



2020

## Wholeness and Belonging in Nikky Finney's *Head Off & Split*: An Eco-Politics of Resilience and Resistance

Mary Rudolph

University of Kentucky, maru237@uky.edu

Digital Object Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.13023/etd.2020.222>

[Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.](#)

### Recommended Citation

Rudolph, Mary, "Wholeness and Belonging in Nikky Finney's *Head Off & Split*: An Eco-Politics of Resilience and Resistance" (2020). *Theses and Dissertations--English*. 114.

[https://uknowledge.uky.edu/english\\_etds/114](https://uknowledge.uky.edu/english_etds/114)

This Master's Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations--English by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact [UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu](mailto:UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu).

## **STUDENT AGREEMENT:**

I represent that my thesis or dissertation and abstract are my original work. Proper attribution has been given to all outside sources. I understand that I am solely responsible for obtaining any needed copyright permissions. I have obtained needed written permission statement(s) from the owner(s) of each third-party copyrighted matter to be included in my work, allowing electronic distribution (if such use is not permitted by the fair use doctrine) which will be submitted to UKnowledge as Additional File.

I hereby grant to The University of Kentucky and its agents the irrevocable, non-exclusive, and royalty-free license to archive and make accessible my work in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known. I agree that the document mentioned above may be made available immediately for worldwide access unless an embargo applies.

I retain all other ownership rights to the copyright of my work. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of my work. I understand that I am free to register the copyright to my work.

## **REVIEW, APPROVAL AND ACCEPTANCE**

The document mentioned above has been reviewed and accepted by the student's advisor, on behalf of the advisory committee, and by the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS), on behalf of the program; we verify that this is the final, approved version of the student's thesis including all changes required by the advisory committee. The undersigned agree to abide by the statements above.

Mary Rudolph, Student

Dr. Alan Nadel, Major Professor

Dr. Michael Trask, Director of Graduate Studies

WHOLENESS AND BELONGING IN NIKKY FINNEY'S *HEAD OFF & SPLIT*:

AN ECO-POLITICS OF RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

---

THESIS

---

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Mary Abigail Rudolph

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Alan Nadel, Professor of Literature

Lexington, Kentucky

2020

Copyright © Mary Abigail Rudolph 2020

## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### WHOLENESS AND BELONGING IN NIKKY FINNEY'S *HEAD OFF & SPLIT*: AN ECO-POLITICS OF RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

Nikky Finney's *Head Off & Split* illuminates an urgent and radical eco-political project: the creation of whole, resilient, co-species communities capable of surviving interlocking political, social, and ecological crises. Finney foregrounds the strategic practice of belonging as a method of survival within contexts of systemic oppression and climate chaos. "Belonging," in these terms, is not a "natural" ontological state, but a mode of co-being that is continually (re)created and (re)enacted through daily world-making practices: foodways, spatial habitation, migration and movement. Belonging is a collection of reciprocal, adaptive, situated praxes that make and sustain beings and worlds. They rely on and affirm a particular imaginary of wholeness defined by entanglement, relationality, diversity, and complexity to create a sense of contribution to that-which-is-beyond-the-self and the more-than-self. Wholeness, in turn, can only exist when beings and collectives act and interact through practices of belonging. Wholeness and belonging as they emerge in Finney's work are, therefore, mutually dependent and co-creative. Though Finney's poetry lays bare the scaffolded effects of oppressive power structures, it is also deeply hopeful in its attention to cyclic processes of nourishment and regenerative possibility.

KEYWORDS: Nikky Finney, *Head Off & Split*, Affrilachian Poetry,  
Belonging, Wholeness

Mary Abigail Rudolph

21 April 2020

WHOLENESS AND BELONGING IN NIKKY FINNEY'S *HEAD OFF & SPLIT*:  
AN ECO-POLITICS OF RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE

By

Mary Abigail Rudolph

Alan Nadel  
Director of Thesis

Michael Trask  
Director of Graduate Studies

21 April 2020

*For my mom, who taught me how to work and dream with passion.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am forever grateful to Nikky Finney for writing these poems. I resonate with them as a gardener, a community organizer, a woman, a Kentuckian, a human being. I respond to Finney's keen sense of justice and recognize in her words the special wonder that comes from practiced communion with the more-than-human world. In this thesis, I have worked to cultivate the position of listener and learner about matters that are beyond the scope of my own embodied experience while simultaneously developing an original reading grounded in it. This project will continue to inform my work in advocacy and activism for years to come, as I continue to think toward an ecological ethics of collective wholeness and belonging.

To my committee, thank you for your generosity and support.

To Dad and Laura, thank you for your unending love and encouragement.

To Andrew, thank you for grounding me and growing with me.

To Arrow, Dexter, and Lucy, thank you for the pure, wordless comfort of non-human companionship.

To the garden, thank you for your lessons on growth, death, decay, and regeneration.

To Wendell Berry, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Sylvia Wynter, Kevin Quashie, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks, thank you for your words.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .....	iii
Part I: Introduction	
Nikky Finney .....	1
The Affrilachian Poets .....	4
Part II: <i>Head Off &amp; Split</i>	
Theoretical Perspectives .....	9
<i>Head Off &amp; Split</i> as Eco-Political Matter .....	12
Part III: Wholeness	
Individual and Collective .....	16
Assemblages and Scales .....	22
Kinship and Difference .....	26
Part IV: Belonging	
Belonging as Sympoietic Praxis .....	31
Belonging through Foodways .....	32
Belonging through Habitation .....	35
Belonging Through Movement .....	37
Belonging as Survival and Resistance .....	39
Conclusion	
Implications for Eco-Political Poetics and Ethics .....	42
Works Cited .....	47
Vita .....	54

## PART I: Introduction

### Nikky Finney

A vital motivation pulses through Nikky Finney’s poetry: to put the things that are necessary for living in the world into language. One such necessity is a feeling of connection to the more-than-human world. Finney has long worked to put her own earth-connection into words, a project that is always unfinished, evolving amid a web of shifting attachments. The origin of her sense of connection, though, is firmly rooted in the specificities of her birthplace—the ecology of Conway, South Carolina perpetuates, grounds, and unifies her poetry (Finney “A Conversation”).

After graduating from Talladega College in 1979, Finney moved to Atlanta, Georgia. There, she was mentored by Toni Cade Bambara, a poet of the Black Arts Movement whose personal, political, and artistic influence continues to inform Finney’s life and work.<sup>1</sup> During this formative period, Finney wrote and published her first collection of poetry, *On Wings Made of Gauze* (1985), which introduces motifs that continue to emerge throughout her oeuvre—relationality, ritual, history, and place. In contrast to her later work, however, these poems read almost like folklore or fable; they are whimsical, veiled by an atmosphere of myth.<sup>2</sup>

In 1989, Finney settled in Lexington, Kentucky as a visiting writer in the University of Kentucky’s English Department; she became permanent faculty a few years later. Finney lived, wrote, and taught in Kentucky until 2013, when she returned to her

---

<sup>1</sup> In her bio, Finney writes that “she follows the path, beyond adornment, that Bambara lived and taught—a writing life rooted in empathetic engagement and human reciprocity” (“About Nikky”).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the first poem of this collection is titled, “The Last Fable: An Introduction” (13).

home state to accept a position at the University of South Carolina. While in Kentucky, she published three books of poetry as well as a collection of short stories.<sup>3</sup>

In *Rice* (1995), Finney reclaims Black history, presence, and world-making as central to and constitutive of South Carolina.<sup>4</sup> She weaves artifacts such as photographs, direct quotations, lyrics from spirituals, Gullah dialect,<sup>5</sup> and Hausa proverbs<sup>6</sup> into the collection to create a rich collage of history retold. More grounded than her first collection, *Rice* establishes Finney's treatment of local customs as they are integrated with local ecologies and introduces a particular emphasis on agricultural practices and foodways. As its title affirms, Finney's second collection holds sacred the traditions associated with rice culture and pays tribute to traditional African and African diasporic agricultural knowledges.<sup>7</sup> Jeraldine Kraver (2002) explores the intersection of personal, familial, place-based, and racialized mythmaking as it emerges in *Rice*.

In *The World is Round* (2003), Finney continues to ponder themes of history and ecology while developing a politics of belonging and based on reciprocity and

---

<sup>3</sup> In *Heartwood* (1998), Finney expands on many of the themes that emerge in her poetry, such as kinship, community, and the persistence of place-based cultural traditions.

<sup>4</sup> I capitalize Black at the direction of Finney herself: "I don't call myself a minority writer. I call myself a Black woman writer. I always capitalize Black. I don't allow myself to be called a minority writer. I believe calling myself this or allowing myself to be called this is a part of the design that those in power have structured to always keep people—who have been marginalized in and by history—over there. I am not 'over there.' I am right here. I am full throttle. I am not a minority anything" ("Interview" 2019).

<sup>5</sup> The Gullah are a distinctive cultural group of Black Americans who descend from enslaved Africans along the southeastern Atlantic coastal plain of the U.S. Many continue to live in small farming and fishing communities on the coasts and islands of South Carolina and Georgia (Opala). Finney describes the Gullah as communities who continue "working the land and making culture happen" in those places, as they have done for centuries ("A Conversation").

<sup>6</sup> The Hausa are an African people who inhabit what is now northern Nigeria and neighboring regions. It is largest ethnic group in Africa and the second most-spoken language after Arabic in the Afroasiatic family of languages.

<sup>7</sup> Sections of the collection are titled for various agricultural practices associated with the African Diaspora. The African "heel-toe" method for planting is "to first dig with the heel / drop seed / then cover with the toe" ("Heel-toe" 1-3). "Thresh" refers to "to separat[ing] the seed" ("Thresh" 4). To "winnow," finally, is to "to free from the lighter particles of / chaff and dirt especially by throwing / it into the air and allowing the wind / to blow away the impurities" ("Winnow" 1-4).

mutualism. In “Hurricane Beulah,” for instance, Finney repeats the following line to describe the weight and essence of her relationship with her grandmother: “We belonged to each other” (46, 49). Evie Shockley (2004) notes the decolonizing poetics that manifest in *The World Is Round*. As Shockley observes, Finney considers contemporary forms of globalism as they are informed by colonialism and the Atlantic slave trade, thereby “preclud[ing] a reductively simple celebration of universality” (206).

