ENTANGLED IDENTITY AND PLACEMAKING WITH THE OKLAHOMA RIVER: MAPPING BLACK ENVIRONMENTAL UN/BELONGING IN OKLAHOMA CITY

By

Malina Anderson

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Rhetoric and Writing — Master of Arts

2025

ABSTRACT

Our ongoing climate crisis impacts every aspect of our existence, seen and unseen. It is critical, in efforts to work toward environmentally- and climatically-just futures, to critically engage with the stories and powers that have enabled injustice and unbelonging. In the United States, this is particularly relevant for Black Americans, who have both generationally inherited environmental exclusion and who advocate for environmental resilience and community-building. This project, heavily informed by Black and Indigenous American environmental scholarship, aims to demonstrate how environmental epistemologies in placemaking influence Black communities' internalization of unbelonging that is also manifested among nonhuman community members – specifically, rivers. Homing in on my hometown of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, I draw on placemaking policy and strategies from the City of Oklahoma City to uncover settler colonial rhetoric within river infrastructure planning that parallel Black environmental restrictions that have sought to erase the identities within Black environmental belonging and the Oklahoma River. The motivation for this erasure, as evident through rhetorical analyses of river infrastructure policy documents; placemaking; and mapping practices, is revealed in its commodification for economic growth and glory for the City. Though these efforts commodify, displace, and systematically oppress Black identities, community coalition-building in Oklahoma City's Eastside neighborhood demonstrates hopeful and resilient environmental and climatic futures. Oklahoma City's comprehensive policy plan, planokc, offers an entry point through its supplemental adaptokc plan for such environmental coalition-building and recognition to be forefronted in future Oklahoma City placemaking policies and strategies. Through adaptokc – as a living document that recognizes the exigence of environmental care and awareness – Oklahoma City placemaking has the potential to, in the face of this climate crisis, build and set an example of co-led futures in which Black and nonhuman, environmental belonging are woven into the fabrics of "place."

This thesis is dedicated to my home places and the stories, people, rivers, and trees that both make them so and make them better.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There came a moment – midafternoon on January 22, 2025 – where I stopped wanting to write this. It was two days after the inauguration of the forty-seventh president of the United States and, even having limited my access to news and social media, I was inundated with repeals, place name changes, executive orders, and speeches that all spat in the face of the work that this thesis seeks to do; the hurt it seeks to heal; the rhetoric it hopes to overturn. There were many moments before this, before the election, even, that I believed this thought work and analysis could make a difference measured by new thinking, inquisitive conversations, and fortified communities. The February National Parks Service layoffs doubled down my doubts.

There has to be an environmental future despite the forces trying to keep us in the apocalypses of panic and division. I write this to write into a realized future.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1:

WHERE ARE WE (AND WHAT DOES THAT MEAN)?

"Oh, one more thing.

"The same way I talked about how where I grew up influenced nature, I also think the origin of the Black American affects what we think about nature. If some of your earliest stories are about slavery and turmoil and the one constant theme is 'I was outside; I was working,' I think there is an unconscious aversion. In Black culture, if you have a job that pays 80,000 working outside versus 60,000 inside, people will automatically think the person most successful is the one working indoors. And I think the converse is true. If we came to this country later than we did and our job was to make bricks or something, we could have a more enjoyable relationship with nature. If our origin had to do with us working in a structure, things would be different. I think it's about origin. I think it's about where you began."

These are words my father, Kevin, shared with me during a conversation about how we perceive and push back against ideas of being Black outdoors. "Black outdoors" is a loaded pair. "Black" in America is so particular yet vast; "outdoors" invokes an image that has been so naturalized in Western, mostly white, discourse that we seldom consider its manufacturing. Ultimately, what my dad shared is a reflection of generations of media, placemaking, exclusion, and settler land epistemologies that are so powerful, so embedded in how we "become," that we, father and daughter in central Oklahoma coming from vastly different backgrounds yet sharing the same skin tone, have come to internalize. So, how did we begin? No matter the point in history, or who is telling it, the story starts with land.

This complicated inheritance of being outdoors is the result of a bordered, boundaried nation founded on land ownership ideologies, genocide of Indigenous peoples, and violent displacements of human/non-human communities…*over* and over again. "Outdoors" thus become a barrier that exists for some, and an invitation that exists for others.

These histories, still being written every day, have created multiple realities of what it means to belong to a place. More specifically, what it means to be *allowed* to belong within nature. "Nature," "environment," and "outdoors" are all terms that may be conflated; as a category of terms, they hold generational, often traumatic memories for Black American communities who have inherited our exclusion from these spaces. But it's not just this country's founding on genocide and slavery and dispossession. Media like that of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the 2014 emergency declaration of the Flint, Michigan water crisis twice put Black relationships with the environment in the social forefront, both showing how vulnerable Black communities are to environmental crises and sustaining the notion that Black folks don't have "good' relationships with the environment.. It is not that the environment "targets" vulnerable Black communities; rather, that Black communities have been historically displaced to communities equally vulnerable to environmental crises; that environmental – and therefore overall – health has historically been considered "less important" for Black communities and left them vulnerable to toxic, human-made environmental situations. Black communities sense of place and sense of environment, in large part through city planning policy, have been *made* to displace and not mitigate harm. See: the Detroit white flight and soil toxicity; tree canopy disparity in east Austin, Texas; or the mile of scrapyards, railway, and interstate crossway built between Eastside Oklahoma City and their neighboring river.

These phenomena are supposedly unseen. They may come up occasionally in an environmental justice-awareness social media or blog post or Black History Month special article but, unfortunately, Black environmentalism often waits for tragedy to strike before giving these communities attention. Black environmental engagement visibility is too frequently conditional. "Waiting" for the right moment to source and cite Black land knowledge leaves gaps in our openness to accepting environmental engagement as an intrinsic Black reality. The story-constructing which makes this in/visibility possible operates among more than Black communities.

The forces – to be clear, that is structural racism; unfair housing; redlining; gentrification; settler colonial land epistemologies; segregation; Indigenous peoples and community displacement; outright theft; slavery; literacy prevention for African Americans; homogenous city planning; to name the front runners – which have sought to keep Black Americans from believing in our abilities to foster environmental connections are the *very same* that have prevented environmental wellbeing for the species ecologies that make up our notion of "nature."

In this project, I will draw from one deeply personal example of this separation/invitation perspective of human-land relationships, accessing a rhetoric within city planning policy and Black neighborhoods' placemaking strategies to articulate its harmful but hopeful present-day function. I use Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, my quasi-hometown, as my case study. I have faith in this example because I lived it; I seek this example because I hope to move beyond the harm that has been designed for me.

So much about living in the OKC metro as a multiracial Black woman is learning how to love deeply in the face of something really ugly. To love people and places without turning a blind eye to accountability and histories and lies and sugarcoating. Growing up in predominantly white, predominantly wealthy places gave me my grounding in standing upright with a soft heart, open arms, and sharp tongue. I can love those who are – or are not – ignorant to injustice; I can do this while making visible the same injustices. But it's not *just* about me. I do this for brighter, sounder, harmonious futures which we all deserve. In 2025, we live amidst a climate crisis that manifests differently and violently across the world. Just as I argue that settler colonial forces are the same which harm Black environmental relationships and environmental wellbeing, anthropogenic – that is, human-caused – climate change continues the violent displacement of Indigenous human and other-than-human communities globally.

Addressing the climate crisis, I argue, must be an ambitious project that recognizes its disproportionate harm. Black and Indigenous communities are two of the most at-risk demographics for climate disasters in North America. Their land stories must be heard along with headlines, and their land knowledges integrated into climate strategies. The exigence of this research – this storytelling – is in identifying and quickly, intentionally, collaboratively ameliorating environmental (which includes infrastructure, legislation, advertising, and land maintenance) harms. The last five years taught us that there are some things that societies cannot simply come back from; instead, we adjust to the better, hopefully healthier, other side of them. We learn from them. I hope that you, reader, learn from this story that the way forward can*not* look the same as the path we took to get here.

–

I approach this project with a number of key understandings – the foundations of my rhetorical analysis, the river down which my solutions flow. It has been a humbling privilege to re-learn land with the guidance and teaching of Black and Indigenous writers, scientists, and storytellers. The primary agent which my analysis and critique seeks to change is environmental engagement and placemaking strategies that reflect settler colonial aims and structures. This is particularly true in Oklahoma City, where the romanticization of settler colonialism thrives in histories of the Land Run and OKC as a "boomtown." Settler colonialism is an ongoing domination of land, ideologies, and peoples that shapes the very way we consider land as community versus property that can be owned, dominated, divided, and sold. Because settler colonialism is the dominant system which structures land use, its insidiousness, the subtle and prolonged violence and increased potential for harm, even environmental engagement, as deemed morally-righteous, includes the exclusion of "othered" bodies, human and non-human who are deemed worthy of dignity and protection. Environmentalism, in the dominant structure, is currently limited in its ability to consider othered

bodies and the different knowledges – like geographies, sciences, and stories – that come with their inclusion.

Colonization manifests across any and all interpretations of "bodies." In his foreword briefing of colonization and othering, Victor Villanuea explains that whereas "the colonized were Othered in postcolonial South Asia and Africa, the indigenous of this [Western] hemisphere were to be eliminated, not only Othered but removed, either physically or culturally in a long and relatively successful campaign of genocide of one kind or other…" (vi). As the purpose of colonization is to establish a New Place from Space, the logic goes that Old Place must be restructured (through infrastructure, policy, etc.), violently. Pasternak et al. further parse the colonial reproductions of violent infrastructures as projects which dispossess, steal, and extract from land and people (2). We know this happens to human communities; it happens to non-human communities, too. In what we recognize as central Oklahoma today, a tributary of a mighty river has been and is a site of violent placemaking in the continuous process of colonization. Our environmental community members have been Othered, physically and culturally, in successful campaigns of complex placemaking.

I wrestle with the rhetorical choice of describing settler colonialism as "dominant" and non-colonial epistemologies as therefore "marginal." As a researcher and human, I have begun to question the rhetorical conception of marginalized communities, not because we are not marginalized, but because I aim to emphasize a destratification of social/ontological understanding. In essence, to "reach, not a point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I" and thus, rather than one center which Othered bodies populate in the margins, there are multiple conceptions of "center" within a network (Deleuze and Guattari 3). Am I validating marginality in a way that works counter to that goal? Margins very much exist within hegemonic settler colonial structures and have real consequences, even in instances where being can perform or be interpreted as margin-crossing. To not recognize them is a massive

ignorance; to perpetuate them in decolonial or destratified futurities might be counterintuitive. I wonder if this can be an act of both/and. In the same way that belonging can be made in unbelonging, and destratification can happen within stratified systems, I lean into how marginalization is realized and perpetuated, and seek a de-centering of ontological/epistemic hierarchies for more just environmental/land-based futures.

This is both a move toward reorientation within settler colonial structures and a multiplied and simultaneous orientation. As I write and imagine reading this project in full, I picture myself and others standing, oriented in a such a way that allows space for viewpoints which once competed with one another, and now network together. Here are a the guiding points in this foundational orientation:

- Humans are community members within land and its/her inhabitants
- Placemaking is a seen and unseen process; seen through policy and infrastructure and often unseen in developing senses of belonging
- Violent placemaking insidiously and generationally inhibits community building
- Rhetorical changes in environmental infrastructure policy and placemaking are necessary for sustainability
- Sustainability is only achievable with equitable access and the continual process constellating knowledges
- What we see today is not what has always been
    - Especially nature.

In the following section, I offer seven key definitions, informed by interdisciplinary scholarship on commonplace terms that I will use generously as the guiding constellation in my following analysis. The purpose of outlining these referential terms is to make clear how, why, and through what histories, scholarship, ways of knowing I lean on commonplace or broad terms.

Because much of my analysis calls on scholars of Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK); Black feminist theory; Black land relationships; metaphysical theories; urban planning; geopolitics; and more, it is important to both clarify how these disciplines and practices come together for a rhetorical analysis and to cite the scholars that have laid the groundwork for such blending. Instead of taking these terms for granted, they are laid out here to serve as a reference point for the remainder of this thesis.

1.1 DEFINITIONS

1.1.1 Place

Place is used throughout this work to indicate the rhetorical invocation of a space which reflects, at least, a resulting meaningful combination of history, infrastructure, policy, natural environment, memory, and community. Places host bodies and meaning; "whether textual, material, or imaginary, [they] are constructed and reproduced…by boundaries [,and] practices, structures of feeling, and sedimented features of *habitus*," or the way someone perceives and responds to location (Reynolds 2; Oxford Languages). Place differs from *space* when meaning is applied; place is "locatable," giving "space meaning by transforming the objective into the subjective…as Yi-fu Tuan writes, 'Space is freedom, place is security'" (Sackey 18). The rhetorical process of securing *place* is what I identify in this project as *placemaking*.The rhetorical process of placemaking includes overlapping historiographies of human-environmental placemaking; infrastructure; city-planning; cultural notions of futures; and agential environmental community members (for example, the continual erosion and dumping of sediment which creates riverbanks on a micro level and forms geo/topographies on a macro level).

Placemaking is typically understood as a processional [rhetorical] strategy often employed by city planners, historians, and community organizers, among others, which aims to enhance healthy and engaged relationships between people and the environments in which they live. I place

"rhetorical" in brackets to demonstrate how rhetoric is utilized interdisciplinarily though not always named as such. The brackets thus aim to visualize its widespread but sometimes unnamed/unseen presence in place-making practices. Placemaking as a practice uses several vehicles for manifestation. The primary placemaking strategies which I will discuss in this thesis are city planning policy, which includes infrastructure planning, community engagement, and tourism marketing; and community memory projects, which draw on place-based stories, gathering, and collective dreaming.. My use of place-making here aims to emphasize the rhetorical component of place-making and define such practice as the rhetorical process of building understandings of place and how one (human and/or non-human) is situated in such place, including past, present, and future conceptions of place.

Place is also made by the relationship between memory and epistemology – the way we experience and/or receive and internalize histories of locale converse with "how we know what we know," a common summation of epistemology. Much of identity, or the way we know ourselves and are perceived, is constructed within, because of, and through place. Thus, place is culturally informed because epistemology is culturally informed. If "perceptions of spaces are [traces of the effects of ideology]…reflective of race, gender, age, [and/or] level of economic security," then contextualizing that space – the perception component – is a process of *place*, and placemaking (Reynolds 8). In the context of place, I think of the three aforementioned components – memory/experience, epistemology, identity – as a placemaking process. Memory/experience might be your map; epistemology would be *where* you're standing on and *how* you determine "where"; and identity is *who* is standing there. Place is known and *knowing* is the recurring summation of internal and external factors, like histories, memory, and orientations.

Finally, place entails overlapping and multi-synchronous placemaking and perceptions. In this case of a city government's placemaking practices, river placemaking practices, and Black placemaking, there are notions "and contours of [life that] would necessarily need to look different

from white idealized visions of vital lives," generating a co-existence of the scales of geographies, or the micro and macro stories of place(s) that are told, inherited, and integrated (Purifoy 32).

1.1.2 Space

I understand *space* in this research as de-identified conceptions and/or combinations of imagined place, land, and/or infrastructure. Space, on earth, is place that, to the interpreter, has yet to be "placed" (and therein lies the incredible locating practice of *place*). In fact, Yi-Fu Tuan has noted that "space" and place" require one another to be understood, "the movement allowed by the latter juxtaposed by the pause in movement required for locational transformation (Elliott 73). Across disciplines, the deliberations and relationships between space and place have been well-investigated. Meaning-making, and thus rhetoric, is the typical differentiation, and the same that I employ here. Whereas place is can be identified as a im/material space in which meaning has been made, "space is primarily defined as a measurable concept or physical geography," or a concept/geography identified by its boundaries or even boundarylessness (Sackey 18). More than an territory or area in which meaning-making happens, the "lack" of [associated] meaning in space provides a grateful balance to placemaking practices as a counterpart, or intercedent. It is from this understanding that I approach the use of "space" in this project.

1.1.3 Land

I understand land as space, place, and friend. This orientation is critical for bearing the integration of Western, Black, and Indigenous knowledges. Western, here understood as specifically settler colonial, interpretations of land are historically violent, exclusive, particular, and romantic. "Land for Sale" signs, which are a common sight in the U.S., are one of many signatures indicative of land epistemologies which regard the earth as commodity; something to be traded, taken, kept, returned, *in possession of*. My primary concern in identifying settler colonial land epistemologies is not to detail its histories – I have learned and read from several authors including Eve Tuck, K. Wayne Yang,

Sylvia Wynters, Walter Mignolo, Kyle Whyte, Malea Powell, Qwo-Li Driskill, and so many more who perform this work beautifully – but rather to highlight the potential bridges between this and other land epistemologies.

My interpretation of *land* leans generously on collaborative, conversational theories of land between Indigenous and Black American writers, both groups which have experienced violent land and relational displacement as the recurring result of settler colonial projects. Knowing land from these positionalities "has to do with Black life constructed as landless on stolen Indigenous land, land as epistemology and ontology for Indigenous peoples, and Black narratives which recover relationships to that selfsame land" (Tuck et al. "Not Nowhere" 6). Robin Wall Kimmerer describes her Indigenous land epistemology as "the residence of our more-than-human relatives, the dust of our ancestors, the holder of seeds, the makers of rain; our teacher…[and] place for which we have moral responsibility in reciprocity for its gift of life" ("Greed Does Not Have to Define Our Relationship to Land"). Part of the criticality of highlighting paralleled Black/Indigenous land histories is to uncover a source of land tension that is felt across Black communities of differing geography, class, gender, and education. For me, this learning provides space to heal and understand my own Blackness among land, and to tell the story of the Oklahoma River from an honest, "middled" perspective. It helps me understand that my Blackness is "from" somewhere, and my shared trepidation is not just explicable, but escapable.

Reflecting on many global Indigenous land epistemologies, this project's understanding of land does *not* equate to the maintenance or expansion of a political nation, as in Western and settler understandings of land and nationhood, but a member *of* a nation, particularly when *nation* is a body of people among land, rather than occupying it. Land has been used within settler colonial projects as a weapon of unbelonging. Black and Indigenous land histories in conversation reveal layers of kinship between Black folks and land; Black and Indigenous peoples; and Indigenous peoples and

land. This network of land epistemologies shares tensions of community versus ownership[1], wherein settler geography interprets land as "property; wherein the presence of Indigeneity on "property" is perceived as a threat [to settler continuity] (Whetung 101); and wherein land is the site of trauma so entrenched that "people were raised thinking that the way to succeed was to get as far away from the land as possible" (Droz).

Now, more than comparing these ways of knowing, we can listen to how they speak to one another. Being able to identify where and how settler colonial land ideologies [or epistemologies?] show up allows us, as people/readers interested in sustaining life on planet Earth (which is an assumption I make about you, the reader/s), to backward-scaffold our approach toward environmental health.

1.1.4 Community

Community is a meaningful and considerate connection to all that may be around us. For this project and in my personal belief, community is not just among humans or even human/animal/earth relationships, but the layered networks of meaning-making between any-thing that is incorporated into a place or space. I employ an (attempt at) rhizomatic, or anti-hierarchical, (Deleuze and Guattari) community building, engagement, and interpretation that includes any/all possible relationships including human and non-human/other-than-human entities within a place. My attempt at uncovering destratified community that operates within stratified community emphasizes that while "it's not easy to see the grass in things in words[,]...never is a plateau separable from the cows that populate it, which are also the clouds in the sky" (Deleuze and Guattari 23). I also draw from Donnie Johnson Sackey's *Trespassing Natures* definition of a social scene to understand community as an "arrangement of people, living organisms, artifacts that are intrinsically

[1] I hate to use such dichotomous language, honestly. "Versus" is so absolute and uncomplicated. My decision to use this imagery is to highlight the epistemic tension among networks of land interpretation; to show that competing advocations are so often going head-to-head.

ensnared together in meaningful ways" (60). My understanding of community can be likened to my definition of place in that it is a meaning-laden environment, though differs in its specific focus of entities which are invested in the collective's wellbeing and/or perceive that entities' presence makes a meaningful difference to their existence.

It is important to consider how community is interpreted because, like place, notions of identity have the potential to be influenced by community. Sackey points out that entities' (be it fish, a policymaker, an engineer, your neighbor) self-identification may not, due to layers of rhetorical networks operating in place/community-building, align with how external entities perceive the other. This misalignment has real consequences; in Sackey's example, multiple countries' interpretation of a mackerel presence, and a discrepancy in what constitutes as marine borders, altered how mackerel exist as a population of individuals and a collective within a broader communal context (Sackey 131). Thus, it is not just self-identification that matters in community, but the networked interpretation of identity.

Community and identity, in the context of environmentalism and the climate crisis, also matter. In the case of human participation, meaning-making within a community, and a lack of clarity regarding the conditions of a community, influence perceptions of belonging. For example, if a Black father in central Oklahoma has only ever seen and imagined white people camping in the woods, the notion that he could be a part of a community of people who camp in the woods might be moot, or even feel dangerous. If he had only ever seen white people protesting or taking part in climate action, he might also perceive climate action groups or events as a primarily white community opportunity. But the same is said for non-human community. Alexis Shotwell and Joanna Zylinska defend the understanding that "all life involves consumption" and therefore "the individual is an inadequate perspective from which to begin grappling with something like climate change" (Pilsch 14). The pursuit of clarifying community is an awareness of who/what is affected by

change or entanglement *and* a level of commitment to interceding if necessary – essentially, collective care.

