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# Decolonizing the YA North: Environmental Injustice in Sherri L. Smith's Orleans

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DECOLONIZING THE YA NORTH: ENVIRONMENTAL  
INJUSTICE IN SHERRI L. SMITH'S *ORLEANS*

by

Micah-Jade Coleman

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate School  
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at The University of Southern Mississippi  
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for the Degree of Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### DECOLONIZING THE YA NORTH: ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE IN SHERRI L. SMITH'S *ORLEANS*

by Micah-Jade Coleman

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Young Adult (YA) dystopias, in recent years, have imagined a future world fueled by the overuse and misuse of technology, the advancement of science for human gain, as well as societies ruled by governments that govern based on their own self-interests and economic gain. Such novels have opened the door for discussion about how the present-day actions of societies can impact the future of the environment; yet many only focus their attention on societies in the North—regions considered “developed” by the western world. In her YA novel, *Orleans* (2014), Sherri L. Smith focuses attention on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and how government denial of ecological realities in southern societies—regions considered “developing”—can lead to catastrophic environmental degradation. Smith’s novel also diverges from other YA novels in that her protagonist is of African descent.

This thesis considers how global understandings of the North/South divide can lead to understandings of the divide on a local scale. Through its setting, conflict, and characterization, *Orleans* exposes the intersections of environmental injustice with racial and gender-based oppression in order to critique the local North/South divide in present-day New Orleans. Smith’s novel also advocates for the reconciliation of the divide through its dramatization of ecofeminist principles, namely Rosemary Radford Ruether’s “ecofeminist ethic” and Vandana Shiva’s “decolonization of the north.”

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my partner, Philip, who motivated me during the many all-nighters I composed this paper. Thanks also to my parents for your many pep talks, and Kristin, Garrett, and Anna Beth for your encouragement, as well as for taking the time from your own work to serve as my editors.

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## CHAPTER I – YA DYSTOPIA, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND DIFFERENCE

Sherri L. Smith’s young adult (YA) dystopia, *Orleans* (2013) connects the past to the future by imagining Hurricane Katrina to be the first in a series of extreme weather events leading to a post-Apocalyptic New Orleans. With the 2005 hurricane at the foundation of its plot, *Orleans* invites readers to reflect on the trauma associated with the storm and the ecological disorder the storm portends. According to Jonathon Sturgeon, contemporary dystopian fiction reflects a widespread awareness of environmental disorder. Hurricane Katrina generated a consciousness of climate change<sup>1</sup> and the urgent need for citizens and government to work to address it: “The events following Hurricane Katrina, and, without question, the hurricane itself, exemplify our shared fear of ecological disaster, state control, and state failure” (n.p.). But even after the storm, citizens remained unserved by the government. Indeed, there has been “year-over-year economic growth” in New Orleans’s wealthier areas since Katrina, and the city is on a path toward addressing past government failures that contributed to the hurricane’s devastation. Yet more than ten years later, city officials have not confirmed whether those issues have actually been rectified (Robertson & Fausset n.p.). This, as well as governmental denial of ecological realities, has contributed to environmental injustice in the region.

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<sup>1</sup>Research has shown that the Southeastern section of the United States has become “exceptionally vulnerable to climate change-related events,” over the past several years (Gutierrez & LePrevost 1). Particularly, the warming of sea surface temperatures has the potential to produce tropical storms with higher levels of intensity: “i.e. more Category 4 and 5 storms” (7). Consequently, hurricane activity, such as high winds and flooding has not only led to “drowning, injury, stress, illness, and death due to contaminated floodwater,” but also tropical storms may hold “greater economic repercussions for those living within the paths of hurricanes” (7).



While set in the future, Smith's novel draws attention to contemporary issues of environmental injustice and how these intersect with characters' racial, gendered, and class-based identities. Smith manages to make this ambitious intersection of themes engaging to Young Adult readers by dramatizing them through setting and through the novel's central relationship between Fen, a woman of color who raises a child in ruined New Orleans, and Daniel, a male scientist who travels from the North to advance his career as a medical humanitarian. Smith clearly contrasts the values of these two characters through conflict and, in this way, educates the reader on environmental injustice as a conflict between values of the global North and the global South. Plagued by the aftermath of environmental catastrophe and a deadly disease, Delta Fever, Fen travels across Orleans to provide a better life for her charge, whereas Daniel travels to Orleans in order to use its resources to find a cure for Delta Fever that will benefit northerners. Conflict between Fen and Daniel arise due to Daniel's belief that cultural practices of the North are sustainable in the South; however, his ignorance of southern systems leaves him unable to navigate through Orleans without Fen and at times places them in life-threatening situations that almost compromise Fen's plan to provide her charge with a better life. Later, when the two characters reconcile, Smith expresses the hopeful elements of an ecofeminist ethic to address the inequities dramatized earlier. This novel offers YA readers a holistic understanding of climate change as an integral, local, and ultimately global issue, one whose consequences differ by race, class, gender and region.

As the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina brought about an awareness of environmental issues, it more importantly brought attention to the intersections of race

and environmental injustice. Specifically, Katrina exposed governmental practices of environmental racism, practices that intentionally or unintentionally subject people of color to environmental hazards (Bullard 6).<sup>2</sup> The hurricane “laid bare the governmental mechanism used to control black bodies and lives...the lack of government aid and support” given to minority populations during the hurricane’s aftermath, “and the violent ghettoization of New Orleans’s black population in the hurricane’s wake...” (Sturgeon n.p.). The aftermath of the storm dramatized the government’s marginalization of its citizens of color. For example, media coverage of African-Americans endangered by governmental failures to prepare for extreme weather dramatized how older forms of racial injustice in predominately black communities are inflected within newly visible issues of environmental crisis.