In 2011, Finney’s *Head Off & Split* won the National Book Award. In this collection, the themes generated in each of her previous works culminate with clarity and purpose. Throughout her career, Finney has received critical acclaim for her honest, compassionate, and insightful treatment of intersectional identities and her deft fusion of the personal and the political (Bashir, Dawes, Gildersleeve, Villarreal). Her story poems have been celebrated as contributing to “the grand spiral of history” and challenging readers to be ever mindful of “who is speaking and why” (McElroy 24). Certainly, Finney’s poems illuminate with clarity and tenderness wide-ranging nuance in and among specific modes, histories, and practices of Black and female being; any careful consideration of her work must be attuned to these themes. The rich ecological implications of Finney’s work, however, remain unexplored.<sup>8</sup> This scholarly lacuna may be partially attributable to what Kwame Dawes, fellow poet and scholar, notes in an epistolary review addressed to Finney:

Because your verse is very direct about exploring life through the roaming eye of a Black woman, your poems must contend with the inevitable, though unfair, label of parochialism and regionalism. The labels are unfair because, while the poetry celebrates the particular, the parochial—through the use of personal detail and specific landscape—it speaks eloquently out of the world with a clarity and a sensitivity that only a focused and intimate view of the world can produce. (276)

---

<sup>8</sup> Though Kraver insinuates the importance of space and geography in collective mythmaking, she does not discuss the ecological import of Finney’s work at length.

As Dawes suggests, while it is necessary to consider Finney's work in relation to the specific relationships and ecologies that embed and inform it, it is equally necessary to recognize the impossibility of containing its generative force within those bounds.

Attending to the ecological valences of Finney's poetry reveals truths that, though rooted in particularities of region and identity, hold sway beyond them: that social and environmental injustice are deeply related symptoms of the oppressive power structures that define neoliberal capitalism. The same colonizing logic that binds and uses people, binds and uses land.

### **The Affrilachian Poets**

During her tenure in Kentucky, Finney co-founded the Affrilachian Poets collective along with Frank X Walker.<sup>9</sup> Their poetry is aptly described in anthology *Black Bone* as “the bedrock of what stands as Affrilachian Cultural Cartography” (Morgan 13). Now numbering over forty practicing poets, writers, and artists, the Affrilachian Poets assert the existence, presence, and contributions of Black Appalachians. They participate in a shared narrative of creativity, adaptation, and continuity which must be understood within an Appalachian context.

The spatial imaginary of Appalachia follows the contours of the Appalachian Mountains as they reach through thirteen states. Despite its vastness and rich biodiversity,<sup>10</sup> Appalachia has often been regarded as a single remote landscape, replete

---

<sup>9</sup> Other co-founders and original members include Kelly Norman Ellis, Crystal Wilkinson, Gerald Coleman, Ricardo Nazario-Colon, Mitchell L. H. Douglas, Daundra Scisney-Givens, and Thomas Aaron

<sup>10</sup> The Appalachian region is among the most bio-diverse in the world, both in terms of species variety and abundance of individual organisms. Many of the plants, animals, insects, and fungi found in Appalachia are endemic to the region, meaning they do not exist anywhere else on the planet. There are many reasons for Appalachia's bio-diversity, including its long evolutionary history and diversity of landforms, elevations, climates, and topographies. For detailed discussions, see Muir (2020) and Loucks, et al (2020).

with natural resources. Those resources have justified extractive industries, such as coal mining and logging.<sup>11</sup> Appalachian culture, moreover, has often been conceived as static, and Appalachian people as relics of settler heritage preserved in mountain hollers, symbols of a romantic past rather than fully dimensional human beings capable of representing themselves as citizens in a modern democracy.<sup>12</sup> Such essentializing notions, rooted in settler mythologies, facilitate both nostalgia and differentiation—Appalachia becomes both origin and Other.<sup>13</sup> bell hooks, Black Kentucky writer and feminist activist argues that Appalachia’s “anarchist spirit” has long threatened the status quo, “hence the need to undermine it by creating the notion that folks who inhabit these spaces [a]re ignorant, stupid, inbred, ungovernable” (13, 20). The reification of Appalachia as a fixed monoculture defined by lacks—lack of wealth, lack of education, lack of opportunity, lack of diversity—is, thus, a primary element of calculated disenfranchisement and erasure which enables continued extraction of resources and labor by the neoliberal capitalist state. This cycle is further perpetuated and excused by classist discourse that

---

<sup>11</sup> Richard York writes, “The powerful economic industries of the region are clearly unsustainable from a purely ecological point of view, particularly the coal industry, being dependent on non-renewable resources and the destruction of potentially renewable resources, such as the forests that are leveled by mountaintop removal coal mining” (15).

<sup>12</sup> In 1899, William Goodell Frost described Appalachian people as “our contemporary ancestors,” establishing a core set of diminishing and patronizing assumptions that has long informed scholarship on the region and its inhabitants: “The question of the method by which these contemporary ancestors of ours are to be put in step with the world is an educational one. I wish only to bring forward two suggestions. In the first place, the aim should be to make them intelligent without making them sophisticated. As a matter both of taste and of common sense, we should not try to make them conform to the regulation type of Americans; they should be encouraged to retain all that is characteristic and wholesome in their present life. Let us not set them agog to rush into the competition of cities, but show them how to get the blessings of culture where they are. Let them not be taught to despise the log cabin, but to adorn it. So, too, the whole aim of our aid should be to make them able to help themselves. Industrial education, instruction in the care of their forests, rotation of crops, and similar elementary matters will make them sharers in the gifts of science” (Frost 80).

<sup>13</sup> Henry David Shapiro’s now infamous *A Strange Land and Peculiar People: The Discovery of Appalachia*, for example, portrays Appalachia as fundamentally other in the tradition of imperialist discourse. In this formulation, Appalachia represents the unknown and uncharted, a wild place that has yet to be mapped, governed, settled, colonized.

associates morality with wealth and immorality with poverty.<sup>14</sup> Stereotypes, therefore, contribute to the control and exploitation of Appalachian communities and ecosystems.<sup>15</sup>

Appalachia is, of course, infinitely more complex than stereotypes suggest, encompassing dynamic assemblages of more-than-human ecologies and diverse human communities. At least eighty-five Native American nations currently inhabit Appalachia, a majority of which are among the two hundred sovereign Indigenous nations as yet unrecognized by the U.S. federal government (Penland). Latin-x populations, furthermore, are growing rapidly in many Appalachian counties (Hayburn). The largest minority group in Appalachia, though, continues to be African American; the lives and contributions of Black Appalachians are fundamentally interconnected—socially, aesthetically, economically, and culturally—with those of all the other ethnic groups in the region.<sup>16</sup> No single story or identity can encompass the various ecosystems, communities, and assemblages that coalesce to create Appalachia.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the region is

---

<sup>14</sup>As hooks notes, “Mass media representations of poor folk in general convey to the public the notion that poor people are in dire straits because of the bad choices they have made. It pushes images that suggest that [when] the poor suffer...it is because of innate weaknesses in character” (30).

<sup>15</sup> According to York, “The profits of the major industries in Appalachia have not translated into the well-being of people in the region. The coal-centric economic development that is currently dominant in many parts of Appalachia is not only unsustainable from an environmental point of view but is also unsustainable purely in social and economic terms, since the coal industry employs fewer and fewer people and suppresses other potential economic opportunities. The economic hardships and environmental degradation associated with the coal industry have undermined social capital in the region, leaving many people there dispirited and pessimistic about the future” (16).

<sup>16</sup>Althea Webb writes, “No number of age-old stereotypes can erase the fact that, Appalachia, distinctive as it is, has never been a region that is *lily white*. History reveals that Appalachia has always had a racially and ethnically diverse population that has been significant and influential. Migration and mobility has shifted patterns of diversity within sub-regions and particular counties, but many areas recall traditions of inclusive collaboration unlikely to have taken hold outside the mountains. Indeed, while some areas today are largely white, the collective memory of a county may reveal a vastly different history” (np).

<sup>17</sup>Ivy Brashear notes, “Stories about Appalachia, who tells them and who gets to claim them, matter a great deal when it comes to understanding the place and people more fully...No one narrative can tell the full story of an entire region and the people that live there because no one person or story can lay complete claim to a place. Appalachia, like every other region of this country, contains multitudes” (“The Lies We’re Told About Appalachia”).

defined by contamination—the crossings, collaborations, and evolving trajectories generated when collectivities emerge, interact, and change one another.<sup>18</sup>

Recent scholarship has begun to define Appalachia by these networked connections rather than by seclusion. It acknowledges that Appalachian history is characterized by relationality rather than isolation, and that Appalachian culture is perpetually (re)created through the ideological, economic, and ecological interactions between and among a multiplicity of more-than-human entanglements.<sup>19</sup> Despite this more nuanced understanding of Appalachia, stereotypes remain influential. Projects that promote a more accurate and complicated story of Appalachia, therefore, continue to be politically exigent.

The work of the Affrilachian Poets responds to this very exigence. Their work brings into clear focus the heterogenous dynamism of Appalachia by demonstrating that the region is “more than one ethnicity can define” (*The Affrilachian Poets*). Walker coined the term *Affrilachia* in 1991, after he discovered that the Webster’s definition of *Appalachian* referred only to the white inhabitants of the region. Walker’s family has lived in the Appalachian foothills for generations, living on and making the land, yet, their existence was rendered invisible by exclusionary discourse. Walker remembers, “I felt as if I were being locked out of something important to me. Something that had always been a part of who I am” (qtd. in Lansana 50). In his poem “Kentucke,” Walker writes, “I too am of these hills” and “indeed / some of the bluegrass / is black” (34, 63-

---

<sup>18</sup>I use the term “contamination” in the spirit of Anna Tsing, who writes, “We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world making projects, mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge. Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option” (27).

<sup>19</sup> See Jones (2019), Revill and Gold (2018), and Swanson (2018).

65). In this way, the very word *Affrilachia* is political in its assertion of the heritage and enduring presence of Black people in Appalachia in opposition to persistent campaigns of erasure and disavowal. As Katheryn Taylor notes, *Affrilachia* demonstrates “the importance of performance—especially of repeatable, influential acts of naming and identification—in generating diverse, interconnected scenes, or *ecologies* that call us to reconceive our historical understandings of Appalachia” (np). In naming and claiming the Affrilachian tradition, Finney participates in creating a collective politics of visibility and affirmation.

## PART II: *Head Off & Split*

### Theoretical Perspectives

In *Head Off & Split*, Finney wields razor-sharp language like a tool in a collection that is focused, politically necessary, and profoundly useful. These poems affirm what Finney herself has testified, that “everything is political—clean water, fresh air, a place to live” (“A Conversation”). Finney joins a tradition of Black women writers, such as Lucille Clifton, Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston, to prioritize political engagement and communitarian ethics along with form and craftsmanship. Her work, like the work of her predecessors, participates in eco-political struggles for collective survival and liberation.