Community and place remain in constant conversation. As the mackerel example demonstrates, they "essentially only exist biologically bound to the materiality within which they live' (Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* 21)" (Sackey 131). Community *happens* – that is, can be a noun and a verb – somewhere, and the meaning-making processes of place tend to also be the ground from which a sense of belonging is made. Belonging denotes an "of-ness" that, when understood as situated and even locatable, must include the human and non-human entities with which we live. Taking it one step further, belief in belonging and clarity of community is an opportunity for action in climate initiatives for those who have historically been or perceived themselves as left out. A move toward engaging non-human community further expands the detriment of the climate crisis to include not de-identified entities, but members of a community whose wellbeing impacts others'.

1.1.5 Environment (-alism; -al justice; engagement/participation)

Like space and place, environment and nature often respond to each other or are even used interchangeably in common vernacular/conversation. While the two are not exactly the same, they might be considered co-constructors of space and place. "Nature" might be oriented similarly to land – i.e., grounded – and a reference to any naturally-occurring, or less-human-mediated, phenomenon, landscape entity, including trees in urban neighborhoods, creeks in rural landscapes, canyons in the southwest, etc. There are likely examples of human-mediated phenomena in nature that, overtime, became "naturalized" into the rhythms of nature, but dissecting such processes goes beyond the scope of this project.

"Environment," alternatively, is more often encompassing and oriented more generally. For example, Romantic languages' use ambient language for environment (in Italian it's *ambiente*). I refer to "the environment" mostly as a less-locatable body deserving of advocacy and protection;

sometimes in reference to addressing climate change; and often as an -ism or -al, as in "to be of" a land/air/water/human/species/structures relationship. Although this approach to the term is more general than some of the others I employ, it is important to demarcate it here so that we might tease out, early, the sometimes assumed or unseen actors of environmental justice, action, impact, and so forth. That is to say, humans are impacted by water and water is impacted by humans. Environmentalism and engagement isn't about being anti-infrastructure or diametrically opposed to economic development, as it has been interpreted in the past (Killingsworth and Palmer 26). Rather than a unidirectional interpretation of environmental engagement – which, in this project, focuses on but is not limited to recreation, stewardship, relationship, and advocacy – recognizing its actors and inhabitants clarifies terms like "environmental justice" and "environmental engagement."

This clarification is critical. Some definitions, though environmentally-conscious, remain human-centered. Including non-human environmental actors is not as simple as a term substitute; for example, Dr. Bunyan Bryant defines environmental justice (EJ) as behaviors which "support sustainable development [and] living conditions in which *people* can have confidence that their environment is safe, nurturing, and productive, and that support communities where distributive justice prevails" (Bryant 23; emphasis added). The Environmental Protection Agency, circa 2013, defined EJ as "is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all *people* regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies" (1). Recognition of synchronous, layered realities– the community – that is *environment* encourages justice measures beyond, but still inclusive of, impact on humans.

I advocate for and analyze from a destratified definition of community, which necessitates the same interpretation of environment, and understanding advocacy of environmental justice. Pasternak et al. implore us to consider what possibilities would open up if we acknowledged terrain

as comprised of multi-national jurisdictional constituents, whether they be animals, plants, spirits, or others (4). Political decision-making for just futures would have to consider what is good for the human and the planet in tandem, as balanced members of a vast network. Thus, there is a temporal aspect of environment that becomes especially visible in our expansion of the term. This is already true of current, settler governmental environmental decision-making, but it can be, as mentioned, narrow. Histories, memories, presents, and healthy futures across species are the multi-lenses through which environments can be observed and for which decisions can be made. This kind of environmental justice begins with a renewed definition of environment.

1.1.5 Geography

Though this term is not employed as frequently as the aforementioned, its inclusion in this section provides further insight into the scholarship, orientations, and approaches which have informed my analysis. The field of geography is much more expansive than I, prior to consciously engaging with my research, could have imagined. Yes, it is the study of physical, natural, and, usually, political arrangements of land; geography is also perhaps most commonly "read" through maps. Maps are made, however, which means that there are rhetorical situations happening in how geography is interpreted and thus disseminated. Further, a geographer has to be oriented in a particular way to view characteristics of such arrangements. Where they start, and the directions they move in, if at all, are included in the writing and reading of disseminated geographies.

Understanding this provides the potential to liberate ourselves from the reality-making function, and therefore hegemonic, ways of interpreting belonging, place, identity, and futures. This possibility may lead to "countergeographies" or alternative geographies which grant "refuge from the otherwise out-of-placeness" which differently-oriented interpreters experience land (Hagan 105). Nedra Reynolds reminds us that "geography gives us the metaphorical and methodological tools to change our ways of imagining writing through both movement and dwelling – to see writing as a set

of spatial practices informed by everyday negotiations of space" (6). Such writing includes policy, placemaking strategies, map-making, community storytelling. The relationship between geography and writing is expansive.

Geography, when understood fundamentally as an orientation, can even operate as a verb describing belonging. Geography can be an act done, especially as a mode of living memory. Madeline Whetung describes doing Nishnaabeg geography as interpreting landscape in different ways by different people (90). She remembers her ancestors' navigations of the creek's waters, knowing that they performed geography with the past and future in mind, too. Knowing that land holds memory, which is now also shaped by settler colonialism. Still, Whetung performs her geography because "The dominant geography is so strong that it is easy to believe our resistance has little effect, and that no matter how we move we will remain invisible. But built geographies cannot replace deep geographies" (110). This resistance and knowing encapsulates geography as a verb of belonging. Doing geography may be defined as (encompassing of) navigating, knowing, learning from land, and remembering across time; "belonging," as (ironically) defined by the Oxford Languages, is an "affinity for a place or situation." Therefore, geography as a verb of belonging is doing geography as an act which (re)invigorates a sense of belonging to a place.

Whetung's act of geography may or may not be interpreted as a countergeography; on one hand, it is a geography enacted against hegemonic geography. On the other, Indigenous geographies precede colonial geography, and I am unsure that enacting Indigenous geography is the same thing as subversion. Countergeographies function differently, perhaps more confidently, regarding Black land orientations. Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis, in *The Black Geographic:* edited collection, platform Black geographic moves informed both by the Blackness of geography, mapping the movement of Black life, and the geography of Blackness, which foregrounds Katherine McKittrick's notion of a "Black sense of place," which regards "the sociospatial character of Black

struggle [that] points to the mutual imbrication of race and the production of space" (4-6). Finally, Hawthorne and Lewis advance a Black Geographic praxis with the following understandings:

1. The nonsingularity and nonuniversality of Blackness;
2. Blackness as locally and globally produces and reproduced through processes (technologies, policies, theories)...;
3. Blackness as always historically and geographically situated;
4. The questioning of ontological claims and of *ontologizing* processes;
5. An attention to the interplay of material and poetic processes (10).

Highlighting this work is highly pertinent for my upcoming analysis as it outlines the rhetorical moves of placemaking strategies; environmental/infrastructural/geographic violences; deep-seated beliefs about belonging within land; and correspondences between Indigenous and Black acts of geography that offer collaborative understandings.

1.1.6 The rights of rivers

Bearing all of these points of combined knowledges in mind, I make my argument with the underlying belief in the rights of rivers. That is, the right for rivers' autonomy, identity, and decision-making to be deeply heard and honored in the process of placemaking. At the most surface level, still nudging even at Western thinking, honoring the rights of rivers allows us to save time, money, and infrastructure that rivers would otherwise make us pay for through flooding, loss of life, "unattractiveness," and non-use. Recognizing that rivers are sacred essential parts of countless lives across ideologies and epistemologies should – and usually is – enough to enact river health measurements.

In this thesis, I do not necessarily take up the call for addressing the rights of rivers in jurisprudence; the inclusion of this definition is to provide a scope and location for my overall advocacy of non-human dignity and the socio/geopolitical treatment of rivers. However, there is a

pressing need, especially as we face climate crises, to listen and learn from Indigenous leaders and scholars in our communities who may be willing to share stewardship practices and ideologies. International Rivers, an organization designed to protect and legally defend rivers' rights, notes a growing interest in rights-of-nature jurisprudence. In the Great Lakes Region of North America, tribal attorney Frank Bibaeu, an enrolled member of the White Earth Band of Ojibwe of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, has advocated for the legal right of mnoomin (wild rice), arguing that the land owns itself ("Rights of Manoomin"). This project, as I have had the opportunity to learn from Bibaeu's example, advances an aligned perspective for the rights of rivers. The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Rivers, endorsed by International Rivers and many other international organizations, forwards an understanding and jurisprudence that regards rivers as living entities entitled to legal guardians and fundamental rights. Further, the Declaration states that "'rivers' should extend to their basins and watersheds; Indigenous communities should be represented in river guardian projects; and that all states should implement and maintain the realization of these rights.

Hierarchical complexes, such as the well-embedded notion that human governments should make decisions *for* rivers, prevent the fullest and most effective pathways toward river health because they ignore the identities of the very bodies in question. Fundamental to the interpretation of this thesis is understanding the rights of rivers as necessarily inherent for all knowledges and practices involved in placemaking; that rivers are natural (not natural*ized*; they are *already*) members of [environmental] communities in and on land, place, and space.

–

This thesis stands as a case study responding to the webbed questions of Black environmental engagement. While I do not argue that Black environmental engagement does *not* exist, my analysis aims to demonstrate how environmental epistemologies in placemaking influence Black

communities' internalization of unbelonging. This is deeply personal; I'm certain that as many Black farmers, camping experts, botanists, and climate strategists as there are, in equal or greater numbers are those who do not believe such roles apply to them. Moreso, that such roles *cannot* apply because "we don't do that"; because that's "White people shit." I argue that, if unbelonging can be made rhetorically, so can belonging. And there is great exigence in engaging intentional, careful research in environmental belonging. Amidst our climate crisis, community mobilization is a remarkable vehicle for building environmental resilience. But Black community members must believe and be shown that resilience is in their – our – futures, too.

This cannot be done though an overly simplistic integration into hegemonic placemaking and environmental practices. That is to say, this work includes but is so much more than building trails from Black neighborhoods or fulfilling "diversity quotas" in place-based marketing. Because Black geographies reflect multiple orientations toward land and relationships, an inclusion of Black environmental engagement must also include those alternative ways of knowing. Moving into this inclusive future for Black placemakers/geographers/knowers/people looks like acting *with* instead of *for*. Indeed, so much of American placemaking has been done without and in spite of Black communities. In the case of Oklahoma City, this violence is multi-fold as city placemaking on/around the Oklahoma River has also disengaged the earth herself. Black placemaking strategies still unfold in Oklahoma City, however, in ways that reflect disconnect and longing for renewed river/land relationships. So, to scaffold the *how* for Black environmental belonging, we must first recognize what other environmental community members correspond to unbelonging. In settler colonial placemaking, how often is the environment herself allowed to thrive? Displacing peoples – in this case, Black and Indigenous – alters the terrain across bodies. How can Black environmental belonging thrive if our placemaking does not even allow environmental beings to belong?

Encompassing environmental histories and perpendicular storytellings of *place* in Oklahoma City, I aim to address the above questions in this thesis, approaching each from the multiply-held orientations that I have previously defined. Chapter 2 foregrounds the multilevel violence of infrastructural and environmental unbelonging in/on/around the Oklahoma River. This story includes a history of city perspectives of the river, its development, and some of the rhetorical placemaking strategies that have been a part of making the Oklahoma River a fixture – rather than figure – of Oklahoma City. The rhetorical analysis of placemaking policy documents in Chapter 2 serves as a methodological example of applying the definitional principles and guiding constellations outlined in Chapter 1, and sets up the manufactured landscape of kindred environmental unbelonging shared between the river and neighboring Black districts, and made through placemaking policy. Chapter 3 follows up on stories of Black placemaking in Oklahoma City as related to the development of the Oklahoma River, augmented by a historying of Black land rhetorics in the U.S. This chapter homes in on three historically-Black neighborhoods in OKC – Walnut Grove, Deep Deuce, and Eastside – and details how their relationships to the river might be reflective of greater hesitation within Black environmentalism *and* how Blackness is already oriented in environmentalism and placemaking. Finally, in Chapter 4, I reflect on the rhetorical consequences of Oklahoma City and Oklahoma River placemaking for the river and Black communities. I identify moments in the City's comprehensive placemaking policy that provide an entryway for non-human consideration in placemaking and Black environmental futures that employ a *with-ness* of our geographies.

This story matters for any-body experiencing the obvious and presumed-invisible effects of climate change. The story of Black OKC and the Oklahoma River is one look into a vast network of complicated environmental un/belonging, focusing on placemaking as an extremely powerful, but by no means sole, rhetorical employment that motivates and affects action. To put it simply, non-

human consideration of community makes us more considerate and careful actors. Intentional acknowledgement of Black place and environmental histories increases our awareness of exclusion, dis/allowance, and even Black aversion to being in "nature." Blackness matters to the climate conversation because it is our national and global communities that disproportionately face its detriment; deserve a viable and sustainable future in this epoch of human-forced climate change; and deserve redemption. We deserve to be with our outdoor community. Such membership should not have to be earned, but innate.

And now, an introduction. A quick Google mapping shows an aerial of wide and braided concrete slabs winding in four opposing directions nearby and over a river that appears manicured and much more straight than the roadways above it. This is Oklahoma City and the river as I have known it.

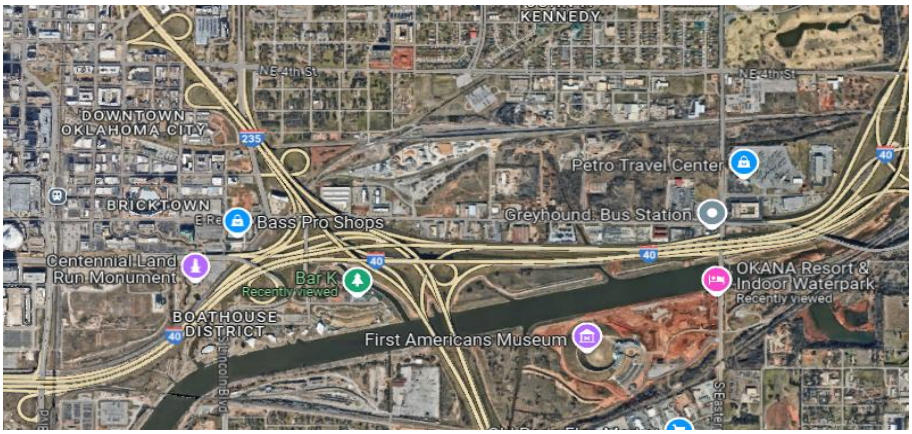


Figure 1: Google Maps aerial image of the Oklahoma River.

CHAPTER 2:

ENVIRONMENTAL UN/BELONGING ON THE OKLAHOMA RIVER

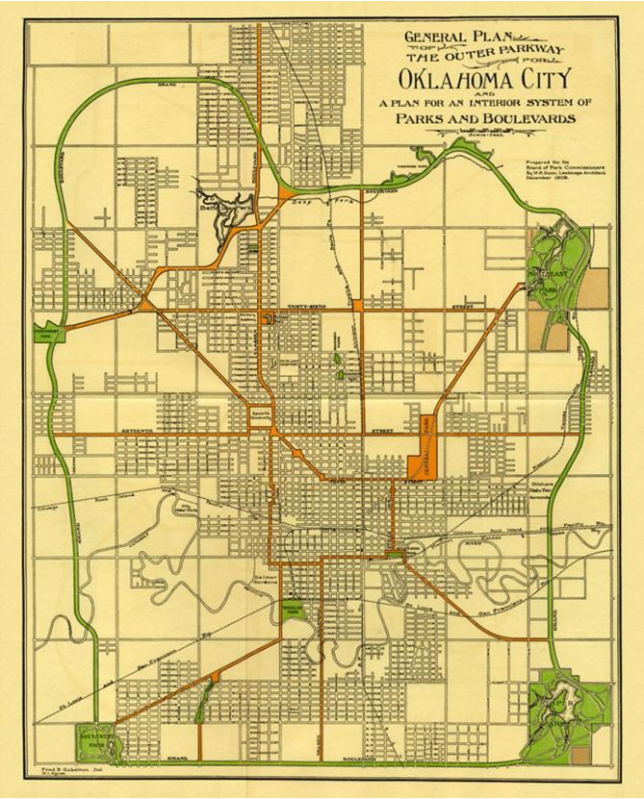


Figure 2: 1909 map of Oklahoma City from planokc ("Why Plan?").

I'm trying to locate the Oklahoma River on a map not designed to inherit it in the ways that I did. I'm looking for the clear bend in the river that was not supposed to be there – the result of domesticating wild waters.

–

Placemaking in our pocket of Oklahoma City, as shown on the map, is a deeply historic and rhetorically-informed practice. The City of Oklahoma City has used infrastructure as the product – rhetorical and realized – of fact-making modes of writing such as city ordinances, maps, and council memos that, as motivated and guided by policy, are specially situated in the fabric of *place*. In addition to drawing upon planokc, the city's comprehensive enhancement plan which acts as a guiding policy, I will use two sets of documents – a Planned Unit Development (PUD) design

statement and a series of city council memorandums from 1999 to 2003 – to articulate how the City of Oklahoma City has relied on the erasure of the river's identity and an orientation of belonging which prioritizes economic engagement to construct its narrative of place. Specifically, I aim to show how this version of place is necessarily over-generalized (and rhetorically unsustainable in the era of extreme climate change) to avoid confronting the Black and non-human erasure upon which such place has been built.

Place in this pocket of Oklahoma City is fundamentally founded on colonial projects of infrastructure, governance, and erasure which I argue are unsustainable for environmental justice and productive and collective security within climate action. Erasure of identities that are epistemically motivated by a utilitarian objectification (more on this in subsection 2.1), like the river, exemplifies uncreative and harmful placemaking practice with real and generational consequences for communities who are erased. This practice of placemaking creates further barriers between the river and herself, as well as between human dwellers among or visiting the river because their experiences are infrastructurally shaped by a particular land-use ideology which does not reflect, and is even harmful to, anyone or all who engage with it. This barrier is unjust, inequitable, and emblematic of the continual utilitarian wastefulness that has commodified land and drained the earth of her natural rhythms. How place is constructed, by whom, has great potential for harm.

The "development" of a river is a complex, yet even violent, act of environmental construction. It is my argument, informed by a belief in inherent water rights, that to domesticate a wild river obstructs its ability to know and make itself known to its human and nonhuman neighbors – its community. Infrastructure in and on [wild] landscapes creates new realities while I recognize that human infrastructure is an unavoidable, even necessary, part of sustaining our species. Constructing against/despite/ in spite of the earth's will is a cautionary move for which rivers in particular have often forced humans to reconsider. Other times, these precious and powerful bodies

of water have been corralled into a utilitarian version of themselves, without their consent or little consideration. Oklahoma City is one of many sites in which that has happened. In the following sections, I will detail the rhetorical development of the Oklahoma River in Oklahoma City placemaking, identifying its actors, policies, timelines, and motivations. I will also break down what a utilitarian view of riparian relationships means in the context of the Oklahoma River, and why it matters to the development of placemaking within and around the river. Finally, I will move into the analysis of key environmental placemaking policy documents regarding river development, ultimately pointing the seemingly small-scale rhetorical choices within such policies toward their broader manifestations in environmental engagement and placemaking.

2.1 CONSTRUCTING ENVIRONMENTAL REALITIES

2.1.1 A Wild River

The Oklahoma River is an interesting case study of this exchange. When the city was settled in 1889 during the wildly preposterous Land Run, it was built on the North Canadian River. As the settler city boomed, the river continued to run wild. For a little more than two decades, Oklahoma City – its developers and inhabitants – ebbed and flowed along with the North Canadian. Flooding and course changes were significant issues and, after the constant flooding – record floods up to fifteen and a half feet – of the Wheeler Park Zoo and destruction of the riverfront amusement park Delmar Gardens in 1912, the city's waterside relationships subsided (Beach; "A River's Rise"). An historic flood in spring 1923 prompted Chamber of Commerce Director Stanely Draper to develop a more robust damming system – a domestication project.

The river had been previously dammed but the report commissioned by Draper was a major move in taming the North Canadian. Later, the Army Corps of Engineers added riprap to the bank of the river to prevent erosion and continue controlling the water. Historian Buddy Johnson explains: "It was called a wild river at the time because it hadn't been dammed along its course

yet…there's a lot more tapped into the river now to control it and to retain the water but, at the time, we just had Lake Overholser which was in no way able to hold the [upstream flood water]" (Beach). In the mid-twentieth century, the Corps of Engineers finally straightened the course of the river and redirected its flow, leading to what would be locally joked as "the only river in the country that gets mowed twice a year" ("A River's Rise"). When Mike Knopp, founder and Executive Director of Riversport, moved to Oklahoma City and began pitching the Boathouse District as a project for the citywide Metropolitan Area Projects program (MAPS)[2] – "I knew that through MAPS we would have some low-water dams. I don't think a lot of people thought about exactly *what we were gonna do with all this water*" – described dreaming of transforming the landscape from the "ditch that…looked remarkably like a world-class water sports venue that you would see in an Olympics city" (Beach; emphasis added). This is the place and mapped geography of a straightened seven-mile stretch that OKCers see today.