Katrina’s aftermath stimulated further response from writers who wished to join the critical conversation and found rich potential to do so using the genres of dystopian and speculative fiction (Sturgeon n.p.). Smith is clearly one of these authors; however, *Orleans* complicates the trend. Unlike popular YA dystopias, such as M.T. Anderson’s *Feed* (2002) or Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy, *Orleans* does not simply use the critical conversation to contemplate environmental crisis in a post-suburban

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<sup>2</sup> One of the most documented instances of environmental racism occurred during the aftermath of the Mississippi River Flood of 1927. During an attempt to save farmland in Greenville, MS, “concentration camps” were set up for black planters who were forced to stack sandbags in order to block flood waters (Ambrose). John Barry notes that white citizens received better accommodations and were housed in hotels or evacuated by boats (315). Initially, William A. Percy—appointed chairman of Flood Relief Committee— had made plans to evacuate African-Americans citizens. However, Percy’s plans were thwarted at the insistence of his father, Le Roy Percy, who feared that black planters who left the Delta would not return. Within these camps there was insufficient food and not enough tents for the thousands of black planters living there (Ambrose). Moreover, any black males who tried to leave were forced at gunpoint to return to the camps.

pocket of the north, an area widely considered “developed” by the western world. Smith’s novel is uniquely invested in the particular racialized setting of New Orleans and in acknowledging the city’s “southernness”—in this case, its jarring similarity to undeveloped nations. *Orleans* ultimately comments on the North/South divide. Although discussion of the North/South divide is primarily focused on a global scale, this thesis focuses on how a global understanding of the North/South divide can help readers grasp how the divide is present on a local scale. For this paper, the North/South divide can be understood as the differences in regional development, wherein the north is equated with “developed,” industrial communities and the south is equated with “developing” communities. *Orleans*, in turn, comments on how this divide contributes to environmental crisis, especially as it perpetuates environmental racism.

*Orleans*’s divergence from other popular YA dystopias is further apparent through its protagonist’s ethnicity. Unlike its counterparts whose plots revolve around white female protagonists, *Orleans*’s descriptions of its protagonist suggest that she is of Afro-Creole descent.<sup>3</sup> This move is consequential: as ecofeminist Rosemary Radford Ruether notes, during Katrina, many of “the dispossessed were black women and their dependent children” (“After Katrina: Poverty” 178). While feminists have previously acknowledged the intersections of racial and gender oppression of women of color, Ruether’s study shows how racial and gender oppression manifests itself in ways other than cultural perceptions of minority women, through relations to habitat.<sup>4</sup> In particular,

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<sup>3</sup> See Collins’s *The Hunger Games* Trilogy, Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* Series, and the *Matched* Trilogy by Ally Condie.

<sup>4</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, bell hooks’s *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, and Sara Suleri’s “Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition.”

Ruether addresses the fact that women of color are disproportionately deprived of their basic right to a healthy, livable environment after natural disasters.

The voices of these women and children echo through *Orleans*'s protagonist, Fen de la Guerre. Where in other YA dystopias, the stories of women and children of color are marginalized, *Orleans* is deeply invested in making their voices heard. By using the basic elements of fiction—setting, conflict, and characterization—*Orleans* exposes the intersections of environmental injustice with race and gender-based oppression in order to critique the local North/South divide in present day New Orleans. The novel, moreover, advocates for a reconciliation of the North/South divide through its dramatization of an “ecofeminist ethic,” an ethic that sees social justice and environmental justice as integrally related, that requires an acknowledgment of human finitude and humanity’s late arrival in the natural world, as well as “mutual interdependency that replaces hierarchies of domination as a model” between the sexes, racial groups, and human and non-human interactions (Ruether “Ecofeminism: Symbolic” 397).

Set nearly fifty years after the events of Hurricane Katrina, *Orleans* speculates on the possible future of the United States if environmental issues, such as climate change, go unaddressed by government and/or its people. Following a series of catastrophic hurricanes, a deadly disease known as Delta Fever spreads across the southern United States, killing millions of American citizens. When attempts to control the disease fail, the government quarantines the American South from the rest of the United States.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The novel indicates that Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, and Texas comprise the states quarantined from the United States. Though historically Mississippi was equally affected by the events of Hurricane Katrina, it is excluded from this list.

Ultimately, the government forces the territory to secede from the nation. As a means to avoid spreading Delta Fever, the remaining inhabitants of the southern territory live in tribes arranged according to their blood types.

Smith's narrative is told through two perspectives. The first is through Fen, a sixteen-year-old orphan living in the former New Orleans. At the start of the novel, Fen is living as a member of the O-Positive (OP) tribe and serves as right hand to Lydia, the chieftain of the OP tribe. After AB blood hunters<sup>6</sup> attack the OPs, Lydia gives birth to a child but dies from blood loss. As Lydia's right-hand, Fen is left responsible for Lydia's daughter and promises to provide a better life for the baby, whom Fen names Enola.

The second perspective from which the story is told is that of Daniel Weaver, a young military scientist from the Outer States—the North. Daniel becomes determined to find a cure for the disease after his younger brother contracts Delta Fever and dies. In time, Daniel discovers a cure but soon finds that while his miracle drug kills Delta Fever, it also kills its human host (46). Still determined to stop Delta Fever, Daniel sneaks into the former states believing the source of a viable inoculation can be found there.

Through Fen and Daniel, Smith engages themes that are foundational to environmental justice (EJ), a movement that acknowledges a link between race and bioregion and actively resists environmental racism. The environmental justice movement advocates on behalf of all groups for equal access to healthy environments, focusing on situations that (intentionally or unintentionally) deprive groups of the right to

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<sup>6</sup> O's are universal donors, especially O negative, because of the absence of a D antigen ("Blood Types"). In *Orleans*, blood hunting, while illegal, is profitable. Those with O blood types are the main targets of blood hunters because they are universal donors.

live in healthy, livable environments, groups who are routinely subjected to environmental hazards (Faber 6).