Finney’s particular vision of collective liberation involves awareness of the deep historical and ecological stratigraphies that entrench contemporary political contexts. She demonstrates a sweeping, historical understanding of ecology, as well as a concept of history that is rooted in spatialized ecology, such that the two are revealed to be always entangled. This concept is concisely illustrated by the image of a “whole fish wrapped in yesterday’s news” which became cover art for *Head Off & Split* (“Resurrection of the Errand Girl: An Introduction” 4). Many of Finney’s meditations on South Carolina exhibit the knotted complexity of interrelated natural-cultural dimensions. Consider, for instance, how Finney blends history and ecology in the introduction of *Rice*:

My first breaths were drawn, my first words coaxed on a triangular patch of sandy land called South Carolina. Land that Indians first inhabited and that Black folks, Africans, had made. I was born to a land thick with Spanish moss and swamp, Cypress and Live Oak, and, in its day, slavery and many a rice field. (11)

In her essay “Inquisitor and Insurgent” Finney writes in analogous eco-political register:

I was born inches away from the sea at the bottom of a fiercely Confederate state, in the small coastal town of Conway, South Carolina, on August 26, 1957. The backyard of our first family house was all sand and seashells. Hundred-year-old oak trees with their canopies of Spanish moss dotted the entire street of tiny wooden houses. The lilting Gullah voices of the children of pure Africans was the first air I ever breathed and the first stories I ever heard. There were postcards sold near the beach that spoke of the legend of the live oaks and the Spanish moss that blanketed them. These cards told a history and held a story that the moss of the live oak was the hair of a southern maiden who had lost her Rebel sweetheart and hung it there hoping for his return. But there were others of us whose great fathers had fought against the Confederacy and believed otherwise: the moss was thought to be the braided hair of all the Africans who had run away and been caught and hanged there. To us the live oaks were said to house the spirits of the slave dead. I learned as a girl there were indeed two sides to every story. More and more I knew that I wanted to be one of those telling and passing on the infinite dark sweet side. (218-219)

Recognizing that human endeavors—history, culture, politics, society—are always subsumed in and related to more-than-human ecosystems, Finney insists on thinking beyond the constricting assumptions of Enlightenment humanism and Cartesian dualism veering towards what Wendell Berry calls “ecological intelligence...a sense of the impossibility of acting or living alone or solely in one’s own behalf, and this rests in turn upon a sense of the order upon which any life depends and of the proprieties of place within that order” (“Standing by Words” 65).

Such an impulse might be compared to theoretical projects like posthumanism or deep ecology.<sup>20</sup> Concepts of ecological interdependence, however, are not new.<sup>21</sup> Nor are they unique to a particular cultural or theoretical lineage. The premise which undergirds much of contemporary critical ecological theory—that humans, non-humans, and the more-than-human world exist in deeply related interdependence as opposed to inhabiting distinct ontological categories—is expressed in various formulations throughout many diverse intellectual and spiritual traditions. In failing to acknowledge or engage with traditions other than Western humanism, some discussions of being human in an ecological context have a tendency to universalize, de-historicize, flatten, and reduce the varied complexity of lived experience. They, therefore, have the potential to reinscribe ethnocentric and androcentric assumptions about “human-ness” even while they critique anthropocentrism.<sup>22</sup> Finney, in contrast, remains attentive to the differences among

---

<sup>20</sup> In the 1970s, Arne Naess published his famous distinction between what he termed the “shallow” and “deep” ecology movements in an essay which has become an Ur-text for subsequent generations of ecological thinkers. In this essay, Naess characterizes the shallow ecological movement as “the fight against pollution and resource depletion” with the primary objective of securing “the health and affluence of people in the developed countries” (3). Meanwhile, conservation efforts represent only one of seven tenets of the deep ecology movement. The other six are as follows: “rejection of the human-in-environment image in favor of the relational, total-field image,” “biospherical egalitarianism,” “principles of diversity and symbiosis,” “anti-class posture,” “complexity, not complication,” and “local autonomy and decentralization” (3-7). From its conception, deep ecology has been a dynamic intellectual project, splitting and branching in complex ways. These foundational principles, however, remain influential within the intellectual landscape of contemporary ecological theory.

<sup>21</sup> Aldo Leopold, for instance, introduced the land ethic in 1949: “All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts... The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (203-204).

<sup>22</sup> I am referring here to certain posthumanist, new materialist, and bare life discourses that promote a flat ontology of being such that they ignore power differentiations among humans based on race, gender, sex, class, ethnicity, ability, and nationality. Alexander G. Weheliye has noted that such projects ignore “cultural and political formations outside the world of [Enlightenment] Man that might offer alternative versions of humanity,” and are therefore complicit in promoting the liberal humanist concept of Man-as-universal-subject (10). Similarly, Zakiyyah Eman Jackson argues that posthumanism is indebted to and, therefore, must be considered in relation to the work of anti-colonial scholars such as Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon, and Sylvia Wynter who destabilize and reimagine “the human” and, thus, the entire basis of liberal humanism.

situated lives.<sup>23</sup> While her poetry is expansive, encompassing national, international, global, and interspecies connections, it is also precise in its attention to the particularities and histories of specific ecosystems, beings, and relationships.

Finney's poetry resists and overflows theoretical containment. My reading of *Head Off & Split* is consequently informed by a multitude of dynamic thinkers. To consider Finney's vision of collaborative survival within the context of eco-political precarity,<sup>24</sup> I rely on Tsing's variation on assemblage theory,<sup>25</sup> Haraway's theory of sympoiesis (or making-with), and Berry's reflections on ecological health. I also integrate elements of post-colonial and critical race theory into my discussion to illuminate the racialized and gendered political dimensions of ecological entanglements.

### ***Head Off & Split* as Eco-Political Matter**

At the center of *Head Off & Split* is an urgent and radical eco-political project: the creation of whole, resilient, co-species communities capable of surviving interlocking political, social, and ecological crises. Finney foregrounds the strategic practice of belonging as a method of survival within contexts of systemic oppression and climate chaos. "Belonging," in these terms, is not a "natural" ontological state, but a mode of co-being that is continually (re)created and (re)enacted through daily world-making

---

<sup>23</sup> I use the Donna Haraway's term "situated" to name embedded and embodied forms of knowledge which are inherently informed by one's positionality: "I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity" ("Situated Knowledges" 589).

<sup>24</sup> I use the term "precarity," in the tradition of Anna Tsing and others, to describe vulnerability amid volatile ecological and political conditions that result in unpredictable encounters between beings, matter, and collectivities.

<sup>25</sup> Originally introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (1980), assemblage theory provides a framework for analyzing complex and fluid relationships among biological material as well as social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions. Tsing builds on assemblage theory in connection with collaborative co-species survival amid climate crisis and ecological destruction.

practices: foodways, spatial habitation, migration and movement. Belonging is a collection of reciprocal, adaptive, situated praxes that make and sustain beings and worlds. Practices of belonging rely on and affirm a particular imaginary of wholeness defined by entanglement, relationality, diversity, and complexity to create a sense of contribution to that-which-is-beyond-the-self and the more-than-self. Wholeness, in turn, can only exist when beings and collectives act and interact through practices of belonging. Wholeness and belonging as they emerge in Finney's work are, therefore, mutually dependent and co-creative.

Rooted in specificity—of places, experiences, bodies, relationships, histories, ecosystems—*Head Off & Split* is distinctly marked by Appalachian geography; the sensory stimuli of South Carolina coasts and Kentucky hills materialize from its pages. It likewise responds to the specific eco-political crisis of Hurricane Katrina. But the implications of the collection radiate beyond its particular contexts to bear on collaborative survival and conditions of eco-political precarity more generally.

So-called “natural” disasters reveal systemic inequity, because people with the fewest resources are inevitably most devastated. They are, therefore, fundamentally political and social in their material effects. Hurricane Katrina was no exception. Because poverty in the United States is both racialized and gendered, non-male people of color were disproportionately affected by Katrina. Overwhelmingly, it was poor Black women who were left without food, water, shelter, or medical attention. Even years later, racialized, gendered, and class-based discrimination continued through compound displacement and ineffective relief policies.<sup>26</sup> The Bush administration was criticized for

---

<sup>26</sup> For a full discussion of Hurricane Katrina and the significance of gender, race, and class during disasters, see David and Enarson (2012).

its failure to fund infrastructure projects adequately. Had the levees been properly maintained, residents argued, much of the devastation would have been mitigated. Activists, organizers, scientists, and scholars also called for President Bush to address climate change proactively in order to plan for and relieve the threat of impending disasters. This demand, however, remains largely unanswered fifteen years later.

Throughout *Head Off & Split*, Finney offers searing critique of the Bush administration, referring to the former president as “Mr. Every-Child-Left-Behind,” describing his “plundering mind” and his worship for “heroes [who] smack buckshot on Indians” (“Left” 64; “Plunder” 141, 54). In lines such as these, Finney connects the globalized neoliberal capitalist system, which contributes to dehumanization, dispossession, and displacement in contemporary contexts, with a history of colonialism, slavery, and genocide.

In “Left,” Finney frames the eco-political catastrophe of Katrina within a long history of racialized violence and abandonment:

People who outlived bullwhips & Bull  
Connor, historically afraid of water and routinely  
fed to crocodiles, left in the sun on the sticky tar-  
heat of roofs to roast like pigs, surrounded by  
forty feet of churning water, in the summer  
of 2005 (80-85)

Critiquing the ineffectual response from government as rooted in an institutionalized anti-Blackness that dismisses poor Black people as fundamentally Other, less-than-human, and therefore undeserving of aid, Finney describes a woman who is “left for dead” with a hand-painted sign that reads, “Pleas Help Pleas” (2, 28):

and even if the *e* has been left off the *Pleas e*

do you know simply  
by looking at her  
that it has been left off  
because she can't spell  
(and therefore is not worth saving)  
or was it because the water was rising so fast  
there wasn't time (29-36)

As the above passages evidence, Finney's collection lays bare the scaffolded effects of oppressive power structures. Yet, it is also deeply hopeful in its attention to cyclic processes of nourishment and possibilities for collaborative survival and regeneration. Even amid vivid descriptions of hurricane devastation, Finney remains attuned to the ways that people are capable of persistence:

The roof is surrounded by broken-levee  
water. The people are dark but not broken. Starv-  
ing, abandoned, dehydrated, brown & cumulous,  
but not broken ("Left" 19-22)

The eco-political realities of climate chaos reveal the urgency of justice work, coalition-building, and self-governance as forms of emergency management. Revealing networks of care embedded in and embodying specific ecologies, Finney suggests wholeness and belonging as tools for cultivating collective resilience in the midst of injustice, violence, and destruction.

### Part III: Wholeness

#### Individual and Collective

“Wholeness” connotes ecological health at many interconnected scales. It describes qualities of diversity, adaptability, and relationality as they create capacity for cycles of resilience and regeneration. Finney’s poetry comprehends both individual and collective wholeness as they exist in deeply integrated simultaneity. Indeed, she describes the fundamental work of the poet as striking a balance between the two: the poet’s work, she reflects, is “to write [her]self and beyond [her]self” (“A Conversation”). There is an inherent tension between these concepts, however. Individual wholeness relies on at least some measure of differentiation and containment of the “one.” Collective wholeness, in contrast, depends on re-imagining “oneness” at the scale of community, assemblage, or ecosystem. Finney’s poetry reveals that these states are not mutually exclusive but are rather held in balance by networks of interdependence.