Interestingly, Johnson describes "what was lost" in tandem with the river's early damming history not regarding the river's course, but the economic, communal, and settlement properties along the banks. And indeed, including the two major parks and zoo, Depression-era migrant camps and communities were also lost to floods. It is worth questioning, though, if and how one category of life was traded for another, and why environmental harmony with the river, in Oklahoma City, *must* rely on its corralling. As the *place* of Oklahoma City formed through the twentieth century, "the water habitat and natural beauty were all lost in [this] transaction. For many years, this historic stretch of the North Canadian all but vanished…[N]o single constituency had much of a stake in [reviving the river]; everyone had learned to get along fine without it" ("A River's Rise"). The 1998

[2] MAPS, though not the primary focus of this project, has been a critical placemaking program in OKC. Beginning in 1993, MAPS has changed the social landscape and sense of place in OKC. Different from urban renewal projects, which tend to gentrify and displace neighborhoods, MAPS responds to improvements, investments, recreation, and more for neighborhoods and districts. It has been implemented across four phases thus far ("MAPS History"). See Works Cited page for more information.

Assistant City Manager Jim Couch, regarding the MAPS revitalization of the river, is quoted as encouraging constituents not to confuse the then-North Canadian with downtown Austin, Texas's Town Lake that comes off the Colorado River. "That river is not the North Canadian," he said, "and you're not going to have a significant water body like that here simply because of what God has given us to work with…It's not a function of money, it's a function of nature" (Lackmeyer and Money). What he meant is that the North Canadian was not *built* for money; it was a natural occurrence interpreted as a gift to the (settled) city of Oklahoma City. But the essence of economy-focused revitalization is not revealed in Couch's dichotomous use of "money" versus "nature." It is the word "function" that operates in both. Built or natural, economic or otherwise, the river would be/come "for" something.

This is not to say that the river revitalization was an inherent evil. Rather, it is an insidious harm to the bodies involved and the overall aim of collective care and environmental inclusion. The placemaking ideologies which motivated the Oklahoma River's rebranded, rerouted homecoming was and is founded in a settler notion of utility and objectification. The land, in this revitalization project, was not allowed to belong to itself. Bringing the water back to the river was a majorly utilitarian matter; therein lies its rhetorical erasure.

2.1.2 Utilitarian Objectification

It was perhaps this era of rerouting , when placemakers determined the river as needing to be domesticated, that most formed the rhetoric of the river's primarily economic and objectified setting in the city's placemaking. The river post-draining had been described as a ditch; "An eyesore and a pity"; "'a scar through the city's heart'"; "'a benign creature that is not serving anybody'" ("A River's Rise"; Lackmeyer and Money). The Corps of Engineer's first damming project created an infrastructural reality around which place would continue to build, including regarding the river as the "problem," rather than the damming. It is understandably difficult, when the two apparent

options are to face dangerous and record-breaking floods or sustain a city, to blame the river. Yet, by straightening, redirecting, and draining the North Canadian, the City of Oklahoma City agreed to construct a future in which naturally-occurring environmental identities fall subordinate to their shared environmental relatives – humans. Excluded from this era of placemaking was a harmonious recognition of shared environmental responsibility (i.e. expansive community); embedded is a perpetuation of environmental objectification that, once solidified through the rhetorical reality-maker that is policy-backed infrastructure, is extremely difficult – but not impossible! – to revise.

Such objectification, similar to Powell et al.'s invocation of object-orientedness, regards a cultural figure – in this case, the river – as an inanimate or non-autonomous object that, because of its presumed untetheredness to settler notions of sentience and dignity, can be isolated and/or manipulated with little consequence (Act I, Scene 1). Though they explicitly do not project their definition of object-orientedness onto object-oriented ontology, a scholarship supporting a metaphysical equilibrium between and that separates nonhumans and humans, Powell et al. describe consequences of object-orientation that is highly relevant to this project's understanding of objectification. They say that an object-oriented approach to cultural communities and understanding their culture "erases the human [and, I argue, nonhuman] bodies involved in their makings," and that such erasure is rooted in settler colonial/capitalist paradigms (Act I, Scene 1). Finally, just erasure through objectification acts as an "allowance" within the settler colonial paradigm to inflict harm or unauthorized changes to bodies. This extractivism and misaligned notion of jurisdiction is exemplified in our human-caused era of climate crisis, as objectified land apparently "warrants" human dominance and decision-making. This erasure through objectification tends to "background" natural community members, *like* rivers and trees, so that their removal or manipulation seems to have little consequence on human community actors.

The notion that landscapes and entities with which we co-occupy land are mere objects is a familiar settler colonial epistemology. My use of "it" language throughout this project is not meant to be reflective of such objectivism, but rather because I feel my cultural languaging practices are too limited, and my knowledge of how my non-human neighbors ought to be regarded very little. Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* presents myself and fellow English speakers with opportunities to revise our language to reflect the honor upon which we tend to bestow subjectified beings (humans, but also pets, things of which we are fond, etc.) (48-59). My decision to continue to use "it" is informed by two principles which I hold: 1) "It" does not have to hold the typical English, lifeless objective connotation; the aim of this thesis project is to highlight the sanctity of environmental life on the primary basis of its existence, and not out of a human ethic of protection in which we deem worthiness upon land, even with good intentions. 2) I do not feel that I could have the right to give names or precise pronouns to community figures without conferring with them first. My hesitancy to rhetorically or linguistically anthropomorphize the river or its non-human neighbors is not out of disrespect. "Subjectivity" within environmental understanding should not be hierarchical, and is itself a concept that, I believe and have been taught, should be carefully considered. Rather than residing in the binaries of objectivity and subjectivity, or even granting valence to either, I understand subjectivity to be an entry point into an entirely different way of thinking – a rhizomatic, à la Deleuze and Guattari, coalition in which sentience is not measured against human capabilities, but "is" on its own. Much like the great rhetorical obstacle of infrastructure, our current tendency toward this ob/subject binary, and the epistemological place many of us often begin, makes the goal of moving away from settler colonial utilitarian placemaking so insidious (and yet so, radically worth pursuing).

This rhetorical space of non-human utilitarian objectification is also a potential place for kinship between bodies who are objectified because of hegemonic system ideologies. This move,

from space to place wherein the interim is kinship of objectified bodies, resituates the objectified; utilitarianism, in environmental spaces, detaches bodies from their home places and communities and assigns a submissive purpose to serving the goal of utility. In the context of land, for example, this might be reflected linguistically as describing situatedness as "on" – "I am 'on' a hill." To move from space to place, and in this move restore kinship between objectified bodies, might be located differently in language – "I am 'in' the field." Within this framework, landscape becomes a space that we are *on*, or rhetorically separate from, whereas our "place" continues to develop as we establish memory and connection with the particular ways that infrastructure and environmental figures have been configured through city planning policy to create a "scene." The difference between "on" and "within" might be found in the ethos of city planning policy in that it is designed to create sectors of engagement through utilitarian lenses.

Even the sectoring of land for preservation, viewing, or traditionally-considered "outdoor engagement" is a rhetorical construct that identities parts of land as "for something." In the case of the Oklahoma River – even beyond its damming and draining – the economic and infrastructural development has been designed to designate a naturally-occurring area as "for." That its development and utility – its "for" – testifies to the rhetorical construction of natural bodies is evident in the submission of PUD 1725, the Planned Unit Development Design Statement, submitted on April 20, 2020. PUD 1725 is a response to the city's master policy plan, planokc, which guides the necessity for emphasizing the "for"-ness of environmental entities. Though I will expand upon this in a later section, it is important to note, within the discussion of environmental objectification and utility, how policy can enshrine such beliefs into placemaking, and is itself a rhetorical practice. Informal rhetorical practices of placemaking that use utilitarian objectification within their frameworks will then likely codify such perspectives into policy, then city planning,

which I identify as the process which makes regarding the environment as a place which we are "within," and a relationship which we must foster, a much harder epistemological shift.

2.1.3 The "Oklahoma River"

Naming practices in placemaking are a powerful rhetorical tool. To name something is not just to bestow its identity, but to share the histories of such names with others in a way that seems nearly irrefutable, rigid, and eternal; the rhetorical practice of naming is a performance of identity, reinforcement of hegemony, and motivator and creator of public memory (Vanguri). In 2004, civic leader Ray Ackerman advocated for the governor to change the name "North Canadian" to "Oklahoma." Ackerman "understood the power of a name and saw little value in one strapped to an inglorious past (and one so alien to its geography – being neither Canadian nor very far north)" ("A River's Rise").[3] It's ironic that the river's supposed geography is itself a construction; the name "Oklahoma," as we learned time and again in Okie primary school, was bestowed by the Choctaw in a treaty agreement. The name Canada, too, was the culmination of Indigenous and colonial histories. And even "north," which operates as our cardinal Western "up," and a cultural navigation landmark for all other directions ("north" is polar south, connotes winter). Yet before Ackerman, and even before the U.S. federal government minted "North Canadian," Muscogee (Creek) writer Alexander Posey called this tributary the Oktahutchee, meaning "sand creek." The river lived in duality thereafter as the Oktahutchee to the Creek Nation and the North Canadian to everyone else.

The "Oklahoma River," rather than the Oktahutchee or a new name altogether, is a name which has worked to cement settler and Western reality on land trod and known by so many others – the Wichita, Kaw, Kickapoo, Ponca, Tonkawa, Otoe-Missouria, Pawnee, Osage, Cherokee, and Kiowa. Further, this "Oklahoma" name invokes a colonial Oklahoma and Oklahoma City; despite

[3] This source comes from a six-part storytelling document produced by Greater Oklahoma City, an affiliate of the Chamber of Commerce, under their stories of "Greater Oklahoma City Economic Development."

its Choctaw name, the soon-to-be glorious "Oklahoma River" which Ackerman rhetorically assessed Governor Henry codified is a version seeking settler colonial perpetuity and environmental objectification. The river's name would bestow its incoming value and glory because it would soon become a world–class utility.

To forgo "Oktahutchee" was, perhaps, again an alienation of the river's geography and, further, a move which revoked the river's identity as an entity beyond settler colonial sociopolitical rhetorical practices. If naming is a placemaking practice, translating "Oklahoma River" across the utilitarian push toward river revitalization situates the river's rhetorical identity in how it serves and responds to Oklahoma City – specifically white and wealthy, as those were and are its namers – dwellers. It is not purely the practice of settler versus Native naming which erases the river's identity; it is not trading one act for another and valuing them as morally good and bad. Posey's name for the river came from the relationship which he built with it, poeticized in his *Song of the Oktahutchee*. Ackerman's naming practice, conversely, was situated in outward value and glory rooted in economic prosperity for and from a select group of Oklahoma City residents – a reinforcement of hegemony. And most importantly, rooted in the violence that is and was the settlement of Indian Territory and the draining, corralling, and straightening of a powerful life force.

"North Canadian" is not the rhetorical act which made the river "alien to its geography." It was the construction of its *new* geography – the domestication, development, and utilitarian objectification that rhetorically detached the river from its community – that forced the river to be foreign to itself. There is erasure woven into this new name, of the river and those who live/d alongside it. The Oklahoma River was renamed as it was folded into a reformed reality of place. I ask, in our anthropogenic present, how we might expect Black human neighbors of the river – who, too, have had land relationships manipulated through infrastructure –to find environmental belonging in a place not even allowed to know itself?

2.2 PLACE POLICY ON THE OKLAHOMA RIVER

Theories of place and placemaking usually measure spatial meaning-making through environmental, discursive, cultural, infrastructural, and/or economic affect and stewardship. Mundell and Nash distinguish between "place" and "developmental space" by quality, futurity, and "foremost[,] an appreciation of markers and frameworks within which these places are formed…includ[ing] the supply of appropriate land and competing demands for [it] (13-29). Their combination of environmental health and social engagement, however, is funneled through economic efficacy as a measure of performative placemaking. As I develop my understanding of rhetorical placemaking, and especially relational environmental stewardship within it, I often question the sustainability of the measurement. On one hand, I recognize that economic stewardship is a viable and proven method for sustaining community engagement and desire; economic stewardship is motivated by creating spaces and places in which residents, citizens, people, and non-human entities can invest time, collaborate, and overall enhance a quality of life. On the other hand, the dominance of an economic metric of success, within places built upon settler colonialism, denigrates the soul health of those who reside in such places.

In following subsections, I will demonstrate how planokc constructs place on the river and how rhetoric within Oklahoma City's environmental placemaking policy is reflected in PUD 1725, accompanying city council meetings, and a particular city tourism map . I argue that such environmental and place development sustains antiquated and harmful ideals of nature-as-amenity, which also sustains river identity erasure and perpetuates the barriers between primarily Black neighborhoods among and around the Oklahoma River.

2.2.1 planokc

planokc is the most recent iteration of Oklahoma City's comprehensive plan, or the "vision statement" document for city/community's current state and plan for future guided by shared values

and goals. planokc inherently complements MAPS, the Metropolitan Area Projects, as a city-development tool created with the input of community interests, needs, and voices. The document, navigable by an accompanying website, is divided into eight Elements: sustainokc; connectokc; greenokc; liveokc; enrichokc; playokc; strengthenock; and serveokc. planokc "serves as a guide for elected and public officials by providing the framework for evaluating development proposals…and describes, where, how, and in some cases when development should occur" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). This planning document, the first of its kind in Oklahoma City since 1977 and implemented in 2015, is the guiding placemaking policy initiative and ethos for the City. This is the document to which placemaking projects like the one proposed in PUD 1725 must respond to, and is thus a critical background for understanding the motivations and qualifiers of Oklahoma River development.

2.2.3 Planned Unit Development 1725 Design Statement

I came across the PUD 1725 Design Statement for the Oklahoma City Boathouse District almost by accident. Visiting the City Clerk's office in Downtown OKC, I spoke with Tony L., supervisor of city archives. As we discussed potential research avenues for me ("You didn't really need to come in person; pretty much everything is accessible online, but I'm happy to help"), I asked how the general public had received plans to alter the river. Unsurprisingly, Tony recalled great public support, echoing usual sentiments of the river – that residents saw it as just "there." Part of what makes MAPS so influential in the city is the all-around support that we Okies lend it. The projects that have come from MAPS have restructured place and revitalized Oklahoma City in a myriad of ways. My decision to focus on PUD 1725 instead of MAPS is because the PUD represents a micro-level manifestation of place policy and projects, providing a closer look at the rhetorical moves that more intimately made Oklahoma River development possible.

I began to gather my things when Tony offhandedly mentioned: "I mean they even rezoned that part of the river for Riversport." I paused. "Sorry? Did they really? Do you have any documents on this?" Rezoning is a legal recognition of developing land-use principles and practices. To rezone the banks of the river perpetuates the opus of land use decision on lawmakers and public/private land developers. Essentially, rezoning the river banks classifies land and river within human (and specifically settler government) jurisdiction. Its goal is "to bring all property controlled by one entity under a PUD with a customized DTD-2 base," or rather to identify land as an objective and moldable title under a human entity's supervision, codified into a document supported by city planning policy as the primary placemaking tool (Zitzow 2). The PUD 1725 Design Statement (PUD 1725) is, thus, a document clarifying the rhetorical intentions of infrastructure and placemaking on the river, and articulates how city planning policy guides placemakers' perceptions of the river's identity (valued as an economic opportunity and amenity).

The purpose of PUD 1725 is to clarify the location, zoning agreement, purpose, and policy alignments of the proposed infrastructural design. Any land use, including commercial, housing, and engagement projects submitted within a Planned Unit Development must align with re/zoning laws and comprehensive policy guidelines. For PUD 1725, the design statement reflects how the proposed river development project will align with rezoned land use parameters around the Oklahoma River and broader planokc policy. This extensive document has been submitted to the City of Oklahoma City Council for approval.

The PUD 1725 for Oklahoma River development forefronts settler utilitarian land use from its first page, translating the hierarchy of land relationships typical in settler colonial placemaking onto river engagement. Its authors – Johnson & Associates, Inc., hired by its applicant the Oklahoma Riversport Foundation to prepare the document – designates the "owner" of the riverbank – referred to in this document as "the property" – as the City of Oklahoma City, with

license to lease and develop given to the Oklahoma City Boathouse Foundation (§3.0). Designating ownership of land, in this placemaking framework, is synonymous with granting rights of stewardship and, even more critically, the right to define stewardship practices. Even as Oklahoma City policy articulates a vested interest in ecological and environmental sustainability, its leeway on economy-centered placemaking rhetorically insists that stewardship equates to economic health and sustainability. The purpose of rezoning the Boathouse/Riversport area is to "continue to foster the development of recreational Riversport activities with a mixture of events and permanent installations. The subject property is mostly developed with boat houses, white water rapids and other recreational activities" (§ 4.0). I do not pretend to advocate for a design statement which does *not* focus on infrastructural and recreational placemaking; rather, I argue that their language clearly delineates priority of placemaking strategy by designating land ownership and operating from the perspective of non-agency of the river.

The authors do the same in their locational practices. In §4.0 "Site and Surrounding Area," the writers identify the developmental based on its cardinal proximities to other economic land designations:

> North: Immediately north of the subject site is US Interstate 40. Beyond I-40 is the DBD, **"Downtown Business District" zoning and Lower Bricktown.**
>
> East: Directly east of the proposed PUD are I-35 and I-235. **These are highways with significant rights-of-way. Beyond the highways, there are industrial zoned lands and residential zoning along the river front.** Southeast across the river is the First Americans Museum.
>
> South: Directly south of the proposed PUD is developed I-3, "Heavy Industrial" zoning. **The land is developed as a rail yard for storage and transportation purposes.**

West: Property to the west of the subject site is primarily zoned DTD-2, "Downtown Transitional District, General," and DBD, "Downtown Business District", which permit a wide array of uses. The property to the west, across I-40, is the Bricktown River Walk Park that features the Centennial Land Run Monument. Further west is the Producer's Coop site. **The property to the southwest is currently developed for industrial uses such as a salvage yard for automotive vehicles and an outdoor storage operation**. (bolded added)

Regarding policy compatibility with planokc matrix for land use conflict identification, they later summarize this section as a site "bound by highways and a railroad. No residential uses are located nearby" (Zitzow 15). The design statement uses locating language that reference hegemonic settler place and geographies that reference other harmful settler placemaking projects – industrial zones, the Land Run Monument, the Interstates. This locational language reinforced hegemonic ways of knowing, orienting around, and engaging with the Oklahoma River and surrounding land. The Section 4 introduction further articulates this geography of the river and surrounding areas; because this document inherently situates riparian community members as within its broader settler placemaking structure, the PUD 1725 design statement is a clear representation of the embedded objectification, hierarchy of entities. As one documented moment within a history of rhetorical placemaking, the PUD 1725 design statement aids in sustaining the hegemony of today's settler-informed notion of "the Oklahoma River." It both reflects and perpetuates a version of geography that has been constructed without accounting for the identity and agency of the river – in fact, despite it.

Section 6, labeled "Concept," relays the Developer's intentions to "rezone the subject property to further restrict the type of development permitted within this area and *to keep consistent with what has already occurred*. City leaders and taxpayers have set the stage for what the Boathouse District is to be, and this PUD will further refine that vision" (emphasis added, 2). What has already

occurred includes revocation of the natural rights of the river; the construction of the Boathouse District; the zoning, leasing, and land use designation to the OKC Boathouse Foundation. The explicit aim of consistency toward this history indicates a lack of critical consideration toward the river's history and placemakers' desire to move forward with its objectification – the disallowance to belong and be identified on its own, or even under collaborative terms.

MAPS, too, has provided incredible opportunities for OKC citizens, regardless of their economic status, to engage with the city; to be integral participants in city design, decision making, and diversity. It is clear to me, as a long-time OKC metro resident and Okie at heart, that the vision for which the Boathouse District, city leaders, and taxpayers have set up is in large part referential to MAPS. Yet the Boathouse District is distinct from many of MAPS' initiatives and engagement effects in that it does not, in fact, respond to the human and land demographics represented in its area. Whereas Scissortail Park hosts initiatives to engage with land stewardship practices and foster native plant habits, pollinator sites, and environmental learning spaces; whereas sidewalks have been built to support walkability; whereas the Clara Luper Civil Rights Center and Diversion Hub are projects specifically designed to highlight and work against systemic injustices, the Boathouse District has allowed developments that turn away from the revolutionary principles which MAPS has proven bandwidth for. Parks are much more easily designated as places to foster land relationships; rivers, on the other hand, have proven perhaps too powerful, or too useless, to let run freely.