New Orleans, the main setting of Smith's narrative, provides an appropriate backdrop to engage themes foundational to the EJ movement as the city saw (and still sees) its share of problems stemming from environmental racism. In her article "After Katrina: Poverty, Race, and Environmental Degradation," Ruether notes that before Hurricane Katrina, "the city was 67% black" and between thirty-four to fifty percent of blacks in New Orleans lived below the poverty line (177). She further points out that much of the impoverished community "were the ones who could only afford the poorest housing that lay in the low areas of town," thereby making them more susceptible to flooding, "while the affluent white areas of town, the Garden District and the French quarter, were in the highest areas that remain mostly unflooded" (178). This situation provides a clear example of the environmental racism that exists in New Orleans.

Even ten years after the events of Katrina, the ability for minorities to afford proper housing in healthy neighborhoods has not improved. According to Campbell Robertson and Richard Fausset of the *New York Times*, New Orleans has become a city of "escalating rents and low wages," as well as a city of income inequality, "a gap that falls starkly along racial lines" (n.p.)<sup>7</sup> As a result of these economic and racial inequalities, many black citizens are still being pushed to lower income areas of the city, areas that still have not fully recovered from the devastation of the hurricane.

New Orleans presents an ideal setting to discuss the North/South divide not only because of its economic inequality, which has led to differences in development for its

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<sup>7</sup> Robertson and Fausset report that "the median income of black households [in New Orleans] is 54 percent lower than that of white households" (n.p.).

communities, but also because the North/South divide is marked by issues of what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence” (2). Certainly *Orleans* depicts the aftermath of extreme weather events and pandemics. But these sensational events arise from subtle, ongoing, and normalized practices. Of slow violence, Nixon writes, “[it is] a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2).<sup>8</sup>

While Nixon’s “slow violence” is used to discuss how practices of big corporations and/or government policies can lead to environmental degradation, its use in this paper is not limited solely to examples of policies that directly affect the natural world, but to any practice or policy that leaves populations degraded overtime. For example, environmentalist Robert D. Bullard notes that many cities, as is the case with New Orleans, have evacuation plans that rely heavily on the assumption that its citizens have access to transportation in order to evacuate; however, more than fifteen percent of New Orleans’s residents, most of whom are minorities, rely on public transportation as their main mode of transit (755-756). As Bullard’s statistical analysis demonstrates, a significant portion of New Orleans’s minority population was already at a disadvantage when Hurricane Katrina hit. Agencies, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), had taken initiatives to evaluate better ways to provide these disadvantaged individuals with evacuation plans that fit their particular needs; yet

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<sup>8</sup>To illustrate this principle, Nixon cites Lawrence Summers, who in an attempt to appease western environmentalists and aid corporations with the distribution of their industrial waste, “advocated that the bank develop a scheme to export rich-nation garbage, toxic waste, and heavily polluting industries to Africa,” reasoning that it would solve the imbalance of hazardous waste in the world (1).

funding for initiatives that might have assisted those disadvantaged was cut, and cities were left with incomplete evacuation plans (755).<sup>9</sup>

Smith includes fictive legal documents in the text of *Orleans*, encouraging her YA readers to think in systemic terms about the personal relationships the novel depicts. It is important for critics of YA dystopia to be aware of “slow violence” to better understand how Smith shapes a highly contemporary and sophisticated understanding of setting in terms that YA readers can grasp, that is, through the relationship of Fen and Daniel in the aftermath of hurricanes, in the midst of disease and through institutionalized injustice

Smith positions her future setting in terms of Katrina’s real causes and effects. Concerning New Orleans specifically, Bullard notes that when the city was made aware of Katrina’s approach, plans were in place that would allow citizens to be transported out of the city by bus or train, but because the plans had been left on the drawing board, the city was unable to follow through with an efficient evacuation plan, leaving many of its citizens to brave Hurricane Katrina because they were unable to leave the city (755). Consequently, many citizens of color were affected by major health hazards as toxic debris pervaded the more vulnerable communities, resulting in clean-ups that would take years and displacing minorities from their homes (769). Bullard’s observations serve as a prime example of slow violence that results from government participation in acts of

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<sup>9</sup>One of these initiatives was known as Project Impact, which aimed to “tackl[e] danger zones head on, before they became disaster statistics” (“Project Impact”). In general, FEMA was interested in assessing various communities’ risk and providing them with the resources they would need to prevent ineffective plans for natural disasters. In 2001 the Bush administration disbanded this project in order to fund the War in Iraq



environmental injustice. Throughout *Orleans*, we see Smith using examples of X, similar to Bullard's, as a catalyst to discuss issues of environmental injustice.

Smith goes further than updating YA dystopia with *Orleans*' indirect depiction of slow violence. She engages ecofeminist understandings of the intersection of gender and habitat by gendering the conflict between North and South with Daniel and Fen. Her use of Fen as the novel's protagonist emphasizes themes integral to ecofeminism, an approach that examines what Ruether describes as "the symbolic, psychological, and ethical connections" between the domination of nature and women, as well as the "male monopolization of resources and controlling power" ("Ecofeminism" 388). Many ecofeminists have articulated the link between gender, race, and bioregion and have long applied these intersections into an understanding of environmental injustice; for example, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies's important work, *Ecofeminism*, observes empirical data that shows how environmental disorder affects people of color more acutely than members of other demographic groups. Among that group, people of color in the global South are more likely to be at risk, especially woman and dependent children, due to practices that contribute to the North/South divide. Not only is Fen a woman of color who lives in the South, she is tasked with the survival of a child. With this complication, Smith not only increases the dramatic tension in Fen's situation but also situates Fen within a conversation about women's traditional and unique investment in habitat health.