Individual wholeness describes the practice of recognizing the multitudes that one contains. This dimension of wholeness insists on a definition of the self that originates primarily *inside* rather than *outside*, resisting flat identities built in opposition to—and requiring comparison to—dominant norms. Finney imagines something akin to Kevin Quashie’s “oneness,” something more and different than the liberal humanist individual, which depends on particular relationships to social and political institutions and has historically denied personhood to those without social mobility, legal rights, and access to

property.<sup>27</sup> Finney’s vision of individual wholeness is rooted, instead, in recognition and avowal of variety and mutuality among diverse lived experiences.

In “Clitoris,” for instance, Finney claims individual wholeness in opposition to masculinist and white-supremacist imaginaries of sexuality that deny women of color self-centered, self-possessed erotic experience. While these imaginaries formulate the (Black) female body as a commodity to be appropriated and used by a (white) male other, Finney asserts “selffull”<sup>28</sup> body politics:

In some females,

the clitoris stretches,  
unfurls,  
8 in,  
with 2 to 3.5  
in, shaft free,  
outside the body (15-21)

Here, the clitoris metonymically invokes collective female sexuality as something vast and full of potential, but subterranean, buried underneath patriarchal understandings of sexuality. Comparing the clitoris to the entire African continent, Finney reinforces an image of the clitoris as immense, titanic, unbounded, a “continent” itself:

---

<sup>27</sup> Quashie formulates “oneness” as “that quality of existence which is not constrained by the limits of the social world” that “constitutes a sense of being capable of and related to everything” (*The Sovereignty of Quiet* 119-120).

<sup>28</sup> Quashie introduces the concept of “selffulness” in *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory* to name a “radical self-possession” that “repairs the sense of being marginal and outside and small” resulting in “a ravenous, wide-spreading, boundary-less disposition, a subject inclined toward and respectful of the communal” (*Black Women* 40, 42).

New studies show  
the shy curl  
to be longer  
than the penis,  
but like Africa,  
the continent,  
is never drawn  
to size.

Mapmakers, and others, who draw  
important things for living,  
do not want us to know this. (4-14)

Body- and sex-politics that seek to racialize and gender “natural” sexual behavior are tools for control, alienation, subjugation, and colonization. Ultimately, such politics disempower people who claim identities other than straight, class-privileged, white, and male. Similarly, diminishing the size of the African continent on world maps reflects and encourages a diminished estimation of African and African-diasporic history and culture while centering and exaggerating European history and culture; cartography itself is a colonial mechanism.<sup>29</sup>

These themes emerge throughout Finney’s earlier work, as well. In *The World is Round*, for instance, Finney describes the colonial violence of territorialization and appropriation:

---

<sup>29</sup> The world map that many in the U.S. are familiar with is known as the Mercator projection. It was developed in 1569 to facilitate ocean-crossing voyages. Transferring the three-dimensional globe to a flat surface produced gaps in the northern and southern areas of the map. To solve this issue, the creators of the Mercator projection chose to stretch out the north and south poles in order to fill the gaps. This distorted the relative size of the continents, making North America, Europe, and Russia appear disproportionately large and Africa appear disproportionately small. A 2017 article discusses this history and shows the true size of Africa relative to other continents (Morlin-Yron).

pornographic hands  
fascinated with difference  
and the spectacle  
of being a Black woman

.....  
We don't have to be dead first  
to be cut into a manageable size,  
one that fits their measuring rods

.....  
it has always been about  
opening us up,  
experimenting with Black women  
but never dissecting their own desires ("The Greatest Show on Earth" 23-26, 40-43, 46-49)

Individual wholeness represents an alternative to such violence. While it necessarily depends on an ability to recognize oneself by means of differentiation, bounding, and containment, Finney prioritizes modes of identification, recognition, and definition associated with personhood that are rooted in embodiment and lived experience rather than philosophy, legal precedent, or other "measuring rods" of Enlightenment humanism.

The opening prose poem of *Head Off & Split*, "The Resurrection of The Errand Girl: An Introduction," tells the story of a girl who is "sent for dinner fish" by her mother (3). When asked whether she would like her fish "head off and split," she understands that the question translates as, shall I "do away with the watery gray eyes, the impolite razor-sharp fins, the succulent heart, tender roe, delicate sweet bones?" (3). The child answers yes. Forty years later, the woman returns to the market, again to buy fish for her mother. This time, when the fishmonger asks if she would like her fish "head off and split," she refuses: "No. Not this time. This time she wants what she was once sent for left whole, just as it was pulled from the sea, everything born to it still in place" (3). Refusing the offer "head off and split?" requires that the woman engage with the fish in

its embodied totality, as an individually whole being unto itself. Her choice belies the wisdom of lived experience: “Not a girl any longer, she is capable of her own knife-work now. She understands sharpness and duty. She knows what a blade can reveal & destroy. She has come to use life’s points and edges to uncover life’s treasures” (3). The awareness of her own capacity, skill, and choice illustrates the woman’s individual wholeness: “She would rather be the one deciding what she keeps and what she throws away” (3). Alternatively, the state of being head off and split connotes not only physical dissection, but a lack of agency and choice: “I am head off & split It’s no / longer my call” (“Head Off & Split” 148-149).

Imagery of the fish market recurs repeatedly throughout *Head Off & Split*, suggesting a closed loop, something whole. Towards the end of the collection, Finney returns to the market to consider “the cut boys” who work in the fishmonger’s stall (“Liberty Street Seafood” 9). The title poem, “Head Off & Split,” follows. In it, Finney describe a childless woman imagines herself as a pregnant fish:

My giggling pouch of new fat  
Up under my lady parts The long orange sac of bubbly  
roe lumbering for attention Down the aging galley

of me Quivering between my tiny sharp dorsal fins  
Beneath my primary spout This part of me that each  
and every time is conveniently ignored is full today  
Surprise! He does not hesitate The coral bed of my

afterlife is washed into the drain Without comment (163-170)

The woman-as-fish embodies both life and death, futurity and violence. A “fertile feast” who has spent a lifetime “hungering / to be called delicious,” she contains the contradictions inherent in being whole (172-173). She is an ecosystem unto herself.

This poem illustrates that Finney is sensitive to the reality that individual wholeness always exists in relation to, and often in tension with, collective wholeness. There are no “natural” or given boundaries that demarcate the parameters of wholeness. Wholeness is always a matter of perspective, and perspective is always informed by the messiness of embodiment within overlapping eco-political contexts. Collective wholeness describes completion, diversity, and health at the level of the community or assemblage. Finney’s poetry reveals that individual “oneness” cannot exist outside of an ecosystem, the “one” is always subsumed in webs of relationships with Others that make bodies, assemblages, and worlds.<sup>30</sup>

In “The Resurrection of The Errand Girl: An Introduction” Finney expresses collective wholeness by attending to relationships between the woman and the fish, between the woman and her mother, between the woman and the fishmonger, and between the fishmonger and the “Three Black boys” working in his stall (4). These relationships are further framed within a global, multi-species context, suggesting that the wholeness of the web of relationality is planetary:

It is the time of animals on the move: on land, fancy blue lights beep  
quotidian conversations deep into the inner ear of fast-walking humans; on  
thinning ice, polar bears turn cannibal and the last male emperor penguin  
is holding one solitary egg on the quivering slope of his webbed feet. (3)

Such a global-yet-specific vision of wholeness approaches what Haraway has imagined as an “earth-wide network of connections” (*Situated Knowledges* 579). It does not blanket the world in sameness, or universalize that which is specific and situated, but

---

<sup>30</sup> Berry writes of wholeness: “Our bodies are not distinct from the bodies of other people, on which they depend in a complexity of ways from biological to spiritual. They are not distinct from the bodies of plants and animals, with which we are involved in the cycles of feeding and in the intricate companionships of ecological systems and of the spirit...The body cannot be whole alone. Persons cannot be whole alone. (“The Body and the Earth” 335-336)

imagines instead an unbounded and immeasurable relationality that forms connections among those specificities.

### **Assemblages and Scales**

Elaborating on this vision of wholeness throughout the collection, Finney brings together a variety of scales—the momentary, the personal, the communal, the ecological, the global, the cosmic—always careful to emphasize their situatedness and relationality. Finney connects her particular treatment of scale to her discovery of photography. Looking through her uncle’s luggage as a child, she recounts, she found his camera and lenses and learned these mechanics could be applied to poetry: “All of these different lenses were also ways of writing” (“A Conversation”). Indeed, in her closing prose poem, “Instruction, Final: To Brown Poets from Black Girl with Silver Leica,” Finney advises, “Be camera, black-eyed aperture” (97). This photographic sensibility is evident throughout *Head Off & Split*, as Finney’s poetic lens dilates and contracts to capture the vast and the microscopic.

The metaphor of photography makes clear that the processes of framing and focalization necessary to produce a photograph—or a poem—are always situated and embodied. Finney brings attention to her own position of artistic control as the embodied subject from whose perspective these poems emerge. By making her positionality apparent, she decenters and denaturalizes the dominant subjectivities historically conceived as “neutral.” This reflexive attention to perspective, moreover, carries implications beyond poetry for understanding selfhood, ecology, and knowledge production.

At times, Finney represents ecosystems as small as a body-part or a plot of land—a backyard in “Heirloom,” and specific anatomy in “The Clitoris” and “The Aureole.” Intimate ecosystems are inextricably networked with regional, national, and global ones. Finney encourages her reader to radically reconceptualize space as overlapping and entangled assemblages of personal, cultural, and ecological matter. Neither as structurally stable nor as spatially or temporally fixed as communities, assemblages continually shift and regenerate in response to evolving conditions and changing relationships (Tsing). Rather than relying on tropes of place as constant and coherent and space as always-already regionalized and bounded, Finney formulates space as relational, composed by material interactions among individuals and radical multiplicities. Because space is always in the process of being (re)created, it contains many realities and many possibilities for coexistence.<sup>31</sup> Finney’s framework dissolves arbitrary delineations between culture and nature in order to engage messy and ever-changing knots of material and semiotic relationships at various scales and express the inescapability of sympoiesis, the process of making-with.<sup>32</sup>

In “Cattails,” for instance, Finney imagines that interpersonal experiences necessitate physical transformation of the human body into non-human forms, cultivating an imaginary predicated on plants and minerals:

she recalls what you must be  
willing to turn into for love: spiny oyster mushroom, damson, salt

---

<sup>31</sup> Doreen Massey describes projects that re-conceptualize in pursuit of a radical politics: “the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere, therefore, of coexisting heterogeneity... Precisely because space on this reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded in material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; it is never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (9).