The Planned Unit Development 1725 design statement rhetorically informs the infrastructural manifestations of placemaking on the Oklahoma River. The document also works as a mediator of sorts; it is a moment between planokc policy and the control of what is/not allowed to infrastructurally occur on land – " to further restrict the type of development permitted within this area [and] keep the development consistent with what has already occurred," i.e. the Boathouse

District (2). In an albeit complicated way, this document requests permission to continue to sustain settler land ideology of ownership,hierarchy, and river erasure through its geographic, locational, and infrastructural practice of defining the river on the Boathouse's terms. This is placemaking, and placemaking in a specifically settler way.

The following documents, the memorandums from 1999-2003, offer another reflection of rhetorical developments of Oklahoma River placemaking. These documents, also coming from the OKC City Council, regard river dam approval agendas from council meetings that detail (in my focus), the location, background, and previous action taken on the proposed developments. These council meetings also took place closer to the inception of MAPS in 1993 and thus offer some insight into how language and infrastructure regarding the Oklahoma River have shifted over time as more placemaking projects in OKC have generated a more shared sense of place and belonging within the public.

2.2.4 Memorandums, 1999-2003

Different from the PUD 1725 design statement, which was submitted in 2020, the 1999-2003 city council memos on the Oklahoma River dams offer more nuanced backgrounds of both river and rhetorical development in placemaking efforts. City council memorandums on the development of the river interestingly reflect a rhetorical shift toward economic sustainability over (symbiotic) land stewardship. The memos act, in this project, as an addendum to PUD 1725 and lend more insight into the city placemakers' epistemologies and environmental considerations which foregrounded the Boathouse District/Riversport development and bridge some gaps in the developing environmental/cultural rhetoric.. These sample memos (sourced from Tony, thank you Tony) regard development and enhancements for low water dams and lake improvements from 1999 to 2003. These agendas, instigated by MAPS first phase, reflect policy makers, engineers, and city council perspectives and priorities of what the future of the river should look like. This included

construction plans for two dams, Dam 2 and Dam 3, modeled after MAPS' North Canadian Eastern Avenue Dam, or Dam 1.

Memos from January to March of 1999 articulate that among the Architect/Engineer's scope of work included integrating the two new dams into Dam 1's system and developing landscaping, trials, and would be responsible for bank treatment in compliance with MAPS' Dam 1 (Deck Item No. VIII. H.). The City hired the Army Corps of Engineers and obtained federal funding under the Ecosystem Restoration Services Section 1135 program. This program, enacted in 1968, "provides the authority to modify existing Corps projects to restore the environment and construct new projects *to restore areas degraded by Corps projects.* [Projects must be] technically feasible, environmentally acceptable, and provid[e] cost effective environmental benefits" (emphasis added; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers). Memo Item No. VIII. H. of March 23, 1999, further describes the program as an aquatic ecosystem improvement, and protection effort with a specific emphasis on wetland, wildlife, and riparian quality of life through restoration. Such environmental improvements included diverting the river to construct Dams 2 and 3; "a series of proposed wetland and riparian areas, nature trails within and through [such areas], and planting of trees and other landscape enhancements, all of which qualify for such Corps evaluation."

Two words from this moment, "enhancement" and "qualify" further reveal the almost bureaucratic settler hierarchy embedded in Oklahoma River placemaking. This memo reflects a belief that the City of Oklahoma City holds jurisdiction in deciding what constitutes "enhancement," while, ironically, in the same effort acknowledging that past harms have been made using the same system of thought. "Qualify" operates similarly, portraying natural entities as needing to reach a predetermined threshold for enhancement. Section 1135 is designed to restore placemaking and environmental harm caused by Corps projects which acted within settler colonial frameworks of enhancement. Though local placemaking projects, rather than federal, are demonstrably more

effective in enhancing place, why should such projects which operate in the same paradigm reap more sustainable results? The operating jurisdictional assumption in "enhancement" within this paradigm limits political and environmental possibilities of multi-actor, and therefore multi-jurisdictional, constituents that can, together, produce more sustainable and inclusive spaces and places (Pasternak et al. 4).

Yet, while these settler valuations of land clearly thrived in the initiation of the Boathouse District and perpetuated unbelonging of the river in placemaking, City Manager Deck and the City Council still clarify the objective "of the program [as] to improve the quality of the environment through the restoration of fish and wildlife habitat at existing [Corps civil work sites]," i.e. dams along the river. I hold this tensions in tandem. In 1999, the objective of recruiting Corps and Engineers' funding held a strong and more ecological and environmental wellbeing focus. And yet, "improvement," "quality," and "restoration" seem at odds with "existing Corps sites" and even determined by using human-centric valuations. Pasternak et al.'s invocation of multi-constituent jurisdiction is a helpful frame for interpreting Oklahoma City's human-dominant modes and limitations for evaluating environmental care. I remain justifiably unconvinced that environmental wellbeing for these damming projects was constellated with non-human rights. However, I also note a stark change in language from 1999 to 2003 in which the prioritization of environmental wellbeing became not even synonymous with placemaking, but perhaps undervalued. Overtime, river restoration changed from a process, which connotes degrees of careful intention, to a bureaucratically efficient itemization as a component of further infrastructural development prospects. More and more, the river rhetorically becomes "for" something besides itself.

The itemization of Restoration as present in these memos demonstrates, within the Western framework exercised by the city, objectification through/ as construction. Each memorandum from 2001 details financing for Dams 2 and 3 and the cooperative efforts between the City of Oklahoma

City and the Army Corps of Engineers. "Restoration" only shows up in the following context: "This escrow agreement is for Project (2) Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration (Between Western Avenue and May Avenue) Basin," or substituting the other Project numbers, 1 and 3, and names, Bottomland Hardwood and Riverine within which "Restoration" is titled. Three memos exist from this year, all from November 14.

The most generous interpretation of how "Restoration" manifested because of these documents is that the summation of Restoration as a proper noun bestowing a project name was the product of well-researched, deduced, and discussed definitional practices of its manifestation. Indeed, the December 1999 memo details these Restorations:

> Planting riparian and bottomland hardwood trees and screenings, construction of wetlands and riverine habitat, aquatic plantings within the river, construction of wing dikes and water control structures within the river to protect aquatic plantings and promote fish and other habitat structure, and construction of maintenance access trails along the corridor (Deck 1999).

Even within this scenario, the language shift from a process of detailed care to itemization, though efficient, morphs Restoration into a solidified and realized project-for-product. This is not inherently unsustainable; rather, because this move occurs within the settler colonial framework of utility, what begins as an act of care has ample opportunity to become a "thing" to "finish." This move is necessary within an ethos of efficiency, be it bureaucratic, economic, or otherwise. In 1999, "little-r" restoration was a process of detailed care for which the City needed funding to perform. Once said funds were granted, restoration was expedited into a more obvious space of itemization, utility, in which environmental health matures utility categorization matures for economic well being. This process is enabled by the foundation of utilitarian objectification, demonstrating why the paradox of "restoration" and "existing Corps sites" can coexist. The intention for careful (or,

less/differently-violent than outright extraction) environmental health was clearly present, however the foundations of these placemaking policy efforts – rhetorical, systemic, epistemological – could not, in its execution, sustain their futures to the fullest.

Interruptions didn't help. The realignment of Interstate 40 in May 2002 – which also further displaced historically Black riverside/river-near neighborhoods; see Chapter 3) – disrupted Dam 2's ecosystem restoration project, prompting the City Council to further revise specifications after other, unrelated disruptions in construction plans. This is the sole memorandum from the year 2002, submitted on May 29. There are, amidst two pages of project setback descriptions, some mentions of the "development of landscaping, trains, access and bank treatment [meant to be similar in design to Dam 1]," and an acknowledgement of the $15,000,000 of federal funds received specifically for "ecosystem restoration and enhancement of the MAPS North Canadian River corridor." In the final, one-paged memo summarizing the project since March of 1999 and submitted on November 18, 2003, the only mention of environmental wellbeing is the exact same language as 2002. These moments in the council memos reflect a recentering of river restoration from a project for ecological community wellbeing to a component of a broader and more economically important placemaking strategy – that is, the river becoming an economic hub for OKC. The May 29 mention of restoration and enhancement is itself couched in qualifications for federal funds, rather than federal funding as a supporting vehicle for ecological health. This arrangement, seemingly unimportant, might instead reflect a broader move toward environment-as-economy and infrastructural development as a means to that end as Oklahoma City placemaking began to ramp up through MAPS.

–

It seems notable that, in these documents, the river is still referred to as the North Canadian. Not because of the chronology of the renaming, but its rhetorical effect on placemaking. I wonder about the correlation between these memos language shifting away from eco-inclusive restoration

projects by 2003 and Ackerman's successful campaign to rename the river, inducted in 2004. What I see in the ascension of *place* and the river in Oklahoma City is a willingness to bypass life and livelihood for the enhancement of the very same. The difference is deservingness. Who and what deserved a particularly autonomous and vivacious existence was forcefully arbitrated by infrastructure and notions of jurisdiction. These historical moments allow an attempt to take the temperature of the city during the [development] of the river as we see (but do we know?) it today. Erasure was riddled in its formulation: revision of ecological focuses; a name change; an Interstate realignment that effectively and disproportionately changed the reality of the city. It seems unlikely that further deidentification could happen between the river and its neighbors. Now that the river has been made to be "for," wouldn't this version finally be mapped onto the story of glory and greatness that Oklahoma City strives to write?

Surprisingly, no.

2.2.5 Mapping OKC As Economy

Figure 3: VisitOKC District Map.

The erasure of the Oklahoma River in OKC placemaking comes to a head with this map. Like the best research finds of this project, I came across this map by chance. I'd landed at the Will Rogers International Airport for the same research trip during which I'd met Tony. My parents, who picked me up, walked me back to the car, through Will Rogers' lobby . At the tourist desk was an array of pamphlets, guides, and magazines about the 405. I rifled through offhandedly, unfolding the above map. "WAIT!" I yelled to my parents a few steps ahead of me. "Look at this. What do you notice?"

This map reflects decades of MAPS placemaking projects and generations of complicated infrastructures. But most importantly, this map does not include the river. This does not appear as lack of ability to show water or highlight river placemaking; Lakes Hefner, Overholser, and Stanley Draper are all depicted in a deep blue; Riversport and the Boathouse District are present and accounted for. What *is* shown is the lauded Interstate crossway of I-235 and I-40. At some point in the design process for this map, someone or some people had to make the decision to exclude the river. To put it in the frame which Pasternak et al., this rhetorical decision reflects settler jurisdiction and exclusionary beliefs about nonhuman entities that is an inadequate model for the exigence of collective climatic futures (4; Pilsch 14-6). An inability, and worse unwillingness, to account for major community/environmental figures on a local scale, and to instead foreground infrastructure for the goal of economic development (as is the goal of tourism material), is a massive disservice to place and placemakers.

Sam Anderson, in his book *Boom Town*, on the many threads of history and placemaking in Oklahoma City, begins his storytelling with directions on how to arrive to Oklahoma City. Anderson researched for years how Oklahoma City tells its stories, maps itself, and has built its sense of place. The following excerpt encapsulates how the river has fit into these narratives and is reflected in the above map:

> You'll **cross over** the Oklahoma River, healthy and full, **although it is not, technically, a river anymore**, because it has been corralled in a concrete trough that is fed and drained by dams at either end, which makes it more like a canal, really, or an inland lake. But **at least now** it is full of water, more **dependable** than the natural river, and as such it has become the anchor of a whole new area of town: the Boathouse District (Anderson 6).

What story does this map tell? For a reader familiarizing themselves with Oklahoma City, they would have no idea of this integral community figure. That would be their reality of Oklahoma City until they were told or shown differently. The Oklahoma River, as Anderson notes, has been corralled, manipulated, *erased* to become a utility that ultimately informs not reciprocal environmental engagement, not an example on how to have healthy environmental relationships, *not* that beings are allowed to belong as they are, but to be an anchor for an artificial, class-restricting, infrastructurally inequitable gateway that has been deemed a more integral figure in OKC placemaking than the very river the city was built on. This is the insidious nature of erasure in placemaking.

2.3 UN/BELONGING IN/ON THE OKLAHOMA RIVER

The result of river erasure in policy-backed placemaking documents has manifested dishearteningly in the above image. The critical difference between building on the river and building with the river is a reorientation that could unfurl in the infrastructural placemaking rhetoric. There are incredible possibilities, within river and city planning policy, of recognizing rivers/river infrastructures not just as a "thing," but "something that…[also] requires constant maintenance and care" which is rooted in a renewed interpretation of community. River infrastructure would become "something within which we are also embedded – a web of relations – maintaining and holding up Indigenous and natural law, making sure that our rivers stay healthy. If our attention is drawn to those healthy relations, then we are going to treat these infrastructures differently" (Pasternak et al.

3). Engaging this practice within infrastructural planning and policy – the process of "writing" a city – situates collaborative human and non-human agency as critical for belonging and futurities.

Placemaking is as rhetorical as it is infrastructural; the two occur simultaneously and conversationally Generated from my analysis of the rhetoric of infrastructure and this chapter's documents, I propose that the rhetorical work of infrastructure might be most easily understood using the following metaphor:

- Space and land are a sheet of paper without words.[4] This sheet of paper has its own meaning and history.
- A group of writers decide to write on the paper. It is up to them to recognize that the paper is its own entity; it has a life before, during, and after its engagement with the writers.
- The words written on the page are infrastructure.
- The meaning of all of the words put together is the construction of place.
- The process of that meaning-making is placemaking.
- The writers who decide which words to use and where are city developers, including policymakers, engineers, investors, etc.
- The readers and critics of the written piece, the audience, read, interpret, and likely internalize the words and, hopefully, the paper, too. They might consider their existences separately, as one, isolated, or in any number of ways.
- The sheet of paper with words exists in its new life, in public memory, and has created a new reality for engagement.

Public memory of an environmental landscape is a powerful result of the perpetuity that economic motivation in placemaking can create; infrastructure can "legitimize" conditional environmental belonging wherein, to quote Black environmental activist and retired National Park

[4] I choose the language "without words" instead of "blank" very intentionally.

ranger Betty Reid Soskin,[5] "'what gets remembered is a function of whose [*sic*] in the room doing the remembering'" (Finney 59-62). As placemaking can be identified as relationships fostered between non-human neighbors, human dwellers, and material fixtures, an economy-first underpinning within placemaking threads monetary utilitarian objectification in how those who retain public memory understand their situatedness within their environment. For example, a river within an economy-first placemaking framework, especially one that has been altered for use, might begin to "work for" a place, running counter to its natural course. Within its environment, this river begins to occupy at least two identities: one which serves a community against its will, and one which knows its natural course and may even crave it, still.

When altered, is the Oklahoma River still a part of its community? I would argue yes and no, within both/any identities. Rather than a member, however, its utilitarian infrastructure situated the river as foremost an "experience," or whatever other parameters the economic ideology allows. The alterations made to the river, because of the institutional power of infrastructure and the policies which allow it, create a new memory for the public which interacts with the river. Its new infrastructure dictates how the public is/is not allowed to engage with it. This generates new conditions of belonging – both for the river and members of the public who may/not be able to access it due to new or existing infrastructures. A primary agent in this narrative is policy. Policy is an institution – a rhetorical powerhouse for establishing and embedding sets of norms, expectations for conduct, and even conditions for belonging in society/ies (Sackey 21). Because policy-backed infrastructural projects like dams, river draining, rerouting, etc. have the institutional means to create and solidify specific realities of place, the version of place from such institutions are more likely to become a relevant part of public memory and sense of place. For Oklahoma City, the river, and

[5] Who was, at the time of her retirement in early spring of 2022, the oldest recognized ranger in the National Park Service.

those around it, such policy is identified here as planokc, the comprehensive policy plan for the city's development.

Missing from the city's locational accounts – from this geography – is any mention of the Black and Hispanic communities displaced by the same foundational placemaking (thus, rhetorics) present within PUD 1725. Section 6.0 further locates the river based on erasure-laden infrastructural placements: "Located on the Oklahoma River in downtown OKC, the Boathouse Districts is at the crossroads of the nation at the intersection of I-35 and I-40, making it easily accessible to metro OKC residents as well as visitors to our city" (2). In the following chapter, I will dissect the underlying assumptions of this document's use of "residents" and "access." For now, it is important to note that such "easy access" is, too, the infrastructural result of erasure. The I-35 and I-40 (and I-253; there are, in fact, three interstates running through this area) crossroads run through two now-destroyed historically Black neighborhoods, Deep Deuce and Walnut Grove; these interstates pushed remaining residents into another historically-Black neighborhood, the Eastside, which today is cusped by both interstates, separating Eastside residents from the river. The land between the two – the Oklahoma River and the Eastside – is, as noted by PUD 1725, "currently developed for industrial uses such as a salvage yard for automotive vehicles and an outdoor storage operation" (§4.0).

In Oklahoma City, through the utilitarian development of the river, Black land relationships have also been systematically stupored by placemaking practices of unbelonging; likewise, I find that the unwillingness to engage truths of erasure at the foundation of placemaking development grants, if not wills, a permission to "forget" the humans and non-human kin with which reside within land. The geographies being formed are worse than inaccurate; they speak to an economic drive for placemaking that pretends to necessitate infrastructural amnesia. This model of insidious

placemaking, though effective, as evident in the strong connotations of place in OKC, is not sustainable within our current climate emergency and burgeoning analysis of the Anthropocene.

To understand how environmental unbelonging is made for Black folks, it is vital to capture plot points in the stories we tell about the places we, Black folks, do and/or don't belong. How can we build stronger, louder, more accessible relationships to our environments if the very bodies which make them up are not allowed to belong to themselves? Essentially, how can Black land relationships thrive when the land itself is not allowed to belong? Jurisdiction, policy, infrastructure – these are the forces which have historically, in the conception of the United States, made and prevented allowances for belonging. As "wilderness" and nature narratives – the "outdoors" – were made, so, too were their audiences depicted. Excluded were the very Indigenous people who have always lived with the land, and contingently included were Black folks whose genesis on this continent began with violent displacement. It is such displacement under which the concept of Oklahoma City was created, and a throughline which place policymakers cannot seem to dissect from – yet.

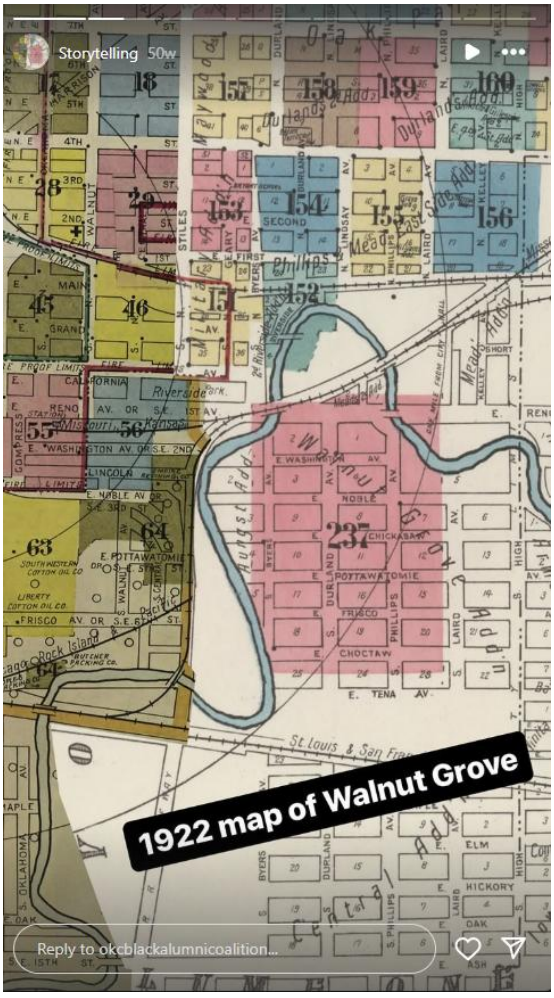
The development, naming, construction, and public ideation of the Oklahoma River is evident of such. For better *and* for worse, the city has propelled its glory through the commodification of the same identities that it has infrastructurally erased. A body of life was regarded within a nature-as-economy lens until its floods became unbearable; then, the river was the same kind of wild that frontiersman rhetoric which expansionist Americans deemed in need of taming. The river was dammed; the river was straightened; the river was drained. Its revitalization was contingent only on how it might serve the people who built their lives around and, within the public narrative, despite it. The river would be brought back under the pretense that its new life – made without its permission and regardless of its evident desire to curve, bend, and run – would bring glory upon the city. It would make Oklahoma City a place that its residents wanted to be and

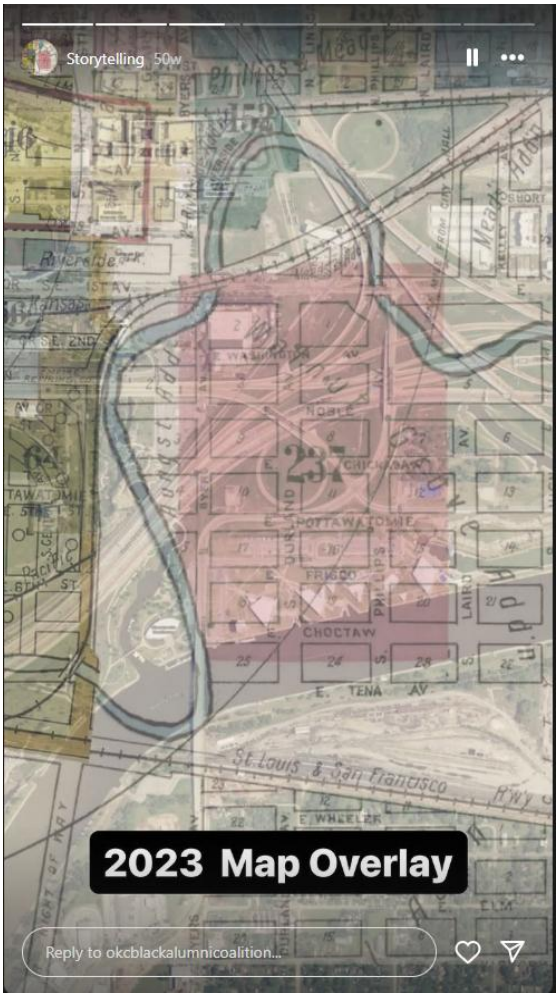
that outsiders would want to visit. The river would become world-renowned for how it has been altered to serve human economic interests and recreation. So much so that it would no longer be the river itself that visitors come to engage with, but the *district* built on its banks. The Oklahoma River would become a destination. People would engage with a form of nature that was rhetorically made through our society's strongest rhetorical reality-makers.