Fen's dependent puts her in a different relationship to her setting than Daniel. Women and dependent children of southern societies are particularly vulnerable as women work closely with the local habitat to steward natural resources so that they may support children and other members of the community entrusted into their care. This

stewardship attempts to balance human and nonhuman rights with resources and is rooted in practices of nurture based on recognition of the other rather than on practices of profit based on exploitation of the other, which is visible in many western societies. In her work on “Earth Democracy,” Shiva observes that farmers work in a sustenance rather than a market economy, and that the former is more sustainable than the latter. The diversion of natural resources to a market economy, in contrast, “generates a scarcity condition for ecological stability and creates new forms of poverty for all, especially women and children” (72). Under the pressures of global capitalism, southern women and children are made poor through the ruin of natural resources that they depend upon. Through “their forced and asymmetrical participation [in global development schemes] they bore the costs but were excluded from the benefits” (72). Both Shiva and Mies point to the patriarchal history of western forms of development that subjugate women and nature as commodities while claiming superior knowledge, objectivity, and liberatory potential. These forms of development are thematic trends that ecofeminists associate with the North/South divide and not just on a global scale (22).

Although the North/South divide presents a problem for southern societies, ecofeminists, such as Ruether, have devised a possible solution. Ruether, calls for the adoption of an ecofeminist ethic that acknowledges humans as “latecomers” to the planet that functioned well without human domination of its systems (396).<sup>10</sup> For Ruether, interdependence between humans and habitat is a basis for an egalitarian social order within which difference does not justify domination (397). She imagines a future wherein diversity allows for holistic approaches to problem solving and where domination no

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<sup>10</sup> Though she articulates its necessity in a religious context, aspects of an ecofeminist ethic can be understood from a secular context as well.

longer flourishes. Ruether's ecofeminist ethic contrasts with the patriarchal systems that subjugate woman and nature as objects to be dominated and degraded. Patriarchal systems share with colonial systems the construction of cultural others in such a way as to justify oppression. Smith dramatizes these intersections with her protagonist, Fen, and her antagonist-turned-partner, Daniel.

As a woman of color in a southern region disadvantaged by a political system that favors the north, and as the primary caregiver and protector of a child, Fen is positioned to expose and personalize issues of environmental racism as it is fueled by the North/South developmental divide. In contrast, Daniel is positioned to represent qualities associated with the global North of ecofeminist critique: he travels from the North to the South with a would-be cure at the expense of those in the South, leading to a perpetuation of environmental injustice we see the novel critique. Rather than function merely as a foil to Fen, Daniel represents notions of northern domination at work in the novel. Through the initial conflict between Fen and Daniel and their eventual reconciliation, Smith dramatizes the intersection of race, gender, and region in a story about environmental disorder that can engage YA readers and help them understand environmental justice as an integral whole. The novel ultimately provides a rich contribution to YA readers growing up in an era where climate change is transforming social priorities and for whom environmental politics is likely to be foregrounded as they assume their civic duties.

CHAPTER II – ENVIRONMENTAL APARTHEID: THE NORTH/SOUTH DIVIDE,  
BLOOD TRIBES, AND GOVERNMENTAL INJUSTICE

Smith is careful to articulate the characters of Daniel and Fen in institutional as well as personal terms. The text encourages YA readers to think systemically in the way it begins, with fictional legal documents that emphasize the political, systemic nature of their relationship. The fictional documents provide a backstory, outlining the events before Fen and Daniel meet by describing the aftermath of storms. It is as if Smith is offering her YA readers an integral paradigm within which to understand the relationship of Fen and Daniel, one that inscribes legal, environmental, and political themes as constitutive of personal experience.

Included in the documents are formal declarations of the Quarantine of the American South and secession issued by Smith's US government in the years 2020 and 2025, respectively. With these documents, Smith's novel dramatizes the United States' government as a governing body driven by its own interests and economic gain. The first of the documents declares, "The Quarantine will be reevaluated as the disease runs its course. Until then, all borders will be sealed" (iv). The document intends to convey the government's determination to find a way to combat Delta Fever, yet a close reading of the passage suggests other motives. For example, the government hopes to "make progress toward treatment," only *after* the disease has "run its course," suggesting that the government's plans to help the nation's citizens do not include southerners. As Delta Fever is a fatal epidemic at this point in the novel,<sup>11</sup> allowing the disease to "run its

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<sup>11</sup> Later in the novel, Fen notes that since the separation of Orleans citizens into blood tribes, the rate of fatalities associated with the disease "ain't what it used to be" (Smith 21). However,

course” implies that the government plans to let the southern citizens infected with the disease perish.

The notion that the people of the South are expendable is furthered a page later in another document issued by the government that uses an appeal to “Nature” to literally naturalize the North’s disavowal of the South:

Therefore it is with regret and pain for our fellow citizens that the United States Senate had agreed to withdraw our governance of the affected states[...] The shape of our great nation has been altered irrevocably by Nature, and now Man must follow suit in order to protect the inalienable rights of the majority [...] the foremost being life.” (v)

In this document, the US government announces what it calls “separation,” a kind of reversal of southern secession: where once the south wished to secede from the North to protect the racist economy of slavery, now the north wishes to dispatch with the South to protect itself from contagion. The language from the Declaration of Independence signals readers to think about this fictional moment in terms of American history and its long conflict with respecting “inalienable rights” for all of its human members. In order to protect the “inalienable rights” of northerners, the government alienates its southern citizens and rejects its responsibility for Americans whose identities as such disappear with a stroke of the pen. Although the language of this “reverse secession” document indicates remorse, the government’s initial plan to let Delta Fever “run its course” shows that, in reality, its remorse is disingenuous because it never intended to help cure its southerners when they were citizens (iv). Moreover, Smith crafts the document such that

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“outlander[s]” and “smuggler[s] from over the Wall” do not have this immunity and the disease proves to be as fatal as it was before the secession (21).

the government speaks in the traditional liberal terms of “Man,” demonstrating an implicit contrast to her protagonist and her charge, neither of whom are men or from the North. Indeed, women and children of the South are not included in this supposedly universal concept of the individual that the north claims to protect (another allusion to American history); instead, they are abandoned by a patriarchy that treats them as second-class citizens who are exempt from the promise of “inalienable rights.”

