in its attempt to preserve culture; they simply produce culture through classification and display. For example, non-Western artifacts are often curated as "primitive art" or tools as "ethnographic specimens," which strips these items of the original value to a people group and society. As mentioned earlier in this paper, "history is told by the victor." In this, we can understand that the story can be told whichever way is conducive to the curator, in this case, the museum curator's preference. After all, the process of curating objects is often through colonization, where cultures are eradicated and people are coerced into taking on the ideologies of the conqueror. This dynamic mirrors how Western institutions also curate disaster narratives: both through museum practice and disaster reporting, as well as people from their original contexts, reclassify them through Western value systems, and present these reordered meanings truthfully. This creates curatorial logics that categorize non-Western artifacts and also shape how crises like Hurricane Katrina are framed, understood, and remembered.

Now, how does all of this apply to Hurricane Katrina? One thing I tell my intercultural communication students often is that there are many cultures within America. New Orleans, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, is full of different cultures. New Orleans is known for its Creole food and Jazz music, but many people are not aware of the deep Native American and West African roots that are coursing through the veins of the city. People pay homage to their

Native American roots through the Mardi Gras Indians. This group, for example, as described in the UNESCO (2021) article, *New Orleans Black Neighborhoods Pay Homage to Native American,* African American communities in New Orleans use indigenous symbols, ceremonies, and community structures to remember, honor, and resist. Their ceremonies often show cultural memory, symbolic forms, and ritual practices that draw on nature and ancestral ties; not only in cultural performances but ongoing living practices as well.

Many people in the city of New Orleans have ties to the land that resonate more with the indigenous epistemology of curation. In reality, their communities are often overlooked, but the people's environments play a role in how they see the world in which they live and the opportunities afforded to them. *Black Ecologies,* a project initiative by AAIHS's Black Perspectives, founded by Justin Hosbey and J.T. Roane, explores how black communities, especially communities in the south and Gulf Coast, are both disproportionately exposed to ecological catastrophe. This project doesn't treat environmental issues as something new; rather, it emphasizes how ecological vulnerability and disaster have shaped the lived experience of Black communities for generations. These disasters are not limited to natural such as storms and floods, but slavery, Jim Crow, and colonialism. In this sense, Black Ecologies reveal how Black communities curate survival, memory, and ecological knowledge under conditions of crisis, demonstrating an intercultural form of curation.

From a Western epistemology, Black communities and culture often do not fit the narrative and are often curated to fit a mold that is often miscontextualized. For example, the looting scenario mentioned earlier that took place during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. From the Western standpoint, people were looting, and a picture was painted that criminalized people instead of contextualizing what was happening. Viewed through the lens of curation, Western disaster media and official narratives do not neutrally report events. They selectively

highlight behaviors that reinforce preexisting racial and cultural hierarchies. When the media emphasized looting as criminality, these narratives "curate" African American communities as deviants. In doing this, they simultaneously erased stories of care, survival, and resilience. In other words, Western curation shapes public memory and often dictates which actions, experiences, and values are preserved. This symbolic curation mirrors the hierarchies seen in museum practices that curate artifacts based on and classified according to Western frameworks. Disaster events are interpreted and memorialized through cultural assumptions about race, property, and social order.

The frames of curation, themselves, are intercultural in nature. Western logic placed on marginalized communities often leads to disparities in the narratives, and unfortunately, the narrative that will most likely take precedence would be the one with more buy-in from the society in which the narrative is told.

**Limitations of the "Nature as Curator" Metaphor**

While the metaphor of "nature as curator" illuminates non-human agency and challenges human exceptionalism, it is not without its risks. The risk with anthropomorphizing nature as "curator" – attributing human qualities, intentions, or behaviors to non-human beings as forces (e.g., describing a hurricane as "angry" or nature as a "curator" – can obscure as much as it reveals. Over-anthropomorphizing nature risks miscurating responsibility. It makes it appear that human focus, rather than social, political, and economic systems, determines what survives or is erased. To say that "nature curated" the destruction of New Orleans or that "mother nature" in the form of a hurricane was "angry" may make ecological processes more relatable, but it gives human-centered logics of choice, preference, and design into forces that do not operate with human categories. In doing this, we can begin to downplay the power of nature and begin to

flatten the complexity in how we, as humans, interpret disasters, culture, and heritage, and ultimately what survives and what doesn't.