So it was and so it is. Come, visit Oklahoma City: The Modern Frontier.

CHAPTER 3:

ENVIRONMENTAL UN/BELONGING IN BLACK OKC





Figures 4 & 5: 1922 and 2023 maps of Walnut Grove from @okcblackalumnicoalition Instagram story highlights.[6]

Walnut Grove, Oklahoma City was in this project before I even knew the neighborhood existed. I am sure that its residents, human and earthly in coalition, were pushing me to press into this history of the river; to find it despite its deep, deep burial in our city's history. It took three months of research before I did.

[6] If you look closely at the overlay in Figure x, the image shows that the Interstate crossway lies exactly where Walnut Grove and the riverbend used to be.

Walnut Grove was a predominantly Black and Hispanic neighborhood directly on the banks of the river and in the sonic trail of the highway. There is absolutely no getting around the fact that there is Black history written, and subsequently erased, in the waters of the Oktahutchee. I use its Creek name here because that seems like the only appropriate way to approach such a history. Walnut Grove, along with their adjacent Black neighborhood, Deep Deuce, were systematically erased by the damming of the river and implementation of the so-called "crossroads of the nation," Interstate 40 and Interstate 35 (PUD 1725, §6). The construction of these highways redlined the city of Oklahoma City further, razing the thriving Deep Deuce neighborhood, displaying its residents and separating them from our third Black neighborhood: the Eastside, once connected to Deep Deuce. Today, Eastside OKC is well-established hub of Black culture; Deep Deuce has been gentrified to the last brick, mining Black, jazz, and Civil Rights history through its sidewalk plaques; and Walnut Grove buried under the glory of Riversport, its strongholds remaining in the memories and descendants of this riverside village.

I consider Oklahoma City to be my home place. Though I have only lived in the metro area, I have spent much of my young adult life becoming within its prescribed city limits. I first became curious about the concept of place I *felt* it, potently, within the city. We have a distinct and beautiful way of knowing our place. We have watched how the downtown area transformed from our precarious auto industry days to a place that we want to be. And yes, resoundingly, such reality became so because of the very erasure practices that I detail here. The Oklahoma City Thunder came to our windswept plains in 2008; the Asian District has remained a cultural stronghold and Super Cao Ngyuen staple in sustaining my family's Filipino culinary heritage. We are a coffee city. We are a complicated city. The city is uniquely politically purple; despite Oklahoma's designation as "the red state," OKCers eyes were glued to our screens, closely watching to see if our county would flip blue for the first time in decades. Our city is led by a politically empathetic, community-based,

and strong leader, Mayor David Holt. Oklahoma City comes with its own lexicon; metro residents have a deeply vested interest in how place continues to form.

I rowed competitively on our river as a teenager. I have felt both held and profoundly out of place growing up in the metro area. I have perceived my funds to be welcome and my hair skin color to be either suspect or exotically interesting. I have walked into, and promptly out of, business establishments in which a person of color or economic diversity was nowhere in sight. I have missed my city dearly in my two year absence; I have been overwhelmingly angry with my city for its seeming inability to take the next half-step toward radical equity. This is my home place. I have chosen these geographies because they are mine, which I share with thousands of others. I have been hurt by my city and seek to identify, even begin to heal, wounds felt by myself and generations of non-white residents. To quote Dipo Faloyin, "Author's Note: I am not neutral."

It is from these stories which I develop the following rhetorical framework for placemaking in Black OKC. Drawing from three critical Black neighborhoods in Oklahoma City, I demonstrate how placemaking by and for Black OKCers has manifested, and specifically how such tense geographies are a case study for Black environmentalism today. Like Hawthorne and Lewis describe, the method of storying examines and placemakes within both "the Blackness of geography" and "the geography of Blackness." As a method employed by Black placemakers, storying also translates to Black geographic processes of remembering, reflecting, and resisting settler/hegemonic land epistems and geographies (4-9). As these OKC neighborhoods demonstrate, Black placemaking-by-storying is the reflection, remembrance, and resistance to forced displacement of Black communities and placemakers.

This chapter addresses the matters with which I began this project – what stories do Black folks inherit that sometimes make us believe we don't belong in nature? – through the lens of geography/infrastructure as influential rhetorical placemaking areas for Black communities in

Oklahoma City. I will further address how rhetorics in Black placemaking in OKC remember, reflect, and resist settler conditions for un/belonging with the Oklahoma River. I highlight these Black placemaking practices across three predominantly-Black neighborhoods among the river – Walnut Grove, Deep Deuce, and Eastside. I have chosen these neighborhoods because each represents a moment in time in which Black OKCers achieved or attempted emboldened relationships with the river and, because of targeted infrastructural projects, met generational obstacles. I primarily draw upon three storytelling bodies – the OKC Black Alumni Coalition (OBAC) Walnut Grove Project; dueling Deep Deuce place stories; and an Eastside mural – to articulate how place is made among Black OKC neighborhoods in relation to the Oklahoma River. Like the construction of the river's identity within OKC environmental placemaking, I argue that Black erasure and (assumed and actual) disengagement is an insidious, perpetuated consequence of the city's ongoing environmental placemaking.

3.1 BLACK LAND RELATIONSHIPS

There is a myth that Black people don't "do" the outdoors. It is perpetuated by media and reinforced even in Black homes. I grew up with this perception, even though I was never sure of where it came from. As noted at the introduction of this work, my father and I have had vastly different Black American experiences. Foremost, he is and has always been perceived as a Black man, an experience with which my Black womanhood can only stand in solidarity because they will never be the same. I am mixed Black/Filipina/White, so my skin tone shows up differently. While it has been more "believable" for my peers, as I was growing up, to believe that my father was my dad than it was to digest that my mother was my own, the variance in shade between my dad and I marked our movement through the world differently. And it was/is the places which we called home that played a significant role in this.

Dad grew up primarily in Ewa Beach, Oʻahu, Hawaiʻi and San Diego, California. When discussing this chapter with him, he shared that, because of this upbringing, his notions of "nature" and being someone of nature were greatly influenced by the land stories, topography, and people around him. He *did* mostly see Black and brown people engaging with nature; this form of nature was sand, oceans, sunshine. The seasons rarely changed; "inside schools" – schools with indoor hallways – were only a figure of television.

When he moved inland, he saw nature, but it was different. Wooded areas, different kinds of trees; trails, seasons, and "lakes" that, even after three decades of living in a landlocked state, he scoffs at (with the exception of five Great ones). He did not see Black and brown people engaging with this nature much, if at all. And, as if to validate his imagery of "nature," when folks in the Plains heard that we grew up on coasts, they lamented along the lines of "I wish I were in Hawaiʻi right now!" It was this kind of "nature" that I inherited – the kind where environmental participation looks like hiking, camping, trash pick-up days, and floating down rivers. The kind that, until a handful of years ago, I thought could only belong to white people because I only ever heard of and saw them doing it.

My dad and I can both call Oklahoma home, but our perspectives on nature, and beliefs on who is allowed within it, vary. This is, in part, because of two reasons: 1) the conditions of belonging in nature have been shaped by who we have seen within it and 2) the land stories and placemaking in these geographies that shaped those beliefs of "nature" usually reinforce those conditions of belonging. Though these reasons are identifiable, they are not as easily (at least for me) detangled. Like I mentioned, this is not just an Anderson-household phenomenon. There are countless anecdotes of Black people, across ages and geographies, realizing that they – we – were allowed to be outside.

Conditions & stories

The conditions under which Black folks have been "allowed" outside begin with the most notorious: chattel slavery. "Outside" was fieldwork; lynchings; black codes and pig laws – being outside, at a point in time for Black folks, was highly and violently conditionally based on extractivism and control of Black bodies. We inherit that trauma, psychologically and in measures of wealth. "Forty acres and mule" was a new condition of belonging: the weak failed attempt at postbellum Black reparations was a promise to trap Black folks within settler systems of land epistemology – the idea that land could be divided, bought, sold, given. Still, the U.S.'s failure to follow through inhibited generational wealth, economic independence, and prosperity for Black Americans. Even in the history of the American environmentalism, before the nineteenth century, nature was "wilderness," and synonymous with "savage," "barren," and "a waste," (Cronon 8) which were also terms used to describe and justify, usually using religious rhetoric, forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples and slavery. Narratives about race have been historically translated onto beliefs about gender and race; for Black people, "the emerging narrative that defined 'the Negro's pace in Nature' [placed] black people at the [evolutionary bottom rung while] reifying whiteness," further excluding Blackness from nation-building (Finney 39).

Thus, in the arch of the Great Outdoors movement emerged another condition of environmental belonging, the "classic wilderness experience." This form of environmental recreation was and mostly still is reserved for those with a class privilege of leaving home and work, necessitating a certain capital which American socioeconomic histories have preserved for white people, especially men (Cronon 13-21). If such a form of environmental recreation is possible without high cost, certain skill levels and knowledge of the outdoors is another requisite-turned-luxury-of-inheritance for simple safety and survival. Black belonging in placemaking, among land,

and within environmentalism has historically been majorly conditional based upon a proximity to whiteness, even when that whiteness is coded as "class" – or vice versa.

How Blackness in nature is represented and circulated creates its own framework for what we might believe is possible. As rhetoricians, we know the discursive and sociological powers of representation and belief. For Black environmentalism, "representation and racialization sustain the way many Americans think about the natural environment…, which informs our environmental policies, institutions, and interactions…" and, thus infrastructures, engagement, and emotions. (Finney 68). The versions of Blackness outside that we have been most widely disseminated tend to reflect harsh and overlapping historic and contemporary depictions, if Blackness is included at all. But "outside," from water to stars, have been more for Black environmentalism. It has been "a source of comfort and terror even as it offered proof that human masters did not control the earth and everything upon on"; it has been a five-years-frozen Ohio River in the 1850s that provided passage for enslaved people escaping (Miles 21). It has been the birthplace of hip hop and block parties on Cedar and Sedgwick in West Bronx, New York (Thomas "How Hip Hop Was Born"). It has been where a twentysomething Black girl from Oklahoma continues to find her solace. Half of these stories I've known since I've been knowing. The other half I've had to seek out and dig hard. I'm sure you can guess which is which.

The/a truth is, Black folks' environmental belonging, especially in a colonized landscape, is often belonging within unbelonging. In the example of the West Bronx block party, the Black cultural placemaking practice of block parties grew from individuals and families moving northward during the Great Migration, creating predominantly Black urban neighborhoods (Thomas). Carolyn Finney, in *Black Face, White Spaces*, shares that she grew up just outside of New York City on a gorgeous wooded estate where her parents, also Black migrants from the southern US, were diligent and relational caretakers of the land. After the estate owners passed, though they had fostered

familial relationships with the land, the cost of staying was too high and her parents had to leave (xiv-xv). My paternal family calls Checota, Oklahoma our homeplace; my great-aunt owns a house and two plots of land where several family members, including my grandfather, were born. Yet they found this belonging on the "Black side" of their segregated town, on land which belongs to the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, a tribe of which we are Freedmen descendants but subsequently faced expulsion due to blood quantum rules enacted in the 70s.

In these generational stories are layers of unbelonging within belonging within unbelonging on land. Folks left places in which unbelonging was an ironic prerequisite for their existence, and/or created belonging in places where, still, unbelonging was and is written into placemaking structures. This is an ongoing, multimodal practice of placemaking on/with land that, under the structural logic of settler colonialism, holds several truths of Black and brown people communities being both "in their place' and 'out of place'" (Muñoz 171).

Though our stories differ, narratives of environmental belonging and placemaking among such communities, specifically Black and Indigenous, are metaphorical and literal space for collaborative, decolonial work. It goes against settler logic to realize that decolonization through land repatriation, as Tuck and Yang ("Decolonization is not a metaphor") argue, is neither a threat to Black prosperity, land relationships, or environmental futures. In fact, a decolonial destratification of ecological hierarchies would likely facilitate the kindred relationship between Black communities, Indigenous people, and non-human/other-than-human community members that also experience displacement and respond with resistance. Embracing a "middleness" of land relationship and reconciliation among Black and Indigenous people, as Tuck et al. and the Black/Land Project (founded and directed by Mistinguette Smith) aim to do, is a crucial coalition move which "points to the importance of learning from the routes and roots of the presumably rootless, the geographies of those presumed ungeographic, and the genealogies of those presumed kinless" (Tuck et al. "Not

Nowhere" 6). That is to say, a fear of epistemic incommensurability is a bigger obstacle for Black environmental belonging than coalition.

–

Discourse regarding the rhetorical distance between Black folks and families and environmental engagement – specifically as recreation, stewardship, relationship – seems aplenty. I forget, as I have worked over the last six years to tune into the constant hum of environmental engagement in my life and learning, that Blackness in nature is *still* not as widespread as it feels. What is that saying? The harvest is plenty but the workers are few? In this case, the research is great and growing but the audience is narrow and/or distracted by one million other things, all the time. I lived as though the tides were truly turning, then went solo-camping in the northern Lower Peninsula of Michigan on a gorgeous summer weekend. I drove around the campsite twice (I had never been camping) before locating my reserved spot. Those two loops were enough to knock me back to reality. Heritage and skin tone are not synonymous markers for POCs, but I could not easily spot a Black or brown brother anywhere. And it didn't help that I arrived on Flag Day. Something about a lone Black woman at a campsite fully booked by white folks with RVs waving huge and/or multiple American flags…it brought back an insecure idea of myself that I thought I'd buried: the notion that I was not supposed to be there.

Dominant settler narratives have given themselves the power to construct land realities that feel much more "concrete," such as infrastructure, policy, displacement, The Great Outdoors, etc. Connecting these rhetorical moves and modes to narrative structuring reveals how placemaking "strategies and violence employ and reproduce a 'fear of a Black planet' [that] is grounded in the myth that geography and power are and should be 'white,' and thus why and how whiteness becomes referential for environmental engagement (Muñoz 169). Katherine McKittrick says that "Black matters are spatial matters" (*Demonic Grounds* xii). The idea that they could be separate is a

settler invention that we, Black folks, sometimes take on and/or shoulder. McKittrick also reminds us that, because colonial geographies necessitate Black placelessness, "while Black people have of course always experienced, occupied, and constructed place, 'black geographies were (and sometimes still are) rendered unintelligible' (9)" (Tuck et al. "Geotheorizing Black/Land" 65). Erasure, when embedded into placemaking as it has been in Oklahoma City, insidiously seeks to do this separation work. It is the bodies, human or otherwise, that continue to remember, even if we forget the language to articulate it.

3.2 BLACK PLACEMAKING IN OKC

3.2.1 Walnut Grove: Rerouting & remembering

Somehow, in my ongoing project about erasure in placemaking, I was still surprised to learn that an OKC community was erased in downtown placemaking projects. The village was situated, as shown in the maps beginning this chapter, in the exact location of the Interstate crossroad. Walnut Grove, like so many other places in Oklahoma City, was erased as a consequence of "a combination of the straightening of the [Oklahoma River] and moving I-40" (Beach). Before this, Walnut Grove was one of four Black riverside neighborhoods – Sandtown, West Town, and South Town – in Oklahoma City as recently as 1964 ("Black Enclaves" 4). And though the city, through generational infrastructural projects and economic placemaking, has intentionally denigrated the institutional/place/public memory of these enclaves, Black OKC placemakers are establishing their/our own place by remembering as a collective.

The OKC Black Alumni Coalition (OBAC) is a metro placemaking organization that has sought to institutionally remember Walnut Grove. The OBAC hosts two placemaking projects, The Walnut Grove Project and annual River Bowl Classic that tandemly reflect Black placemaking strategy through community memory and actively reinvigorates Black environmental engagement. The Walnut Grove Project, locatable on the OBAC website states its mission is "to recollect,

remember, and educate the public about the history of Walnut Grove" ("Walnut Grove Project"). The public-facing attribute of this statement is a testament to the criticality of public memory in placemaking, just as recollection is an important word that signals a recovering significant loss embedded within that placemaking. Their placemaking method of placemaking, therefore, is remembering. To do this, they start with a story.

The project page on OBAC's website begins with "The Story of Walnut Grove." They locate the neighborhood, nicknamed "The Grove," first by referencing significant Black moments of place before utilizing the settler geographies of place that city planning policy created: "Did you know that the very location of our River Bowl Classic is where the historically black neighborhood, Walnut Grove once existed, between Lincoln Blvd and High Ave, and Reno Ave and E. Tena Ave (Oklahoma River)." By foregrounding the River Bowl Classic, a Black environmental and cultural place-project, in its locational practice, the story of The Grove overlays its Black geography *onto* the city's erasure project – that is, today's map of OKC. As they describe generational Black residence and strong social identity of Walnut Grove, OBAC writes that "the last few homes in the area existed well into the early 2000s." This move, also emphasized in American Indigenous placemaking and writing, is a reminder to website visitors not only that The Grove's erasure was recent, but its descendants and communal existence remains relevant to our current sense of place. What we see of that area today (i.e. the land and infrastructure that shapes our OKC sense of place) happened because Black futures were recently deemed undeserving, unfit, and unnecessary for the city's placemaking goals.

OBAC's mission of recollecting history is a public invitation to descendants and neighbors to bring their stories of place together; some of their collection, like maps and photos, are currently made available on their website. Thus, The Walnut Grove Project exemplifies a mode of placemaking that reinstitutionalizes sense of place from the combined perspective of multiple

stories, acting on the exigence of collective placemaking for sustainable future. This is a further disruption to settler placemaking, which constructs from isolation to create an impermeable truth. In fact, on March 13, 2025 (just last week, at the time of writing) OBAC co-hosted a community engagement workshop on Walnut Grove in the Boathouse District, which they acknowledge as an historic site for Black culture and river relationships. The flyer invited OKCers and descendants to "Bring your photos, stories, and artifacts from Walnut Grove to help us preserve its history" ("Walnut Grove Community Engagement Session").[7] The rhetorical work of inviting and collecting photos, oral histories, and artifacts presents an ethos to the Project's mission of publicly remembering. These stories and objects, as an amassing collective, may thus become referential for OKC placemaking futures. Similar to city planning policies, this community collection allows Black river relationships to live within institutional placemaking memory, and does so on Black geographic and placemaking terms.

The River Bowl Classic (RBC) does the same work of re-establishing Black place and geography with the river. Whereas The Walnut Grove Project recollects to remember and educate, The River Bowl Classic in tandem provides an actively-engaged site of placemaking where Black OKCers can create new stories of place with the river. The RBC "is an annual, reunion-style event curated [by OBAC to serve] as a platform [that involves and unites] black high school alumni, students, and community members in thrilling watersport competitions including rowing, dragon boating, and kayaking" ("River Bowl Classic"). The RBC page storys its genesis as a morale-boosting reunion in 2022 after two years of the national resurgence and social reckoning of Black Lives Matter and COVID-19. This page, too, offers a Black history of OKC river relations and even points to Black hesitancy toward environmental engagement: "Selecting RIVERSPORT as the [site] of the OBAC reunion was a big ambition. Not only is there a historical trauma and stigma

[7] See Figure 7 in Appendix.

surrounding water among the black community, but for some descendants of Walnut Grove, the black neighborhood that previously existed on the north side of the river, RIVERSPORT may not evoke positive associations." The decision to enact the first reunion was made in partnership with Riversport leadership, becoming a site of possibility (and realization!) for invigorating and destigmatizing Black environmental engagement and placemaking.

Both projects, RBC and The Walnut Grove Project, not only bring the past forward, but braids their chronologies together. The River Bowl Classic still utilizes story as placemaking, but does so in a way that annually connects the stories of The Grove's (and Black OKC river relationships) to one another. Like the rhetorical work of locating The Grove on the Project website page in Black geographic terms, the River Bowl Classic overlays Black placemaking among kindred erased bodies. Not only does the Classic remember and revive Black environmental connection, it is also an act of remembering the river's identity. *This* is "doing geography" as a verb of belonging. Though the city erased both bodies of collectives, OBAC's placemaking-through-remembering revives Black belonging within infrastructures of unbelonging.