The language of the documents is not the only evidence that furthers the idea of a government disinterested in helping its southern citizens; the five-year time span between when the documents are dated is also quite telling. Within this time frame, there is rarely any mention of the government’s working to cure Delta Fever. In fact, I only located two instances of such effort within the entirety of *Orleans*. The first endeavor is when Daniel attempts to create a vaccination for the disease, not because he wishes to help the sick but because he hopes to preserve his brother’s legacy. The second possibility is when Daniel mentions the federally-funded Institute of Post-Separation Studies in Orleans, which he believes was tasked with finding a cure as well. Even so, the government think tank proves to be a sham when the novel reveals that its “official charter was to study intergroup relations” after the division of the southern citizens into blood tribes (74).

*Orleans* soon reveals that even through the government is disinterested in the southern population, the government does show an interest in salvaging southern resources. Daniel notes that the “*New* in *New Orleans* had been dropped” after the second storm, “when the Fever was at its worst” (73). He continues his recollection:

There had been attempts to re-create New Orleans in the serving South  
[...] a private island was sold to the government with plans to relocate the

more historical structures, and many of the city's people. But Hurricane Lorenzo had dispensed those plans [...] Daniel knew this because the island, now simply known as Folly Island, had been one to the places he and his team were allowed to collect environmental samples. Not quite the same flora as you would find in the Delta... but as close as one could get outside of the quarantine zone. It was like a theme park version of the real place, Daniel thought. (73)

Here, Daniel recounts the government's plan to recreate New Orleans and the renaming of the southern territory to Orleans. The loss of the "New" in New Orleans signifies the loss of the city's appeal. Traditionally, New Orleans is considered an attraction that generates revenue from its tourism. Because the city has been quarantined due to Delta Fever, its people lose their value to the government. Despite the fact that Delta Fever is "at its worst," the interest of the government is not focused on curing its people but on relocating the landmarks of the territory in order to recreate the city in a "theme park" like fashion, as Daniel points out. Because theme parks function as profitable attractions, by relocating the island, the government can therefore profit again from the city without having to rebuild any living communities or care for its inhabitants; however, as Daniel notes, "Hurricane Lorenzo had dispensed those plans" causing the funding for the project to be pulled (Smith 73). In this passage, the hurricane's name is telling. The name Lorenzo is derived from the name Laurence, "a Christian name, used to denote a personification of indolence" ("Lorenzo"; *OED*). Hurricane Lorenzo thus functions as a warning of the government's indolence in its refusal to rectify the environmental degradation—the source of its problems. Instead of addressing these problems, the name

Folly Island insinuates that the government foolishly attempted to circumvent the ecological realities the hurricane foreshadowed and took the easier solution to resolve its issue by profiting from the remains of Orleans. Lorenzo's intervention in the plans demonstrates that finding a solution to the degradation does not occur by ignoring the problem but by taking notice of and acting on nature's warnings in order to deal with the degradation. Yet the destructive string of hurricanes that follow Lorenzo suggest that the warning is never heeded, which causes more environmental disorder to ensue.

Further evidence that articulates the government's interests in exploiting Orleans for capital gain appears toward the beginning of the novel when Daniel recalls his failed attempt at curing Delta Fever:

Daniel's cure for Delta Fever had created an even deadlier strain of the disease [...] it was a weapon, that only killed Delta Fever carriers, which now included every inhabitant of the Delta coast. The United States economy was suffering. If the Delta could be recovered, stripped of Delta Fever and harvested for its natural resources ---timber, oil, shipping lanes, and more... If the military knew about Daniel's virus, they might very well use it. Genocide in the name of money. (46-47)

Daniel realizes that his creation of the deadly virus—while a failure at curing the disease—may still benefit the United States' government economically. It is as if the former American South has become a colony of the American North. Worse, Daniel speculates that upon knowledge of this disease, the military will use his drug as a weapon against the carriers of Delta Fever: the inhabitants of Orleans. Both of Daniel's recollections suggests that in the interest of economic development, the government will



value its economic recovery over human life. Here again Smith alludes to American history, to the genocide of Native people and the development of their territories. In short, the citizens of Orleans are subordinated to the interests of a foreign government, in order to stimulate its economy. Moreover, Daniel's account highlights the objectification and subsequent commodification of the Delta region. The region is invaluable to the Outer States and therefore it, but not its citizens, can be saved from its Delta Fever. Even so, this commodification of the land only benefits those who profit from government, leaving the area degraded once it is used.

Daniel's last words, "Genocide in the name of money," resonate with Nixon's observation of slow violence in the global South. Whereas Nixon cites the introduction of industrial waste into foreign ecosystems, ultimately leading to unlivable lands, Smith's dramatization of Nixon's principle proposes the use of northern technology to kill off the Orleans population in order to benefit the Outer States' economy.