<sup>32</sup> Haraway continues, “Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing... *Sympoiesis* is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical, systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company” (*Staying with the Trouble* 58).

marsh, cedar, creosote, new bud of pomegranate, Aegean sage blue sea, fig, blueberry, marigold, leaf fall, frog's eye, dusty miller, thief-of-the-night. (39-43)

Love turns the speaker into a sympoietic assemblage of living, non-living, and once-living things. Not only are individual bodies revealed as always immersed in interdependent assemblages, they *are* interdependent assemblages themselves.<sup>33</sup>

In "Plunder," Texas and America function not only as geographic regions, but as cultural identifiers for people, ideas, and policies. George Bush, for example, is described in relation to his home state of Texas: "He's still very much a Texan," with a "Texas-size laugh" ("Plunder" 81, 122). America, too, delineates a particular ideology and mode of being: "the American public," "how very American" ("Plunder" 7, 17). Finney uses the colloquial *American* to describe being of or related to the United States specifically, bringing into focus the violence done when U.S. identity is constrained to a dominant norm by contrasting this conceived norm with the sweeping landscapes and diverse ecologies of the entire western hemisphere, the *Americas*. The poem concludes with imagery that renders Katrina a disaster simultaneously global and personal:

The 1,836 ghosts of Katrina drilled &  
fought their way through every protective oil well put  
in their path and finally reached the other side of the  
still devastated world. (254-257)

Finney honors the individual wholeness of the dead by giving their specific number and imagining their continued existence after death. The infrastructure of the fossil fuel industry, in contrast, denies the dignity of wholeness on many scales, devastating

---

<sup>33</sup> Finney's figurative depiction of the body-as-assemblage might also be thought of in relation to microbiology. On a cellular level, the vast majority of the human body is made up of normal bacterial flora or indigenous microbiota. In this sense, human bodies are quite literally entire ecosystems unto themselves.

ecological communities, spurring climate chaos, and barring spirits from completing their trajectories.

Finney also addresses temporal scales. In “Segregation, Forever,” she positions a fleeting present within the context of geological and mythic time. The poem opens with a quoted passage from *Fossils: A Guide to Prehistoric Life*, framing the momentary within millennia. Oshun—an African goddess of love, fertility, and water—is described with fingers that are “six-million years long” (10-11). Three young Black boys who play together in the street are compared to “Onychaster, brittle beloved / animal flora, from the Mississippian” and then “the last great mammals to appear, / before the last great rain” (28-29, 31-32). As the speaker bears witness, she ponders the history of the African Diaspora and the early Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., Ida B. Wells, Mardi Gras, and the 1919 Tennessee Valley flood (36, 42, 46). Finally, “Black boy joy” opens into possibility for an emergent “new world phylum” (53, 52). The poem magnifies a seemingly small moment of daily practice and frames it within the expansive scales of past, present, and future life-worlds.

In “The Resurrection of the Errand Girl: An Introduction,” Finney draws further attention to her instrumentalization of scale through double entendre, describing the “three-dollar-an-hour, head-off-and-split-boys” whose Black faces are “speckled with the white sequined scales of fish already beheaded” (4). Here *scales* evoke both the physical detritus of fish bodies and the conceptual framework Finney uses to consider wholeness of various kinds and at various levels. Her careful attention to scales demonstrates that the intimate vibrates within worlds, worlds within the intimate.

## Kinship and Difference

Finney integrates various modes of non-human being into *Head Off & Split*, taking seriously non-human capacity for individual wholeness and the contributions that all manner of earthly co-residents make to the compost of collective wholeness.<sup>34</sup> When characteristics like reason, consciousness, language, culture, technology, and autonomy are used to justify human exceptionalism and thereby categorically separate humans from all other organisms, possibilities for connection, collaboration, survival, and resilience are dangerously limited. Finney's poetry illustrates what Tsing has observed, that "it is unselfconscious privilege that allows us to fantasize—counterfactually—that we each survive alone" (29). In Finney's ecological vision of multispecies co-existence, humans and non-humans relate to one another through complex webs of connection, sometimes resembling each other, such that the contemplation of one can often offer insight into another.

This kind of cross-species recognition is evoked in "Penguin, Mullet, Bread" in which a human mother is described in reference to a penguin mother:

...Fed by  
the mother who relishes the story of turning her back & leaving me,  
  
once, to swim off a thousand miles,  
find food,  
fight off shimmering shark,  
then swim a thousand miles back,  
just to drop her beak into mine. (72-77)

Although the experiences of mothering and being mothered are understood through animal embodiment, the latter is not reduced to a symbol. Instead, lived experience

---

<sup>34</sup> Haraway writes that organisms "require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not no-place, entangled and worldly" (*Staying with the Trouble* 4).

affirms non-human affective consciousness without assuming sameness. The behavior of the penguin mother contextualizes and illuminates that of the human mother without promoting a flat ontology of experience and existence.

In “Clitoris,” Finney troubles anthropocentric assumptions about sexual pleasure. She writes, “The longest clitoris of record / has been found in the blue whale” (22-23). By locating the largest clitoris in the body of a non-human being, Finney resists the normative politics of anatomy that inform not only gendered and racialized but also species-based theories of sexuality. Importantly, though, Finney does not suppose or even imagine what an erotic experience for a whale might be like, thereby avoiding a false sense of empathy based on projections of the human self onto the animal Other. Instead, she combines provocative biological data with figurative final lines:

In water  
desire can rise,  
honor sea levels,  
ignore land-locked  
cartographers.

In water,  
desire refuses to retreat. (24-30)

In lines like these, Finney creates a sense of radical curiosity<sup>35</sup> about non-human bodies and the possibilities they suggest for alternative and diverse modes of being that might aid in the creation of multispecies life-worlds amid neoliberal capitalist destruction.

In “Resurrection of the Errand Girl: An Introduction,” Finney considers environmental degradation and anti-Blackness as related and reinforcing systems which trouble traditionally accepted distinctions between human and animal other: “In the oil

---

<sup>35</sup> Haraway and Tsing discuss the eco-political exigency of developing a radical curiosity about the more-than-human world (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 37; Tsing 6).

drenched Gulf a flotilla of grandfather sea turtles—shell down, feet up. On hurricane soaked rooftops Black people have been abandoned—again” (3). Both human and non-human beings suffer within the context of climate chaos, but Finney does not equate their suffering. The image of dead sea turtles introduces the image of Black humans on rooftops, suggesting the eco-political entanglement of distinct embodied experiences. The proximity of these experiences on the page suggests the possibility of mutuality across difference. Furthermore, the image of shimmering fish scales on the dark skin of the cut boys reinforces collaborative material and semiotic entanglement between humans with non-human animals.

Finney encourages affective recognition and connection between human and non-human beings, acknowledging more-than-human participation in interdependent eco-political networks and sympoietic world-making. At the same time, she also exposes the paradoxical limits of sympathy within anti-Black contexts. Environmentalist movements in the U.S., for example, often cultivate deep sympathy for the more-than-human world. Yet many of these movements largely avoid engaging and connecting with Black human beings.<sup>36</sup> Recognizing that environmental justice cannot be separated from social justice, Finney prioritizes oppression within a broader multispecies context of environmental precarity.

Finney’s assertion of cross-species kinship is particularly laden given the long history in the U.S. of equating Blackness and animality to justify slavery, subjugation, abuse, imprisonment, and murder. The intersections of racialization and animalization as

---

<sup>36</sup> Carolyn Finney describes the deep-rooted mistrust of environmental organizations and movements among Black communities based on a history of exclusionary practices that encourage primarily white membership and assume that white experiences of “nature” are universally normative (*Black Faces, White Spaces* 102-110, 33).

modes of oppression are fraught with ethical questions.<sup>37</sup> In this context, Finney honors multi-species kinship networks *and* foregrounds social dimensions of race, gender, sex, and class that frame differences among human experience, sensitive to what Haraway has noted, that “we are all responsible to and for shaping conditions for multispecies flourishing in the face of terrible histories, but not in the same ways. The differences matter—in ecologies, economies, species, lives” (*Staying with the Trouble* 116).

Finney’s Condoleezza Rice poems arise out of similar consideration of the difference between lived human experiences. She reflects that she was drawn to Rice as a subject because of the nuances of sameness and difference she recognized between their personal contexts: “We were both southern Black girls whose individual lives were shaped mightily by the 1950’s and 60’s Civil Rights legislation. I wanted to know more about our similarities and our differences, so I started scribbling” (“Interview”). Finney engages in similar contemplations in earlier work. In “The Girlfriend’s Train,” a poem from *The World is Round*, for instance, she considers communication between women who inhabit vastly different positionalities. Finney describes an encounter with a woman who demands “*How do you do that? / Write like you never been hit before?*” (34-35). Speaking as a representative for survivors of physical violence, the woman continues, “*we were just wondering / how you made it through / and we didn’t*” (58-60). In response to stark disparities in experience, Finney highlights the necessary process of “measuring out [the] differences” in order to reach a place of recognition and mutuality (75). A framework of wholeness involves the implicit danger of considering totalities, such as *the*

---

<sup>37</sup> Bénédicte Boisseron’s *Afro-Dog* (2018) contextualizes recent debates in human-animal studies within the context of critical race studies. She provides an insightful analysis of the relationship between race and animality in the Americas and the trans-Atlantic world and exposes key comparisons and oppositions that have been instrumentalized to attach fundamental value, or lack thereof, to both Black and animal life.

world and *the* human, which can lead to false universalization. Finney, though, carefully avoids the dangers of both totalization and compartmentalization by paying close attention to nuance and difference within the uneven terrain of lived experiences and the diverse eco-political realities which always situate them. She articulates the vital practice of acknowledging and investigating difference in order to reach a place of mutuality.

## PART IV: Belonging

### Belonging as Sympoietic Praxis

Throughout *Head Off & Split*, daily practices and interactions have real, world-making potential. Practices of belonging transform and create beings, assemblages, and ecologies and act as the connective tissue between them and place. Place, furthermore, is not just topography and landmarks, but defined also by the individual and collective practices of its inhabitants.<sup>38</sup> Though often focalized through a human perspective, belonging depends on interaction among human and non-human beings in more-than-human contexts. Belonging, therefore, requires place-attachment as it is collaboratively constructed through interpersonal and interspecies relationships. Berry writes that this kind of place-attachment is not “‘given’ or unconscious or automatic but involve[s] disciplines...that must be deliberately made, remembered, taught, learned, and practiced” (“Standing by Words” 555-556). Everyday rituals and practices of belonging cultivate place-attachment by sustaining more-than-human kinship networks and promoting reciprocity among individuals, collectives, and communities.<sup>39</sup> Finney accentuates the processual and relational character of belonging; it is not an ontological state founded on static origins or essentialized identities, but a matter of ongoing, situated sympoiesis.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Berry writes that “the world” is “the sum of the changes made by all various creatures and natural forces in their intricate actions and influences upon each other and upon their places. Because of the woodpeckers, nature is different from what it would be without them. It is different also because of the borers and ants that live in the tree trunks, and because of the bacteria that live in the soil under the trees. The making of these differences is the making of the world” (“Getting Along with Nature” 587-588).