Rerouting the river erased the river's natural identity and its Black neighbors' [cultural] livelihood for a future version of Oklahoma City that could continue to build on their non-existence. It generated shared generational harm across bodies. Efforts to highlight Walnut Grove's presence and cultural significance in broader OKC placemaking it's *very* new. In fact, a majority of my citation material for the section was only produced in the last year, the most recent published only five weeks ago. It was extremely difficult to source descriptive material of the neighborhood, especially maps. What led me to OBAC was the fact, after hearing brief mentions of Walnut Grove across my research, I tried for weeks to find maps and finally came a single source that said more about the neighborhood than "it was there; now it's not" (and even that was like pulling search engine and databases' teeth). What's more, they had maps. Very few, but enough to get the proverbial ball

rolling. My own searching process is a testament to Black erasure in Oklahoma City and how placemaking has institutionally separated Black folks from land, environment, and the river.

Black community includes the environment, nature, the outdoors. OBAC, as a placemaking body, is working to recover the stories that have told us otherwise and to reconstruct Black futures on Black terms – to remember that we belong, especially in places intentionally constructed for our unbelonging.

Deep Deuce: Razing & reflecting

Deep Deuce, in 2025, is marketed by the City as a destination; a neighborhood where OKC placemaking happens through the commodification of place stories. A swift Google search of Deep Deuce, OKC, brings up a curated set of descriptions: a hip neighborhood with vibrant nightlife, a regional center of the jazz era, a historic OKC neighborhood for Black culture. The strategic settler placemaking of Deep Deuce – for example, the fact that it has been integrated into the city's District map – hosts an air of commodification. Black placemaking of land relationships in Deep Deuce happens through the practice of reflection. Oxford Languages offers three definitions of "reflect": 1) to throw back without absorbing; 2) to think carefully about; and 3) to bring credit or discredit to the relevant parties ("Reflect"). Each of these interpretations co-operate in Deep Deuce's placemaking strategy. I bring Deep Deuce into this narrative because of its proximity to the Oklahoma River – three-quarters of a mile from its banks with the Interstate crossway in between – and because the Eastside, our third historically and predominantly Black OKC neighborhood in this chapter, became the new home of displaced Deep Deuce residents when they were removed to Eastside's southern JFK neighborhood. Despite its proximity to the Oklahoma, this section focuses on placemaking through land. Deep Deuce as a district does not naturally evoke river relationships, attesting to the crux of its Black environmental erasure

Deep Deuce was borne from Sandtown, another Black river enclave, as it grew northward. In 1915, Oklahoma City Council passed a segregation ordinance disallowing Black residential growth any more north of Second Street. Though the U.S. Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional, "de facto segregation kept the wall intact, making Second Street a symbolic battleline in the fight against racial injustice" ("Deep Deuce History"). Deep Deuce became a thriving and nationally-recognized jazz district and Black cultural epicenter: American novelist Ralph Ellison is from here; Clara Luper held sit-ins here; Martin Luther King, Jr. passed through looking for a job at the historic Calvary Baptist Church (which still stands today). In the 1980's, the City razed a beating heart of Black OKC, redlining OKC to force Black residents east of the Interstate. Its ghost was brought back in the early aughts. Brought back as a "district" within a broader web of OKC place. Brought back for economy on the conditions of historical commodification within settler placemaking. Much like the memos' itemization of Restoration from Chapter 2, including the history of Deep Deuce in its District marketing cannot, in this sociopolitical climate, cannot be ignored so it is embraced, conditionally.

Like this chapter's foundational Black environmental un/belonging, the condition under which Deep Deuce's Black legacy is allowed to sustain within hegemonic placemaking is when rendered to or proximal whiteness. Unlike OBAC's locational strategy, the official District website for Deep Deuce locates the neighborhood by mirroring the City's displacement mapping, locating it "in downtown Oklahoma City, roughly between Main Street and NE 4th Street, from Broadway to I-235." Their description of the neighborhood provides a brief and insidious rhetorical situation of Black presence and settler mapping:

> Known for its African-American heritage, Deep Deuce is **recapturing its glory days** as a vibrant urban neighborhood. During the 1920s and 1930s, the area **was** a hotbed of jazz music and African-American culture. The neighborhood **has undergone a renaissance**

> with many large-scale apartments and condominium. The **cozy** neighborhood offers a great walkable environment with a variety of restaurants, pet friendly businesses, art galleries, and an ever-growing list of new **amenities** ("About"; bolding added).

I speak from personal experience when I say that there are not many Black folks or communities that are well-established in Deep Deuce today. The opportunity to inherit or create a generational Black community in Deep Deuce was systematically stolen from Black OKC placemakers through the neighborhood's razing – or, as the About page frames it, its "renaissance." The assurance that today's version of Deep Deuce is "recapturing its glory days as a vibrant urban neighborhood" is an outright falsehood in any context, but especially for Black placemaking and geographies. The assumed parallels drawn between Black Deep Deuce and Deep Deuce of today summate the former neighborhood's glory as economic prosperity which serves settler placemaking projects, instead of one that fostered Black prosperity and land relationships. Say nothing of the fact that Deep Deuce today is primarily white *because* that is, according to settler placemaking, the conditional proximity under which Deep Deuce is "allowed" to be a part of place in OKC.

This page further frames the destruction and displacement of Black lives as a "renaissance." *Okay*. The use of passive language in its clandestine reference to the razing – *has undergone* – further puts the opus of Black displacement on a nameless, faceless figure that, in reality, is and was Oklahoma City councilpeople, city planning policy, and the development of "large-scale apartments and condominiums" that would ensure Black folks could not hold on to or reestablish their geographies in Deep Deuce. Descriptions of the neighborhood as "cozy" and full of amenities compounds Black erasure and the violent land histories instigated by prejudiced policies. As OBAC referenced the RBC and the Oklahoma River, what is an exciting environmental engagement opportunity for white folks in Oklahoma City can reek of trauma and land relationship disruptions

for Black folks who remember. Amenitizing Deep Deuce in this website's placemaking strategy further highlights the settler inclination to utilize and objectify, thus erase the identity of, land.

The Deep Deuce website does have a page on Black history. It is not navigable in the top tabs, nor is it a dropdown page under "About." This itself is very telling; Deep Deuce placemakers evidently do not consider the areas Black history as a part of, or "about" what the neighborhood reflects today. Instead, evidence of Black Deep Deuce is buried within a button labeled "Read Deeper" beneath a blurb titled "History: Jazz, Civil rights and Black Culture" that is two mouse scrolls deep on the first page. Black placemaking in Deep Deuce is reduced to a single paragraph within this follow-up page and has no mention of the City's destruction and forceful displacement. Then, they offer four links "for additional Deep Deuce history" at the bottom of the page. The first three are histories written by white male journalists; the fourth link, titled "Oklahoma Historical Society: Second Street," is written by Anita Aronld, a Black female writer from Oklahoma. In all, it takes two scrolls and three pages to get to evidence of Black geography that is actually written by a Black writer.

The plaques are further signifiers of the dual-reflection placemaking in Deep Deuce. Anyone who has visited Deep Deuce likely knows about the plaques; my only hesitation in an affirmative "definitely" comes from the fact that the bronze plaques, which are supposed to reflect Black Deep Deuce, are planted within the neighborhood's red brick sidewalks. Each plaque tells the story of prominent Deep Deuce figures who made the neighborhood legendary and advocated for Black civil, artistic, and placemaking rights. Though they are touchpoints for Black identity in the area, emphasizing Black centrality and vibrance, the violent development of the neighborhood remains absent from the plaques' stories (Payne and Greiner 125). The plaques institute Black un/belonging in place by both reflecting the oppression and conditional allowance of Black stories and reflecting

back onto Deep Deuce the determined persistence of Black geographies in OKC land/environmental placemaking.

This placemaking strategy of reflecting Deep Deuce is different from Walnut Grove's remembering because Deep Deuce has not been forgotten; like the river's course, its identity has been rerouted under the conditions of settler infrastructure, policy, and land epistemology. Reflection is a dual un/belonging placemaking strategy because Deep Deuce is made to reflect whiteness and settler placemaking in how it has been reconstructed through recent placemaking strategies that are contingent on Black erasure and the violent razing of the neighborhood. However, reflection through Black stories reflects the razing back onto the city to maintain dual, but different in appearance, institutionalization of Deep Deuce in a public sense of place. Contemporary Black placemakers like Tré Smith, a Black OKC-based social media content creator, and Jabee – a prominent OKC Black hip hop artist, activist, entrepreneur, and three-time Emmy award winner – use their platforms to reflect on and share Black OKC/Deep Deuce history. A recent local news article on Smith's digital content on Black OKC history says that his "tour begins at Calvary Baptist Church, where he *reflects* on the significance of walking the same steps as [MLK]. 'It kind of gives me goosebumps, you know,' Smith said. It's surreal just to walk through these streets. I mean, I drive past here all the time, and you know, I even hang out in this area sometimes, and it feels good to know that I'm aware of the history behind this area"' (Walker; emphasis added). Such reflection is also exemplified by the Deep Deuce plaques. The presence of settler placemaking and Black land histories is not a tug-of-war but an overlapping geography which reflects the generational Black environmental struggle that systemically keeps us from environmental participation and community belonging.

"Was" is a nagging recurrence in Deep Deuce place stories. It "was," "was," "was," so much that I find myself stuck in trying to figure out what it is. At least, if I want to keep the story centered

on Blackness – and I do. Deep Deuce's significance to Black culture in OKC is not *just* historical, though, and that is where current placemaking strategies must end, in current logic, their recognition of violent infrastructures. As someone who inherited place stories of OKC, I always heard of it as a place Black people *used* to be. That much is true, but it is not the full truth. It is a place we used to be because we were no longer allowed to be.[8] The historification of Blackness in this neighborhood paints silhouettes of figures who, in reality, would be rejected if we tried to reclaim the neighborhood as a critical land base, a home place, for Black lives .Through reflection, Black placemakers have flipped this place-based historicizing strategy on its head by insisting on Black stories of commemoration in Deep Deuce. These Black land relationships are tied up in community building, social justice, equity, and sustainability that OKC placemaking has not always followed through on, but can.

Deep Deuce grew from Black community with the river. The Oktahuthcee, or Oklahoma/North Canadian, was and reflects a site of Black placemaking and environmental relationality. That is not to say that Black folks and the river lived in perfect harmony; the river flooded year after year in Black enclaves. It was, however, in the dual erasure move of violent rerouting, razing, and infrastructure building from by the City, an environmental relationship that was severed by dominating, utilitarian settler placemaking projects. In the three quarters of a mile between Deep Deuce and the Oklahoma River today are tons and tons of concrete and rebar, zooming cars, and a Boathouse District that established settler place that dominates any trace of Black relationship with the land and water. And many of the remaining Black OKC families that

[8] I say "we" in genuine Black solidarity with Black communities in the OKC metro while also recognizing that my ancestors are not from there. My Blackness within OKC is not generational and uniquely mine. I see myself as a perpetual member of a collective, Black Americans, and member of the OKC metro community, even after my relocation to Michigan. **I am Black; Black is we.**

remember and reflect Black Deep Deuce are on the opposite side of Interstate 235 in a neighborhood locally known as the Eastside.

Eastside: Redlining, resources, & resisting

From Booker T. Washington Park at the southernmost end of Eastside to the northern bank of the Oklahoma River is 0.6 miles, or 1.04 kilometers. To get to the bank, however, one has to pass through the Boathouse District; it's the only pedestrian-safe way to access the river from Eastside. The clearest path would be direct, but that half-plus mile of land is covered by scrap yards and steel companies. So, to cross from Booker T. to the river would take approximately thirty-four minutes for the average able-bodied walker. This would be a relatively dangerous hike, though, including passing under ten Interstate roads and, for most of the journey, walking on the side of the road as there are no clear sidewalks. Clearly, this journey was not infrastructurally designed to be easy or even feasible.

As mentioned before, Eastside is a Black cultural hub that, as a recognized neighborhood, was created as an intentional byproduct of redlining and demolishing Deep Deuce. Urban renewal, including gentrification, is and was a driving force for Black land/environmental/place/identity erasure. Historically, when cities or city leaders campaign to destroy POC or poor neighborhoods, they use redlining as a mapping practice to demarcate such areas as hazardous or declining within federal housing planning policy (Anna). In cities across the United States, maps from tree canopy disparity to test scores to income levels all tend to mirror redlined maps' quality-of-place scales and articulation of resource-deservingness. Though this much is true for Eastside, Black placemakers actively resist erasure and that of land relationships through land stewardship and collective placemaking.

One of the biggest resource issues on the Eastside is food accessibility. Jabee has used his platform to educate people on how and why Eastside food inaccessibility is an infrastructural and

settler placemaking issue, citing systematic food insecurity – ultimately, a result of redlining and destroying Deep Deuce – as a displacement strategy that the City employed to erase Black community (Viriyapah). The Market at Eastpoint has sought to change that. In 2021, what began as a vacant lot community garden grew into a full-fledged, fresh food grocery store led by twenty-two local high schoolers. The Market opened to invigorate a sense of belonging in place that wasn't based on systemic food injustice, but to holistically resist it by "provid[ing] access to healthy, affordable food, stimulate economic growth, create jobs, and build a community.as a neighborhood collective" ("The Market"). That The Market came from a group of high schoolers is even more affirmative, and inspiring, of Eastside's resistive willingness against Black erasure. This initiative, grown from a collective and caring mode of resistance, reflects the neighborhood's environmental, future-forward placemaking for Black geographies – Eastside will not be erased because of systemic, settler colonial, placemade food insecurity.

Alongside The Market, neighbors in Eastside resist land relationship erasure and food insecurity through local urban farming networks. LaTasha Timberlake, Founder and Executive Director of Lillian Timber Farms, started an urban farming lot in 2019 on North Lottie Avenue in the Eastside. The mother lot, communally known as "The Lottie Lot," was a response to Eastside food insecurity and a way to support community health and engagement. In fact, the farm would not exist without community volunteer labor that collectively installed the Lottie Lot. Not only does Lillian Timbers invite community members to co-steward the gardens, they also teach sustainable living practices ("About Lillian Timber Farms"). The collective, sustainable, land-based practices, from the inception of Lillian Timber Farms, Timberlake and her team have emphasized community resistance and careful partnership with the land. The Farm's website further provides testimonies of community partners and members; here are some excerpts from their feedback:

"...The events brought together people of all ages, backgrounds, and gardening knowledge for one common goal — to provide fresh fruits and vegetables for the surrounding communities. …we're thrilled to continue supporting LaTasha and Lillian Timber Farms **in the years ahead.**"

"...Please **come and join us!** If gardening is not your thing, there are many other opportunities to volunteer and show your support! "

"Watering the Lottie Lot each week was a beautiful way to stop, breath, and reflect…"

"...[Attending allows] me to **connect** with people all over the community…[for] **a common goal** of improving our communities and feeding others!" ("About"; bolding added)

Eastside community members clearly reflect a sense of emboldened community and hope, joy, and vision for Black environmental futures. They also emphasize the refreshing and empowering affect of coming together; these testimonies show a clear call to action for Black Eastsiders who may feel as though they don't belong. They say, "you are wanted and needed." Their call to action is Black environmental belonging, made within Black pl/spaces. The embodied work of land stewardship for folks who, as is the throughline of the chapter and thesis, have such fraught relationships with land *and* food access is a reinvigorating, reimagining of what can be possible for Black environmentalism, generational sustainability, and belonging in places and spaces designed to act violently against their community.

This embodied placemaking through collective urban farming is a mode of doing Black geographies in spaces of infrastructural unbelonging. The Farm's stewardship, like OBAC's River Bowl Classic, is also a resistive push against Black erasure in environmentalism rhetoric. The sustaining invitation to engage in Black land relationships responds to the overall need for Black futures, storytelling, geographic practices, and environmental belonging within the climate crisis.

Through Lillian Timber Farm's resistive Black land-based practices, Eastside is ultimately inspiring Black and Black-made environmental futures.

There is evidence of Eastside's effective resistance within the broader City's placemaking strategies. VisitOKC, the city's tourism website and department, highlights photos, events, and descriptions of Oklahoma City's Districts (again, re: §2.2.5). Their website, however, is up front, if not brief, about the history and systemic degradation of Eastside: "The East End District is in northeast OKC along NE 23rd Street and is experiencing vibrant redevelopment using a community-based approach to ethically preserve African American art and culture" ("East End District"). They prominently feature up-close images of Juneteenth celebrations and one of Victoria Kemp, a prominent and second-generation Black woman restaurateur and operating partner of her mother's award-winning soul food spot, Florence's Restaurant. This is not to say that the City deserves applause for highlighting Black culture and land establishment; rather, that Eastside's – and Black OKC community organizations in general – resistance to settler historicization, geographies, and environmental narratives *is already* disrupting harmful, hegemonic placemaking.

But what about the river? The hardest part about this chapter was trying to focus on the river when it hardly, if at all, shows up in the research. I had to continuously remind myself that their proximities are not coincidental. It was difficult to find, in these placemaking strategies, explicit river connections because they were systemically disappeared. At one point, early on, in my thesis writing process, a committee member asked me if I had found evidence of a desired connection with the Oklahoma River within Black Eastside placemaking. Essentially, "does the neighborhood even want this idea that you're setting up for them?" I realized I actually wasn't sure. In November, as my best friend and I drove around Eastside to understand how the neighborhood has been corralled by the Interstate concrete separating them from the Oklahoma River, we came across this mural:

Figure 6: Eastside Futures mural painted by artist Steven Cread Bayliss (Cread).

3.3 BLACK OKC ENVIRONMENTAL FUTURES

The Eastside's environmental relationship to the river, even after generations of policy-enabled displacement and violent infrastructure, is the proverbial blossom growing from concrete. It is one thing to tell a story of systematic river displacement and the need to rekindle; it is wholly another to be confronted with this mural and see, first hand, how the river echoes in Eastside's past and future. The mural is painted on the north side of the Bridge Impact Center, a local non-profit organization that provides holistic and emergency programming – from financial and artistic education to mentoring to legal services – to build and sustain positive community environments and futures by educating, equipping, and empowering Oklahoma City's under-represented youth ("The Bridge"). If we know that "seeing is believing" within rhetorical strategies of belonging, the emblem of the river in this mural empowers Eastside youth and neighbors in their environmental futures, including one built in relationship with their neighbor, the Oklahoma River.

The Eastside is a major, but not the only, hub of Black placemaking, storytelling, and belonging in Oklahoma City. The neighborhoods' resistive placemaking's disruption of the City's broader settler place stories might be an example of how the Eastside can be a model and encouragement for other Black OKC futures. Rekindling Black environmental relationships with the river, as an Eastside resistive and imaginative placemaking strategy, can serve as an example for other Black environmental rekindling in the city and across Black urban spaces in the U.S.

This work, as a reminder, is done as a collective, or in community, and is inclusive of non-human community members (the river, land, produce). Not only does the mural represent and reflect resistive placemaking in Eastside, urban farming, The Market co-operative, OBAC and the River Bowl Classic, and Deep Deuce placemakers/historians perform Black geographies tandemly for greater Black OKC environmentalism. Each neighborhood, and the overlapping, collective, land-based, place-based strategizing within them, are moving against place and infrastructure policies that have sought their erasure. Moreover, these placemaking strategies rewrite Black environmental belonging within environmentalism's broader, settler narratives of who is "allowed" outside, to perform environmental engagement, and is equipped to advocate for their climatic futures.

Though Black identity is not uniformly shaped, nor uniformly experienced (re: my father and I experiencing different forms of nature in our upbringing), the deep-seated belief or unconscious internalization of unbelonging is generally shared. The Black/Land Project, mentioned in 3.1, seeks to identify how Black people self-define and vary in land relationships under a common internalization of Black identity as informed by African descent, diaspora, and "trauma due to the racialization of that identity" in land/placemaking (Tuck et al. "Geotheorizing" 65). Thus, even in our Black experiential differences, there is a thread between Black identity-shaping and land displacement. The commonly-shared informant of Black identity – being members of the *African* diaspora – is inherently land-based and geographically informed.

This differently-shared place-based, geographic self- and system-identification extends beyond Black multiplicities and into the "layered histories embedded in place" shared among Indigenous and Black folks/groups (Hawthorne and Lewis; Dillon 250). Though we differ in our geographies and place stories, Black and Indigenous peoples have generationally experienced land displacement, systemic erasure in placemaking, and have been Othered in dominant settler rhetorics of environmental belonging. These rhetoric of these erasure practices create "narratives of particular humans as questionable; harming the landscape, and lacking the capacity to *use* the land appropriately [which] (re)articulate[s] the rhetoric[al production] of blight and empty wastelands," also giving credence to the policies that have forced Indigenous and Black removal and erasure (Corbin 191; emphasis added).