The preceding examples illustrate how the North/South divide intersects with trends acknowledged by ecofeminism, particularly the patriarchal economic practices that can drive northern development. These patriarchal practices commodify natural resources and undercut the sovereignty of people in poorer communities over their own sustenance. While the above examples demonstrate how the monopolization of resources can lead to an objectification and subsequent commodification of the land, it is the governmental implementation of the blood tribes that leads to the objectification/commodification of the citizens of Orleans, as well as their own experiences with "slow violence."

Throughout *Orleans*, the necessity of tribal life is continuously endorsed by the novel's characters since it prolongs the inhabitants' lives by preventing Delta Fever from

crossing blood types. And while the benefit of tribe life cannot be ignored, the belief that it is implemented purely for the southern citizens' protection is revealed by Fen to be a farce when she and Daniel travel across Orleans to retrieve research for Daniel's inoculation. Fen and Daniel arrive at the Institute of Post- Separation Studies in order to find old research for Daniel and communicate with the consciousness of a professor who worked there. The professor, Dr. Warren, tells Daniel, "THERE IS NO CURE" (206). Daniel replies, "Not yet [...] but I'm working on one. But I don't have access to samples in the States... finding a cure was one of your objectives" (206). Fen then indicates to Daniel that "[t]hey ain't working on a cure here [...] Orleans is just a lab to them. We ain't people, we rats" (206). Fen indicates to Daniel that despite his initial belief, the institute is only meant to study tribes in an attempt to eradicate racism, as it is Dr. Warren's "pet project" (207). In other words, Warren's research would advance his career and the scientific knowledge of northern society. Dr. Warren's work, represents the careerist individualism of western development. Daniel, shocked, comes to realize that the institute is simply "Tuskegee<sup>12</sup> all over again" or another study rooted in practices of human objectification that is used to benefit northern development—in this

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<sup>12</sup> During the early 1930s, the US Public Health Service, along with the Tuskegee Institute, began studying the prevalence of syphilis in black men. The study "involved 600 black men—399 with syphilis, 201 who did not have the disease," and continued until the 1970s (CDC). However, this research was conducted without the informed consent of the subjects. Participants believed that they were "being treated" for "bad blood," colloquial terminology for various conditions such as anemia and syphilis (CDC). All participants were informed that they would receive free medical care and meals, as well as burial assistance. However, the participants were never told the true nature of the study nor given proper treatment for their condition. At this time there was an inoculation that would treat syphilis, but during an investigation of the study, it was found that none of the participants received such treatment or were given the option to leave the study if they chose to do so (CDC).

case scientific knowledge— and advance the careers and prestige of its authorities rather than the people it pretends to help.

Fen's revelation that the citizens of Orleans are similar to "rats" and Daniel's realization that the blood tribes are "Tuskegee all over again" point to a history of northern science that has dehumanized people of color, objectified them for scientific gain, and justified its actions by claiming that the knowledge gained from experimenting on minority populations would benefit them. Researchers from the Tuskegee study, for instance, posited that the study would help with the prevalence of syphilis in the American-American communities, yet the researchers objectified their participants by seeing them as "lab rats" to be examined rather than humans with the right to participate in the study with full disclosure (*CDC*). In a similar manner, the blood tribes do benefit the citizens of Orleans by prolonging their survival. However, the citizens are deceived concerning the nature of the tribes, and the long-term effects of the tribes ultimately subjugate the Orleans citizens to 'slow violence.'

The 'slow violence' maintained by the blood tribes is foremost seen in the blood tribes' perpetuation of crime. Blood tribes lend themselves to the hunting or killing of Orleans citizens in order to harvest blood, a life source for the citizens. As a result, carriers of blood that can be universally donated become objects of commodification. Still, the novel points out that crimes, such as blood hunting, occur "first by necessity, then by a self-determined sense of right" (Smith 254). For the citizens of Orleans, blood hunting is primarily about survival.

Adding to this notion of crime is Fen's claim that while the blood tribes are meant to eradicate racism, in fact, they still promote a racialized society. As stated earlier, the

AB blood tribe is considered the most dangerous and least favorable group because many of their tribesmen act as blood hunters. For instance, they are described as “big, strong, and crazy” (19), which evokes notions of savagery, notions that are especially embodied by their leader Le Beta Sauvage—the savage beast. Yet what is noteworthy about the fact that AB is considered the lowest and most dangerous of the blood tribes is that African-Americans are more likely than any other races to have AB blood (“Blood Types”). Despite scientists’ attempts to eradicate racism through blood tribes, by differentiating citizens based on blood types, they promote a racialized biopolitics.

*Orleans*’s use of blood types to classify its characters is consequential and points to a history of savagery and second classism equated with blackness. The blood tribe’s survivalist blood hunting alludes to post-Katrina media coverage that focused on the supposed crimes of the black populations. Famously, white residents who appropriated supplies from stores were depicted as resilient survivors while black residents who did the same were depicted as looters. As a result of this racialized criminalization by the media, law enforcement became geared towards preventing crimes that were not actually occurring, rather than using their time to actually assist citizens with evacuations out of the city (Reuther “After Katrina: Poverty 178-179). By telling the stories of the displaced person of color, Smith subverts any essentialist ideas of the black criminal, depicting violence in survivalist terms as people cope with catastrophe fueled by government failures.

### CHAPTER III - RECOVERING THE OTHER/ANOINTING THE MOTHER

Since *Orleans* functions as a critique of the events of Hurricane Katrina and systems that work against environmental justice, it is only fitting that the novel's protagonist represents the population disproportionately affected by the events: women and children of color. Yet, it is not until the middle of *Orleans* that readers are informed of Fen's ethnicity, indirectly through reference to her hair. Fen states, "Folks in Orleans all be mutts except for Asians" (144). "Mutt" in this connotation likely refers to the mixed heritage of Louisiana Creole peoples. Even so, Afro-creole may be a better term to describe Fen's ethnicity as descriptions of Fen's hair point to her possible ancestry and notions of black hair politics.