<sup>39</sup> Tsing writes, “world-making projects emerge from practical activities of making lives; in the process these projects alter our planet” (21-22).

<sup>40</sup> Sylvia Wynter’s human-as-praxis theory provides critical foundations for this formulation of belonging. Wynter argues that the Western “monohumanist” model of *the* human that treats “European man” or “Man” as the normative measure for all of humanity is only one “genre” among many (“Unsettling Coloniality”). Man, she continues, has nevertheless come to overrepresent itself to such an extent that it proposes to be “the *natural scientific model* of a *natural* organism” which “preexists—rather than *coexists* with—all the models of other human societies and their religions/cultures” (“Unparalleled Catastrophe” 21). In opposition to this false universalism, Wynter calls for a reimagining of what it means to be human and a

Finney's poetry attends specifically and repeatedly to the following sympoietic practices of belonging: foodways, habitation, and migration. What follows is a treatment of each as they contribute to survival and resilience.

### **Belonging Through Foodways**

Finney often contemplates practices associated with local foodways. She illuminates that eating is fundamentally communal; it nurtures a consciousness of our dependence on and connection to interlocking lives and worlds.<sup>41</sup> The processes of food consumption are also political, because they affect and react to larger systems; local food economies depend on and propel the economic and social structures they are embedded in. Furthermore, the practices that characterize foodways—growing, preparing, cooking, eating—are often developed through repetition into ritual and passed from one generation to the next. A careful treatment of foodways, therefore, reveals biological interdependence among beings and bodies, as well as collaborative cultural production.

In "Resurrection of the Errand Girl: An Introduction," Finney attends to patterns of learned behavior associated with local food economies and ecologies. The fishmonger, for instance, "echoes the words he heard as a boy from his father" and the woman's parents are described as "the two who made her" (3). Even the fishmonger's "inherited bone-handled whale knife" evokes generational continuity and tradition, as an artifact that is kept, cherished, and passed on (4). Finney, thus, establishes the rituals of the fish market as constitutive of place itself: "Friday. Fish. Tradition old as the South itself" (3).

---

reconfiguration of humanist principles based on the decolonizing work of Franz Fanon and Aimé Césaire: "Humanness," she writes "is no longer a *noun*. *Being human is a praxis*" ("Unparalleled Catastrophe" 23).

<sup>41</sup> Berry writes that eating "is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection to the world" ("The Pleasures of Eating" 709).

The woman, furthermore, claims responsibility for her role in the food economy rather than outsourcing the labor associated with consumption. Acting out of a sense of “duty,” the woman knowingly engages in the complex worldly relationship between eater and eaten, she performs her own knifework (3). The woman’s choice is, thus, not merely a personal preference, nor only an act rooted in individual wholeness, but a political and act of belonging rooted in ecological intelligence, the awareness of herself as part of various ecosystems.<sup>42</sup>

Reflecting on this particular poem, Finney describes an early memory of her grandmother<sup>43</sup> killing and butchering a chicken. Until witnessing this, she had known her grandmother to raise and care for chickens and had also watched as she prepared and cooked chicken meat. Seeing her grandmother wring a chicken’s neck, however, taught Finney that nourishment often requires violence, that human and non-human worlds are bound together, that the more-than-human world is created and changed by the actions and non-actions of all. Here is the seed for Finney’s theory of wholeness. So often, people avoid the pain that comes from truly engaging with the effects of their decisions, paying for other people to, as Finney says, “do the dirty work,” whether it’s “cleaning the fish” or “cleaning up the asbestos” (“A Conversation”). For Finney, to be simultaneously

---

<sup>42</sup>According to Berry, ecological intelligence involves conceiving the world as a “system of nested systems...the individual human within the family within the community within agriculture within nature...So long as the smaller systems are enclosed within the larger, and so long as all are connected by complex patterns of interdependency, as we know they are, then whatever affects one system will affect the others” (“Standing By Words” 555).

<sup>43</sup>Finney recalls, “my grandmother was a huge influence. She was a farming woman, a woman who grew things with her hands—a woman who could look at the sky and tell you how the day was going to go—deeply rooted in human connectedness to geography and landscape...I was the oldest granddaughter, and she and I were incredibly close. So many of my own sensibilities—being a human being, being alive, what matters in the world, cycles of life and death—all those things come from my grandmother, who could walk into the woods and tell you what leaf would make a good tea and what leaf to avoid forever” (“Say Hard Things Tender”).

whole and part of the whole—to belong—involves choosing to perform one’s own dirty work, being mindful of one’s actions and their ramifications upon self and ecosystem, and attempting to act ethically from this kind of un-innocent ecological awareness.

In “Negroes with Guns,” Finney emphasizes the materiality of a specific and situated food culture: “brown hands covered in twice sifted / paprika and goose flour,” the “red cake bowl,” “fatty chicken thighs,” “fresh garlic,” “milk butter,” “greens,” and “cornbread poured on a hot griddle” (60-61, 79, 85, 86, 87, 103). In this poem, a woman works in her kitchen with the ease of embodied knowledge and muscle memory. She has performed these tasks many times in the same way. The food in this poem is so integrated with daily practices of being, it becomes constitutive of people’s bodies. Finney imagines the “brown taffy baby” and the “dark dark / gingerbread of [the woman’s] face” (15, 67-68). These metaphorical crossings expose the transformative potential of consumption as both physical and political process. Similarly, in “Penguin, Mullet, Bread” Finney describes a mother who “cooks like a woman who can taste / any flavor in the world” (21-22). The woman pre-masticates fish for her baby to eat, and the child’s “eyes / grow big from what she tastes” (21-22, 13-14). In this encounter, the child learns not only what and how to eat, but how to *enjoy* eating as a fundamental practice of belonging.

Eating enacts mutualism between individual organisms and their encompassing ecosystems. Local foodways nourish and sustain survival at the scale of the “one” and coalesce to form collective food economies and ecologies. As such, foodways offer a multitude of access points and intersections at which one might affect interlocking networks and participate in the creation of whole, resilient, and just local food systems.

## Belonging through Habitation

Finney accentuates the importance of made spaces in the emotional cartography of home; to enact belonging requires material dwelling places. While shelter is a basic necessity for survival, what characterizes adequate shelter is situated within specific assemblages. In “Dancing with Strom,” Finney describes situated homemaking as “the native necessity of nailing down / a place” (159-160). Homemaking is a culturally- and geographically-specific practice that reflects the experience of the maker, as Finney expresses through her reflections on particular homes, inhabitants, and builders: “the architect Black the builder of every house in view Black / and bare-handed” (39-40).

Finney contemplates the porch as a symbol of belonging through habitation. She writes, “Enslaved Africans gifted porches to North / America. Once off the boats they were told, / then made, to build themselves a place—to live” (48-50). Porches exist as physical representations of collaborative survival amid precarity: “They build the house that will keep them alive” (51). They are also reminders of the myth that temporal distance erases or mitigates realities of the past. Many porches in the South were constructed by slaves, many endured throughout Reconstruction and Jim Crow, and many still stand to witness contemporary iterations of anti-Blackness—police brutality, mass incarceration, gentrification, displacement, and the systemic proliferation of debt and poverty. As Finney articulates in *The World is Round*,

After slavery there were other chains.  
The South still rounded up Black men

who wouldn't look the other way,  
drop eyes or chin,

pass or step aside (“The Running of the Bulls” 1-6)

Finney further describes one porch in particular and her experience of sharing it with Strom, the “Dixiecrat senator,” “the face of hatred” (85, 90). A wedding brings the two together. Because porches are places of community, domestic comfort, and relaxation, they demonstrate how systems of oppression and systems of survival coexist. This coexistence is represented clearly by the epigraphs which introduce the poem. The first is from Strom Thurmond (1948): “I want to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, there’s not enough troops in the army to force the southern people to break down segregation and accept the Negro [pronounced Nigra] into our theaters, into our swimming pools, into our homes, and into our churches.” The second is from Civil Rights leader, Modjeska Monteith Simkins (1948): “I said, ‘I’m gonna fight Thurmond from the mountain to the sea.’” The tension they create exists wholly and unequivocally, spatially bound by “the power of a porch” (158).

Finney elaborates on these themes in “My Time Up With You.” On “*A rickety porch, somewhere in east Texas*,” Mayree Monroe announces: “*Ain’t goin nowhere. Ain’t moving. Not from this house*” (1, 5). Her house embodies stability and continuity, her ability to remain. She patiently lists each hurricane that it—and she—has endured, adding, “*I have paid off this house three times over what anybody / else ever would have paid*” (128-129). Her home, the actual physical structure of it, becomes constitutive of her identity. When she gives her name, she lists her address; when she gives the names of her foremothers, she lists their addresses, too:

*This Mayree Monroe,  
of 621 Oakland Avenue, daughter of Ester Brown,  
of 18 Clementine Road, granddaughter of Mary One,  
of Route 4, Box 318. I will be here ‘til the end. (144-147)*

Mayree's refusal to leave her home is testament to the reciprocal commitment she has established with place and community through practices of belonging despite a history of systemic anti-Blackness:

*Lily of my Valley* "odds aren't the best" they say. Did you  
hear 'em talkin' to me that way?

Dropping her voice down to a whisper, she stands like a  
Black beam against the wind, both arms akimbo.

*Well odds aren't never been the best*  
*for Mayree Monroe and her kind.* (128-139)

In these lines, Finney expresses the complex matrix of feelings attached to the cultivation of belonging through homemaking when the meaning of *home* carries histories of violence, structural inequality, and racialized oppression. She is acutely aware that concepts of home and homeland have been utilized for sinister purposes of invasion, colonization, and genocide. At the same time, Finney celebrates the richness and resilience of eco-political assemblages that create possibility for livable shared worlds, for homes, recognizing that *home* itself is an ecological concept. Practices of belonging construct and maintain spaces in which human and non-human beings can live fully and well; they make the world itself and make it livable, too.

### **Belonging Through Movement**

Belonging, however, does not demand staying forever in one place. In "Men Who Give Milk I," for instance, Finney describes a man whose "whole / world is on the move" (13-14). Despite his transience, he continually enacts belonging through choreographed migration patterns that give him access to memories of familial kinship networks and "stich" him "to the earth" (70).