The beauty of Black geographies, and incorporating them in collective climate crisis futurizing, is that such geographies already account for these differences because they are based on synchronous shared and multiple identifications of self and land. Further, the work of engaging rhetorics of belonging in environmental narratives necessitates holding both Black and Indigenous land stories on selfsame land (Tuck et al. "Not Nowhere"). As this thesis aims to realize Black environmental futures, especially in Oklahoma, the shared uplift of Indigenous geographies, place, and environmental knowledges is the only equitable way to break from settler paradigms. My proposal of healing and layered, and therefore destratified, placemaking strategies do not rotate whose geographies come "first," but rather co-operate ways of doing geographies when building environmentally- and climatically-safe communities and futures.

The river is a critical figure in our Black OKC placemaking, even if we have been unallowed to know it. So much of our place-based Black history and identity started with the river, grew *from* the river. Engaging with the Oklahoma River, or any river, or any landscape, in community, recreation, and stewardship is *not* "just white people shit." This is an oft-internalized myth that is

sustained by the meaning-making functions of violent infrastructures, land-use and housing policies which encourage systemic erasure, and the over-representation of whiteness in environmental narrativizing. But we are here, too. The razing of Black neighborhoods and rerouting of the North Canadian River altered Black land relationships for generations. Concrete and asphalt and scrap metal and steel yards have been meticulously placed as seemingly-immovable, impenetrable obstacles between Black Oklahoma City histories and Black Oklahoma City futures across decades of rhetorical policy – moves that echo settler colonialism, necessitate erasure, and perpetuate conditional Black environmental belonging

CHAPTER 4:

KINSHIP, GLORY, AND A WAY FORWARD

"We need to see the material connections between the health of our rivers, the future that we want to inhabit, and the future in which we want future generations to be able to live" (Pasternack et al. 4)

–

I have foregrounded this project with the question, "How can Black environmental belonging happen in a place where even natural beings' belonging is made conditional?" Essentially, when the most fundamental community members of a place – land, water; air – are corralled and developed for settler colonial utility, how does the hierarchy of that paradigm show up in placemaking for other communities? Settler colonial frameworks Other Indigenous, Black, and environmental bodies for the production and perpetuation of its settler colonial projects. Those projects include systemic hierarchies, like racialization, patriarchal structures, capitalism; objectifying, dividing, owning, and selling land; and the notion of science as singular and solely rational. Othered bodies know, learn, love, and map differently from the settler paradigm and their erasure is a violent, generational, automated process and priority for settler perpetuity. In Oklahoma City, the dual un/belonging embedded within place between the Oklahoma River and historic/ally Black neighborhoods reflects one of countless places in which environmental belonging has been systemically reconditioned for Othered bodies to control them for settler continuity and to disable potential allyship between those Othered. Despite the stories that contemporary maps of Oklahoma City and its infrastructure tell us, the river is a part of Black OKC's history, stories, identity, and future. Perhaps, in the proposed move to remake place by synchronously incorporating Othered bodies' geographies, the matter of bringing them back together could be in emphasizing their contemporary kinship to build more sustainable places and climate futures.

Recovering the relationship between Black OKC and the Oklahoma River is a highly potent point of Black environmental reinvigoration. And, like the Eastside, this communal rekindling has to happen on Black terms. The aim is Black environmental futurity and the prospect of building equitable, multiply-informed climatic futures for a planet that is home to more than settler colonial projects and placemakers.

In this chapter, I will highlight one moment in Oklahoma City's planokc policy that demonstrates great potential to build upon such equitable futures and places. To understand what might keep the City from moving in environmentally equitable directions, I will also spend some time parsing out a common thread that I noticed while studying Oklahoma City's placemaking: the desire, drive, and presumed need for glory. By identifying how glory shows up across the placemaking policies, rhetorics, and places that we have already discussed, I will demonstrate how this drive, as it currently operates within settler frameworks, hinders Oklahoma City from becoming the environmentally equitable place that, not only it can be, but that Black and riparian communities deserve.

4.1 GLORY AS COMMODIFICATION OF ERASURE

The rhetorical underpinning that seems to keep Oklahoma City from realizing its environmental potential is glory. From the documented moment of Oklahoma City's becoming – a notably and emphatically settler colonial moment – there seems to be a marked near-obsession with being glorified. I found this thread in piecemeal; it came up in *Boom Town*, across policy texts, in placemaking stories. My dad called me one night and even said he'd been thinking about why OKC does certain things and even he came to the conclusion that it might have something to do with the City's need to establish itself within the national landscape. This seemed relatively true; especially as someone that introduces themselves as "from Oklahoma," I have gotten a lot of of "Oh, I've never been!" or "I've never met anyone from there!" Growing up, my peers and I encountered myths

about Oklahoma all the time – that our primary mode of transportation was horses, that we all lived in tepees and didn't have houses, that we didn't have tall buildings. And, admittedly, I was late to school once because chickens were crossing the road; I *have* been slowed down by folks on horses (usually they just pull to the side to let cars pass). But the external narrative of Oklahoma and its City as a static antique of Manifest Destiny and pinnacle of Indigenous American stereotypes has been wholly inaccurate, and perhaps fodder for placemaking policies that strive for glorification.

Oklahoma City's settlement unfurled as all colonial settlements do, in one body of governance or another: illegally. Prior to the Land Run's initiation, a group of furtive settlers, including the career-settler expansionist David Payne, came to "a bend of the North Canadian River. This [land] is the site, today, of downton Oklahoma City…Payne declared [it] would be the site of his great city, a city that would [be]...a showpiece of the power of civilization over savagery" (Anderson 24). As the settlement city grew, Oklahoma City leaders furthered the utilitarian objectification of the river. The 1889 effort to make the river "functional" stemmed from a desire to become, as a city, glorious. Sam Anderson writes succinctly:

> [It was a] project so huge it promised to vault the place **up the ranks** of real American cities[, to become like Vemice, Beijing, Panama, Suez, Nicaragua, England, Egypt, and the Baltic Sea]. The North Canadian River was a lovely waterway, twisting in crazy loops all through the center of town, but it was also a typical prairie river, which meant that it was temperamental, drying up and flooding at seemingly random intervals…The city powers had, frankly, **had enough of its nonsense.** They wanted the river to **behave**…This was the era of triumphant global canals…[and] Oklahoma City, at six months old, could see no reason not to join this **glorious tradition** (114; bolded added).

Again, glory.

I bring Anderson's true, but dramatic, retelling of Oklahoma City into its placemaking rhetorics because *Boom Town* had real implications and impact on how OKCers perceive them/ourselves and place stories. *Boom Town* is a demonstrable part of contemporary OKC placemaking; as a city, frankly, we were excited by "our" story being told. The Oklahoma City National Memorial Museum held "A Conversation with Sam Anderson" event moderated by our mayor, David Holt, in 2018; two prominent local news outlets, the *405 Magazine* and KOGU, interviewed Anderson and reported on the glory and namesake his work brought to the city: "With Oklahoma City – 'one of the great weirdo cities of the world' – still aching to be taken seriously, *Boom Town* gives it a chance to be honestly appraised, examined and celebrated. Maybe even to have another boom" (Corely). Even one of our (and my personal favorite) local ice creameries was named after the book. OKC-transplant and owner of Boom Town Creamery Angela Muir happened to be reading *Boom Town* during the same season she was generating her shop; they even sell copies of the book in-store ("About"). Though Anderson's book does not shy away from explicitly telling stories of white supremacy and systemic violence, he does tug on the same rhetorical thread that I am laying out here. That is, like my dad suggested in his off-handed phone call, we are a city that craves to be lauded.

This obsession has been, from Payne's illegal settlement (and in the concept of settler land jurisdiction in general), channeled into the river. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the name of the Oklahoma River changed from the North Canadian in 2004, a move headed by local figure and ad-man Ray Ackerman, who "understood the power of a name and saw little *value* in one strapped to an *inglorious* past" ("A River's Rise"; emphasis added).[9] Around the same time, Mike Knopp (also mentioned in Chapter 2) aided MAPS' hopes to reinvigorate the river; in his Metro Library Podcast

[9] Former Senator Keith Leftwhich is quoted as saying that "Changing the name at the same time we redevelop the river in Central Oklahoma **would send a message to the country**" (Lackmeyer).

interview alone, he describes early dreams to "propel the river," "transforming an entire landscape" from the "ditch" it was made to be to a local and international hub for water sports and notoriety. Knopp further describes the river, facilities, and downtown amenity of the Oklahoma as or striving to be "world-class" nine times in his interview and Sheldon Beach, the podcast host, describes it as the City's "showpiece" ("The Oddly Interesting History"). Knopp is not responsible for erasing the river's identity; the development of the Boathouse District and Riversport, however, has built upon its infrastructural identity erasure in its response to the city's supposed need for glory.

The identity of a place and people, for Oklahoma City's placemaking, is brought to the fore on the condition that it will assist in its standards of glorification. We saw this with Black neighborhood and historical placemaking, especially in Deep Deuce. If you recall, the neighborhood's "About" page claims that Deep Deuce, "[k]nown for its African-American heritage, [is] recapturing its *glory* days as a vibrant urban neighborhood" (emphasis added). Hegemonic placemakers are willing to acknowledge, then swiftly ignore, the neighborhood's identity, i.e. Blackness, when its infrastructurally-made proximity to whiteness brings it contemporary and historic glory. Oklahoma City's strive for glory relies on utilitarian Black and non-human erasure to become what it believes, and has always believed, it is destined to be. This glory generates revenue, too. According to Sheldon Beach, the Boathouse District generates about $23 million for Oklahoma City annually ("The Oddly Interesting History"). The District map from Chapter 2 highlights areas of economic, as well as cultural, engagement to the point that cultural engagement must be economic for its validation in OKC mapping ("Oklahoma City Districts"). Identity erasure, for non-white humans and non-human members, thus becomes a feature of that glory.

Ultimately, Oklahoma City seems to have a record for measuring its sustainability, and therefore futurity, based on glory within a settler colonial paradigm. I've spent a handful of chapters dredging up this insidious thread, but nowhere is this obsession more obvious than in the current

development of Legends Tower. Half a mile from[10] the north bank of the Oklahoma River, half a mile from Deep Deuce, three-quarters of a mile from where Walnut Grove used to be, and 1.15 miles from the southernmost area of Eastside, and 823 feet (0.1 miles) from the Bricktown Canal that stems from the river is the proposed site of the fugliest skyscraper this side of the Mississippi. What began as a proposed 1,750 foot tower (of which the official terminology in architecture is "supertall skyscraper" and I wish I was kidding), has grown to a proposed 1,907 feet *specifically* as a nod to the year of Oklahoma's granted statehood. The tower has been proposed and is funded by real estate firm Matteson Capital, based in Newport Beach, California, and architecture firm AO, based in Orange, California. Like the development of the Boathouse District, the Oklahoma City Council approved a rezoning for the site, from the previous limit of 300 feet, as a special accommodation to Matteson and AO in the Special Planned Unit Development (SPUD) (Haworth). The so-called appeal for Legends Tower – and the name itself gives it away – is that it will bring international renown to Oklahoma City as the tallest building in the U.S. and sixth-tallest in the world.

The current tallest building in the OKC skyline is our decorated Devon Tower, clocking in at 844 feet. Given the topography of central Oklahoma, and the overall lack of skyscrapers, the Devon Tower is visible even towns over. I can even see it from my parents' neighborhood, about sixteen miles north.[11] Legends Tower, more than double the height, would dwarf Devon Tower and everything/one around it. Still, CEO of Matteson Capital, Scott Matteson, plays into the City's taste for glory:

> Oklahoma City is experiencing a significant period of growth and transformation, making it well-positioned to support large-scale projects like the one envisioned for Bricktown…

[10] See Figure 8 in Appendix.
[11] See Figure 9 in Appendix.

> [Matteson Capital] believe[s] that this development will be an **iconic** destination for the city, further driving **the expansion** and diversification of the growing **economy**, drawing in **investment**, new **businesses**, and **jobs**. It's a dynamic environment and we hope to see The Boardwalk at Bricktown stand as the **pride** of Oklahoma City (Haworth; bolded added).

Matteson is even cited as saying that he did not want to draw inspiration from surrounding sites because "'He just felt like that wasn't the right vibe that he was trying to create[and he] was trying to kind of elevate Oklahoma City'" (Wheeler). In other words, Legends Tower articulates a place-based future that is primarily economy-driven, does not need to respond to or reflect OKCers' sense of place, nor is it designed to inspire community. Legends Tower's most functional aim is to bring glory to Oklahoma City despite cost, history, and community.

As situated on and around sites of historic Black OKC enclaves and as a neighbor to the Oklahoma River, Legends Tower will again only seek to serve these erased geographies in the ways that they bring glory to Oklahoma City's external identity. Deep Deuce has been, in recent generations, folded into placemaking in Bricktown, its neighbor district to the west, further diminishing its distinctive identity (Payne and Greiner). The Legends Tower, which will include a riverwalk connection, is also a part of a broader placemaking project from AO called The Boardwalk at Bricktown (AO). The collapsing of these area histories into an outsourced placemaking project designed to expand Bricktown's sense of place is a new level of infrastructural erasure. In fact, architectural critics argue that the Tower "is the physical manifestation of the inequalities of the capitalist economy… all wrapped in the paradoxical and often dystopian promise of ever-expanding growth. Before mass media changed cultural production, the prevailing notion was that the city with the tallest tower must have the most cultural and economic importance" (Scavnicky). If this project follows through, it will further signify the commodification of erasure as a key feature of glorifying Oklahoma City.

This is a move in the wrong direction for Oklahoma City placemaking. As a reminder from Chapter 2, infrastructures is a mode of writing cities; from the Interstate crossroads to the Boathouse District; to Deep Deuce and conceptions of the Legends Tower, infrastructure plays a crucial role in the service of a future imagination and depends on sets of economic realizations that have their roots in racial, settler colonial capitalism and are grounded in an imaginary of state modernity (Pasternak et al. 3-4). The same rhetorical bending is present in Black and Indigenous land/environmental/place histories in the U.S. In the establishment of the National Parks Service, "the removal of Indigenous communities consolidated power and control over [natural] spaces among affluent white elites [to use] these lands for recreation" (Corbin 191). Among urban landscapes, land has been contextualized as a vital organ for city health; though true, this has given city planners (through policy functions like eminent domain) sanction to forcibly remove, displace, evict, inflict violence, and appropriate land for the creation of "green space for tourism and recreation for a different and more affluent white population" (Corbin 192). These city-sanctioned displacements sought to erase Black, Indigenous, and non-whiteness from dominant environmental narratives; perpetuated settler sectoring and development of land to idealize non-human community members; and uses the rhetoric of environmental wellbeing to evoke a version of the future where said wellbeing cannot be realized without the erasure of non-white, non-affluent identity-holders.

The expansionist rhetoric present in OKC placemaking, coupled with infrastructural/rhetorical appeals to glory, writes a story for the City's future, echoes the major component of the settler colonial logic system that drives imperial expansion (Pasternack et al. 3). The place-embedded impression that we must become not just relevant, but world-class by pursuing national recognition of what and where Oklahoma City is leans into frontier rhetoric that engages, unabashedly, the imperialism and colonialism on which the City was founded. This, though markedly different from *land*-based imperialism, is a rhetorical place-based expansionism that strives

to empower colonial structures. These moves of writing Oklahoma City therefore sustain settler systems that cause human and environmental harms and construct the City's future as one that requires those harms for its sustainability. The same logic structures have been foundational in global environmental extraction, overconsumption, excessive damming, and more features of anthropogenic climate change. It then costs more money to uphold the things that are promised to bring us glory, which regardless of their upkeep drain the earth of her resources and natural features. The model is cheap. It demands quantity and forgoes qualities of intentional, intergenerational, and equitable placemaking.

Within Oklahoma City's comprehensive planning policy, planokc, are two Elements called "sustainokc" and "greenokc," both of which are designed to, economically and environmentally, promote the health and wellbeing of place in the City. Yet this is expected to take place within a deeply, rhetorically constructed space that reflects erasure through settler colonialism. I propose that these two things – environmental wellbeing and settler colonial rhetorical placemaking – cannot equitably co-function. Sustainability and ecological restoration, especially in the epoch of anthropogenic climate change, is a resistance against the forces which have previously prevented them (i.e. settler colonialism). There is, however, a way forward. I said before that I come to this analysis with love for my home place, which has taught me to hold the tension between apparently diametric truths. In this final analysis of OKC placemaking, I will highlight models of anti-erasure placemaking from hegemonic structures in the same sites that we have spent discussing, and a moment within planokc's policy that provides a way through, and eventually out of, the settler systems that have sought to inhibit equitable riparian and Black environmental futures.

4.2 A WAY FORWARD: ENTRY POINTS IN adaptokc & MODELS TOWARD DECOLONIALITY

adaptokc is considered a supporting document that complements all eight Elements of planokc. Though planokc is considered to be Oklahoma City's primary placemaking policy plan, adaptokc is the supplementary element that directly faces and responds to the placemaking issues that I have laid out throughout this project: multiple environmental futurities and the features that prevent them.[12] This document also explicitly addresses climate change and how, for example, warming summers directly affect placemaking in Oklahoma City. This is what my overall analysis points to; a kairotic moment in OKC place-planning policy in which just and multiply-positioned futures can be equitably codified, growing from a foundational epistemology that recognizes that climate will and does disproportionately affect the sense of place in Oklahoma City. The rhetorical moves present in the following forefronted quotations from adaptokc further recognize awareness of non-human community, that we are in community with land and ought to be good and conscious stewards of it, and that past and contemporary placemaking in Oklahoma City has created inequitable barriers in placemaking barriers for historically-marginalized communities.

The plan's Executive Summary begins with an environmental hi/story of the Dust Bowl and the "indelible scars" it left on our economy, society, and ecology (iii). The improvement of these three components are thus the focal assessments across each of adaptokc's initiatives. The exigence, the document explains, is primarily (but not exclusively) the threat of climate change (4). The three principles at the core adaptokc are to: 1) Position Oklahoma City to lead by example as a steward of public resources; 2) Adapt our infrastructure, services, and communities to Oklahoma City's changing; and 3) Identify how to use technological innovations to our advantage (iii). The document

[12] Page 4 of adaptokc also namedrops Sam Anderson and *Boom Town*. This book's placemaking power is, indeed, far-reaching in OKC.

further identifies a list of climate change-related risk factors, including an "increase in cultural, linguistic, and age-related challenges to public service delivery" (iii). The explicit willingness to address disproportionate and the emergency of climate change impact, and specifically its harmful effect on human and non-human ecology, takes a markedly different approach than the policies and placemaking strategies in other chapters. Rather than analyzing progress, process, and product of placemaking and infrastructure from a narrow (settler-propagating) view, adaptokc attempts to cast a net as wide as climate change will reach in Oklahoma City. Albeit imperfectly, this policy's direct aim for layered climate resilience offers an entry point in OKC policy for implementing rhetorics of belonging in placemaking by destratifying settler evaluations of placemaking, environmental health, and community building.

This entry point in adpatokc, though offered within a settler mode of organizing place (i.e. policy), could be a moment of settler destratification to move toward decolonial assessments of community health. adaptokc's language mirrors the positions and arguments I have taken up in this thesis. Its language recognizes the critical relationship between placemaking, environmental wellbeing, and identities in community for which policy can create equity and/or generational and cultural harm. It situates the first principle component of adaptokc, Environment, as follows:

> It is impossible to extricate ourselves from our environment. **There can be no community,** no economic growth or development **without breathable air, uncontaminated soil, and clean water**. The cost of environmental degradation is significant, even if not always readily visible. As such it does not simply jeopardize public and economic health but requires public funds at every level of government to ameliorate. **Economic growth and environmental decline need not be synonymous.** Responsible, sustainable economic development is a reality; consider the growth in U.S. gross domestic product throughout the latter half of the 20th century as national environmental policies were adopted. Locally, we, too, must realize

> the balance between these seemingly adverse initiatives to make the most productive use of our finite natural resources while accounting for the socialized risks that can burden residents and institutions (9; bolded added).

This section holds an interesting balance between economic and environmental responsibility. There are similarities between the argument that I pose – that community includes environmental health, and placemaking can forefront these efforts effectively. The emphasis on economy, though, is where we diverge. I might mark this, simply, as an awareness of economic gymnastics that is beyond my level of analysis. As I noted early in this project, I recognize that economic health is a part of placemaking in our current moment and I do not propose an eradication of economy.[13] This moment in adaptokc, therefore, points to an opportunity for OKC place policy to intentionally consider environmental health in everything it does, whether or not it seems like an "exclusively" environmental issue, because everything happens among land, air, and water and matters to all who are situated within it.

Finally, in its section on "Maintaining adaptokc," the writers describe adaptokc as a "living document" to be updated and maintained every five years by the Office of Sustainability, thus embedding the ethos of adaptation, or a rhetorical and realized commitment to assessing landscape changes and adjusting accordingly, into its policies (5). Such a codified investment, especially when stemming from a focus on climate resilience strategizing, embeds a further opportunity to intentionally consider how marginalized humans and non-humans evaluate and reflect their own health. This is incredible potential to continuously engage non-settler ways of knowing, relating, and growing. Adaption requires careful, critical listening. With its proclaimed commitment to do so, and especially regarding environmental/climate community, adaptokc offers an entry point for rhetorical

[13] Although, that's really only because I don't know *how* to propose that. At the end of the day, capitalist economies will continue to cause harm to the planet and her people. The opportunity here, though, in the reinvigoration of multiple geographies, could even include an eventual move toward decolonial economics. Beyond my scope of research, though.

changes that reflect renewing conversations with the Oklahoma River and its neighbors. These moments in Oklahoma City placemaking policy are fodder for destratified, equitable environmental futures.