In this case, I fear that there is a major risk in the potential erasure of systemic racism and colonialism when too much agency is attributed to "nature" itself. If we solely frame Hurricane Katrina as an act of "nature as curator", then we risk erasing the racial and systemic hardship and disparities. For example, the racialized neglect in rebuilding the New Orleans East neighborhood and the Six Flags amusement park, or the governmental failure to respond, and the disparity between the socio-economic conditions that caused thousands of residents to be "left behind" to deal with the horrific aftermath of the storm. These decisions determined which communities were protected, which were abandoned, and ultimately which cultural and material elements survived or decayed. When we apply human characteristics to nature, we risk shifting power from those who should be held responsible for "curating" racial and systemic injustices. After all, human systems of power also contributed to destruction because of the centuries of policies, racial inequalities, and infrastructural neglect that were set up in the City of New Orleans. Consequently, this metaphor, and metaphors like it, can unintentionally silence the critical race and decolonial scholars seek to identify.

This is where intercultural frameworks become abundantly clear. Indigenous epistemologies, for example, often emphasize reciprocal relationships and responsibilities between humans and the non-human, rather than imposing anthropomorphic traits. When we consider black ecological perspectives, we must consider how disasters are never just "natural" here in America. Indigenous and Black ecological frameworks reveal how survival, memory, and environmental knowledge are curated through relationships, histories, and care practices, rather than through hierarchical or anthropomorphized logics. Historically, their perspectives are layered with racial dispossession, segregation, and neglect. By applying "nature as curator" to

the conversation with these intercultural frames, the metaphor's blind spots can be balanced. In doing this, it will allow us to recognize non-human agency without displacing accountability for human responsibility and decisions rooted in racism, colonialism, or systemic inequity.

With that said, however, anthropomorphism can serve as a useful rhetorical tool, but only when carefully situated. We just must be mindful of the risk of over-simplifying the dynamics of power and obscuring the forces that shape cultural survival.

**Final Thoughts**

This paper discusses the metaphor "nature as curator" as a productive way to imagine the culmination of human and non-human forces. This metaphor challenges the illusion of human exceptionalism, highlights the agency of nature, and draws attention to the ways in which cultural heritage is ever-changing and fluctuating based on things that may have an impact on the people of a particular culture. It is important to carefully navigate this idea, however, because we can anthropomorphize this metaphor too heavily and risk masking systemic racism, colonial histories, and political failures, and misplace accountability and responsibility. This misplacement can be seen through the devastation and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. While the storm itself reveals the agency of water, levees, and decay, the devastation cannot be understood apart from governmental neglect, racialized abandonment, and inequalities that have existed for centuries.

On the other side of this, we can situate this metaphor inside intercultural frameworks. In doing so, we begin to see a fuller picture along with the two epistemologies" Indigenous and Western. Indigenous epistemologies remind us of the reciprocal responsibility of humans and non-humans, whose black ecological perspective insists that no disaster is "purely natural". This is due to their lived experiences that have been shaped by racial dispossession and neglect. The western epistemology seeks to curate human exceptionalism and curates based on what "they"

deem as important or interesting. When the indigenous epistemology and black ecological perspective enter into the conversation with western ecological thought, the metaphor of "nature as curator" becomes less about assigning human logic to non-human forces and more about the grappling of shared, contested processes of survival, memory, and meaning-making.

The curation process– what survives and what dies– isn't solely a nature versus human process. Rather, it is a dual process that requires us to use a more intercultural approach when narrating heritage, disaster, and survival in the Anthropocene. Ultimately, the metaphor of "nature as curator" illuminates the interplay between non-human agency and human systems of curation. By placing disasters, heritage, and material survival within intercultural frameworks, we can recognize how nature's processes intersect with social, political, and economic decisions, while also correcting for the distortions introduced by Western-centric and anthropomorphized narratives.

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