Throughout the collection, Finney often contemplates cycles of leaving (differentiation) and returning (reincorporation). The title poem, "Head Off & Split,"

recounts the story of a daughter who is leaving her parents and childhood home for “the 803<sup>rd</sup> time” (120). Finney compares the process of cleaning and butchering a fish to the woman’s experience:

Each time the  
leaving hardens the soft tissue of my birth This time  
he says He will only take the head and the pearl green  
eyes Next time he says The lungs The heart sac  
The liver Will all have to go along What can you do  
in this life without the parts you need (121-126)

The body parts of the fish become talismans of home, denoting history, culture, and kinship. With each leaving, the woman fears that she will lose these necessary parts of herself, becoming less and less bound to her people and place. At the same time, communal rituals of belonging are constructed around the very act of her leaving:

everyone gathered for the morning goodbye  
smells of fried fish and grits sacred Sunday morning goodbye  
food made especially for only daughters who have perfected  
the art of leaving (46-49)

The family continues to enact belonging despite the daughter’s mobility, revealing possibilities for sympoietic connection that depend on migration.

Migratory movement, moreover, requires familiarity with specific places and ecologies. To travel into, within, and through places requires embodied memory and local knowledge. Movement is facilitated by connections to other persons, organisms, and assemblages, relational because space itself is relational. In “Cattails,” a woman journeys repeatedly across five states to see her lover. In “Negroes with Guns,” a couple retraces a practiced path among well-known landmarks “into the old old woods,” as they have done for fifteen years: “the wind behind the house, past the prayer trees. / Beyond the woods, back back of the shed, / into the hush hush air” (10, 3-5). In these lines, the

repetition of single words mimics the repetition of the ritualized walk, emphasizing its recurrence as a practice.

Finney is mindful, too, that one's degree of mobility reflects situated dimensions of power and privilege—the ability to move from place to place is not a universal given, but is often restricted based on gender, sex, race, nationality, class, ability, and access. In “Negroes with Guns,” for instance, Finney references “the black code days” when “prayer and camp meeting / rose like jasmine vine” in the “backwoods,” describing a woman who “cannot swim, fly, leave land, / with ease” (8, 6-7, 46-47, 38-39). In such contexts, the ways in which people move through space are even more indicative of belonging, because safe passage requires deeper and denser networks of local knowledge and relationality.

### **Belonging as Survival and Resistance**

Finney's model of strategic belonging emerges as a useful tool for on-going eco-political projects of collaborative survival, resilience, and resistance. Through practices of belonging, beings connect with other beings within integrated ecological assemblages in pursuit of mutuality, wholeness, resilience, and survival. In “Instruction, Final: To Brown Poets from Black Girl with Silver Leica,” Finney directs, “Be diamondback terrapin, the only animal that can outrun a hurricane” (97). This provocative image suggests that to outrun a hurricane means to outlast it, to remain, to continue in the midst of disaster. The terrapin embodies both homemaking and migration as practices of belonging that contribute to strategic adaptability. Its shell evokes shelter, home, and stasis. Indigenous to the southeastern United States, the diamondback terrapin is the only species of turtle that inhabits the salty, brackish water of tidal marshes. Its life cycle,

however, involves a pattern of migration between land and sea. So, even though it has adapted to a very particular ecosystem, the terrapin is able to move between environments within that ecosystem. Finney reinforces adaptability as a mode of survival that can be cultivated through sympoietic practices of belonging.<sup>44</sup>

In the context of neoliberal capitalism, survival itself is often considered a form of resistance. Finney reveals, however, that belonging can also facilitate overt, active forms of eco-political resistance. In “My Time Up With You,” for example, Mayree Monroe practices belonging in order to resist displacement and claim her right to inhabit and regulate her own body and homeplace. Similarly, in “Red Velvet,” Finney imagines Rosa Parks’s famous act of civil disobedience as one of strategic belonging. Like Mayree Monroe, Parks practices belonging to claim individual wholeness despite institutionalized anti-Black discrimination:

She had grown up in a place:  
where only white people had power,  
where only white people passed good jobs on  
to other white people,  
where only white people loaned money  
to other white people,  
where only white people were considered human  
by other white people (18-25)

The wisdom of lived experience prepares Parks for “the heavy work of resistance” (46). Finney establishes this by attention to her age: “She was not a child. She was in her forties” (15). Finney further describes Parks in terms of her work and her skill, repeatedly designating her as “a seamstress” and a woman “who knows her way around velvet” (16, 103; 108, 32-33). Parks demonstrates individual wholeness as a woman who “believes

---

<sup>44</sup> As Tsing articulates, “changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival” (27).

she is worthy of every / thing possible,” but her practices of belonging also contribute to collective wholeness (115-116). Finney imagines Parks as part of a more-than-human assemblage, effective because of her engagement with the more-than-human world and her ability to make use of the tools available to her: she has “the help of all things, needle sharp, / silver, dedicated, electric” (123-124). Ultimately, Parks’s resistance work is made possible by her connection to others—she is a member of a coalition who “can pull cloth and others / her way, through the tiny openings she and others / before her have made” (124-126). Finney specifically names Mary Louise Smith and Claudette Colvin who preceded and followed Parks’s demonstration in allied resistance to accentuate the potential in individual practices of belonging to accrete toward collective movements and, therefore, represent a viable strategy for eco-political activism and resistance (37-39).

## CONCLUSION

### Implications for Eco-Political Poetics and Ethics

An eco-political reading of *Head Off & Split* bears vital implications for the development of an eco-political poetics and ethics based on wholeness and belonging. First, the collection demonstrates that poetry itself is useful. In “The Occasional Poet,” Finney reflects on her fundamental desire to be of use:

I remember wanting to be useful and not just a little girl with her pencils writing for herself. My community was filled with so many useful Black people who did things with their hands. Mr. Neal built our houses, Dr. Deas was our pharmacist. I would watch him behind his counter in his white jacket mixing our medicines sometimes. Mr. Brown was our electrician. He rewired our houses with a pencil on his ear. Mrs. Robinson was our great seamstress. I wanted to be useful too. I wanted to make something with my hands. When I started telling people around me that I was a poet they started requesting poetry from me. Mrs. Dicks was turning 90 and needed a poem. Emmanuel Church was turning 125 and needed a poem. Mrs. Bethune's portrait was going up in the old high school—Could you write us a poem please? This early novice poet-work had less to do with inspiration and more to do with wanting to offer something, made with my own two hands, to the people I cherished. It had to do with wanting poetry to be seen as useful—useful as a roof or coat.

As Finney intuited as a young poet, writing takes place within ecological and political systems and has material effects upon those systems, rendering it an eco-political practice. Poetry itself, furthermore, has the capacity to function as worldly matter within specific eco-political contexts. Built on foundations of honest, accurate representations of real beings, places, and the relationships among them, Finney's work is rooted in her particular sense of community and works to nourish and grow the connections that sustain it.

Second, an eco-political perspective sheds light on the fact that all literature, and all knowledge, is situated within interlocking ecological and political dimensions, race and region among them. Because the situatedness of dominant positionalities has been historically rendered invisible, though, the contexts of work emerging from those positionalities is often ignored—the poetry of class-privileged white men is rarely distinguished as such. Meanwhile, work that materializes from non-dominant positionalities is often identified and considered primarily in terms of identity; bookstores often have separate shelves for “minority” literatures. Finney’s work illustrates that, although situatedness embeds, grounds, and generates literatures, it should not be weaponized to compartmentalize, limit, or diminish work that emerges from marginalized positions. Rather, critics must learn to see and articulate the situatedness of dominant positionalities as clearly as they do non-dominant ones. “I will not be minimized or downsized or slipped into easy categories” Finney says, “I am a Black woman writer who is free to write about the entire world” (“Interview” 2019).

Finney reveals entanglement between organisms, assemblages, and ecosystems, indicating that there truly are no neutral encounters. Amid histories of oppression and ongoing injustice, it is easy to become paralyzed by such knowledge. Resorting to apathy and the illusion of non-action, though, is not a viable ethical position; even non-actions have non-neutral material effects. Rather than succumbing to cynicism founded on supposed inevitability of systemic oppression, however, Finney remains deeply and radically hopeful. She writes from a place of possibility and transformation to actively participate in the creation of potential shared worlds. For Finney, there is a practical means of affecting change within tangled matrices of power—through situated,

sympoietic practices of belonging that cultivate personal relationships and contribute to the collective health and wholeness of eco-political assemblages. Collective action and coalition-building at the local scale, in this framework, is capable of affecting networks of relationships that expand ever outward.

Building healthy and effective coalitions, however, is neither a simple nor consistent endeavor. In the tradition of Audre Lorde, Finney realizes that strong coalitions depend on mutuality across difference, not the erasure of difference.<sup>45</sup> Failure to acknowledge, articulate, and collaborate across difference leads inevitably to an isolated and vulnerable position rooted in fear, guilt, and denial, that is destined to reinforce and universalize dominant subjectivities.<sup>46</sup> The first step in the process of coalition-building, therefore, is to explore and take responsibility for one's own privilege and power.<sup>47</sup> As Finney warns, we must be "careful to the very end what [we] deny, dismiss, & cut away" ("Instruction, Final: To Brown Poets from Black Girl with Silver Leica" 97). Powerful coalitions are, thus, rooted in ecological intelligence, reciprocity, and sympoiesis.

---

<sup>45</sup> Demanding a culture of mutuality that acknowledges non-dominant difference in order to build effective coalitions, Lorde writes in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," "Without community there is no liberation...But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist" (112). In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," she continues, "Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections. Either way, we do not develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives" (115-116).

<sup>46</sup> hooks discusses mutualism in the context of Affrilachia, "It requires an ethic of relational reciprocity, one that is anti-domination. With reciprocity all things do not need to be equal in order for acceptance and mutuality to thrive. If equality is evoked as the only standard by which it is deemed acceptable for people to meet across boundaries and create community, then there is little hope. Fortunately, mutuality is a more constructive and positive foundation for the building of ties that allow for differences in status, position, power, and privilege whether determined by race, class, sexuality, religion, or nationality" (87).

<sup>47</sup> Haraway describes this kind of self-awareness as facilitating one's ability "to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another" and to "partially to translate knowledges among very different—and power-differentiated—communities" ("Situated Knowledges" 586, 579).

Finney's collection reinforces that, in the context of a failed and dysfunctional state, citizens must care for one another and their local ecologies through creative forms of grassroots self-governance.<sup>48</sup> Such projects are revealed as even more urgent during periods of crisis. I write in the spring of 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like Hurricane Katrina, the current public health crisis has exposed the social and ecological precarity of globalized neoliberal capitalism. The pandemic has disrupted global supply chains, and, in the U.S., the fundamental inadequacies of a privatized healthcare system have been made tragically apparent. Like all disasters, COVID-19 disproportionately affects poor people and people of color as a result of underlying structural inequities.<sup>49</sup> Crises reinforce that survival depends on cultivating resilience across scales by prioritizing collective well-being over corporate profit. Grass-roots coalition-building and self-governance efforts, therefore, become critically necessary as means of providing care, resources, and advocacy within specific communities. Organizing for social justice becomes emergency management, and it depends on the exchange of local knowledges that emerge out of daily practices and lived experiences.