There are also models in Oklahoma City for non-erasure in this critical placemaking engagement. For example, despite some rhetorical similarities, the difference between the Legends Tower and Boathouse District is that the latter is a local and more potentially, culturally and environmentally sustainable site for local futurities. The Legends Tower, as it stands (no pun intended), has little demonstrable vested interest in increasing the equity, community, or cultural social development of Oklahoma City nearby the river. Even in Knopp's insistence on the glorification of the Oklahoma River as a world class facility and local amenity, he also acknowledges that the river has its own rhythms to which participants must be attuned and learn to respect its dynamics ("The Oddly Interesting History"). The Boathouse District further recognizes the (social) inequity that Riversport has the opportunity to create and has begun to implement programs to change that. As OKC prepares to host the 2028 Olympic canoe slalom and softball events, Riversport's OpportUnity program aims to bridge Black urban youth engagement as more eyes, which includes scholarships and other opportunities, fall on OKC ("OpportUnity"). The OpportUnity web page explains Riversport's commitment to uplift Black OKC futures, break down financial and cultural barriers in watersport, and highlights examples of Black rowers who have gained success in the sport. These moments and models within river placemaking are opportune for more-than-human and Black placemaking and geographic autonomy.

OKANA[14], the Chickasaw Nation's riverside resort that opened February 2025, and FAM, the First Americans Museum, also present models for engaging cultural communities that have

[14] OKANA is derived from the Chickasaw words for water (oka') and friend (inkana').

relationships with the Oklahoma River. Situated on the south bank of the river, both infrastructure/cultural sustainability and engagement projects have been built and/or opened to the public in the last five years. These institutions reflect significant and collaborating geographizing between sovereign tribal governments/Indigenous placemakers and settler placemaking policies by embedding Indigenous stories, historic and contemporary, within the City's placemaking strategies, and on the terms of the tribes involved.

As VisitOKC's East End site mentioned in Chapter 3 further demonstrates, Oklahoma City is capable and willing to implement equitable frameworks for reinvigorating placemaking. The itemization of Restoration from chapter 2 reflects a settler utilitarian and objectified approach to environmental wellbeing. What if, by engaging Black geographies, wrestling with destratification, and holding intentional space for non-human constituency, Restoration on the river became a critical wellbeing project which overlapped Black, Indigenous, and non-human (river) geographies through the rhetorical vehicle of policy? What if the City retraced its steps to the moment, as evidenced in the river development memos, when restoration centered on environmental wellbeing, then rebuilt river engagement through equitable collective placemaking practices?

The work is hard, especially when trying to hold multiple geographies within a settler policy system, inherently designed to work against non-human sentience and non-white placemaking. However, as I have identified throughout this chapter and thesis, there are moments and entry points for this work to be engaged (planokc/adaptokc; east end website; un/belonging place practices; publicizing OBAC and non-white geographic efforts; rhetorical changes over time in river development placemaking documents).

The very idea of "adaptokc" elicits a willingness to, well, adapt. And, as Tuck et al. show, the work is not start-to-finish, but happens in the middle ("Not Nowhere"). This is perhaps the most difficult reality to hold in settler epistemology; that doing work doesn't mean it will be "done," but is

always happening. It is, per Tuck and Yang, an incommensurable move toward a wholly different kind of justice than that which happens within settler colonial paradigms. Oklahoma City policy, as adaptokc shows, can do this. Ultimately, however, this work leads to a breakdown of settler domination, including the efficacy of current modes of policy. It is better to invite such a change, for the sake of planet and people, than to have its climate change force the confrontation of its sustainability inefficacies. Moments in policy that point toward decoloniality necessitate a end-point, wherein the rhetorical power of policy as a settler society-shaping institution becomes something wholly different, informed by the destratification of community that rebuilds toward a common goal, using in/common geographies, among selfsame land.

4.3 WHERE WE END UP

"For me, what all of these factors do is steepen the learning curve. For every one white person that told me that nature was awesome and that I should appreciate it, it would take ten Black folks to finally go do it."

This comes from the same conversation between my father and I that I started this project with. Across the few dozen pages I've written, everything is encompassed in the matter of what seems to keep Black folks from engaging with nature? We *are* outside, and we also aren't. We belong and resist unbelonging. And that steep, steep learning curve is reflected by these systems and social/environmental rhetorics that historically stand between us. In Oklahoma City, placemaking has been orchestrated against Othered bodies, including Black folks and environmental bodies, through policies, infrastructure, and place stories that come from hegemonic settler narrativization which has the institutional means of making those versions of place seem standalone and superior. Overlapping histories and geographies in the land and water in and around the Oklahoma River reflect this too-common occurrence. Despite generational proximity to the river, Black neighborhoods today have been infrastructurally separated from their home places and restricted

from fostering an emboldened environmental community with their neighbor and potential ally. Further, on the same land that OKC placemaking policy displaced them from/onto, Black placemakers have experienced a similar kind of restriction and erasure in how they sustain land histories and present-day communities. The utilitarian manipulation of the river's identity only compounds unbelonging in Oklahoma City placemaking. Through infrastructure policy and settler mapping practices like PUD 1725 and the OKC District map, the Oktahutchee/North Canadian/Oklahoma River has been wrangled into a geographic version of place that sustains unbelonging of Othered communities.

Black OKC and the Oktahutchee share a critical relationship in the fabric of OKC place and geographies. They have since the complicated arrival and settlement of Black enclaves of what is, today, Oklahoma City. These communities are kindred in their erasure through settler placemaking; their potential allyship could come to fruition in river placemaking strategies as modeled by OKANA, OBAC, and FAM, and are opportune within the entry point of adaptokc policy. Black environmental futures in Oklahoma City are being imagined and realized on Black geographic terms and engage rhetorical practices – like the River Bowl Classic and Eastside mural – that recognize the river not as something to dominate, but a friend to be reunited with.

–

Recently, I've been looking back at a social media post from the Oklahoma Black Alumni Coalition. It is of Black rowers in an eight-seater boat on the Oklahoma River, paddling past the newly-opened OKANA resort. The caption reads "Congratulations @okanaresort on your new opening. #OurView."[15] This is a kind of reinvigorated environmental memory itself; a coalitional reminder that Blackness and Indigenity happen with the river, and each group contends together, despite settler powers that separate them, what it means to placemake on our own terms, to embody

[15] See Figure 10 in Appendix.

our own geographies. It's a particularly violent and insidious and hopeful phenomenon of Black American existence to have this kinship in our hearts and to be systemically made to forget. There is an opportunity, as we build climate-resilient places, to confront Black and non-human erasure in rhetorics of placemaking, and to look toward models of layered non/human geographic engagement for equitable environmentalism.

"I want one day for that not to be foreign to me," my dad concluded. This is where Black environmental futurity begins.

WORKS CITED

@okcblackalumnicoalition. "Storytelling." *Instagram Stories* highlight, posted February, 2024/ https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17949984236755421/. Accessed 29 January 2025.

"A River's Rise to Olympic Rings: A Transformation in Six Chapters." *Greater Oklahoma City Chamber*, 1 May 2018. https://www.greateroklahomacity.com/stories/a-rivers-rise/. Accessed 17 January 2025.

"About." *Boom Town Creamery*, https://boomtowncreamery.com/index.php/about/. Accessed 21 March 2025.

"About." *Deep Deuce District*, https://deepdeucedistrict.com/about/. Accessed 16 March 2025.

"About." *Lillian Timber Farms*, https://www.lilliantimberfarms.org/about. Accessed 19 March 2025.

adaptokc. City of Oklahoma City Planning Department. https://planokc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/adaptokc070720ADOPTEDRECEI-1.pdf. Accessed 23 March 2025.

Anderson, Sam. *Boom Town*. Broadway Books, 2018.

Anna. *OK Space*, https://www.theokspace.com/. Accessed 5 November 2024.

Beach, Sheldon. "The Oddly Interesting History of the Oklahoma River." *Metro Library Podcast*. 15 May 2019, https://podcast.metrolibrary.org/the-oddly-interesting-history-of-the-oklahoma-river.

"Black Enclaves in Oklahoma City." *Metropolitan Library Systems*, 6 February 2025. https://www.metrolibrary.org/sites/default/files/Black%20Enclaves%20in%20Oklahoma%20City.pdf. Accessed 16 March 2025.

Bryant, Bunyan. "Issues and Potential Policies and Solutions for Environmental Justice: An Overview." *Environmental Justice: Issues, Policies, and Solutions*, edited by Bunyan Bryant, Island Press, 1995, pp. 8-33.

City of Oklahoma City City Manager Office. "City Council Memorandum on Dams 2 and 3," 1999-2003, Oklahoma City, OK. Informally published.

Corbin, C.N.E. "Rendering Gentrification and Erasing Race: Sustainable Development and the (Re)Visioning of Oakland, California, as a Green City." *The Black Geographic*, edited by Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis, Duke University Press, 2024, pp. 189-212.

Corely, James. "OKC's Story, Spirit in Boom Town." *405 Magazine*, 24 August 2018, https://www.405magazine.com/okcs-story-spirit-in-boom-town/. Accessed 21 March 2025.

Cread, Steven Bayliss. Eastside Futures, Bridge Impact Center, Oklahoma City, OK.

Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Environmental History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1996, pp. 7–28.

"Deep Deuce History." *Retro Metro*, 4 May 2009, https://www.retrometrookc.org/deep-deuce-history/. Accessed 10 March 2025.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix. "Introduction: Rhizome." *A Thousand Plateaus*. University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp. 3-25.

Dillon, Lindsey. "The San Francisco Blues." *The Black Geographic*, edited by Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis, Duke University Press, 2024, pp. 246-263.

Droz, Pennelys. "Stolen Lands: A Black and Indigenous History of Land Exploitation." *Yes! Magazine*. 16 November 2022. https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2022/11/16/history-land-slavery-indigenous Accessed 8 March 2025.

Elliot, Chiyuma. "'My Bad Attitude toward the Pastoral': Race, Place, and Allusion in the Poetry of C.S. Giscombe." *The Black Geographic*, edited by Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis, Duke University Press, 2024, pp. 72-93.

Environmental Protection Agency. "Environmental Justice-Related Terms As Defined Across the PSC Agencies." *Environmental Protection Agency*. 13 May 2013. https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2015-02/documents/team-ej-lexicon.pdf. Accessed 7 March 2025.

Faloyin, Dipo. *Africa is Not a Country: Notes on a Bright Country*. W.W. Norton, 2022, p. 285.

Finney, Carolyn. *Black Faces, White Spaces*. The University of North Carolina Press 2014.

Google Maps (n.d.). "Aerial image of the Oklahoma River." https://www.google.com/maps/@35.4655936,-97.4893828,4106m/data=!3m1!1e3?authuser=0&entry=ttu&g_ep=EgoyMDI1MDQwNy4wIKXMDSoJLDEwMjExNDUzSAFQAw%3D%3D. Accessed 20 October 2024.

Hagan, Ampson. "Blackness Out of Place and In Between in the Sahara." *The Black Geographic*, edited by Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis, Duke University Press, 2024, pp. 97-123.

Haworth, Jon. "Plans proposed for new tallest building in America and the location might surprise you." *ABC News*, 25 January 2024, https://abcnews.go.com/US/plans-proposed-new-tallest-building-america-location-surprise/story?id=106665288. Accessed 22 March 2025.

Hawthorne, Camilla and Jovan Scott Lewis, editors. "Introduction." *The Black Geographic: Praxis, Resistance, Futurity*, Duke University Press, 2023, pp. 1-24.

"History." *Deep Deuce District*, https://deepdeucedistrict.com/history/. Accessed 16 March 2025.

Killingsworth, Jimmie M. and Jacqueline S. Palmer. *Ecospeak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America*. Southern Illinois University Press, 1992.

Lackmeyer, Steve. "Flashback: Ray Ackerman and the River, Part Two." *The Oklahoman*, 30 May 2013, https://www.oklahoman.com/story/business/columns/steve-lackmeyer/2010/10/05/flashback-ray-ackerman-and-the-river-part-two/60936407007/. Accessed 22 March 2025.

Lackmeyer, Steve and Jack Money. "REBIRTH OF A RIVER MAPS Crowns City's Old Plans For N. Canadian." *The Oklahoman*, 30 August 1998. https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/1998/08/30/rebirth-of-a-river-maps-crowns-citys-old-plans-for-n-canadian/62270561007/. Accessed 20 January 2025.

"MAPS History." City of Oklahoma City, https://www.okc.gov/government/maps-3/maps-history. Accessed 24 March 2025.

McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006, p. xii.

Miles, Tiya. *Wild Girls: How the Outdoors Shaped the Women Who Challenged a Nation*. W.W. Norton, 2023, pp. xi-40.

Mundell, Amanda and Hazel Nash. "The Reality: The Legal Framework and Placemaking." *Placemaking: People, Properties, Planning*, edited by David Higgins and Peter J Larkham, Emerald Publishing Limited, 2025, pp. 13-29.

Muñoz, Solange. "Marielle Franco and Black Spatial Imaginaries." *The Black Geographic*, edited by Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis, Duke University Press, 2024, pp. 165-186.

"OpportUnity." *RIVERSPORT*, https://www.riversportokc.org/mission/opportunity/. Accessed 23 March 2025.

Pasternak, Shiri et al. "Infrastructure, Jurisdiction, Extractivism: Keywords for decolonizing geographies." *Political Geography*, vol. 101, March 2023, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102763. Accessed 12 November 2024.

Payne, Adam A. and Alyson L. Greiner. "New-Build Development and the Gentrification of Oklahoma City's Deep Deuce Neighborhood." *Geographic Review*, vol. 109, no. 1, 2019, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/gere.12294?needAccess=true. Accessed 17 March 2025.

Pilsch, Andrew. "Ethical Models for Nonhuman, Collective Rhetoric: A Review of Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times." *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture*. 2017. https://enculturation.net/ethical_models. Accessed 7 August 2024.

planokc. Oklahoma City Planning Department. https://planokc.org/. Accessed 11 October 2024.

Powell et al. "Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics." *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture*, vol. 17, no. 1, Oct. 2014, http://enculturation.net/our-story-begins-here. Accessed 2 February 2025.

Purifoy, Danielle. "Call Us Alive Someplace: DuBosian Methods and Living Black Geographies." *The Black Geographic*, edited by Camilla Hawthorne and Jovan Scott Lewis, Duke University Press, 2024, pp. 27-49.

"Reflect." *Oxford English Dictionary*, https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=reflect.

Reynolds, Nedra. *Geographies of Writing : Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2003. *ProQuest Ebook Central,* https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/lib/michstate-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1365225.

"Rights of Manoomin." *Center for Democratic and Environmental Rights*. https://www.centerforenvironmentalrights.org/rights-of-manoomin. Accessed 14 March 2025.

"River Bowl Classic." *Oklahoma Black Alumni Coalition*. https://www.okcbac.com/river-bowl. Accessed 16 March 2025.

Sackey, Donnie Johnson. *Trespassing Natures: Species Migration and the Right to Space*. The Ohio State University Press, 2024.

Scavnicky, Ryan. "Legends Tower is a very 20th-century way to say that you are squarely entering the 21st century." *Dezeen*, 7 February 2024, https://www.dezeen.com/2024/02/07/legends-tower-oklahoma-city-skyscraper-ryan-scavnicky-opinion/. Accessed 22 March 2025.

The Black/Land Project. https://www.blacklandproject.org/. Accessed 10 March 2025.

"The Boardwalk at Bricktown." *AO,* https://www.aoarchitects.com/project/the-boardwalk-at-bricktown/. Accessed 22 March 2025.

"The Bridge." *Urban Bridge*, https://www.urbanbridge.org/bridge-impact-center. Accessed 19 March 2025.

"The Market at Eastpoint." *The Market at Eastpoint*, https://www.marketateastpoint.org/the-market-at-eastpoint. Accessed 19 March 2025.

"The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Rivers." *The Universal Declaration of the Rights of Rivers*, https://www.rightsofrivers.org/. Accessed 14 March 2025.

Thomas, Briana A. "How Hip-Hop Was Born 50 Years Ago in a Block Party in the Bronx." *Smithsonian Magazine*. 11 August 2023. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/how-the-block-party-became-an-urban-phenomenon-180980560/. Accessed 12 March 2025.

Tuck, Eve and Yang, K. Wayne. "Decolonization is not a metaphor." Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-40.

Tuck, Eve et al. "Geotheorizing Black/Land: Contestations and Contingent Collaborations." *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2014, pp. 52–74.

Tuck, Eve et. al."Not Nowhere: Collaborating on Selfsame Land." Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society, 26 June 2014, https://decolonization.wordpress.com/2014/06/26/not-nowhere-collaborating-on-selfsame-land/. Accessed 4 February 2025.

US Army Corps of Engineers. Section 1135 of the 1986 Water Resources Development Act Authority for: Project Modifications to Improve the Environment. US Army Corps of Engineers Walla Walla District, 1986. https://planning.erdc.dren.mil/toolbox/library/PL/sec1135.pdf. Accessed 4 February 2025.

Vanguri, Star Medzerian, editor. *Rhetorics of Names and Naming.* Routledge, 2018.

Villanueva, Victor. "Foreword." *Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies*, edited by Iris D. Ruiz and Raúl Sánchez, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. v-viii.

Viriyapah, Matthew. "Jabee On Julius Jones, Gentrification & His 'Fragile And Cruel' New Album." *KOSU*, 2 September 2020, https://www.kosu.org/music/jabee-on-julius-jones. Accessed 17 March 2025.

"District Map of Oklahoma City." VisitOKC. Pamphlet.

Walker, Kylie. "OKC content creator's viral TikTok video highlights Deep Deuce's African American history." *KOCO 5 News*, 25 February 2025, https://www.koco.com/article/okc-viral-tiktok-video-deep-deuces-african-american-history-bhm/63925784. Accessed 17 March 2025.

Wall Kimmerer, Robin. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed Editions, 2013, pp. 48-59.

Wall Kimmerer, Robin. "Robin Wall Kimmerer: Greed Does Not Have to Define Our Relationship to Land: On Choosing to Belong to a Place." *Literary Hub*. 4 June 2020. https://lithub.com/robin-wall-kimmerer-greed-does-not-have-to-define-our-relationship-to-land/. Accessed 8 March 2025.

"Walnut Grove Community Engagement Session." @okcblackalumnicoalition. "**It's where we row**! Join us in March for a community engagement session to remember and preserve the history of Walnut Grove, with support from @ou_iqc , @metrolibraryok , and @riversportokc. As we carry forward the spirit of Black History Month, let's honor the past and shape the future together." *Instagram*, 26 February 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DGimtPLJfxx/.

"Walnut Grove Project." *Oklahoma Black Alumni Coalition,* https://www.okcbac.com/walnut-grove-project. Accessed 16 March 2025.

Wheeler, Grace. "Plans for nation's tallest building would transform Oklahoma City. But residents are skeptical." *KOSU*, 28 May 2024, https://www.kosu.org/local-news/2024-05-28/plans-for-nations-tallest-building-would-transform-oklahoma-city-but-residents-are-skeptical. Accessed 22 March 2025.

Whetung, Madeline. "Doing Indigenous Geography." *Nishnaabeg Encounters: Living Indigenous Landscapes*. Master's thesis, University of Toronto, 2016. Pp. 90-111.

"Why Plan?"*planokc*, https://planokc.org/why-and-how/. Accessed 9 April 2025.

Zitzow, Mark and Oklahoma City Riversport Foundation. "PUD 1725 Design Statement for Oklahoma City Boathouse District PUD." 16 April 2020. Informally published.

APPENDIX

Figure 7: Flyer for OBAC's Walnut Grove Project community engagement workshop.

Figure 8: Mockup up Legends Tower from Matteson Capital and AO.

Figure 9: View of the Devon Tower from my parents' neighborhood in Edmond, Oklahoma.

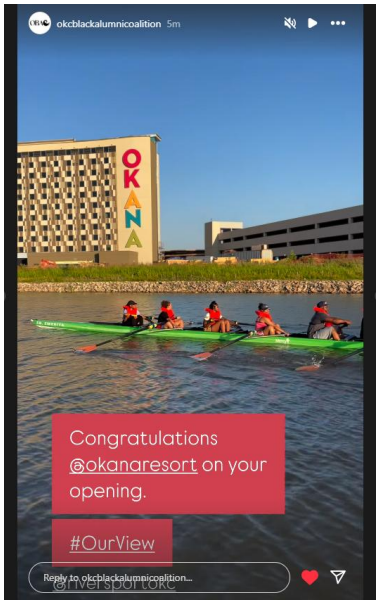


Figure 10: OBAC's Instagram story congratulating OKANA.