Since the arrival of the first enslaved Africans, hair has signified racial identity in America.<sup>13</sup> According to Wanda M. Brooks and Jonda C. McNair, hair that resembles "Eurocentric physical features—" for instance smooth, long, and straight hair— has since been recognized as "normative," whereas textured hair has been traditionally associated with blackness (297). In literature, the normative nature of Eurocentric hair is apparent in the generalness of its descriptions. As I surveyed children's and YA literature for this paper, I noticed that descriptions of hair associated with protagonists who are white or racially ambiguous were described in generalities such as hair color, length, and/or style. For example, *The Hunger Games* protagonist Katniss is described as having "long, dark hair" (4). Similarly, Tris of *Divergent* recounts the following memory about her hair: "The strand fell on the floor in a dull, blond ring" (1).

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<sup>13</sup> Wanda M. Brooks and Jonda C. McNair note that having Eurocentric hair "translated to economic opportunity and social advantage" for slaves who were not afford such privilege (297).

In contrast to white or racially ambiguous characters, hair belonging to characters who are explicitly identified as black is most always described using signifiers of hair texture, such as in Carolivia Herron's controversial children's book *Nappy Hair* (1997) and Jacqueline Woodson's protagonist in *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014), who is described as having a "crop of thick curls" (11). Several times in *Orleans*, Fen's hair is described as "rough" and "frizzy," indicating its texture in the same fashion as black characters and therefore signifying Fen's blackness (Smith 30 & 93).

It is not simply Fen's ethnicity that makes her an appropriate choice for a protagonist but also her embodiment of the black adoptive mother. Fen is positioned for the role of adoptive mother after she is left to care for her chieftain's newborn daughter (Smith 37-40). Fen's role as an adoptive black mother holds implication for our understanding of the novel, and Patricia Hill Collins's discussion of the relationship between biological mothers and "other mothers" can shed light on our understanding of Fen's characterization. In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Collins writes:

Biological mothers, or blood mothers, are expected to care for their children. But African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise...As a result, other mothers—women who assist blood mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood." (178)

Collins recounts that in the African-American tradition, the rearing of children, while primarily the responsibility of the blood mother, is seen as a community effort. Other mothers, many times, are of blood relation to the mother and her child, but the title of

other mother can also extend to “fictive kin” or individuals—in this case women—who are of no blood relation to the mother and her child, yet have familial-like ties with the two (179). Though other mothers can provide a biological mother with temporary relief from raising her children, in times of death or when the biological mother is unable to properly care for her child or children, other mothers take on full responsibility of biological motherhood. As a part of this tradition of black communitarianism, Fen as “fictive kin” steps into her role as full time “other mother” when her chieftain passes.

Fen occupies the role of other mother both prior to and after Lydia’s death. In the first chapter of the novel, Fen barter with a smuggler in order to procure baby supplies for Lydia, namely a blanket, baby bottle, formula, and baby naming books (Smith 15). Fen therefore takes on the responsibilities of an other mother by relieving Lydia of the duties necessary to nurture a child. When Lydia dies from the attacks, Fen’s role of other mother turns from supplemental caretaker to adoptive parent. Fen is charged with protecting the child from Orleans’s citizens who would benefit from the newborn’s untainted blood as well as with naming the child. Passages in the novel refer to the baby as Fen’s. In fact, upon Daniel and Fen’s first encounter, he mistakes Enola for Fen’s, asking her “What’s your baby’s name?” (132).

Moreover, it is Fen’s role as other mother that helps drive the plot forward. Fen states, “Lydia say she want Baby Girl to have a better life... Ain’t no such thing as a better life in Orleans. Not really. Only chance this baby got be in the Outer States. So I got to get her there” (60). Initially she believes that Father John, a priest and old friend of her family, will be her answer as he communicates with those outside the wall (61);

however, when he proves to be corrupt and thirsty for Enola's blood, Fen entrusts Daniel with the task of getting Enola to safety. The text reads:

Fen: "The Charity Gate," I say. "You ready to go?"

Daniel: "We're ready."

Fen: He say *we* and it hit me that Enola don't belong to me no more.

She ain't looking up at me with her mama's big brown eyes; she looking at him... Baby Girl be all right as long as we get them out of Orleans.

(316)

Fen realizes that the price for getting Enola to safety is to relinquish her motherly role. Because she is infected with Delta Fever, Fen is unable to follow, indicating that separation is inevitable.

This scene exposes a key element to understanding black motherhood. Collins notes, "In many African-American communities, so much sanctification surrounds Black motherhood that 'the idea that mothers should live lives of sacrifice has come to be seen as the norm'" (174). In order for black mothers to be seen as moral and respectable mothers, they must sacrifice some aspect of their lives. For Fen, she must sacrifice her relationship with Enola to secure Enola's redemption from a life in Orleans.

To ensure that Daniel and Enola make it to the border, Fen acts as a distraction.