Finney's poetry offers ways for thinking about the complex project we are now called to undertake—to continue to belong to each other and our places in pursuit of

---

<sup>48</sup> There are many ways that state and federal governments could improve people's lives while prioritizing ecological biodiversity. For example, by taxing profits from environmentally destructive industries, investing in public education, expanding access to health care and affordable housing, preserving open space, and encouraging community land ownership. In the absence of such policy efforts, however, it falls to citizens to organize in pursuit of social justice.

<sup>49</sup> There are higher rates of fatality among people with underlying health conditions, and this translates into a high percentage of deaths among people with less class privilege and people of color due to disparities in access to and quality of healthcare. Furthermore, people in these groups are less likely to be able to practice prescribed social distancing measures because they are more likely to be essential workers without the economic means necessary to stay home; these populations are also more likely to utilize public transportation to get to those essential jobs. See supporting statistics from the Center for Disease Control.

collective wholeness in the context of layered eco-political crises.<sup>50</sup> She encourages readers to consider what it means to truly listen and learn from a place of radical curiosity, to speak *with* rather than *for*, to advocate without appropriation, to knowingly and purposefully participate in the sympoietic practices of belonging, and to cultivate mutualism across difference. I will leave the last word to Finney, as a meditation on how one might begin: “Be gentle but firm with yourself. Be willing to say the hard thing but also willing to admit that you are not the expert, just a voice wanting to come out of the wilderness” (“Say Hard Things Tender”).

---

<sup>50</sup> Haraway describes the eco-political work at hand this way: “to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present...to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places” (*Staying with the Trouble* 1).

## Works Cited

- Bashir, Samiya. "The World Is Round." *Black Issues Book Review*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2003, p. 28.
- Berry, Wendell. "Getting Along with Nature." *Wendell Berry: Essays 1969-1990*. The Library of America, 2019, pp. 587-599.
- . "Standing by Words." *Wendell Berry: Essays 1969-1990*, pp. 535-570.
- . "The Body and the Earth." *Wendell Berry: Essays 1969-1990*, pp. 329-375
- . "The Pleasures of Eating." *Wendell Berry: Essays 1969-1990*, pp. 703-709.
- Boisseron, Bénédicte. *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question*. Columbia University Press, 2018.
- Brashear, Ivy. "The Lies We're Told About Appalachia." *Yes! Magazine*, 12 Nov. 2019, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/building-bridges/2019/11/12/the-lies-were-told-about-appalachia>. Accessed 12 Feb. 2020.
- Center for Disease Control. "Preliminary Estimates of the Prevalence of Selected Underlying Health Conditions Among Patients with Coronavirus Disease 2019—United States, February 12-March 28, 2020." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 3 April 2020, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6913e2external> icon.
- David, Emmanuel and Elaine Pitt Enarson. *The Women of Katrina: How Gender, Race, and Class Matter in an American Disaster*. Vanderbilt University Press, 2012.
- Dawes, Kwame. "Reading Rice: A Local Habitation and a Name." *African American Review*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1997, pp. 269-279.
- Finney, Carolyn. *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*. University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

- Finney, Nikky. "A Conversation with Nikky Finney." By Hastings Hensel, *Youtube*, 7 May 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7yfd24FTPc>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2020.
- . "About Nikky." *Nikky Finney*. 2020. <https://nikkyfinney.net/about.html>.
- . "Cattails." *Head Off & Split*. Northwestern University Press, 2011, pp. 50-51.
- . "The Clitoris." *Head Off & Split*, p. 56.
- . "Dancing with Strom." *Head Off & Split*, pp. 63-68.
- . "Head Off & Split." *Head Off & Split*, pp. 88-94.
- . *Heartwood*. University of Kentucky Press, 1997.
- . "Heirloom." *Head Off & Split*, p. 52.
- . "Instruction, Final: To Brown Poets from Black Girl with Silver Leica." *Head Off & Split*, p. 97.
- . "Interview: Nikky Finney." By Aaron Delee, Dan Fliegel, Dane Hamann, Anthony Opal, and C. Russell Price, *Jet Fuel Review*, 2019, <https://www.jetfuelreview.com/interview-nikky-finney.html>.
- . "Interview with Nikky Finney: Say Hard Things Tender." By Christian McEwan, *Teachers & Writers Magazine*, 5 Oct. 2015, <https://teachersandwritersmagazine.org/say-hard-things-tender-1898.htm>.
- . "My Time Up With You." *Head Off & Split*, pp. 17-22.
- . "Liberty Street Seafood." *Head Off & Split*, pp. 85-87.
- . "Negroes with Guns." *Head Off & Split*, pp. 72-75.
- . *On Wings Made of Gauze*. Quill, 1985.
- . "Plunder." *Head Off & Split*, pp. 23-32.

- . "Resurrection of the Errand Girl: An Introduction." *Head Off & Split*, pp. 3-4.
- . *Rice*. Sister Vision, Black Women and Women of Color Press, 1995.
- . "The Aureole." *Head Off & Split*, pp.46-47.
- . "The Occasional Poet: An Interview with Nikky Finney." By Scalawag, *Scalawag*, 7 Jan. 2019, <https://www.scalawagmagazine.org/2019/01/qa-nikky-finney/>.
- . *The World is Round*. InnerLight Publishing, 2003.
- Frost, William Goodell. "Our Contemporary Ancestors in The Southern Mountains." *Appalachian Heritage*, vol. 4, no. 4, reprinted 1976, pp. 70-80.
- Gildersleeve, Britton. "Finney's Poetry Fuses the Personal, Political." *Tulsa World*, 16 Oct. 2011, [https://www.tulsaworld.com/archive/finney-s-poetry-fuses-the-personal-political/article\\_8630b041-6013-5f47-af8e-c44a500171ff.html](https://www.tulsaworld.com/archive/finney-s-poetry-fuses-the-personal-political/article_8630b041-6013-5f47-af8e-c44a500171ff.html).
- Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575-599.
- . *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Hayden, Wilburn. "Appalachian Diversity: African-American, Hispanic/Latino, and Other Populations." *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2004, pp. 293-306.
- hooks, bell. *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. Routledge, 2009.
- Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. "Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2013, pp. 669-685.

- Jones, Bradley. “(Com)Post-Capitalism: Cultivating a More-than-Human Economy in the Appalachian Anthropocene.” *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2019, pp. 3-26.
- Kraver, Jeraldine. “‘Mobile Images’: Myth and Resistance in Nikky Finney’s *Rice*.” *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2002, pp. 134-147.
- Lansana, Quraysh Ali. “Soul in Them There Hills.” *Black Issues Book Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, Mar. 2001, pp. 50-51.
- Leopold, Aldo. *Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*. Oxford University Press, 1949.
- Lorde, Audre. “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Crossing Press, 2007, pp. 114-123.
- . “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, pp.110-113.
- Loucks, C. et al. “Appalachian-Blue Ridge Forests.” *World Wildlife Fund*, <https://www.worldwildlife.org/ecoregions/na0403>. Accessed 21 Mar. 2020.
- Massey, Doreen B. *For Space*. SAGE Publications, 2005.
- McElroy, Colleen J. “What’s Out There?” *Women’s Review of Books*, vol. 29, no. 1, Jan. 2012, pp. 24-26.
- Morgan, Shauna M. “25 Years of Revolutionary Art: Cultural Cartography and the Expanding Landscape of Affrilachian Poetics.” *Black Bone: 25 Years of the Affrilachian Poets*. Wax and Wane Media, 2017, pp. 13-16.

- Morlin-Yron, Sophie. "Why Do Western Maps Shrink Africa?" *CNN*. 23 March 2017.  
<https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/18/africa/real-size-of-africa/index.html>. Accessed  
 11 Feb. 2020.
- Muir, Charlotte. "Biodiversity of the Southern Appalachians." *Highlands Biological  
 Station*. <https://highlandsbiological.org/biodiversity-of-the-southern-appalachians>.
- Naess, Arne. "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A  
 Summary." *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*. North  
 Atlantic Books, 1995, pp. 3-7.
- Opala, Joseph A. "The Gullah: Rice, Slavery, and the Sierra Leone-American  
 Connection." *The Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and  
 Abolition*, 2020. [https://glc.yale.edu/gullah-rice-slavery-and-sierra-leone-american-  
 connection](https://glc.yale.edu/gullah-rice-slavery-and-sierra-leone-american-connection).
- Penland, Jenny. "The Invisible Populous of Appalachia: Seeking Statutory  
 Recognition." *Intercontinental Cry*, 5 Feb.  
 2014, [https://intercontinentalcry.org/invisible-populous-appalachia-seeking-  
 statutory-recognition/](https://intercontinentalcry.org/invisible-populous-appalachia-seeking-statutory-recognition/)
- Quashie, Kevin Everod. *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*.  
 Rutgers University Press, 2012.
- . *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)Becoming the Subject*. Rutgers  
 University Press, 2004.
- Revill, George, and John R Gold. "'Far Back in American Time': Culture, Region,  
 Nation, Appalachia, and the Geography of Voice." *Annals of the American  
 Association of Geographers*, vol. 108, no. 5, 2018, pp. 1406-1421.

- Shapiro, Henry David. *A Strange Land and Peculiar People: The Discovery of Appalachia*. Rutgers University, 1966.
- Shockley, Evie. "The World Is Round." *Indiana Review*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2004, pp. 204-207.
- Swanson, Drew A. *Beyond the Mountains: Commodifying Appalachian Environments*. University of Georgia Press, 2018.
- Taylor, Kathryn Trauth. "Naming Affrilachia: Toward Rhetorical Ecologies of Identity Performance in Appalachia." *Enculturation*, 2011, <http://enculturation.net/naming-affrilachia>.
- The Affrilachian Poets*, <http://www.theaffrilachianpoets.com/history.html>.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Villarreal, Yezmin. "Nikky Finney Sings Poetry of History, Remembrance." *The Guilfordian*, 6 Oct. 2011, <https://www.guilfordian.com/archives/2011/10/06/nikky-finney-sings-poetry-of-history-remembrance/>.
- Walker, Frank X. "Kentucke." *Affrilachia*, Old Cove Press, 2000, pp. 95-97.
- Webb, Althea. "African Americans in Appalachia." Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations." *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*. Duke University Press, 2015, pp. 9-89.
- . "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 257-337.

York, Richard. "Re-Envisioning Development in Appalachia: Thoughts on What Is Worth Sustaining." *Journal of Appalachian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2016, pp. 9-18.

## Vita

1. Mary Abigail Rudolph
2. Born in Louisville, Kentucky
3. Received BA in English from Western Kentucky University (2014).
4. Professional Positions:
  - Community Garden Coordinator at Americana Community Center in Louisville, Kentucky
5. Scholarly Honors:
  - Scholarship Recipient for Futures of American Studies Institute, Dartmouth College (2019)
  - Writing Center Excellence Award (2018)
  - Women and Gender Studies Award for Creative Writing (2014)
  - Morris K. Udall Award for Environmental Stewardship (2012)