The text reads:

Behind him, Fen stood silhouetted against the searchlights, rain spattering the water around her. Her arms were raised, her face turned up... For a moment she looked at him. The moment hung in the air, Fen's mouth



curving into a smile, seeing Daniel and the baby almost [to the wall][...] A shot rang out. The bundle fell from her hands. (323)

Fen distracts the border guards from noticing Daniel and Enola sneaking into the Outer States. As a result, Fen is instantly killed from the gunfire. In the article “Sacrifice, Surrogacy and Salvation: Womanist Reflections on Motherhood and Work,” Monica A. Coleman, an African-American theologian, observes that “blood sacrifice is often sacralized: Blood is the force of life. Blood is supposed to bring us closer to God. When humanity has erred, God recognizes blood and will forgive. These are the lessons of blood atonement” (qtd. in Coleman 205). Coleman notes that blood sacrifices act as the ultimate atonement “[w]hen humanity has erred” (205). From a biblical standpoint, the ultimate blood sacrifice that led to atonement occurred when Christ was crucified. As Fen is required to sacrifice herself in order to fulfill her motherly role, her death acts as the sacred blood sacrifice to which Coleman refers and thus situates Fen alongside Christ as Orleans’s savior. Fen is removed from the sins of the north that led to the degradation of Orleans, and therefore she can act as atonement for humanity and a catalyst for the reconciliation of the North and the South.

Having relinquished his individualist ideology and taken on Fen’s sense of communitarianism, Daniel is able to help Fen begin the reconciliation between the North and the South. When Fen is killed, the parental responsibility of Enola is transferred to Daniel. For ecofeminists, such as Ruether, a reconstruction of western societies calls for “interdependency,” among the sexes: “In terms of male-female relations, this means not simply allowing women more access to public culture, but converting males to an equal share in the tasks of child nurture and house maintenance” (“Ecofeminism: Symbolic”

397). In short, ecofeminism calls for a blurring of gender roles, roles that have been used in the past, to justify the patriarchal domination of nature and women. The death of Fen and the subsequent transfer of parental responsibility to Daniel dissolve a patriarchal hegemony that required Fen to serve as the sacrifice and foreshadows a society that embraces an ecofeminist ethic.

While this study has focused mostly on the Fen/Daniel partnership, an understanding of *Orleans*'s critique is not complete without a look at Fen's charge, Enola. Like Fen, Enola's name helps unlock knowledge into her role in the novel. Traditionally the abbreviation NOLA is used to indicate New Orleans, Louisiana. Moreover, the prefix 'e' indicates several meanings. Foremost, it can mean "out, away, without," or as the shortened version of the prefix 'ex' it indicates something coming "out of" something else (*OED*). Taking this etymology into consideration, as well as Daniel and Fen's move toward an ecofeminist ethic, Enola as a character represents the promise of a new era. Recalling that Enola is free of Delta Fever, she is New Orleans 'without' disease; therefore she is the promise of a new South that can occur when a move toward an ecofeminist ethic takes place.

## CHAPTER IV – DECOLONIZING THE YA NORTH

Smith's novel provides an ambitious and very contemporary subject for its young adult readers. While racial injustice has long been famously addressed by YA fiction, and while contemporary YA dystopias display the disorder of capitalism run amok and profound classism, Smith's *Orleans* connects all of these issues under the canopy of climate change and, with her ecofeminist perspective, adds gender and race as major factors for consideration. The result is a rich and thorough lesson on environmental injustice, which is inextricably linked to the problem of the North/South divide. The total combination makes *Orleans* a tool for what Shiva calls the "decolonization of the north:"

It seems that each time the North has claimed new control over the lives of people in the South, it has been legitimized on the basis of some form of the white man's 'burden' arising from notions of superiority. The paradoxical consequence of white man's burden is that the earth and other peoples carry new burdens in the form of environmental destruction and the creation of poverty and dispossession. Decolonization of the North becomes essential if what is called the 'environment and development' crisis in the South is to be overcome." (265)

Shiva's idea of the "decolonization of the north" advocates for a change in ideology; we must understand that cultural differences in the North and South should no longer be a support for patriarchal or colonial systems that justify oppression in "developing" nations. Cultural differences should no longer be equated with relationships of superiority and inferiority, but rather cultural difference should be recognized as simply difference in ways of life that supports a nation's unique needs. As northerners,

we must recognize that southern nations do not need saving in the sense that a northern way of life is suitable for every nation of the world. Once we begin to understand cultural difference in such a way, southern nations that experience environmental degradation, due to northern influence that values its resources over the way of life in the region, may cease to exist.

*Orleans* does not end neatly. In fact, the ending is left ambiguous. While readers do find out that Enola and Daniel make it to the Outer States, they are left unsure of either character's fate; however, *Orleans* does evoke positive undertones. The last line reads, "In [Daniel's] arms, Fen's baby girl was awake and wriggling against him, waving her small fists at the weeping sky" (324). As Enola is representative of posterity moving toward an ecofeminist ethic, her raised fist against a "weeping sky" suggests not a Melvillein rage against an uncontrollable 'Nature' but a nascent environmental activism. Enola's fist is a response to grief that humans have disordered a trans-human commons. Enola's gesture may well represent a new environmentalism in the era of anthropogenic climate change, a signal Smith sends to her YA readers who will indeed be the generation to confront the consequences of climate change. Even so, the gesture is ambiguous and precedes an uncertain future beyond the novel's end, encouraging its young readers to create their own ending, one that might include the ecofeminist ethic that the novel advocates.

Dystopian fiction can engage young readers in environmental discourse. Smith's contribution to the genre encourages young readers to think systematically about environmental disorder and to synthesize insights into racial, gendered and regional differences as they come to understand climate change in terms of environmental

injustice. *Orleans* also expands the scope of African-American children's and YA literature from literature that only informs young readers of African-American history or the urban life of the black child or teen. Smith's novel sets an ambitious standard for both African American YA literature and YA Dystopia. It assumes that its YA readers may comprehend personal issues in systemic terms and it challenges them to do so with a setting wherein climate change and environmental injustice cannot be denied. It challenges critics to update their understandings of African American YA conventions to include global and environmental themes not as marginal ones but as central to contemporary citizenship. Finally, its ecofeminist aesthetic encourages readers of any age to work with race, gender, region, and habitat as integral elements in an overall understanding of justice in the era of climate change.

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